Anti-Activism and Its Impact on Civil Society in Hong Kong: A Case Study of the Anti–Falun Gong Campaign

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Abstract
In this article, we introduce the concept of “anti-activism” and explore the possible impact of anti-activist action in Hong Kong. We define anti-activism as a form of countermovement intended to discredit, distract, and even harass activists in voluntary social movements. Our data and analyses are based on field observations, interviews, and primary documents collected in Hong Kong during 2012–2018. We focus on the case of the protest campaign against the quasi-religious group Falun Gong to develop our argument. We find that anti-activists do not try to win public support for their cause. Instead, they succeed most effectively through the process of disrupting and discrediting voluntary activists to arouse tension, conflict, suspicion, and annoyance in the public. They discredit not just their opponents but even themselves, and, thus by extension, they discredit social movement activism per se, polarize public debate, and in a way undermine the integrity of civil society in Hong Kong.

Keywords
civil society, anti-activist, countermovement, polarization, Falun Gong, Hong Kong

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The unprecedented “one country, two systems” model of governance has placed Hong Kong in a peculiar political terrain that invites the contending forces of civil liberty and authoritarian sovereignty to meet with exceptional acuity. Hong Kong, as a “special administrative region,” was guaranteed meaningful autonomy from the Chinese ruling party through two internationally binding documents, the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984 and the Basic Law of 1990. The commitments expressed in these documents have led to a unique context in Hong Kong where the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) remains officially underground despite its sovereignty over the city (Qian, 2000; Loh, 2010). Hong Kong as an international, capitalist hub is at the same time a city full of local and transregional protests. When protests conspicuously challenge the CCP, direct repression and other demobilizing strategies that are routinely used in mainland China may be prohibited by Hong Kong law, attract international scrutiny, and be deemed illegitimate due to Hong Kong’s special status.

In avoiding these direct tactics, an alternative form of countermovement has emerged, what we call anti-activism, and has become increasingly visible in the city. Anti-activism refers to mobilized efforts presented as voluntary civic activism that aim to discredit certain social movements through disrupting, distracting, and even harassing their activists. More than a dozen anti-activist pro-government bodies have appeared in Hong Kong since 2012, with their pro-Beijing position made clear to the public. Between that time and when our research concluded in 2018, anti-activists seemingly staged collective actions whenever pro-democracy and/or anti-government protests occurred, sometimes showing up for precisely one to two hours—as if hired by the hour and protesting “on the clock.” Such anti-activism is likely to be initiated by the state as a “tactical adaptation” (McAdam, 1983) to the unique political context in Hong Kong. However, given the underground nature of the ruling party in this territory, it is practically impossible to provide direct evidence that the pro-Beijing groups and their anti-activist actions are sponsored by the state. It is, nevertheless, empirically imperative to explore the strategies of these anti-activist groups and their impact on Hong Kong’s civil society.

In this article, we use a case study of the anti–Falun Gong (anti-FLG) campaign to examine the strategies and impact of anti-activism in Hong Kong. FLG as a quasi-religious qigong group was banned in China in 1999. Since then, it has been engaged in protesting the Chinese government and the CCP from Hong Kong and throughout the Chinese diaspora. In 2012, an anti-FLG organization called Hong Kong Youth Care Association Limited (HKYCAL) began staging opposition demonstrations against the FLG in Hong Kong. The participants of
HKYCAL, like many anti-activists from other organizations, strategically present themselves as genuine civil society activists: self-organized and voluntary advocates for a legitimate public cause. But the details of anti-FLG efforts, which we describe below, show that the purpose of their demonstrations is less to win the hearts of the public, and more to disrupt and discredit their targets. Even when the wider public appears apathetic or hostile to both FLG and its anti-activist detractors, the anti-activists are still capable of negatively impacting their targets, by inciting conflicts and arousing suspicions, polarizing debate, and stifling rational discourse. Thus, we argue that anti-activism succeeds in the short term by obstructing and tarnishing its opponents, and may in the long term discredit social movement activism as a legitimate form of public advocacy and contention.

In the sections that follow, we first define the nature of anti-activism and lay out our conceptual framework. Then, we give a brief description of activist protests in Hong Kong and of anti-activist mobilization. After presenting our research methods and data collection, we describe the strategies of the anti-FLG protests, and the FLG’s and public’s responses. Based on the insights generated from this case study, we analyze the possible impact of anti-activist mobilization on Hong Kong’s civil society and social movements in general.

**Activism and Anti-Activism**

Social movements are collective, voluntary, and sustained extra-institutional efforts to change some aspect of society, usually by making public claims against political authorities. The concept of mobilization is based on the idea that movements are not spontaneous happenings. Instead, organizations and strategic action come together to mobilize resources and people to mount campaigns of protest and other collective actions over time and space (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015; Goodwin and Jasper, 2015; Tarrow, 2011; Tilly and Wood, 2013). Fundamental to the very idea of social movement activism is that it is based on “ordinary people” acting voluntarily as citizens, rather than as employees of the state or of corporations. Equally important to social movement activism is that protesters attempt to garner public support through collective demonstrations of “worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment” (Tilly and Wood, 2013) and ultimately hope to advance their political cause through moral pressure via public opinion. According to the generally accepted theory of social movements, these civil society activists use a widely shared repertoire of usually nonviolent protest practices to advocate change. Here, we reserve the term “activism” for these voluntary, coordinated efforts by citizens to advocate change.
Practically all social movements go through cycles of contention that consist of various episodes responding to changes in opportunities and threats (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015). Each of these episodes normally begins with mobilization and ends with demobilization, regardless of whether the movement activists have achieved their objectives. Demobilization is the process of decreasing resources and causing the people who are making claims to stop doing so (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015). It occurs when the process of mobilization reverses and movements lose participants and resources. Demobilization can be driven by a number of factors, including countermovement from another interest group, disillusionment and loss of enthusiasm, loss of solidarity and recrimination, or state repression. Countermobilization and countermovements arise when social movement activism emerges to oppose activism undertaken by others. Countermovements, at least in the ideal type, also comprise autonomous citizen groups, inspired by values, beliefs, and interests.

States, including China, often respond to activism according to their strategic or ideal interests through repression, accommodation, co-optation, or non-attention (Tilly, 2006; Cai, 2010). All of these responses can contribute to the demobilization of citizen movements. In China, the most common and tolerated protests are local, short-term, and nonpolitical. Local and central authorities respond differently to these protests (Cai, 2010), but the net effect is to reduce or eliminate protest. Demobilizing strategies include surveillance (Cunningham, 2007), ridicule and stigma (Cunningham, 2009; Stern and, O’Brien 2012), control parables (Stern and Hassid, 2012), and relational repression (Deng and O’Brien, 2013). Only in rare cases have protests cohered into social movements, spreading across regions, social classes, and occupations, and making political demands on central authorities. In those instances, the most significant of which are the 1989 student-led protests and the case of Falun Gong, the state coupled propaganda with direct and violent repression. This included mobilizing the military in 1989, and deploying against FLG an array of domestic security agencies, including the so-called 610 Office, and incarcerating protesters through administratively imposed, rather than judicial, detention (Brook, 1992; Junker, 2019; Tong, 2009). These demobilization strategies, however, are primarily concerned with stopping unrest in China proper. In each instance, the state counters citizen activism by acting more or less as the state, whether through its monopoly on legitimate violence, through the judiciary, through semi-state agencies such as official media and propaganda, or even through non-state individual agents as found in relational repression.

