The China Factor in Hong Kong Elections: 1991 to 2016

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ABSTRACT: The China factor has always been a significant structural, ideological, and organisational factor in Hong Kong elections. Since 2003, the deepening of intervention by Beijing and its Liaison Office in Hong Kong meant that the China factor as an organisational force became increasingly salient in elections. It also drove more people, especially young people, to resist China's control and take the road of supporting independence or self-determination. The 2016 elections showed more ostensible intervention by the Liaison Office, and independence became a new campaign issue. The China factor will continue to be an integral part of Hong Kong elections in years to come.

KEYWORDS: The China factor, Hong Kong independence, Hong Kong politics, Umbrella Movement, Hong Kong identity, Legislative Council elections, Liaison Office.

The partially free elections in Hong Kong have always been conducted in the shadow of the People's Republic of China. Since partial elections were introduced in 1991, the China factor has been shaping the development of Hong Kong elections in three dimensions: as an ideological/identity factor, a power-structural factor, and an organisational resource factor. In recent years, with more intervention from Beijing, the China factor as a power-structural and organisational factor has become increasingly salient in Hong Kong elections, in some cases threatening the electoral integrity of the elections. The deepening of intervention by China in turn has driven more Hong Kong people to support self-determination or independence in recent years, meaning that ideologically the China factor took on a totally different dimension in the 2016 Legislative Council elections.

This paper traces how the impact of the China factor on Hong Kong's elections changed from 1991 to 2016. The China factor as an ideological or identity factor has always shaped the major political divide in Hong Kong elections. As a power-structural factor, China as the sovereign master served to define the rules of the game in Hong Kong, to help pro-Beijing forces maintain a legislative majority and to marginalise the democrats in a bid to maintain the hybrid nature of the regime. The huge presence of China-funded organisations and groups in Hong Kong gives the pro-Beijing camp an immense resource edge over the pro-democracy opposition. The greatest danger to Hong Kong's autonomy is not only increasingly strong intervention from China, but also the possibility that Hong Kong people will gradually be accustomed to the omnipresent China factor in Hong Kong elections, in violation of the principles of "One Country, Two Systems."

The China factor in multiple dimensions

There are different ways to understand and analyse the impact of the China factor in Hong Kong elections. Wu saw the major impetus of the China factor lying in the utilisation of its formidable capital and resources to absorb nearby regions into its sphere of political influence (Wu 2016). In the case of Hong Kong, the China factor in electoral politics is much more complicated and multi-faceted. With most inhabitants of Hong Kong ethnically Chinese, Chinese nationalism and identity has always been an ideological factor that frames political attitudes in Hong Kong. As China holds the constitutional power to decide Hong Kong's political setup after 1997, structurally China can intervene to change the rules of Hong Kong's elections. With the Hong Kong Chief Executive selected by Beijing, the Hong Kong government is power-dependent on China. The executive branch is not politically neutral in administering the elections, but has an incentive to help the pro-Beijing/pro-government parties to marginalise the pro-democracy opposition. Beijing can also intervene to assist pro-China forces in Hong Kong with their vastly superior organisational and material resources. The China factor in Hong Kong elections has thus taken on three dimensions: the ideological/identity dimension, the power-structural dimension, and the organisational/resource dimension.

Ideological/identity dimension

Since popular elections were introduced into the Hong Kong Legislative Council (Legco) in 1991, the attitude toward the Chinese government has been a key factor determining the voting choice of Hong Kong voters (Leung 1993, 1996). Decolonisation has triggered democratisation and an indigenous democracy movement in Hong Kong since the 1980s, and the Hong Kong democrats, in their bid to fight for democracy and preserve the freedom and autonomy of Hong Kong, entered into direct conflict with the Chinese government. Since the 1980s, attitudes toward the Chinese government and democratisation have been the major political cleavage dividing political parties in Hong Kong (Lau and Kuan 2000; Ma 2002). On one side of the political divide are the democrats championing values such as rule of law, democracy, freedom, and autonomy for Hong Kong, who are accused of being "anti-China." On the other side are the pro-Beijing parties/groups and business conservatives in Hong Kong, who stress patriotism, loyalty to, and good relations with Beijing, and who say that democratisation should be gradual and respect the priorities of the Chinese government.

Identity with China or Hong Kong has also been an important factor framing political attitudes and hence voter choice in Hong Kong. Most post-war

inhabitants of Hong Kong were immigrants from China who identified as Chinese nationals without necessarily supporting the Chinese Communist regime. A Hong Kong identity has emerged since the 1970s, as members of a new generation with a stronger sense of belonging to Hong Kong see themselves as a superior group of Chinese who are more Westernised, affluent, educated, and civilised (Lui 1997; Mathews 1997). Hong Kong Chinese cherish their political and economic freedom, and the capitalist and consumerist lifestyle in Hong Kong. They are also more inclined towards Western values such as democracy, rule of law, civil liberties, and the like, which has brought them into conflict with Chinese identity (Wong Timothy 2002; Lau 2000). In recent years, the rise of a new political identity of Hong Kong, pointing towards self-determination, was a major political change that shaped the 2016 election.

