

Explaining Localism in Post-handover Hong Kong

An Eventful Approach

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ABSTRACT: The pro-democracy movement in post-handover Hong Kong had long been an intense struggle between the hybrid regime and pro-democracy civil society. Since the early 2010s, a new political force, broadly known as the localists, has entered the political domain through a series of protest events and elections. However, just as they gained a foothold in politics, the hybrid regime swiftly moved in to clamp down on the nascent movement to keep them out of the political system. What explains the ebbs and flows of Hong Kong's localist movement? This essay posits that localism is not an inevitable product of the macro-structural socio-political process, but an amalgam of ideas and action logics assembled sequentially through events and discursive constructions. We argue that localism first emerged through the interplay between anti-mainlandisation protests and both online and intellectual discourse, and officially ascended to the political stage after the Umbrella Movement. Despite their meteoric rise, localists' militant actions have allowed the hybrid regime to marginalise the nascent force through legal and non-legal repression, which has in turn created a "divided structure of contestation" among the opposition.

KEYWORDS: localism, Hong Kong, democratisation, China, protests, hybrid regime, civil society.

Introduction

The pro-democracy movement in post-handover Hong Kong has long been an intense struggle between two contending forces: on the one hand, a hybrid regime buttressed by a dense network of local business elites and backed by its authoritarian principal, the People's Republic of China (Case 2008; Fong 2013); and on the other, a loosely-knitted network of pro-democracy parties and civic groups that promotes constitutional reforms, scrutinises the regime, and mobilises at critical times to disrupt unpopular government plans (Ma 2005; Cheng 2016). Since the early 2010s, however, a new political force, broadly known as the localists (*bentupai* 本土派), has emerged in the political domain. Gaining their voice through a series of anti-mainlandisation protests, the localists rallied to defend local autonomy, interests, and culture against what they saw as a relentless trend of "mainlandisation." Following the 2014 Umbrella Movement, the localists went on to establish political parties and won a considerable number of seats in both the 2015 District Council election and the 2016 Legislative Council election. However, as soon as they gained a foothold in politics, the hybrid regime swiftly moved in to clamp down on the nascent movement with hard-line measures to exclude them from the political system. Localist candidates were disqualified from elected offices and barred from entering elections, and a rising countermovement against the localists has also been launched by pro-regime groups.

What explains the ebbs and flows of Hong Kong's localist movement?¹ Why did the localists grow strong after the Umbrella Movement but quickly become marginalised? In this article, we posit that localism is not an inevitable product of the macro-structural social process, but an amalgam of ideas and action logics assembled sequentially through events and discursive constructions. Using Sewell's eventful perspective, we argue that local-

ism first emerged through the interplay between anti-mainlandisation protests and both online and intellectual discourse, and then ascended to the political stage after the Umbrella Movement. Despite their meteoric rise, localists' militant actions have allowed the hybrid regime to marginalise the nascent force through legal and non-legal repression, which has in turn created what Okar-Lust calls a "divided structure of contestation" among the opposition (Lust-Okar 2005). An eventful angle will allow us to understand not only the origins—but also the complexity and weakness—of the localist movement. It will demonstrate that the localists cannot be simply understood as a singular or an inexorable force.

Hong Kong's localist movement

While many studies on Hong Kong politics have focused on the contention between the hybrid regime and the pro-democracy forces, recent works have started to shed light on the rise of the localist movement. Two analytical perspectives can be delineated from these works. One perspective tends to analyse the localist movement from a structural angle, interpreting it as a product of Hong Kong's socio-economic and political development and its changing relationship with mainland China. Kwong Ying-ho attributes the rise of localism to the "transition fatigue" of Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement and the deepening integration with mainland China (Kwong 2016). While Kaeding agrees that the "China factor" has played a crucial role in this process, he also points to the hard-line measures under C.Y. Leung's administration, which together triggered political resistance especially among the younger generation in the hope of defending local interests and identity (Kaeding 2017), a point echoed by Chan Che-Po in his obser-

1. Throughout this article, the localist movement will be used interchangeably with localism.

vation of Hong Kong's student movement after the Umbrella Movement (Chan 2016). Without challenging the contributing role of the "China factor," Chan argues that local socio-economic problems are also relevant in triggering the rise of localism. Analysing the localist discourse in the media through the framework of "discursive opportunity structure," Chan offers a wider range of explanation beyond political factors (Chan 2017).

Another perspective analyses the rise of localism in terms of the development of nationalism or shifts in national identification. A clear example is Fong's work, which sees localism as the manifestation of peripheral nationalism that seeks to resist incorporation by the Chinese government and its state-building nationalism (Fong 2017). Similarly, using polling data on national identification, Yew and Kwong point to the rise of Hong Kong identity as the fundamental driving force of localism. The trend of growing local identity, they argue, is historically rooted in the values and norms embedded by social development since the 1970s, and is now fostered by rapid economic integration with mainland China and Beijing's interventionist approach. While also acknowledging this shifting trend of identification, Veg develops a more sophisticated theoretical model to understand the nature of identity changes in two dimensions: the framework of identification (local versus pan-Chinese) and the mode of identification (ethno-cultural versus civic). By focusing on several protest events, Veg observes that civic-based identification with a local democratic community is becoming increasingly incompatible with the ethno-cultural identity that is being promoted by the Beijing government (Veg 2017).

Both perspectives have undoubtedly contributed to a deeper understanding of the fundamental drivers of the nascent localist movement. However, there is a tendency among these works to consider localism as a structural product that results reactively from socio-economic and political changes. Take Fong's work as an example: despite its extensive research, the study characterises the localist movement as a form of peripheral nationalism reacting against China's state-building nationalism. While we do not fundamentally disagree with such an interpretation, we argue that it might risk underemphasising the role of agency in the process—how different social and political actors, including activists, intellectuals, politicians, netizens, online opinion leaders, and state actors, shape and reshape localism in a non-linear and contingent fashion. Structural factors are no doubt still relevant in explaining the rise of localism, but more attention should be paid to the role of agency in order to understand why the localist movement manifests in its present shape, as well as why the movement rises and falls in terms of its political and mobilisation power, despite the structural impetus. An alternative analytical framework is thus needed to account for not only the emergence, but also the vicissitudes of the localist movement.

William Sewell's "eventful sociology" may offer a useful framework in this regard. Recognising the power of historical events in transforming social structures, Sewell calls for an eventful notion of temporality to focus on how events shape and reshape human actions and meanings across space and time. For Sewell, events are defined loosely as "a ramified sequence of occurrences that is recognized as notable by contemporaries, and that results in a durable transformation of structures" (Sewell 2005: 228). Distinguishing from what he identifies as teleological and experimental temporality, eventful temporality assumes that social relations are characterised by "path dependence, temporally heterogeneous causalities and global contingency" (Sewell 2005: 102). This means that although events are often path-dependent and contingent happenings that mostly reproduce the underlying social structure, sometimes they can transform struc-

ture by rearranging social relations and changing the cultural categories that shape and constrain human actions. Social processes, as Sewell concludes, are "inherently contingent, discontinuous and open-ended" (Sewell 2005: 110). By focusing on the disruptive power of events and the role of a wide range of political actors, the eventful approach is thus more likely to produce a nuanced account of socio-political changes. In our case, it will allow us to illuminate how the localist movement in post-handover Hong Kong is constituted and shaped by protest events, public discourse, and regime actions.