Another way the Chinese state may respond to activism is through what we term “anti-activism.” Anti-activism is countermobilization that presents as voluntary civic activism and that aims to discredit and undermine citizen
movements. It is not necessarily state- or party-sponsored, but it very often
is when citizen movements target the state or the party in power. Although
anti-activism is likely to be initiated by the authorities, it can be outsourced
to third parties such as business owners or nongovernmental agencies to
organize what is in effect *faux voluntary* citizen mobilization. The possibil-
ity of outsourcing anti-activist mobilization to a third party is greatest in
contexts where direct intervention by the authorities is deemed illegitimate
or ineffective, and where voluntary movements are popular and socially
endorsed. Instead of imposing direct repression on the targeted movement
groups, the authorities utilize civil society repertoires by sponsoring so-
called voluntary organizations to attack the targeted activists. An example of
anti-activism is the Guomindang’s mobilization of pro–Jiang Jieshi students
and anti-radical student associations, which staged loyalist rallies and dis-
rupted radical student gatherings to undermine the efforts of CCP campus
organizers under the Nationalist regime (Wasserstrom, 1991). The key was
to use one camp of students against another camp of students, to disrupt and
undermine the opposition camp’s collective actions. Anti-activism may
involve money or other forms of favors given by sponsors to participants.
Nonetheless, it is different from so-called astroturf movements, and thus
requires its own conceptualization.

“Astroturf” mobilization refers to “artificial social movements” that
are pawns of vested interests designed to resemble grassroots movements,
just as an astroturf playing field mimics actual grass (Tolkin, 2011).
Astroturf campaigns aim to manipulate public discourse (often through
social media) by creating a false impression. Usually money is involved
either through sponsorship or by paying participants directly (Tolkin,
2011). Examples are the so-called “internet navy” 網絡水軍 used by
some private enterprises, and the “fifty-cent gang” 五毛黨 used by the
Chinese authorities. Both strategies utilize the internet to orchestrate pub-
lic opinion in a certain direction. The internet navy refers to manipulated/
paid positive postings about certain products/services so as to influence
the public impression and to boost sales. The fifty-cent gang refers to the
practice of hiring ordinary citizens to write “politically correct” pieces to
manufacture public discourses in support of the Chinese authorities and
policies, with each piece being rewarded RMB 0.50 (Lin, 2016). Even
though anti-activism resembles astroturfing in that non-civil society
actors are orchestrating the appearance of voluntary activism, anti-activ-
ism is distinct from astroturfing in a key way: anti-activism does not nec-
essarily attempt to win public support. Astroturf campaigns operate within
the ecology of the social movement sector, both co-opting and affirming
it. Astroturf campaigns, like genuine grassroots movements, seek to gain
public support. Anti-activism, we posit, is a degree more insidious relative to civil society because anti-activists do not need to win public support in order to achieve their aims.

In conventional social movement activism, activists use public performances to persuade the wider public of the validity and urgency of the movement’s aims (Tilly, 2008). Social movements are, in this sense, a field of non-violent public contention in which challengers, counteractivists, and authorities compete for public support. Movements or countermovements gain power as they win public support. Anti-activism, on the other hand, operates according to a logic that is quite distinct from conventional protest activism. The aim is not so much to win the hearts of the public but instead to disrupt and discredit self-organized, voluntary activists. Even if anti-activists’ own efforts discredit themselves in the eyes of the public, as we observed in the anti-FLG case, they may still achieve their desired outcome by simultaneously discrediting their targets. It is not about winning over the public, but about taking down those who would dissent (Knight and Greenberg, 2011).

**Activism in Hong Kong**

Hong Kong, a city filled with soaring skyscrapers, spectacular night views, and energetic nightlife, has earned fame as “the pearl of the orient.” At the same time, the city is full of social and political protests every year, ranging from ad hoc labor strikes to annual mass demonstrations for democratization. According to scholars of Hong Kong studies (Lui and Chiu, 2000), a “social movement industry” (McCarthy and Zald, 1977) began to emerge by the end of the 1970s. In the 1980s, political groups surged in response to Sino-British negotiations over the decolonization of Hong Kong.

The 1989 pro-democracy student movement in China and the June 4 incident significantly pushed the movement industry in Hong Kong forward. At least seven major public rallies or protests were held in May–June 1989, and the numbers of participants ranged from fifty thousand to more than one million (Wong, 2000). With Britain loosening the colony’s long-stringent regulation of public protests after 1989, the frequency of protests in the city jumped substantially in the first half of the 1990s (Chen, 2009). While there were 285 marches in the city in 1993, there were 405 marches in 1995, or an average of one protest per day (Gilley, 1997). Through democratic reforms along with the rule of law, the political climate in the 1980s through the 1990s was characterized as “promoting pluralistic values without fear of state coercion or retaliation” (Cheng, 2016: 387).
Due to a downturn in the economy after the handover of sovereignty in 1997, protests related to social and economic issues increased (Lui and Chiu, 2000; Chan and Lee, 2007). On the sixth anniversary of the handover (July 1, 2003), more than half a million citizens took to the streets to protest the government’s response to the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic and the proposal of national security legislation (the so-called Article 23 legislation). This protest succeeded in forcing the chief executive, Tung Chee Hwa 董建華, to step down, and led to the suspension of efforts to pass national security legislation in accordance with Article 23 of the Basic Law. It empowered citizens, giving them a sense of collective efficacy and a belief in the capacity of the public as a collective actor in politics and public affairs (Chan and Lee, 2007). Since then, mass demonstrations organized by the pan-democratic camp for democratization and for various other causes have been held every year on July 1, as well as on other festival days, such as the National Day on October 1 and the New Year on January 1.

The number of collective actions increased rapidly after 2003, especially in 2006–2007. New activism has also followed the global trend of occupation (Cheng, 2016). In 2012, the mass sit-in demonstration against incorporating “moral and national education” into school curricula proved to be effective. With tens of thousands of secondary school students and parents participating, this occupation protest forced the government to withdraw the introduction of the national education curriculum. The success boosted the student activists’ confidence, bringing occupation as a form of protest to its peak in the Occupy Central Movement (OCM, also called the Umbrella Movement), which lasted for seventy-nine days from September to December 2014. OCM was unsuccessful in achieving its goals and led to demobilization and intensified divisions within the opposition movement. In June 2019, after our research and writing of this article were complete, a massive pro-democracy campaign emerged, known as the Anti–Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) movement. This campaign has eclipsed all prior campaigns in scale, intensity, duration, and degree of violence used by protesters and police.