Power-structural dimension

Compared to Taiwan or elsewhere in Asia, the nature of the China factor is totally different for Hong Kong, as Beijing is the ultimate sovereign master. It is also different from the impact of other authoritarian countries on neighbours (such as Russia on Ukraine or Finland), where parties need to deal with the spectre of a strong external neighbour by adapting their platforms in diplomatic, economic, or security issues. China's presence in Hong Kong is inherent and legitimate, and can affect the rules, operation, and integrity of elections in Hong Kong. As a power structure factor, China has impacted Hong Kong's elections in at least three ways:

- China has ultimate control over the constitutional structure and rules of the electoral game in Hong Kong;
- China has the incentive to influence the election outcome in Hong Kong to ensure majority legislative support for the Hong Kong government, and to keep the pro-democracy parties a minority opposition;
- the power-dependent Hong Kong government is under Beijing's influence when administering the elections in Hong Kong, which can affect the fairness and integrity of the elections.

Hong Kong has been a partial-democratic regime since the 1980s. The Basic Law states that Legco and the Chief Executive (CE) will ultimately be elected by universal suffrage. The transition to full democracy, however, requires the approval of Beijing. Scholars on Hong Kong have struggled to agree on the nature of this regime. A plethora of labels have been offered, including "liberal autocracy," "competitive authoritarianism," "hybrid regime," "electoral authoritarianism," "soft authoritarianism," "liberal authoritarianism," and the like (Kuan and Lau 2002; So and Chan 2002; Case 2008; Ma 2007; Wong Stan 2015). The common theme of all these "democracies with adjectives" (Collier and Levitsky 1997) is that Hong Kong is not a liberal democracy. Studies on various forms of "electoral authoritarianism" point to the incentives of authoritarian regimes to introduce partial or limited elections. They want to claim electoral legitimacy for their governing power, but elections in hybrid regimes entail the risks of losing power to the opposition. Incumbents are therefore tempted to control or manipulate the results by various means, including giving out economic incentives, twisting the rules, building pro-state patron-client networks, or outright rigging or fraud (Schedler 2002, 2006; Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Ottaway 2003; Levitsky and Way 2002).

The Chinese government shares these incentives when facing elections in Hong Kong. It is wary of full democracy in Hong Kong putting pro-democracy activists in power. It would like a facade of elections to enhance legitimacy, but has the incentive to bend electoral rules and intervene to help pro-Beijing groups maintain a pro-government legislative majority, while marginalising the democrats. The ideal situation is for pro-democracy groups to remain a "permanent minority" as window-dressing for the partial democracy without threatening Beijing's political control. As the Hong Kong CE is selected through "de facto" appointment by Beijing, this power dependence (Kuan 1991) means that the Hong Kong government may not be totally neutral in administering elections in Hong Kong. It is under pressure from Beijing to enable pro-Beijing groups to win more seats to preserve regime control. This can serve as a threat to the electoral integrity of Hong Kong.

Organisational/resource dimension

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had had a notable presence in Hong Kong since 1921 (Chan Lau 1999; Kong 2011). In 1947, the CCP set up the Hong Kong Working Committee to oversee party work in Hong Kong, then restructured it to become the Hong Kong and Macau Working Committee (HKMWC) in 1955. In 1978, the State Council set up the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office, responsible for China's policy over Hong Kong and Macau. Before 1997, the HKMWC was based inside the New China News Agency (NCNA), and the head of the NCNA was the secretary of the CCP party branch in Hong Kong, commanding all "leftist" organisations in *nomenklatura* fashion (Burns 1990). Since 1949, the CCP had built a sizeable network in Hong Kong. The network was comprised of commercial and economic organisations (department stores, banks, tourist agencies, etc.), educational and cultural organisations (schools, newspapers, film companies, publishers, bookstores, etc.), and "mass organisations" (labour unions, residential associations, youth and women's groups, sports and recreational associations, etc.) (Burns 1990; Xu 1993; Jin 1988). These "leftist" groups were very unpopular after the 1967 riots and were shunned by Hong Kong's mainstream society. In the 1980s, with the resumption of sovereignty imminent, the CCP re-vitalised these organisations by putting in more resources. It also began to engineer a united front of pro-Beijing organisations.

Common to many hybrid regimes, the pro-government parties usually have superior material resources that they can use to their electoral advantage, winning seats and majorities to help maintain regime legitimacy. The immense network mentioned above can serve as a very effective mobilisation apparatus in elections. Twenty years after 1997, this network has become increasingly mature and resourceful, with increasingly skilful operations that have enabled the pro-Beijing camp to gradually gain ground in popular elections.

The following sections will discuss how the China factor has affected Hong Kong elections over the years, including how the impact in the three dimensions has evolved over the years. For easy understanding, the time frame of analysis will be divided into three stages: (a) the pre-1997 period; (b) from 1997 to the 2008 election; (c) after 2008. I will also carry out a more detailed analysis of the state of the China factor in the 2016 Legco elections in Hong Kong.

The pre-1997 stage: China as future master

Ideological/identity

The China factor served as the most important ideological factor in the 1991 and 1995 Legco elections, as attitude toward the Chinese government

was the key campaign issue. Leung Sai-wing was the first to use the concept of "China factor" to analyse elections in Hong Kong. He conceptualised the "China factor" as a historical, structural, and socialisation factor. To Leung, Hong Kong's political history was deeply intertwined with the political development of China since the late Qing era: the Opium War, the 1911 Revolution, the Sino-Japanese War, the Civil War, and political turmoil under Communist China all served to shape the development of Hong Kong. Many post-war inhabitants came to Hong Kong as a result of war, economic hardship, and political instability in China, which shaped their attitudes and feelings towards China. The fear of loss of freedom under Communist rule after 1997 intertwined with the urge for democracy, a sentiment pushed to a climax by the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown.

