

China's Changing Ruling Strategies on Hong Kong and Their Implications

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Abstract

This paper analyses the recent developments of the ruling strategies, including the united front work, of China on Hong Kong and their implications. It examines the development of the strategies of integration, co-optation, collaboration, containment and denunciation, and investigated into the Hong Kong Hakka Associations and the Silent Majority for Hong Kong as cases of interest. The paper argues that the ruling strategies have become ever-expanding, more statist and institutionalised in nature despite a growing dichotomy in the local society. Lastly, it evaluates the limitations of the evolving ruling strategies and their repercussions and implications.

Keywords: *state-society relations, statist ruling strategies, united front, state corporatism, Hong Kong and China*

1. Introduction

Protests against the Extradition Bill in Hong Kong (2019), as characterised by composing mainly of young people and without organised central leadership, have been labelled a radical movement. Importantly, opinion polls have indicated increasing public acceptance of violent protest actions, heightened dissatisfaction with the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government and the central Chinese government, rapid erosion of public trust in the authorities' commitment to the "One Country, Two Systems" model, and escalating state-society antagonism. Indeed, the protests have had rocked the authorities like a thunderbolt. Since the Umbrella Movement (2014) and the Mong Kok Riots (2016), the Hong Kong society had largely been pervaded with a strong sense of political powerlessness and political quietism with subsequent arrests and imprisonment of movement leaders and the futility to bring about universal suffrage. Meanwhile, counter-mobilisation efforts by pro-Beijing groups and the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in Hong Kong (CPGLO) were launched in high gear in the Hong Kong society. For instance, in the District Council elections in 2015 and the Legislative Council elections in 2016, the pro-Beijing camp had respectively won around 54.6% (*Wikipedia*, 2015) and 40.6% (Tsui, 2016) of the total votes. The protests against the Extradition Bill, nevertheless, have witnessed the repercussions of China's ruling strategies on Hong Kong.

This paper analyses the changing ruling strategies of China on Hong Kong in the recent years and their implications based on my published framework of analysis of China's united front work in Hong Kong (Lam and Lam, 2013). The paper examines the development of the strategies, namely, integration, co-optation, collaboration, containment and denunciation, which have become ever-expanding, and more statist and institutionalised to the extent beyond the traditional definition of united

front work. The HKSAR government has also become more embroiled in China's overall ruling mechanisms on Hong Kong. Methodologically, this research retrieved the related information about the individuals, organisations and events under study via the WiseNews and various websites for the period of 2010 to 2019.

2. Evolving Ruling Mechanisms

A significant part of China's ruling strategies on Hong Kong has been qualified as "united front work". By definition, united front work is relatively informal and soft tactics adopted to build friendship and political following, which include the work to educate, persuade, co-opt and integrate people. The importance of united front work to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as a whole is obvious. As proclaimed by Mao Zedong in the "The Communists" in 1939, the united front has been one of the three magic weapons of the CCP along with armed struggle and communist party building (Groot, 2016: 167). Despite its informal and soft nature, united front work in China has actually been augmented by extensive corporatist structures and manpower. The United Front Work Department (UFWD) of the Central Committee of the CCP, which reports directly to the CCP's central committee, manages relations with various organisations and individuals inside and outside China to ensure support for the rule of CCP. Since united front work is regarded as a whole CCP activity, its operation is unified, coordinated and visible in different sectors (Brady, 2019: 4). Various co-optation mechanisms, such as the Chinese People Political Consultative Committee (CPPCC), have existed alongside the UFWD to facilitate its goal achievement.

The fact that China's united front work is institutionalised and well coordinated by the state partly explains why some scholars have analysed it as an element of Chinese state corporatism. Since the 1990s,

the concept of state corporatism has been widely employed by scholars in analysing the ruling strategies of China. Under state corporatism, the state plays an important architectural role in the building of relatively cohesive and hierarchical bureaucratic institutions and structures facilitating control of different social sectors, interest groups and political parties. It also acts as an active arbiter for various parochial interests organising the relations among them. In practice, united front work serves as a part of the tactics to educate, persuade, co-opt and integrate people (e.g., Foweraker, 1987; Oi, 1992; Unger and Chan, 1995).

The UFWD underwent a major reorganisation in 2018. Before that, signs of the rising importance of the UFWD were noticeable. In 2012, a CCP document titled “Opinions on Strengthening the Building of the Team of Non-Party Representatives in the New Situation” indicated the importance of making friends with non-party representatives (Liao and Tsai, 2019: 32-33). A 2013 internal CCP memo may hint at the reasons for the perceived importance of united front work. As stated in the memo, the threats to CCP rule, including civil society, democracy and media freedom, would need to be tackled (*Geopolitical Monitor*, 22nd March 2019). Being a strong promoter of united front work (Groot, 2018: 15), Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the CCP and President of China since 2013, had described it as important for the whole CCP and China’s broader foreign policy (e.g., Shen and Yang, 2015; Information Office of the State Council, PRC, 2017; Bowe, 2018). Under Xi’s leadership, united front activities came to fall into four main types. These include the efforts to control the Chinese diaspora, co-opt foreigners for promoting the CCP’s foreign policy goals, support a global multi-platform on furthering pro-China perspectives, and promote the Belt and Road Initiative (Brady, 2019: 4). Meanwhile, the UFWD has a significant expansion. For instance, some 40,000 new cadres have

been recruited into the UFWD since 2013. Its scope of mandate has also expanded to cover the Religious Affairs Bureau, State Ethnic Affairs Commission, and State Council's Office of Overseas Chinese Affairs (*Geopolitical Monitor*, 22nd March 2019, p. 6). In Xi's address to the 19th National Congress of the CCP in 2017, he further urged the CCP to form the broadest possible patriotic united front. As stated, this would be important for bringing about "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (Xi Jinping, 2017; Bowe, 2018). In 2018, the UFWD underwent a major restructuring from nine bureaus to twelve. And its responsibilities have come to cover policies on Xinjiang and Tibet, and target businesspeople and Chinese diaspora communities as well. After restructuring, united front work in Hong Kong is put under the central leadership of the Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan United Front Work Bureau of the UFWD (Joske, 2019: 6-7).