Running alongside the pro-democracy movement has been the protest mobilization of the FLG following its ban in mainland China in 1999. FLG activism in Hong Kong since 1999 has included annual marches, booths on the street displaying the sins of the CCP, sidewalk occupations in front of the Chinese Liaison Office, petitions, lawsuits, and distribution of FLG newspapers to Hong Kong citizens and especially to visitors from China. FLG has also been among the regular participants in pan-democratic demonstrations. The majority of these demonstrations have been peaceful, and have rarely encountered direct, confrontational opposition. From the end of the 1970s up
to mid-2019, the social movement sector’s overall contentious repertoire (Tilly, 1995; Tilly, 2008) in Hong Kong could be characterized as civil, orderly, and generally nonconfrontational, even though a trend toward moderate civil disobedience emerged as early as 2000 (Ku, 2004) and by 2010 radical flank activists were experimenting with more confrontational tactics (Cheng, 2016). FLG activism in Hong Kong, however, has assiduously avoided civil disobedience, law breaking, and any form of violence. Its law-abiding tactics made FLG difficult to target for direct repression, leading pro-China forces to develop anti-activism.

**Anti-Activist Mobilization in Hong Kong**

The success of the mass rallies on July 1, 2003, that forced the chief executive to step down and suspended the national security legislation, however, also spurred backlash from the Central People’s Government (CPG) in Beijing. A regime reconfiguration aimed at subordinating local society to the CPG’s authoritarian sovereignty began in the second half of 2003, when the CPG changed its policy in Hong Kong from “non-intervention” to “pro-action” (Cheng, 2016). Since then, mainland officials have developed a new political narrative that emphasizes the ultimate power of the CPG over the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) under the Basic Law (Fong, 2017). At the same time, pro-government countermovement groups, such as “unions of societies” 社團 and “native place associations” 同鄉會, began to revive after 2003 (Cheng, 2016). Dozens of these groups had existed long before as United Front groups to support Beijing’s initiatives in Hong Kong (Loh, 2010). The CCP’s United Front organizations appeared in Hong Kong as early as the late 1930s during the Sino-Japanese War (Chu, 2010). These “unions of societies” and “native place associations” became active again as grassroots movements to contest the pan-democrats by staging and sponsoring counterprotests. They were the forerunners of the pro-government anti-activist bodies that have appeared since 2011.

Given how the “one country, two systems” framework was implemented prior to the 2019 Anti-ELAB movement, the Chinese authorities simply could not use direct repression against peaceful, law-abiding protests targeting the CCP. Instead, legal constraints, the culture of civil liberty, and the pervasiveness of street protests in the HKSAR called for alternative tactics by pro-government interests. Unlike the so-called pro-establishment political parties, which normally operate within the official political structure, pro-government anti-activist groups present themselves as ordinary citizens who are outside of the establishment. Many of these pro-government groups appeared in the early 2010s. Examples include Caring Hong Kong Power
Anti-activists can often be seen holding the People’s Republic of China (PRC) flag and the HKSAR flag as well and banners with nationalist slogans. Their protests are usually on a small scale, ranging from a dozen to a hundred participants. Many participants appear to be working class people. They chant slogans such as “We are Chinese,” “We love Hong Kong,” “Protecting our home Hong Kong,” “We support Leung Chun Ying [former chief executive of Hong Kong].” They reproach pro-democrats as “traitors,” and call on them to “Get out of Hong Kong.” Consequently, participants from both camps often shout and swear at each other. Such confrontations mark a shift from the more civil protest repertoires that generally prevailed in Hong Kong before 2012.

The different anti-activist bodies stage such similar actions and use such similar slogans that outsiders can have a difficult time distinguishing one from the other. However, there is no sign that they have united with each other to enhance their power and influence. Instead, they consciously draw boundaries between themselves and at times they clash with each other (Hong Kong Economic Journal, 2012). In this way, they resemble PONGOs—party-state encouraged civic groups that mobilize public demonstrations in support of party rule—and yet they lack centralized coordination and have multiple fronts of sponsorship (Thornton, 2013). Rumors that participants in the anti-activist protests are paid have also undermined their credibility. So far we have not seen evidence that these groups have gained support from the general public.

The pro-government, anti-activist bodies have also been active in organizing rallies and protests against the OCM. The Silent Majority for Hong Kong, founded in August 2013 by a small group of pro-mainland scholars, entrepreneurs, and professionals, was the very first group to stage mass opposition against the OCM. It initiated the formation of the Alliance for Peace and Democracy (The Alliance) with other pro-mainland organizations in July 2014. The Alliance staged a signature campaign and a mass rally in July–August 2014 in support of the government’s proposed reform of the
2017 election of the chief executive and to oppose the OCM. The organizers claimed that they gathered 1.5 million signatures in a month, and more than 190,000 citizens participated in the rally on August 7, 2014. This was the largest anti-OCM demonstration and was considered successful, though there were reports that some participants were recruited from Guangdong and paid to demonstrate (Apple Daily, 2014; Cable TV, 2014). Two months later, another anti-OCM group named Occupy Central Not Representing Me 佔中不代表我, also known as Blue Ribbon (in contrast to Yellow Ribbon, which represented the OCM), appeared on the scene. While the Alliance still cared about winning public support, Blue Ribbon seemed to care less about recruiting supporters than disturbing and disrupting the OCM. This group appeared on an ad hoc basis to organize mass demonstrations to counter the OCM. One Blue Ribbon demonstration we observed as researchers in October 2014 had about fifteen hundred participants. Some of them looked like retired police officers. The majority of the participants were local citizens, though some appeared to have come from Guangdong on the mainland.

Many of the anti-activist protests operate on an ad hoc basis, contingent on the activities of the pro-democratic or anti-government activists. Nonetheless, as FLG followers in Hong Kong have been active in staging protests and setting up booths on the streets for their campaign against the CCP, anti-FLG demonstrations have been held in parallel with those of the FLG everywhere. They are the most conspicuous pro-PRC exercise at the street level in Hong Kong, and they vividly display the general characteristics of anti-activism. In the next section, we turn to a case study of this anti-activist effort.

**Methods and Data Collection**

We selected the anti-FLG campaign as a case study for two major reasons. First, the major player of this campaign, HKYCAL, was among the very first anti-activist groups to appear on the streets of Hong Kong, and its extreme strategic actions became a model for subsequent anti-activist groups that sprung up during the OCM. Anti-OCM groups include genuine pro-China activists and autonomously organized groups. In contrast, HKYCAL represents a cause with little or no obvious public support, and it invests few resources in creating the appearance of a genuine activist group. The extremity of the case helps us see and assess the implications of anti-activism. Second, as anti-FLG demonstrations are persistent and regular, they are relatively more accessible than those organized on an ad hoc basis. Although members of HKYCAL generally refused to be interviewed, we were able to observe their actions and behaviors on a regular basis so as to map out their pattern.
We adopted an ethnographic method to collect data. Our field research on the dynamics between FLG and anti-FLG demonstrations was conducted from 2012 to 2018, but the most intensive observations occurred in 2015–2016 by the two authors and three research assistants. The data presented in this article come from our observations of FLG and anti-FLG events and interviews with participants in both camps and the public (such as onlookers, local pedestrians, tourists, shopkeepers, and taxi drivers) in Hong Kong. Practically all studies of social movements focus exclusively on movement organizers and participants, whereas the public is often absent and their voices are rarely heard. We consider interviewing members of the public to be distinctly important for assessing the impact of FLG and anti-FLG protests in public spaces.

