

## Deepening the State

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## Deepening the State

*The Dynamics of China's United Front Work in Post-Handover Hong Kong*

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**ABSTRACT** United front work has long been an important tool through which the Chinese Communist Party exercises political influence in Hong Kong. While existing works have revealed the history, actors, and impact of united front work in this semiautonomous city, few studies have focused on its changing structure and objectives in the post-handover period. Using publicly available reports and an original event dataset, we show that united front work has involved a steady organizational proliferation of social organizations coupled with their increasingly frequent interaction with the mainland authorities and the Hong Kong government. We argue that united front work has become more decentralized and multilayered in its structure and that its objective has been shifting from elite co-optation to proactive countermobilization against pro-democracy threats. Our findings indicate that state power in post-handover Hong Kong does not solely belong to governmental institutions; it is increasingly exercised through an extensive network comprising multiple state and social actors.

**KEYWORDS** united front, social organization, clientelist network, elite co-optation, China, Hong Kong

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Hong Kong has been a special administrative region of the People's Republic of China (PRC) since 1997. However, long before the semiautonomous city was handed over by the British, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), since its birth, had sought to establish its presence in the territory. The capitalist city, despite being a stark ideological opposite to the socialist ideal, has served as a useful and relatively safe haven for the CCP to conduct revolutionary and political work and as a strategic outpost to communicate, interact, and trade with the outside world. These activities strengthened the party's survival in its nascent years and have also enabled it to meet its political needs at different periods of time. Facilitating these activities is the idea of the united front, a Leninist invention that originally sought to unite all workers from nonsocialist parties against the capitalist class. Adopted by the CCP to bring friends and sympathizers in line against its political opponents and credited by Mao Zedong as one of the CCP's "three great magic weapons" (*sanda fabao*), united front work has been an—if not the most—important tool for expanding and consolidating political influence in Hong Kong, both before and after the sovereignty handover. It has allowed the party-state to build up an extensive pro-Beijing following to ensure its domination of the city. To a large extent, one could say

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that united front work was simply the “basis and starting point of various tasks” for the local CCP (Loh, 2010, p. 88).

Given the centrality of the united front in China’s policy toward Hong Kong, the topic has aroused substantial interest among scholars. Numerous studies have been published about the history of united front work in Hong Kong (Lau, 1999; Loh, 2010), the target of such work (Chu, 2010), the role of key united front actors (Burns, 1990; Lee, 2019), the strategies involved (Lam & Lam, 2013), and its impact on local politics (Lo, Hung & Loo, 2019). However, despite their contribution to the field, these works have several limitations. First, these studies often put the attention on state actors that are formally responsible for carrying out united front work, which is usually the Central Liaison Office (CLO) and its predecessor. This focus neglects the fragmented nature of China’s authoritarianism (Lieberthal & Lampton, 1992; Mertha, 2009) in that many local government actors are also actively involved in developing their line of united front work in Hong Kong. Second, these studies tend to adopt a state-centric perspective, portraying the united front as a top-down, hierarchical structure. Although they do recognize the relational nature of united front work, the analytical attention is tilted toward the state actors and their policies, which understates their interaction with a myriad of social actors. Third, because of the clandestine nature of the united front, these studies have mostly relied on archival and anecdotal data, which makes the findings rather descriptive and unidimensional. This has undermined the actual scale, scope, and rhythm of united front work on an empirical level.

This article seeks to unravel the dynamics of China’s united front work in post-handover Hong Kong. Based on publicly available reports and an original event dataset, we use a social network approach to delineate the changing landscape of the united front and the interactions between a myriad of state and nonstate actors that are taking place under united front work. In addition to showing the steady organizational proliferation of pro-Beijing social organizations, we demonstrate their increasingly frequent interaction with the Special Administrative Region (SAR) government and different levels of government in mainland China. By doing so, we argue that united front work has become more decentralized and multilayered in its structure and that its objective has been shifting from elite co-optation to countermobilization against pro-democracy threats.

Our findings seek not only to highlight the continual salience of the united front tactics that the Leninist party-state relies on to control a peripheral territory but also to cast it in a different analytical light. By utilizing a rich set of event data that has not been explored by scholars, we are able to visualize and, to some extent, quantify united front work in a relational and temporal manner. Moreover, by showing the multitude of state and nonstate actors involved in the united front, the results indicate that state power in post-handover Hong Kong does not solely belong to governmental institutions; it increasingly rests in the nexus between state and society.

## THE POLITICAL ART OF MAKING FRIENDS

The CCP’s united front work has a long history in Hong Kong. As soon as the party was established in the early 1920s, it began to operate in the then British-ruled colonial city,

using it as a revolutionary base to build up power against the Nationalist government. Although by the mid-1930s the communist activities had almost come to a complete halt due to the Long March (Lau, 1999), the Japanese invasion provided an opportunity for the party to reestablish itself and expand its united front in the city (Loh, 2010, pp. 56–63). After the party captured political power in the mainland, Hong Kong continued to serve as an important outpost. Despite its ideological aversion against imperialism, the CCP decided to leave Hong Kong in the hands of the British for strategic purposes. It adopted a policy known as “making full use of Hong Kong in the interest of long-term planning” (*changqi liyong, chongfen dasuan*), which remained in place for the next few decades until the handover (Loh, 2010, p. 84). Under this policy, Hong Kong became both a window through which the CCP communicated and engaged with the outside world and an ideological battlefield against the Kuomintang and the US-led “Free World.” The city’s unequivocal capitalism also provided a stable source of foreign currency and other essential supplies for the Leninist party-state to sustain itself through its economic turmoil and international sanctions.