In Hong Kong, during the period before 1997 when China was not the sovereign, the concept of united front work had been widely employed to understand the informal influence of the formerly Xinhua News Agency in Hong Kong (now the CPGLO) on Hong Kong's civil society. Since 1997, the CPGLO acts as the representative for Beijing, being responsible for liaison between Mainland agencies and the local community, coordinating the activities of the Chinese Communist Party in Hong Kong, and conducting united front work, propaganda and supervision. It also controls Beijing-affiliated publications and media in Hong Kong mobilising support for the policies of the Beijing-appointed government (Yep, 2007). As proclaimed, the targets of united front work in Hong Kong are relatively inclusive of all the nationalists (愛國一家), including socialist nationalists (擁護社會主義的愛國者), People's Republic of China nationalists (擁護中國共產黨統治的愛國者), unification nationalists (擁護祖國統一的愛國者) and Chinese cultural nationalists (擁護中國文化的愛國者) (Qiang, 2010: 86).

Worthy of note, there were significant reshuffle of China's personnel on Hong Kong since 2012. For instance, Zhang Xiaoming replaced Peng Qinghua as the director of the CPGLO in 2012. In the same year, Zhang Dejiang, chairperson of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC), took over the leadership of the Central Coordination Group on Hong Kong and Macau Affairs while Li Yuanchao became his deputy. In 2014, a high-level think tank, the Chinese Association of Hong Kong and Macau Studies was formed (Cheung, 2018). In the same year, China promulgated "The Practice of the 'One Country, Two Systems' Policy in the HKSAR" (Information Office of the State Council, PRC, 2014), stating its overall jurisdiction over Hong Kong. Also, the Standing Committee of China's NPC denied Hong Kong the possibility of having genuine universal suffrage in electing the Chief Executive, which subsequently triggered the Umbrella Movement. In February 2020, Xia Baolong, vice-chairperson of CPPCC, was appointed as head of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office, which has thus added weight to the role of the Office in governing Hong Kong.

Scholars observed that China's united front work in Hong Kong has consistently classified people into supportive majority to mobilise, a wavering middle to neutralise and an enemy to defeat (Loh and Lai, 2007). The previous studies of China's united front work in colonial Hong Kong tended to focus mostly on how Beijing consolidated its relationship with individuals in Hong Kong through co-optation (e.g., Wan, 2003; Lee, 2006). The works published afterwards have expanded the scope of examination contributing to more systematic investigations into China's united front work in Hong Kong (Chu, 2010; Loh, 2010; Cheng, 2020; Lo, Hung and Loo, 2019). These works testify to the observation that owing to the principle of "One Country, Two Systems", China has had to experiment with its ruling strategies on Hong Kong,

not only in proclaiming sovereignty after the handover, but also in assimilating and gradually merging Hong Kong into the greater Chinese social, cultural and political system.

3. Development of China's Ruling Strategies on Hong Kong

As pointed out in my earlier work, five types of united front strategies have been employed in parallel, namely integration, co-optation, collaboration, containment and denunciation, in Hong Kong since political handover of 1997. To quote, firstly, integration refers to the process of merging different parties with one another based on common interests, and at the ideological and affective levels, aiming at the development of common instrumental interests, wills and feelings. Such strategies have been widely visible in all aspects of life in Hong Kong since 1997. Notable examples included the implementation of numerous economic interchange and activities between Hong Kong and the mainland, such as CEPA (the Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement). Alongside strategies of economic integration, attempts to cultivate patriotism and cultural integration have also become notable. For instance, patriotism was made a criterion of selecting the Chief Executive. National education and patriotism have been promoted in schools and public discourses. Secondly, co-optation refers to the process of bringing outsiders inside so that alternative views of its supporters can align with those of the Chinese authorities. Important co-optation mechanisms in Hong Kong included the CPPCC, the NPC, functional constituencies of the Legislative Council, and the Election Committee of the Chief Executive of Hong Kong. Since 1997, there has been extensive co-optation of key persons in the media and social bodies. Also, the CPGLO has collaborated with civic bodies in Hong Kong or sponsored them in organising youth activities and

education projects. United front work has also taken the form of political appointment of pro-Beijing elements into the HKSAR government and advisory committees. Thirdly, collaboration targets the wavering middle and indicates a more detached relationship between the united front work agents and the targets. Collaborators are often those who would prefer a little distance from Beijing while not antagonising it. Pragmatic collaborations of the CPGLO and those so-called “independent” candidates in elections are good examples. Fourthly, containment characterises the Communist agents’ efforts to check the expansion or influence of the opposition in Hong Kong by nourishing and forming supporters’ networks and strategic alliances. Previously, such efforts predominantly targeted the democratic camp in Hong Kong. Notable examples included cultivation of regimented participation led by pro-establishment figures, such as the Alliance for Constitutional Development, to counteract the influence of the opposition of democrats to the government’s constitutional reform proposal. The several times of reinterpretation of the Hong Kong Basic Law by the Standing Committee of the NPC can be seen as attempts to bring in the Chinese authorities’ understandings of the related Hong Kong laws. One reinterpretation made in 2005 virtually disallowed Hong Kong to implement universal suffrage in the upcoming elections of the Hong Kong Chief Executive and the Legislative Council which, nevertheless, is “promised” in the Basic Law. Discursive-wise, the Chinese officials and pro-Beijing figures had also pushed forward their definitions and understandings of human rights, universal suffrage and democracy to shape public understandings of these terms. Lastly, denunciation, characterised by threats, condemnation and outright rejection, is one of the most exclusive forms of measure used by the Chinese authorities to defeat its enemies and control the Hong Kong society. This is done to halt the opposition’s influence immediately and permanently, such as the

denunciation of the democrats in Hong Kong as colluding with foreign forces (Lam and Lam, 2013).