In the 1991 election, the most important campaign issue was candidates' attitude toward the Tiananmen crackdown, and voter surveys showed that this attitude was a major determinant of voter choice (Leung 1993). Voters who had a negative evaluation of the Chinese government and the Tiananmen crackdown were more likely to vote for the democrats. In 1995, two years from the handover, the China factor took on a different form. Pro-Beijing parties and candidates claimed that if more pro-Beijing candidates were elected, there would be less confrontation with China, bringing a smoother transition. Pro-democracy parties and candidates were branded as "anti-China" because they had supported the 1989 Beijing movement and Governor Chris Patten's last-ditch democratic reform. The democrats asserted that they could stand up for Hong Kong's interests against China's intervention and fight for the autonomy, freedom, and democracy of Hong Kong. Voter surveys showed that trust in the Chinese government was a key factor that determined voter choice in the 1995 election; voters who had less trust in China were more likely to vote for the democrats (Leung 1996).

Power-structural

Leung (1996) also saw the China factor as a structural factor in the transition era in that it brought about a dual authority structure to Hong Kong. As future sovereign master, the Chinese government served as an authority structure that could affect politics and elections in Hong Kong. Unlike after 1997, Beijing could not directly dictate the electoral rules in Hong Kong, but with the conservative elites in Hong Kong, who used to be pro-British, gradually deserting the outgoing master in favour of the future one (Lau 1999), Beijing could still exert a lot of influence. A good example would be the struggle over the electoral system after 1991. After the democrats won 16 out of the 18 seats under the "double-seat, double-vote" system in 1991, the pro-Beijing press and conservatives in Hong Kong criticised its "coat-tail effects" and proposed changing to a system resembling Japan's single-non-transferable vote (SNTV) (Ma and Choy 1999). Chris Patten's reform proposal for the 1995 elections included changing the electoral formula to a first-past-the-post (FPTP) system. This was again criticised by China, as it was seen to benefit the more popular democrats. Nevertheless, the fact that the 1995 election adopted the FPTP formula showed that China was not able to dictate the rules of the electoral game before 1997.

Organisational resources

The China factor as an organisational force in Hong Kong elections should never be underestimated. According to the memoirs of Xu Jiatun, NCNA director and party secretary for HKMWC from 1983 to 1990, the total CCP membership in Hong Kong was 6,000 by 1983 [1] (Xu 1993). Qian claimed that after 1983, more than 83,000 Communist cadres with changed names and false identities entered Hong Kong to groom a "fifth column" (Yan 2000). Before 1991, the pro-Beijing forces did not actively participate in local elections in Hong Kong, seeing these as elections under the British colonial regime. In the 1991 Legco elections, only three candidates received formal endorsement from CCP-led groups in Hong Kong. After the democrats won a landslide in 1991, Beijing decided that they needed to rally the pro-Beijing forces in Hong Kong to compete with the democrats. The Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong (DAB) was formed in 1992. Its party leadership comprised the main leaders of leftist unions, pro-Beijing organisations, and community groups. It became the flagship of pro-Beijing forces in Hong Kong in subsequent elections, leading the political struggle on all fronts with the pro-democracy parties.

The CCP has actively built a united front since the 1980s, especially in the elite business and professional stratum (Wong Wai-kwok 1997; Goodstadt 2000; MA 2007; Wong Stan 2012; Fong 2014). Beijing co-opted political elites, professionals, and social leaders by appointment into Beijing-appointed consultation or rule-making bodies, including the Basic Law Drafting and Consultation Committees, Hong Kong Advisors, District Advisors, the Preparatory Committee and the Selection Committee for the first CE election (Ma 2007). Approaching 1997, the NCNA began to organise National Day commemoration activities, and invited business elites and local leaders to join the Organisation Committees for National Day celebrations in various districts. It became an important means of networking with Hong Kong elites, which helped strengthen the united front before and after 1997 (Fong 2014).

The 1995 Legco election was the first major test of the prowess of this pro-Beijing network. In 15 of the 20 constituencies, the pro-Beijing camp managed to coordinate one candidate to compete with the democrats. The democrats won a hard-fought victory, partly because they had more political stars, which benefited from the FPTP system. The 1995 election nevertheless showed that the pro-Beijing camp was catching up and learning electioneering skills. The pro-Beijing camp won only three of the 20 directly-elected seats, but in several constituencies they ran the pro-democracy candidates quite close.

The first decade after 1997

In the first decade after 1997, the China factor on Hong Kong elections was marked by a tempering of the ideological factor and limited intervention in the elections (compared to later stages). With the change of sovereignty, the most important change was in the power structure dimension, accompanied by a gradual expansion of the pro-Beijing organisational network.

Ideological/identity

The China factor as an ideological factor in Hong Kong elections was less salient in the early post-1997 period. In this period, Beijing did not intervene actively in domestic social and economic policy-making in Hong Kong, or at least much less than expected. The worst fears before 1997 were not re-

1. Note that this figure was at a period when the pro-Beijing forces in Hong Kong were at their low-tide, being regarded as too radical since the riots of 1967.

alised. Hong Kong people turned their attention to economic issues after the Asian financial crisis in 1997-98. With increased social and economic integration, the economic dependence of Hong Kong on China, and government propaganda about the Motherland wanting only the best for Hong Kong, Hong Kong people showed more trust and confidence in the Chinese government. With Hong Kong's economy increasingly dependent on China, even the democrats did not want to adopt a hostile attitude toward China. With the passage of time, the Tiananmen crackdown ceased to be a campaign issue in the elections of 1998 and 2000.