Methodology

This article adopts a mixed method to understand the eventful development of Hong Kong's localist movement. First, we conducted a bottom-up search in Wisenews, an online database of full-text newspapers, for all kinds of protest events that took place in Hong Kong from 2008 to 2017. To ensure that the search results were comprehensive but did not outstrip our ability to screen them, we limited our search to two newspapers, *Ming Pao*, a widely-read paper that claims to be politically neutral, and *Wen Wei Po*, a pro-Beijing, state-controlled paper.⁽²⁾ Out of the search results, we identified 31 protest events that carried the aims of protecting local resources, interests, and identity. Based on these reports, together with other related online and offline publications, we then traced the rise and development of the localist movement through selected protest events. Besides the localist protests, we further identified 186 counter-protests organised by pro-regime organisations, 31 of which were targeted localist protests, to understand how the state responded to the nascent movement. Second, we conducted semi-structured interviews with seven localist activists from March to July 2017 to gain an insider view of their work. Our interviewees include leaders of localist organisations (n=2), their core members (n=2), social media opinion leader (n=2), and a frequent participant of localist protests (n=1). Interview questions include, for example, why they decided to join the localist bloc; what distinguishes them from traditional pro-democracy activists; how they participated in politics; and how they perceived the prospect of localism.

The eventful rise of localism

Since the 2003 July 1 rally, when half a million citizens demonstrated against the impending national security legislation, mass protests have become inseparable from the political development of post-handover Hong Kong. Although these protests were motivated by a wide range of issues, from heritage preservation to the issuing of TV licenses, underlying many of them was the determination to protect the city's eroding civic freedom and the aspiration of liberalising the partially democratic political system (Ma 2005). These protests tended to follow the principle of being "peaceful, rational, non-violent, and non-profane," and their objective was to obtain policy concessions from the government through large turnouts, rather than to create chaos (Cheng 2016). Beginning from 2011, however, a new type

2. We selected these two newspapers for the purpose of recording both the localist protests and the counter-mobilisations organised by the pro-Beijing camp. Most of the localist protests were likely to have been reported in *Ming Pao*, although recent changes to its editorship have raised worries about its pro-Beijing tendencies. Meanwhile, most of the pro-Beijing counter-mobilisations were likely to be captured by the state-controlled *Wen Wei Po*. We did not select a pro-democracy paper because our aim is merely to record events, rather than doing content analysis on how different newspapers report the events.

of protest has come under the spotlight. Rather than mobilising on issues related to civil liberties, political reform, or urban redevelopment, these emerging protests focused on livelihood problems stemming from the increasing interactions between Hong Kong and mainland China. Protesters rallied on the grounds of protecting daily necessities, such as milk powder and hospital beds, which, they complained, were often in short supply given the influx of mainland tourists and migrants. More confrontational repertoires of contention, which defied the conventional protest norms of being civil and orderly, also began to emerge.

Dissent first began with the heated issue of birth tourism. Following the Court of Final Appeal decision in 2001 that Chinese citizens born in Hong Kong would enjoy the right of abode, Hong Kong saw an influx of pregnant women visiting from mainland China to give birth to their infants, known locally as “anchor babies.” In 2010, for instance, babies born to mainland mothers in Hong Kong totalled 32,000, accounting for about 40% of all births.⁽³⁾ Fears that birth tourism would cause shortages of hospital resources fuelled growing criticisms against these visiting pregnant women. Tensions began to emerge online in April 2011. Netizens from the Golden Forum, a popular Internet chatroom, planned an online “attack” on a mainland online forum called “Community for Giving Birth in Hong Kong” by spamming it with protest messages. Some netizens then turned to Facebook and set up a page called “Oppose Mainland Pregnant Women Coming to Hong Kong to Give Birth! Let’s Show 100,000 Likes to the Government.” A strongly worded manifesto was posted:

Giving birth is the happiest thing in life. It is also women’s natural duty and pride. However, Hong Kong’s locust-defending politicians, fake social workers, wily lawyers, profiteering intermediaries and hospitals, and mediocre government ministers—they are all self-serving and have betrayed local women for a long time (...). We are a group of Hong Kong citizens who do not participate in political and factional struggle. We are a purely self-mobilised movement whose primary goal is to support local pregnant women and their babies (...).⁽⁴⁾

The growing discontent quickly spilled into the streets. From late 2011 onwards, protests against birth tourism erupted constantly, with turnouts varying from a few hundred to thousands. Netizens, many of them young parents, even started raising funds for their campaigns through Internet forums, namely the Golden Forum and Baby Kingdom, an online parenting community, to place a full-page, coloured advertisement in local newspapers. Emblazoned with the headline “Enough, Hongkongers!,” the advertisement published on 1 February 2012 began by asking rhetorically if citizens were willing to spend a million Hong Kong dollars every 18 minutes to raise an anchor child. Using an overtly xenophobic tone, the advertisement urged the government to revise Article 24 of the Basic Law and to stop pregnant women from visiting from the mainland. Also printed on the background of the advertisement was a locust standing on top of Lion Rock, a mountain often used to symbolise the hardworking spirit of Hong Kong citizens. Prior to this advertisement, the term “locusts” had been used as an insult in online forums for quite a while when people criticised mainlanders for swarming the city and draining its resources. In early 2011, it also became the theme of a parody song entitled “Locusts Everywhere,” which went viral on the Internet. It was, however, this advertisement that catapulted the term to public attention. Despite sparking criticism against its offensive and discriminatory wording, the xenophobic advertisement resonated with

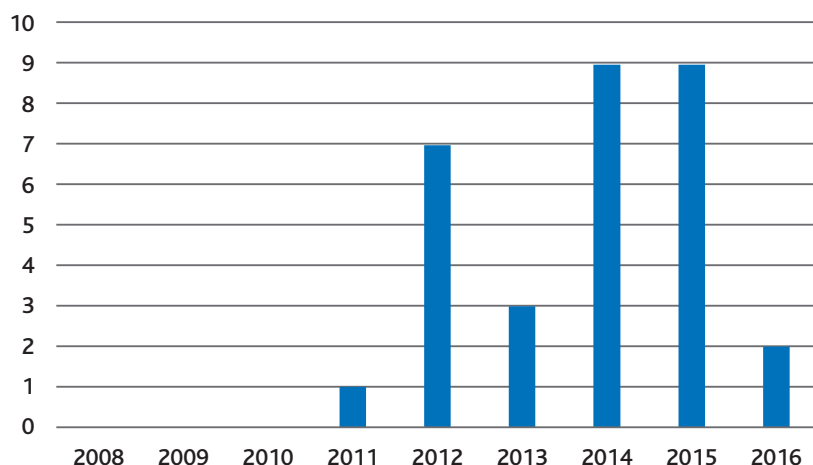
those who had been outraged by the situation. It was also seen as a countering move against earlier remarks made by Peking University professor Kong Qingdong, who called Hongkongers “bastards” and “running dogs of the British government.”⁽⁵⁾

The discontent spread to a related problem—the increasing number of mainland tourists visiting Hong Kong. Since the introduction of the Individual Visit Scheme in 2003, which was part of the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) to boost local tourism, the number of mainland tourists has grown exponentially. The liberalisation scheme not only led to overcrowding in public transport and shopping areas, but also altered Hong Kong’s retail landscape as jewellery shops and pharmacies began to mushroom in urban areas mainly to serve mainland visitors. An incident at the Dolce & Gabbana (D&G) flagship store crystallised the growing discontent. In early January 2012, following reports that a security guard at the store had stopped a photographer from taking pictures of the shop and allegedly said that only mainlanders would be allowed to do so, several rallies were held in front of the store, with turnouts ranging from a few hundred to over a thousand. The boiling anger eventually forced the Italian fashion brand to release an official apology to placate public outrage.