It should be noted that although united front work is often apparently soft and informal, it has been part of China's overall national integration and ruling strategies. Thus, its ultimate aim is to ensure Hong Kong continue to be in China's grip. Although China's ruling strategies on Hong Kong were relatively subtle in the first fifteen years after political handover, it has started to change radically and has gone beyond the traditional definition of united front work in the recent years. There are several notable features of the change.

China's ruling strategies on Hong Kong have expanded with elaborate targets, programs and institutions aiming at maintaining the Chinese authorities' hegemony and achieving high degrees of political collaboration in Hong Kong. Specifically, the CPGLO has played an increasingly important and visible role of coordination and command in Hong Kong politics. This phenomenon has been accompanied by the growing and acquiesced importance assigned to the CPPCC and NPC Hong Kong deputies in Hong Kong's governance. Meanwhile, it has also become common to appoint and thus co-opt pro-Beijing figures into the government. Knitted networks of pro-Beijing grassroots, social and political organisations, facilitated or led by affiliates of CPGLO, have flourished. As their interests are well connected, this has given rise to the so-called clientelistic state corporatism (Liao and Tsai, 2019). Along with these developments, the Chief Executive and Principal Officials have been subject to greater political demands on their patriotism. Even civil servants, who should be politically neutral in Hong Kong's political tradition, are required to participate in exchange tours on national education in the mainland. Those employed from 1st July 2020 would even be required to pledge allegiance to the SAR and support the Basic Law in writing.

The enhanced role of the CPGLO in Hong Kong's governance and the expanding united front work of the Chinese authorities in Hong Kong have directly blurred the autonomy of the HKSAR government. The supposedly autonomous HKSAR government has facilitated the work of the CPGLO or become an agent of united front work and statist control. As it will be analysed below, the result of these developments is the decline of the legitimacy and credibility of the HKSAR government and the policy of "One Country, Two Systems" in the eyes of the people.

Comparatively speaking, the strategies of containment and denunciation are used much more than before to achieve a halt of the influence of the opposition and quick resumption of political control. Point-to-point tactics are employed by which specific front organisations are mobilised to curb the influence of specific targets immediately, such as the founding of the Silent Majority for Hong Kong to halt the influence of the Occupy Movement. Moreover, such counter mobilisation has led to the growth of parallel organisations in various sectors in Hong Kong in the recent years (e.g., *Business Insider*, 28th November 2014; Cheng, 2020; Lo, Hung and Loo, 2019).

Last but not least, rhetoric mobilisation has been employed to counter the opposition's mobilisation. The principles of stability, economic development, sovereignty and patriotism have been the focuses of the Chinese state corporatism. In Hong Kong, the narratives have become more emotional and populist with greater emphasis on the principles of Chinese sovereignty, political loyalty to the CCP, social order, rule of law, and maintaining economic prosperity to appeal to the economic and political elites. They have functioned to agitate fears, prejudices and concerns of the general public against democracy movements as a result (Stulz, 2016).

The following analysis will highlight important examples of China's ruling strategies on Hong Kong in the recent years based on my previous analysis framework.

3.1. Integration

Integration measures have taken place in all aspects. Particularly, in the recent years, economic integration took place as there are more and more infrastructural and economic projects merging Hong Kong into the mainland. For instance, the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge, besides the highly controversial express rail link, was built since 2009 and was completed in 2018. Besides, both the Tuen Mun-Chek Lap Kok link and the Tuen Mun Western Bypass will help connect Hong Kong with some key mainland cities.

Building upon the CEPA, the CEPA supplement agreements VII to X were signed between 2010 and 2013 which further strengthened cooperation between Hong Kong and the mainland in finance, investment, services and trade (Trade and Industry Department, Government of HKSAR, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013). The importance of Hong Kong as a centre of international finance for China was emphasised in the 12th National Five-Year Plan (2011) and further in the 13th National Five-Year Plan (2016). Important trade agreements between Hong Kong and mainland cities were also made. These included the Shanghai-Hong Kong Stock Connect (2014), and the Agreement between the Mainland and Hong Kong on Achieving Basic Liberalisation of Trade in Services in Guangdong (2014), and the Shenzhen-Hong Kong Stock connect (2016). The promulgation of the Belt and Road Initiative (2013) and the Greater Bay Area (2016) further indicated that Hong Kong would be fully integrated into national development through participation in these initiatives. The Greater Bay

Area, comprising of nine Guangdong municipalities, Hong Kong and Macao, was mentioned under the chapter entitled “Upholding ‘One Country, Two Systems’ and Moving toward National Reunification” in Xi Jinping’s report to the 19th National Party Congress in 2017 (*Outline Development Plan for the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area*, 2019).

Politically and legally, the famous document “The Practice of the ‘One Country, Two Systems’ Policy in the HKSAR” promulgated in 2014 has stated the central government’s overall jurisdiction in Hong Kong and that loving the country is the basic political requirement for Hong Kong’s administrators with judges of the courts and other judicial personnel also regarded as the administrators. Regarding cultivation of patriotism, it has become common for Chinese officials to criticise Hong Kong people as ungrateful and unpatriotic. In 2019, the National Anthem Bill, aiming at ensuring the respect for the national anthem, has been gazetted and is pending for a second reading in the Legislative Council. Also, the National Security Law was gazetted on 30th June 2020 and took immediate effect on the same day.

The governments have highly encouraged cultural integration between Hong Kong and the mainland. For instance, the number of primary and secondary school students receiving government subsidies for mainland exchange programs had increased respectively from 19,900 to 24,100 and 19,700 to 46,300 from 2011/2012 to 2015/2016. Those post-secondary school students who had gone to these exchange tours had also increased from 1,200 to 5,000 from 2011/2012 to 2015/2016 (Fong, 2017). Moreover, since 2014, the HKSAR government has conducted the Mainland University Study Subsidy Scheme to support Hong Kong students in pursuing undergraduate studies in the mainland (Education Bureau, Government of HKSAR, 2018). After the Protests against the Extradition Bill, there have again been calls to reform youth

education in Hong Kong, for example, removing the liberal studies curriculum which has been blamed for radicalising young students.

