

## The Journey Back: Education, Hope and New Beginnings

Many of the young people arrested during the 2019 social unrest were still studying at the time. Some were university students, while others were still in secondary school. For many, arrest and prosecution interrupted not only their education but also their plans and aspirations for the future. Ah Hao (pseudonym) and Alan (pseudonym) were among these students.

With support from Project Change and the opportunities offered by their schools and universities, both were able to resume their studies and successfully complete their education. Yet for many young people, graduating is only the beginning of a much longer journey. The impact of arrest and conviction can continue to cast a shadow over their lives, affecting their career prospects and opportunities for the future. Whether they are able to rebuild their lives and contribute their talents to society depends not only on their own determination, but also on a community willing to offer understanding, acceptance, and a genuine second chance.

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**Ah Hao: "I Hope Other Young People Will Be Given the Same Understanding and Second Chance."**

In January 2020, 14-year-old Ah Hao (pseudonym) was arrested during the social unrest in Hong Kong on suspicion of criminal damage. During the arrest, he sustained a serious head injury and was taken directly to hospital, where he remained for 48 hours instead of being held at a police station or detention facility.

“I was hit in the head during the arrest,” Ah Hao recalled. “There was blood everywhere.” His injuries required several days of hospital treatment before he was released on bail and allowed to return home.

At the time, Ah Hao’s mother had been diagnosed with a serious illness and was receiving treatment in Mainland China. Looking back, he feels relieved that she was not in Hong Kong to witness his injuries, sparing her additional worry. Yet because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lengthy quarantine requirements for cross-border travel, he was unable to be by her side while she underwent treatment.

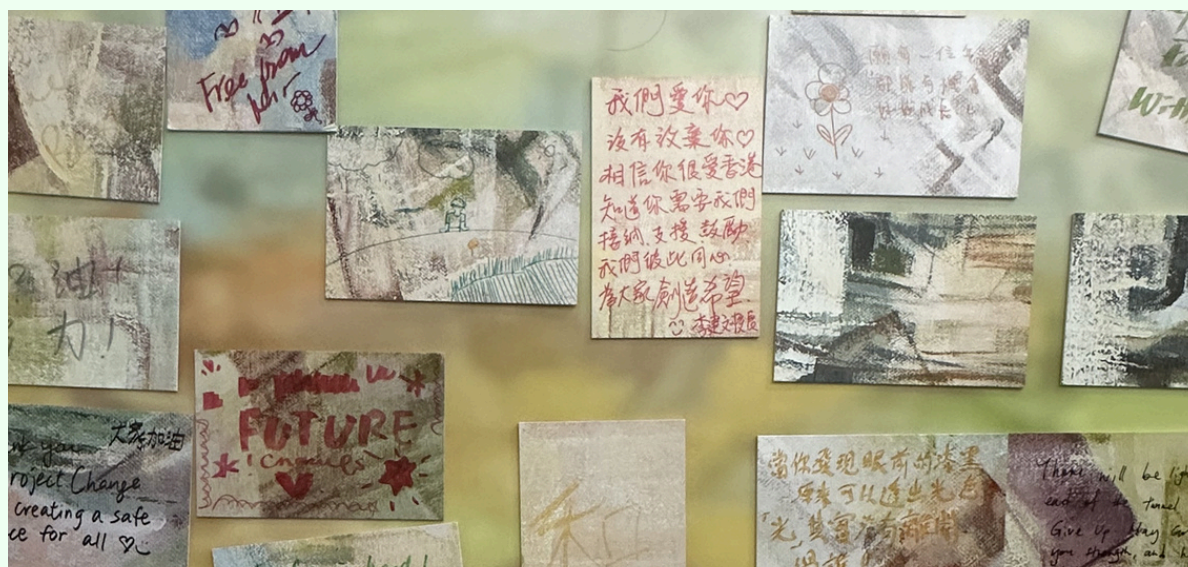
Today, one of his greatest regrets is that, as a young teenager, he lacked the maturity to support his mother when she needed him most.

After his mother returned to Hong Kong following surgery, Ah Hao received a phone call from the police informing him that he would be formally charged. His greatest fear was not the legal proceedings - it was telling his mother.

“She knew nothing about it. I was terrified she would suddenly find out if the police came to our home. I didn’t know how she would react.”

Fortunately, the officers asked him to report to the police station rather than arresting him at home. Although this spared his mother the shock of an unexpected visit, Ah Hao still found it incredibly difficult to tell her what had happened.

“I didn’t know how to tell my mum. No matter what, I knew I had to tell her and that was the moment I feared most.”



Eventually, Ah Hao was convicted. Taking into account his young age, genuine remorse, and willingness to accept responsibility, together with strong support from his school, letters from his teachers, a comprehensive probation report, and careful mitigation by his lawyer, the court sentenced him to a Community Service Order rather than immediate imprisonment.

Hong Kong law recognises the importance of rehabilitation for young first-time offenders. In certain circumstances, a first conviction may become “spent” after a prescribed period of three years, allowing young people who have demonstrated they can move forward to rebuild their lives.