To achieve these objectives and make full use of Hong Kong, the CCP developed an extensive united front that spanned a wide range of sectors. Apart from aligning with the working class, its traditional base of support, the party-state—represented by the New China News Agency (NCNA) in the territory—cultivated supporters and friends among the capitalists, professionals, and politicians while extending its influence into education, media, and culture. This extensive united front, known locally as the “leftists,” was all at once mobilized during the 1967 riots due to the influence of the Cultural Revolution when pro-Beijing groups organized a struggle committee to coordinate strike actions and violent protests against the colonial authorities (Cheung, 2009). However, because of its increasing radicalization, coupled with the hard-line responses from the colonial authorities (Yep, 2008), the leftists lost public sympathy. Many citizens instead opted to throw their support behind the colonial government. As a result, the united front was forced to go underground through the 1970s (Ma, 2007, p. 35).

It was not until the negotiation of Hong Kong’s sovereignty in the 1980s that the united front reemerged from the dark. After the Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed in 1984, the local CCP, led by the newly appointed head of the NCNA, Xu Jiatusun, became very active in rebuilding the united front. Xu particularly focused on the tycoons, the business elites, and the middle class in order to solicit their support for the 1997 handover (Chu, 2010, pp. 77–94; Loh, 2010, pp. 145–168). New political institutions, such as the Basic Law Drafting Committee and the Basic Law Consultative Committee, were established to manage the transition and co-opt social and professional elites under the CCP’s sphere of influence. Promises and assurances that Hong Kong would be reunited with China under “democratic reunification” were also made to an emerging group of student activists and pro-democracy advocates in order to gain their support. Although the charm offensive was suspended by the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989, many elites soon realigned themselves with the party-state either because of the lure of the lucrative Chinese market or because of the guarantee of official appointments in the post-handover administration (Cheng & Yuen, 2019, p. 431). Thereafter, pro-Beijing

groups remained active in politics, occasionally mobilizing against the electoral and legal reforms introduced by the last governor, Chris Patten (Ma, 2007, pp. 42 and 131).

Two main features characterized China's united front work in colonial Hong Kong. First, united front work was conducted under a relatively centralized system and through a hierarchical command-and-control structure featuring "statist corporatism" (Lam & Lam, 2013). The apparatus was directed at the top by the Central Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group headed by Premier Zhou Enlai, whose orders were implemented locally by the NCNA (Burns, 1990). Although there were at times subtle tensions between central government agencies (e.g., Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office) and the NCNA, and although individual features were salient in united front work, the united front apparatus was largely centrally coordinated by a limited number of actors. Second, the primary objective of united front tactics in the colonial era was co-optation. Given that the CCP did not enjoy any formal power in the colonial city, united front work remained discreet and underground. Its scope had to be limited to building alliances with elites and masses through which they could achieve the party's strategic objectives and build up a significant base of social support after the handover. Even though the underground front mobilized in some particular instances, such as the 1967 riots or the Patten reforms, it generally refrained from participating openly in local politics. Making friends remained its principal task.

To some extent, these features are still relevant after the 1997 handover. First, united front work remains the responsibility of the precinct of the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, which has replaced the NCNA as the local party branch since 2000. The CLO has expanded its size, operations, and scope of work over the years. It has actively engaged with many social sectors and has assisted pro-Beijing political parties in campaigning in elections. Its role has grown so significantly that Lee (2019) has characterized it as a quasi-ruling party. Second, co-optation still constitutes an important component of united front work. Business and professional elites continue to pack national political institutions (Wong, 2012), namely, the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, which provide them with direct access to Beijing (Fong, 2014). Mass line work has expanded substantially through a wide range of social organizations and residential associations, which enable penetration into the grassroots (Ma, 2007, pp. 151–153). Lam and Lam (2013, p. 322) argued that united front work in post-handover Hong Kong reflects "a more inclusionary version of state corporatism," and it relies on a variety of tactics that revolve around co-optation, depending on "whether the central government regards its targets as friends, valuable potential co-optees or enemies."

However, there have also been significant changes in the meantime. First and foremost is that united front work has surfaced from the underground and become more conspicuous, even though the party does not operate formally in the territory.<sup>1</sup> The objectives of united front work have also diversified: rather than being limited to coopting

1. The CCP is not formally registered as a legal entity in Hong Kong, even after the 1997 handover, and it has no publicly declared local members.

supporters, the united front has become a crucial vehicle of electoral mobilization for the pro-Beijing camp (Kwong, 2007; Lo, Hung & Loo, 2019). Moreover, pro-Beijing grassroots organizations have been increasingly involved in contentious activities against the political opposition, ranging from signature campaigns to rallies in support of unpopular government policies and to counterprotests (Lee, 2019, p. 10; Cheng, 2020; Yuen & Leung, forthcoming). In short, united front work has evolved from a transitional and preparational strategy in the colonial period into a routinized governing approach in the post-handover era. Nevertheless, although some of these changes have been captured by the existing literature, these works have largely followed the framework of statist corporatism, focusing on the role of the CLO and its line of authority. This analytical lens has neglected the involvement of many central and local government agencies, which are increasingly salient in the united front work in Hong Kong, and the relational dynamics of these state actors with social organizations. The secretive nature of united front work also means that we still know little about their scale, scope, and rhythm, as well as the relative importance of different actors, on an empirical level.

