EXAMINING THE BLUE RIBBONS: PRO-REGIME IDENTITY DISCOURSES, PROPAGANDA, AND MOBILIZATION OF HONG KONG'S PRO-ESTABLISHMENT CAMP

by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the resilient Hong Kong people, who have worked tirelessly to transform the city from a transient haven for refugees into a place they proudly call home. In this dissertation, my aspiration is to document the rich tapestry of history, culture, and identity that belongs to these tenacious individuals.

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In 2017, I departed from my 11-year career in journalism and embarked on a new chapter of my life at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Having been distanced from the academic realm for an extended period and lacking prior experience in empirical research, I dove headfirst into the world of doctoral studies. Transitioning from the bustling journalism industry to an academic pursuit was not effortless. It demanded adaptation to a new environment, both geographically and culturally, as well as a shift from primarily using Chinese to embracing English as my professional language. Amidst these adjustments, I encountered the unexpected challenges posed by the global COVID-19 pandemic.

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ABSTRACT

While existing research has extensively explored the identity formation and mobilization of the oppositional “Yellow Ribbons” in Hong Kong, the pro-establishment “Blue Ribbons” has remained understudied. This dissertation addresses this gap, offering the first systematic analysis of how pro-establishment groups construct a pro-regime identity and mobilize their supporters in Hong Kong. It adopts a mixed-method approach, combining 1) a qualitative analysis of the political discourses disseminated by twelve pro-establishment digital media over two years, 2) a regression analysis of the mobilization effects of these political discourses on Facebook, and 3) systematic interviews with active pro-establishment group members.

Previous studies often use the theory of post-materialism (Inglehart, 2015) to argue that Hong Kong society has shifted from materialist toward nonmaterial liberal values, thus leading to increased challenges to the political status quo. Situated within this context, the findings reveal that pro-establishment digital media strategically appeal to materialist values traditionally embraced by social conservatives in Hong Kong to construct political discourses. Moreover, they carefully avoid political taboos, such as communism and personality cults, which could trigger a backlash from social conservatives. This reflects a calculated effort to provoke counter-reactions from conservative segments against liberal movements that challenged the ruling regime.

However, mobilizing support from politically pragmatic citizens can be difficult, as they may just disengage from politics altogether and their opposition against democratic movements does not necessarily translate into genuine support for the regime. This predicament is evident by the research findings that most content categories within the political discourses disseminated by pro-establishment digital media cannot predict online

engagement, except those expressing disapproval toward the Yellow Ribbons. This observation is further supported by my interview research, as the political opinions of pro-establishment group members are surprisingly diverse and fragmented, contrary to the prevailing perception that they are unwavering supporters of the regime.

To navigate this complex situation, pro-establishment groups strategically offer supporters material incentives to recruit members, such as monetary return, community support, and career opportunities. They also avoid probing deeply into the internal political beliefs of their members. As a result, the acquisition of pro-establishment group membership is not solely based on inner thoughts and beliefs but on outward displays of loyalty to the regime. This approach allows pro-establishment groups to recruit those who may not hold strong ideological beliefs but are willing to conform out of pragmatic incentives. Within these power dynamics, pro-establishment media provide valuable discursive resources that help members stay informed about what they should do and say to display outward loyalty and obedience. Consequently, media propaganda from pro-establishment media claims a special role in countermobilization by bridging the political gap between the regime and its supporters. It simultaneously appeals to the supporters' interests while providing them with behavioral guidance.

Overall, this study presents a rare but important case about how China seeks to tame a rapid liberal transition of society. The findings have broad theoretical implications for the literature on propaganda and countermobilization in nondemocratic regimes.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Anti-ELAB Protests	Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Protests
CA	Content analysis
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CPPCC	Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
CUHK	The Chinese University of Hong Kong
DA	Discourse analysis
DV	Dependent variable
ES	Effect size
IRG	International Research Group
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
IV	Independent variable
LEGCO	The Legislative Council
M	Mean
NGOs	Non-governmental organizations
NPC	The National People's Congress
NSL	National Security Law
OLS	Ordinary least square
RQ	Research question
RTHK	Radio Television Hong Kong
SD	Standard deviation

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCING THE BLUE RIBBONS

1.1 Introduction

As a Hong Kong native, I worked as a journalist in the city from the late-2000s to the mid-2010s as Hong Kong shifted to Chinese rule once again. Throughout this time, the former British colony, with its free press and a semi-democratic republic, experienced a wave of anti-government protests driven by two core objectives: democratization and enhanced autonomy.

While pursuing my Ph.D. studies in the United States, I maintained the tradition of visiting Hong Kong once or twice a year to reconnect with my family and friends. However, in the summer of 2019, I witnessed a city engulfed in turmoil. For weeks, crowds of Hong Kong citizens took to the streets to protest against a proposed bill by the local government, which aimed to enable the extradition of criminal suspects to Mainland China for trial (known as the Anti-ELAB protests or 2019 Hong Kong protests). These protests soon evolved into broader movements, advocating for more than just the bill's withdrawal but also pressing for "five demands," including immediate democratic reforms (Lam, 2019).

During my visit, what struck me the most, however, were not the protests and rallies led by democrats and localists, but rather the counter-rallies organized in support of the regime's repression.

On June 30, 2019, more than a hundred thousand pro-establishment supporters turned out in force to counter the Anti-ELAB protests (Zhao & Zhang, 2019). A month and a half later, this mobilization further escalated. On August 17, an estimated half-million pro-establishment supporters gathered at Tamar Park for a rally. They chanted slogans like "oppose violence, save Hong Kong," while holding placards that said "not allow Hong Kong to be chaotic anymore" (Creery, 2019).

These pro-establishment supporters are often referred to as “Blue Ribbons.” The origin of the term is not easily traceable, but it is notable that the term emerged during the 2014 Hong Kong pro-democracy movement, commonly known as the Umbrella Movement. While the movement’s supporters wore yellow ribbons to symbolize their cause, those who opposed the protests and stood in support of the government started wearing blue ribbons as a counter-symbol. On October 4, 2014, a purported group of pro-establishment individuals organized the first “Blue Ribbons” rally in Hong Kong, drawing thousands of participants (Ho, 2014) (See Figure 1.1). Since then, the “Blue Ribbons” have gained a reputation and maintained a prominent presence in Hong Kong politics. However, prior to 2019, the scale of counter-mobilization by the Blue Ribbons had never reached such magnitude. And it is this movement that is the focus of this dissertation.

Figure 1.1 A Screen Capture of the Poster Calling for Supporters to Wear Blue Ribbons to Attend an Anti-Umbrella Movement Rally.

While research on protests against non-democratic rule has been extensively conducted in the social sciences, there has been a lack of scholarly focus on mass demonstrations in support of non-democratic regimes (Hellmeier & Weidmann, 2019), with Hong Kong being no exception. The phenomenon of the "Yellow Ribbons," representing the pro-democracy and localist fractions, has garnered considerable academic attention. However, the pro-establishment "Blue Ribbons" in Hong Kong has remained understudied.

This dissertation shifts the focus to the often-overlooked pro-establishment camp in Hong Kong. Specifically, it concerns the processes of identity formation and mobilization within this camp. While scholarly studies have extensively explored the identity formation and mobilization within the opposition, the pro-establishment camp has received comparatively less attention.

The existing literature on the identity formation and mobilization of the Yellow Ribbons commonly relies on several key arguments. Foremost among these arguments is the theory of post-materialism (Inglehart, 2015), which scholars have widely utilized to argue that Hong Kong's society has undergone a shift from conservative to more liberal values as a consequence of rapid industrialization, thereby leading to rising localism and a greater willingness among citizens to challenge the political status quo (e.g., Charm & Lin, 2023; Ma, 2011; Lee & Tang, 2014; Tang & Cheng, 2021; Veg, 2017). Another argument, referred to as the reactionary argument, posits that political interference from China has eroded the promised autonomy of Hong Kong, thus prompting resistance among its citizens as they strive to protect their rights and preserve their unique identity (Fong, 2020; Kaeding, 2017; Ping & Kwong, 2014; Veg, 2017). Lastly, some scholars emphasize the role of digital communication technologies in facilitating collective actions within Hong Kong, suggesting these technologies have provided new avenues for organizing and mobilizing that enable

Hong Kong citizens to connect and coordinate their efforts more effectively (e.g., Lee, 2015; Lee, 2018b; Lee et al., 2015; Leung & Lee, 2014; Tang & Lee, 2013; Yuen & Chung, 2018).

However, it is crucial to recognize that the impact of any social, political, and technological factors should not be confined to one side alone. Thus, a central impetus driving this research project is to examine how the above social, political, and communicative factors, which have been shaping the oppositional movements, have also influenced the processes of identity formation and countermobilization within the pro-establishment camp. By examining these dynamics, I aim to gain a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted interactions and complexities at play in Hong Kong's political landscape.

I have adopted a mixed-method approach to understand the political identity of Blue Ribbons and their motivation for political participation. Firstly, I qualitatively analyzed social media content disseminated by pro-establishment media outlets to dissect the identity discourses they propagated and their propaganda strategies. Second, I quantitatively tested the mobilizing potential of these discourses by examining whether they can predict user engagement online. Thirdly, I incorporate an offline perspective by conducting the first systematic interview study on Blue Ribbons in Hong Kong. This interview study explores how pro-establishment group members perceive the identity discourses propagated by the Blue digital media and how they articulate their own political identities and motivations for political participation.

Based on the findings, I put forth several major arguments.

First, I find that pro-establishment digital media heavily resorts to materialist values and norms traditionally embraced by older generations in Hong Kong to construct their political discourses online. This signifies an attempt to provoke counter-reactions from social conservatives against the liberal social movements challenging the ruling regime. The

interview research further supports this argument, as pro-establishment group members generally share the belief that democratic movements are unrealistic and too costly.

Secondly, I argue that seeking support from politically pragmatic and conservative citizens poses a double-edged sword for the regime. While politically pragmatic citizens are more likely to oppose costly democratic movements that may lead to social unrest and government repression, their opposition does not necessarily translate into genuine support for the government. Additionally, conservative citizens, driven by pragmatism and self-interest, may disengage from politics altogether. This presents a challenge for the pro-establishment camp in mobilizing its supporter base in Hong Kong.

This predicament is evident in my research findings. As my interview research reveals, contrary to the prevailing perception that pro-establishment group members are fervent nationalists or unwavering supporters of the regime, their political opinions are surprisingly diverse and fragmented. Many individuals within these groups are not fully convinced by the ideologies promoted by the regime, despite their general disapproval of democratic movements. This fragmentation becomes apparent when examining the limited success of most content categories within the identity discourses disseminated by pro-establishment digital media in mobilizing online engagement. Only a few exceptions, such as expressions of disapproval toward their political adversaries, the Yellow Ribbons, manage to yield significant outcomes.

Thirdly, I argue that pro-establishment groups are flexible and strategic in their handling of this predicament. On the one hand, they strategically offer supporters material incentives, such as monetary return, community support, and career opportunities, to mobilize their political engagement. On the other hand, they tend to avoid probing deeply into the internal political beliefs of their members. As a result, pro-establishment group membership is not solely based on inner thoughts and beliefs but rather on outward displays

of loyalty and obedience to the regime. Active participation in pro-regime political performances is required to be recognized as "pro-establishment."

Within the power dynamics, pro-establishment digital media does not necessarily indoctrinate political beliefs into the minds of pro-establishment group members. However, they do provide valuable discursive resources that help members stay informed about what they should do and say within their organization's sphere. Consequently, pro-establishment media propaganda plays a special role in countermobilization by bridging the political gap between the regime and its supporters. It simultaneously appeals to the supporters' interests while providing them with behavioral guidance.

These findings provide important insights into how powerful nondemocratic regimes, like China, mobilize supporters in fierce political competition. The findings also illuminate a picture of pro-establishment supporters, commonly known as "Blue Ribbons." I contend that pro-establishment supporters are not a monolithic group of unwavering loyalists to the regime. Rather, they are individuals with differing levels of trust in the government and their own personal motivations guiding their political involvement. However, "Blue Ribbons" do share certain ideological common grounds, namely a collective mindset of political pragmatism and materialism. This shared perspective leads them to prioritize personal material gains and resist sacrificing them in pursuit of social ideals, such as democracy. Among these politically mobilized conservative citizens in Hong Kong, "Blue Ribbons" represent those who have been galvanized by the regime, either through ideological indoctrination or the provision of material incentives, to actively participate in the pro-regime politics.

I shall return to the discussion of research insights later in the following chapters. In this introduction chapter, however, I seek to provide the necessary background for understanding the main topic of this dissertation: the rise of Blue Ribbons in Hong Kong.

In what follows, I begin by discussing the Blue-Yellow divide in Hong Kong and the imbalance of academic attention that tilts toward the Yellows rather than the Blues. Then, I review explanatory factors that researchers commonly employed to explain political changes in Hong Kong over the past decades. Next, I provide an overview of the existing knowledge surrounding the Blue Ribbons and address some gaps and shortcomings in the scholarship. Finally, I present the research questions and the structure of the dissertation.

1.2 Situating the Blue-Yellow Divide in Hong Kong

In 2019, Hong Kong experienced a year of intense turmoil. As the Blue Ribbons gathered to support the regime, the anti-regime movements had no signs of receding. As the Hong Kong government failed to address the majority of political demands, including democratic reform, put forth by the anti-establishment protestors, the anti-ELAB protests grew increasingly confrontational. Predictably, this political deadlock intensified tensions between the Blue Ribbons and the anti-establishment protestors, who commonly identify themselves as "Yellow Ribbons" (Dearden, 2014).

Merely three days after the historic pro-establishment rally at Tamar Park, a man stabbed three individuals at a "Lennon Wall" message board, a collective artistic work adorned with colorful notes containing messages advocating for democracy. The perpetrator was incited by the political views expressed on the board, and one of the victims was critically injured (Chan, 2019). On November 13th, during a clash between anti-ELAB protestors and government supporters, a 70-year-old man lost his life after being struck in the head by a brick (BBC, 2019).

