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United Front Work and Mechanisms of Countermobilization in Hong Kong

Edmund W. Cheng*

ABSTRACT

This article examines the Hong Kong regime's mechanisms of countermobilization as a reaction to and preemptive strike against dissent. It reveals how united front work historically rooted in Chinese Communist Party apparatuses has penetrated into Hong Kong. The PRC's Liaison Office in Hong Kong and the Hong Kong government have established a hierarchical yet dispersed platform to combine repression with outsourced contention. Hong Kong's regime demonstrates its resilience in how it and the Liaison Office's united front apparatus recruit nonstate actors to constrain opposition from below through both carrots and sticks. More broadly, the article unpacks how the regime's mechanisms of patronage, counterprotest, attrition, and stigmatization operate. While these regime repertoires have curtailed organized resistance during some periods, they have also eroded the regime's legitimacy, exposing it to the re-eruption of protests. The article concludes by assessing how the pro-government united front alliance was utilized during the unprecedented summer of dissent in 2019 over a proposed extradition law.

The government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR), which has tried to manage a series of popular political contentions without making concessions, is a pertinent case for examining a regime's repertoires for managing dissent.¹ The SAR is a special form of hybrid regime whose hybridity is defined by two sets of contradictory tendencies: (i) executive domination with a limited franchise, in which ordinary citizens elect only part of the legislature, co-existing with rule-of-law liberalism; and (ii) Beijing's influence over the city's

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1. Yougshun Cai, *The Occupy Movement in Hong Kong: Sustaining Decentralized Protest* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Francis L. F Lee and Joseph M. Chan, *Media and Protest Logics in the Digital Era: Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

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political elite co-existing with the pro-democracy opposition's capacity to mobilize civil society activism.² Hong Kong's hybridization of extensive civil liberties and a non-elected executive overseen by an authoritarian regime in Beijing as the territory's ultimate sovereign raises questions of how the authorities can deal with proponents of civil liberties while sidelining them enough to exert control over popular contention. Observers often attribute Hong Kong's new political order to Beijing's hardline exercise of its jurisdiction over the territory, under which patriots are rewarded and the opposition is marginalized.³ To what extent is this observation true, and if it is true, what mechanisms have been put in place? It is timely to analyze the organizational ecology of the Beijing and Hong Kong governments' countermobilization efforts along with the repercussions.

This article conceptualizes the authorities' countermobilization as a form of state-initiated contention, through which the Hong Kong authorities, and the People's Republic of China (PRC) government behind them, strive to marshal existing institutional tools to outsource repression, to discipline protest leaders, and to instigate contention between the Hong Kong government's supporters and challengers. To operationalize this effort, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) employs "united front work" by establishing a hierarchical yet dispersed platform to address the evolving contradictions in Hong Kong's post-handover period. A set of patronage, ideological, legal, and contracting-out mechanisms has since been formalized to practice state repression and outsourced contention.

I argue that the hybrid regime's resilience is demonstrated not only in how it has recruited nonstate actors to constrain the pro-democracy opposition but also in the mechanisms it developed to counter and preempt challenges from below more generally. While state-initiated contention sought to constrain organized resistance in the post-Occupy (Umbrella) Movement period since 2014, this has eroded the legitimacy of the hybrid regime, generating accumulated grievances and making the regime more vulnerable to the protests that erupted in the summer of 2019.⁴ Millions of Hong Kong citizens took to the streets to demonstrate against an extradition bill that would have sent Hong Kong people charged with crimes in China to stand trial there. This fact raises questions about the repercussions of the united front work. The last section of this article will

2. Brian C. H. Fong, "State-Society Conflicts under Hong Kong's Hybrid Regime: Governing Coalition Building and Civil Society Challenges," *Asian Survey* 53, no. 5 (2013): 854–82; Edmund W. Cheng, "Street Politics in a Hybrid Regime: The Diffusion of Political Activism in Postcolonial Hong Kong," *China Quarterly*, no. 226 (2016): 383–406.

3. Richard C. Bush, *Hong Kong in the Shadow of China: Living with the Leviathan* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2016).

4. Ngok Ma and Edmund W. Cheng, eds., *The Umbrella Movement: Civil Disobedience and Contentious Space in Hong Kong* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019); Ching Kwan Lee and Ming Sing, eds., *Take Back Our Future: An Eventful Sociology of the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

assess the changes and continuities of the CCP's united front countermobilization coalition during the unprecedented political upheaval.

REPRESSION OF PROTESTS AND OUTSOURCED CONTENTION

From a massive rally in June 2003 to the Occupy Movement in 2014, Hong Kong experienced a high tide of mass mobilization. The threat posed by that mass mobilization was not that it might immediately lead to regime change but that uninterrupted mass mobilization can generate a dynamic that weakens the regime in various ways.

First, the pro-democracy mass mobilization tended to generate dissention against the ruling class. It created an image that the regime is unpopular or unstable and motivated some elite groups to defect to the opposition or defy government directives.⁵ Hong Kong's business and professional elites withdrew their support for a national security law in 2003 and a "patriotic education" curriculum in 2012 after mass street demonstrations. Second, mass mobilization gave rise to new political groupings, who achieved territory-wide popularity and found it easy to capitalize on street politics as they entered electoral politics. After the Umbrella Movement erupted in 2014, student activists such as Joshua Wong and Edward Yeung and their comrades formed new political parties to contest against pro-establishment politicians and attempted to use institutional resources to sustain their social movements.⁶ Third, mass mobilization often results in the construction of a new frame for collective action. This framing process unifies protesters on what they are fighting for and how to make sense of their participation. The rise of localism among Hong Kong youth in the post-Occupy period produced a notion that the forces in favor of independence and militant action were gaining strength.⁷

In the face of credible or imagined threats, regimes can resort to their own mobilization—a process to gain resources they previously did not control in pursuit of a particular objective. Traditionally, state mobilization, which is most prevalent in totalitarian or authoritarian regimes, functions as a series of top-down initiatives exercised through dependent social organizations. Steven Levisty and Lucan A. Way, however, noted that hybrid regimes are mostly associated with a market-oriented economy under which the state no longer possesses organizational control over society and in which individuals' social advancement has been

5. Samson Yuen and Edmund W. Cheng, "Neither Repression nor Concession? A Regime's Attrition against Mass Protests," *Political Studies* 65, no. 3 (2017): 534–57.

6. Sebastian Veg, "The Rise of Localism and Civic Identity in Post-handover Hong Kong: Questioning the Chinese Nation-State," *China Quarterly*, no. 230 (2017): 323–47.

7. Alvin Y. So, "The Making of Hong Kong Nationalism," *Asian Nationalisms Reconsidered*, ed. Jeff Kingston (New York: Routledge), 135–46.

detached from their alignment with the state agenda.⁸ In this circumstance, a hybrid regime cannot merely rely on state apparatuses but must also incentivize nonstate actors to manage dissent.

The case of Hong Kong suggests that countermobilization is best conceptualized as a form of state-initiated contention arising in response to formidable threats to the prevailing political order.⁹ State-initiated contention means that the state, or more precisely, the incumbent regime, strives to marshal available state apparatuses to discipline activists while instigating nonstate actors to confront the opposition during elections and protests. To achieve these dual objectives, the regime must also ensure that its countermobilization is severe enough to silence dissidents while not provoking a backlash from society.

Constrained by its hybrid structure, the Hong Kong regime must leverage the reputation and procedures of various state apparatuses to manage dissent.¹⁰ It often has maneuvered by way of court rulings and administrative tools to discipline pro-democracy politicians and impair the networks of organized opposition. In the past several years it also has stigmatized young activist protesters as rioters and traitors, which serves as an ideological tool to rally conservative and nationalist residents of Hong Kong.

In parallel, the regime strives to form alliances, mobilize resources, and outsource conflict by cultivating various societal groups that act as its proxies. The consolidation of patronage by both the government and the CCP's united front apparatus in Hong Kong offers an ecology under which the state's authority and the elite's resources are systemically appropriated for political purposes. The outsourcing of contention in Hong Kong to nonstate agents such as mass organizations and satellite groups has, on occasion, facilitated the use of extralegal or illegal means while maintaining a firewall between the state and the contracted-out enforcement agents. Inside mainland China, this technique has been used at local levels, generating intimidation and threats within the wider society while distancing the regime from vicious actions and enabling it to evade responsibility.¹¹

To analyze the interplay between protest repression and outsourced contention, this article has relied on several sources. First, I examined political appointments, elite bibliographies, and public finance records to reveal the patronage

8. Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, "The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (2002): 51–65.

9. Extant literature noted how the state can permit the occurrence of countermovements to weaken its challengers. The definition of a countermovement is understood as an antimovement initiated by a conservative nonstate force against the original movement. However, a countermovement is only one form of countermobilization. See David S. Meyer and Suzanne Staggenborg, "Movements, Countermovements, and the Structure of Political Opportunity," *American Journal of Sociology* 101, no. 6 (1996): 1631.

10. Graeme B. Robertson, *The Politics of Protest in Hybrid Regimes: Managing Dissent in Post-Communist Russia*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 31.

11. Lynette H. Ong, "Thugs and Outsourcing of State Repression in China," *China Journal*, no. 80 (July 2018): 94–110.

between the regime and elites and the latter's sectoral networks and sponsored organizations. Second, I collected firsthand information through semistructured interviews with politicians, activists, and grassroots officials who are sponsors or agents of the regime's repertoire. Third, I engaged in participant observation at more than fifteen countermobilization rallies and mapped their functions and funding. Finally, I carried out a media analysis of a controversial oath-taking ceremony to trace the collaboration between the state and nonstate countermobilization agents. The scope of my analysis covers the post-2003 period, when popular contention intensified, with a focus on the post-2014 period during which countermobilization was more organized, extensive, and overt.