#### METHODS AND DATA

This article aims to delineate the dynamics of China's united front work in post-handover Hong Kong using an original event-organizational dataset. Much of the data is extracted from the social organization news section (*she Tuan xinwen*) of *Wen Wei Po*, a state-owned newspaper and the CCP's mouthpiece in Hong Kong. Since 2003, the section has reported the events involving pro-Beijing social organizations and various governmental actors in mainland China and Hong Kong, which provides an invaluable record of united front activities. We first scraped the reports from 2003 to 2019 from the newspaper's website using computer programming techniques. After removing reports that were unusually long (which are likely to be long lists of names), we collected a total of 30,174 reports. Given that the amount of data is so large that it renders manual coding impossible, we utilized the same computer program and an organizational list that we have prepared alongside the program to identify the organizations present in each report. The list consisted of 3,869 organizations in total, spanning five different types: (1) central party agencies (e.g., the United Front Department, Propaganda Department and Organization Department), (2) local government agencies (i.e., agencies on or under the provincial level, including local united front bureaus), (3) Hong Kong government agencies (e.g., the Chief Executive Office, Home Affairs Bureau or Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau), (4) the CLO and its various subdivisions, and (5) pro-Beijing social and political organizations (e.g., hometown associations and community organizations). The first four types were collected through government websites and the list of China's administrative divisions; the last one was compiled through the lists of organizations from various pro-government signature campaigns.

The above list allowed us to identify how many organizations and which type of organizations were present in a single report, where each report is assumed to represent an event. We excluded events that had fewer than two actors, which left us with only

14,503 events (on average, 853 events per year) to analyze. Under the assumption that events allow multiple organizations to interact with one another (and therefore perform united front work), we then performed co-occurrence analysis of these events using the five different types of actors as analytical units. We only counted the co-occurrence of any two different types of actors as interactions, ignoring the co-occurrence of the same type.

The co-occurrence of different actors in each event does not *always* imply that these actors had built tangible and meaningful relationships through that event. After all, actors do not need to interact or mingle with one another, even if they are attending an event together. However, co-occurrence helps to reflect the potentiality of interactions, which, we believe, offers a useful proxy to gauge the possible scale of united front activities, given the relational nature of such work. It also gives researchers a quantifiable basis to compare the volume of possible united front activities across time periods. To strengthen our co-occurrence analysis, we also collected the background data of the major pro-Beijing grassroots organizations in Hong Kong based on the same list that we collected. We used WiseNews, online search engines, and newspaper advertisements to find their year of establishment, membership size, and affiliated organizations. Finally, we also relied on annual financial reports and participant observations to delineate the resources and activities of these grassroots organizations.

#### THE ORGANIZATIONAL PROLIFERATION OF THE UNITED FRONT

During the revolutionary era, the CCP's united front involved an alliance of nonparty social forces or, in some cases, secondary enemies in order to defeat the party's primary enemies. This strategy was often targeted at the educated class and the nationalistic capitalists before the founding of the People's Republic. However, once the party-state established formal state power and extended its tentacles into the peripheral territory, the strategy of united front work also needed to be adapted (U, 2012). Since the CCP did not directly and formally exercise political power in the colonial enclave, it had to depend on a range of local intermediaries, primarily social organizations, to penetrate society and channelize their influence. Moreover, under Mao Zedong's indigenization of Marxism-Leninism, which emphasized the principle of "mass line" (*qunzhong luxian*) (Gregor, 2019), the united front apparatus in capitalist Hong Kong required close ties with the grassroots rather than just with the bourgeois professionals. These two strategic considerations laid the foundation for a multilayered and decentralized structure of the united front later in post-handover Hong Kong, even though it remained rather centralized and unitary in much of the colonial era (Burns, 1990).

Given the changing state-society relations in post-handover Hong Kong discussed earlier, the united front's operational dynamics and co-optation targets have shifted accordingly. During the early post-handover period, the primary aim of the united front was to contain the contradiction between socialism and capitalism under "One Country, Two Systems." To earn support from the capitalist class to ensure a stable transition and effective governance, business elites were thus the principal targets of co-optation. Co-opted business elites often gained representation in the national political institutions in

the mainland and in statutory bodies in the Special Administrative Region (SAR). Nominations to different levels of the People's Congress and People's Political Consultative Conference were mostly handled by the CCP's United Front Department after considering the advice from the Hong Kong and Macau offices and the CLO. In return, the capitalist class would make use of its standing and influence in professional and business organizations to support the SAR government. However, the massive rally on 1 July 2003 against a proposed national security law prompted Beijing to adopt a more organized effort to control the territory. As the party-state saw the societal challenges as a form of national security threat, business alliances and underground operations were seen as insufficient for containing the pro-democracy opposition. The united front sought to expand its reach and deepen its penetration into the masses, much more than it did during colonial times, to strengthen the patriotic force.

The result is a gradual shift from statist-corporatism to political clientelism in which the majority of social organizations are no longer subsumed under the SAR government's framework of governance but are instead leveraged by the CLO as vehicles to expand its influence at the grassroots. Lee's recent study (2019) suggested that the uniqueness of clientelism in Hong Kong is that its political machine is adapted from the party-state's united front infrastructure of indirect rule over Hong Kong. Under the new united front ecology, business elites become clients under the political patronage of the CLO, and they in turn sponsor social organizations and increase the dependency of the masses on the political machine.

In the post-2008 period, the CLO significantly expanded its internal structure and boosted its public visibility not only to make friends but also to combat enemies. Its number of internal bureaus increased from 9 to 25, which are in turn territorially divided according to district boundaries and functional roles (Lee, 2017). Each regional bureau oversees several electoral constituencies. Furthermore, its social work, external relations, and public affairs bureaus are given the responsibility to unite business and grassroots associations; liaise with the local and mainland authorities regarding economic, educational, and cultural exchanges; and supervise propaganda mouthpieces and pro-Beijing political parties, respectively. Specifically, the united front's organizational proliferation can be measured by its ability to co-opt and revamp three types of social organizations including local federations, hometown associations, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Figure 1 illustrates the hierarchical and relational structure of the united front apparatus for Hong Kong. The Central Committee's Central Leading Group on Hong Kong and Macau Affairs commands at the top as the highest decision-making body on matters related to Hong Kong. Like other leading small groups, it is headed by a committee or standing committee member of the Politburo and is responsible for advising the Politburo on policy matters and coordinating policy implementation decisions. To ensure a chain of command and effective policy implementation, the heads of the relevant party departments and government committees serve as either deputies or members.