For young people like Ah Hao, some were arrested as juveniles but, because legal proceedings stretched on for years, they turned 21 before their cases were heard. As a result, they were no longer eligible to be dealt with through the youth justice system and lost opportunities for rehabilitation that younger offenders might otherwise have received.

Today, Ah Hao has completed the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE), entered university, and is building a new future. He hopes other young people will also be given the understanding and second chance they need to rebuild their lives and contribute to society.

Looking back, Ah Hao recognises how anger shaped his thinking when he was younger. He said he was overwhelmed by emotions, which made him difficult to think rationally.

The experience also taught him what truly matters. Not being able to accompany his mother through her illness remains one of his deepest regrets. Now, although his university is far from home, he has chosen not to live in student accommodation. “I simply want to spend more time with my mum.”



## Alan: "I'm Grateful for My Family's Unwavering Support."

When Alan (pseudonym) was arrested in 2019, he was just 19 years old and in his first year at university. Like many young people of his generation, he had never been particularly interested in politics or public affairs. But the proposed amendments to Hong Kong's Extradition bill drew him, along with many others, into the protests.

He was arrested during the unrest. Two years later, after believing the matter had come to an end, he received a call from the police asking him to return to the station to give a further statement. It was then that he learned he would be formally charged.

"It felt as though the sky had fallen in. Two years had passed, and I thought it was all behind me."

What worried him even more was the future he had worked so hard to build. "I hadn't finished university yet. I was afraid that if I was sentenced, my university wouldn't let me continue with my studies. I was the first person in my family to go to university, and my mum had always been so proud of me."

Around that time, a senior student who had gone through a similar experience introduced Alan to Project Change, where he found support as he prepared to face the legal process.

In late 2021, Alan pleaded guilty when his case came before the court and was remanded in custody. "The first night in detention is something I'll never forget." Although he had tried to prepare himself mentally, the reality was very different from what he had imagined. "The prison was nothing like what you see on television. I was exhausted, but I couldn't sleep."

The sounds of passing traffic, engines outside the detention centre, and correctional officers moving through the corridors stayed with him throughout the night. "It was probably the longest night of my life. Time seemed to stand still. Even when I heard the birds singing, thinking dawn had arrived, it was still the middle of the night."

As he lay awake, his thoughts returned to university life. "I kept thinking about studying. The days when I could exchange ideas with classmates were the ordinary days that I had been missing so much."

During his time in custody, his mother and younger sister came to visit. Detainees were allowed to receive up to six books each month from family members. His mother chose six volumes of the classic comic series *Old Master Q*. “It made me realise that, in my mum's eyes, I was still the little boy who loved reading *Old Master Q*,” Alan said. He eventually asked her to exchange the comics for other books he wanted to read.

Growing up, Alan had spent much of his childhood living with his grandparents. Perhaps that was why his mother did not always understand his interests. Or perhaps, as with many parents, she simply still saw him as her little boy. Yet throughout everything that happened, she never stopped standing by him.

After serving his sentence, Alan hoped to return to university and continue his education. However, another challenge awaited him. The university informed him that it would convene a disciplinary panel to decide whether he should be allowed to remain as a student. “I was very worried.”

Once again, he turned to Project Change for support. The team helped him prepare for the disciplinary hearing.

Looking back, he says the process was difficult, but ultimately worthwhile. “Over time, I realised the disciplinary hearing served an important purpose. It gave me the opportunity to explain myself, and to show my professors and fellow students why I deserved another chance.”

In the end, the university allowed him to continue his studies, and Alan successfully completed his degree.

Having lived through his arrest and the long legal process, Alan says the experience took him through emotional highs and lows, leaving a lasting mark on him.

As he searched for work after graduation, job applications often required him to disclose his criminal record, and interviewers frequently asked detailed questions about his conviction. “I dreaded those conversations. Every time I had to explain what happened, it felt like I was being put on trial all over again.”

Today, through Project Change’s network, Alan has found work that he genuinely enjoys. For now, he says he is not making ambitious plans for the future. “I just want to take good care of myself and my family. I don’t want them to suffer because of me again.”

During the period following his arrest, his mother worked two jobs to support the family, carrying an enormous burden. It is a sacrifice Alan has never forgotten.

Looking back, he says the experience has changed him profoundly. “The biggest lesson I've learned is never to act on impulse. If I don't fully understand something, I shouldn't rush into it.”

His perspective on social change has also evolved. “I still hope society can become better and that positive change can happen. But change doesn't have to come through radical actions. Real change often takes time. It grows little by little, and every society has to find its own path, rather than simply adopting approaches from elsewhere.”

Above all, Alan is grateful to the people who stood beside him. “I'm thankful to everyone who helped me: my family, especially my mum, who never gave up on me; Project Change; and an employer who believed in me when others might not have. Without them, I wouldn't be where I am today.”

## Our Work

### Number of Services

Up to now, we have provided 537 service sessions to young people, as well as their parents and loved ones. Among the young people who received services, about 127 used counselling services, and about 150 participated in the “Reintegration Programme”. Some young people received both services.