Indeed, the Blue-Yellow divide has extended beyond sporadic individual confrontation, becoming entrenched in Hong Kong people's lives. Research shows that politically active youth in Hong Kong who are more pro-democracy have been engaging in

"disconnective practices" online. These practices involve avoiding political discussions with pro-establishment contacts or unfriending them (Chu & Yeo, 2020). In addition, Yellow and Blue Hong Kong citizens begin to actively avoid each other on dating apps. Researchers observe that pro-democracy users explicitly state "No blue ribbons, no police" on their profiles (Chan, 2021). Regarding the economic aspect, supporters of both sides have adopted consumption strategies to boycott or "buycott" brands and shops according to their colors (Chan, 2022; Li & Whitworth, 2022; Poon & Tse, 2022). Some political enthusiasts have even created mobile apps to inform people of the location and political leaning of Yellow and Blue restaurants and shops (for an example, see Figure 1.1). Overall, the Blue-Yellow divide has deeply polarized Hong Kong society, with the political labels and terminologies of Blue and Yellow becoming entrenched in the city's daily conversation.

Figure 1.2 A Screen Capture of the "Ultimate Yellow/Blue Map (終極黃藍地圖)" that Locate "Blue" or "Yellow" Shops and Restaurants

1.3 Post-materialist Shift in Hong Kong

The political salience of the Blue-Yellow divide in Hong Kong notwithstanding, the scholarly focus on Hong Kong politics has been quite imbalanced. While limited attention has been given to studying the pro-establishment Blue Ribbons, extensive research has been conducted on the Yellow Ribbons, which encompass the democrats and localists. This body of research consists of two main lines of inquiry. The first strand examines the post-materialist shift in social and political norms in Hong Kong after its rapid industrialization that led to the emergence of the "Yellow Ribbons" in the city (e.g., Cham & Lin, 2023; Kaeding, 2017; Lee, 2018a; Ma, 2011; Ping & Kwong, 2014; Sing, 2010; Tang & Cheng, 2021; Veg, 2017).

Research on the social norms and identities of Hong Kong can be traced back to Siu-Kai Lau's influential research about the immigrant society of Hong Kong. Lau's study focuses on the extensive influx of immigrants to Hong Kong in the postwar era, fleeing from the political turmoil in Mainland China. Hong Kong, in this context, was a society of refugees. Lau (1981) observes that these immigrants brought with them a sense of "utilitarian familism," which emphasized familial interests, prioritized material gains over social ideals, and demonstrated little interest in establishing a civil society.

These immigrants also harbored a deep skepticism toward communism. For those who had fled from mainland China to Hong Kong, many viewed Hong Kong as a lifeboat rescuing them from the chaos of Communist China. Meanwhile, the rapid economic growth in postwar Hong Kong fostered a belief among its citizens in the merits of a free-market non-interventionist approach to economic governance. In contrast, communism was associated with political struggles and the planned economy that had wreaked havoc on China's economy, standing in stark contrast to the stable and free-wheeling nature of Hong Kong (Ma, 2011).

Given the political pragmatism and fear of communist China prevalent in Hong Kong society, it is understandable why the immigrant population tolerated the rule of the nondemocratic British colonial government. As long as the government ensured social stability, facilitated economic growth, and refrained from being overly exploitative, Hong Kong citizens were content with the status quo (Sing, 1996). Indeed, both the immigrant society in Hong Kong and the colonial government were conscious of their boundaries, with both operating under a mutual understanding of non-intervention. This resulted in a minimally integrated social-political system, where political expressions from the society were limited, and the government did not actively encourage political participation (Lau, 1984).

At least until the early 1990s, Hong Kong citizens still exhibited a general sense of political passivity. Surveys reveal that while Hong Kong citizens expressed a desire for democratic reforms, their understanding of democracy was primarily instrumental. Many viewed democracy not through an ideological lens but rather as a means to achieve pragmatic objectives such as good governance and economic stability (Kuan & Lau, 1995). Furthermore, despite an increasing consumption of political news among Hong Kong citizens, their political efficacy and inclination toward political participation remained exceptionally low, rendering them as a group of "attentive spectators" of political affairs (Lau & Kuan, 1995).

Overall, these narratives depict older Hong Kong citizens as materialist and pragmatic. Therefore, they could accept governing by a nondemocratic administration as long as it can deliver good governance. However, while these narratives could explain why Hong Kong society acquiesced under colonialism, they could not explain social changes after the handover, in which democrats and localists who labeled themselves as Yellow Ribbons could

no longer tolerate the nondemocratic rules and political interventions from the Beijing government.

Many scholars attribute the value changes and ruling legitimacy crisis in Hong Kong to the post-materialist shift in Hong Kong society (e.g., Charm & Lin, 2023; Lee & Tang, 2014; Ma, 2011; Tang & Cheng, 2021; Veg, 2017). Here, they typically draw upon the theory of post-materialism proposed by Ronald Inglehart (2015) as an explanatory framework. As Inglehart postulates, as societies become more affluent following industrialization, younger generations begin to take material security for granted and place greater emphasis on non-materialistic goals in the social agenda. These goals may include democratic governance, environmentalism, gender equality, and same-sex marriage (Inglehart & Norris, 2003). When younger generations encounter the political establishment constructed by previous generations, they are also more willing to participate in politics to challenge the political status quo (Henn et al., 2018).

According to Inglehart and Norris (2019), these value changes are driven by three secular processes. Firstly, there has been a significant expansion of higher education, with a growing number of younger cohorts attaining college degrees. Secondly, there is a continuous surge toward urbanization, as individuals with higher education levels gravitate toward large cities, creating distinct skill clusters. Thirdly, western democracies have become increasingly ethnically diverse, with a substantial influx of people from other countries.

In the past few decades, Hong Kong has undergone similar secular processes. The city has long become economically prosperous, boasting one of the highest gross domestic products (GDPs) globally. Hong Kong is also renowned for its knowledge-based economy, marked by a vibrant array of diverse international collaborations where Chinese and Western influences intertwine. With basic material needs relatively fulfilled, Hong Kong has transitioned into a post-materialist society with a heightened desire for full democracy (Ma,

2011). This post-materialist shift has fueled Hong Kong people's demands for an elected government, which led to the Umbrella Movement in 2014. It has also cultivated citizens' tendency to critically evaluate policies, which motivated citizens to participate in the Anti-ELAB protests in 2019.

Empirically, survey researchers provide evidence to support these claims. Table 1.1 summarizes the post-materialist values shift in this city documented by survey research. Since the early 2000s, survey research has documented that a significantly larger proportion of postmaterialists or mixed believers emerged in Hong Kong. Furthermore, postmaterialist orientation is found to have a negative impact on the perceived quality of Hong Kong's elections, particularly among individuals who supported and participated in the Umbrella Movement (Tang & Cheng, 2021). Post-materialism also interacts with political grievances to amplify the inclination of Hongkongers to engage in protests (Charm & Lin, 2023). Moreover, as some scholars observe, this trend is particularly salient among the young generations (Wong & Wan, 2009).

Table 1.1 Post-Materialist Values Shift in Hong Kong Society Since the 1980s

Author	Ho	Ho & Leung		Wong & Wan		Lee	
Year of data collection	1985	1993	1995	1992	2007	2011	2014
Materialist	49	75	79.3	34.4	28.5	26.8	26.9
Mixed	49.6	24.7	20.0	57.6	56.2	56.5	50.3
Postmaterialist	1.4	.3	.6	7.5	13.4	16.7	22.8
N	(1000)	(292)	(349)	(590)	(804)	(806)	(800)

Note: The data was compiled from Ho (1985), Ho & Leung (1997), Wong & Wan (2009), and Lee (2018a) by Huang (2022)

With the emergence of post-materialism, younger generations are also increasingly rejecting paternalistic values like nationalism, leading to a shift in the identity of Hong Kong citizens (Veg, 2017). The identity shift is corroaborated by the analysis of biannual HKU POP survey data from 1997 to 2022. Figure 1.3 displays the political identity trend as measured with the question, "Please use a scale of 0-10 to rate your strength of identity as Hongkongeses/Chineses." Since 2010, the preference for a local identity gradually increased,

while the strength of Chinese identity shrank to an all-time low before the enactment of the National Security Law in 2020, then rebounded back to the rate in 1997.

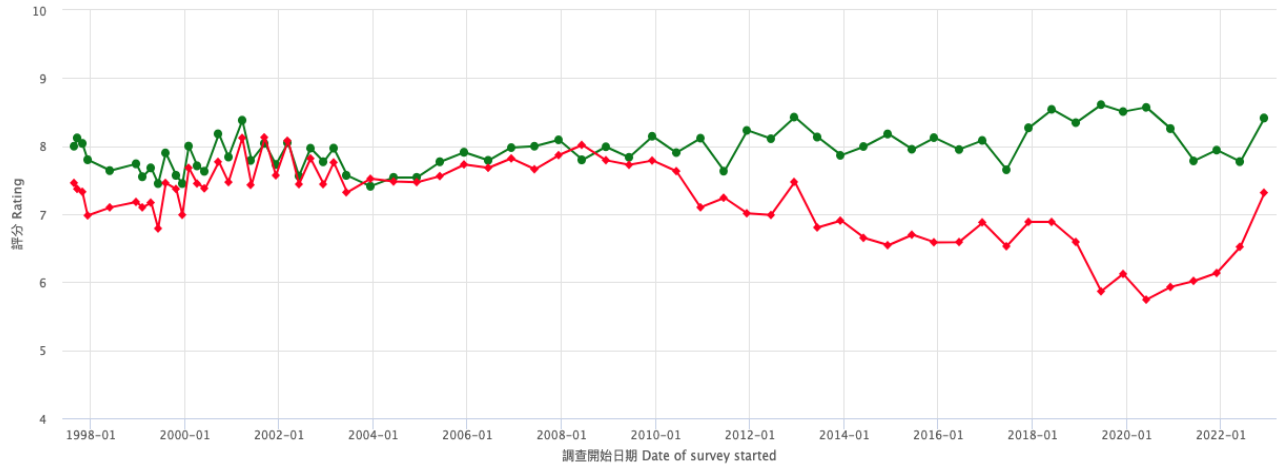

Figure 1.3 Strength of Hong Kong vs. Chinese identities in Hong Kong, 1997–2022

Note: Data collected from Hong Kong University Public Opinion Programme; The green line represents the average rating that respondents give to rate their strength of Hongkongese identity. The red line represents the Chinese identity.

Many scholars attribute the rise of localism to the post-materialist shift in this city. As Hong Kong citizens become more liberal and politically empowered, they are now more sensitive to the loss of autonomy and are more prone to consider separation as a viable political option to remedy this loss (Siroky & Cuffe, 2014).

Most typically, scholars adopt a "Hong Kong vis-à-vis China" framework to suggest that the rise of localism is reactionary to the tightening of political control from China (Fong, 2020; Kaeding, 2017; Veg, 2017). For example, Ping and Kwong (2014) argue that because China has been "mainlandizing" Hong Kong through rapid integration and interventions toward Hong Kong's affairs, many Hong Kong citizens gravitate toward a localism that prioritizes local interests. Some contend that localism was gradually mobilized through a series of transformative events (Cheng, 2019; Cheng & Yuen, 2019; Yuen & Chung, 2018). The key idea is that the local identity of Hong Kong is articulated and reinforced through routinized political events, such as elections, and unexpected political events, such as

protests, developed in the past decade (Lee & Chan, 2022). As an example, Veg (2017) uses the June 4 vigil, the 2012 anti-National Education protest, and the 2014 Umbrella movement to illustrate how Hong Kong citizens expressed their identity through a shared experience of a failed quest for democratization and a collective demand for universal suffrage.

According to these theories, the two notable features of the Yellow Ribbons in Hong Kong, i.e., democratism and localism, did overlap to some extent. As Veg (2017) concludes, the tendency to prioritize civic values renders the Hongkongese identity increasingly incompatible with the Chinese identity advocated by the Beijing government, which emphasizes the importance of bloodline and cultural heritage. Who qualifies to be a "local" in Hong Kong is subjected to the progressive values that they believe. Therefore, the localist movement in Hong Kong is inseparable from the democratic movement.

1.4 Influences from Digital Media

Another line of studies provides an alternative explanation of the rise of the Yellow Ribbons. They often situate the formation of the Yellow Ribbons within the context of digital technologies, investigating the relationship between digital media and their mobilization (e.g., Lee, 2015; Lee, 2018b; Lee & Chan, 2018; Lee et al., 2015; Leung & Lee, 2014; Tang & Lee, 2013; Wang, 2018; Yuen & Chung, 2018; Yung & Leung, 2014).

At the beginning of 2023, the number of Internet users in Hong Kong reached 6.97 million, with an internet penetration rate of 93.1 percent. Additionally, in January 2023, there were 6.73 million social media users in Hong Kong, accounting for 89.9 percent of the total population[1]. This makes Hong Kong one of the most digitally savvy cities in the world.

[1] https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-hong-kong#:~:text=There%20were%206.97%20million%20internet,percent%20of%20the%20total%20population.

Given the extensive development of the Internet in Hong Kong, many scholars argue that the mobilization of anti-regime protests in Hong Kong was made possible by the emergence of digital communication. After the handover, the traditional media of Hong Kong underwent significant acquisition and co-optation by China (Lee & Chan, 2009; Koo, 2022). By the early 2010s, however, researchers noticed that social media, together with several alternative digital media established in Hong Kong, had facilitated the formation of an "insurgent public sphere." As Lee et al. (2015) concur, when political controversies arose, social media and these alternative digital media outlets could provide room for "issue advocates to galvanize into collective action, making demands and putting pressure on the political authorities (p. 360)." Digital media also enables opposition supporters to connect online to mobilize resources and discuss strategies (Lee et al., 2019). This renders the mobilization from the side of the Yellow Ribbons sustainable even without stable and legitimate leaders (Lai & Sing, 2020).