THE CHINESE PARTY-STATE'S UNITED FRONT WORK IN HONG KONG

The united front (統一戰線) is an integral part of the CCP's domestic and overseas practices. James Armstrong defined the united front policy as a "limited and temporary alignment between a Communist party or state and one or more non-Communist political units."¹² This definition suggests that the alignment is *flexible* in principle and can be readjusted according to shifts in the principal contradiction (主要矛盾) as new enemies and new situations arise. Lyman Van Slyke described the united front as both *nationalistic* and *hierarchical* in practice, and he noted that it exercises "one form of expression of its patriotism by asserting that the united front includes all patriotic Chinese; and by insisting that the Party leads the united front, it equates support of the Party with nationalism."¹³ United front work hence identifies and designates patriots who are willing and able to assist the agenda of the party-state.

Over time, the united front's hierarchical structure and patriotic assertions have evolved in view of changing contradictions in Hong Kong. During the late colonial era, CCP activities largely operated covertly through the Xinhua News Agency bureau in Hong Kong. The agency's dual role as a party-state organ in charge of Hong Kong and Macau affairs (港澳工委) and as a government liaison bureau enabled it to lead and coordinate the leftist mouthpieces and grassroots apparatuses implanted in earlier years to engage in propaganda, persuasion, and cooptation. During Deng Xiaoping's era, as the principal contradiction was designated as being between socialism and capitalism under "one country, two systems," the united front organs began assiduously developing relations to earn the

12. James D. Armstrong, *Revolutionary Diplomacy: Chinese Foreign Policy and the United Front Doctrine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 11.

13. Van Slyke Lyman, *Enemies and Friends: The United Front in Chinese Communist History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1967), 3–6.

trust of the capitalist class.¹⁴ Before the handover, a number of veteran Hong Kong officials, public intellectuals, and moderate politicians were appointed as members of the Basic Law Drafting Committee, the State Council's Hong Kong Affairs Advisory Committee, the National People's Congress (全國人大), and the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (全國政協). The network of "patriots" was expanded to ensure a smooth transition of Hong Kong from a British colony to Chinese sovereignty, and Hong Kong capitalists were wooed to invest in the mainland.¹⁵ Business elites were co-opted in exchange for the preservation of capitalism and of their political power in Hong Kong as well as privileged access to and protection in the mainland markets.¹⁶ Notably, nearly all of the pro-democracy opposition was excluded.

In 2000, the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government (LOCPG, 中聯辦) in Hong Kong replaced the Xinhua News Agency as Beijing's official representative. After the massive July 1 rally in 2003 set the precedent that popular resistance could force the Hong Kong government to yield and rescind an unpopular bill strongly favored by China, the CCP altered its policy in Hong Kong of "nonintervention" (不干預) to "proactive" (有作為).¹⁷ In 2008, a ranking officer of the LOCPG published an article in a mouthpiece of the Central Party School, *Xuexi Shibao*, that advocated the creation of a "second governing corps" (第二支管治隊伍) to "fully, openly, and legally" assist in the governance of the first governing corps, the Hong Kong government.¹⁸ Although the official was relatively junior, his publication was a blend of work report and policy recommendation. Not long thereafter, the LOCPG significantly expanded its internal structure and increased its public visibility to accommodate this new mission. The number of its internal bureaus increased from nine to 25, territorially divided according to district boundaries and functional roles.¹⁹ Each regional bureau oversees several Legislative Council (LegCo) constituencies and several dozen district council constituencies. Furthermore, its social work, external relations, and public affairs bureaus are designated to unite business and mass societies; to liaison with local and mainland authorities regarding economic, educational, and cultural exchanges; and to supervise media mouthpieces and pro-establishment political parties.

In summary, the CCP's united front work resembles what scholars of contentious politics call "organizational ecology," which increases the dependence and

14. Suzanne Pepper, *Keeping Democracy at Bay: Hong Kong and the Challenge of Chinese Political Reform* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

15. Xu Jiatun, *Xu Jiatun Memoirs* (Hong Kong: United Press, 1993).

16. Brian C. H. Fong, "The Partnership between the Chinese Government and Hong Kong's Capitalist Class: Implications for HKSAR Governance, 1997–2012," *China Quarterly*, no. 217 (2014): 195–220.

17. Cheng, "Street Politics in a Hybrid Regime," 391.

18. Er-bao Cao, "Yiguo liangzhi tiaojian xia Xianggang de guanzhi lilian" [Governing force in Hong Kong under the condition of one country, two systems] *Xuexi Shibao*, January 28, 2008.

19. Ching-yan Lee, "Xihuan zhigang, zhonglianban hua'an weiming" [Shiwan ruling Hong Kong, liaison office out of darkness] *Hong Kong Economic Journal Monthly*, March 2017.

strength of patronage organizations while crowding out independent ones.²⁰ Its hierarchical and nationalistic features correspond to the dual goals of (1) coordinating a variety of agents against dissent and (2) winning the hearts and minds of the Hong Kong public. Its allies have formed a pro-establishment camp (建制派), which includes old patriots such as “leftist” trade unions and political parties as well as new patriots such as businesspeople, civil servants, and counterprotest groups with vested interests in the status quo. While the composition of the pro-establishment camp has been preserved, the old and new patriots are increasingly motivated to serve extensive sociopolitical functions.

By contrast, the pro-democracy camp (民主派) resorts to electoral and street mobilization to accelerate democratization, which is thus designated as the old enemies. With the rise of a localist discourse in the post-Occupy period, young activists formed new political parties and movement organizations to promote their claims of self-determination or independence. The party-state gradually began to feel that the PRC’s sovereignty was under challenge from these new political forces. The principal contradiction thus evolved into a demarcation between ethno-nationalism and anti-China localism. To counter this anti-China localism, the scope and intensity of the united front has again been expanded, and the Chinese party-state has also emerged openly in Hong Kong’s political scene.²¹

PATRONAGE OF BUSINESS ELITES AND GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONS

Patronage is a relationship power structure based on economic dependency and interpersonal bonds to cultivate a political end.²² It has been used by the LOCPG to cement the party-state’s relational ties with Hong Kong’s business elites and to utilize their economic resources to build up a political machine and conduct various forms of state-initiated contention. The appointment of tycoons and their proxies in the Legislative Council (LegCo) to the committee that selects Hong Kong’s chief executive and to consultative bodies to the PRC’s National People’s Congress and People’s Political Consultative Conference is indicative of the business elite’s political proximity to the Chinese government.²³

20. Jack A. Goldstone, “More Social Movements or Fewer? Beyond Political Opportunity Structures to Relational Fields,” *Theory and Society* 33, no. 3–4 (2004): 333–65.

21. Christine Loh, *Underground Front: The Chinese Communist Party in Hong Kong*, 2nd ed. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2018), 9.

22. Thomas Gold, Doug Guthrie, and David Wank, eds. *Social Connections in China: Institutions, Culture, and The Changing Nature of Guanxi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

23. Sonny S. H. Lo, *The Dynamics of Beijing-Hong Kong Relations* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 30–32.

The party-state's firm attitude toward disciplining defectors among the elite and persuading others to submit to the incumbent order was evident during the Umbrella Movement. James Tien, a leader of the Liberal Party, a major pro-establishment party, and a spokesman for local tycoons, urged Hong Kong's chief executive, C. Y. Leung, to resign on October 14, 2014, to resolve the political crisis. Before protesters managed to exploit this emerging cleavage within the ruling elite in Hong Kong, the People's Political Consultative Conference held a special meeting the very next day and expelled Tien for violating the consultative body's charter and conduct. Despite Tien's expulsion, top Chinese officials reassured him that he would remain part of the patriotic force, a united front logic that punishes deviant behavior but preserves the government-business coalition. Since then, the tycoons have stopped challenging the authorities in public. Studies have shown that Hong Kong's business elites' access to and political protection in mainland markets heavily depend on their loyalty, often expressed through their financial support for the pro-establishment political parties.²⁴

The united front's elite patronage is best illustrated by representation in national consultative bodies. Nominations to China's People's Political Consultative Conference have been handled by central government apparatuses, particularly the CCP's United Front Department and the State Council's Hong Kong and Macau Office. The Liaison Office of the Central People's Government (LOCPG), serving as both the party and government branch in Hong Kong, is consulted about nominees.²⁵ Each year, the Hong Kong constituency is allocated approximately 124 seats out of approximately 2,300 in the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (hereafter Conference). Table 1 shows the trend of sectoral representation in the Conference during the period 2003–19. During this period, Hong Kong's business elites remained the main target of co-optation, though at the same time an increasing number of the elite businesspeople came from among the executives of PRC state-owned corporations in Hong Kong. Too, the targets for representation in the Conference gradually shifted from people holding prominent social and economic status to those performing grassroots sociopolitical functions, as can be seen in table 1. The executives of hometown associations and service-oriented NGOs were more likely to be represented in the two most recent sessions of the Conference, indicating that grassroots networks have been prioritized by China's party-state. In the Twelfth Conference session that began in 2013, 63 percent of Hong Kong's representatives came from "mass societies," including service NGOs funded by the united front, and in the Thirteenth Conference session that commenced in 2018, fully 67 percent.

24. Ngok Ma, "The Making of a Corporatist State in Hong Kong: The Road to Sectoral Intervention," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 46, no. 2 (2016): 247–66.

25. The State Council's Overseas Chinese Affairs Office was merged with the United Front Department in March 2018.

Table 1. Hong Kong Sectoral Representation in the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, 2003–23

	State Sector		Business Sector		Professional Sector		Service NGOs		Mass Societies		Total N
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
	Tenth Session (2003–8)	25	20.5	66	54.1	50	41.0	12	9.8	33	
Eleventh Session (2008–13)	25	19.8	79	62.7	49	38.9	12	9.5	38	30.2	126
Twelfth Session (2013–18)	24	19.4	79	63.7	54	43.5	23	18.5	55	44.4	124
Thirteenth Session (2018–23)	22	17.7	86	69.4	38	30.6	30	24.2	53	42.7	124

Source: Compiled by the author using extensive bibliographies and media reports.