The most significant event related to the ideological impact of the China factor in this period was the Article 23 legislation. Article 23 of the Basic Law rules that Hong Kong should enact laws on its own to prohibit treason, secession, sedition, subversion, theft of state secrets, and linkage with foreign political organisations. The article grew out of the 1989 Beijing movement, after which the Chinese government was concerned that Hong Kong could be used by foreign powers to effect political change in China. To the pro-democracy camp in Hong Kong, Article 23 presented a powerful weapon by which the government could clamp down on dissidence and curtail freedom in Hong Kong. To most of the opposition and civil society, the legislation proposed by the government was too loose and vague, and liable to abuse by the authorities to hurt civil liberties in Hong Kong. With an unprecedented mobilisation of civil society, a massive rally of 500,000 people on 1 July 2003 forced the government to withdraw the legislation (Ma 2005).

The 2003 rally against Article 23 was a watershed event for post-1997 Hong Kong politics. It rekindled the democracy movement, as the democrats lost no time in demanding that the 2007 CE and the 2008 Legco should be fully elected by universal suffrage. The issue of universal suffrage became a key campaign issue in the 2003 District Council (DC) elections and the 2004 Legco elections. The democrats won a landslide victory in the 2003 DC elections, as many voters came out to "punish" pro-Beijing candidates who had supported Article 23 legislation.

Power-structural

As the new sovereign master, China could change the electoral rules to help pro-Beijing forces and marginalise the democrats. Since the Chinese government considered the Patten reform unconstitutional, it abrogated the elected legislature in July 1997 and instituted a Provisional Legislative Council (PLC) under its control. The PLC changed the electoral formula for the Legco direct election from FPTP to proportional representation (PR), allowing the weaker pro-Beijing camp to win more representation in future contests. It also dramatically narrowed the franchise of the nine functional constituency (FC) seats in 1995 from 2.7 million to a few thousand, with most of the FCs changed from individual voting to corporate voting, which disadvantaged the democrats. The Election Committee that elected ten seats in 1998 was re-composed. Instead of being elected by District Councillors as in 1995, it would be elected by several hundred members composed mostly of business and professional elites. All in all, the change of the electoral rules made it more difficult for the democrats to win seats. In the 1998 election, the democrats got only 19 seats out of 60, compared to 29 seats in 1995, despite getting a higher popular vote share than in 1995.

With the change of sovereignty, and the increased dependence of Hong Kong's economy on China, the power-structural dimension changed in that the business and professional sectors in Hong Kong were becoming more dependent on China. The Chinese government made an active effort to co-opt capitalists into central institutions such as the Hong Kong delegations for the National People's Congress (NPC) and the Central People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) (Fong 2014). Business and professional leaders actively sought these official posts, as they would facilitate building *guanxi* in China and expanding their business in the mainland. Less resourceful members of the Hong Kong elite sought places in the people's congresses and political consultative conferences of mainland provinces and cities. This brought about a gradual extension of the united front in Hong Kong, with the net cast ever wider to include more members of the elite.

Organisational/resource

At the mass level, the pro-Beijing network was largely composed of the following forces:

- Leftist unions coordinated by the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions (HKFTU);
- Rural groups led by the Heung Yee Kuk;
- Employees of China-funded enterprises in Hong Kong;
- Members of "mass associations," including cultural and recreational groups, women's groups, hometown associations, and other groups.
- Residential associations at the local level, including ownership committees, mutual-aid committees, and residents' groups on specific issues. These community organisations were coordinated at the regional level by larger umbrella organisations.

The whole mobilisation apparatus worked on multiple fronts. These pro-Beijing groups would cultivate members' support through dispensation of material benefits, services for members, social activities for members, and socialisation efforts meant to convert more people to supporting the government. Paid cadres would take care of the organisational work in a relatively labour-intensive manner. These groups would also help recruit and groom political aspirants to give them exposure and connections. These aspirants had a better chance of getting appointed in government advisory bodies, which helped them accumulate social service records. Over time, these groups formed dense networks that absorbed people from all walks of life, and served as a socialisation network that could spread pro-government and pro-China ideology. In election times, this network provided considerable support in terms of manpower for campaigning and "getting out the vote."

After the 2003 rally and the subsequent landslide defeat of the pro-Beijing camp in the 2003 DC elections, Beijing leaders were worried that the Hong Kong democrats, whom they saw as Western collaborators, would seize the chance to grab power. The governing crisis under Tung Chee-hwa made them believe that the relative autonomy that the Hong Kong government had enjoyed in 1997-2003 could mean a loss of control. With the possibility of further democratisation in the future, they needed pro-Beijing forces to have better vote support, otherwise more elected seats would only mean more power to the democrats. Beijing began to adopt a more hands-on approach to Hong Kong affairs after 2003 and intervened more in Hong Kong's elections (Cheng 2009).

What followed was a massive increase in subsidies to the pro-Beijing network in Hong Kong, which further enlarged the resource disparity between the pro-Beijing forces and the democrats. Pro-Beijing parties and organisations were much better staffed, much more resourceful in organising activities and providing services, and could give away free gifts such as rice, meals