Using survey data, researchers provide empirical evidence to illustrate how social media in Hong Kong facilitates the political participation of the Yellow Ribbons. For instance, Tang and Lee (2013) find that exposure to shared political information online predicts political participation in Hong Kong. Lee et al. (2015) observe that political news use through social media correlates positively with support for the Umbrella Movement but negatively with government trust. Alternative digital media usage also predicts Hong Kong citizens' political knowledge about the opposition (Lee, 2015), leads to protest participation and support for unconventional protest tactics (Leung & Lee, 2015), and predicts support of violent protest strategies and separatism, especially among protest participants (Lee, 2018b).

1.5 Who are Blue Ribbons?

Overall, the phenomenon of Yellow Ribbons in Hong Kong has been described as triggered by a post-materialist shift following industrialization, reactionary to China's intervention, and mobilized through digital communication. However, while the scholarship has established theoretical accounts to explain the rise of Yellow Ribbons, the Blue Ribbons have not received the same level of scholarly examination. This glaring gap in the literature leaves us with a limited understanding of how factors such as post-materialist value shifts and digital communication influence the rise of the Blue Ribbons.

This dearth of scholarly attention is becoming increasingly problematic, considering the growing influence of the Blue Ribbons in Hong Kong. After the enactment of the National Security Law (NSL) in 2021, almost all oppositional media, political parties, and pressure groups were disbanded or turned inactive under the repression. In 2021, two of the most influential pro-democracy news outlets in Hong Kong, the *Apple Daily* and the *Stand News*, were closed following police raids and the arrest of news managers of the outlet (Davison, 2021; Ng & Pomfret, 2021). In 2023, one of Hong Kong's most prominent pro-democracy groups, the Civic Party, voted to disband after its members were squeezed out of local councils and charged under the NSL (Chau, 2023). The continued repression from the Beijing government has fundamentally altered the political ecology in Hong Kong, as Yellow media has perished, and Yellow politicians are now essentially banned from getting any public position.

As a result, the political balance is increasingly tilting toward the Blue Ribbons, and they have since dominated the political stage in Hong Kong. For instance, in 2016, Blue pro-establishment parties controlled 40 out of 70 seats in the legislative council (LEGCO). But in 2021, 89 out of 90 seats at the LEGCO is controlled by the Blues. Given the current political reality, we could reasonably predict that the political influences from the Blue Ribbons will

be increasingly salient in the future. Yet, unlike Yellow Ribbons, very little is known about the identity formation, communication, and mobilization of the Blue Ribbons.

Despite the lack of studies about the political identity of pro-establishment groups in Hong Kong, terminologies like “Blue Ribbons,” “Blue camp,” or “The Blues” have become widely used in the existing literature. As a result, the conceptualization of some studies in this field has become analytically vague and imprecise.

Most typically, the Blues are described as pro-establishment supporters or opponents of anti-establishment protests in Hong Kong, as exemplified by descriptions such as “pro-establishment faction” (Song et al., 2023, p.121), “pro-establishment people” (Ngai, 2020, p.336), “whose main objective is to physically confront the yellow ribbon people” (Chen & Szeto, 2015, p. 450), “supports the police and the governments of Hong Kong and China” (Chan, 2021, p.5).

Beyond these traditional definitions, many make additional, or even contradictory, assumptions about the Blues without providing empirical evidence. For instance, in a paper on cultural activism in the Umbrella Movement, Wong and Liu (2018) assert that many Blues Ribbons are immigrants who “experienced the hardship when migrating to Hong Kong and simply wanted the social order be restored so that the city can continue to prosper” (p.162). Cheng (2020) depicts that the Blues “demanded the restoration of law and order” (p.16). Similarly, Luk (2021) indicates that “the Blues claimed themselves as the law and order protector,” but they are also enthusiasts who seek to “justified their violent act in the name of homeland protection” (p.5). However, the Blues are also being referred to as lacking enthusiasm or being indifferent toward politics. In a thread about the Blue Ribbons in *The Encyclopedia of Virtual Communities in Hong Kong* (香港網絡大典), a reference work that

covers a range of popular topics in Hong Kong, the author posits that the “Blue Ribbons” are commonly known as “political disinterested self-seekers (港豬).”[2]

In one particular case, the Blues are being seen as equivalent to government officials. In Liu’s (2015) analysis of the political discourses of the Yellows and the Blues, she utilizes a televized meeting between the Hong Kong Government officials and the representatives of the Hong Kong Federation of Students on constitutional reform on 21 October 2014 and directly adopts the government officials’ rhetoric as representing the voice of the Blues. Here, the political discourses of the Blues are reduced to words from Hong Kong government leaders.

Overall, the Blue Ribbons have been described in a chameleon-like manner. This leaves us with one outstanding empirical question: What really comprises the political identities and discourses of pro-establishment groups? How do they perceive and understand themselves? To what degree is their emergence a response to the Yellow Ribbons and the postmaterialist shift of Hong Kong?

This puzzle is further highlighted by the possibility that supporters of the pro-establishment camp in Hong Kong may refuse to see themselves reductively as Blues (Kong et al., 2021). While government supporters in Chinese contexts have historically demonstrated high levels of trust in the regime, their trust is not unconditional, even in Mainland China, where social control is stricter than in Hong Kong. Their level of trust is contingent upon political issues (Ma & Christensen, 2019), governance (Zhao & Hu, 2017), and the economy (Wang, 2005). This cautions against the usual practice of applying stereotypical political labels to pro-government groups in Hong Kong without empirical evidence. As such, an empirical investigation into the construction of political discourses by the Blues is essential to develop a nuanced and rigorous understanding of the Blue Ribbons

[2] https://evchk.fandom.com/zh/wiki/%E8%97%8D%E7%B5%B2%E5%B8%B6

phenomenon in Hong Kong. This approach, I believe, is crucial to avoid the reduction of complex political issues into binary oppositions or simplistic terms, which may perpetuate political stereotypes, biases, and inaccuracies in the analysis of the politics in Hong Kong.

1.6 Digital Mobilization of the Blues: Internet Control in Nondemocracies

Studying the emergence of Blue Ribbons illuminates not only the evolution of identity politics in Hong Kong but also offers insights that transcend the local context, contributing to the broader scholarship on the consolidation of nondemocratic regimes.

While the Yellows in Hong Kong utilize the Internet for online mobilization, the Blue Ribbons also employ digital means to mobilize themselves. Since the early 2010s, several radical pro-establishment digital media outlets have been established in Hong Kong, gaining popularity on social networking sites like Facebook, and served as important mobilizing platforms for the pro-establishment camp (Lee, 2021; Tsui, 2015).

At its core, the establishment of these pro-regime digital outposts reflects China's state propagandists' efforts to shape online opinion in Hong Kong. However, Hong Kong's state propagandists operate under significantly different circumstances compared to their mainland counterparts.

Critics generally regard China as a prime example of sophisticated Internet control, with the establishment of extensive digital propaganda networks (Han, 2015; King et al., 2017; Roberts, 2018). However, the operation of state propagandists in the mainland heavily relies upon the government's ability to censor the Internet. In mainland China, the Chinese government restricts access to external websites and social media, creating a digital landscape tailored for Chinese citizens. The absence of foreign social media platforms allows state propagandists to shape Internet cultures and spread political narratives without meaningful competition and challenges (Pan, 2017).

At least until very recently, Hong Kong boasted a robust civil society and liberal social media culture that freely voiced criticism against the government. Unlike mainland China, social networking platforms owned by Western countries, such as Facebook and Twitter, remain uncensored in Hong Kong. Consequently, the proliferation of Blue digital media is a unique occurrence wherein China, a sophisticated censoring regime, intervenes in digital politics while contending with intense political competition on digital landscapes beyond its control.

As explicated above, while we have gained considerable insight into how yellow-leaning alternative media in Hong Kong facilitates the mobilization of anti-establishment protests, our understanding of Blue digital media remains limited. As suggested by Lee (2021), there is "a lack of systematic analysis of the content of the progovernment [online] outlets" (p.3400). Hence, the investigation of Blue digital media deserves more academic attention. Its investigation not only offers an opportunity to understand identity politics in Hong Kong but also adds meaningful insights into how Chinese state propagandists operate in an unusually competitive environment to shape political discourses against influential local rivals and mobilize their support base.

1.7 Offline Mobilization of the Blues: Investigating the Incentive Structure

Of course, the emergence of the Blue Ribbons is not merely a digital media phenomenon, as they have a very strong offline presence. Scholars observe that China has been cultivating various pro-regime groups in Hong Kong with the intention of using them for countermobilization (Cheng, 2020; Yuen, 2023). Starting from the early 2010s, numerous small-scale groups of Blue Ribbons, such as Caring Hong Kong Power, Voice of Loving Hong Kong, and the Defend Hong Kong Campaign, began to step onto the political stage of Hong Kong and frequently organize protests against dissident groups (Lee, 2020). Scholarly

attention was also put on the cultivation of pro-establishment grassroots organizations that provide community services to citizens, especially hometown associations, service-oriented NGOs, and local federations (Yuen, 2023; Lee, 2020).

Countermobilization against dissent movements orchestrated by pro-government groups is definitely not a new phenomenon (Davenport, 2012; Ekiert et al., 2020; Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007). Yet, in the case of Hong Kong, the existence of a vibrant civil society that consistently calls for democracy or even separatism entails serious competition for support, thus creating a unique opportunity to examine the mechanisms that enable the clients of the state to effectively mobilize their members.

How do the Blues achieve this goal? In recent years, a few studies have been conducted to answer this question. As some researchers suggest, the Chinese government has built an incentivized structure motivating pro-establishment elites to organize the masses through grassroots organizations. For example, studying data collected from the websites of pro-establishment groups, Yuen (2023) finds that elites in Hong Kong with more connections to grassroots organizations are more likely to remain in office in the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, a national institution. In addition, survey researchers have found that the presence of grassroots organizations was indeed related to a higher turnout of the recipients during the elections (Lee, 2023; Wong et al., 2019).

Despite their insights, these studies have limitations. Most importantly, these studies heavily rely upon quantitative data. They were either conducted by survey (e.g., Lee, 2023; Wong et al., 2019) or by the utilization of open data, such as biographical data and organizational data on the websites from grassroots organizations and newspapers (Lee, 2020; Yuen, 2023). There is a lack of in-depth fieldwork that examines the internal dynamics of pro-establishment groups. This leaves some important questions unanswered: How do members of pro-establishment groups perceive and interpret the discourses propagated by

Blue-leaning digital media? Can these discourses influence their identity and political views? Additionally, little is known about the operational dynamics of pro-establishment groups and their members' motivations for engaging in online and offline politics. Investigating pro-establishment groups can offer insights into these inquiries.

1.8 Research Questions

Based on the above literature review, the purpose of this dissertation is to examine the rise of the often-overlooked Blue Ribbons in Hong Kong. It proposes a thorough investigation scheme focusing on 1) the identity discourse construction of the Blues, 2) their online mobilization, and 3) their offline mobilization. Overall, six research questions were posed.

The first and second questions explore how state propagandists in Hong Kong construct and propagate pro-regime identity discourses online. Specifically, they were concerned with the *discursive content* that Blue digital media produced and the *digital strategies* they adopted to disseminate these content:

RQ1: What constitutes the political discourses promoted by pro-establishment digital media outlets on social networking platforms?

RQ2: What strategies have they adopted to utilize the digital affordances of social networking platforms to engage and mobilize their readers?

While the first two questions explore the identity discourses and mobilization strategies of the Blues from a media perspective, the third and fourth questions are asked from an audience perspective. Specifically, they are about *audience mobilization effects* and *audience perception* of the identity discourses that Blue digital media produced.

RQ3: What motivates readers to engage with pro-establishment digital media on social networking platforms?

RQ4: How do readers of pro-establishment digital media perceive and understand the political discourses they promoted?

The fifth research question goes beyond digital political identity construction and online mobilization and seeks to address what motivates the political engagement of pro-establishment groups' members overall:

RQ5: How do members of pro-establishment groups understand and define their "pro-establishment" political identity? What motivates them to participate in politics?

Finally, the last research question situates my findings within a bigger theoretical dialogue. It asks:

RQ6: In understanding the answers to the first five sets of RQs, what can we say about how nondemocratic regimes counter subversion via online and offline platforms? What can we learn about the communicative and mobilization strategies in nondemocratic regimes from these findings?

1.9 Research Plans

To answer these research questions, I use a combination of digital media data and interview data. The summary of the overall research outline can be found in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2 Research Outline of the Dissertation

Chapters	RQs	Data	Research Methods
Ch.2	RQ1: What constitutes the political discourses promoted by pro-establishment digital media outlets on social networking platforms?	The original dataset consists of 430,742 Facebook posts and story content from Blue digital media; Collected using Crowdtangle; 500 posts were randomly sampled for discourse analysis (DA) and content analysis (CA).	Use DA and CA to identify discursive content and digital strategies.
	RQ2: What strategies have they adopted to utilize the digital affordances of social networking platforms to engage and mobilize their readers?		

Chapters	RQs	Data	Research Methods
Ch.3	RQ3: What motivates readers to engage with pro-establishment digital media on social networking platforms?	Same as the above.	Use regression analysis to test the effects of identified discursive content and digital strategies; Coding results from the CA as IVs; User engagement data of the analyzed Facebook posts (e.g., likes, comments, shares) as the DV.
Ch.4	RQ4: How do readers of pro-establishment digital media perceive and understand the political discourses they promoted? RQ5: How do members of pro-establishment groups understand and define their "pro-establishment" political identity? What motivates them to participate in politics?	Interviews with 14 active members of pro-establishment groups; Recruited from three major pro-establishment groups with snowball sampling.	Analyzes audience perception of media's political discourses, self-understanding of the "Blue Ribbons" identity, and the motivation of their political engagement.
Ch.5	RQ6: In understanding the answers to the first five sets of RQs, what can we say about how nondemocratic regimes counter subversion via online and offline platforms? What can we learn about the communicative and mobilization strategies in nondemocratic regimes from these findings?	All findings from the above chapters.	A theoretical synthesis of the implications of all findings.