Note: The total percentage in each session exceeds 100 percent because each member from Hong Kong often served multiple roles. To minimize the fallacy of double counting, I distinguished the honorary from the executive positions of these political appointees. If a member belonged to more than one sector, only the sector in which he or she occupied an executive position was coded. If a member held an executive position in more than one sector, he or she was double counted.

In short, efforts increasingly were made to extend the united front partnership well beyond elite representatives to the leadership of an everyday mass following, through coopting and revamping three types of “mass societies” (社團): local federations (地區聯會), hometown associations (同鄉會), and service-oriented NGOs. These “mass societies” resemble the mass organizations inside China that serve as grassroots arms of the party-state.²⁶

Members of the elite have been encouraged to become patrons or donors to such interconnected associations. It is unclear whether these elites were favored and co-opted because they already had an influence in such organizations or were encouraged by the party-state to perform such roles after the associations had been co-opted. Both possibilities support our argument that the CCP's patronage mechanisms are hierarchical yet interactive. Under this incentive-driven mechanism, members of the elite can now earn their representation in the Conference not only through their standing in their existing fields but also through channeling their resources to help support social organizations deemed friendly to the party-state.

The numbers of hometown associations peaked in 2008 and 2009 as the LOCPG and mainland's united front bureaus encouraged their formation to penetrate the grassroots. Traditionally, most migrants from the mainland originated from localities such as Guangzhou, Dongguan, Chaozhou, and Meizhou in Guangdong Province and from urban areas in provinces such as Jiangsu and the Shanghai region. Their hometown associations in Hong Kong were thus county- or city-based. Under the co-optation policy, the post-2003 period saw the growth of

26. On the party-state's creation, nurturing, and financing of service NGOs inside mainland China, see Huan Gao, “Cross-Province State Aid and the Development of NGOs after the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake,” *China Journal*, no. 82 (July 2019): 71–87.

province-based *federations* acting as an umbrella platform to systematically reorganize the patriotic forces. Formed in 2006, the Federation of Hong Kong Guangxi Community Organizations included 14 city-based associations, 40 affiliated groups, and 110,000 individual members. Whereas the Guangdong and Fujian hometown associations had restructured to become federations, provinces as remote as Ningxia and Qinghai set up their associations in Hong Kong. These associations' agendas expanded from connecting their native countrymen to serving electoral political ends. In fact, the membership application forms of the hometown associations often required applicants to indicate whether they were registered voters and, if yes, in which constituencies.

The second type of mass societies comprise three local federations in Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and the New Territories. These federations networked women associations, youth groups, cultural societies, and industry chambers. Formed in 1997, the Kowloon Federation of Associations has 220,000 reported members, 191 affiliated associations, and hundreds of community branches corresponding to the districts and neighborhoods in Kowloon. They often have organized megacultural and community events to generate income and reach out to grassroots residents. In each year, the Hong Kong government has allocated tens of millions of dollars to celebrate national events. Subject to their ideological stand, the opposition would not apply for such funding, which means public resources are effectively channeled into the united front associations and their extended charity arms. While some events were national celebrations and traditional Chinese festivals, others were traditions reinvented to construct a cultural identity and extend community networks.²⁷ For instance, the Hungry Ghosts Festival was once restricted to the Chaozhou home-town associations and was no longer popular in the 1990s and 2000s. However, the Federation of Hong Kong Chiu Chow [Chaozhou] Community Organizations and the Kowloon Federation of Associations have actively sponsored and promoted the festival since 2008, and the Hong Kong tourism and home affairs authorities have enthusiastically sponsored and advertised these events. In 2011, the festival was included in Hong Kong's first National Intangible Heritage listing. By 2015, more than 60 hometown associations, mostly arms of the Chaozhou association, organized the festival in more than a hundred Hong Kong neighborhoods, during which entertainment was offered and presents were distributed. These various activities provided the associations with potential clients, including elderly people and immigrants. These associations were the principal sponsors of megaevents such as National Day banquets and traditional Chinese festivals attended by high-ranking LOCPG and Hong Kong government officials.

The third type of mass societies are the service-oriented NGOs, which further advanced the pro-establishment cause's social reach and public service provision.

27. Selina Chan, *Chaozhou Hungry Ghosts Festival* (Hong Kong: Chung Hwa, 2015).

Notable examples include the Internet Professional Association established in 1999 and the New Home Association in 2010, which targeted the information technology and social worker sectors, respectively, strongholds of the democratic opposition. The IT Association reportedly heavily subsidized new members so that they would register as voters in the information technology functional constituency of the LegCo. With little track record, the New Home Association has operated at an annual budget of hundreds of millions, enabling it to recruit hundreds of social workers and simultaneously to serve new immigrants from China and the grassroots population. These one-stop services and extended networks helped build trust and ties with their professional-cum-political clients.²⁸ Reaching out further, working-class citizens in public housing have been easy to attract through friendliness and the provision of goods and services. These penetration strategies have reinforced class divisions between pro-establishment and pro-democracy supporters in Hong Kong.²⁹

Often registered as charitable organizations, these mass societies served as intermediaries to materialize state agenda and to connect to cultivate ties in the society. Business chambers financed hundreds of exchange tours to China each year for students of different ages, through groups such as the Future Star Federation of Students and the Hong Kong Youth Exchange Promotion Association. Their charity status ensured that donations from the patronage was tax exemptible. The Hong Kong government became another source of funding for these activities. A government audit report revealed that the Hong Kong Home Affairs Bureau spending for mainland exchange tours increased 3.6-fold, from HK\$26.4 million to HK\$112.7 million, between 2012 and 2017, with several approved budgets exceeding funding guidelines. In the same period, the Hong Kong Education Bureau approved an increase in a budgeted quota to fund mainland exchange tours from 5,600 students to 42,600, although only 40 percent of the quota was filled.³⁰

Finally, the pro-establishment political parties have received abundant resources from the patronage networks, both vertically controlled by the LOCPG and horizontally networked with the mass societies. From 2008 to 2016, the annual budget of the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (DAB), the largest pro-establishment party, increased from HK\$35 million to HK\$124 million. Of this amount, approximately one-third came from members' donations and one-third from the income generated by events and investments. The final third came from an annual fundraising drive in which liaison

28. Interview, social workers, Hong Kong, August 27, 2016.

29. Stan Wong Hok-Wui, Ngok Ma, and Wai-man Lam, "Immigrants as Voters in Electoral Autocracies: The Case of Mainland Chinese Immigrants in Hong Kong," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 18, no. 1 (2018): 67–95.

30. Audit Commission, *Report No. 70 of the Director of Audit on the Results of Value for Money Audits*, March 25, 2018.

officials served as patrons and members of the business elite as donors. In 2016, the president of the Hong Kong Association of Chinese Culture successfully bid HK\$8.8 million at an auction for calligraphy donated by the head of the LOCPG to DAB.³¹

Such generous donations have enabled the pro-establishment parties and their LegCo members and district councillors to sponsor tourism packages, banquets, training classes, legal consultations, medical checkups, festival gifts, and so on. Working-class citizens in large public housing projects have been easy to attract through this provision of goods and services and through efforts at friendliness. These penetration strategies have reinforced class divisions between pro-establishment and pro-democracy supporters in Hong Kong.³² The service provisions and activities have connected pro-establishment political parties with mass societies and enabled pro-establishment forces to broaden their social reach, assess public sentiment, exchange favors for votes, and develop solidarity among groups. In 2014–15, the DAB had more than 200 local branches offering 19,555 activities, or 53 activities per day; in 2015–16, the DAB recruited more than 31,000 members and 7,000 volunteers.³³ An ex-worker in a pro-establishment party and ex-service provider outlined to me the operational hierarchy and goal: “We are required to submit reports to Sai Wan [the location of LOCPG] annually in non-election years and quarterly in election years. One purpose is to monitor our spending and performance pledges . . . but the main goal is to experiment with innovative measures to penetrate the grassroots.”³⁴

By linking funding with accountability, the LOCPG has established a hierarchical structure to regulate this patronage and grassroots politics. This bureaucratic incentive system is quite similar to China’s model for managing society. To accommodate its increasingly sophisticated role in coordinating its business and grassroots clients, the LOCPG purchased more than 500 commercial and private apartments in Hong Kong valued at more than HK\$3 billion and recruited thousands of employees between 1999 and 2015. According to Land Registry records, HK\$70 million was spent within a year after the Umbrella Movement.³⁵

Although there is no clear evidence that these efforts affected voting preferences, the pro-establishment camp has steadily increased its vote share in successive LegCo elections and by-elections, increasing from 30 to 50 percent from 1998 to 2018. The increase in the LOCPG’s infrastructural power appears to have enabled it to harness central apparatuses’ funding, local donations by Hong

31. DAB, *Report and Financial Statements*, January 2008 and January 2018.

32. Stan Wong Hok-Wui, “Gerrymandering in Electoral Autocracies: Evidence from Hong Kong,” *British Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 2 (2019): 579–610.

33. DAB, *Report on Annual Activities*, March 2016 and March 2017.

34. Interviews, pro-establishment party’s community officer and mutual-aid committee’s chair, March 22 and 24, 2017.

35. Hong Kong Government, Land Registry Public Records.

Kong's elites, and public resources to limit the democratic opposition's mobilization of new constituencies. The intertwined patronage networks helped to (1) channel business and government resources toward pro-establishment hometown associations, (2) mobilize the regime's sectoral and grassroots bases against the opposition's strongholds, and thereby (3) increase the Hong Kong government's and pro-establishment parties' dependence on the CCP's united front work.³⁶

COUNTERPROTESTS BY OUTSOURCED AGENTS

Although counterprotests against the pro-democracy camp emerged in Hong Kong only in recent years, they swiftly became a tool to oppose dissenting opinions and actions. Until recently, the pro-establishment parties and organizations, despite having abundant resources, were weaker than the democratic opposition in terms of influencing public opinion and mobilizing collective action. This weakness left the pro-democracy camp in a strong position to represent civil society and dominate public discourse. However, during the 2010s, numerous nucleus and satellite counterprotest groups have surfaced, emulating the protest repertoires of the pro-democracy camp and claiming to represent the silent majority. These counterprotest groups include the pro-establishment trade unions, hometown associations, villager organizations in the New Territories, and triad societies, and they have employed a range of repertoires directed toward slightly different audiences and purposes.