The photo ban incident bolstered anti-mainlandisation sentiment and galvanised attention on the issue of parallel trading. Due to the rising purchasing power of mainland citizens and their growing demand for quality products, parallel traders, some of whom are mainland visitors taking advantage of multiple entry visas (others are local citizens), have seized the opportunity to smuggle highly-demanded goods, such as baby formula and diapers, across the border. These activities have caused shortages of household goods in many North District towns bordering Shenzhen and exacerbated the problem of overcrowding in streets and public transports. Emboldened by the recent success of the D&G protest, netizens again called for protests through Facebook and online forums. For several days in mid-September 2012, hundreds of protesters, many wearing facemasks to conceal their identity,⁽⁶⁾ gathered around the Sheung Shui MTR station and yelled insults at parallel traders, calling them “locusts” and “chee-na,” a derogatory term for China often associated with its use by the Japanese during the Second World War. Given the name “Liberate Sheung Shui,” these protests involved intense physical clashes between protesters and those they identified from appearance as parallel traders, which was partly intended as a strategy to gain public attention and force the authorities to take action.

Some netizens went offline and established an advocacy group called “North District Parallel Imports Concern Group” to coordinate the actions. Intermittent protests continued into early 2013, forcing the railway authorities to set restrictions on carry-on luggage on trains and the government to eventually impose a two-can quota on baby formula. While the problem of parallel trading was temporarily eased, anti-mainlandisation sentiment continued to intensify over the following months. Numerous groups, many

3. “Chinese ‘Birth Tourists’ to Hong Kong Double,” *The Telegraph*, 9 February 2012, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/hongkong/9072457/Chinese-birth-tourists-to-Hong-Kong-double.html> (accessed on 26 April 2018).
4. Facebook page of “Oppose Mainland Pregnant Women Coming to Hong Kong to Give Birth! Let’s Show 100,000 Likes to the Government,” <https://www.facebook.com/itsimetosayno/> (accessed on 27 April 2018).
5. “HK People Labelled as Dogs by Mainlander,” *South China Morning Post*, 21 January 2012.
6. One interviewee, who is a frequent participant in localist protests, said that he wore a facemask as a preparatory measure for more confrontational protest actions, so that he would not be recognised by the police from photos or videos of the protest. Interview with Freddie Wong in a café in Hong Kong, 5 April 2017.

Figure 1 – Number of anti-mainlandisation protests from 2009 to 2016

Note: Anti-mainlandisation protests include rallies and demonstrations on issues such as immigrants, anchor babies, milk formula, parallel trading, and tourists.
Source: *Wiseneews*.

of which first emerged online, were established with an anti-mainlandisation agenda and the objective of protecting local interests and culture. In early 2014, some of these groups formed an *ad hoc* coalition under the banner of "anti-mainlandisation and anti-colonisation." After mobilising a rally on New Year's Day in 2014, the coalition, led by Leung Kam Sing, a founder of the "North District Parallel Imports Concern Group," organised a protest on Tsim Sha Tsui's Canton Road in early February aimed at "expelling the locusts." Scuffles broke out as protesters waved slogans and shouted insulting remarks at mainland shoppers, and as they confronted pro-Beijing countermovement groups.

The increasing number of anti-mainlandisation protests, as shown in Figure 1, shows the symptom of increasing socio-economic interaction between Hong Kong and mainland China. Although the two economies were interconnected long before the handover, the process of integration accelerated after 2008 as China had joined the World Trade Organisation and was set to become a global economic powerhouse. The rising purchasing power of Chinese citizens fuelled a spending spree on items ranging from daily goods to luxury merchandise to offshore properties. Hong Kong's economy no doubt has benefited from mainlanders' growing affluence thanks to the city's geographical proximity to the mainland, but the increasing influx of capital and people has also brought adverse impact on local livelihood, as manifested by the problem of tourism and parallel trading, which the HKSAR government has failed to address.

The fact that these anti-mainlandisation sentiments were framed as a matter of resource competition as opposed to more overtly political concerns makes an important point. Previous protests have not directly touched upon these problems, nor have they engaged seriously with the question of how to deal with the rising political and economic power of China. Even though protests such as the Anti-Express Rail-link movement did look at the issue of cross-border integration, the focus was more on abstract issues such as urban redevelopment rather than on the tangible impact on citizens' everyday lives. That these anti-mainlandisation protests directly addressed these livelihood concerns partly explains why they gained traction so quickly after they broke out. It is important to mention, however, that although these concerns were tangible, they were sometimes exaggerated and amplified by political actors to capture societal and media attention.

As Leung Kam Shing, convenor of the "North District Parallel Imports Concern Group," said in a radio interview, "We have exhausted every possible milder option that we could think of; that is why we staged this kind of more radical, direct protest to draw the government's attention."⁽⁷⁾ By participating in these actions, protesters engaged in what Ip calls "boundary-making practices" with visible targets (Ip 2015), namely pregnant women, parallel traders, and shoppers, through which they empowered themselves as political subjects vis-a-vis what they perceived as symbols of the expanding economic presence and power of China. More importantly, the protests helped to create a loose network of activists and supporters aligned around the imperative to protect the interests of the local population and autonomy from the growing influence of China, which

would be reactivated after the Umbrella Movement. One of the leaders of the Hong Kong National Party, a localist party formed in 2016, said that while he did not participate in these protests, the idea of protecting local interests that they promoted did leave a strong impression on him.⁽⁸⁾

New organisational logic and repertoires could also be observed from these protests. Unlike previous protests, which were mostly organised by traditional pro-democracy political parties and civic groups, these protests were initiated and coordinated through online platforms, namely Facebook and Internet chatrooms, by netizens who had little or no experience in politics and preferred to conceal their identity. Empowered by social media while lacking a centralised leadership, these citizen self-mobilisations (Lee 2015) are close to what Bennett and Segerberg call "crowd-enabled connective actions," in which protesters adjoin in physical spaces through the mediation of digital networks and act under personalised action frames rather than collective ones (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). Their repertoires also deviated from previous protests. Eschewing the peaceful and nonviolent protest ethos that has long characterised the city's political activism (Ku 2004; Cheng 2016), protesters employed militant and confrontational tactics to advance their objectives. And even though their objective was still to press for certain changes in government policies, their protest targets were not so much the government authorities but rather specific groups of people. As such, these localist protests no longer resemble what Ma Ngok calls "civil society in defence," where citizens rally to defend their civil and political rights against authoritarian advances (Ma 2005). Although these protests were still defensive in the sense of protecting the *status quo*, they were grounded in the belief that militant and aggressive actions are more effective in reversing and resisting socio-political changes.