RQ1 and RQ2 are about the political identity discourses Blue digital media constructed and the digital strategies they employed to propagate these discourses. To answer them, I utilized Crowdtangle, a public insights tool by Meta, to collect all Facebook posts

published by twelve pro-establishment media outlets over a two-year period following the implementation of the national security law (between July 1, 2020, and June 30, 2022). A dataset consisting of 430,742 Facebook posts was generated. From the complete dataset, a random sample of 500 posts was selected for further analysis. Using this dataset, I conducted a discourse analysis to identify recurring themes of discursive content and mobilizing strategies that Blue digital media used. It follows with a content analysis to examine the patterns of occurrences of themes and strategies to provide a comprehensive picture of the digital propaganda that China promoted in Hong Kong.

RQ3 focuses on the mobilizing effects of these political discourses and mobilizing strategies. Upon the results of the content analysis, I identified several recurring themes and mobilizing strategies. Using these themes and strategies as independent variables and utilizing user engagement data on Facebook, including metrics such as likes, comments, and shares, as the outcome variable, I conducted a regression analysis. The aim was to examine the effectiveness of these recurring themes and mobilizing strategies in mobilizing readers to actively engage with Facebook posts online.

RQ4 and RQ5 shift the focus to those who participate in pro-establishment groups and read pro-establishment news media. Field research was conducted to explore how members of pro-establishment groups perceive the identity discourses propagated by the Blue digital media and how they articulate their own political identities and motivations for political participation. To recruit participants, I used personal connections as a former reporter in Hong Kong as a springboard to get access to the field and then gradually snowball my samples (from January 2023 to May 2023). Ultimately, I was able to conduct in-depth interviews with 14 active members from six pro-establishment groups, ranging from directors to active volunteers.

The smaller number of interviewees can be attributed to two factors. First, many informants are older citizens who cannot maintain focus in lengthy interviews. Therefore, I conducted multiple short interviews to collect data. Second, cultural norms, such as engaging in small talk and accompanying elders to meals, extended the time required to establish rapport. Furthermore, eight of my informants were contacted and interviewed twice or more. For these reasons, the sample offered fewer interviews but was rich in providing insightful answers.

Using personal connections to get access to the field is considered an effective research method to study sensitive political issues in a nondemocratic context. However, this method also comes with a risk of reinforcing personal prejudices in the analysis as the data was generated with people close to my social circle. In addition to the challenge of collecting valid data, studying political identities and mobilization in a politically restrictive context like Hong Kong can also be risky to both research participants and the researcher. A detailed discussion of my ethical and methodological considerations is available in section 4.4.

Lastly, drawing upon the insights gained from addressing RQ1 to RQ5, RQ6 explores the implications and lessons derived from these findings. Using Hong Kong as an example, I undertake a theoretical synthesis to examine how nondemocratic regimes effectively counter subversion through both online and offline platforms. I analyze the communicative and mobilization strategies employed by these regimes to maintain control and suppress dissent. This synthesis provides valuable insights into the dynamics of authoritarian resilience in the face of opposition, shedding light on the strategies that can be employed by nondemocratic regimes to safeguard their power.

1.10 The Dissertation's Structure

After this introduction chapter, chapters two, three, and four present the empirical findings of this dissertation. They are primarily organized as three separate research articles, with their own literature review, methods, findings, and discussion sections. Finally, the dissertation ends with a concluding section of the overall theoretical discussion.

In chapter two, I demonstrate that pro-establishment digital media has strategically calibrated their political discourses in Hong Kong to vie for support from politically apathetic social conservatives. My main claim is that these political discourses show minimal indications of postmaterialist civil values, such as democracy or social equality. Instead, they mainly regress to the materialist norms often upheld by social conservatives, such as social security, economic developments, and the advocacy of a self-reliant spirit, to compete for their support. Accordingly, individuals and groups associated with the regime were depicted as the protectors of the materialist development progress of society, while their political adversaries, including the opposition and Western democracies, were depicted as disruptive forces of this progress.

In addition, state propagandists are aware of political taboos that might trigger negative reactions from Hong Kong citizens, such as the sentiment of anti-communism and a general disdain for personality cults. Consequently, they allocated minimal news space to the supreme leader, Xi Jinping, and refrained from mentioning the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in most news stories. This approach diverges from traditional propaganda practices in China, where emphasis is often placed on the communist party and supreme leader (Luqiu, 2016; Shirk, 2018).

State propagandists also leverage the digital affordances of Facebook to utilize a strategy, which I termed "engagement bait," to urge readers to like or react with emoticons to express political support for any political statements they make. This strategy offers an

effortless outlet for political expression, allowing pro-establishment supporters, who might be more politically inactive, to engage with politics without paying significant effort or commitment.

In chapter three, I subjected these content and strategies to statistical testing. Using real user engagement data as the outcome variable, a regression analysis was conducted. The findings indicate that many normative themes that pro-establishment digital media propagated, such as nationalism, cannot effectively mobilize readers to engage online. As exceptions, Facebook posts that promote a self-reliant spirit, the importance of security and order, and unfavorably depict political figures who hinder the materialist development of society significantly predict user engagement online.

The findings are in line with the argument that Blue Ribbons exhibit materialist and pragmatic characters. While materialist and pragmatic citizens may be more likely to oppose costly social movements that may trigger conflicts and repression from the regime, their political pragmatism may also drive them to disengage from political participation altogether. The findings appear to reflect this dilemma, as readers of pro-establishment digital media are not easily or uniformly mobilized by the political values and norms that state propagandists aim to convey unless those values pertain to the defense of their materialist and pragmatic lifestyle or negate the Yellow Ribbons. Another noteworthy finding is that the strategy of "engagement bait" can effectively mobilize user engagement online, thereby highlighting the importance of providing pro-establishment supporters with a convenient and low-cost avenue for political expression.

Chapter four presents the findings of my interviews and encompasses an offline perspective to this study. I show that the political opinions of pro-establishment group members are unexpectedly diverse and fragmented. While they share a general sense of disapproval toward the unrealistic anti-regime social movements, many of them expressed a

sense of apathy and skepticism toward official ideologies actively promoted by the regime, including the idea of Chinese nationalism. This contrasts with the popular perception that pro-establishment group members are all fervent nationalists or unwavering supporters of the regime.

While there are indeed some individuals who can be considered "true believers" in pro-establishment groups, many others are drawn by material incentives, including monetary rewards, community support, and career prospects. It follows the logic that inner thoughts and beliefs do not solely determine the group membership of pro-establishment group members. Rather, it is more dependent on the display of outward conduct. While pro-establishment groups highly prioritize the political posturing of pro-regime ideologies, internal discussions surrounding them are rare. This creates a space where implicit political grievances and apathy coexist with the outward display of nationalist fervor.

To be recognized as "pro-establishment," group members must exhibit fluency in pro-regime rhetoric and actively engage in related political performances. While the political discourses propagated by pro-establishment media cannot necessarily indoctrinate political thoughts into the minds of pro-establishment group members, they do provide useful discursive resources that help members stay informed about the nationalist and pro-regime script they are expected to perform within their organization's sphere.

In chapter five, I draw the above findings together in the final conclusion and discuss their broader implications for Hong Kong politics and the scholarship of propaganda and countermobilization in nondemocratic regimes. Additionally, I offer suggestions for future research directions in this field. Moreover, I shed light on the ongoing political tightening in Hong Kong following the implementation of the national security law, which represents a critical juncture for the city's freedom. Leveraging the insights derived from this study, I

extrapolate on the potential future trajectory of pro-establishment identity construction, propaganda strategies, and countermobilization efforts in Hong Kong.

CHAPTER TWO: COUNTERING THE TREND OF LIBERALIZATION: EXAMINING PRO-ESTABLISHMENT DISCOURSES ONLINE

2.1 Introduction

In nondemocracies, Internet censorship is common. This may create an impression that nondemocratic governments always tend to govern over a politically disengaged online mass. However, nondemocracies are not averse to proactively utilizing the Internet. Instead, they often go beyond defensive measures of Internet control, such as blocking and censoring, but leverage the Internet to disseminate political propaganda to promote a pro-regime identity or mobilize supporters to showcase popular support.

Scholarly research has extensively examined the proactive use of digital propaganda by nondemocratic regimes. This research primarily focuses on two main areas: domestic propaganda, which operates within the borders of nondemocratic states with strict control over Internet platforms and service providers (e.g., Deibert, 2015; Guriev & Treisman, 2019; Han, 2015; King et al., 2017; MacKinnon, 2011; Roberts, 2018; Spaiser et al., 2017), and overseas propaganda, which nondemocracies employ to interfere with democratic regimes (e.g., Gorodnichenko et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2018).

The rise of pro-establishment digital media in Hong Kong, however, does not fit well into these two categories. Hong Kong, a former British colony, is now a territory of China. In contrast to overseas propaganda that is typically aimed at foreigners, whether or not China can garner the support of Hong Kong citizens directly impacts China's ruling legitimacy in this "irredentized" city. However, unlike mainland China, China had not implemented any Internet firewalls in Hong Kong. Popular social networking sites in Hong Kong, such as Facebook, are operated by foreign companies. Therefore, unlike domestic digital propaganda in mainland China, state propagandists in Hong Kong must navigate Internet landscapes beyond their capacity to censor. Hence, Chinese state propagandists face unique challenges in

Hong Kong, as they have to compete on digital platforms without operational control and counter influential local rivals absent in the mainland.

But China's digital propaganda in Hong Kong is understudied. Notably, pro-establishment groups in Hong Kong have been setting up online outposts to promote a pro-regime identity and rally their supporters (Lee, 2021; Lee & Chan, 2018; Tsui, 2015). However, systematic research on the content and strategies employed in their digital propaganda endeavors is currently lacking.

This chapter presents the first study in this dissertation that examines the rise of the Blue Ribbons by focusing on the construction of pro-regime identity by pro-establishment digital media in the challenging environment of Hong Kong. Following a mixed-method approach, this study employs both discourse and content analyses on social media content published by twelve pro-establishment digital media outlets between July 1, 2020, and June 30, 2022. Drawing upon Abdelal et al.'s (2005) theoretical framework of identity construction, the present study asks two questions: What constitutes the political discourses promoted by pro-establishment digital media outlets on social networking platforms (RQ1)? What strategies have they adopted to utilize the digital affordances of social networking platforms to engage and mobilize their readers (RQ2)?

The analyses contribute to the existing literature by shedding light on two key aspects: 1) the understudied pro-establishment identity that China aims to establish in Hong Kong, and 2) how Chinese propagandists, known as some of the most sophisticated in history, adapt to the challenging environment outside the "great firewall" to compete for popular support against influential local rivals.

The next section first reviews the literature on digital propaganda from nondemocratic regimes, followed by an introduction to the political context of Hong Kong. Then, an identity

theory framework proposed by Abdelal et al. (2005) will be discussed. The methods and findings are then presented.

The findings demonstrate how pro-establishment digital media strategically calibrate their propaganda schemes to adapt to the challenging political situation in Hong Kong to vie for support from politically apathetic social conservatives. These strategies include resorting to materialist norms to construct identity discourses, avoiding political taboos that might trigger negative reactions from Hong Kong citizens, and leveraging the digital affordances of Facebook to attract clicks. These findings have important implications for the study of digital propaganda and pro-regime identity construction in nondemocratic regimes.

2.2 Nondemocracies and Internet Control

Social media was once hailed as a powerful tool empowering dissidents to subvert non-democratic regimes. Its accessibility, compared to offline media, provides affordable outlets for disseminating subversive political content, thereby increasing the cost of censorship (Earl & Kimport, 2011). With its capacity for simultaneous, low-cost, multi-directional communication, social media also facilitates the coordination of collective actions and fosters an environment conducive to the growth of independent alternative media that are more inclined to challenge the prevailing status quo (Couldry & Curran, 2003). Consequently, censoring regimes may become more vulnerable.

Nonetheless, the Internet's political impact depends on the strategies employed by a regime to address challenges. One common tactic is blocking and banning. In Russia, the government has taken down defiant websites and enacted extremism laws to create a chilling effect (Gainous et al., 2018). In Singapore, fake news laws have been passed, granting the government the authority to determine what can be posted online (Teo, 2021). In Iran, the government has compelled private social media messages to be rerouted through state

providers to enable censorship (O'Neill, 2018). In extreme cases, regimes can even shut down the Internet, as the Mubarak government did in Egypt in 2011 (Dainotti et al., 2014).

Of all the censoring regimes, China is often held as a prime example that has effectively repressed online dissents (Mackinnon, 2011). Studies consistently demonstrate how China carefully calibrates its digital censorship. Examining the Chinese blogosphere, King et al. (2013) reveal that while the Chinese government may tolerate slight political criticism online, it selectively deletes posts that may exhibit collective actions. This tactic is complemented by more sophisticated methods that do not directly prevent access to information but rather create obstacles. While access to dissident information is not completely obstructed, it can only be obtained through expensive and inconvenient means, such as internet proxies, which increase the costs associated with accessing censored material (Roberts, 2018).

2.3 Why do Nondemocracies Adopt Digital Propaganda?

Yet, the above review only captures half of the story, as nondemocracies are not solely reactive to digital communication. Indeed, the Internet often serves as a double-edged sword that state propagandists can wield to promote a pro-regime identity and consolidate their regimes (Gunitsky, 2015; Keremoğlu & Weidmann, 2020; Zhuravskaya et al., 2020).

Why do nondemocracies proactively utilize the Internet for propaganda? First, hard repression is not always effective, and digital propaganda can serve as a supplement. In China, the inconvenience associated with accessing sensitive information does not deter everyone from seeking the information, particularly knowledgeable users (Roberts, 2018). Sometimes, blocking may even backfire, spurring interests and motivating netizens to circumvent censorship to find forbidden information (Hobbs & Roberts, 2018). In Saudi

Arabia, imprisoning online dissents may just draw attention to their causes and trigger more political expression from their Twitter followers (Pan & Siegel, 2020).