Figure 1 shows this trend in Hong Kong between 2010 and 2018, during which at least 108 counterprotest groups emerged. The figure shows that pro-democracy protests and countermobilizations have interacted with one another in ebbs and flows. The first recorded countermobilization arose in 2010, led by an elite-sponsored alliance with a strong tie to traditional “leftist” groups (傳統左派) such as DAB (currently the largest political party in LegCo) and the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions. Satellite groups soon emerged, and the number of such groups peaked between 2014 and 2015, corresponding with the rise of protests and the subsequent birth of the localism movement. Over time, the satellite groups replaced nucleus groups as the major force of countermobilization, even when they declined in number, while their targets, the pro-democracy movement groups, receded even more dramatically between 2015 and 2018 prior to the eruption of protests in the summer of 2019.

36. Leading positions in the Home Affairs Bureau have been occupied by former members of the DAB. The Home Affairs Bureau is crucial not only because it is responsible for allocating government resources in the community but also because it makes recommendations to the electoral commission on redrawing the electoral districts. This authority has facilitated gerrymandering—the packing or cracking of districts with clear partisan biases to undermine the performance of opposition candidates. The pro-establishment camp has subsequently controlled all eighteen district councils, which channel public resources to the community. See Wong, “Gerrymandering in Electoral Autocracies.”

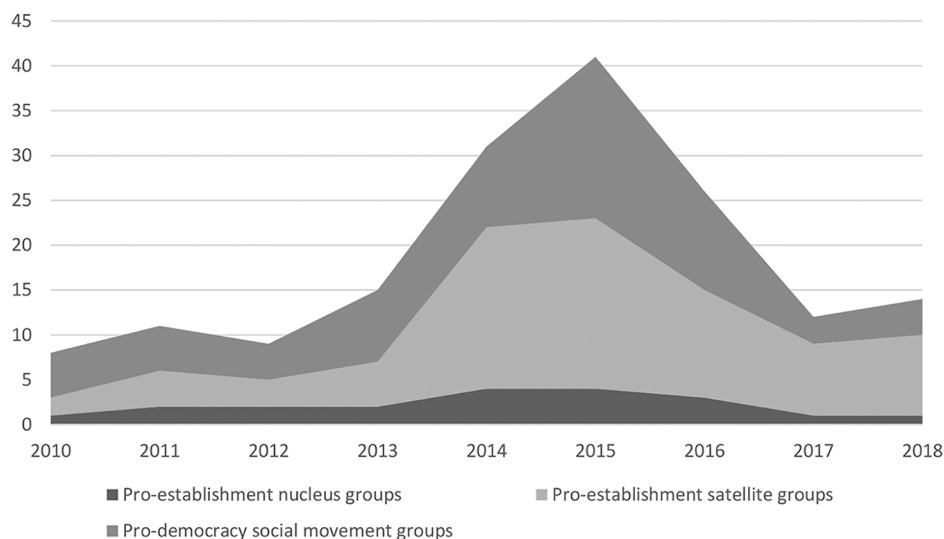


Figure 1. The Number of Pro-democracy Movement and Counterprotest Groups in Hong Kong

The nucleus groups tended to form ad hoc concern groups or umbrella alliances to support a government policy and to demonstrate the regime's social base. Exhibiting clear and strong linkages with the regime and traditional leftists, these groups resorted to peaceful repertoires such as parades and signature campaigns to appeal to a wider constituency. For example, the Alliance of Constitutional Development (政制向前走大聯盟) was initiated by pro-establishment elites and supported by 44 established associations, including pro-establishment trade unions, political parties, hometown associations, and local federations. In January 2010, this organization claimed to have collected 1.6 million signatures supporting the Hong Kong government's constitutional reform. Another example is the Silent Majority for Hong Kong (幫港出聲). Initiated by a group of journalists, businesspeople, and scholars, the group was sponsored by a patron of a hometown association and a National People's Congress member. The group strove to combat Occupy Central through demonstrations and petitions, mobilize the conservative middle class against protesters, and promote the official rhetoric that civil disobedience causes disruption to public order and livelihoods. Its one-week petition in September 2013 claimed to have collected 1.83 million signatures, including those of ranking officials and business elites. The signatures were then cited by the government to show popular support against Occupy Central.³⁷

37. The National People's Congress chair praised the group for its efforts to "promote patriotism and boost positive energy in society." See "Top Legislator Meets Visiting Patriotic Hong Kong Group," *Xinhua*, November 29, 2016.

In the post-Occupy era, these nucleus groups directly combated the pro-democracy opposition in large-scale rallies and LegCo elections. During the pro-democracy camp's annual July 1 rally, the groups organized mega-events to show the size of their own backing and to make it more difficult for the opposition to mobilize. In 2016 and 2017, the Hong Kong Celebrations Association, representing more than 50 pro-establishment trade union groups and hometown associations, were given priority to rent Victoria Park for a seven-day science expo to celebrate the 1997 handover of sovereignty to the PRC. Without access to the park that had been used as their rallying point since 2003, tens of thousands of pro-democracy protesters were squeezed into narrow lanes and pathways. The nucleus group then justified their use of the venue by announcing that it had more than 210,000 attendees compared to the pro-democracy groups' "thousands" of protesters.³⁸ During LegCo elections, the same groups established street stations to campaign for pro-establishment politicians. The volunteers wore similar vests identifying their hometown affiliation. I observed that team leaders openly recorded attendance and monitored behavior. While hometown networks were an integral part of the pro-establishment's electoral machines, this information had hitherto been kept underground. This transition to public disclosure of organizational linkages indicates an intensification of state-initiated contention.

By contrast, the satellite groups emphasized their independent stance while publicly dissociating themselves from disorderliness and denouncing calls for separatism in Hong Kong. Most of these groups were led by figures who either quietly had prior working experience in the pro-establishment "leftist" groups or were completely unknown to the public until then. Their main supporters tended to come from the grassroots, such as elderly people and immigrant families. Although they openly professed a pro-establishment agenda, these groups tended to conceal their organizational links to political or business elites. Distancing themselves from the elites allowed them to deploy a wide range of repertoires, such as parades, demonstrations, verbal abuse, assaults, sieges, and harassment, to suit a variety of situations and audiences. After the mass protests of the Occupy Movement subsided, these groups shifted their targets from pro-democracy politicians, Falungong protesters, and mainland dissidents to student activists. For instance, the groups have protested regularly outside courtrooms and openly ridiculed the student activists summoned to court, calling for the rule of law. They marched into university campuses, besieged workplaces, and encircled churches to intimidate pro-democracy opinion leaders. They also solicited donations and staged protests in support of law enforcement agents who had been charged with assaulting activists and excessive use of violence.

38. "July 1 March Organisers Lose Venue to Pro-Beijing Group Again," *South China Morning Post*, May 10, 2018.

Unlike their nucleus counterparts, the satellite groups, such as Protecting and Cherishing Hong Kong's Power (愛護香港力量) and Voice of Loving Hong Kong (愛港之聲), cared less about winning public sympathy than about occupying the streets. My observations suggest that most of these demonstrators had regular and often fixed working hours at rallies between 9:30 a.m. and 5:30 p.m., a common dress code, and standardized protest slogans, indicating that they were less autonomous than they claimed. For instance, members of Caring for Hong Kong Power dressed in red to signify their allegiance to the Chinese nation and attacked the democrats as puppets of foreign imperialism. Voice of Loving Hong Kong members dressed in blue to denote their support for the Hong Kong police force and demanded the restoration of law and order. The demonstrators usually refused to talk to me, but after some follow-up inquiries, I managed to find one informant. He shared the instructions given to him for how to recruit people to join their demonstrations: "Recruit sit-in protesters regardless of age or gender. Meals and transportation included. Work from noon to 6 PM. Daily piece rate for walking is HK\$1200 [US\$150]. Bonus for extra performance."³⁹

The informant clarified the operational dynamics in which the "demonstrators" were recruited several weeks before a scheduled protest event, indicating that the protests are well planned. While organized, their countermobilizations are also fragmented. The openly active recruiters, equivalent to a kind of subcontractor, are the bottom level of a hierarchical system. This hierarchical chain required ample time to ensure the required turnout for planned events, based on which the recruiters were compensated. As many of the satellite groups were relatively small, with only a few core members, the organizational structure of the counterprotests is amorphous, but this helped to conceal and protect the patrons. However, this method of outsourcing work to strangers can lead to information leakages.

Both nucleus and satellite groups have been highly proactive in using social media to deliver their pro-establishment messages. For instance, the digital media HKGPost was founded by the same elite group that initiated the Silent Majority. It endorsed nearly every government policy and criticized the pro-democracy opposition, while asserting that it valued Hong Kong's democratic core values as much as the activists. Similarly, the digital media SpeakoutHK, a satellite propaganda outlet established by the United Foundation, the chief campaigner for former Chief Executive C. Y. Leung, advocated policies to "put Hong Kong people first." Using populist language supplemented by insider information, these sites reached social groups neglected by mainstream media. Internet traffic data suggest that the two platforms had the two highest engagement rates among all online media websites between 2014 and 2016.⁴⁰ Like similar operations in the

39. Interview, protest subcontractor, March 2, 2018.

40. Tommy Cheung, "Wangshang yulun zhan, jianzhi yi chao qian" [The pro-establishment camp has led online media war], *HK01*, December 13, 2016.