Table 1 – Self-Identity of Hong Kong People

Period of study	*N*	Hong Konger (%)	Hong Konger in China (%)	Chinese in Hong Kong (%)	Chinese (%)	Other (%)	Don't know/ hard to say (%)
Jul-Dec 2016	1001	34.6	29.1	17.7	16.3	1.4	1.0
Jul-Dec 2015	1011	40.2	27.4	13.0	18.1	0.9	0.4
Jul-Dec 2014	1016	42.3	24.3	15.0	17.8	0.6	0.0
Jul-Dec 2013	1015	34.8	27.6	15.0	21.8	0.8	0.1
Jul-Dec 2012	1019	27.2	33.1	16.1	21.3	0.6	1.7
Jul-Dec 2011	1016	37.7	25.3	17.8	16.6	0.6	2.1
Jul-Dec 2010	1013	35.5	27.6	13.8	21.1	0.4	1.5
Jul-Dec 2009	1007	37.6	23.9	13.1	24.2	0.2	1.0
Jul-Dec 2008	1016	21.8	29.6	13.0	34.4	0.5	0.7
Jul-Dec 2007	1011	23.5	31.5	16.0	27.2	0.7	1.1
Jul-Dec 2006	1011	22.4	24.3	20.1	31.8	0.6	0.7
Jul-Dec 2005	1017	24.8	26.5	16.9	30.7	0.0	1.1
Jul-Dec 2004	1007	25.9	23.1	16.2	31.6	0.4	2.8
Jul-Dec 2003	1059	24.9	23.4	15.6	32.5	0.3	3.3
Jul-Dec 2002	2043	30.0	21.7	14.7	31.1	0.5	2.1
Jul-Dec 2001	2077	29.0	24.2	14.0	28.7	0.4	3.8
Jul-Dec 2000	2127	36.3	23.0	14.2	21.3	0.7	4.7
Jul-Dec 1999	1660	33.5	22.6	17.0	23.6	0.4	2.9
Jul-Dec 1998	1587	36.6	23.5	16.7	19.9	0.4	2.9
Jul-Dec 1997	2080	35.9	23.6	19.9	18.0	0.3	2.5

Source: Public Opinion Programme, The University of Hong Kong, https://www.hkupop.hku.hk/chinese/popexpress/ethnic/index.html.

for the poor and the old, and the like. Their community network organised numerous recreational, social, and cultural activities, which allowed pro-Beijing councillors and prospective candidates to enhance their name recognition and reputation. They had a much better chance to get government or DC subsidies for their activities, partly because of their control of the majority in all DCs after 2007, which further enlarged the resource gap with the pro-democracy parties (Wong 2014).

Under the aegis of the Liaison Office, the pro-Beijing camp extended their united front by winning over local leaders. Au Nok-hin has detailed how the pro-Beijing camp used different means to neutralise or win over local leaders who used to be politically neutral, pro-Taiwan, or even pro-democracy. The rich and strong community networks enabled them to contact these local figures by co-organising or subsidising activities, building up relations, and providing material or other incentives to gradually win them over. Government co-optation and better prospects for business and career development invariably served as significant incentives. Over time, the pro-Beijing network expanded quickly at the local level, weakening community support for the democrats (Au 2015).

The post-Olympic China factor

Ideology/identity dimension

Tracking polls on Hong Kong identity showed that identification with and trust in China peaked at around 2008, the year of the Beijing Olympics, after which it started to fall (see Table 1). Increased oppression of dissidence in China and tightening control over Hong Kong rapidly impaired the image of the Chinese government. Hong Kong people were becoming sceptical of the rapid integration and influx of capital and people from the mainland, as large numbers of mainland tourists and visitors pushed up rents and retail prices in Hong Kong. There were concerns that mainland immigrants would eat up social and welfare resources in Hong Kong. The change quickly gave rise to "anti-China" sentiments after 2009 (Ma 2015). Many in Hong Kong began to fear that increased economic dependence and integration would mean Hong Kong losing its identity and distinctiveness, and that policies and resource allocation in Hong Kong would serve China's priorities instead of those of Hong Kong. Sentiment quickly turned not only against Beijing's political control, but also against the influx of mainland money and people.

The years after 2003 also saw the fermentation of a new political identity for Hong Kong, especially among the younger generation. The 2003 rally was a major empowering exercise for members of the younger generation, who were more inclined to post-materialist values, and more self-expressive and eager to assert their own identity (Lee and Chan 2008). In rediscovering and re-narrating the political history of Hong Kong through a series of heritage and environmental protection movements after 2003, young activists dismissed the construct that Hong Kong was only an "economic city," and asserted that it was a city rich in social movements and political action (Ma 2011). They favoured direct action and bottom-up movements from the communities to reclaim their decision-making power from the ruling class (Chen and Szeto 2015). A series of heritage protection movements and political movements served to instil a drive for self-expression and self-determination in the agitated youth.

The China factor as an ideological factor changed rapidly in the years 2008-2016. The rise of "anti-China sentiment" and a new political identity for Hong Kong led to new currents of "localism," self-determination, or support for independence (Ma 2015; So 2015). The major campaign issues in the 2012 Legco elections were the national education curriculum, resistance against control from Beijing, and upholding "One Country, Two Systems."

The relatively good results of more radical and anti-China candidates testified to a trend of radicalisation in Hong Kong.

Power-structural dimension

The years after 2008 saw increased intervention by the Liaison Office in elections in Hong Kong. At the elite level, the increased dependence of the Hong Kong economy on Chinese capital and mainland opportunities meant the Liaison Office had stronger control over non-popular forms of elections in the business and professional sectors, including the FC elections and the subsectoral elections for the Election Committee, which elects the CE. The Liaison Office can more or less dictate who can run for and represent the sectors. In both the 2012 and 2017 CE elections, it was reported that Beijing directly intervened to make sure their hand-picked candidate would be elected. Henry Tang, Chief Secretary from 2007 to 2012 and son of a local tycoon, was the original choice for 2012, but after his popularity plummeted because of a series of scandals, Beijing decided to switch its support to Leung Chun-ying at the eleventh hour. It was reported that Head of the CCP United Front Work Department Liu Yandong went to Shenzhen one week before polling day, summoning leading figures in the Election Committee to twist their arms to ensure Leung's election.[2] The day after Leung was elected, he visited the Liaison Office, as if to thank them for their support. All this heightened worries in Hong Kong that Leung's election would mean much tighter control from Beijing.