Fighting a two-way battle

While this sequence of anti-mainlandisation protests created a loose community of like-minded activists and supporters, localism had not yet been

7. D100 radio program, 7 March 2015, available at <https://www.d100.net/%E3%80%8A%E7%B6%AD%E5%A4%9A%E5%88%A9%E4%BA%9E%E8%AC%9B-%E5%85%89%E5%BE%A9%E8%A1%8C%E5%8B%95%E3%80%8B-%E4%B8%BB%E6%8C%81-%E6%9E%97%E9%9D%9E%E3%80%81%E5%80%AB%E7%88%BA-%E3%80%81/> (accessed on 10 May 2018).

8. Interview with Jason Chow in a café in Hong Kong, 2 March 2017.

defined and articulated as a political discourse. One way for localist activists to carve out a new discursive space in the political domain is to differentiate themselves from pro-democracy parties and groups. Hence, rather than joining with veteran democrats as allies, localists considered them competitors, arguing that their dominance of the political opposition was the reason that the pro-democracy movement had been stagnant. A new battlefield was thus waged against the pro-democracy camp, the ensuing power struggle demonstrated by the discursive construction of the term "leftards" (*zuojiao* 左膠). This term was invented by a political commentator, Kay Lam, initially to characterise pro-democracy activists who sympathise with Chinese immigrants owing to their liberal and cosmopolitan values.⁽⁹⁾ It later gained traction in online forums and social media platforms during the anti-mainlandisation protests, in which "leftards" were attacked for being the "collaborators" who have aggravated the influx of mainlanders.

The usage of "leftards" not only became a discursive weapon for localists to shore up political influence, but also expanded to take aim at a broader range of behaviour. The annual June 4th candlelight vigil in Victoria Park, at which hundreds of thousands of citizens have mourned the deaths of participants in the 1989 Tiananmen Movement, became a target of the localists. Localists accused the organiser, the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China (hereafter the Alliance), of capitalising on the vigil to garner votes while promoting a pan-Chinese identity. The latter, localists argued, was manifested in the theme of the 2013 candlelight vigil, which included the slogan "love the country, love the people" (*aiguo aimin* 愛國愛民). Leaders and participants were labelled "pan-Chinese idiots" (*dazhonghuajiao* 大中華膠), a variant of "leftard," because they were seen as putting the goal of China's democratisation before the pursuit of local democracy and the protection of local interests. Such a view was actively promoted by Chin Wan, an academic seen by many as the ideological godfather of localism. After the 2013 vigil, Chin wrote on his Facebook page:

Hong Kong cannot be rescued. This is not because of the Chinese Communist Party, but because she has been kidnapped by the pan-democrats and the Alliance. The Alliance has kidnapped Hong Kong people's conscience. These people kneel and pray at its evil altar every year. When there are righteous people who vow to boycott the Alliance and smash the altar so as to liberate them, their attitude is to stay with the kidnappers, cursing and resisting their liberators.⁽¹⁰⁾

Chin argued that the tendency of traditional democrats to fight for China's democratisation is due to their Chinese nationalist ideology, which also explained why they were reluctant to defend the boundary between Hong Kong and the mainland. In his influential book, *Hong Kong as a City-state*, which later became a "manifesto" for localism, Chin propounds the idea of city-state, an autonomous and *de facto* independent political entity that would best serve the interests of Hong Kong (Chin 2013). Chin argues that Hong Kong had in fact been ruled as a *de facto* city-state under British colonial rule and the early handover years. But such a status has deteriorated since 2003 with the influx of mainland migrants and tourists, which threaten local institutions and social customs. In Chin's view, it is erroneous to think that China's democratisation would bring about democracy in Hong Kong. Even if China democratises, he argues, the lack of traditional culture and social trust in China, which had been destroyed under Communist rule, would result in a kind of fascist politics that would subordinate Hong Kong under centralised control (Chin 2013: 51-52). In this regard, a "Hong Kong-

first" approach fighting for a hard boundary with the mainland will be the best solution to defend Hong Kong's city-state autonomy, through which traditional Chinese culture and the Cantonese language can be preserved and genuine democracy can be achieved.

While Chin's bold theories do not seem to have gained broad support, his harsh criticism of the June 4th candlelight vigil was nevertheless influential. After that, localist groups began to organise parallel commemorations in other venues. In 2013, netizens started an alternative vigil outside the Tsim Sha Tsui Cultural Centre. In the following year, the Student Union of the University of Hong Kong initiated a parallel vigil on campus, claiming a turnout of 1,000 people. Vowing that Hong Kong people have no responsibility to build a democratic China, these parallel vigils discarded the rituals seen in the Victoria Park ceremony, such as singing songs, as well as any symbols and references that might invoke Chinese nationalist sentiments. Organisers argued that the commemoration should be grounded in universal values (such as human rights) rather than patriotic or nationalistic values, and should focus on the local significance of June 4th. Under mounting pressure from localist groups, the Alliance eventually backed down and dropped the slogan "love the country, love the people" from the 2013 theme. The style of the vigil was also modified to appeal to a younger audience, such as by inviting young people as speakers.

Besides referring to those who embrace Chinese nationalism, the term "leftards" was also employed by the localists to attack social activists who have adopted a more moderate protest approach and a more tolerant attitude towards mainlanders. More specifically, their target was those who led a series of heritage preservation campaigns from 2005 to 2007 and later the Anti-Express Rail-link movement. Mobilising under the name of "post-80s youths" and forming groups such as Local Action, this earlier generation of "localists" was among the first to draw attention to local consciousness. Aligning with traditional democrats while differentiating themselves from them, the "post-80s youths" called for a new way of reforming the entrenched political structure by focusing on a range of issues outside constitutional reform (Lam-Knott 2018). However, their liberal orientation also became a point of criticism for localists. Unwilling to endorse localists' anti-immigrant attitudes and their xenophobic actions in the anti-mainlandisation protests, these activists were branded as "leftards" who were incapable of protecting local interests and standing up to Beijing. They were also accused of inhibiting protests in a way that prevented these protests from achieving successful outcomes. This kind of criticism emerged in the 2012 Anti-National Education Movement, when protest leaders were blamed for withdrawing just as the government offered concessions. A participant, Shandia, who became a localist activist and a regular media contributor, recalled how she felt disappointed with the movement leaders during that time, and how this turned her into a sceptic of peaceful and non-violent protests.⁽¹¹⁾

Localists' struggle against what they branded as "leftards" became most salient during the 2014 Umbrella Movement, when multiple protest camps emerged in reaction to the repressive use of tear gas by the police. In the Mongkok protest camp, which attracted protesters with localist and militant

9. "立法禁止除褲放屁" (*Li fa jin zhi chu ku fang pi*, Legislation prohibiting taking off pants before farting), *PlasticHK*, 13 January 2009, http://plastic.hk.blogspot.hk/2009/01/blog-post_1734.html (accessed on 27 April 2018).

10. A post on Chin Wan's Facebook page, 5 June 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/wan.chin.75/posts/10151606625682225> (accessed on 14 August 2018).

11. Interview with Shandia in a café in Hong Kong, 7 June 2017.

orientations, condemnation of “leftards” became visible from the start. Posters urging protesters to “beware of the leftards,” and sometimes even listing the names of prominent “leftard” activists, could be seen on lamp-posts and sidewalks around the camp. Such tensions were aggravated by the ensuing dynamics in the Mongkok camp. As protesters defended the camp against the incursion of mobsters, counter-protesters, and police officers, these militant actions lent legitimacy to the framing of the Mongkok camp by the localists as their stronghold. Andy Chan, founder of the Hong Kong National Party, said that his localist political beliefs and the idea of organising a political party were fermented in Mongkok, where he fought vehemently against the counterforces and where he made the first public speech of his life.⁽¹²⁾ As Civic Passion similarly wrote later in their book documenting what they call the “Umbrella Revolution” (Passion Times 2016):

In Mongkok, protesters kept on resisting against the enemies, and this allowed localist consciousness to gradually take over the protest camp. (...) From now on, localist consciousness will be unstoppable.