Established in 1958 and reorganized in 2003, the Hong Kong–Macau leading small group is one of the eight primary leading small groups within the Central Committee



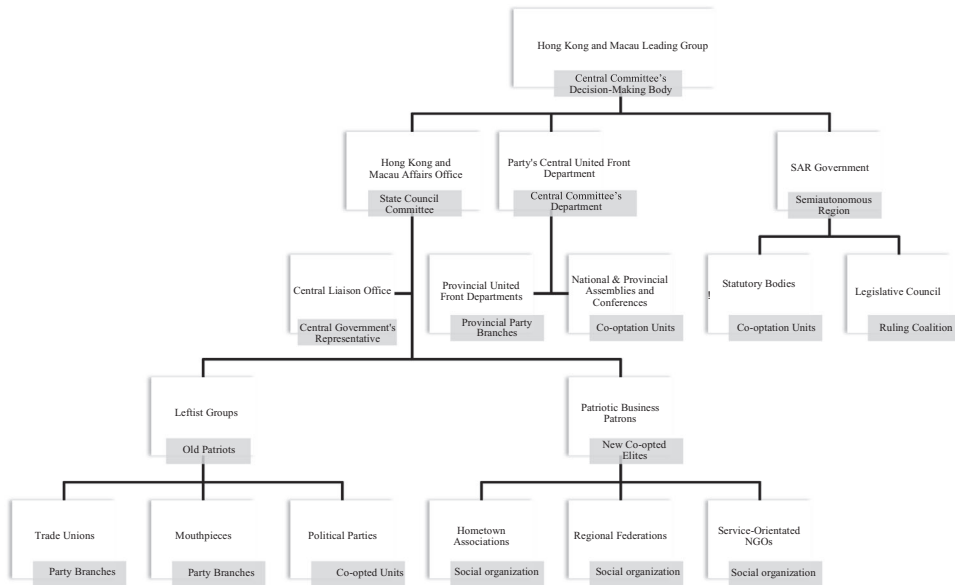


FIGURE 1. The structure of the United Front in Hong Kong.

(Miller, 2008, p. 3). The leading small group leads two important implementation bodies: (1) the United Front Work Department, which is a party structure; and (2) the State Council's Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office (HKMAO), which is a government unit. The United Front Work Department is tasked with making loyal friends from a board spectrum of social elites (Wang & Groot, 2018, p. 570). Along with its provincial branches, it is responsible for vetting and recommending elites to be co-opted into the national and local assemblies, that is, the People's Congresses and Consultative Conferences. The HKMAO, meanwhile, is tasked with mobilizing state resources to coordinate actions among local-level authorities. It also develops working relations with the SAR government and other business and professional organizations and elites in the semiautonomous city.

In terms of hierarchy, the CLO is supposed to be a half-level below the HKMAO whose status is equivalent to a ministry. However, in terms of its status, the CLO could be as powerful as the HKMAO because its head was ranked as the party secretary of the Hong Kong Work Committee, which is the highest-level party organ in Hong Kong.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, past leaders of the CLO were always members of the Central Committee who were members of the Central Leading Group and enjoyed access to the Politburo, and they also possessed extensive organizational and social connections in the local society. As a result, the CLO has direct control of the leftist groups that have served as the subsidiaries or extended arms of the party-state since the founding of the People's Republic. Apart from the old patriots, the CLO is also co-opting an increasing number of grassroots social

2. The Hong Kong Work Committee is the top party branch in Hong Kong. It shares the same personnel as the Central Liaison office under the principle of "a single organization, two signboards" (*yige jigou liangkuai paizi*).

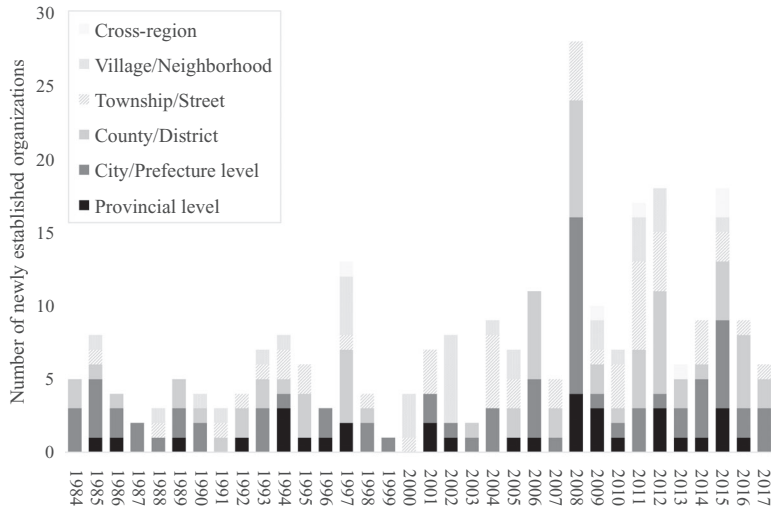


FIGURE 2. The growth of Hometown Associations in Hong Kong, 1984–2017. Source: Annual reports and official websites of Hometown Associations.

organizations to expand its patron–client networks with the support of pro-Beijing business elites. In addition, although the SAR government is supposed to be highly autonomous from the united front work organizations, in recent years, its interactions with the mainland authorities and social organizations have also significantly increased, indicating the organizational proliferation of the united front work.