Second, nondemocracies can use the Internet to gauge public sentiment (Mackinnon, 2011), thus necessitating the development of noncoercive Internet management. In Russia, the government allows the existence of certain liberal digital media outlets to gain insights into the overall protest mood (Gunitsky, 2015). In China, the likelihood of a policy revision increases with the number of online comments demanding that revision, showing that even nondemocracies use the Internet to improve governance (Kornreich, 2019).

Finally, strict censorship carries an economic cost. Nondemocracies rarely block Internet access for a prolonged period (Howard et al., 2011), as allowing the unfettered information flow is an inevitable trade-off for economic growth and international integration (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006). Therefore, proactive digital propaganda may offer a way to hedge the destabilizing costs of inevitable Internet use (Gunitsky, 2015).

2.4 Media Propaganda and Collective Identities

The notion that propaganda can promote pro-regime identities is not new. Political leaders often use propagandistic statements to define citizens' identities, such as asserting group memberships entail certain collective purposes, political loyalties, or a marked animosity towards an opposing group (Brass, 1997; Eifert et al., 2010; Horowitz, 1985).

Propaganda involves "the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols" (Lasswell, 1927, p. 627). However, propaganda should not be confused with any attempt to change opinions. Propaganda always targets specific groups with specific political objectives. Benkler et al. (2018), for example, define propaganda as any communication designed to manipulate a target population into adopting a particular understanding of themselves or behaving in ways that the propagandists desire. Propaganda is

often used by states and governments to promote a shared set of identities, vilify those who do not conform, and eventually integrate citizens into society with the collective consciousness that serves the interests of the propagandists (Ellul, 2021). Although propaganda can be applied by non-governmental agents, such as corporations, this chapter only focuses on the type of political propaganda adopted by states and governments, particularly within nondemocratic contexts.

There are also discernible distinctions between propaganda and persuasion. Jowett and O'donnell (2018) define propaganda as "the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviors to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (p.7). Similarly, Pratkanis and Turner (1996) define propaganda as a communication attempt "to sway an audience toward a predetermined viewpoint through the use of simplistic images and slogans that bypass critical thinking by appealing to biases and emotions" (p. 190). Persuasion, they argue, relies rather on "debate, discussion, and thoughtful consideration of options" to uncover "better solutions for intricate problems" (p. 191), while propaganda involves the manipulation of the masses by those in power. Overall, what their definitions have in common is that propaganda should be differentiated from persuasion based on the nature of manipulation employed in crafting messages. Furthermore, propaganda differs from professional journalism. The principles outlined by the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1923[3] clearly distinguish journalism from propaganda based on its processes of informing and scrutinizing, as well as its purpose of holding those in power accountable (Sotirovic, 2019).

As I will soon demonstrate, The content generated by pro-establishment digital media frequently exhibits a pronounced bias toward the pro-establishment camp and the Chinese

[3] See this link for the full document:
https://www.unm.edu/~pubboard/ASNE%20Statement%20of%20Principles.pdf

government, thus lacking the fundamental element of balance. It also tends to prioritize the dissemination of the government's perspective rather than engaging in meaningful policy discussions. Given these distinct characteristics, this study employs the term "propaganda" to describe the content that pro-establishment digital media produce.

Historically, mass media has been a powerful shaping force for collective political identities. With the advent of industrialization, states began utilizing mass media to cultivate national belonging. As Anderson (2006) contends, the development of mass media during industrialization, such as newspapers, enabled the dissemination of information and knowledge across vast distances, thus helping cultivate a shared identity among individuals who had never met. As such, mass media facilitated state founders in creating a collective consciousness that transcended primordial units like villages and extended to the boundaries of national mass communication. Similarly, Gellner (1983) concurs that the cultivation of national identity was made possible only through "a reasonably precise bureaucratic and technological communication" (p.57). Hobsbawm (1999) further observes that even seemingly mundane forms of state-led communication, such as public ceremonies, monuments, and statue displays, can imbue symbolic meanings that foster political unity and national consciousness.

In modern times, mass media still effectively alters people's political identities and behaviors. This is especially true in nondemocratic contexts, evident in historical cases such as Nazi Germany, where radio exposure played a role in promoting the popularity of the Nazi party (Adena et al., 2015). Similarly, in Rwanda, the use of hate radio contributed to the cultivation of an anti-Tutsi sentiment among the Hutu population, leading to the genocide of the Tutsi (Snyder & Ballentine, 1996). However, in the post-genocide era, radio was utilized by the Rwandan government to foster a more inclusive Rwandan identity among both Tutsi and Hutu communities (Blouin & Mukand, 2019).

In the digital age, nondemocratic regimes have shifted their propaganda to the Internet. This transition garners significant scholarly attention and led to the emergence of two strands of research. The first strand focuses on domestic propaganda that operates within the border of nondemocracies. Here, nondemocracies typically imbue a pro-regime identity to their citizens by highlighting the regime's achievements, such as economic performance and provision of public service, or the despicability of the opposition (Guriev & Treisman, 2019).

In Russia, the Kremlin-sponsored youth group Nashi initiated campaigns to post pro-regime messages online, "dislike" anti-regime videos on YouTube, and leave pro-Putin comments on negative stories about him (Gunitsky, 2015). On Twitter, rhetoric accusing the Russian opposition that they are paid by and colluded with the United States was widely spread (Spaiser et al., 2017). In Syria, hackers were used to deface and dismantle anti-regime websites and Facebook pages (Moss, 2018). In Mexico, bots were used to spread disinformation to distract citizens' interest in political criticism (Treré, 2016). Even the Islamic State (ISIS) used social media to convey the material, spiritual, and social benefits of joining them among Muslims (Mitts et al., 2022).

In China, propagandists traditionally use the state-owned media system to construct a pro-regime identity rooted in nationalism by framing the Chinese Communist Party as the undisputed leader of the "great rejuvenation" of the Chinese nation (Carrai, 2021). Additionally, Chinese propagandists have been fostering a cult of personality around the current leader, Xi Jinping (Luqiu, 2016), to the point where critics argue that a personalist dictatorship is rising (Shirk, 2018). Given the rapid economic growth of China in the past decades, the theme of economic achievement is also a popular topic of propaganda (Tang, 2016).

Today, Chinese propagandists have shifted their content dissemination to the digital arena. But Chinese propagandists go beyond mere replication. Chinese propagandists now

use both clickbait and non-propaganda content, such as lifestyle tips, to attract clicks at a rate comparable to commercial and celebrity social media accounts (Lu & Pan, 2021). Such soft-news popularity can spill over to propaganda news, as evidenced by a recent study showing a 100% increase in soft-news popularity would lead to a 38.5% increase in propaganda popularity the following month (Zhu & Fu, 2023). Furthermore, these efforts are supported by the collaboration of thousands of county-level propaganda departments, fabricating social media content that masquerades as citizens' responses to current events (Han, 2015; King et al., 2017; Roberts, 2018).

Another strand of research on digital propaganda from nondemocracies examines how they interfere with democratic states. While social media campaigns by nondemocratic regimes mainly target their own populations, some also aim to influence foreign countries (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017). One example is the use of bots to incite intergroup hatred within democratic states. Gorodnichenko et al. (2018) discovered that Twitter bots were employed during the 2016 U.S. presidential debate and the Brexit referendum to sway voting outcomes and exacerbate social polarization. Although Gorodnichenko et al. did not specify who owns these bots, some studies have revealed their connection to Russia (Badawy et al., 2019).

State propagandists in China also demonstrate adaptability to the Internet cultures prevalent in liberal democracies. When conducting propaganda campaigns on foreign-based social media platforms, Chinese state-controlled media outlets are willing to modify their strategies. They often reduce the dissemination of government-mandated narratives about China and instead adopt a more critical tone (Fan et al., 2023), indicating that nondemocratic regimes may pragmatically adjust their political messaging according to external constraints.

2.5 Challenges from Hong Kong

Following the 1997 handover of Hong Kong, its traditional media underwent significant acquisition or cooptation by China (Lee & Chan, 2009; Koo, 2022). However, since the early 2010s, alternative digitally-based media outlets have emerged. These alternative digital media, including *InMediahk* (*香港獨立媒體*), *Initium Media* (*端傳媒*), *Stand News* (*立場新聞*), benefit from lower operational costs online and exhibit greater structural independence. Through social media, they have successfully expanded their audience and amplified marginalized voices neglected by traditional media. As Lee et al. (2015) conclude, digital alternative media and social media have altogether created "an insurgent public sphere," (p. 360) where people can express political dissent, spread subversive information, and organize collective action, such as democratic or localist movements (Wang, 2018; Yung & Leung, 2014).

Empirical evidence supports the claim that digital alternative media and social media have fuelled anti-regime protests in Hong Kong. Survey researchers find that social media use is associated with Hong Kong citizens' support for democracy and protest participation (Lee et al., 2015; Tang & Lee, 2013). Moreover, the use of digital alternative media in Hong Kong is associated with more oppositional knowledge (Lee, 2015), more frequent protest participation (Leung & Lee, 2014), and the adoption of radical views, including support for violent protests and Hong Kong independence (Lee, 2018).

State propagandists in Hong Kong have responded by establishing their own digital media outposts to engage in social media warfare. A type of online outlets were established by state-owned media outlets. For example, a prominent state-owned newspaper in Hong Kong, *TaiKungPo* (*大公報*), established its Facebook account in August 2020[4]. Its parent

[4] Referring to their page transparency disclosure: https://www.facebook.com/tkp1902/about_profile_transparency

company, *Hong Kong TaiKung WenWei Media Group* (*TaiKung WenWei*; *大公文匯全媒體*), launched its official Facebook page on February 2021[5]. Another example is *Orange News* (*橙新聞*), a digitally-based media that was founded in 2014 and has been active on social media since then. The outlet is controlled indirectly by *Sino United Publishing* (*聯合出版集團*), a state-owned company registered in Hong Kong[6].

Non-governmental pro-establishment groups also established their online presence. This includes the *Silent Majority* (*幫港出聲*), a pro-establishment media outlet launched in 2013 and owned by a group of conservative public figures. In 2015, a key member of the *Silent Majority*, Robert Chow, founded the *HKGPAO* (*HKG 報*), a radical pro-establishment media affiliated with the *Silent Majority*. Commercial pro-establishment media entities have also joined the digital media battle. For instance, *SingTao Daily* (*星島日報*), a traditional pro-China newspaper in Hong Kong, funded the development of a pro-establishment online news site, *Bastille Post* (巴士的報). Other influential pro-establishment digital outlets include *KinLiu* (*堅料網*)、*Hong Kong Good News* (*時聞香港*)、*Today Review* (*今日正言*).

Compared to their counterparts in Mainland China, these pro-establishment digital media outlets face special challenges in Hong Kong. In the mainland, the Chinese government has established a "Great Fire Wall" to restrict access to external websites, resulting in an Internet landscape monopolized by social networking platforms tailored exclusively for Chinese citizens. The absence of U.S. social media firms in Mainland China allows the government to censor through content removal and promote political narratives without much attention competition. As argued by Jenifer Pan (2017), this market dominance

[5] Referring to their page transparency disclosure: https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064842371663&sk=about_profile_transparency

[6] The Sino United Publishing controls the *Orange News*. Its ownership disclosure can be found on its website https://www.sup.com.hk/organization/detail/16

greatly shapes the propaganda strategies in China to an extent that other regimes are unlikely to replicate.

Without an official censorship system, China cannot censor online information in Hong Kong at will. A notable example is the song "Glory to Hong Kong," created by pro-democracy and localist supporters during the anti-ELAB protests. Despite the implementation of the national security law in Hong Kong, the song has remained available on the Internet. It has even been mistaken as Hong Kong's national anthem at international sporting events, triggering the Hong Kong government to request Google remove the song from its search engine and apply for a court injunction to ban it. However, as of recently, Google has not complied (Leung, 2023), and the court has dismissed the government's bid (Westbrook & Sun, 2023).

In Hong Kong, China has not implemented an Internet censorship system. Therefore, it remains unclear how state propagandists replicate or adjust the content and strategies commonly employed on the mainland's Internet. Analyzing the case of Hong Kong can provide valuable insights into China's digital propaganda and pro-regime identity construction efforts, complementing existing knowledge primarily derived from observations within mainland China.

Only a few studies have examined the political narratives and digital propaganda strategies employed by state propagandists in Hong Kong. One such study by Liu (2015) analyzes a televised meeting between government officials and oppositional leaders to explore the construction of pro-establishment political narratives that criticize the Umbrella Movement. As she observed, the movement was portrayed as violating the principles of the "rule of law." In addition, the narratives reinforced the constitutional authority of the central government and reasserted Hong Kong's national identity, assuming that the protestors opposed the patriotic and politically correct stance. Another study by Lee and Chan (2018)

examines social media posts from two pro-establishment digital media outlets regarding the Umbrella Movement. They find a similar framing of democratic protestors as rule breakers who cause public disturbance and are influenced by foreign intervention. Furthermore, Feng et al. (2021), in a study focusing on partisan fact-checkers in Hong Kong, find that pro-establishment fact-checkers often utilize journalistic fact-checking as a disguise to selectively set political agendas and offer explicit criticisms against "Yellow Ribbons" that extend beyond the role of fact-checking.

Nonetheless, these studies have notable limitations. They either focus on specific instances of identity discourse construction (Liu, 2015), or examine only one to two pro-establishment media outlets (Lee & Chan, 2018; Feng et al., 2021). Additionally, they were usually conducted solely about the 2014 Umbrella Movement. Overall, as noticed by Lee (2021), "there is a lack of systematic analysis of the content of the progovernment outlets" (p.3400). Studying Blue digital media outlets can address the literature gap, shedding light on how Chinese propagandists promote a pro-regime identity in Hong Kong, where they face intense competition on platforms beyond their control.