Regarding the media sector in Hong Kong, as of 2016, 35% of the 26 main media outlets came to be owned or controlled by Beijing or Beijing-related capital (Hong Kong Journalists Association, 2017: 7) whereas the rest of the media outlets were largely co-opted and self-disciplined (Hong Kong Journalists Association, 2018: 30-39).

3.2. Co-optation

The strategy of co-optation has various targets including the media, professionals, the business sector and selected figures from the opposition camp. The co-optation of the media in Hong Kong was important to China which, as analysed above, has largely completed (Ma, 2007; Hong Kong Journalists Association, 2017, 2018). As will be analysed below, the arrest of Jimmy Lai, founder of *Apple Daily*, a pro-democracy newspaper, his two sons and four other senior executives of the Next Digital (formerly known as Next Media) under the National Security Law in August 2020 further signalled the authorities' determination to silence the political dissent in the media.

The business sector has been another important target of co-optation along with the media. This has continued unabatedly with official and unofficial meetings between Chinese officials and selected business people in Hong Kong. For instance, in 2014, during the saga of Occupy Movement, 70 business people were invited to meet with Xi Jinping in Beijing to make sure that they would not support the Movement. At the institutional level, a good example of co-optation is the composition of the giant machines: the NPC and the CPPCC. The business sector has remained the most significant target of co-optation in these two organisations (Table 1 and Table 2).

Table 1 Occupational Background of NPC Hong Kong Deputies

Occupational background	12th NPC (2013-2018)		13th NPC (2018-2023)	
	No.	%	No.	%
Politician	3	8.3	2	5.6
Business	20	55.6	22	61.1
Professional	5	13.8	6	16.6
Social services	3	8.3	3	8.3
Labour	2	5.6	2	5.6
Culture and media	1	2.8	0	0
Others	2	5.6	1	2.8
Total	36	100	36	100

Source: Author's own research.

Table 2 Occupational Background of CPPCC Hong Kong Deputies

Occupational background	12th CPPCC (2013-2018)		13th CPPCC (2018-2023)	
	No.	%	No.	%
Politician	7	5.6	5	4
Business	88	70.4	92	74.2
Professional	11	8.8	14	11.3
Social services	7	5.6	4	3.2
Labour	1	0.8	1	0.8
Culture and media	7	5.6	3	2.4
Others	4	3.2	5	4
Total	125	100	124	100

Source: Author's own research.

As with the media, the authorities have also set more stringent political standards for the Hong Kong capitalists to follow. For instance, in 2015, Li Ka-shing, one of the most prominent businessmen in Hong Kong, was reported to have moved the domicile of Cheung Kong Holdings from Hong Kong to the Cayman Islands and sold some

properties in Shanghai and Beijing. He was then criticised as “ungrateful” in the Chinese state media. Later on, Cheung Kong Holdings issued a three-page statement denying the allegations that the companies were divesting from China and affirming Li’s support for the leadership of Xi Jinping.

Interestingly, some democrats were also the targets of co-optation. For instance, Ronny Ka-wah Tong, originally a key member in the Civic Party, was appointed as the ex-officio member of the Executive Council in 2017. He has become extremely pro-Beijing and pro-government from that time onwards. Andrew Wai-kwong Fung, formerly a member of the Democratic Party, quitted the party in 2012 and was appointed by the then Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying as the government’s Information Coordinator in 2013. Law Chi-kwong, also a member of the Democratic Party, was appointed the chairperson of the Community Care Fund established to provide assistance to people with financial difficulties in 2012 and then the Secretary for Labour and Welfare in 2017. As earlier stated, the autonomous role of the HKSAR government has blurred as it participates more in the political integration of Hong Kong into China. It is observed that during Carrie Lam’s term as the Chief Executive since 2017, more pro-Beijing figures have been appointed into the government as undersecretaries and political assistants under the political appointment system. For instance, in 2017, out of the eleven Undersecretaries appointed, four of them were from the pro-establishment camp, who included Bernard Pak-li Chan (Undersecretary for Commerce and Economic Development) and Caspar Ying-wai Tsui (Undersecretary for Labour and Welfare) from the pro-Beijing Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (DAB), Joseph Ho-lim Chan from the Liberal Party (Undersecretary for Financial Services and the Treasury), and Choi Yuk-lin (Undersecretary for Education) from the pro-Beijing Hong Kong

Federation of Education Workers. Also, out of the ten political assistants appointed, seven of them had former pro-establishment political affiliations. They are Elizabeth Hoi-yung Fung (Political Assistant to the Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development) from the Path of Democracy, Jade Wing-yu Lai (Political Assistant to the Secretary for Home Affairs) from the Hong Kong United Foundation, Lillian Man-lei Cheong (Political Assistant to the Secretary for Innovation and Technology) from Arete, Pauline Yeung (Political Assistant to the Secretary for Financial Services and the Treasury) from Our Hong Kong Foundation, Mark Chuen-fu Fu (Political Assistant to the Secretary for Transport and Housing) from the Liberal Party, Jeff Chun-fai Sze (Political Assistant to the Secretary for Education) from the New People's Party, and Siu Ka-yi (Political Assistant to the Chief Secretary for Administration) from the DAB (HKSAR government, 2017).