Left-wing activists in the Mongkok camp were gradually marginalised, particularly after the so-called “hotpot incident,” in which they were reproached for turning a serious protest into entertainment (Yuen 2018).

The electoral success of localism

The “failure” of the Umbrella Movement to achieve any concessions from the authorities was a traumatic experience for localist supporters who had committed to the protracted protest. It bolstered their long-standing grievances against veteran pro-democracy activists and eventually fomented the emergence of a localist faction. Two factors were particularly important in coalescing the localist faction from a group of loosely connected netizens that mobilises sporadically. First, the idea of militant resistance, as well as the belief that a more distinct boundary should be drawn between Hong Kong and China, became more deeply ingrained into the localist discourse. Having experienced police brutality during the Umbrella Movement and seeing the unyielding stance of Beijing on political reform, localists became convinced that democracy or autonomy under “one country, two systems” would no longer be possible.⁽¹³⁾ As a result, they became more identified with the localist camp and more outspoken in promoting its causes, from the protection of Hong Kong’s cultural identity to political independence. Second, localist activists became more inclined to organise. Since the Umbrella Movement, numerous organisations advocating localist ideologies have been established. Disappointed with veteran democrats and those branded as “leftards” in the struggle for democracy, localist activists saw the need to cultivate a strong organisational base and leadership in order to expand their political influence.⁽¹⁴⁾ As a result, not only did they attempt to dismantle traditional pro-democracy organisations, such as the Hong Kong Federation of Students, they also established new organisations that would help them gather resources and groom new representatives who would stand for localist ideals inside the political system.

These newly-emerged localist organisations can be divided into two categories with regards to how and where they promote the localist agenda. The first category consists of political parties or activist groups aimed at mobilising protests and contesting elections. Usually treating territory-wide political issues as their pivotal focus, these new parties, despite their shared faith in political breakthrough, are very different in terms of their political

ideologies and attitudes towards the traditional pro-liberal bloc. On one side of the spectrum are organisations with a moderate agenda, which promote the right to self-determination and lean closer to the traditional pro-democracy camp. An example is Demosisto, which evolved from Scholarism, a student activist organisation that led the Anti-National Education Movement in 2012. On the opposite end of the spectrum are those with a much sharper localist agenda as well as deeper animosities towards the traditional pan-democrats. An example here is Hong Kong Indigenous, which was established in early 2015. The party not only promotes Hong Kong’s independence but also valorises the militant tactics that protesters used in the Umbrella Movement. Their most symbolic action was the “Liberate Protests,” which were revived in the early 2015 to target parallel traders and mainland tourists. During these protests, in which Hong Kong Indigenous often played a leading role, protesters’ tactics became much more confrontational and militant than a few years ago. Not only did protesters attempt to disrupt the business of pharmacies that sold goods to parallel traders, they even physically assaulted suspected traders and harassed tourists.⁽¹⁵⁾ Another close example is the Hong Kong National Party. Founded in March 2016, the party is unambiguous in supporting Hong Kong independence. Less active in mobilising militant protests and more secretive in operation, it promotes its pro-independence agenda through activities from staging large rallies and organising forums in university campuses, to distributing leaflets on the streets.⁽¹⁶⁾ Also clear in their pro-independence stance is Student Localism, a localist group formed by secondary school students. Its convenor, Tony Chung, said that they aim to emulate the success of Scholarism in promoting political independence among students.⁽¹⁷⁾

The second category consists of community-based organisations aimed at building up grassroots networks for the localist movement and promoting its ideas on an everyday basis through the provision of community services. Examples of these new community-based organisations include Kowloon East Community, Shatin Community Network, and Tin Shui Wai New Force. Unlike the territory-wide political parties, these organisations are based in local districts and tend to avoid identifying themselves explicitly as localist while serving their communities. Their attitude towards the traditional pan-democrats is also much softer than the localist political parties, as indicated by how they have avoided competing directly against pan-democrat candidates in local elections. In the 2015 District Council election, representatives from a few of these community-based organisations successfully won

12. Interview with Andy Chan in a café in Hong Kong, 14 June 2017.

13. “香港補選：選民「理性」考量 本土第三勢力待觀察” (*Xianggang bu xuan: xuan min 'li xing' kaoliang, bentu di san shi dai guan cha*, Hong Kong by-election: Voters’ “rational” concern, localist faction as a third force to be observed), *BBC Chinese*, 29 February 2016, http://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/china/2016/02/160229_hongkong_by_election_analysis (accessed 26 April 2018).

14. During an interview of Youngspiration, a founding member said it was time to replace those pan-democrats proxies who could not represent them after the Umbrella Movement. See: “青年新政專訪(上)—誕生之謎” (*Qingnian xinzheng zhuanfang (shang) — dansheng zhi mi*, Interview of Youngspiration (Part One) – The myth of its birth), *Polymer*, 24 February 2015, <http://polymerhk.com/articles/2015/02/24/12357/> (accessed on 26 April 2018).

15. One of the liberate protests on 8 March 2015 involved physical attacks by protesters as well as misidentification of Hong Kong citizens as Chinese tourists. See: “反水貨「踢內地客」亂罵港人 轉場屯門尖沙嘴 6人被捕” (*Fan shu huo 'ti neidi ke' luan ma gang ren, zuanchang Tun Men Jianshazui liu ren bei bu*, Anti-smuggling protesters “kicking mainland tourists” and yelling at Hongkongese, changing venue to Tuen Mun and Tsim Sha Tsui, 6 protesters were arrested), *Ming Pao*, 9 March 2015, <https://news.mingpao.com/pns1503091425837921634> (accessed on 26 April 2018).

16. “Hong Kong’s Pro-Independence Party Turns Focus to School Students,” *The News Lens*, 20 September 2016, <https://international.thenewslens.com/article/49596> (accessed on 27 April 2018).

17. Interview with Tony Chung in a café in Hong Kong, 4 May 2017.

seats in some districts, including Kwun Tong and Sha Tin. Youngspiration, which started off as a community-based organisation and later rebranded itself as a territory-wide political party, also managed to capture one seat in Hung Hom.

The LegCo by-election in February 2016 triggered by the resignation of former lawmaker Ronnie Tong is often regarded as a climax of the localist movement. Despite the slim chance of winning, Edward Leung, the spokesman for Hong Kong Indigenous, entered the by-election to challenge Alvin Yeung from the Civic Party, who was widely expected to “inherit” Tong’s seat. The civil unrest in Mongkok on the first day of the Lunar New Year in 2016 became a turning point for Leung’s campaign. Classified later by the government as the “Mongkok Riot” but known by supporters and sympathisers as the “Fishball Revolution,” the incident was sparked by a government crackdown on unlicensed street vendors. As hygiene officers attempted to remove the hawkers, Leung’s party, Hong Kong Indigenous, called on its supporters to protect them. Tensions further escalated as the police arrived and sent in a portable podium for crowd control. Angry protesters then clashed violently with armoured police officers, who attempted to clear them from the streets with batons and pepper spray. After warning shots were fired, protesters began to attack the police by throwing glass bottles, pallets, and bricks dug out of the pavement. Skirmishes lasted until the following morning, and many were arrested as a result. Despite the violent outcome, Leung’s leadership in the unrest gained popularity and sympathy, not only from those who were sympathetic to the localist cause but also from some in the traditional pro-democracy camp. Eventually, Leung captured 15% of the vote, an indication that he would stand a high chance of winning the upcoming general election. After Leung’s success, the localist camp was characterised by commentators as the “third force.”⁽¹⁸⁾ Indeed, in the general election held a few months later, even though Edward Leung was disqualified due to his pro-independence stance, a point to which we will soon return, two Youngspiration members and four self-determinists captured seats in the Legislative Council. The results were widely interpreted as a triumph for the localist movement.