We have observed FLG activities altogether on forty-four occasions and anti-FLG activities on twenty occasions. We observed FLG activities more often because in addition to street demonstrations, we also observed their qigong and reading exercises when the anti-FLG groups were absent. We observed coexisting FLG and anti-FLG activities and their interactions with the public on different dates and at different times in order to capture a more comprehensive picture. Altogether we conducted eighty-five formal and informal interviews with FLG participants, anti-FLG participants, and various members of the public. Our interview questions for both FLG and anti-FLG participants centered on what motivated them to come out to demonstrate, their specific goals, their routines, their perceptions of the opposing camp, and their assessment of public responses. Members on the FLG side were generally very willing to talk to us whereas those in the anti-FLG camp were very restrained even when they agreed to talk to us. Our interviews with the public aimed to understand their views on the FLG and the anti-FLG protests, and whether the anti-FLG movement had changed their views on FLG.

Due to the political sensitivity of the topic, we attempted to approach anti-FLG members individually at different times in different spots. However, we all received exactly the same standardized response—"We don’t accept interviews"—from anti-FLG participants. It was quite obvious to us that they were instructed to reject requests for interviews from any parties. Eventually we stopped asking. Instead, we began to approach them as academics who were curious about their activities, though we made it clear that we were conducting research about FLG and anti-FLG activities. They were relatively less guarded when approached by our research assistants, who were students from mainland China and who spoke Putonghua. We therefore relied more on the research assistants (who acknowledged that they were conducting research on behalf of professors) for talking to anti-FLG participants. We are aware of the limitations of our data given that the informants’ attitudes were
always cautious. Nonetheless, their distrust of researchers and journalists and their evasive answers to some of our questions are themselves valuable data. Furthermore, in the study of some secretive organizations or activities, indirect evidence can be considered acceptable when direct evidence is impossible to obtain without violating human research ethics. Since HKYCAL members were unwilling to talk about their organization, we relied on local newspapers as a source of data. Unfortunately, we still lack reliable information about their sources of funding.

**A Case Study of Anti-Activism: The Anti-FLG Protests**

*The FLG Protests*

Founded in 1992 in northeastern China by a native Chinese named Li Hongzhi 李洪志, FLG as a qigong group once attracted millions of followers in the PRC and worldwide. Two incidents in 1999 brought the world’s attention to this group, including a large-scale mass-sit-in protest staged by FLG members in Beijing that encircled the residential compound of the top leaders of the CCP. This provoked a subsequent heavy-handed crackdown, with thousands of FLG followers being arrested and either imprisoned or sent to correctional camps (Chan, 2004; Palmer, 2007; Ownby, 2008; Tong, 2009; Junker, 2019). Despite the persecution of FLG members in the PRC, FLG followers outside the PRC have remained active in staging protests against the CCP. Their mobilization power even in the absence of their charismatic leader has been recognized by social movement scholars (Fisher, 2003; Cheris Chan, 2013; Junker, 2014a). Today, we can still see FLG’s presence in major cities all over the world (Hong Kong, Taipei, New York, Chicago, Boston, San Francisco, Los Angeles, London, Melbourne, Berlin, Paris, Rome, etc.).

FLG has been active in staging protests and petitions in Hong Kong since the PRC’s crackdown in 1999. Aside from participating in pan-democratic demonstrations, FLG followers have been petitioning and holding parades a few times a year to mark their anniversaries and commemorations. At the same time, they have set up over two dozen booths in areas in Hong Kong frequented by mainland tourists. They display banners and posters showing the suppression of FLG in mainland China and accusing the former president of the PRC, Jiang Zemin, and his associates of committing crimes. They conduct staged simulations of “live organ harvesting” in the streets to call attention to what they consider to be the illegal treatment of FLG followers in mainland China. They have explicitly launched an anti-CCP campaign with
the slogan, “Withdraw from the party for your own good; Heaven will destroy the CCP”—a message they convey in the hopes of convincing the public, particularly mainland Chinese, to resign from the CCP if they are currently members. According to our observations, their booths do draw attention from some mainland tourists. Although they have been occasionally confronted by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department for “blocking walkways,” they have operated free from formal or informal intrusion in Hong Kong for more than a decade. Since June 2012, however, seas of anti-FLG banners and posters have suddenly appeared wherever FLG is present, and anti-FLG demonstrators have confronted FLG face to face.

Anti-FLG Organizations

FLG’s vigorous resistance has driven the CCP to continue its efforts to curb the underground practices of FLG in the PRC (Tong, 2009; Noakes and Ford, 2015). State actions against FLG on the mainland include detention in prisons, labor camps, and re-education centers; the application of programmatic transformation measures; and the practice of electronic surveillance and censorship (Noakes and Ford, 2015). The visibility of FLG outside mainland China and its endless accusations against the CCP have unsurprisingly prompted anti-FLG campaigns in places where FLG protests are still active. Anti-FLG campaigns take place not only in Hong Kong but also in Taiwan and North America. The global scale of anti-FLG protests suggests that it is unlikely that this effort is mobilized by the local government in Hong Kong, but rather is orchestrated and indirectly sponsored by Beijing.

HKYCAL (officially registered as a “limited company” on June 8, 2012) has been the dominant player in the anti-FLG campaign in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Daily News, 2012). Its name can be deceptive, as it closely resembles an existing non-governmental organization, Hong Kong Youth Care Association (HKYCA) 香港互助青年協會, which is a welfare organization. HKYCAL has exactly the same English name as this organization except that it is a limited company and thus has an “L” at the end of its abbreviation. This has confused the media, and even Reuters and the South China Morning Post (the most credible English newspaper in Hong Kong) have misreported HKYCAL as HKYCA (Torode, Pomfret, and Lim, 2014; Thomas Chan, 2013). Journalists from Reuters and the FLG-associated newspaper the Epoch Times both reported that Hong Wei-cheng 洪偉成, the general manager of Yanjing Beer (HK) Limited, was registered as HKYCAL’s chairman (Torode, Pomfret, and Lim, 2014; Epoch Times, 2013). Hong’s name appeared occasionally in the two CCP-backed newspapers in Hong Kong, Wen Wei Po 文匯報 and Ta Kung Pao 大公報, in appreciation of his support of the Hong
Kong government in particular and for his contributions to the Chinese state in general (see, for example, Wen Wei Po, 2008; Ta Kung Pao, 2010). He was also found to be a director of a New Territories clan association, which was believed to be a core part of China’s United Front operations in the city’s northern fringes close to the mainland border (Torode, Pomfret, and Lim, 2014). As the core members of the HKYCAL were reluctant to be interviewed and we do not feel we can rely on the Epoch Times for empirical data, we know very little about the background of this organization. We have nevertheless observed that its members are mostly in their forties and fifties, and some of them have a mainland accent. They appear to be from the working class, and some look like new immigrants. Up to 60 to 70 percent of them are women. We estimate that there were about two hundred members working full-time or part-time for HKYCAL as of April 2016. Green T-shirts, green jackets, and green vests constitute their uniform.

During FLG’s major events, we observed not only members of HKYCAL but also more than a hundred other anti-FLG protestors, from preschoolers to people in their seventies. These protestors came from such organizations as the Association of Caring for the Grassroots in Hong Kong (the authors’ translation of its name into English), the Community 新思維力量 (founded in March 2013), the Anti-Cult Association 香港加僑反邪教協會 (founded in 2012), Proud & Wonderful Hong Kong Company Limited 同心護港大聯盟 (founded in March 2015), and Loving Hong Kong Citizens Alliance 愛港市民聯盟 (the authors’ translation). The last two organizations, as we observed, shared overlapping membership.