3.2.1. A case of co-optation: Hong Kong Hakka Associations

In the civil society, as before, pro-Beijing associations in Hong Kong have taken up a lot of co-optation activities. The Hong Kong Hakka Associations (香港客屬總會) is one of the examples. The association was founded in Hong Kong in 2011 to unite all patriotic Hakka (an ethnic group in China) people originated from the provinces such as Guangdong, including places like Shenzhen and Dongguan, in Hong Kong. In this regard, the association has interestingly played around identity politics to appeal to Hong Kong people's ethnic and provincial origins. As perceived by the founders of the association:

“Since the reunification, Hong Kong and the mainland have formed a community of fate and blood. More and more people agree that Hong Kong can only rely on the motherland so as to maintain its assets and foundations of development in the long run. More and more people

believe that the NPC has laid down the direction of universal suffrage in Hong Kong, which will effectively clear the obstacles to Hong Kong's political reform and promote the development of Hong Kong's democracy. More and more people recognise that street social movements are harmful to Hong Kong's economy, democracy and the rule of law. The rule of law and rationality are Hong Kong's mainstream public opinion. We firmly believe that the social divisions and political stalemate caused by the opposition's turmoil will be disintegrated. A more stable and harmonious Hong Kong will move from a vision to a reality."

(Hong Kong Hakka Associations, 2013: 1 – author's translation)

The association has multiple objectives including uniting the two million Hakka people and building network among them in Hong Kong. As stated, its objectives are:

"To adhere to patriotism, loving Hong Kong and loving indigenous hometown, unite Hong Kong Hakka folks, participate in Hong Kong's public affairs, support the HKSAR government's governance according to law, safeguard Hong Kong's prosperity and stability, promote cooperation and exchange between Hong Kong and the mainland as well as build economic development in the indigenous hometown."

(Hong Kong Hakka Associations, 2013: 1 – author's translation)

Overall speaking, the association has used soft power, such as organising visits to various Hakka cultures in the mainland, to achieve its aims. In the previous years, it had even organised exchange tours to the Hakka communities in Taiwan aiming at helping national unification. It also aims at giving support to the HKSAR government's

governance in Hong Kong. In 2014, it participated in the Alliance against the Occupy Movement with other pro-Beijing organisations and supported the government's constitutional reform proposal. It is a patriotic organisation which holds annual celebrations of the national day in Hong Kong. Lastly, it is well connected to the CPGLO and united front departments in the mainland that had paid high-profile visits to the association. As stated in the Annual Report of the association:

“Since its establishment, the Hong Kong Hakka Associations has received the support of the Central Government, the Central CPGLO in Hong Kong, the Guangdong Provincial Party Committee, the Provincial Government, the municipal committees of the Guangdong Province, the Municipal Government, and the Hong Kong SAR Government. Thus our association has developed smoothly. In the past year, the leaders and heads in the mainland had personally visited our association to deepen their understanding of it.”

(Hong Kong Hakka Associations, 2014: 6 – author's translation)

Regarding the structure of the association, it is complex with 39 founders, 18 honorary chairpersons, eight honorary advisors, three honorary presidents, one founding chairperson, one chairperson, one executive chairperson, four general vice-chairperson, 20 vice-chairpersons, nine presidents, one secretary, four deputy secretaries, one treasurer, two legal advisors, and 119 members of the board of directors. The backgrounds of the personnel of the association are interestingly affiliated with the Chinese authorities. Take the founders as an example. Out of the 39 founders, there are 26 CPPCC members, five NPC members, two Chief Executive Election Committee members, one former Hong Kong Advisor (who advised China on Hong Kong's political transition matters before 1997), and one former civil servant.

Also, their occupational backgrounds are highly affiliated with the business sector with 24 of them being business people. The rest are politicians (five), rural village sector elites (three), professionals (three), former civil servants (two), and cultural and media sector people (two). Regarding the social and political affiliations of the founders, most of them were with chambers of commerce such as the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, DAB and the New Territories Association, which is another huge united front organisation.

As of mid-2019, the Hakka Associations has 77 member organisations. Most of them are clan associations (52), followed by confederation of societies (seven), friendship associations (six), chambers of commerce (five), alumni associations (three), fitness association (one), and others (three). Nevertheless, the transparency of the operation of the member organisations is low as the information of most of the member organisations are not available to the public.

As shown above, the Hakka Associations is a good example of co-optative united front organisation in Hong Kong. Its nature, focus on ethnic identity, composition, scale, connection with Chinese officials and the fact that it was formed in 2011 all seemed to show that its establishment was to respond to the challenges from the local civil society by strong co-optation work.

3.3. Collaboration

As shown in my previous research, the measure of collaboration has continued because collaborators would prefer a little distance from Beijing while not antagonising it. Nevertheless, this area of work has shrunk in importance as the state has stepped up its efforts to integrate and co-opt various social forces and if unsuccessful, to oust them.

One previous example of collaboration is the backroom negotiation between the Democratic Party and Beijing in 2010. The HKSAR

government had proposed an electoral reform which was generally criticised by the democratic legislators and the community as too conservative. Nevertheless, several days before the government proposal was put to vote in the Legislative Council, Li Gang at the CPGLO met with the representatives of the Democratic Party and opened green light for their revised constitutional reform proposal. Their revised proposal was then successfully passed by the Legislative Council, which triggered public condemnation of the Democratic Party and then divisions in the democratic camp. Similar secretive negotiations happened in 2015 again. Emily Lau, chairperson of the Democratic Party and other two vice-chairs of the party were found to meet with Feng Wei, Deputy Director of the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office, in secret and without the knowing of even their party members. It was rumoured that the secret negotiation was about the District Council elections that was to take place later in the year. The incident again invoked much criticisms and suspicion towards the Democratic Party.

Another trend is about the developing self-censorship among the groups and organisations that choose not to antagonise the Chinese authorities and as a result, have implicitly collaborated with them. The extent of such collaboration is yet to be investigated. One notable example is the self-censorship of the owners of cinemas in Hong Kong in relation to the broadcasting of a film entitled *Ten Years*, which imagines the decline of Hong Kong in its rule of law, human rights, freedom, and so on, from 2015 to 2025. The film was harshly criticised by China's media as nonsense and overly pessimistic about the development of "One Country, Two Systems". Although the film won a best film award, only a few cinemas in Hong Kong agreed to broadcast it. Eventually, the film producers had to reach out to broadcast the film in different districts.