Three types of social organizations are prioritized as targets under the post-handover united front. The first and arguably most important type of social organization being co-opted is Chinese hometown associations. Formed organically by people who share the same lineage or ancestral connections, hometown associations aimed to provide mutual aid to Chinese migrants from the same places or bloodlines and to serve as their business networks (Cheng, Li & Ma, 2014). They had a long history in Hong Kong and South-east Asia (Sinn, 1997; Liu, 1998). Most of the early hometown associations were county- or city-based, serving migrants from different parts of the Guangdong Province and coastal regions such as Xiamen, Quanzhou, Ningbo, and Shanghai. In the post-handover period, particularly after 2003, many new hometown associations from lesser-known localities and regions were established (see Figure 2). Many of them received support from the local governments of the respective region in the mainland, which sought to establish their economic and political clout in the semiautonomous city. Meanwhile, a rising number of province-based “federations of hometown associations,” such as those representing Guangdong, Guangxi, Fujian, and Hainan, have also been established to serve as umbrella platforms to consolidate the local-level hometown associations, which used to be disconnected from one another. They were often set up by established or nouveau pro-Beijing business and professional elites, who would, in turn, receive positions from national political institutions such as the National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference.

The primary goal of these new umbrella platforms is to ensure better coordination and relationships building among the pro-Beijing forces. Each of these federations claimed to have at least hundreds of thousands of members and dozens of city or prefecture-based hometown associations. The federations of hometown associations constitute the top layer of each provincial community, whereas all the lower-level associations within each province are designated as second- or third-layer member units. The leaders of the city or prefectural-level associations are often appointed as senior board directors, whereas the leaders of associations at the county and village levels become the rank-and-file directors. This arrangement has created a pyramid-like, multilayered, and interconnected structure to bridge class, dialect, and geographic divisions in each native-place community (Choi, 2006). They are no longer simply welfare providers for migrants since they increasingly take on the function of an overt broker for united front work. For instance, the annual report of the Federation of Hong Kong Guangxi Community Organizations indicated that the hometown association was established under the support of the Guangxi Committee United Front Work Department to promote the spirit of “Love the Nation, Love Hong Kong” and to consolidate the patriotic forces in Hong Kong (Federation of Guangxi Community Organizations, 2013, p. 2).

The second prime target in the united front strategy is the three local federations in Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and the New Territories. For instance, the Kowloon Federation of Associations was formed in 1997 and reportedly has 220,000 members, 191 affiliated associations, and hundreds of community branches corresponding to different districts and neighborhoods as of 2019 (Kowloon Federation of Associations, 2019). The members of these federations included women’s associations, youth groups, cultural societies, neighborhood associations, and mutual aid committees. The neighborhood associations and mutual aid committees were formed by the colonial government in the 1970s to encourage public participation in neighborhood affairs, help organize community activities and government campaigns, and offer advice on local matters (Ma, 2007). After the handover, while these committees are supposed to be self-governing and representing the interests of grassroots citizens, they became heavily dependent on the funding and directives of the government through the Home Affairs Bureau (HAB). Therefore, it is not surprising that the successive secretaries of the HAB since 2007 have been former members of the two largest pro-Beijing parties in Hong Kong, even though most of the principal officials of the Hong Kong government did not have any previous party affiliation. Each year, the HAB allocated tens of millions of dollars to these federations and their member associations, which would in turn organize a dizzying range of mega-cultural and community events to reach out to grassroots residents. Since the opposition seldom applied for such funding (and would likely be rejected if they did), public resources have thus been effectively channeled into these pro-Beijing organizations and their extended arms.

The third target for cooptation is the service-oriented NGOs, which serve to advance the party’s social reach through professional service provision. The New Home Association (NHA) is a notable example. Established in 2010 and sponsored by numerous pro-Beijing tycoons, it has become highly competitive in the social work

sector, which is a stronghold of the democratic opposition. With an enormous annual budget, the NHA has recruited hundreds of social workers to serve new immigrants from China and the grassroots. The one-stop services and extensive networks helped to establish a relationship of dependency between the providers of patronage goods and their grassroots clients (Lee, 2019). Often registered as charities, these social organizations served as important intermediaries enabling the building of new ties in the community and advancing the state agenda. Another example is the business chambers, which financed hundreds of exchange tours to China each year for different aged students through groups such as the Future Star Federation of Students and the Hong Kong Youth Exchange Promotion Association. Their charity status ensures that the donations from patrons are tax exempt. The SAR government is another major source of funding for these activities. A government audit report revealed that the HAB spending for mainland exchange tours quadrupled from HK\$26.4 million in 2012 to HK\$112.7 million in 2017.

The organizational proliferation of the united front has created an extensive and multilayered patron-client network that is highly dependent on the party-state directives but less regulated by administrative protocols. Unlike in the late colonial and the early SAR period, many social organizations are no longer regulated by professional ethics and funding rules but are increasingly facilitated by relational networks and political connections. Hometown associations, federations of community organizations, and serviced-oriented NGOs were either created on purpose or systematically revamped to serve political tasks. Their activities have also been increasingly subsumed under a united front logic, very different from the pre-handover period when they were organically set up as a social hub through which natives or coworkers could mingle and maintain connections with their community and professions. Moreover, although business elites continued to be a target of co-optation, they are now expected to play a more proactive role in brokering organizational proliferation. Their most important function is not so much to offer their professional expertise, but rather to provide the financial resources and social networks for creating these organizations from scratch, managing the registration process, recruiting members, drafting the constitution, donating money, and sponsoring properties to serve as office spaces.