When asked what drove them to protest against FLG, the members of HKYCAL whom we informally interviewed all gave a common narrative that FLG was an “evil cult.” They cited as evidence the fact that FLG followers refused medical treatment when they were sick, making FLG harmful to people and to society. When asked if they personally knew anyone practicing FLG, most of them did not, except for two who mentioned that their distant relatives in China had joined FLG and later went insane. They accused the founder, Li Hongzhi, of receiving financial support from the United States and of causing harm to his followers. They rarely expressed any emotion when they criticized FLG in front of us. The lack of emotion and passion in their protests against FLG made them look like they were doing a job, rather than being activists.

We did not directly ask the HKYCAL members we spoke to if they were being paid for their anti-FLG actions, but they typically became quite sensitive to our questions about what they did for a living. They often reacted evasively by saying, “We are doing this voluntarily” without telling us what they did for a living. They admitted that they received allowances for lunch
and public transportation. Some of these so-called volunteers actually resided in Shenzhen and traveled to Hong Kong on a daily basis to work for HKYCAL. Although they often claimed that they were volunteers, some of them compared what they were doing for HKYCAL with other paid jobs, such as distributing commercial flyers, serving in restaurants, and working for retail shops. One of them in an informal interview with one of our research assistants lamented that she had her own business as a shopkeeper in the past and thus in the beginning it was difficult for her to accept her role of distributing flyers for HKYCAL. She complained about the long hours (8 a.m. to 5 p.m.) that HKYCAL scheduled for them to work (Interview in Tsim Sha Tsui, Oct. 2018). Furthermore, she did not sound like she enjoyed what she was doing, but rather sounded more like a low-ranking worker who had no better option for making a living. We, therefore, are quite confident in inferring that the anti-FLG demonstrators were paid to protest against FLG. In fact, when the first author chatted with two participants from the Association of Caring for the Grassroots in Hong Kong and one participant from the Community during their action against the FLG’s parade in April 2016, they admitted that each of them was given a lunch and would be remunerated HK$500–HK$600 as an “allowance” for joining the protest. This explains why we sometimes saw young children of only four to five years of age at the protests, because a family of four might receive HK$2,000 for simply standing there and making noise to disturb FLG events.

**Strategies of the Anti-FLG Protests: Disrupting Rather Than Reaching Out**

We observed that HKYCAL first appeared with banners and posters attacking FLG in June 2012 outside Hung Hom train station, where most mainland tourists arrive in Hong Kong. HKYCAL put up more than thirty banners and posters that interweaved with the FLG’s. These banners were printed with Chinese and English texts in black and red colors, such as “Boycott Falun Gong evil cult, Build a harmonious Hong Kong,” “Taiwan Falun Gong get out of Hong Kong,” and “Li Hongzhi is a wanted person. Bring to justice Li Hongzhi.” HKYCAL’s name and logo were on each banner and poster. The posters were printed with pictures and texts explaining why the general public (including mainland tourists) should stay away from FLG. Li Hongzhi was said to be like other cult leaders, such as Shoko Asahara or Jim Jones, and FLG was presented as a dangerous cult comparable to Aum Shinrikyo founded by Asahara (which organized a deadly attack with sarin on a Tokyo subway in 1995) and Peoples Temple founded by Jones (which is known for the “Jonestown” mass-murder/suicide in 1978). Other examples of cults
causing death of innocents in Texas, the Philippines, and South Korea were shown in the posters. These banners and posters seemed to suggest that HKYCAL’s target audience was the general public, and its objective was to warn the public away from FLG in order to counteract FLG’s self-promotion and condemnation of the CCP.

In 2012–2014, HKYCAL often interspersed its own banners and posters among FLG postings as a way to distract from FLG’s message. Let us describe our ethnographic observation of a typical scene in the hustle and bustle on the streets of Hong Kong:

It was around 4 p.m. at the busiest intersection between Nathan Road and Argyle Road in Mongkok, where a FLG booth was completely surrounded by anti-FLG banners. The banners accused FLG of being an “evil cult,” and its charismatic leader was characterized as “shameless,” and “causing damage to people’s life in Hong Kong.” Two FLG members holding a big banner “Falun Dafa Is Good” were standing in between two sets of anti-FLG banners, one in the front and the other at the back. One big anti-FLG banner and a dozen small ones were placed right in front of the FLG booth, almost completely blocking FLG’s big banner. The FLG and anti-FLG banners were placed so close to each other that they looked like one group to any outsider who was unfamiliar with FLG. There were only three members in each camp. The anti-FLG members, all women in their forties, were standing and chatting with each other rather than approaching the pedestrians. In contrast, a woman in her fifties from the FLG camp was distributing Epoch Times and attempting to persuade onlookers to resign from the CCP. We asked the FLG members how they felt about being surrounded by HKYCAL and why they did not move to another location. They replied that they felt “helpless,” since HKYCAL had followed them wherever they went, rendering futile their attempts at evasion. (Observation in Mongkok, April 2, 2013)

HKYCAL would routinely demonstrate by setting up placards right next to FLG booths and distributing flyers to pedestrians. One of their flyers had titles in both English and Chinese. The English title read “Cults Inside Out: How People Get In and Can Get Out”; the Chinese one read “Anti-Evil Cult Falun Gong; Evil Cult: The Truth behind the Brainwashing” 邪法: 洗腦背後的真相. The content was bilingual. It contained descriptions and pictures of the alleged self-immolation of FLG members in Tiananmen Square in 2001, a biography of Li Hongzhi, details about the properties he holds in the United States, and rhetoric characterizing FLG as an evil cult. The English version was poorly scripted and full of typos and grammatical errors (e.g. “House propert [sic] of Li Hongzhi’s familly [sic] in the United States”). Although HKYCAL’s booths appear wherever FLG is present, and there are normally two to three members stationed at the booths, they seem passive and disengaged about interacting with the public when compared to FLG
members. Members of HKYCAL usually hold a stack of flyers to be distributed to passers-by. However, from our observations in Tsim Sha Tsui on weekday and weekend afternoons in March–April, 2016, they attempted merely eight to ten times an hour on average to distribute flyers to the many tourists and shoppers passing by, and only about two to three of those being approached took their flyers.