3.4. Containment

Strategies of containment have flourished in the recent years, which variously included the attempts to revise existing rules or legal framework, establish parallel organisations and pro-Beijing online media, and cultivate the so-called “new Hongkonger” identity. The local legislature and the civil society are important battlefields.

While the democratic legislators have attempted to use the legislative space in the Legislative Council to influence the policy process, the HKSAR government has implemented revisions of legal rules and/or framework to contain their influence. For instance, in 2010, five democratic legislators had resigned to trigger a by-election so that voters could show their support for having universal suffrage in elections if they chose to vote the legislators back to the legislature. On the grounds of wasting public funds, the government proposed a bill stipulating that resigned legislators would not be allowed to run in the legislative election again within six months subsequent to their resignation. The bill was passed by the Legislative Council. Moreover, in 2012, the then president of the Legislative Council Tsang Yuk-shing, for the first time, restricted the duration of the legislative debates on arrangements for filling a vacancy arising from the resignation of Legislative Council members or other reasons. Since then, it has become more common that the Legislative Council president manipulates the legislative rules of procedures to “cut cloth”, so as to contain legislators’ action of filibustering.

Besides the legislative rules of procedures, the oath-taking ceremony of the legislators has also become another battlefield. Over the past years, the oath-taking ceremony has been the venue of protest of some democratic legislators. However, in 2016, the HKSAR government mounted legal challenge to disqualify two localist legislators from

Youngspiration on the grounds that their actions in the oath-taking process had contravened the Basic Law. Subsequent to the reinterpretation of the Basic Law by the Standing Committee of the NPC, altogether six newly sworn-in legislators were disqualified. All of them were either localists or democrats.

Also in 2016, candidates of elections were required to pledge to uphold the Basic Law articles that state that Hong Kong is an inalienable part of China, that the SAR comes directly under the central government, and that no changes to the Basic Law can contravene Beijing's basic policies regarding Hong Kong. Nevertheless, Agnes Chow, co-founder of Demosistō, and Edward Leung of Hong Kong Indigenous were both disqualified from Legislative Council election although they had signed similar declaration forms. Chan Ho-tin, convenor of the banned Hong Kong National Party, was rejected to run after refusing to sign one. In July 2020, 12 pro-democracy activists were disqualified from running in the Legislative Council elections in September 2020 which have afterwards been postponed for a year due to the COVID-19. In November 2020, the mass resignation of democrats from the Legislative Council after the government ousted four pro-democracy legislators was condemned by the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office.

The local civil society is another battlefield. Since political handover, the political authorities have worked hard to cultivate patriotism in Hong Kong (Lam and Lam, 2013: 309-310). Such efforts have met challenges especially during the Protests against Moral and National Education in 2012. As a measure of containment, a new Hong Kong identity or the so-called “new Hongkongers” has been promoted. The idea was stated in the *People's Daily* in 2013 which published the articles of “Development of Hong Kong needs new Hongkongers” (香港發展需要新香港人) and “New Hongkongers are

the main strength for building Hong Kong” (新香港人是建設香港的重要力量)。“New Hongkongers” may refer to the mainland immigrants who came to Hong Kong since the 1980s or those mainlanders who worked in Hong Kong, resided in Hong Kong for family reunion, and mainland students who stayed and worked in Hong Kong after graduation. According to the articles, “new Hongkongers” constituted over 40% of the total Hong Kong population, and as said, they should participate in Hong Kong politics (Li, 2013).

Parallel organisations, established to contain the influence of the opposition, have flourished. There are parallel organisations that adopt a soft approach to attract followers. Examples include the young people groups such as Achievers Association (雋士會 2012), Hong Kong New Youth Energy Think Tank (香港新活力青年智庫 2014), Hong Kong Army Cadets Association (香港青少年軍總會 2015), Hong Kong InnoVision (香港青年新創見 2015) and many others. There are professional bodies of a similar nature, such as The Small and Medium Law Firms Association of Hong Kong (香港中小型律師行協會 2012), Hong Kong Cultural and Educational Exchange Association (香港文化教育交流協進會 2012), Hong Kong Legal Exchange Association (香港法學交流基金會 2014) and Hong Kong and Mainland Legal Profession Association (香港與內地法律專業聯合會 2015). Moreover, social and clan associations have also grown significantly. Examples may include New Home Association (新家園協會 2010), Chinese Social Worker Development Association (內地留港社會工作者發展協會 2014) and Hong Kong Volunteers Foundation (香港義工聯盟 2014). Many clan associations, aiming at consolidating Hong Kong people's ethnic identity, have also been established. Notable examples include Hong Kong Hakka Associations (香港客屬總會 2011), Hong Kong Qidong Natives Association (香港啟東同鄉會 2012), Hong Kong Federation of Hainan Community Organisation

(香港海南社團總會 2012) and Wuyi Association of Hong Kong (香港五邑總會 2016). Furthermore, parallel pro-Beijing online media have been founded to attract followers notably youngsters. Important examples of such online media include *HKG Pao* (HKG 報), *Line Post* (線報) and *OrangeNews.hk* (橙新聞).

There are other hardliner groups dedicated to counter democratic mobilisation. For instance, Patrick Tat-pun Ko, a former director of the United Front Work Department's Shenzhen overseas liaison committee, established the Voice of Loving Hong Kong (愛港之聲) in 2012. Around the same time, more similar grassroots groups were formed, such as Defend Hong Kong Campaign (保衛香港運動), Justice Alliance (正義聯盟), Caring Hong Kong Power (愛護香港力量), Sounds of Silence Hong Kong (沉默之聲), Take Action (齊心行動) and Silent Majority for Hong Kong (幫港出聲).