2.6 Identity Discourse: What is it? How to Assess?

Given the above review, this chapter aims to explore the *content* that pro-establishment digital media produced to construct a pro-regime identity and the *digital strategies* they adopted to disseminate their propaganda:

RQ1: What constitutes the political discourses promoted by pro-establishment digital media outlets on social networking platforms?

RQ2: What strategies have they adopted to utilize the digital affordances of social networking platforms to engage and mobilize their readers?

To address these questions, a combined mixed-method approach of qualitative discourse analysis (DA) and quantitative content analysis (CA) is employed.

A discourse can be seen as a structured way of communication that operates within specific rules, norms, and conventions, representing a social process that is culturally and institutionally organized (van Dijk, 1991). Examining a discourse, therefore, entails analyzing not only the explicit linguistic elements such as words, sentences, and images but also the underlying ideologies, cultures, beliefs, and power dynamics that shape the communication. Thus, DA necessitates an exploration of both the communicative texts and the underlying social norms that govern the interactions within these texts.

This holds true when examining identity discourses. Identities are socially constructed beliefs encompassing multiple facets. While there is a long-standing debate regarding these aspects (see Abdelal, 2006; McClain et al., 2009; Brubaker & Cooper, 2000 for detailed discussion), scholars generally agree that identity is a form of relational consciousness (Adams, 2009). Individuals can only understand who they are by mapping themselves within a bigger external world. Thus, identities can be seen as a cognitive map that concerns the configuration, structure, and meaning of self in relation to groups and the perceived external reality (Greenfeld & Eastwood, 2007). While identity discourses can be expressed through texts, they extend beyond the static description of self-categorization of grouping but instead reify a system of knowledge, thoughts, narratives, and practices that sustain people's understandings of their self-group understanding (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004; Fairclough, 2013).

As identity is socially constructed, it must be somehow multiple and fluid. However, this prevailing constructivist stance may come with a cost. As Brubaker and Cooper (2000) observe, scholars of identity now conceptualize "all affinities and affiliations, all forms of belonging, all experiences of commonality, connectedness, and cohesion, all self-

understandings and self-identifications in the idiom of 'identity' " and this "saddles us with a blunt, flat, undifferentiated vocabulary" (p.2). Echoing this view, discourse theorists also point out that identity discourse studies have become too fragmented with a "dazzling variety and diversity in terminology and foci" (De Fina, 2011, p.265).

Identity cannot be unrestrictedly fluid. To address this concern, Abdelal et al. (2006) have proposed a widely utilized framework that imparts analytical rigor to the empirical examination of identity. As they argue, identity possesses fixed elements along four salient dimensions, namely constitutive norms, social purposes, relational comparisons with reference groups, and worldviews. They also stress that people's understanding of these dimensions is not without contestation, as group members may hold various degrees of agreement over them. Therefore, the framework of Abdelal et al. is useful to the present analysis. On the one hand, it provides some fixities in the analysis of an identity construct. On the other, it still allows for a flexible, constructivist interpretation of identity. For the DA, I used Abdelal et al.'s theory as the foundational guide for coding while remaining open to variations and modifications.

This study further utilized CA to examine the prevalence of identified discursive themes and propaganda strategies from the DA. DA and CA differ in the role of content and the situatedness of knowledge. Traditionally, DA focuses on the construction of social reality, not quantifying specific content characteristics. CA, through quantifying content elements, assumes the existence of factual objectivity. However, as Hopf (2004) argues, "meanings are always in flux, but this does not mean that they are not fixed through power arrangements institutionalized in various ways at various historical junctures, such that it is possible to theorize about replicable patterns of social conduct over time" (p. 32-33). This study, therefore, believes that "quantifying the use or absence of words and phrases in different contexts can be an effective way of laying bare the exercise of power" (Bennett, 2015, p.

990). In other words, I see the pattern of the occurrence of meaning is also a part of an identity discourse. Here, the results of the CA will be interpreted within the social contexts in which they were produced.

2.7 Data and Analytical Procedures

The data analyzed below was collected using Crowdtangle, a public insights tool from Meta that allows access to all Facebook's public posts. Facebook was chosen as a platform for analysis as it is the most popular social media in Hong Kong, accounting for 43% of total pageviews across all digital devices as of 2023[7]. The dataset consists of 430,742 Facebook posts published by twelve pro-establishment digital media outlets during a two-year period following the implementation of the national security law, specifically between July 1, 2020 and June 30, 2022. From the complete dataset, a random sample of 150 posts was selected for DA (see Table A1, Appendix A for the descriptive statistics of the sample).

Among the media outlets, four of them, including *Taikungpo.com* (大公網), *TaiKungPo* (大公報), *WenWeiPo* (香港文匯報), and *TaiKung WenWei* (大公文匯全媒體), are legacy state-owned media outlets in Hong Kong that established their online presence on Facebook. Eight of them, including *Today Review* (今日正言), *Kin Liu* (堅料網), *Bastille Post* (巴士的報), *Silent Majority* (幫港出聲), *Think HK* (思考香港), *Hong Kong Good News* (時聞香港), *Orange News* (橙新聞), and *HKGPAO* (香港 G 報), are digital-native media. The number of their page likes is listed in Table A2, Appendix A.

The DA and CA encompassed all texts and photos included in each Facebook post. Additionally, if a post contained a link redirecting to an external news website, the content of

[7] https://www.statista.com/statistics/1128813/hong-kong-market-share-of-social-media-platforms/#:~:text=Leading%20social%20media%20platforms%20in%20Hong%20Kong%202023%2C%20based%20on%20market%20share&text=As%20of%20July%202023%2C%20Facebook,compared%20to%20a%20year%20ago.

that linked page, including its texts and pictures, was also analyzed. However, videos were not assessed so that I could focus on the most similar propaganda materials.

Following the DA, recurring discursive themes and propaganda strategies were identified. These themes and strategies were then used to establish coding categories for a CA conducted on a randomly selected sample of 500 posts. Descriptive statistics for this sample can be found in Table A3, Appendix A. Two coders, including the author and a graduate student in communication studies, conducted the coding after undergoing two rounds of testing and training. Each testing round involved both coders independently coding a randomly selected set of 50 posts. Ultimately, all items utilized achieved a Cohen's Kappa value exceeding 0.8 or a percentage of agreement surpassing 95%. Throughout this process, adjustments were made to both the DA's results and the CA's coding scheme continuously to refine the interpretation of the findings (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The codebook, containing the operationalization of all variables with illustrative examples, can be found in Appendix B.

It is worth noting that most independent variables are not mutually exclusive. For instance, a news story can have multiple themes and communication purposes. Therefore, instead of the traditional chi-square testing method, the CA employs Cochran's Q test, a method that can be used to assess dichotomous multiple response data (Stephen & Adruce, 2018).

2.8 Findings

2.8.1 Norms: Echoing with the Conservative Values

Existing studies on the identity discourses of the Blues often suggest that they propagate narratives emphasizing the rule of law, the need to condemn foreign intervention, and public nuisance brought by anti-regime protestors (Lee & Chan, 2018; Liu, 2015).

Through closely examining news reportage by pro-establishment digital media, I contend that these narratives are not isolated frames but rather intricately intertwined to

promote identity discourses that leverage conservative values and beliefs in Hong Kong to showcase the expected conduct of a legitimate citizen. Table 2.1 summarizes the definitions of all normative themes identified in the DA, revealing that state propagandists in Hong Kong employ a range of political notions that echo traditional values.

Table 2.1 Normative Themes Identified in Pro-establishment Digital Media Discourses

Theme	Definition
Security and order	The stories focus on the restoration of order, the preservation of security, or the adherence to or violation of laws. They may also directly advocate for actions such as ceasing violence or controlling disorder.
Development and achievement	The stories celebrate or advocate taking action to achieve various accomplishments or advancements, encompassing economic development, infrastructure projects, scientific breakthroughs, and sports achievements of China and Hong Kong.
Patriotism	The stories emphasize or advocate individuals' contributions and sacrifices in service to the nation, support for the Chinese nation, or condemn those who betray their country, including Quislings.
Charity and Services	The stories celebrate or advocate for charity, voluntary works, or the serving spirit to society.
Politicization Criticism	The stories criticize the politicization of social affairs or the overly-partisan performance of individuals or groups.
Self-reliant hardworking	The stories depict individuals' willingness to endure hardships or work diligently without complaints, highlighting their perseverance, criticizing laziness, or advocating for such behaviors.
Filial piety	The stories portray or advocate for actions of filial piety, such as explicit expressions of love, taking care, or purchasing gifts for one's parents.
Social equality	The stories celebrate or advocate for social equality, including racial, gender, or class equality.
Political freedom	The stories celebrate or advocate for democracy, political freedom, freedom of expression, or the protection of political rights.

Note: For more detailed definitions with examples, refer to Appendix B, Table B1

To analyze the generalizability of these normative themes, a CA was conducted (For the codebook, see Appendix B, Table B1). The results are summarized in Table 2.2. As the

results indicate, conservative values appear more frequently than progressive values in their news repertoire. The observed differences of occurrence between observed normative themes are statistically significant (Cochran's Q = 223.72, P <.00). Of all, it is most common for pro-establishment media to emphasize the importance of "security and order" and "development and achievement." This reflects a response from the state propagandists to address the 2019 anti-ELAB protests, which were considered to threaten social security and development seriously.

Table 2.2 Frequency of Recurring Normative Themes

Theme	Frequencies
Conservative values	
Security and order	17.8% (89)
Development and achievement	11.2% (56)
Patriotism	9% (45)
Charity and Services	4.6% (23)
Politicization Criticism	3.8% (19)
Self-reliant hard working	3% (15)
Filial piety	2.4% (12)
Post-materialistic values	
Social equalities	1.6% (8)
Political Freedom	.6% (3)
Cochran's Q	223.72
P values	.000***

Note: N=500

The study of Hong Kong identities traces back to Lau Siu-Kai's (1981) concept of "utilitarianistic familism." According to Lau, Hong Kong's population consisted of a significant portion of immigrants who fled political turmoil in Mainland China during the 1960s and 70s. These immigrants exhibit social identities characterized by materialism,

utilitarian concerns, and a strong adherence to traditional familial values. Their primary focus was on personal or familial financial gains, in which they exhibited little to no interest in politics or the development of civil society. Moreover, their flee from the Chinese communists instilled an anti-communist sentiment in Hong Kong, which was later reinforced by the colonial government's propaganda to resist mainland political influence and infiltration (Jiang, 2022).

However, Hong Kong's rapid industrialization in recent decades has brought considerable changes, leading to a shift towards post-materialism (Inglehart, 2015). Younger HongKongeses have become more localized (Ping & Kwong, 2014), liberal (Ma, 2015), and inclined to engage in political protests (Charm & Lin, 2023). Nonetheless, the norms that Blue digital media propagated reflect little indication of this post-materialistic transformation. Instead, they predominantly adhere to the "old" values, including development, nationalism, resistance to participatory politics, obsession with security and order, filial piety, and self-reliant hardworking spirit.

Of all normative themes, the underlying notion is the celebration of material developments. An illustrative example is the Tianwen-1 (天問一號), a robotic spacecraft sent to Mars by the China National Space Administration. Pro-establishment digital media extensively covered each phase of the mission, including the launch[8], Mars orbiting[9], and rover landing[10]. In every story, they diligently describe the challenges and the significance of the historic achievement. For example, *WenWeiPo* characterized the expedition as a miracle "globally recognized as a highly challenging aerospace technology project" with approximately 20% success rate[11]. In a story that reported how the Tianwen-1 took a "selfie"

[8] https://www.facebook.com/2031074317195947/posts/2415384418764933

[9] https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/3832779006811177

[10] https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/4125258794229862

through a separation monitoring system, *TaiKung WenWei* wrote, “Foreign space science writers exclaimed that it feels like China is in the year 2122.” [12]

These acclamations are not limited to scientific advancements but can be all-encompassing. For example, in a story that celebrates the launch of an advanced satellite, the focus is on how the satellite can provide digital services not only to China but also to half of the globe (*Silent Majority*, January 31, 2021).[13] Sometimes, the development of science is juxtaposed with economic achievements: “In 2020, the world was plagued by the pandemic, but it did not hinder China from achieving a new high in GDP and achieving remarkable accomplishments in the aerospace field.”[14] Citing words from President Xi Jinping, pro-establishment digital media even claimed that China has successfully lifted 98 million rural population out of poverty.[15]

The celebration of achievement and development often links to other values, such as nationalism. Using the launch of Tianwen-1 as a case, *WenWeiPo* proudly concluded that China could accomplish the Mars expedition in one attempt, but other countries may take decades to achieve[16]. Similarly, *HKGPAO* footnoted, “China completed a mission that took NASA several decades to accomplish.”[17] However, constitutive norms typically emerged during the post-materialist transformation of industrialized society, such as democracy and social equality, are generally absent. This is not to say that pro-establishment digital media never mentions these values. However, such mentions are usually just rhetorical satire of the

[11] https://www.facebook.com/193439447353622/posts/4268813583149501

[12] https://www.facebook.com/193439447353622/posts/5014633065234212

[13] https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/3772857649469980

[14] Ibid.

[15] https://www.facebook.com/512700315470576/posts/5221742007899693%22

[16] https://www.facebook.com/193439447353622/posts/4268813583149501

[17] https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/4116120708477004

hypocrisy of the West. For example, in response to human rights abuse accusations from the West, *Hong Kong Good News*, a news aggregator, shared a story criticizing the genocide of Native Americans during the early colonization of the United States and Canada, suggesting that the West should first reflect on themselves.[18]

Although notions about progressive social reforms may be disregarded, it should not be assumed that pro-establishment digital media overlooks all forms of social or communal engagement. On the contrary, they often promote participation in activities such as charity and voluntary work that do not challenge or provoke systemic reform of existing social and political structures. An exemplary case highlighting the significance of such participation is the volunteer program for the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. Volunteers, particularly those from Hong Kong, were highly esteemed. They were described as social elites who successfully underwent a rigorous selection process and comprehensive training, acquiring knowledge encompassing venue information and social etiquette. They were even referred to as "the most beautiful scenery of the Olympics."[19]

Only within this context does it become understandable why the protestors who violate the principles of the "rule of law" (Liu, 2015) and create a "public nuisance" (Lee & Chan, 2018) are met with resolute disapproval from the pro-establishment media, as they are viewed as disturbing the perceived "normalcy" of Hong Kong, which encompasses the right to security and stable development.