Another strategy HKYCAL deploys is to drown out the voices of FLG demonstrators so that FLG’s messages fail to reach pedestrians. The following scene is frequently observed in one of the busiest shopping streets in Causeway Bay:

When FLG would stage simulations of the CCP harvesting live organs from FLG members in prison, their booth was often surrounded by half a dozen HKYCAL demonstrators holding flags and banners. Loudspeakers from HKYCAL broadcasting “FLG is an evil cult” were placed right next to the FLG followers who were meditating next to their booth. FLG also broadcasted how their members were prosecuted in China, but their voices were drowned out by HKYCAL’s. While the FLG demonstrators were distributing *Epoch Times* to pedestrians, the HKYCAL demonstrators simply stood there holding the flags without actively approaching the public. It appeared that the primary objective of the HKYCAL’s action therefore was to interfere with FLG’s activities rather than to target the public. (Observation in Causeway Bay, August 2016)

Since 2015, it has become even more obvious that the HKYCAL has been more interested in disrupting FLG’s activities than reaching out to the public. When we approached HKYCAL at its booth in Hung Hom in July 2015 to ask for flyers, we were told that there were no materials for distribution. Then, on July 18 and 19, 2015 (Saturday and Sunday respectively), we observed two days of FLG parades marking the sixteenth anniversary of FLG being banned in China. The Saturday parade followed a six-kilometer route, passing through the densely populated Kowloon Peninsula from a community park called Cheung Sha Wan Playground to the Star Ferry pier in Tsim Sha Tsui. The Sunday parade was longer, starting in North Point in eastern Hong Kong Island and ending in western Hong Kong Island at the Liaison Office of the CPG in the HKSAR. Saturday’s parade included about six hundred Falun Gong adherents, and Sunday’s was somewhat larger. The anti-FLG mobilization at the two parades was vigorous throughout, and their strategies were exactly the same.

To appreciate the scale of the contention between FLG and anti-FLG demonstrators, it helps to picture one of the parades in detail:

On the morning on July 18, 2015 (Saturday), both FLG and anti-FLG groups had reserved space in the playground, which was effectively divided up into two corrals, each about the size of half of a football field. Four rows of
barricades separated the two sides. The FLG side had about six hundred participants whereas the anti-FLG side had about three hundred. There were several anti-FLG groups, the largest being from HKYCAL. The anti-FLG demonstrators installed seven vertical banners, each towering about 10 meters high, with slogans such as “Li Hongzhi is a demon. Falun Gong is an evil cult” and “Let’s make a harmonious Hong Kong. Stay away from Falun Gong.” These signs were freestanding, installed with apparently professional-quality materials and skill. The signs faced the Falun Gong preparation area and not, as one might expect, the street where passing members of the public might read them. Behind the banners and floating in the air about 30 meters above the fray were a half dozen enormous helium balloons, like green spherical zeppelins, all emblazoned with a crossed-out FLG logo. From each green orb dangled a black banner declaring “Bring Li Hongzhi to Justice” and bearing a crossed-out picture of Li on which fangs had been drawn. In contrast to the lackadaisical appearance of the anti-FLG demonstrators, pre-recorded loud, constant chanting was broadcast and blared across the park from their handheld megaphones. Chanting frequently followed a call-and-response form, with one voice calling out “Down with the Falun Gong!” and then the whole group replying with the same call. (Observation from Cheung Sha Wan to Tsim Sha Tsui, July 18, 2015)

Given that the orientation of the signs and sounds were all targeted at FLG’s preparation area rather than the surrounding community, the effect of the anti-activist mobilization in this setting was primarily to distract and disturb the FLG demonstrators. The FLG side of the contentious formations in some ways mirrored the assault it was experiencing:

Like the anti-FLG demonstrators, the FLG demonstrators also had large 10-meter-tall signs, with messages like “Bring Jiang Zemin to Justice” and “Heaven Will Destroy the CCP.” In response to the noise and disruption generated by the anti-FLG crowd, the FLG demonstrators put up a wall around their preparation grounds with these signs. Their volunteers stood facing inward, with their backs turned toward the rest of the park. Within the “private space” created by the wall of signs, FLG’s marching band, dressed in blue and white uniforms, rehearsed its performance. This created enough noise, at least when one walked close by, to drown out the anti-FLG megaphone chanting. (Observation from Cheung Sha Wan to Tsim Sha Tsui, July 18, 2015)

Along the entire six-kilometer march to the Star Ferry pier on July 18, 2015, small teams of anti-FLG groups occupied major intersections:

The anti-FLG groups used the subway to leapfrog the FLG parade, so that one team would be able to protest the FLG procession at multiple points along the route. At the final destination, anti-activists repeated what they had done at the
playground: they installed a wall of banners, megaphones, and what appeared to be two busloads of new college-age recruits. FLG participants shared a rumor that these students had been bused in from Shenzhen, the city just across the border in mainland China. The FLG parade ended with a drum and dance performance, which occurred again within the makeshift private space behind the FLG banners, which had been formed into a barrier against the anti-activist forces. FLG participants expressed their frustration, fatigue, and feelings of resignation when speaking with us. (Observation from Cheung Sha Wan to Tsim Sha Tsui, July 18, 2015)

Given the interactive and even mirroring nature of the contentious repertoire that has taken shape between the FLG and the anti-FLG camps, one difference is striking. During the parades, the FLG activists consistently directed their public messaging at bystanders. Walking on the sidewalks on either side of the march were a handful of FLG members handing out free copies of their newspapers, the *Epoch Times* and *Minghui*. In contrast, the anti-FLG demonstrators lined the parade route yelling (or playing pre-recorded) slogans at the FLG marchers, booing them, and holding out their hands with thumbs pointed down in disgust. They made no effort to approach the bystanders or distribute material to them. Nevertheless, they quite effectively disturbed and disrupted FLG’s demonstration. In their interviews with journalists, FLG followers admitted that HKYCAL’s attacks made their collective actions “much more difficult” (Torode, Pomfret, and Lim, 2014).

On April 24, 2016, we observed another anti-FLG demonstration jointly staged by HKYCAL and some other groups. From what we could see, it seemed very likely that the anti-FLG protesters were paid to turn out and harass the opposition:

There were about seven hundred FLG and three hundred anti-FLG demonstrators from at least six different organizations. The HKYCAL, with about two hundred participants, took a leading role. It set up a huge façade facing the park where the FLG group was holding a forum. A giant sheet of black cloth with Li Hongzhi’s portrait was hung on the façade, signifying that this was the site of Li Hongzhi’s funeral. The words, in white, “Sinner Forever” and “Li Hongzhi’s Funerary Photo,” were printed above and below Li’s portrait. Bunches of white flowers surrounded the portrait and on either side were a pair of Chinese idioms: “Corrupt Cheater” and “Cruel Traitor.” Loud Chinese mourning music was played. When the FLG group started to parade, a loud male voice accompanied by funeral music announced “Three bows please! This is the funeral of Li Hongzhi! This is the funeral of Li Hongzhi!” This announcement was chanted many times, along with other comments such as “Li Hongzhi is a sinner. He deserves it! You guys, don’t be too sad. I feel sorry for you. But I’m very happy!” Five members of HKYCAL wore vests of white sackcloth over white shirts and
pants with white sackcloth cone-shaped hats (which are worn by members of the family of the deceased) to dramatize paying last respects to Li. The FLG demonstrators marched as if they heard nothing.