On the popular front, the Liaison Office played an indispensable role in strategic coordination of the pro-Beijing forces. In DC elections, with single-seat constituencies, the key to victory was to avoid vote-splitting within the same political camp. If more than one conservative candidate wanted to run in a constituency, the Liaison Office served as the final arbiter of who was going to run. In the Legco direct elections, with multi-seat constituencies elected by PR, it was vital to field the optimal number of lists and then divide the votes by a certain formula among different lists. The Liaison Office served as the overall coordinator of the campaign strategy and the vote-division operation (see next section).

A major change in this period was more reports on electoral fraud and manipulation, damaging public confidence in electoral fairness, and creating distrust in the Hong Kong government to uphold electoral integrity. The government-appointed Election Affairs Commission (EAC) was accused of gerrymandering to help pro-Beijing candidates in the DC elections. Stan Wong shows that pro-democracy incumbents were more likely to have their constituencies redrawn to make re-election more difficult (Wong 2015). In these tiny districts, frequent redrawing of boundaries made it difficult for resource-strapped democrats to hold their turf.

There were more media reports on "vote-packing" and other manipulation in the elections. "Vote-packing" means illegally registering voters in constituencies not of their true residence to affect election results. On polling day, these voters could be mobilised to vote for a certain candidate. In the DC elections, which had only an average of 9,000 voters per district, the presence of a few dozen of these voters could tip the balance. After the 2011 DC election, dozens of voters and one pro-Beijing councillor were caught, tried, and sentenced to jail. In the 2015 DC elections, a man who claimed to represent China's United Front Work Department tried to offer money for some young radical groups to run in certain precincts so as to "split the vote" from the pro-democracy camp. The man was later found guilty and sentenced to jail.[3] As for electoral fraud elsewhere, it was difficult to catch the mastermind behind all these plots. Many in Hong Kong, however, believed that only the Liaison Office and the pro-Beijing camp had the resources to carry out these tricks. More people began to question the electoral integrity of the popular elections.

Organisational resources

The massive input of resources made this a period in which the mobilisation and coordination efforts of the pro-Beijing camp became much more mature and effective. The network worked to marvellous effect, especially at the grassroots level, bringing the pro-Beijing camp excellent results in the 2007 and 2011 DC elections. As the DCs are local consultative bodies with no real executive power, the very small size of the constituencies benefit those who own personal votes, local patron-client networks, and strong constituency services. In 2007, the pro-Beijing camp won about 70% of the elected seats. They managed to gain further ground in 2011, with the democrats' seats further reduced to about 100 out of 412 elected seats. The loss of the DC seats meant a major loss of income and resources for the resource-strapped pro-democracy parties. It also made it difficult for the pro-democracy parties to groom young talent and establish networks at the local level. The pro-Beijing forces thus gradually encroached on the democrats at the district level and took over their local bases, hollowing out their grassroots support. Stan Wong shows a strong connection between DC incumbency and vote share obtained by the pro-Beijing camp in the Legco elections (Wong 2015).

At the Legco level, the most important impact of organisational resources was in enabling effective vote division by dint of meticulous calculation and mobilisation. With the Liaison Office's active coordination, candidates from the DAB, the FTU, and other conservatives ran under different banners, catering to voters of different class backgrounds and ideological tints. The pro-Beijing network, coordinated on a regional basis, developed a directory of their supporters, which helped them estimate the number of potential supporters in the district and "get out the vote" effectively (Au 2015). Different pro-Beijing organisations were assigned to mobilise for different lists, to bring about a designated vote division to enable the pro-Beijing camp to win maximum seats. In 2012, this vote division strategy worked almost to perfection as the pro-Beijing camp won 17 out of the 35 directly-elected seats (48.6%) with a vote share of about 41%. By contrast, without effective coordination, the democrats fielded too many lists in most of the districts. In some cases, some lists attracted too many votes, leading to vote wastage. As a result, the democrats owned about 56% of the votes in 2012 but could only win 18 of the 35 seats (51.4%). In three of the five Legco constituencies, the pro-Beijing camp got fewer votes than the pro-democracy camp but won more seats, showing its effective vote division strategy.

The China factor in the 2016 Legco election

The China factor played out in a qualitatively different manner in the 2016 elections. It was the first Legco election after the 2014 Umbrella Movement. It was also the first election where "Hong Kong independence" was a campaign issue.

2. *Sing Tao Daily News*, 20 March 2012, p. A02.
3. "Wangtai zhuchi Zeng Yongjian quhui huixuan qiu simian: Guan: Yingxiang minzhu fazhan xu yancheng" (Internet radio host Cheng sentenced to four years: Judge: Heavy sentence for its damage to democratic development), *Ming Pao*, 27 October 2016, http://news.mingpao.com/pns/dailynews/web_tc/article/20161027/s00002/1477504698298.