For example, in 2020, the student union of The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) published an open letter on Facebook that glorified physical confrontation with police brutality and proudly identified themselves as "students of the University of Riots (暴大人)." In response, *Silent Majority* referenced a commentary from *Xinhua* (新華社), the

[18] https://www.facebook.com/512700315470576/posts/5830027253737829

[19] https://www.facebook.com/105073301637072/posts/319438870200513

official news agency of China, which condemned the protestors for turning the CUHK into a "dead city" and depriving many students and scholars of their rights to learn and research.[20] In another story by *Silent Majority* that review the political situation in Hong Kong, it was asserted that the disruption had reached a point where Hong Kong's identity was no longer recognizable:

> When did we Hong Kong people become like this?... The spirit of unity and resilience among the people of Hong Kong, symbolized by the Lion Rock spirit, has been gradually eroded in recent years by events such as the Occupy Central movement, violent protests, and the actions of various opposition figures.[21]

Under this circumstance, restoring normalcy is undoubtedly crucial. Pro-establishment supporters are expected to align with the police and denounce hypocritical, costly, and unrealistic political movements. It follows with the logic that the politicization of social affairs is better to avoid, a point emphasized throughout the reportage of Blue digital media. Those who constantly advocate for political reforms, separatism, and protests are frequently labeled as "political trickster (政棍)," a term referring to politicians who deceive the citizens for personal gains at the expense of society. In the example above, the student union at the CUHK was indeed criticized for using innocent students as "political fuel" for their own interests. Another illustrative instance involves the implementation of China's "zero-tolerance" Covid quarantine policy in Hong Kong. Hong Kong's opposition generally disagrees with this policy, expressing concerns about the potential expansion of the government's power and damage to the economy. As a rebuttal, pro-establishment digital media quickly labels the opposition as "politicizing the anti-pandemic efforts."[22]

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[20] https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/3355609221194827

[21] https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/3295573157198434

[22] https://www.facebook.com/105073301637072/posts/319423406868726

The condemnation of the politicization of social affairs also extends to how pro-establishment digital media portrays their supporters. Pro-establishment supporters were regularly depicted as ordinary, innocent, and altruistic people who were unwittingly caught up in the vortex of dirty politics. On November 13, 2020, *Today Review* published a story in memory of Luo Changqing, a 70-year-old man who lost his life after being struck in the head by a brick in a conflict against pro-democracy protestors. In the story, he was described as having "no political ideology, didn't damage a single brick or tile, didn't obstruct pedestrians, didn't shout a single slogan, yet in the end, he sacrificed his life." [23]

In some instances, even if pro-establishment supporters have actively engaged in highly politicized activities, pro-establishment media may persist in framing and portraying them as separate from politics. In 2020, HKGPAO acclaimed a group of youth for volunteering to clean the street in a story, picturing them as protectors of public hygiene who combat the Covid-19 pandemic. However, a closer examination reveals that the story has downplayed their partisan intent, as they were dedicated to clearing graffiti on the street with political slogans from the anti-ELAB protests. The story wrote:

> They urge everyone to **set aside political differences** and unite to combat the pandemic. Please share and give your support to these anonymous heroes. (*Silent Majority*, October 19, 2020) [24]

If politicization is to be avoided and material development is to be celebrated, then it also becomes reasonable to expect individuals to demonstrate a spirit of self-reliance, prioritizing personal advancement and community contribution without political complaint. For example, *Hong Kong Good News* recently featured a news article highlighting the remarkable achievement of a 17-year-old Hong Kong student who was awarded a scholarship

[23] https://www.facebook.com/2031074317195947/posts/2508970566072984

[24] https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/211985720361795

to pursue a master's degree at the University of Oxford. Notably, the article emphasizes that despite his disadvantaged background, living in a modest home without a proper table, he diligently completed 200-page practice exercises every day.[25] In contrast, young activists of the opposition were regularly portrayed as trouble-makers who neglected their duty as students and citizens:

> …instead of enjoying their youth and properly studying, they became advocates for Hong Kong independence, violating the National Security Law and getting arrested. What has happened in Hong Kong? Why have these young people, as if possessed by a spell, thrown themselves into the dark political whirlpool*?* (*Silent Majority*, October 30, 2020)[26]

2.8.2 Collective Purposes: Passive Recipients of Political Information

Coding for the collective purposes propagated by Blue digital media is challenging. Despite their consistent calls for a return to normalcy, unwavering support for the nation and police, and condemnation of opposition forces and foreign powers, their stories often lack concrete political analysis or policy discussion with actionable steps. Furthermore, a significant portion of their content simply relays information disseminated by the Chinese or Hong Kong governments, with minimal editorial input or critical analysis.

It is not uncommon for them to directly share Facebook posts published by government departments, such as the Hong Kong police[27], without editorial input. Sometimes, they may plainly summarize government press releases[28] or officials'

[25] https://www.facebook.com/512700315470576/posts/2822186184521966

[26] https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/3554936921262055

[27] https://www.facebook.com/512700315470576/posts/4634884826585417

[28] https://www.facebook.com/127413667428891/posts/1928944830609090

interviews[29]. In comparison, only a small fraction of stories proposed or cited any policy recommendations.

But as discussed earlier, if active participation in politics for social reforms is deemed undesirable, it becomes easier to comprehend why policy advocacy is so infrequently seen. Among those rare suggestions, many are about restricting citizens' freedom for political participation, such as enacting additional laws under Article 23 of the Basic Law to remove room for separatism further.[30] Other suggestions include 2) deeper integration of borders, resources, and legal systems between Hong Kong and China, 2) policies for economic, scientific, public service, or infrastructure development, 3) and stricter policies to curb Covid.

A codebook for CA is developed based on this observation (See Appendix B, Table B2, and B3). Table 2.3 shows the results of the analysis. About 25% of the posts were plain governmental information relays and less than 10% of the stories proposed or cited any policy suggestion. Their differences are significant (Cochran's Q = 46.87, P < .00). This indicates rather than initiating policy deliberations, Blue digital media are more inclined to relay policy information simply.

Table 2.3 Frequency of Governmental Information Relays and Policy Suggestions

	Frequencies
Governmental information relaying	25.8% (129)
Policy suggestion*	9.2% (46)
Cochran's Q	46.87
P values	.000***

Note: N=500; Suggestion types: Freedom restriction: 3.4% (17); Sino-Hong Kong integration: 3% (15); Development and advancement: 1.6% (8); Curb covid: 2.2% (11)

[29] https://www.facebook.com/263384634045118/posts/1288735691510002

[30] https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/365476371679395

2.8.3 Relational Group Comparisons: Hong Kong Government at the Intermediate

Research on identity politics often suggests that people tend to devalue outgroups while emphasizing the positive aspects of ingroups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Therefore, analyzing the depictions of social groups provides valuable insights into how boundaries between ingroups and outgroups are established within identity narratives.

In my analysis, I identified a total of 18 distinct individuals, groups, or organizations frequently referenced in pro-establishment media. Without any prior assumption of groupings, I classified them into ingroups, outgroups, and intermediate groups of the pro-establishment camp. This classification was based on the descriptions attributed to them in the reports.

Unsurprisingly, certain individuals, groups, and organizations were dichotomized as either ingroups or outgroups. The Chinese nation, the Chinese government, Supreme Leader Xi Jinping, other CCP leaders, the People's Liberation Army, Chinese brands and corporations, Chinese medics, ordinary mainlanders, as well as foreign allies of China were portrayed predominately favorably. In the specific context of Hong Kong, the Hong Kong police and pro-establishment groups are also mostly depicted positively. Aligning with the norms that Blue digital media propagated, these entities are often portrayed as providers and protectors of the normal development of society. In contrast, some groups were consistently framed unfavorably as disruptive forces. This includes oppositional groups and supporters, individuals participating in riots, and foreign powers perceived as introducing troubles in Hong Kong and China.

Another trait of relational group comparisons is rather unexpected. Seemingly, state propagandists do not consider the Hong Kong administration as ingroups. This is reflected by the mixed portrayals of local government elites, where both favorable and unfavorable depictions coexist. Such portrayals extend beyond the Hong Kong government (excluding the

police forces) and encompass public organizations, legislatures, Hong Kong citizens, Hong Kong brands and companies, Hong Kong medics, and the city of Hong Kong itself.

When the Hong Kong government demonstrates its commitment to defend the regime, pro-establishment digital media exhibits significant support. For example, in 2020, the Hong Kong government disqualified 12 pro-democracy candidates, including four incumbent legislators, from upcoming elections. *HKGPAO* lavishly praised the incumbent Chief Executive Carrie Lam, commending her for "taking action to prevent shameless politicians from remaining in the Legislative Council" and asserting that her unwavering stance deserved commendation.[31]

However, the Hong Kong government continues to face criticism, especially regarding its handling of challenges. For instance, in the context of the Omicron Coronavirus outbreak, *HKGPAO* criticized the Hong Kong government as having "failed to make any disaster preparedness measures, instead displaying arrogance and complacency." [32] Similarly, *Hong Kong Good News* shared a commentary from a mainstream newspaper, concluding that if not for the pandemic, the anti-ELAB protests would have persisted. The commentary further attributed the absence of renewed protests to the enactment of the National Security Law by the central government, stressing that the credit cannot be given to the Hong Kong government.[33]

Most importantly, the allegiance of certain segments within the Hong Kong government remains a subject of scrutiny, with accusations of sympathy towards "disruptive forces" and even suspicions of collusion. A notable instance is the introduction of a new rule by the Department of Justice in 2020, mandating prosecutors to obtain a supervisor's

[31] https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/218161846410849

[32] https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/4991996297556103

[33] https://www.facebook.com/512700315470576/posts/4473029999437568

approval for charges withdrawal. Seizing this opportunity, *KinKiu* quoted a pro-establishment lawyer who stated, "there have been rumors that prosecutors sympathize with violent protesters…hopefully, no rioters will be released without prosecution."[34] Another government agency facing constant criticism is *Radio Television Hong Kong* (RTHK), a public broadcasting service provided by the Hong Kong government. In a commentary, *WenWeiPo* issued a strong statement, saying that "a group of Yellow Ribbons have occupied the *RTHK*, using the pretext of "editorial autonomy" to secretly covertly support anti-China movements."[35]

Using CA, the favoritism and unfavoritism displayed in the reportage concerning all observed groups were coded (for the codebook, please refer to Appendix B, Tables B4 and B5). Table 2.4 summarizes the results, confirming the above observations. Ingroups, such as the Chinese society, Chinese government, China's leaders, international allies of China, Hong Kong police, and pro-establishment groups, were predominantly depicted either favorably or neutrally, with few instances of unfavorable depictions. In contrast, the opposition and foreign powers are predominantly depicted negatively, with some neutral descriptions and no positive portrayals.

Finally, the depictions of Hong Kong administration (Hong Kong government, public organizations, and legislatures) and the Hong Kong society (the city of Hong Kong, ordinary Hongkongeses, Hong Kong brands/corporations, and Hong Kong medics) were mixed, with roughly equal amounts of favoritism, unfavoritism, and instances of no clear favoritism in the reportage.

Results of Cochran's Q tests indicate significant differences in the number of favorable reports (Cochran's Q = 126.29; p<.00), unfavorable reports (Cochran's Q = 126.29;

[34] https://www.facebook.com/518758878276908/posts/1687803241372460

[35] https://www.facebook.com/193439447353622/posts/4173196162711244

p<.00), and reports with no clear favoritism (Cochran's Q = 126.29; p<.00) received by these groups.

Table 2.4 Depictions of Ingroups, Outgroups, and Intermediate Groups

	No clear favoritism	Favorable	Unfavorable
Ingroups			
Chinese society*	4.2% (21)	11.8% (59)	.6% (3)
Chinese government*	5% (25)	4.4% (22)	0% (0)
China's leaders*	.6% (3)	.8% (4)	0% (0)
International allies	.6% (3)	1.4% (7)	0% (0)
Hong Kong police	6% (30)	4% (20)	0% (0)
Pro-establishment groups (Blue Ribbons)	4.2% (21)	3.6% (18)	0% (0)
Intermediate groups			
Hong Kong society*	12.8% (64)	3.6% (18)	5.2% (26)
Hong Kong Administration *	3% (15)	3% (15)	3% (15)
Outgroups			
Oppositions ("Yellow Ribbons") *	2.6% (13)	0 (0%)	17.2% (86)
Foreign Power	5.4% (27)	.6% (3)	12% (60)
Cochran's Q	127.29	159.99	450.33
P values	.000***	.000***	.000***

Note: N=500; Number in the bracket is the frequency of appearance.
*Some categories are merged because of their similarity in statistical patterns and nature. The breakdown can be located in Table A4, Appendix A

2.8.4 Political Worldviews: Deemphasizing Personality Cult and Color Politics

At its core, people's understanding of identities is based on their worldviews, which serve as cognitive frameworks enabling group members to make sense of external conditions (Abdelal et al., 2005). How do Blue digital media construct political worldviews for its readers? Three notable traits emerge.

First, as indicated in Table 2.4, Blue digital media predominantly presents neutral or positive portrayals of Chinese society, government, CCP leaders, international allies of China, and Hong Kong police. However, there is a significant variation in the editorial attention devoted to these entities. Notably, little attention is given to China's leaders and international allies of China. While the reduced coverage of international allies can be attributed to the lack of proximity in foreign affairs, the lesser attention paid to national leaders is intriguing. A closer analysis shows that the supreme leader, Xi Jinping, was mentioned only six times (Favourable: .8% (4); Unfavourable: 0% (0); No clear favoritism: .4% (2)), and other party leaders were mentioned only two times (Favourable: .2% (1); Unfavourable: 0% (0); No clear favoritism: .2% (1)) out of 500 posts (See Appendix A, Table A4). This observation contradicts the argument of a rising cult of personality in China (Luqiu, 2016; Shirk, 2018), implying that state propagandists may have refrained from fostering a personality cult in Hong Kong.