Figure 3 shows the amount of donations and sponsorships as a proportion of total income of four representative hometown federations from 2009 to 2018. Their amount of funding has dramatically increased over time, corresponding to the new united front initiative to proactively penetrate the grassroots. For example, the total income of the Guangdong federation increased from HK\$15.2 million in 2009 to HK\$29.9 million in 2018. Despite the overall increase, its main source of income remained dependent on donations. Take 2017, for example. On average, more than 68.6% of its income came from donations from local tycoons or sponsorships from the HAB or district councils. In contrast, membership subscriptions and event income were highly insignificant and accounted for only 6.5% and 11.3% in 2017, respectively. Moreover, its large-scale events often incurred deficits. For example, for the Chiu Chow federation, both the Chiu Chow Festival and the Yu Lan Festival ran deficits of HK\$3.34 million and HK\$0.99 million,

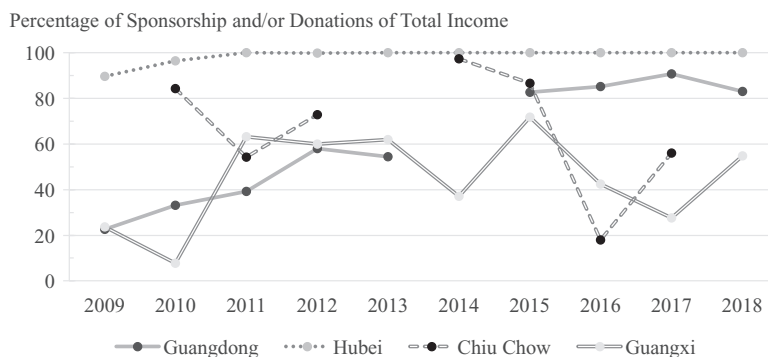


FIGURE 3. Income source of representative Hometown Associations in Hong Kong, 2009–2018. Source: Annual financial reports of Hometown Associations, 2009–2018.

respectively, in 2017. Overall, only the events in 2009 and 2010 for Guangdong and those in 2012 for Chiu Chow resulted in profits. Hence, it is highly unlikely that these organizations would be able to sustain themselves under either the market model or the charity model. Given that their operations are highly dependent on the support of the state apparatuses and pro-regime elites, they thus resemble social organizations in China more than conventional civil society organizations. What makes them different from the state-dependent model in mainland China is that they are not merely extended arms of the state; rather, they are horizontally connected through an extensive patron–client network and are often financed by patriotic business tycoons.

### THE MULTILAYERED STRUCTURE OF THE UNITED FRONT

To promote and coordinate the party’s political agenda in Hong Kong, the CLO has become the organizational nexus that connects different levels of government in the mainland, the Hong Kong authorities, and local social organizations. However, although its political role has been strengthened notably after the 2003 rally, it was not until the second decade of the SAR that this was materialized by a concerted policy directive with institutional implications (Cheng, 2016). In 2008, a CLO ranking officer published an article in *Study Times*, the mouthpiece of the Central Party School, advocating the creation of a “second governing team” to “fully, openly, and legally” assist the SAR government (Cao, 2008). Although the official had a relatively junior hierarchy, this publication has proven to be a reflection of top-level policy formation. This was partly revealed by the restructuring of the CCP’s Leading Small Group on Hong Kong and Macau Affairs in the same year. This leadership change explains why the targets of co-optation have evolved from the business elite to the masses and the purposes have changed from preserving the status quo to enforcing institutional changes and countermobilization. It also coincided with the appointment of Xi Jinping, then Politburo Standing Committee member, to lead the leading small group in 2008, shortly before he became the general secretary in 2012. During his tenure as the

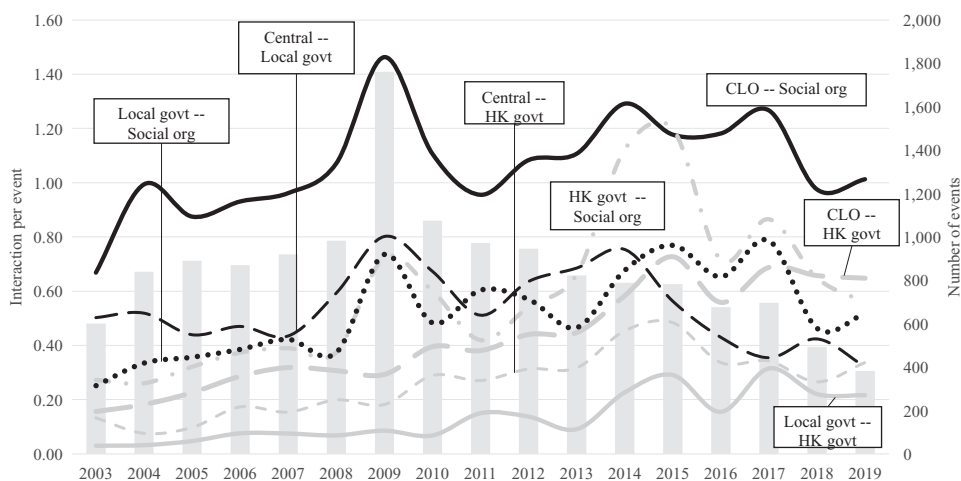


FIGURE 4. Interactions between state agencies and social organizations in Hong Kong, 2003–2019.

top policymaker on Hong Kong matters, Xi reportedly prescribed a more proactive approach and the mass line principle for pro-Beijing social organizations to participate in local affairs (Li, 2019, p. 10).

Apart from a more active CLO, governmental actors from the mainland have also become increasingly involved in united front work. The most salient perhaps are those from the different levels of local governments, ranging from the provincial to the street/prefecture level. To develop ties with fellow natives from their localities who live in Hong Kong to accomplish both economic and political objectives, local governments from across the mainland have been visibly active in encouraging native elites to establish hometown associations. As a result, local officials are frequently invited to Hong Kong as officiating guests in various kinds of activities of these hometown associations, such as inauguration ceremonies and annual celebrations of key political dates. Their travel tours to their hometowns in the mainland are often accompanied by meetings with local government officials and learning sessions.