No comprehensive surveys have yet been conducted to determine the background, class profile, and political activities of people who self-identify as localists. However, some existing analyses might provide us with a better understanding of the localists. According to an analysis done by a local media organisation on the LegCo by-election results, the electoral districts where Edward Leung received the most votes were mainly public housing estates, which typically had a higher proportion of registered voters between 18 and 25 years old.⁽¹⁹⁾ This shows that youngsters from less well-off socioeconomic conditions were more inclined to vote for the localists. However, despite the electoral surge of the localists, a survey conducted in 2016 by the Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey of the Chinese University of Hong Kong shows that the public in general had a more negative impression of the localists as compared with impressions of the pan-democrats and the pro-Beijing forces, especially among people over 25 years old.⁽²⁰⁾ These conflicting findings demonstrate that public attitudes towards the localists remain divided. The electoral rise of localist political parties may merely be the result of growing support from youngsters, rather than from across different generations.

Moreover, it must be emphasized that the localist camp is far from a unified group; it remains deeply fragmented by ideological fault lines. Several factions could be characterised. The nationalists (*minzupai* 民族派), which include Hong Kong Indigenous, Youngspiration, and some small localist com-

munity organisations, emphasise the importance of protecting local cultural values and cultivating nationalist consciousness. The constitutionalists (*zhixianpai* 制憲派), represented by the electoral alliance of three political organisations—Hong Kong Resurgence Order, Proletariat Political Institute, and Civic Passion—promote the refinement of the Basic Law through a *de facto* referendum for perpetual autonomy after the promise that Hong Kong’s way of life and freedoms would remain unchanged for 50 years expires in 2047. Meanwhile, the self-determinists (*zijuepai* 自決派) also promote Hongkongers’ right to self-determination through a referendum but take a moderate line closer to that of the veteran democrats. Comprising newly established parties such as Demosisto and independent activists such as Eddie Chu, Edward Yiu, and Lau Siu-lai, self-determinists are regarded by hard-core localists more as members of the pan-democrats than members of the localist camp.

State responses to delegitimise the localists

In response to the rise of the localist movement, the HKSAR government took immediate steps to stem its growth. In the Mongkok unrest, more than 60 protesters were arrested, including Ray Wong and Edward Leung, leaders of Hong Kong Indigenous. Many of them were later charged with rioting, illegal assembly, and assaulting police officers. The government and politicians from the pro-establishment camp staged a high profile condemnation of the violent actions. Although the incident helped to bolster Edward Leung’s support in the subsequent by-elections, the violent unrest undermined public support on a broader scale and lent the hybrid regime a new source of legitimacy to carry on the repression of the localist movement.

Political measures: Disqualification from elections

An immediate step taken by the HKSAR government was to bar the localists or those who share similar ideals from entering the city’s legislature. In the 2016 LegCo election, a new administrative measure was added in the nomination process. Candidates were now required to sign a confirmation form, which requires candidates to declare that they will uphold the Basic Law and recognize that Hong Kong is an inalienable part of China.⁽²¹⁾ The form provides a new regulatory checkpoint for the Electoral Affairs Commission (EAC), an administrative body appointed by the Chief Executive, to screen candidates. As a result, six election hopefuls had their nominations invalidated by the EAC returning officers (who are often civil servants). This included Edward Leung, who stood a high chance of winning if he were al-

18. Yee Lee 李怡, “世道人生：本土與激進的興起” (*Shidao rensheng: bentu yu jinyin de xingqi*, World and life: the rise of localism and radicalism), *Apple Daily*, 10 March 2016, <https://hk.news.appledaily.com/local/daily/article/20160310/19523270> (accessed on 26 April 2018); King Cheung Chan 陳景祥, “第三勢力 三分天下？” (*Di san shili, san fen tianxia?*, Third force and a world divided by three?), *Ming Pao Finance*, 2 March 2016, <https://www.mpfinance.com/fin/columnist2.php?col=1463481145811&node=1463567094754&issue=20160302> (accessed on 26 April 2018).
19. “【選民分析】梁天琦十大高得票選區 90後選民比例特別高” (*Xuanmin fenxi: Liang Tianqi shi da gao depiao xuanqu 90 hou xuanmin bili tebie gao*, Analysis of voters: The ten districts where Edward Leung got the most votes contain explicitly higher proportion of post-90s voters), *Apple Daily*, 30 March 2016, <https://hk.news.appledaily.com/local/realtime/article/20160330/54922435> (accessed on 14 August 2018).
20. “Hong Kong Public Opinion & Political Development” Opinion Survey Ninth Round Survey Results (6-15.7.2016), July 2016, http://www.com.cuhk.edu.hk/ccpos/research/1607TaskForce_Survey-Result_160804_Eng.pdf (accessed on 14 August 2018).
21. Confirmation Form of 2016 Legislative Council General Election, *Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government*, 2016, <https://www.eac.gov.hk/pdf/legco/2016lc/reo-n-confirmation-2016lc.pdf> (accessed on 27 April 2018).

lowed to run, and Andy Chan from the Hong Kong National Party. The decision sparked a mix of anger and confusion as candidates from the pan-democratic camp were validated even though they refused to sign the form. In the case of Edward Leung, even though he did sign the form and publicly disavowed his pro-independence stance, his candidacy was still rejected on the grounds that he had made such comments before.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the invalidation, the election achieved a record turnout and brought seven localist candidates into the legislature. This strengthened the resolve of the government to make further advances on the localist movement. Swiftly after the oath-taking ceremony, which has traditionally been a protest opportunity for pro-democracy candidates, LegCo rejected the appointment of two pro-independence lawmakers from Youngspiration, Sixtus "Baggio" Leung and Yau Wai Ching. The decision was based on the argument that the two lawmakers did not show genuine support for the Basic Law in their oath-taking, during which they carried flags printed with "Hong Kong is not China" and used a derogatory word for China as protest measures. While the government filed a judicial review to get the court's endorsement, the National People's Congress weighed in to establish specific guidelines on oath-taking. In November that year, the High Court ruled in favour of LegCo's decision, even though the ruling stopped short of directly applying the NPC's interpretation.