Ideology/identity: Rise of localism

The most salient political change facing the 2016 Legco elections was the rise of "localism" as a political current. The 2014 Umbrella Movement fostered a new political identity for Hong Kong, especially among the younger generation. The "yellow ribbon" supporting the occupation became a symbol of a peaceful and freedom-loving movement in pursuit of democracy and autonomy, with the courage to fight for their own destiny in defiance of Beijing and police violence. However, as the 79-day occupation failed to bring about any institutional change, it led to major disappointment among pro-democracy supporters and more detachment from China. To many people, the end of the Umbrella Movement showed that Beijing paid little heed to the desire for democracy in Hong Kong, and would only agree to a manipulated CE election. Many disgruntled youth saw "One Country, Two Systems" as a hoax that would only mean increased political control, diminishing autonomy, and fake democracy. Genuine democracy and autonomy under Chinese sovereignty seemed unlikely. This quickly fanned the flames of separatism or self-determination in Hong Kong.

After 2014, various strands of "localist" thinking quickly emerged. Before that, "anti-China" sentiment manifested itself in many forms, but seldom went as far as proposing independence for Hong Kong. Chen and Szeto distinguish between two types of localism: "progressive localism" and "anti-China" localism (Chen and Szeto 2015). The former doesn't stress independent sovereignty, but calls for "democratic self-determination" based on bottom-up grassroots movements that seek to reclaim people's decision-making from the ruling class to achieve genuine democracy. It coincides with the efforts of some post-Umbrella activists to "go back to the communities." After 2014, the "anti-China" strand, mostly seeing the Chinese government and/or mainlanders as the root of most of Hong Kong's problems, was on a rapid uprise. Some of these "anti-China" localists claimed that a "new Hong Kong nation" or sovereign state of Hong Kong was needed to get real autonomy and democracy (Kaeding 2017; Chan Chepo 2016; Kwong 2016).

In the 2016 election, the "anti-China" strand included groups such as Hong Kong Indigenous, Youngspiration, a temporary electoral alliance of three radical groups, and some other independents. The progressive localists were represented by three candidates: Eddie Chu, Lau Siu-lai, and Nathan Law. With the pro-Beijing candidates adopting a strong denunciatory position against Hong Kong independence, the issue was discussed in every televised forum. Most localist candidates were rather cautious, refraining from firmly committed to independence during the campaign. Youngspiration called for building a "Hong Kong nation" (香港民族). Nathan Law's platform did propose different self-determination mechanisms (e.g. referenda) by 2047 for Hong Kong people to decide their future, with independence a possible option.

The key campaign issue of the 2016 election was the attitude toward "One Country, Two Systems" and the possible re-election of Leung Chun-ying in 2017. Concern about "One Country, Two Systems" was heightened before the election by the "missing booksellers" case. Starting in December 2015, five people involved with the Causeway Bookstore, which published and sold books about gossip and political scandals in China, went missing. Many people believed they had been abducted and taken to China. In June 2016, Lam Wing-kee, one of the five missing, appeared at a press conference and detailed how he had been detained without trial for several months in China. He was only released to Hong Kong on the condition that he would provide his abductors with complete records of the purchasers of his books. The case was seen as a serious breach of "One Country, Two Systems": not even the personal safety of Hong Kong citizens could be protected in Hong Kong territory. The Leung government was seen as doing little to protect the rights and security of Hong Kong people. The democrats claimed that Leung's reign had seriously damaged the autonomy and core values of Hong Kong; hence electing more democrats into Legco would send a clear political message to Beijing.

Power-structural dimension

What alarmed Hong Kong was that the depth and nature of intervention of China in the 2016 elections were threatening the fairness of the contest. In July 2016, the EAC suddenly imposed a new rule: all Legco candidates needed to sign a Confirmation Form, declaring that they would "uphold the Basic Law and pledge allegiance to the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region." It was commonly believed that this was meant to screen out candidates who supported Hong Kong independence. In the end, most of the opposition candidates refused to sign the form, seeing it as legally ungrounded and unreasonable political screening, but most were nonetheless allowed to stand in the election. Six candidates were disqualified on the grounds of past pro-independence views. The criteria for disqualification were never effectively explained, as some had signed the form but were disqualified, while other pro-independence candidates were allowed to run.

Most saw the disqualification as the result of Beijing's intervention, not allowing pro-independence candidates to run and win a seat. However, the disqualification only made the independence issue more salient during the campaign. On August 5, pro-independence groups held what they claimed was "the first pro-Hong Kong-independence" rally, drawing a crowd of at least 3,000 people chanting "Hong Kong independence." [4] During the campaign, the Post Office "censored" the candidates' mailed pamphlets, not allowing those with terms such as "self-determination" or "independence" to be mailed to voters. This again aroused criticism of the government manipulating the election and infringing on electoral fairness and freedom of speech.

Ten days before polling day, Liberal Party candidate Ken Chow announced during a live televised election forum that due to "heavy pressure," he was withdrawing from his campaign. He felt that continued campaigning would put those close to him "in trouble," implying threats of violence. He left Hong Kong the next day. After the election, Chow returned and revealed in a press conference that three people from Beijing had met him in a Shenzhen hotel, asking him to stop campaigning, or else something "unfortunate" would happen to his friends and family members. [5] James Tien, honorary chairman of the Liberal Party, also revealed that the Liaison Office had contacted him to ask Chow to withdraw so as not to "split votes" from Julius Ho, another pro-Beijing candidate. [6] In the end, Julius Ho was elected with the help of heavy mobilisation by pro-Beijing local networks.