The FLG demonstrators marched from 2 p.m. to 6 p.m., following exactly the same route as they had on July 18, 2015. The anti-FLG group again used the subway to leapfrog the FLG parade and stood on the sidewalks, broadcasting or shouting anti-FLG slogans. The final stop of the FLG’s parade was the Liaison Office, where FLG followers read out their petitions to the Beijing government. Three anti-FLG groups arrived early outside the Liaison Office, awaiting the FLG demonstrators. They stood in the demonstration zone separated from one another by barricades set up by the police. It was raining very hard and even though the demonstrators wore raincoats and held umbrellas, they were all wet. Some child demonstrators were taken by their parents to shelter in a footbridge nearby. The FLG petition team, consisting of about twenty followers, arrived at about 5:45 p.m. They stood in a small demonstration zone right in front of the Liaison Office, their backs turned to the office. Surprisingly, the anti-FLG group left by 6 p.m., right before the FLG members read out their petitions.7 (Observation from North Point to Sai Ying Pun, April 21, 2016)

It was surprising that all the anti-FLG protesters suddenly disappeared because that would have been the best moment to disturb the FLG protest by playing music or chanting slogans so that FLG’s petitions could not be heard. It was very likely that the anti-FLG participants were only hired up to 6 p.m., and were dismissed right before the most critical moment of the FLG protest. Another interesting observation was the overlapping membership of some of the anti-FLG groups. About a dozen persons (all males aged from their twenties to fifties) wearing white polo shirts bearing the Chinese characters “Proud & Wonderful Hong Kong Company Limited” on the back appeared in North Point in the morning with cardboard signs in their hands to protest against FLG. This group of people disappeared for hours during FLG’s march from North Point to the Liaison Office. However, some of them reappeared outside the Liaison Office awaiting FLG’s arrival, but now they wore a different uniform emblazoned with the words—in Chinese—“Loving Hong Kong Citizens Alliance” on their backs. Their change of membership to protest the same event on the same day at two different times is very likely due to different sponsorship during these two time slots.

Public Responses and Impacts on the FLG

We observed that the local public generally lacked interest in both the FLG and anti-FLG booths and posters. Some tourists, mostly from mainland China, did stop to look at the posters from both sides. Nonetheless, they
usually walked away when they were approached by members attempting to sell their campaign. Among the onlookers, pedestrians, tourists, shopkeepers, and taxi drivers whom we interviewed, the overwhelming majority expressed no interest in either FLG or those who opposed it. Tourists and some local onlookers could not distinguish one camp from the other. Some commented that “there has been too much emphasis on politics in Hong Kong” and said that they supported neither the FLG nor the anti-FLG camp. Others said what both camps were doing was “nonsense” and simply treated it as drama.

Although the contrived anti-FLG demonstrations as a whole failed to gain public support, they have had some negative impact on the FLG. The first negative impact has to do with complaints about noise pollution. Since anti-FLG groups used loudspeakers to broadcast their messages, FLG responded by turning up the volume of their anti-CCP messages. Many shopkeepers complained that both the FLG and anti-FLG groups were too noisy and disturbing. Some of them, however, put the blame on the FLG. A white collar man in his late thirties commented:

I’m politically neutral. I’m not against Falun Gong. However, they always block traffic. This affects my life. Wherever there is the Falun Gong, there is the anti-Falun Gong. Very noisy! When one camp booms out their messages, the other camp booms out even louder. Then the noise gets louder and louder. Our life is very much affected by this noise pollution. I’ve gradually come to be slightly against the Falun Gong. (Interview in North Point, April 24, 2016)

Another interviewee, a shopkeeper, expressed a similar view, saying that “it was the presence of the Falun Gong that led to the appearance of the anti-Falun Gong and, therefore, the Falun Gong was the root of the problem” (Interview in Sai Ying Pun, April 24, 2016). Taxi drivers complained that both camps blocked traffic, and again FLG was the one blamed “because they [Falun Gong] held the demonstrations way before the anti-Falun Gong did. If Falun Gong disappeared, then naturally the anti-Falun Gong groups would disappear too” (Interview, May 9, 2016).

Second, when FLG and anti-FLG groups accused each other of getting paid to come out and yet no sound evidence was provided by either party, the public tended to believe that both camps received payments “to perform.” An onlooker of the FLG parade commented,

They accused each other of getting paid to come out. I don’t know if this is true. But I think that both of them do receive money to come out. […] I don’t have evidence but this is what I guess. They both stand there all day long, every day. What do they do for a living? (Interview in North Point, April 24, 2016)
Likewise, a pedestrian who saw the FLG booth on a footbridge shared a similar view:

I heard that each person received four or five hundred Hong Kong dollars a day. It doesn’t matter whether one belongs to Falun Gong or anti-Falun Gong, they all receive money to show up. Who would come out to oppose Falun Gong without getting paid? At the same time, who would stand here distributing Falun Gong materials every day without getting paid? (Interview in Wan Chai, July 27, 2016)

Some shop owners and onlookers commented that the anti-FLG groups’ actions did not appear to be sincere and, at the same time, they wondered how FLG could afford to organize parades so often with hundreds of participants flown in from Taiwan.

Lastly, the anti-FLG demonstrations have effectively intimidated FLG, causing FLG members to be suspicious of outsiders and to turn themselves into a clique, which has cost FLG further public support. For example, FLG holds its annual forum and parade on the fourth Sunday of April every year to mark the anniversary of its mass sit-in in Beijing in 1999 that resulted in the crackdown. We observed this annual event in 2011 and 2012 by attending the FLG forum and walking along with the parade. The forum, held in a public park in North Point on Hong Kong Island, was open to the public and we were free to take photos. When we arrived at the park in 2016, however, the forum was enclosed by barricades and banners. We could only peek at the forum through a crack between the banners. Just outside the enclosed forum were loud speakers broadcasting chants of “Eliminate the Falun Gong evil cult,” alternating in Cantonese and Mandarin. The anti-FLG chant was so loud that we could barely hear FLG’s speeches at the forum while standing outside the barricades. We were not allowed to go into the forum because it was no longer open to the public. Why was not it open? “Some people came to disrupt our events on purpose,” a FLG member who was in charge of the forum explained. Although the anti-FLG demonstrations seemed orchestrated, they still created trouble for FLG, leading it to exclude outsiders from attending their forum, and ultimately foreclosing an opportunity to develop public support.

**Conclusion: Undermining Civil Society**

Anti-activism as a form of demobilization is likely to be state-initiated and/or sponsored. Instead of direct repression, states utilize the space of civil society to orchestrate *faux voluntary* mobilization to attack targeted groups or
movements. This form of countermovement is unnecessary in mainland China where direct and relational repression, and other forms of control, can be exercised legitimately and effectively. However, it was found in Hong Kong, where the ruling party remained underground and civil liberties with freedom of speech and protest were the norm at least up to the time when we concluded the writing of this paper. The promulgation of the National Security Law in Hong Kong by the National People’s Congress on June 30, 2020, has opened up a whole new set of questions for future research on this topic.

Our key to understanding the distinctive nature of anti-activism is to decipher the ways anti-activists, in contrast to conventional activists, are differently oriented vis-à-vis the public (see also Junker, 2014b). Much of the evidence presented here suggests that persuading the public was only a superficial objective for anti-FLG protests. While FLG’s tactics were consistent with conventional social movement activism aiming to garner public support, the anti-FLG “volunteers” rarely attempted to reach out to bystanders. Furthermore, by holding the PRC flag in their protests, these pro-government groups are destined to have a very small market in a city where so many fear that Hong Kong’s bounded autonomy and freedoms are being taken away by Beijing. If the effects of anti-activism mobilization are not primarily to be measured by the extent of public support, what is the proper yardstick? We suggest that anti-activism, intentionally or unintentionally, undermines the public sphere more generally by fomenting distrust in protest as a way to observe and measure public opinion, and by polarizing public debate.