PRC, many of the social media accounts were fake and operated by what are referred to as “fifty-cent party” (五毛黨) commentators—bloggers hired by the authorities to manipulate public opinion through the Internet.⁴¹ Their accounts generated a biased representation of public opinion and challenged the notion that digital technologies might be conducive to the growth of civil society. Instead, these online outlets produced fake news, spread hatred, and deterred dialogue.

In the most extreme cases, when a perceived threat to regime stability was imminent, thugs were hired to suppress protests. During the Umbrella Movement, on October 3, 2014, dozens of thugs attacked protesters and journalists gathered at Mong Kok. They threw punches, destroyed banners, removed barricades, and attacked individuals. Similar but smaller-scale attacks occurred throughout the occupation. Some commentators have suggested that the Chinese authorities paid the thugs to impede peaceful protests.⁴² Others have suggested organized criminals spontaneously took the initiative to protect their underground business interests that were disrupted in the occupied zones.⁴³ Through interviews with triad members and other informants, researchers found that the thugs were not from mainland China but were members of local organized triads. Depending on one’s hierarchy in the triads, each member received HK\$800 to HK\$10,000 per day for his actions. The researchers ruled out the theory of spontaneous actions, as the loss in the triad members’ own business revenue was insignificant, and the thugs received concrete orders from the triad’s leaders. They concluded that the thugs were hired by local businessmen who wanted to impress the authorities by resolving the political crisis.⁴⁴

Some of the satellite groups resorted to creating disorder as a tactic when confronting pro-democracy protesters. A pro-democracy legislator explained how these groups weakened protests by creating a specter of chaos: “By encouraging recurring affrays in people’s neighborhoods, they dragged everyone through the mud. The Blue Ribbon [the countermobilizers] were ostracized by many citizens, but people also blamed the protesters. The logic is simple: why did these counter-protests occur? Because the protesters occupied roads or disrupted order. Disorder and feelings of insecurity made people feel impatient and threatened. In our districts, voters often came to us and demanded that we end the crisis.”⁴⁵ Both

41. Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret Roberts, “How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, Not Engaged Argument,” *American Political Science Review* 111, no. 3 (2017): 484–501.

42. Louisa Lim, “The Thugs of Mainland China,” *New Yorker*, October 8, 2014.

43. David Tweed, “Triads See Underworld Business Hurt by Hong Kong Protests,” *Bloomberg*, October 10, 2014.

44. Federico Varese and Rebecca W. Y. Wong, “Resurgent Triads? Democratic Mobilization and Organized Crime in Hong Kong,” *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology* 51, no. 1 (2018): 23–39.

45. Interview, pan-democracy LegCo member, Hong Kong, February 3, 2017.

the nucleus and satellite groups used countermobilization to appeal to conservative consistencies or to intimidate the pro-democracy opposition. Tracing the rise and fall of these counterprotest groups indicates that a group that managed to capture media attention, create pressure on activists, or attract substantial members was rewarded with new resources and crowded out less successful groups. The tension between these outsourced groups was obvious in their competition for recognition and financing. However, the tension was manageable under the united front apparatus, which allowed the dispersed agents to play their part as long as they could effectively conduct countermobilization.

ATTRITION THROUGH RESPECTED INSTITUTIONS

Despite the absence of universal suffrage, Hong Kong's hybrid regime built its legitimacy on procedural justice and professional ethics, highlighting the rule of law and an impartial civil service.⁴⁶ According to Asian Barometer surveys conducted from 2001 to 2016, the courts and civil service were Hong Kong citizens' most trusted political institutions, with ratings two to three times higher than those of the executive and legislative branches. These respected institutions are extensions of the state and possess the legitimacy and authority to enforce the law. By maneuvering to influence legal procedures, the regime could weaken the protest leadership and provide opportunities for outsourced agents to react. This strategy was a proactive approach to undermine the strength of the democratic camp without overt repression.

The PRC set the stage by reasserting its direct sovereignty over Hong Kong and its public servants. Immediately before the large-scale Occupy Central sit-ins erupted, in July 2014, China's State Council issued a *White Paper on the Practice of One Country, Two Systems Formula*, emphasizing that "the relationship between the central government and Hong Kong is that of delegation of power, not power-sharing." While the English translation declared that the central government possesses "comprehensive jurisdiction" (全面管轄權) over Hong Kong, the scholar in charge of drafting the paper intentionally adopted the phrase "comprehensive governance" (全面管治權) in the Chinese version. The white paper extended the definition of patriots beholden to China to include civil servants, judges, and prosecutors.

Rather than intervening overtly, though, the Chinese government has stayed behind the scenes and has allowed the Hong Kong government to turn to its allies and the court system. During the Umbrella Movement, the High Court

46. Albert H. Y. Chen, "Social Movements and the Law: The Case of Hong Kong," in *Civil Unrest and Governance in Hong Kong*, ed. Michael H. K. Ng and John D. Wong (New York: Routledge, 2017), 127–50.

issued four civil injunctions to evict people from the occupied sites—one for a taxi-driver group, one for a minibus-operator group in Mong Kok, one for an investment company, and one for a bus company in Admiralty. Despite a lack of evidence that the authorities initiated these private filings requesting injunctions, these business groups had close ties to the pro-establishment camp. Senior executives at the transportation companies confirmed that they were approached by an intermediary relaying the government’s message that “something should be done by the company to end the protests.”⁴⁷ One company refused, and another prepared an injunction document. The company that refused to assist was removed from the government’s list of subsidy programs in the following financial year. By contrast, the lawyer who applied for an injunction on behalf of the minibus group was a patron of a hometown association and a member of the DAB. She was subsequently appointed a justice of the peace in 2015 and selected as a member of China’s National People’s Congress in 2016. The investment company, which owns the CITIC Tower to which the injunction applied, was a joint venture controlled by the Chinese state-owned enterprise.

Although the Hong Kong government had legal grounds to deploy police to clear the occupation of traffic arteries and public areas, it chose not to exercise its coercive authority. Instead, it maneuvered through the court system to issue injunctions, thereby shifting responsibility to the courts. The legal procedures affirmed the official discourse that attacked the occupation as unlawful, economically costly, and resulting in social chaos. This discourse depicted protest leaders in negative overtones as “revolutionaries” and the young participants as victims of the leaders’ illegal and misguided behavior. The legalistic framing of “public disorder disrupting livelihoods” diverted attention from the political claims made by the Umbrella Movement and reduced the occupation to a simple cost-benefit calculus vis-à-vis the business operations disrupted by the occupation.

The injunctions also caused divisions among the movement leadership on whether protesters should heed a contempt of court order or refuse to budge and suffer legal penalties in accordance with the principle of civil disobedience. The pan-democrats eventually conceded to the court’s order and called for a retreat from protest sites. Their decision prompted some other participants in the Umbrella Movement to accuse the pan-democrats of complying with an unjust law and causing the movement to fail. A young protest leader traced how the internal fragmentation between pro-democracy politicians and activists was exploited: “The moment the injunctions were issued, the Civic Party’s barristers immediately declared that they would not stay in the prohibited zones. They told us it was because they respected the rule of law. Of course, we do too . . . but what about the procedures? Didn’t we break the law from day one [of the occupation]?”

47. Interviews, senior executives of transportation companies, August 20 and 27, 2015.

How could we explain ourselves to [the more radical] protesters at Mong Kok?”⁴⁸ The radicalization of protest repertoires in the Umbrella Movement⁴⁹ further justified the regime’s oppressive tactics after the protesters had dispersed. The Department of Justice repeatedly opted for mass arrests, lengthy evidence collection, selective prosecutions, and severe ordinances to achieve its goal of disciplining protesters. These draconian procedures disrupted the movement networks and deflated activists’ morale and energy.⁵⁰ The police had arrested 1,003 protesters for unlawful assembly in the Umbrella Movement by December 31, 2014, but the Department of Justice had charged only 216 of them as of January 2018. Among this group, for which there was evidence of offenses, only 8.1 percent were found guilty, and 4.2 percent were bound over.⁵¹ The rest were required to report to the police regularly. By contrast, a total of 91 Mong Kok rioters, who were of working-class background and received less public sympathy, were charged with rioting. They experienced speedy prosecutions and trials, and some key figures were sentenced to 3–7 years of imprisonment.

Second, recurring charges targeting youthful activists generated a sense of political persecution. In August 2016, 16 activists who had participated in nonviolent sit-ins in the 2013 and 2014 protests were convicted by district courts for illegal assembly or contempt of injunctions and were sentenced to community service or probation. Even though these verdicts were in line with legal precedents,⁵² the secretary of justice reopened the cases. It was later revealed that this decision was made even though top prosecutors within the Department of Justice did not recommend it.⁵³ In August 2017, all 16 activists, including the renowned student activists Joshua Wong, Alex Chow, and Nathan Law, were sentenced to 6–14 months of imprisonment by the Court of Appeal, which effectively barred them from seeking political office for five years. Although the Court of Final Appeal repealed these sentences, it approved the legal principle adopted. At the terminal court, the verdicts had a binding effect in the lower courts on hundreds of pending court cases on illegal assembly and police assault.

Finally, innovative measures were adopted to pressure and subvert the leadership of the pan-democrats. On September 19, 2017, after three years of investigation but only a month after the above verdicts were concluded, the Department of Justice dropped the charges of “illegal assembly” and instead submitted charges

48. Interview, protest leader, Hong Kong, 21 February 2018.

49. Agnes Shuk-mei Ku, “In Search of a New Political Subjectivity in Hong Kong: The Umbrella Movement as a Street Theater of Generational Change,” *China Journal*, no. 82 (July 2019): 111–32.