Figure 4 shows the interaction between the five types of organizational actors, as briefly discussed in the Methods section. Overall, there have been increasingly more interactions between any two types of actors from 2003 to 2019. Interactions that involved social organizations were particularly frequent, and they all suddenly surged in 2009, which was likely because many new social organizations, particularly hometown associations, were established in that year, as suggested by Figure 2. The increased number of interactions between different levels of party-state institutions and social organizations also corresponds to the suggestion of a second ruling team run by the CLO to assist with the governance process.

The most visible trend in the figure is the salient role of the CLO. Among its relationships, the most frequent interactions take place between the CLO and local

social organizations. On average, the two types of actors have more than one interaction per event, which means that for any one event, it is expected there will be co-occurrence of the CLO and a local social organization. The frequency of interactions is also growing. This pattern serves as a proxy to illustrate the organizational proliferation of social organizations through united front work. Recent studies show that the leaders of social organizations tend to interact with CLO officials because these officials were responsible for nominating seats in national and regional People's Congresses and Consultative Conferences (Yuen & Leung, forthcoming). Their business interests in the mainland are also better protected by these official titles, which explain why they are interested in being co-opted and often try to use sponsorship of these social organizations and community events to strengthen their ties with mainland officials.

Another important trend concerns the increased interactions between local governments in the mainland and social organizations in Hong Kong, which indicates the former's growing local presence. As noted earlier, local officials were frequently invited to Hong Kong as honored guests in a wide range of activities during which they could mingle with local actors. Interestingly, the line closely correlates with that between the CLO and local social organizations (a 0.82 correlation), even though the former has a lower magnitude. On the other hand, interactions between central government agencies and local social organizations rose from 2003 to 2014 but dropped afterward (only a 0.39 correlation for the interaction between the CLO and local social organizations). One possible explanation is the gradual institutionalization of the role of the CLO. After rapid expansion in the late 2000s, the CLO has become the primary nexus between mainland authorities and Hong Kong's community actors. Local government officials needed to "go through" the CLO when interacting with local actors, as indicated by the high correlation. In comparison, central government agencies have become less relevant in everyday united front work.

The third notable trend is the growingly salient role of the Hong Kong government under the multilayered united front work. Not only is the interaction between the Hong Kong government and social organizations rising, but there was also a sudden jump from 2013 to 2015. Similarly, there are also substantially more interactions between the CLO and the Hong Kong government. The number of interactions between central government agencies and the Hong Kong government and the number between mainland local governments and the Hong Kong government have also slightly increased. The ups and downs illustrate two operational dynamics of the united front. First, united front activities are driven by important events. The dramatic spike from 2013 to 2015 was most likely associated with the countermobilization toward the Umbrella Movement in 2014 (Cheng & Chan, 2017). Second, the SAR government has also taken a more proactive role to build ties with various community actors. In the late colonial and early post-handover period, it tended to adopt a consultative model that mainly regulated the funding source but gave organizational autonomy to grassroots actors. In the post-2008 period, the SAR government has played an increasingly active role in the united front work by cultivating the grassroots networks.

## THE COUNTERMOBILIZATION TACTICS OF THE UNITED FRONT

Countermobilization is another new tactic of the pro-Beijing forces in post-handover Hong Kong, which reflects a change in both the targets and tactics of united front work. We consider countermobilization as “a form of state mobilized contention that arises in response to a formidable threat to the prevailing order” (Cheng, 2020, p. 4). It is a common tactic used by hybrid or authoritarian regimes around the world (Robertson, 2010; Ekiert, Perry & Yan, 2020; Hellmeier & Weidmann, 2020). In Hong Kong, the rise of countermobilization was set against the background of the increased scale and interval of protest events since 2003. The old united front tactic that emphasized building government–business alliances and grassroots networks were seen as inadequate for coping with these societal threats. This prompted the regime to proactively counteract the oppositional forces by relying on the pro-Beijing grassroots networks as the organizational basis. These networks have long been mobilized to support pro-Beijing political parties during elections. These experiences facilitated their swift mobilization once the arena moved from institutional politics to street politics. Moreover, with the proliferation of patron–client networks between the state and social organizations, united front directives from above become easily channelized into pro-Beijing groups to perform countermobilization.

The first massive counterprotest in post-handover Hong Kong occurred in 2010 when pro-Beijing political parties and social organizations took the lead to organize rallies in support of the Hong Kong government’s constitutional reform bill. Initiated by renowned public figures, the pro-government rally largely emulated the repertoire of pro-democracy protests and managed to create some level of social support for the passing of the bill. Inspired by the success, a number of pro-Beijing political groups were later established to follow the countermobilization playbook. Notable examples include Caring Hong Kong Power, Voice of Loving Hong Kong, and Defend Hong Kong Campaign. Although some of their initiators and organizers were former personnel in various pro-Beijing social organizations, these political groups fashioned themselves as citizen-based organizations. They were also referred to as “satellite groups” to indicate their network linkage but physical distance with the regime (Cheng, 2020). The naming of their organization reflected their loyalty and political beliefs, symbolizing the idea that they were self-mobilized to take to the streets out of their love for the nation and the city, which had been threatened by the chaos produced by pro-democracy activism.