Anti-activism’s emphasis on interference rather than communication can be seen in the use of noise and banners by anti-FLG groups. Drowning out the sound of FLG or pro-democracy protests is a major tactic of the anti-activists, as we frequently observed. HKYCAL emphasized physically obstructing FLG’s signs, rather than making counterclaims that onlookers might find persuasive. The constant blaring of pre-recorded anti-FLG messages via loudspeakers was witnessed at FLG parades and booths, even when no bystanders were present. This demonstrates how anti-activists aimed to disrupt and distract their opponents, rather than present a persuasive message to the public. The noise pollution of the contending “protests” sparked anger and frustration in the surrounding public, which was a cost borne by FLG but not HKYCAL.

Discrediting is a major objective of countermovements in general (Knight and Greenberg, 2011). What makes the anti-activist form of discrediting distinctive, we suggest, is that anti-activists succeed even if they discredit themselves in the process. That is, whereas conventional social movements aim to appear worthy and have standing in the eyes of the public, anti-activists are tolerant of being dismissed and viewed negatively, as long as their efforts
simultaneously discredit those of the opposition by casting doubt on all participants in a conflict. If one side is faux, the other side may be too, and all protests become something unreliable, inauthentic, and suspicious. Similarly, during the OCM, rumors circulated all over the city that both OCM participants and anti-OCM participants received payments. There were rumors that some OCM participants were paid to sit in and sleep overnight in Mongkok’s occupation zone and some anti-OCM participants got paid to disturb public forums and make mischief to discredit the movement (Field observations, October–November 2014). These rumors, regardless of their veracity, discredited the OCM to some extent. They also led to mutual suspicion and distrust between activists and the general public. For instance, some participants of the OCM were increasingly guarded when they interacted with outsiders and observers due to the rumors that some anti-OCM people might come to stir up trouble (Field observation, November 2014).

Another undermining effect comes from provoking the radicalization of tactics used by political dissidents. Between 2000 and 2012, FLG had been quietly managing stalls on a daily basis, distributing information, displaying banners, and collecting signatures in about two dozen locations in Hong Kong. During that period, there were very few complaints against FLG (Chiu, 2014). Only after HKYCAL mounted an aggressive campaign against FLG did FLG activists respond more aggressively by turning up the volume of their speakers and engaging in banner-hanging battles, and so forth. Furthermore, discrediting opponents by generating a loud, disruptive, rancorous, and sometimes violent atmosphere at protests may be especially effective in the densely populated space of Hong Kong, which maintains relatively stringent and widely shared norms of public civility. The overall level of public nuisance increased drastically as the contentious repertoire evolved between both groups, as prompted by HKYCAL’s initial aggressive tactics. Since HKYCAL does not need to be concerned about its public standing, the reputational cost disproportionately fell on FLG.

Furthermore, anti-activism may well polarize public debate by pushing out moderate or centrist voices. The sudden emergence of pro-government collective action, which appeared to be sponsored by the PRC, has been interpreted by many in Hong Kong as one sign among many of Hong Kong losing its autonomy. Anti-activism is frequently interpreted as evidence of PRC encroachment and increasingly repressive governance. In response, and further fueled by the failure of the OCM to win any concessions after a largely peaceful seventy-nine-day occupation, anti-government and anti-mainland sentiment has intensified and fueled more radical anti-mainland activism, as advocated by some newly emerged “localist groups” 本土派. Just as Edmund Cheng (2016: 401) found that increased regime control “failed to demobilize collective action and instead provoked radicalization,” we find that polarization is amplified by
the fact that anti-activist groups not only stage protests against pro-democratic activism but also enthusiastically support the government and the police. This, unintentionally or deliberately, drives the government and the police into opposition to the pro-democratic camp. Similarly, any criticism of the pro-democratic camp may be appropriated by pro-government groups to justify their cause. As the public sphere has become polarized, the space for criticism and debate between the poles has shrunk. Many educated members of the public who were critical of the OCM’s methods but sympathetic to their cause remained silent rather than be associated with the Blue Ribbon camp. Open, civil public discourse was subsequently curtailed during the OCM. Likewise, localism activists took any positive comments about the police as “supporting the repressive government against the people.” As polarization occurred, fights between localist and pro-government groups intensified in the absence of voices from those in the center. Anti-activism thus contributed to undermining moderate voices in public debate and in part contributed to the prevalence of uncivil contention, which came to figure prominently in the Anti-ELAB movement.

Anti-activism is distinctive for both its lack of concern about gaining public support and its aggressive efforts to undermine dissenting voices in the public sphere. Our case study of anti-FLG activism in Hong Kong suggests that this form of contention undermines the legitimacy of protests altogether and thus represents a threat to the integrity of democratic civil society. A cumulative effect of anti-activism appears to be that it encourages the bystander public to consider minority voices engaged in protest as a nuisance and as the ultimate cause of social disorder. Such was the “blame the victim” reasoning of the members of the public we interviewed who saw FLG as the root cause of the problem. Given that one measure of the health of a democracy is its capacity to protect the rights of minority voices, the discrediting effect of anti-FLG mobilization has ominous implications. Fake civil society groups that undermine protest as a legitimate form of contention over public issues may be an important way that Beijing attempts to demobilize opposition in Hong Kong. Given the ongoing tensions in the city and the weakening of opposition forces in established political institutions, we anticipate that people and groups will continue to turn to the social movement sector to voice opposition. We also expect such activism to meet more frequently with state-sponsored forces of demobilization in the form of anti-activism.

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Notes
1. According to Article 23 in Chapter 2 of the Basic Law of the HKSAR, the Hong Kong government “shall enact laws on its own to prohibit any act of treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the Central People’s Government, or theft of state secrets, to prohibit foreign political organisations or bodies from conducting political activities in the Region.” This article has aroused tremendous fears of losing the freedom of speech and assembly that people in Hong Kong have enjoyed since the 1970s. When this article was being prepared for press, the CPG announced plans to implement a Hong Kong national security law separately amended to the Basic Law and, in effect, rendering moot the debate about Article 23.

2. For video clips of Caring Hong Kong Power rallies, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PQuxJNQdXZI, and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onjPQW_IzRQ.

3. It is a norm in Hong Kong for the organizers of any mass demonstration to inflate the number of participants. For this particular event, the police estimated that there were about 110,000 participants and the Public Opinion Programme of the University of Hong Kong estimated that there were about 80,000–90,000 participants.

4. Besides practicing a set of qigong exercises, FLG followers also collectively read aloud parts of their sacred text, the Zhuan Falun 轉法輪, authored by their charismatic leader.

5. This estimate comes from our interview with a HKYCAL member in an anti-FLG demonstration on April 24, 2016.

6. This narrative has been used by the anti-cult campaign in China since the crackdown on FLG in 1999.

7. We observed a similar pattern at a protest against the Hong Kong University Council on July 28, 2015. The anti-activists used their bullhorns at full volume to drown out the press conference of the Hong Kong University Alumni Association working group. However, after precisely sixty minutes, they suddenly disappeared. We surmise that they were paid for one hour of protest to disturb the activists’ events. One of our research assistants observed that some anti-FLG protesters in Toronto interacted with FLG members in a rather friendly manner. Members from the two opposing camps even chatted and laughed together when no passersby were around.
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