50. Interviews, student activists, September 2, 2015; Occupy Central leader, March 18, 2016.

51. Official Record of Discussion of the HKSAR Legislative Council, CB(4)1386/16-17(07).

52. *SJ v Yan Shen*, CAAR 10/2010; *HKSAR v Wong Yuk Man and Chan Wai Yip*, HCMA 453/2013.

53. “Critics Cry Foul as Joshua Wong and Other Young Hong Kong Democracy Leaders Get Jail,” *Reuters*, August 17, 2017.

of “public nuisance.” The Occupy Central trio, Benny Tai, Chan Kin-man, and Chu Yin-ming, and six other legislators and activists were each charged with “conspiracy to commit public nuisance,” “inciting others to commit public nuisance,” or “inciting people to incite others to commit public nuisance” for their leadership roles in the Occupy Central movement. Public nuisance is an ancient offense originating from the common law system, whose legal principles are ambiguous and abstract. However, this offense has been incorporated into Hong Kong’s Summary Offenses Ordinance and carries a maximum penalty of three months of imprisonment.⁵⁴ Because the Department of Justice decided to make the charges through common law rather than statutory law, the defendants could be subject to a maximum penalty of seven years of imprisonment. All of the nine Umbrella Movement activists were unanimously convicted. Eight of them were sentenced to 8–16 months of imprisonment, including four instances of suspended sentences, while the remaining one received a 200-hour community service order.⁵⁵

By manipulating legal procedures, the courts were placed at the center of a political drama, and social activists who were designated offenders were disciplined in ways that sought to mobilize public support against the protesters’ actions. Although the government remained at a distance to avoid being held accountable, businesses aligned with the government played key roles by applying for injunctions, fully supported by the police and pro-establishment media. Attrition thus reflected the logics of strategic repression and outsourced contention against dissent. Instead of imposing direct coercion, attrition is often channelized through nonstate agents and legal procedures to differentiate and punish the key challengers of the regime. While political opponents are intimidated, attrition avoids generating a strong sense of oppression among conservative law-abiding subjects. However, the consequence in Hong Kong, intended or not, was the gradual erosion of the legitimacy of previously respected institutions such as law courts among the pro-democracy supporters.

STIGMATIZATION AND AMBIGUOUS FORBIDDEN ZONES

Unlike in other hybrid regimes, the civil service in Hong Kong is regarded as professional, impartial and shielding civil society despite the absence of democratic institutions.⁵⁶ A series of extraordinary and extralegal administrative interventions to disqualify candidates from the opposition parties and to unseat elected politicians, however, demonstrated a tendency toward collaboration among the

54. Stephen M. Lau, *Hong Kong Legal Principles* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 218–22.

55. *HKSAR v Tai Yiu Ting and others*, DCCC 480/2017.

56. Ming Sing, “Introduction,” in *Politics and Government in Hong Kong: Crisis under Chinese Sovereignty*, ed. Ming Sing (London: Routledge, 2009), 1–13.

Table 2. The Spectrum of Opposition Parties in Post-Occupy Hong Kong

	The Opposition		
	Pro-democracy	Pro-self-determination	Pro-independence
Political platform	Fight for universal suffrage	Right to a civil referendum	Create a Hong Kong nation
Major parties	Democratic Party, Civic-Party, Labor Party, League of Social Democrats, etc.	Demosisto, Land Justice League, Democracy Ground Work	Young Inspirations, Hong Kong Indigenous, Hong Kong National Party
Regime repertoire	No candidates banned from running in elections	All candidates banned from running in elections	All candidates banned from running in elections;
	Only one elected LegCo member disqualified	All but one elected LegCo member disqualified	All elected LegCo members disqualified
	A few protest leaders prosecuted	Majority of the protest leaders prosecuted and imprisoned	All protest leaders prosecuted and imprisoned

PRC party-state, Hong Kong government, and civil service. The Hong Kong government repeatedly proclaimed that the actions against those who advocated independence were legitimate because their platforms were unconstitutional. Table 2 outlines the political spectrum of the opposition vis-à-vis the regime's responses in the post-Occupy period. Among the new post-Occupy parties, the independentists want to build a new nation, whereas the self-determinists want to promote the right to determine Hong Kong's future after 2047, and many of the self-determinists have openly opposed the claim for independence. As summarized in table 2, when the size of the independentist group grew, the political redline (政治紅線) was extended to include self-determinists and to marginalize traditional pan-democrats in the LegCo. The construction of what Rachel Stern and Kevin O'Brien referred to as an ill-defined forbidden zone,⁵⁷ in which opposition politicians can be penalized for previously tolerated actions, is a stigmatization mechanism that both restricts viable opposition candidates from running in elections and labels them as public enemies subject to discipline. This label has the divisive effect of pushing moderate politicians and their electorates from

57. Rachel E. Stern and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Politics at the Boundary: Mixed Signals and the Chinese State," *Modern China* 38, no. 2 (2012): 174–98.

the opposition camp to distance themselves from the radicals. Yet, the moving targets of the forbidden zone suggest that stigmatization has less to do with the *extremism* of a political group than with the *strength* of the group in threatening the political order.

The administrative interventions began to become more aggressive in the 2016 LegCo by-elections. On July 17, 2016, civil servants at the Electoral Affairs Commission suddenly imposed a new qualifying procedure that required all candidates to submit a declaration form stating they accept the statement “Hong Kong is an inalienable part of China” or face invalidation even though the existing nomination form already requires candidates to declare their allegiance to the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and to uphold the Basic Law, which is predicated on Chinese sovereignty. The Hong Kong Bar Association questioned the legal basis for a returning officer to vet and bar candidates. A government spokesman, however, justified the new rule in terms of preserving constitutional order and informing the electorate: “We believe that advocating and promoting the “independence of Hong Kong” is contrary to the content of the declaration that the law requires a candidate to make . . . rendering it questionable as to whether the concerned candidate is capable of being validly nominated, causing uncertainties for the solemn Legislative Council election and confusion for electors.”⁵⁸

All candidates from the pro-democracy and self-determinist factions refused to sign the declaration. Knowing they were also targets, all but two independent candidates signed the declaration. The outcomes, however, were selective and inconsistent: the returning officers permitted all of the pan-democrats to run and admitted all of the self-determinist candidates, including those from Demosisto, the political party co-founded by Joshua Wong and other activists, but barred all pro-independence candidates except for candidates from Youngspiration, a new political party. The returning officers justified their decisions by citing “insincere or non-solemn” declarations in the disqualified candidates’ speeches in forums and posts on social media.

The second round of disqualifications began in the 2018 LegCo by-elections. This time, a returning officer banned Agnes Chow of Demosisto, the most popular candidate contesting the Hong Kong Island constituency. Unlike previously disqualified candidates, she had not made any pro-independence pledge. The returning officer, however, stated that Demosisto’s view advocating a civil referendum to determine the city’s political future was inconsistent with the Basic Law. Simultaneously, another returning officer approved the self-determinist candidate Edward Yiu to contest the election, but the decision came only on the last

58. Hong Kong Government, “Statement by HKSAR Government regarding 2016 Legislative Council Election,” press release, July 14, 2016.

day of the nomination period.⁵⁹ In November 2017, Eddie Chu, a current legislator, was banned from standing in a village election. Although Chu openly opposed independence, a returning officer ruled that his past record indicated that he “implicitly” supported such a platform. Several law professors contended that the evolving disqualification criteria have expanded from vetting concrete behavior to restricting freedom of thought.⁶⁰

The regime’s administrative interventions then expanded from barring candidates from running in elections to unseating elected legislators. On October 12, 2016, Leung Chung-hang and Yau Wai-ching of Youngspiration displayed a “Hong Kong is not China” banner and swore allegiance to the “Hong Kong nation” in their oath-taking ceremony at the inaugural LegCo session. The president of the LegCo invalidated their oaths, but they remained as legislators-elect. Thereafter, the secretary for justice launched a judicial review seeking to disqualify both Leung and Yau. In a special session, the National People’s Congress Standing Committee reinterpreted Article 104 of the Basic Law on what constitutes “not sincere or not solemn” oath-taking. It specified that those who committed this offense should be barred from taking office and from retaking the oath, and this interpretation was to be applied retrospectively.⁶¹ Bound by this reinterpretation, a Hong Kong court unseated the legislators. On December 2, 2016, another three self-determinist legislators and one pan-democrat legislator⁶² were also unseated by the court over their oath-taking manner. After these two rounds of disqualification, the opposition camp lost its minority veto in the LegCo. The pro-establishment camp then reacted quickly to rewrite the rule book to stop filibustering, a mechanism that had been adopted by pan-democrats to obstruct controversial bills.

Table 3 summarizes how the two main pro-establishment newspapers in Hong Kong, both of which are owned by the Liaison Office, framed the disqualifications in 2016. The diagnostic framing (what are the causes) and prognostic framing (what are the solutions) are interrelated, as defining the nature of a problem leads to advocating a solution. If the oath-taking incidents are understood as illegitimate deviant behavior, then the issue is one of litigation, which falls within the jurisdiction of Hong Kong. However, if it is regarded as a separatist attempt, then it concerns central-local relations, which, according to the Basic Law, is subject to National People’s Congress interpretation.

59. Although Edward Yiu associated himself with the politicians in the pro-self-determination faction, he did not openly advocate such a platform.

60. “Hong Kong Lawmaker Eddie Chu’s Ban from Village Election Based on Shaky Argument, Legal Scholars Say,” *South China Morning Post*, December 3, 2018.

61. Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, *Interpretation of Article 104 of the Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China*, November 7, 2016.