Emboldened by the ruling, LegCo further disqualified four pro-democracy legislators in December 2016 for their "insincere" oaths. A few months later, the Court of First Instance again ruled in favour of the government, this time citing not only local laws but also the NPC's interpretation of the guidelines of oath-taking. By then, six lawmakers had been unseated, stripping the pro-democracy camp of their majority in the geographical constituencies, together with their veto power in blocking government bills. In the March 2018 by-election that aimed to fill the seats of four disqualified lawmakers, three candidates—Agnes Chow, Ventus Lau, and James Chan—had their nominations invalidated by the returning officers on similar grounds. While Lau and Chan were invalidated based on their pro-independence stances, Chow, a Demosisto member who was expected to win, was rejected on the grounds that her party advocates self-determination. In the end, amidst a low voter turnout, the pro-democracy camp only managed to recapture two of the four contested seats, with the other two lost to the pro-Beijing camp. Meanwhile, Andy Chan's election petition to nullify the 2016 LegCo election was rejected by the court. Confirming the NPC's interpretation of the Basic Law, the judge ruled that the EAC had the power to issue the confirmation form and screen out candidates who do not show the intent to uphold the Basic Law and swear allegiance to the HKSAR.

Social measures: Countermovements

Another strategy that the hybrid regime uses to clamp down on the localist movement is to tolerate countermovements that target the localist movement. This strategy is commonly found in other hybrid regime contexts, such as Russia and Venezuela, where the state sponsors social organisations and protest groups to bolster its legitimacy and counterbalance opposition groups (Robertson 2011; Handlin 2017). From 2011 to 2013, several pro-regime countermovement groups have also emerged in Hong Kong. This includes Caring Hong Kong Power, Voice of Loving Hong Kong, Defend Hong Kong Campaign, Justice Coalition, Sounds of Silence, Silent Majority, Virtue Dynamics, and Hong Kong Action, which formed a loose coalition known as the "Love Hong Kong Faction." Fashioning as citizen-

based organisations and widely believed to be sponsored by pro-Beijing organisations,⁽²²⁾ these groups initially focused on staging protests against the pro-democracy political parties and organising demonstrations in support of government policies. In the case of Caring Hong Kong Power, the group gained attention by attacking the Civic Party for supporting the rights of anchor babies, new immigrants, and domestic helpers and hence "betraying" the interests of local people. Meanwhile, Voice of Loving Hong Kong took a more "moderate" approach by organising forums and petitions in support of government policies and officials. While taking slightly different lines, these groups tend to respond quickly to new political opportunities. For instance, after the Occupy Central movement was proposed, these groups organised a series of protests and petitions to counter the civil disobedience campaign. A coalition known as the Alliance for Peace and Democracy was also established in July 2014, comprising more than 1,500 pro-Beijing political parties, industry associations, and mass organisation, to rally against Occupy Central. Together, these pro-regime forces played a crucial role in creating chaos in the protest camp and thereby constraining leaders' strategic moves, which enervated the 79-day Umbrella Movement (Yuen and Cheng 2017).

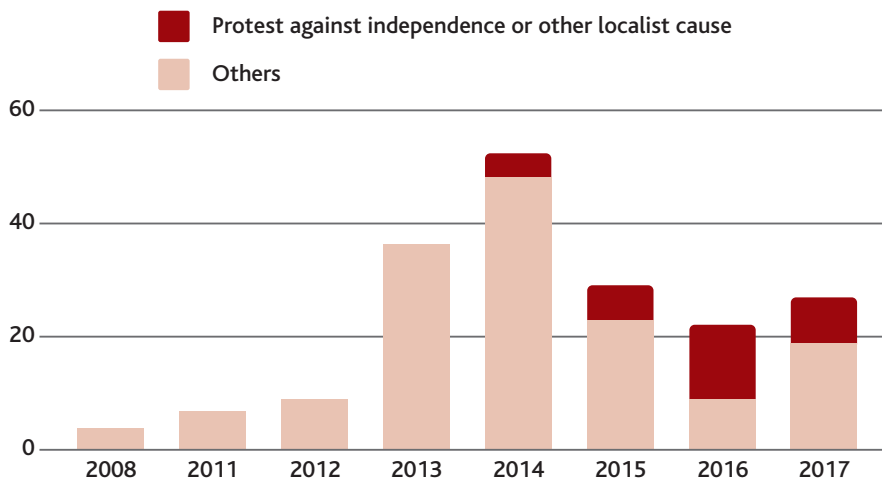
The rise of the localist movement offered another countermobilisation opportunity for pro-regime groups, this time through opposing independence and defending Chinese identity. Its early manifestation could be seen during the Expel the Locusts Protest on Canton Road in early 2014, when the Voice of Loving Hong Kong staged a parallel demonstration against the localist protesters. But the anti-independence countermovement took more concrete shape after high-level officials made rhetorical attacks on the localist movement. In 2015, then Chief Executive C.Y. Leung called on *Undergrad*, a student publication at the University of Hong Kong, and denounced its editorial board for advocating the idea of a Hong Kong nation. This triggered a growing spate of criticisms from pro-Beijing elites and media against the budding localist movement, which escalated after the Mongkok unrest and peaked in the oath-taking saga. A new coalition, known as the Alliance Against Insulting China and Hong Kong Independence, was established as a result. In October 2016, the new Alliance staged a protest to call for the disqualification of the two Youngspiration lawmakers.⁽²³⁾ A month later, it held another large rally outside LegCo to demonstrate against pro-independence calls and support Beijing's interpretation of the Basic Law, claiming a turnout of 40,000.⁽²⁴⁾

Figure 2 displays the frequency of countermobilisations from 2010 to 2017. While these countermobilisations were typically aimed at supporting government policies or officials, supporting the police, and targeting pro-democracy protests before 2014, countermobilisations against indepen-

22. "誰在「愛護香港力量」背後?" (Shei zai 'Aihu Xianggang Liliang' beihou, Who is behind Caring Hong Kong Power?), *InMedia*, 10 October 2010, <https://www.inmediahk.net/%E8%AA%B0%E5%9C%A8%E3%80%8C%E6%84%9B%E8%AD%B7%E9%A6%99%E6%B8%AF%E5%8A%9B%E9%B7%8F%E3%80%8D%E8%83%8C%E5%BE%8C%E5%BC%9F> (accessed on 21 August 2018).

23. "反尋華反港獨大聯盟稱呼籲全球華人譴責梁頌恆游蕙禎" (Fan ru hua fan gang du da lian-meng cheng hu yu quanqiu huaren qianze liang songheng you huizheng, Alliance Against Insulting China and Hong Kong Independence calls for condemnations to Sixtus 'Baggio' Leung and Yau Wai Ching from ethnic Chinese in the world), *Radio Television Hong Kong*, 26 October 2016, <http://news.rthk.hk/rthk/ch/component/k2/1292980-20161026.htm> (accessed on 26 April 2018).

24. "4萬人集會反港獨撐釋法 有人稱有錢收 大會指捏造" (Si wan ren jihu fan gang du cheng shi fa, youren cheng you qian shou, dahui zhi niezao, 40,000 people participating in the rally opposing Hong Kong independence and supporting the Basic Law interpretation, some said the participants are paid, and the host denied), *Ming Pao*, 14 November 2016, https://news.mingpao.com/pns/dailynews/web_tc/article/20161114/s00002/1479059764755 (accessed on 26 April 2018).