3.4.1. A case of containment: Silent Majority for Hong Kong

The above containment measures are all part of the organised strategy to counter democratic mobilisation. Take the Silent Majority for Hong Kong as an example. The association was founded in 2013 by pro-Beijing figures including former *RTHK* radio host Robert Chow, economics professor Ho Lok-sang and some CPPCC members. It was established with an explicit aim to arouse public concerns about the damages of the Occupy Movement. Also, it encourages people to speak out fearlessly against any attempts disruptive of Hong Kong. As stated, the organisation seeks to “promote a prosperous and stable Hong Kong, it supports ‘One Country, Two Systems’ and national unity, and opposes any attempt to undermine peace in Hong Kong.” (Silent Majority for Hong Kong, n.d. – author’s translation)

The association is special in the sense that it has been an efficient containment agent in Hong Kong in employing both rhetoric and actual

political mobilisation such as signature campaigns and rallies. The following analysis will focus on its rhetoric mobilisation especially on how it narrated against its opposition, the Occupy Movement, and about itself, and how it mobilised by fear with straightforward narratives, which were appealing to ordinary people unfamiliar with politics.

It is noticed that Robert Chow and other founders of the Silent Majority had stressed from the very beginning that they came out because they did not want Hong Kong to become chaotic (只係唔想香港亂). The fear of 亂 (pronounced *lyun* in Cantonese, *luan* in Mandarin) – instability and chaos – served as a straightforward appeal to ordinary Hong Kong people who cling to social stability. Despite the fact that the Occupy Movement organisers had stressed that the movement would be conducted peacefully and with love, in Chow's perspective, that would be impossible as people assembled (*Wen Wei Po*, 9th August 2013a).

Narratively, their appeal to people's fear was backed by the stress on the importance of the moral imperative of the rule of law or law-abidingness. As claimed by Ho Lok-sang, it would be all the more important to obey the law (守法係最重要嘅). Without any detailed explanation of the ideas such as the differences between the ideas of the rule of and rule by law as what the Occupy Movement organisers had done, the Silent Majority founders pressed forward the belief that the movement would make Hong Kong chaotic and divided (社會陷入撕裂紛亂) and the core value of law binding would vanish (理性守法的核心價值更面臨蕩然無存). Perceived in this way, law served instrumental functions in preserving social order instead of social justice as suggested by the Occupy Movement organisers (*Wen Wei Po*, 9th August 2013a). Also, according to Ho Lok-sang, law-abidingness is even more important than equality of political rights, as law serves to protect people's rights (法治精神保障市民的權利, 較平等的政治權利而言是更為重要) (*Ta Kung Pao*, 10th August 2013: A16). However,

it remained unanswered on how being law-abiding would help if people do not even enjoy fundamental rights.

The appeal to the fear of the people was also backed by the appeal to people's concerns about their pragmatic interests. As argued by the Silent Majority founders, the Occupy Movement would affect people's pragmatic interests, such as the business environment of Hong Kong, people's livelihood, price or properties and salaries (佔中是會影響香港的營商環境，損害民生) (*Ta Kung Pao*, 11th August 2013: A02; *Ta Kung Pao*, 14th August 2013: A02). In a word, they should not affect other people (如果是純粹的公民抗命，你咪自己唔交稅博拉，唔影響其他人咯) (*Ta Kung Pao*, 11th August 2013: A02), which is a typical local understanding of freedom as negative freedom.

Having framed their own demands, the Silent Majority founders had also blurred the importance of the demands of the Occupy Movement: implementation of genuine universal suffrage in elections. As argued by the founders, there was no blueprint of genuine democracy. "One person, one vote" as an ideal would not be possible (所謂真普選，全世界都無藍本，一人一票，票票等值根本無法落實). They cited the electoral college system in the elections of the United States as example, implying that genuine democracy was unrealisable (*Wen Wei Po*, 9th August 2013b).

At times, the Silent Majority founders would help defend the government. Chow reframed the Broken Window Theory and claimed that any governance had holes and problems which only needed mending. But if more windows were broken, which means that the government would face even greater challenges, then in the end people would suffer as they would be left unprotected by any windows (想像一下，政府管治及公共機構有那處(的窗戶)不是千瘡百孔？大家預計新玻璃窗裝上又會被打破，只會修修補補，對嗎？... 風雨一來，全無遮擋，受苦受傷就是香港市民) (*Ta Kung Pao*, 9th August

2013(a): A04).

Interestingly, Silent Majority founders would like people to believe that the organisation is politically neutral. They had stressed that the organisation would not comment on politics, participate in politics and make policy suggestions (作為一個組織，我們不論政，不參政，不提議) (*Ta Kung Pao*, 9th August 2013(b): A04), and it was not affiliated with the CPGLO.

3.5. Denunciation and Arrests

It was found that the ruling strategy of Beijing has become increasingly more aggressive, with greater rewards for those in Hong Kong who followed Beijing's line, and punishments for those who betray. For instance, Benny Yiu-ting Tai, who initiated the Occupy Movement, was criticised by various pro-Beijing sectors. In 2014, the state media *CCTV*'s daily news for the first time condemned the Occupy Movement for severely disrupting Hong Kong's socioeconomic order. Later in the same year, *Wen Wei Po* and *Ta Kung Pao*, the newspapers owned by the CPGLO in Hong Kong, published internal emails of Tai and accused him of receiving anonymous donation of HK\$1.45 million for the Occupy protests. During the Umbrella Movement, Chan King-cheung, the then editor-in-chief of *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, quitted abruptly, revealing that he had received pressure from the management to drop the column of Tai. In July 2020, Tai was removed from his tenured associate professor position over his criminal convictions related to the Occupy Movement.

The missing booksellers incident that took place in 2015 was another famous example which further revealed the growing stringent nature of Chinese authorities' strategies on dealing with opposition views. Lee Bo, a Hong Kong bookseller who sold banned political books on the mainland disappeared. Two colleagues and two employees of Lee

had also disappeared later. In 2016, Gui Minhai, one of Lee's colleagues, appeared on the state television *CCTV*, admitting that he killed someone in a drunk driving crash twelve years ago and he has been sentenced to ten years in prison in China in February 2020 for providing intelligence overseas.