62. Leung Kwok-hung is a long-serving pan-democrat who opposed independence but advocated China’s democratization.

Table 3. Framing of the Oath-Taking Disqualifications by Hong Kong's Pro-establishment Newspapers

Diagnostic Frames	Prognostic Frames	Average Frequency
Deviance	Fall within SAR jurisdiction following LegCo rules of procedure and Court of Final Appeal ruling	October 12–November 1
Examples: disgraceful behavior (<i>shuang chou</i>); malicious oath (<i>xieshi</i>); has eroded Hong Kong civic values		6.4 articles per day
Separatist	Subject to Beijing's intervention following National People's Congress interpretation	November 2–19
Examples: pro-independence behavior (<i>bodu</i>); illegal oath; humiliated the Chinese nation (<i>ruguo ruhua</i>)		21.1 articles per day

Note: I have derived this information from 496 articles published in Ta-Kung Pao and Wen-wei Pao between October 12 and November 19, 2016, contained in the WiseNews database.

In stage one, the two state mouthpieces adopted the deviance frame, which designated the opposition localist legislators' oath-taking as disgraceful, malicious acts that eroded Hong Kong's civic values and reflected the immaturity of the localists. Despite the use of colorful language, the two newspapers affirmed the jurisdiction of Hong Kong to adjudicate the misbehavior of the legislators-elect. After the chief executive and the head of the Liaison Office proclaimed on November 1 that the National People's Congress' interpretation was pertinent, the official framing shifted, and the two newspapers' frequency of reporting increased notably. In stage two, they denounced the oath-takers' desire to separate Hong Kong from China, claiming that the pro-independence oath-takers' behavior had not only humiliated the Chinese nation but also disrupted Hong Kong's constitutional order. Concurrently, a record five hundred united front organizations joined hands on November 5 in an "anti-independence, pro-interpretation" rally that claimed to have attracted 40,000 participants. In the week that followed, the two newspapers published 52 articles covering scenes of the rally, arguing that there was substantial public anger against separatism and strong public support for the reinterpretation.

This evolving trajectory displays the operational dynamics of stigmatization. The administrative interventions instigated a forbidden zone that initially derived from the united front work's nationalistic discourse and permitted

propaganda and the countermobilization rally to stigmatize the new opposition groups as public enemies. The accusations that they had transgressed a forbidden zone then deprived the localists of the legal right to participate in electoral politics and the differentiated treatment of candidates caused opposition politicians planning to seek public office to second-guess whether their political stances fell within the regime's permitted boundary.

Another direct consequence was the rise of the "blame game" within the opposition. A widely circulated conspiracy was that Youngspiration was a mole planted by the regime. The accusations were that the party had access to abundant resources despite being green to politics and inactive in previous protests; their leaders had a history of associations with pro-establishment politicians and elite-sponsored associations; and their choice of offensive words and immature behavior antagonized the public and projected an image that they were "insincere and non-solemn."⁶³ While there is no concrete evidence to verify these speculations, the outcome of their actions opened a window of opportunity to split the opposition camp and facilitated the regime's proactive exclusion of the localists. The resultant "witch hunt" weakened the already fragile trust between the supporters of pan-democrats and localists. This distrust was a knee-jerk reaction to the CCP's united front work but also built upon the opposition's desire to seek a hidden pattern in the ambiguous "forbidden zone." Furthermore, the oath-taking controversy quickly overshadowed the opposition's recent electoral victory in the 2016 LegCo election. This victory had been accompanied by a six percent increase in voter turnout, the defeat of two pro-establishment candidates in functional constituencies, and the election of a young cohort of opposition legislators in the geographical constituencies. These results fostered the hope that parliamentary politics and institutional resources could substitute for street politics during the low tide of social movements.

Ambiguous redlines and associated penalties encouraged the opposition to constantly monitor the official boundary, which caused self-censorship in their political platforms and self-restraint in collective actions. The stigmatization also created rifts between different factions in the opposition and encouraged civil servants to submit themselves to the party-state's nationalistic discourse.⁶⁴ In parallel, supporters of Hong Kong localism believed that the territory's formal institutions were impaired and that they had been deprived of real choice and representation, motivating them to boycott elections and protests.

63. "Shiren shigui" [Comrade or scout?], *One Magazine*, November 17, 2016; "Shigui ye shiren," [Both comrade and scout] *MingPao*, November 23, 2016.

64. In December 2018, top central government officials proclaimed that anyone opposing one-party rule should also be banned from seeking political office in Hong Kong, as the PRC's 2018 constitutional amendment stipulated that the CCP leads the country. Fearing that such remarks would constitute evidence to disqualify their future candidacies, some pan-democratic candidates declined to participate in the annual June Fourth vigils to commemorate the Tiananmen protests (interview, veteran activist, January 19, 2019).

In this environment, the main pro-establishment DAB Party swept two geographical constituency seats in two LegCo by-elections in 2018. Since the hand-over in 1997, the pan-democrat politicians had never lost to the pro-establishment politicians under the plurality system or in one-to-one battles. The by-election defeats, however, are questionable: the absolute number of votes gained by pro-establishment politicians remained constant but was accompanied by a declining electoral turnout among youths, from 57.5 to 32.7 percent between the LegCo elections in 2016 and the by-elections in 2018.⁶⁵ The pro-establishment camp won largely because they mobilized their conservative constituencies, while the radical constituencies were demobilized from voting for their choices after the various disqualifications of candidates. The united front's dual goals of managing dissent and winning hearts and minds were only partially achieved.

UNITED FRONT ADAPTATIONS DURING THE 2019 SUMMER OF DISSENT

After a period of abeyance in mass protests after 2014, in 2019 Hong Kong witnessed a summer of massive collective actions. The protests were fluid and diversified, featuring marches, rallies, sit-ins, general strikes, class boycotts, and human chains stretching kilometers. More than a million citizens participated in each of the three largest marches. The anti-extradition movement evolved over the weeks through almost daily “eventful protests,” a term that denotes that the protests were often spontaneous and disruptive, were path-dependent on enduring structures and repertoires, and yet engaged in actions to transform those structures.⁶⁶

Although the anti-extradition movement originated from a single policy initiative by Hong Kong's chief executive, Carrie Lam, the protestors' collective claims for political reform were the culmination of accumulated grievances associated with authoritarian encroachments in the preceding periods. Despite the absence of a formal leadership, protestors quickly went beyond protesting the extradition bill (which Carrie Lam eventually withdrew) and a demand for her resignation and instead reached a consensus that the priority should be to implement universal suffrage so as to make Hong Kong's government accountable to its citizens. In terms of structure, whereas the regime's countermobilization mechanisms had previously impeded highly organized protest movements and had disciplined leading activists, this provoked the upsurge in 2019 of a leaderless organizational structure featuring hidden networks, collective deliberation, and digital activism. The faceless protestors' donning masks in order to hide their

65. Ivan Choy and Jun-wen Chen, “Sanyue buxuan qingnian toupiaolu diefu zui tuchu” [In the March by-elections, the drop in turnout is most salient among the youth], *Ming Pao*, September 19, 2018.

66. William H. Sewell Jr., *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 110 and 270; Donatella della Porta, “Protests as Critical Junctures: Some Reflections towards a Momentous Approach to Social Movements,” *Social Movement Studies* (2018): 1–20.

identities reflected not only a deep distrust of the authorities but also a fear of state reprisals. In terms of strategies, diffusion of “be water” protest tactics, in which protestors fluidly gathered and dispersed and unexpectedly quickly turned up elsewhere in the city in a single evening, is very much a countermeasure to the government’s mechanism of attrition in wrecking organized resistance. The protestors also stuck to an action protocol of “climbing mountains together, while making your own effort,” which successfully stressed the movement’s solidarity and aimed to redress the mechanism of stigmatization that attempted to divide the pan-democrats from the localists and to promote rifts between the peaceful and militant factions of protesters.

The profound changes in political activism in Hong Kong have forced the regime to adjust the tactics of the united front work. But despite making shifts in the operations and visibility of countermobilization during the upheaval, the united front work was still largely embedded in its organizational ecology. The central authorities’ hardliner policy, the collaboration between the local authorities and business elites, and the interplay between the repressive apparatuses and outsourced agents remain essential to operating state-initiated contention. For her part, Chief Executive Carrie Lam, in a leaked audio recording of a closed-door meeting with a group of businesspeople, admitted she has to serve two masters—the PRC authorities as well as the Hong Kong constituencies—and hence lacked the autonomy to make concessions to end the upheaval.⁶⁷

Contested patronage.—Similar to the preceding periods, the “leftist” trade unions and patriotic political parties were the most loyal members of the united front during the 2019 upheaval, and publicly cast their unconditional support for the extradition bill. However, in numerous meetings with government officials, they blamed the Hong Kong government for damaging their support network at the grassroots.⁶⁸

In contrast to the “leftist” patriotic groups, the business elites have been highly skeptical of the extradition bill, fearing it would render their assets subject to Chinese jurisdiction and would hurt Hong Kong’s international status. The period from April to June saw an upsurge of open discontent or passive resistance among this sector of the ruling elite. The cracks this caused in the patronage network established by the party-state was mended temporarily when the LOCPG summoned all of the business representatives to China’s national consultative bodies to urge their support for the chief executive. However, unlike during the Umbrella Movement, when business tycoons immediately and collectively expressed their disapproval of the Occupy protesters, business tycoons in 2019 did not adhere to the government discourse until the anti-extradition movement entered its sixth

67. “The Chief Executive Has to Serve Two Masters—HK Leader Carrie Lam,” *Reuters*, September 12, 2019.

68. Interviews, government official, Hong Kong, July 16, 2019.

week, and only after the *People's Daily* and Xinhua News Agency criticized their silence. Subject to political pressure, many of them issued statements condemning violence, but many signed joint statements using their companies' names instead of personal ones. Li Ka Shing, the most prominent tycoon in Hong Kong, provided ambiguous statements and recommended "more tolerance to the young people," who would be the "masters of our future." In response, the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission and Xinhua News accused Li of "connivance with criminals" and criticized the tycoons' greed and irresponsibility as the root causes of widespread discontent.⁶⁹ Congruently, the state-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission summoned the executives of more than a hundred state-owned enterprises and urged them to increase investment in Hong Kong real estate and tourism and assert a proactive role in the financial hub. "The business elites in Hong Kong are certainly not doing enough. Most of them are just not one of us," said one attendee.⁷⁰ Whether these developments indicate a policy change to crowd out some of the tycoons who had been wooed by the united front and replace them with loyal subordinates or a strategic measure to force local capitalists to make efforts to pacify the social discontent remains uncertain. However, what was revealed is that cracks among the cultivated patriots have deepened.