4. *Apple Daily*, 5 August 2016, http://hk.apple.nextmedia.com/realtime/news/20160805/55459782 (accessed on 15 October 2016).
5. *HK-01*, 7 September 2016, http://www.hk01.com/%E7%AB%8B%E6%B3%95%E6%9C%83%E9%81%B8%E8%88%89/41788/-%E6%8C%81%E7%BA%8C%E6%9B%B4%E6%96%B0-%E5%91%A8%E6%B0%B8%E5%8B%A4%E7%88%86%E6%96%99-3%E5%80%8B%E5%8C%97%E4%BA%AC%E4%BE%86%E7%9A%84%E4%BA%BA%E8%AD%A6%E5%91%8A%E6%88%91%E6%94%BE%E8%BB%9F%E7%AB%B6%E9%81%B8%E5%B7%A5%E7%A8%8B (assessed on 15 October 2016).
6. *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 14 September 2016, http://www2.hkej.com/instantnews/current/article/1391164/%E7%94%B0%E5%8C%97%E4%BF%8A%3A%E4%B8%AD%E8%81%AF%E8%BE%A6%E6%9B%BE%E8%A6%81%E6%B1%82%E5%8B%B8%E9%80%80%E5%91%A8%E6%B0%B8%E5%8B%A4%E5%8F%83%E9%81%B8 (assessed on 15 October 2016).

Table 2 – Vote Share Change for the Two Camps, 1991 to 2016

1991	1991	1995	1998	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016
Pro-democracy	64.45%	61.49%	63.42%	57.25%	60.63%	58.27%	55.37%	54.87%
Pro-Beijing	30.52%	35.11%	32.31%	35.42%	37.29%	39.83%	42.84%	43.37%
Other	5.04%	3.41%	4.27%	7.33%	2.09%	1.90%	1.79%	1.76%

Source: Author's own compilation.

Table 3 – China Factor, Different Dimensions, Different Stages

Stage	Ideology/Identity	Power-Structural	Organisational/Resource
Before 1997	Attitude to Chinese government and Tiananmen dominant	Indirect Influence on Rules of game in Hong Kong	Early stage: learning to use organisational resources for election game
1997-2007	China factor tempered before 2003 Article 23 became key issue in 2003/04	Change of electoral rules Extension of united front and patron-client network	Injection of more material resources after 2003
Post-Olympic, 2008-2016	Rise in "anti-China" sentiment after 2008 and localism	Increased intervention from Liaison Office	Effective use of resources and network for mobilisation and vote division
2016 election	Localism/Self-determination rising, One-Country, Two Systems losing confidence	More intervention with lower public confidence in electoral integrity More electoral fraud reported and detected	Effective use of material resources and network for mobilisation

Source: Author's own compilation.

Organisational resources

The Liaison Office continued to serve as the key string-puller for the pro-Beijing camp in 2016. For long-time observers of Hong Kong elections, the Liaison Office played its "usual role" in the 2016 election. The result was still remarkable. The pro-Beijing camp got about 41% of the popular votes, almost the same as in 2012, showing consolidated support amidst a historic high voter turnout. The vote total of the pro-Beijing camp increased from about 740,000 in 2012 to 870,000 in 2016, showing progress in "mass work" and mobilisation. The coordination of the pro-Beijing lists and vote division strategy still worked fine, as in two constituencies they repeated the feat of getting fewer votes than the pro-democracy camp, but winning more seats. In contrast, the pro-democracy camp was highly fragmented, fielding more lists than their vote share would allow. Effective mobilisation of organised votes allowed new pro-Beijing candidates such as the FTU's Kwok Wai-keung, Eunice Yung of the New People's Party, and conservative Julius Ho to get elected.

Despite the growing weight of the organisational resources of the pro-Beijing camp, the ideological factor seemed to have the greatest impact on the results of the 2016 Legco elections. "Anti-China" localists got 10.9% of the votes and three seats. The "progressive localists" were the biggest winners, as their three candidates were all elected with decent vote counts for a total vote share of about 8%. The pro-democracy opposition held their turf, winning 19 of the 35 popularly-elected seats with a vote share of about 55%.[7] With a historic turnout of 58%, it seemed that many voters in Hong Kong had come out to vote for those who would continue to fight for democracy and resist further encroachment from China. Yet the immense resource networks of the pro-Beijing camp and the high-profile intervention and coordination by the Liaison Office made for a formidable electoral force that was gradually gaining ground on the democrats (see Table 2).

Conclusion

For a quarter of a century since partial popular elections were introduced in 1991, the China factor has been a major force shaping elections in Hong Kong. Table 3 summarises the evolution and change of the impact of the China factor in three dimensions in different stages. The general trend is that China deepened its intervention into Hong Kong elections 20 years after 1997, with more mature use of organisational resources. This change ultimately brought about a rise in self-determination currents as a form of resistance to deepening intervention.

The biggest threat to Hong Kong's autonomy lies in Hong Kong people gradually getting used to the strong presence and intervention of China in Hong Kong's elections. While the Liaison Office has engaged in deeper and more open intervention in Hong Kong elections, the vote share of the pro-Beijing camp has continued to rise, showing that a fair portion of Hong Kong voters have either accepted the intervention as a *fait accompli*, or do not mind Beijing stepping in on Hong Kong affairs as long as material benefits are delivered. Ultimately, the defence of Hong Kong's autonomy depends on Hong Kong people's attitudes and actions, demonstrated in different arenas of resistance: the electoral arena, civil society, the media, and the like. The deepening intervention by China and disappointment with "One Country, Two Systems" drove more Hong Kong people to support self-determination in the 2016 election. As the Chinese government has already identified Hong Kong independence as one of the major political targets to be crushed, the rise of self-determination sentiment means that China-Hong Kong relations will enter a most precarious stage in the coming years.

7. Votes for "localists" or the pro-independence faction are included in the "pro-democracy opposition" here.

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