Significant denunciations of the pro-independence movement in Hong Kong have also taken place. After the founding of the Hong Kong National Party in 2016, an editorial piece in the Chinese government-owned *Global Times* condemned the Hong Kong National Party calling it “a practical joke” and labelling it as political extremism. Moreover, the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office issued a statement through the official Xinhua News Agency slamming the party. In 2018, the HKSAR government banned the Hong Kong National Party under the Societies Ordinance. The Protests against the Extradition Bill had caused the arrest of over 6,000 people and nearly 40% among them were students. Since the passing of the National Security Law on 30th June 2020, there have been arrests made under the new law, including Jimmy Lai, founder of *Apple Daily*, and Agnes Chow, co-founder of Demosistō.

4. Limitations of the Ruling Strategies and Implications

The ruling strategies including the united front work which aim at the assimilation and integration of Hong Kong into China in the past decade have proven otherwise, notably evidenced in the onset of the Umbrella Movement, the Mong Kok Riots and their aftermath. The Protests against the Extradition Bill at the turn of the decade further exposed the challenges to the ruling strategies of China on Hong Kong. Namely, these include, firstly, shrinking faith in the promises of “One Country, Two Systems” and high degree of autonomy to Hong Kong as well as declining government legitimacy; secondly, backlashes against

mainlandisation and the united front agents leading to heightened political activism and a more consolidated Hongkonger identity; and thirdly, polarisation of the civil society with tension between the state and society transformed into clashes between different local groups.

Firstly, the expansion and extremes of the ruling strategies have eroded the already thinning faith in “One Country, Two Systems” and the protection of human rights and freedom stipulated in the Basic Law of Hong Kong. In a survey conducted by the Path of Democracy in 2017, the public’s assessment of “One Country, Two Systems” scored only an average of 4.84 out of a scale of 10 (*South China Morning Post*, 10th July 2017). Even before the outbreak of the Protests against the Extradition Bill, the Hong Kong University Public Opinion Programme had found that 55.3% and 55% of the respondents did not have confidence in “One Country, Two Systems” and Hong Kong’s future respectively (HKU POP, 2019a). In parallel, the HKSAR government had suffered from a humiliatingly low support rate, and a historic legitimacy and governance crisis. Back to mid-2019 with hard-handed suppression on the anti-Extradition Bill protests, the support rate for the Chief Executive Carrie Lam was only 32.8% (HKU POP, 2019b). Eight months later in February 2020, this further plunged to 18.2% (PORI, 2019a) and 82.5% of the respondents stated that they were quite or very dissatisfied with the performance of the HKSAR government (PORI, 2019b).

Secondly, the step-up efforts by the authorities to assimilate Hong Kong people and denouncing any resistance identity building and mobilisations have agitated the locals igniting even greater resistance before the passing of the National Security Law on 30th June 2020. Scholars observed that the Hong Kong polity has been expanding with rapid politicisation on all fronts of issues. Growing political activism prevailed, signified by the people’s proactive challenges to the

fundamental and mainstream social and political values and structures and a corresponding growing acceptance of the use of radical tactics (Lam, 2012, 2018a). Various types of localist organisations, including community-oriented organisations, professional organisations and political organisations, flourished ever since (Lam, 2018b). Importantly, the Hongkonger spirit has drawn attention since the former Chief Executive of Hong Kong Leung Chun-ying in his policy address in 2015 lambasted the *Undergrad*, a student publication of the Hong Kong University Student Union, and its publication *Hong Kong Nationalism*. Thereafter, the *Undergrad*, the young people and sympathisers alike have been labelled and attacked by the pro-Beijing camp as advocates of independence for the city (Aih, 2015). In reaction, there witnessed greater call from organisations and individuals to preserve Hong Kong's political autonomy and further demand for self-governance until today. Another landmark was the "anti-mainlandisation" bill introduced by legislator Claudia Mo. The bill was aimed to defend Hong Kong's local history and culture from the influence of mainland China. It proposed to immediately cancel multi-entry permits for Shenzhen residents, halt projects promoting regional integration and instead formulate a long-term population policy for sustainable development in Hong Kong (*Hong Kong Free Press*, 19th November 2015). The motion was defeated but like other examples mentioned above, it had demonstrated the backlashes against mainlandisation and the united front agents in Hong Kong through heightened political activism and a consolidated Hongkonger soul.

Thirdly, as stated, with soft and hard tactics as well as patronising and repressive strategies used in parallel by both the HKSAR and the central authorities, the ruling strategies on Hong Kong have resulted in polarisation of the local society. The tensions between the authorities and the people have diverted and diffused into clashes between local

groups campaigning for universal suffrage and protection of human rights and those counter-mobilisation efforts by the pro-Beijing camp and clashes between the police and protesters involving violence on both sides. People's discontent with propaganda by unpopular pro-Beijing figures and businessmen was aggravated into wider discontent and even rage when allegedly triad gangs were deployed to attack protestors or fake as vandalising protestors. In a poll conducted for Reuters by the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute in December 2019, it was found that the protests against the Extradition Bill were supported by 59% of the respondents. More than one third of the respondents attended the demonstrations. The respondents who were older, less educated and not born in Hong Kong were relatively less supportive of the protest movement. Also, 74% of them demanded an independent inquiry into alleged police brutality in the protests (Reuters, 31st December 2019).

5. Conclusion

This paper analyses the recent developments of the ruling strategies, including the united front work, of China on Hong Kong and their implications for the future Hong Kong polity. The paper examines the development of the strategies of integration, co-optation, collaboration, containment and denunciation. It also investigated into the Hong Kong Hakka Associations and the Silent Majority for Hong Kong as cases of interest. The paper found that the ruling strategies have become ever-expanding, more statist and institutionalised in nature despite a growing dichotomy in the local society. Lastly, the paper evaluates the limitations of the evolving ruling strategies and their implications for the future Hong Kong polity.

Note

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