Coercive attrition.—The hybrid regime adopted more repressive measures during the anti-extradition movement. According to police records, by mid-September the police had fired roughly 3,100 rounds of teargas and 1,100 rubber bullets, bean bag rounds, and react rounds; arrested one and a half thousand people aged 12–72, including 400 students and 300 women; and prosecuted 200 of them, of which 70 were charged with rioting. Parallel to this, attrition efforts were made to impede the movement networks and the protests' logistics, with selective arrests of pro-democracy leaders, speedy prosecutions of protest militants, regular bans on mass protests, and the preemptive suspension of public transport. Confrontations between protesters and police have since been dispersed, pursuing protesters into commercial districts, shopping malls, gated communities, and public-housing estates.

These efforts at coercive attrition largely backfired, entangling the authorities in controversy. Opinion polls revealed that public trust toward the police force dropped significantly on a 10-point scale from 5.6 in late May to 2.9 in early September, and 71.7 percent of respondents believed that the police used excessive violence.⁷¹ In an opinion poll conducted in early September, the secretary of justice received a popularity rating of 17.7 out of 100, which is the lowest rating ever

69. "Hong Kong Tycoon Li Ka-shing Hits Back at 'Unwarranted' Accusations," *South China Morning Post*, September 13, 2019.

70. "China Prods State Firms to Boost Investment in Crisis-Hit Hong Kong," *Reuters*, September 13, 2019.

71. "Population Polls on the Extradition Law Amendment Bill Rounds I–IV," Center for Communication and Public Opinion Research, Chinese University of Hong Kong, May–September 2019.

received by a political appointee in the post-handover period.⁷² This consensus spreading among self-identified democrats and centralists and across age and class suggested that the direct repression not only failed to disperse the crowds but also damaged the credibility of the police and other once-respected public institutions.

Extended stigmatization.—The forbidden zone has become rigid and broader, covering individual speech and behavior in public and semiprivate spheres. On June 12, Hong Kong authorities denounced militant protesters as rioters and differentiated them from moderate protesters. While the Chinese news media censored reports on the protests until June, they intensively and exclusively reported violent scenes thereafter. From July to August, the State Council's Hong Kong and Macau Office framed the movement as "riots," that "contain features of color revolutions," and "show signs of terrorism." The need "to stop violence and end chaos" (止暴制亂) and to combat foreign interference denoted that the central government had classified the protest movement as a national security threat. These labels aim not only to prevent diffusion to the mainland of sentiments favorable to the protestors but also to mobilize nationalist sentiment to provide justification for emergency measures whenever necessary.

Correspondingly, the targets of stigmatization are no longer restricted to the radical protestors but have been extended to include pan-democrats, journalists, teachers, professionals, and ordinary citizens participating in nonviolent actions, as well as private companies permitting such actions. One notable example was the reprisals against the management and employees of Cathay Pacific who respectively permitted and participated in the general strike on August 8 and other protests. Besides the forced resignations of the chairman and CEO of the airline, the PRC authorities demanded further reprisals. As of mid-September, more than a hundred flight attendants and members of ground crews at Cathay Pacific had been fired because of protest participation or comments on social media. Individuals' actions and opinions in the workplace and in social life have thus been subject to scrutiny and discipline.

Intensified counterprotests.—After the mass protests erupted, countermobilization intensified but remained divided between nucleus and satellite groups. An ad hoc alliance against the protest movement organized three large rallies on June 30, July 20, and August 17. Although the organizers claimed that the three rallies drew 165,000, 316,000, and 476,000 people, respectively, the venues could accommodate only 20,000 to 80,000 people, and they were not fully occupied. Prominent pro-establishment politicians and businesspeople attended the rallies, and their declarations evolved from supporting the police to restoring order and opposing foreign interference, which corresponded to the shift in government

72. "Popularity of Secretaries of Departments and Directors of Bureau," Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute, September 2019.

discourses. I attended the rallies, and I found that hometown associations and local federations formed the mobilizing core. They recruited their everyday clients and drew upon the older generation and new immigrants from mainland China. Participants from the hometown associations were eager to show their organizational affiliations yet were suspicious about talking to me. Even when they shared their views, they worried that their personal opinions could not represent the collective views. My impression was that the nuclei groups' rallies were adequately organized but their supporters were not very devoted.

In parallel, the satellite groups became active but were unregulated. Some of these groups destroyed the walls of protest posters and pro-protest notes in each district, confronted protesters in shopping malls, or besieged schools during class boycotts. The most violent episode occurred the night of July 21, when hundreds of white-shirted men indiscriminately attacked civilians at the Yuen Long train station and in train coaches at an hour when protest participants were returning home from a major rally in the city. The disappearance of the police in Yuen Long that evening aroused widespread accusations that the police had colluded with thugs to intimidate protesters. By reviewing closed-circuit video footage, a Radio Television Hong Kong documentary confirmed that hundreds of men carrying thick sticks and rods had gathered outside the Yuen Long station a few hours before the attack. Several police vehicles passed by, but none of them stopped to interrogate the mob. A member of the Yuen Long district council who is a pro-establishment lawyer connected to clan associations and rural village committees was videotaped giving several members of the mob a thumbs-up, calling them "heroes" and saying "thank you for your hard work."⁷³ In other districts that are strongholds of the pro-regime camp, similar smaller attacks subsequently occurred. Although these attacks amplified the outsourced contention between people, they also exposed the violent crudity of some of the satellite groups, which compromised the regime's overall goal to manage dissent.

CONCLUSION

The PRC and Hong Kong authorities deem that, in order to maintain regime stability, they must not only recruit allies and suppress dissidents but also set boundaries on the claims and actions they would tolerate. Hence, during the years since the massive pro-civil liberties rally in 2003, the united front apparatus has deepened its countermobilization efforts in Hong Kong to manage and preempt challenges from below. First and foremost, in this earlier period patronage secured the loyalty of many of the business elite, laying the groundwork for a counterprotest to diminish the political space and weaken the mobilization capacity of the

73. "721 Yuen Long Nightmare," *Hong Kong Connection*, Radio Television Hong Kong, July 29, 2019, <https://www.rthk.hk/tv/dtt31/programme/hkcc/episode/579157>.

opposition. In parallel, the repressive mechanisms of attrition and stigmatization increased the potential costs of participating in protests and also demobilized supporters from engaging in elections. To achieve this, outsourcing contention and use of the legal system to exercise repression and stigmatization have been put into play to hamper the protesters' momentum.

Admittedly, these multifaceted repertoires were not innovations of the Hong Kong regime. Ruling elites in other hybrid regimes increasingly have been exposed to free information flows and electoral contestation, which makes large-scale repression more difficult and costly to implement. What makes the Hong Kong case special is that these mechanisms have operated under the ecology of a special hybrid regime with preexisting civil liberties and rule of law. The tasks of subverting these liberal institutions without provoking mass discontent and ensuring that state apparatuses and outsourced agents do not substantially deviate from the regime's agenda have become demanding. The Hong Kong government has formally accommodated freedom of assembly and speech and crafts a façade of domestic autonomy while simultaneously seeking to stifle dissent through countermobilization. Some of the new grassroots counterprotest groups, which seek recognition and reward, have been encouraged to adopt aggressive tactics and to push forward redlines to differentiate themselves from the traditional "leftist" unions and parties that are constrained by electoral considerations.

I have argued in this article that historical legacies and new forms of patronage have provided the PRC's apparatus in Hong Kong with patriotic allies, abundant resources, and discursive tools to implement its agenda and to monitor its allies and agents. Benefits were doled out to those in need in working-class neighborhoods, and public housing estates gain a larger base of support. Once the united front work grew endogenously and became publicly observable in the years after Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, the united front not only openly rewarded collaborators and attacked challengers but also convinced moderate elites and parts of the undecided populace that accommodating themselves to the new political order in Hong Kong rather than engaging in contention was their best available alternative. This approach worked among a diverse number of Hong Kong constituencies at the grass roots, as evidenced by bolstered electoral support for pro-establishment and pro-Beijing parties.

Alongside this, other mechanisms of countermobilization in Hong Kong bear the learning curve of contemporary authoritarianism. Contrary to the conventional view that legal institutions, modern bureaucracy, civil society organizations, and social media are defenders of an open society, if not prerequisites for democratic transition, these can be manipulated by the hybrid regime to justify coercion, to avoid accountability, or to amplify contention between people. Hiding behind respected legal institutions and nonstate agents, the hybrid regime has managed to achieve a duality of proactivity and detachment, thereby impairing organized resistance and avoiding political accountability. Consequently,

rather than serving as China's offshore civil society to cultivate liberal ideas and demonstrate civic practices for mainland China, Hong Kong has steadily been utilized as a dependent laboratory in which to experiment with increasingly authoritarian protocols.

Nevertheless, although the regime's reactive and preemptive repertoires have constrained organized resistance during some recent periods, they have not enabled the regime to win the hearts and minds of the majority of the populace. Routine dependency on the united front work and on Beijing's backing has not only cost the hybrid regime legitimacy but also implicitly revealed the limitations of its autonomy. The resilience of the summer of dissent in 2019 along with the protest movement's tactical ingenuity, internal solidarity, and international appeal are repercussions of the countermobilization mechanisms. These new developments have forced the PRC and local authorities to readjust the targets of coercion and have increased the costs of countermobilization. In Gramscian terms, while the war of maneuvers has been forcefully contested through the regime's countermobilization efforts, the war of position is far from over.⁷⁴

74. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: International Publisher, 1971), 97.