This top-down initiative found a new life alongside the rise of pro-democracy protests and gradually evolved into a multilayered and decentralized network of counterprotests. Unlike electoral mobilization, which is more institutionalized and regulated by electoral rules, countermobilization is event-driven and situationally induced. Indeed, many of the counterprotest groups were established before or during the large-scale pro-democracy protests such as the Umbrella Movement in 2014 and the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement in 2019. For instance, in August 2014, a group known as the Alliance of Peace and Democracy, which brought together numerous pro-Beijing grassroots organizations, initiated a petition campaign that collected signatures from nearly 1,600 organizations and



1.8 million individuals in one month. It was followed by a march that claimed to have rallied 130,000 people. Our analysis of the signatories suggested that a wide range of grassroots organizations were involved—more than one-fourth were hometown associations, along with community organizations, resident associations, alumni groups, youth and women’s groups, and cultural and sports associations. This unprecedented parade of pro-Beijing forces would not have been possible without the already existing grassroots networks, indicating how the social capital cultivated through organizational proliferation can be readily activated in crisis situations.

Counterprotests against pro-democracy forces continued after the end of the Umbrella Movement with the main targets shifting to the pro-autonomy localist movements (Veg, 2017). Meanwhile, grassroots organizations—such as the Alliance of Peace and Democracy and its member units—replaced the satellite groups as the new leading forces. This was likely because, first, satellite groups often adopted overly dramatic and coercive protest tactics that created embarrassment for the pro-Beijing camp; and second, grassroots organizations have greater legitimacy because of their organic connections with the masses and are thus in a better position to appeal to their nationalistic sentiments.

The Anti-Extradition Bill Movement in 2019 further highlighted the role of pro-Beijing grassroots organizations in mobilizing counterprotests. After the SAR government failed to suppress the movement through heavy-handed police tactics and right before the central government put forward the official rhetoric of “stop violence and restore order” on 7 August, pro-Beijing groups were swiftly mobilized. Two mass rallies were organized on 20 July and 3 August to indicate that “a silent majority” was in support of the government. In both protests, pro-Beijing grassroots organizations, particularly the hometown associations, became the core units of mobilization. During the 20 July rally, which claimed a turnout of 310,000, we counted 75 grassroots organizations, 39 of which were hometown associations. In some cases, lower-level associations were tasked by their high-level associations to recruit a certain minimum number of protestors, which they had to mobilize through their grassroots networks and social media tools. Participant observation at that rally also showed that these organizations often came in large groups, distinguished by large banners indicating their affiliations. Such practices have long been adopted during electoral mobilization, which aimed to cultivate group solidarity, demonstrate organizational capacity, and display loyalty to state directives.

It is important, however, to note that the countermobilization strategy is not always successful in curbing the opposition, as reflected also by the anti-extradition protests. Not only did the overwhelming public support for the protests make it difficult for countermobilization to be effective, public outrage against police brutality also meant that pro-Beijing forces could not come up with a rightful frame to justify their counter actions, unlike during the Umbrella Movement (Yuen & Cheng, 2017). Moreover, the multi-layered and diffuse structure of countermobilization also implied that some of its front-line actions could not be properly restrained, as indicated by the Yuen Long incident on 21 July when white-shirt thugs staged a gruesome attack against protesters and ordinary citizens. The landslide defeat of the pro-Beijing camp in the November 2019 District

Council Election was also an indicative sign that the grassroots penetration and social mobilization of the pro-Beijing forces were not as effective as expected.

Regardless of the outcome, it remains clear that countermobilization has become an integral part of the regime repertoire to counteract opposition threats. The production of a multilayered united front means that a sizable group of pro-Beijing forces is actively seeking political opportunities and targets to prove their loyalty and justify their existence. Indeed, after the anti-extradition protests, there have been multiple instances in which pro-democracy activists were attacked by people who were likely linked with pro-Beijing groups. Some of the inherent problems of countermobilization are that it tends to be intractable, often resulting in unruly actions; and indiscriminate in nature, which could hurt bystanders. This has effectively weakened the orthodox logic of the united front, which aims to differentiate the primary enemies from the secondary enemies and seeks to collaborate with the latter.

## CONCLUSION

As an integral component of China's policy toward Hong Kong, united front work has been a widely researched topic among scholars. However, due to the opaque nature of such work, existing research has mostly relied on historical and anecdotal data, which makes it difficult to delineate the evolution of united front work in terms of its structure and objectives. This article is an attempt to fill this empirical gap. By making use of organizational reports and an original event dataset, we have shown how post-handover united front work, particularly since the mid-2000s, has involved a steady organizational proliferation of social organizations and increasingly frequent interactions between these social organizations, different levels of the mainland authorities, and the Hong Kong government. The result is a more decentralized and multilayered structure of the united front apparatus, involving multiple state and social actors. Shifting objectives of the united front work are also witnessed. Rather than adhering to elite cooptation, united front work has become more proactive in organizing the pro-Beijing forces in the semiautonomous territory and countermobilizing against the pro-democracy opposition whenever opportunities arise. Due to the changing roles and relationships between the party-state and grassroots actors and between the central and local governments, the governance model of post-handover Hong Kong has gradually shifted from regulatory statist-corporatism to collaborative political clientelism.

Our findings thus contribute to a better understanding of China's united front work in a peripheral region, which it has yet to gain complete political control over despite its sovereign status. Although the findings are by no means completely new, they have provided empirical support to the perceived trend of increasing united front activities through the first two decades of the handover. More importantly, the findings have indicated that united front work is not just limited to a conventional set of government organizations, such as the CLO or the United Front Work Department. The analytical scope should be broadened to include other governmental units, such as local governments in the mainland and the Hong Kong government. Because of the relational

nature of united front work, analysts must focus on the interaction between these state actors and various social actors. The united front should thus be considered as an extensive network comprising both state and social actors rather than just an extended arm of the state. ■

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