Figure 2 – Frequency of countermobilizations

Note: Protests against independence or other localist causes refer to as countermobilisations targeting protests supporting Hong Kong independence or against mainlandisation.
Source: Wisenews.

dence or other localist causes made up a significant part of their activity in 2015 and 2016. Although the overall number of the latter dropped in 2017, the localist movement still offered an easy prey for pro-regime groups to countermobilise whenever political opportunities arose. For instance, in September 2017, following the display of banners supporting independence in numerous university campuses, a pro-Beijing group held a protest at the Chinese University of Hong Kong threatening to tear down independence-themed posters. On the very same day, organisers of a separate anti-independence rally held at Tamar Park called on the University of Hong Kong to sack Occupy Central leader and law professor Benny Tai.⁽²⁵⁾

There is no solid evidence that pro-regime groups are directly mobilised by the hybrid regime or the Chinese government, except sporadically anecdotal reports by the media that showed linkages between these groups and pro-regime elites. Nor did they seem to have directly de-mobilised the localist movement. Instead, these countermovements were aimed more at manufacturing and displaying public disapproval against the localist movement. They served to make the talk of independence or self-determination taboo, drawing a line between what is politically permissible and what is not. This tactic seemed to have achieved some success. For instance, after Au Nok-hin entered the 2018 by-election on behalf of the disqualified Agnes Chow, Au avoided any explicit mention of self-determination, probably to minimise the risk of disqualification. Furthermore, due to the exclusion of localist candidates, the election no longer explicitly featured any slogans or policy platforms among the election hopefuls in support of independence or self-determination.

Excluding the localists: Towards a divided structure of contestation

The disqualification saga and the rising trend of countermovements both played an important role in excluding localists from the political system, resulting in what Ellen Lust-Okar calls a “divided structure of contestation” (Lust-Okar 2005). In many authoritarian and hybrid regimes, Lust-Okar observes that incumbents can create institutions to structure the opposition through holding elections and setting rules regarding the legal eligibility of candidates and parties. Incumbents can either include or exclude opposition

groups categorically, creating a unified structure of contestation (or unified SoC, e.g. Jordan and Egypt under Nasir and Sadat); or allow some opposition groups to participate legally while excluding others, fostering a divided structure of contestation (or divided SoC, e.g. Morocco and Egypt under Mubarak). Under the latter, political opposition permitted to participate in the system is more likely to become reluctant to mobilise against the regime or make radical demands out of fear of being ousted from the system. Similar structures have been observed in Russia, which under President Vladimir Putin has developed a registration system to exclude opposition parties and politicians from electoral competition (Robertson 2011: 162); and in Venezuela, where some opposition parties were directly banned by the government from running for

presidential elections.⁽²⁶⁾ In these contexts, scholars have noted how opposition becomes divided on myriad issues, such as whether to participate in future elections, whether to form electoral coalitions, or whether to accept election results (Gandhi and Reuter 2013).

In the case of Hong Kong, while opposition parties and politicians had always been allowed to stand for elections and enter the legislature under a unified SoC, electoral disqualification from 2016 to 2018 created a divided SoC that includes or excludes opposition candidates based on their or their party's stance on the issue of independence or self-determination. Under this system, EAC-appointed returning officers, acting as gatekeepers, enjoy discretionary power to screen candidates based not only on their self-declaration, but also on their past remarks or behaviour. The result is a fragmented political opposition: between those who are allowed inside the system, namely traditional pro-democracy parties such as the Democratic Party and the Civic Party, and those who are banned from it, namely localist parties such as Demosisto, Youngspiration, and Hong Kong Indigenous. While the former may be increasingly tamed by the fear of being excluded from the system, the latter may become critical of their counterparts for being co-opted into the system. The structure is further reinforced by pro-regime countermobilisations, which are discursively reshaping the boundary of political correctness. By controlling where the legal and discursive boundary lies, the hybrid regime can thus manipulate the behaviour of opposition groups and pit them against one another.

Fragmentation among the localists has also weakened their ability to promote a credible political alternative to the existing agenda set out by the traditional democrats, which aims to maximize democracy under the present system. Although localist groups share the basic objective of contesting the constitutional framework of “one country, two systems,” they differ widely in their relationship with the legal opposition and their strategies in achieving their political goals. While self-determinists have a closer rela-

25. “4000人反「港獨」、反冷血、反偽學 市民聲討戴耀廷” (*Si qian ren fan 'gang du', fan leng xie, fan wei xue, shimin shengtao Dai Yaoting*, 4,000 people against Hong Kong independence, cold-bloodedness and pseudoscience, citizens condemn Benny Tai), *Wen Wei Po*, 17 September 2017, <http://news.WenWei Po.com/2017/09/17/IN1709170023.htm> (accessed on 26 April 2018).

26. “Venezuela Opposition Banned from Running in 2018 Election,” *BBC*, 11 December 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-42304594> (accessed on 1 March 2018).

tionship with veteran democrats and tend to avoid identifying with pro-independence discourse, they are also not seen by pro-independence localists as part of the localist camp. Even among the pro-independence localists, factional strife remains rampant. Except during the election cycles, cooperation between these localist groups has been almost non-existent. Moreover, given that they are unable to contest elections, it has become much harder for them to solicit popular support. As a result, the divided structure of contestation has become further divided in multiple layers.

Conclusion

This article has analysed the rise and fall of the localist movement in post-handover Hong Kong from an eventful perspective. Rather than seeing the movement as a product of structural political and socioeconomic changes, we have examined how different state and societal actors shape and reshape the movement through events and discursive constructions. Following Sewell's eventual approach, our analysis helps to dispel two common misconceptions about the localist movement. First, localism is not a singular force with a common political agenda; instead, it comprises multiple factions that only share the basic goal of defending the local autonomy and the interests of the local population, but differ widely in terms of their ideologies and action logics. Second, localism is not, as it stands, an inexorable force that is set to propel the pro-democracy movement in a new direction. Despite the meteoric rise of the localist movement through the protest events from 2011 to 2015, its fragmented nature, as well as subsequent state responses, namely electoral disqualification and counter-mobilisations, have dampened the nascent movement and created a divided structure of contestation among the opposition.

The divided structure of contestation has serious implications for Hong Kong's embattled pro-democracy movement. While scholars such as Ma Ngok have long pointed to the internal schisms within the pro-democracy camp over the tactics in fighting for constitutional reforms (Ma 2011), a new divide has now emerged, which is based on whether one endorses the legitimacy of Hong Kong as a Special Administration Region under "one country, two systems." Under the new division, it is expected that pro-in-

dependence and pro-self-determination activists will continue to be excluded from the political system by legal and administrative measures, while being socially marginalised through pro-regime countermovements. Some localist groups are attempting to circumvent these exclusionary measures by building grassroots support in communities (*shequ* 社區) in preparation for the District Council elections; but whether they will be barred from running on legal grounds remains unclear.

Moreover, under the authoritarian grip of President Xi Jinping, who has overseen a sweeping crackdown on civil society in mainland China, the Chinese government is expected to continue ruling Hong Kong with hard-line policies. The recent national anthem legislation, and the rhetorical support for reviving national security legislation, are examples of Beijing's tightening grip in trying to outlaw speech and actions supporting independence and self-determination. Meanwhile, opposition permitted inside the system will continue to face the dilemma of how to best challenge the authorities and press for democratic reforms. To secure their positions, these oppositions might learn to toe the line and avoid making progressive claims on the authorities. The government, on the other hand, will continue to manipulate the boundaries just to keep the political opposition divided. Until a cohesive united front can be formed among the democratic opposition, and unless Beijing is willing to relax its authoritarian grip and hold out an olive branch, it is difficult to imagine any possibilities for Hong Kong to embark on genuine political reforms.

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