Second, pro-establishment digital media have carefully calibrated their terminology in reference to the power center of China. Three distinct forms of addressing the "center" were identified, including the state/nation (國家), the central government (中央／中央政府), and the CCP/party (黨／共產黨／中共). The frequency of their appearance was analyzed in CA, with the codebook provided in Appendix B, Table B6). Table 2.5 summarizes the findings, indicating that the less partisan terms, including the central government and the state/nation, were a lot more frequently used in comparison to the more partisan terms, the CCP/party. The difference in term frequency is significant (Cochran's $Q = 27.04$, $p < .00$).

Table 2.5 Political Terminologies Used by Pro-establishment Digital Media

	"Central government"	"Party"	"State/nation"
Frequency of term appearances (Cochran's Q = 27.04, p < .001***)	4.6% (23)	1.4% (7)	7.4% (37)

	Blue labels	Yellow labels	Black labels
Frequency of term appearances (Cochran's Q = 39.69, p < .001***)	0% (0)	7.8% (39)	5% (25)

Note: N=500

Third, pro-establishment digital media outlets employed a range of "yellow labels" to negatively portray those whom they perceive as aligned with the opposition, such as yellow artists (黃藝人)[36], yellow stores (黃店)[37], yellow reporters (黃記者)[38]. Additionally, they also assign terms related to "black" to those who support or participate in anti-regime protests, such as black riots (黑暴)[39] and black-clad individuals (黑衣人)[40], given the prevalent use of black clothing by Hong Kong protesters. However, they rarely assign blue-related labels to pro-establishment supporters despite the widespread usage of the term "Blue Ribbons" in society. The term frequencies were analyzed using CA and are presented in Table 2.5 (Coding criteria in Appendix B, Table B6). While yellow and black-related terms were commonly used, no instances of references to blue-related labels were found within the analyzed dataset.

Since no instances of references to blue-related labels were found, to illustrate better under what circumstances pro-establishment digital media outlets would mention the terms "Blue Ribbons," I conducted a post-hoc exploration. More articles were found that can shed light on their mindset. One such article, published in *Today Review*, featured the experiences of a pro-establishment high school student who faced bullying and unjustly received the label

[36] https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/375243044036061

[37] https://www.facebook.com/193439447353622/posts/5406826342681547

[38] https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/5374286972660365

[39] https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/3403905506365198

[40] https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/304811351079231

of a “Blue ribbon” for advising her peers against participating in unlawful protests.[41] This demonstrates the presence of stigmatization associated with the “Blue ribbon” label, which may contribute to the avoidance of related terminology.

2.8.5 Digital Strategies: Engagement Bait

Recent research indicates that China’s propaganda apparatus has undergone transformations to adapt to the digital landscape, employing tactics such as soft news (Zhu & Fu, 2023) and clickbait (Lu & Pan, 2021). Similarly, a strategy that would be called “engagement bait” for soliciting users’ responses was observed in the analysis. Pro-establishment media outlets frequently prompted users to engage with their Facebook posts as a way of political expression. Typically, they would make some political statements, followed by explicit demands for users to like, comment, share, or press an emoticon to support these statements. These statements usually involve endorsing ingroups or negating political opponents.

Figure 2.1 Example of how HKGPAO Calls Users to Engage on Facebook Using the Like Button and Emoticons

Figure 2.1 illustrates this approach. Approximately three months after the implementation of the National Security Law on July 1, 2020, *HKGPAO* published a

[41] https://www.facebook.com/2031074317195947/posts/2582546362048737

commentary highlighting the arrest of at least 28 individuals for violating the law[42]. They attached a poster to the Facebook post featuring three statements juxtaposed with different emoticons. The "Love" emoticon was associated with "It is not enough," the "Sad" emoticon represented "Don't be so harsh," and the "Like" emoticon was linked to "Support strengthening law enforcement." In this case, *HKGPAO* presented a pseudo-poll to its readers, utilizing emoticons as voting options to elicit user engagement.

Figure 2.2 Example of how HKGPAO Calls Users to Engage on Facebook Posts Using the Like Button and the "Sad" Emoticon

Figure 2.2 illustrates another example, showing that this strategy is usually applied to solicit support for ingroups and trigger backlash against outgroups. On September 8, 2020, a judge who was frequently criticized by the pro-establishment camp for being lenient towards individuals charged for rioting in the anti-ELAB protest, Ho Chun-Yiu, was transferred to a different position[43]. After that, an opposition leader criticized the pro-establishment camp for pressuring the court, and a pro-establishment lawmaker said that the court should not cover its own mistakes. *HKGPAO* created a poster on Facebook and asked readers to endorse either one of them, with "like" representing the pro-establishment lawmaker and the "sad" emoticon representing the opposition's leader.

[42] https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/3462997477122667
[43] https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/200066088220425

The frequency of user engagement calls in pro-establishment media outlets' posts was analyzed using CA, as shown in Table 2.6 (Codebook in Appendix B, Table B7). Out of 500 posts, 89 utilized such practice. Notably, the majority of these calls urged users to press an emoticon rather than comment or share the post (Cochran's Q = 164.46, p = .00).

Table 2.6 Frequency of User Engagement Calls

	Comment	All emoticons	Share
Frequency of user engagement call (Cochran's Q = 164.46, p < .001***)	.4% (2)	17.8% (89)	.6% (3)

Note: N=500

2.9 What Can We Learn from the Findings?

This chapter presents research that draws on Facebook data collected from 12 pro-establishment digital media outlets to examine how state propagandists in Hong Kong construct political discourses that promote a pro-regime identity.

Scholars commonly suggest that Hong Kong society has undergone a significant shift of social norms and values toward post-materialism after its rapid industrialization, with younger generations becoming more localized (Ping & Kwong, 2014), more liberal (Ma, 2011), and more inclined to engage in political protests (Charm & Lin, 2023). My study results suggest that the pro-regime political discourses constructed by pro-establishment digital media show minimal indications of these post-materialist values, such as liberalism or localism. Instead, they regress to the social norms held by the more conservative fraction of society, which is typically represented by the older generations. These social norms reflect a political pragmatism that emphasizes social security, materialist developments, a distaste for the politics of democratization, and a self-reliant hardworking spirit. Within this normative framework, pro-establishment media portrays groups and individuals associated with the regime, such as the Chinese government, Chinese political leaders, pro-establishment groups,

and the Hong Kong police, as the protectors and facilitators of materialist development progress. Conversely, their political adversaries, including the opposition and Western democratic regimes, are depicted as disruptive forces that hinder this development.

This showcases a calibrated propaganda effort to garner support from the more conservative and pragmatic fraction of the Hong Kong population. This approach aligns with the concept of "cultural backlash" proposed by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2019), which explains the rise of authoritarian populism in advanced democracies. According to Norris and Inglehart, as industrialized societies progressively embrace liberalism, older and more conservative generations may perceive these social changes as a threat. As a result, they may align themselves with authoritarian-populist parties that promise to halt the liberal revolution. The findings add to their observation and suggest that the association between authoritarians and conservative masses that resist liberalism is not limited to advanced democracies. In a non-democratic context, the regime may also seek to exploit or even intentionally incite political backlash to attack the opposition and enhance the resilience of the regime.

For the understanding of digital propaganda of nondemocracies, these results reveal the adaptability and flexibility of Chinese state propagandists. Tailoring their schemes to suit the local circumstances, state propagandists in Hong Kong draw discursive resources upon the norms and beliefs upheld by the conservative fraction of the Hong Kong population. Moreover, they strategically steer clear of political taboos, such as communism and personality cults, that might trigger negative reactions from this group. As alluded to earlier, the older generations in Hong Kong have firsthand experience of a society shaped by waves of immigrants fleeing political upheaval in Mainland China, including the Cultural Revolution spearheaded by Mao in the 1960s. These immigrants brought with them a deep-

seated skepticism towards communism, political conflicts, and personality cults, which persisted as they settled in their new home, Hong Kong.

Within this context, Blue digital media outlets allocate minimal editorial space to news concerning the supreme leader, Xi Jinping, and refrain from mentioning the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) when referring to the center of power in China. This diverges from propaganda practices in the mainland, where emphasis is often placed on the CCP and Xi's role in propaganda efforts (Luqiu, 2016; Shirk, 2018). These findings substantiate the notion that China pragmatically adapts its political messaging in response to external constraints, such as the platforms used or the perceived norms of message recipients (Fan et al., 2023).

The findings suggest that the criticism of “politicization” is often employed to discredit those who criticize the regime or support anti-establishment movements, often labeling them as “political tricksters” (政棍). This approach aligns with the skeptical attitudes towards politics prevalent among the conservative fraction in Hong Kong. Consequently, it is not surprising that the so-called “Blue digital media” refrain from using the term “Blue Ribbons” to describe themselves and their supporters. Instead, they frequently employ yellow-related terminologies to label their political opponents. This tactic serves to portray their opponents as overly partisan while positioning themselves as non-partisan and innocent. It also follows with an implication that the Blue labels lack significant symbolic meaning for pro-establishment supporters. They do not rally around this symbol and may even perceive the label as stigmatizing.

Surprisingly, pro-establishment digital media seemingly does not consider the Hong Kong administration as ingroups. They disseminate political narratives characterized by a deep distrust of the ruling elites, highlighting their disloyalty and incompetence to safeguard society’s security and development. Why do they adopt this approach? One possible explanation lies in the principle of "One Country, Two Systems," which restricts direct

intervention by the regime in Hong Kong affairs. Consequently, online propaganda serves as an indirect means to send a signal, pressuring disloyal individuals within the establishment and compelling the Hong Kong government to remove them from power.

This aligns with previous studies suggesting higher trust in the central government of China and lower trust in local district-level administrations (Chen & Shi, 2001; Li, 2008; Liu & Raine, 2015), in contrast to countries like the U.S., where trust in local governments generally surpasses that in the central government (Frederickson, 1997). Scholars attribute China's distinct pattern to the perception that the central government is more responsive to public demands (Yang & Holzer, 2006) and can provide better governance and public services (Liu & Raine, 2015). However, there is a limited exploration of how these narratives are shaped. The findings thus serve as a case study demonstrating the efforts of Chinese propagandists in shaping such perceptions.

Lastly, the results also indicate the impact of digital media on state propaganda in Hong Kong. Pro-establishment media frequently employs a strategy termed "engagement baits," explicitly urging readers to engage with their Facebook posts as a means of political expression, whether through likes, comments, shares, or emoticon reactions to endorse the political statements they made. High engagement rates are recognized as a crucial factor influencing the reach of content (Quesenberry & Coolsen, 2018). This practice demonstrates an effort to leverage the digital affordances of Facebook.

Moreover, these practices are carefully calibrated to elicit user opinions primarily through likes and emoticons rather than encouraging commenting or sharing (noted that users can add comments when sharing a post on Facebook). This suggests that pro-establishment media prioritizes eliciting emotional responses from readers within predefined options rather than fostering deliberation. It signifies a populist approach to soliciting support, offering an

effortless outlet of clicktivism to engage with politics without requiring much effort or commitment.

How do these identity discourses and strategies help Chinese state propagandists develop a pro-regime identity in Hong Kong? Previous research has indicated that exposure to pro-establishment digital media is associated with more conservative views and may have neutralized the influences of alternative media content that typically advocated for democracy, as the connection between online alternative media use and prodemocracy attitudes was weaker among older citizens regularly exposed to pro-establishment online media (Lee, 2021). The findings, therefore, shed light on how this effect could be achieved by delineating the propaganda strategies of pro-establishment digital media: They carefully adapt to the local circumstances to calibrate their propaganda schemes.

On the one hand, they draw discursive resources from a part of the existing culture of Hong Kong to consolidate regime support from the conservative fraction of society. They construct identity narratives that may attract the conservatives and avoid saying what may trigger a backlash from their supporters. On the other, they adapt to the digital affordances of Facebook to develop a strategy of "engagement-bait" to improve the visibility of their content. These approaches facilitate Chinese state propagandists to compete against influential local rivals on digital platforms full of competing political narratives online that China cannot directly censor and control. As such, pro-establishment digital media outlets become a site of meaning contestation, allowing the state to indoctrinate values, opinions, and attitudes to the masses.

2.10 Limitations

This study has certain limitations. Firstly, its analyses primarily focus on textual and pictorial content, and caution should be exercised when applying the findings to video-based

analyses of propaganda. Second, the analyses were conducted with a specific focus on revealing the construction of a pro-regime identity and the digital strategies employed to disseminate these contents within a nondemocratic context. It does not comprehensively explore all potential political discourses generated by pro-establishment digital media in Hong Kong. Third, the analysis is primarily based on Facebook and may be specific to the digital affordances of this platform, making the direct transferability of the findings to other social media contexts uncertain. Lastly, while the methods of DA and CA shed light on the construction of political discourses, they do not provide insights into their effects or the strategic considerations of the writers in constructing them.

In the next two chapters, I will address the aspect of audience effects of these identity discourses and interview those involved in producing these discourses to further explore their strategic considerations.

CHAPTER THREE: LIMITED MOBILIZATION EFFECTS OF PRO-ESTABLISHMENT DIGITAL PROPAGANDA

3.1 Introduction

Propaganda can be persuasive. Previous research indicates that propaganda often achieves its intended effects, as seen in cases such as Nazi Germany (Adena et al., 2015), Arab countries (Nisbet & Myers, 2011), and China (Stockmann, 2010). However, propaganda can also be ineffective or even backfire, particularly when the messages lack issue salience or fail to align with people's identities, experiences, values, or acquired information about the world (Chen, 2019; Chen & Shi, 2001; Huang, 2018).

In the context of Hong Kong, the extent to which state propaganda can achieve its intended effects has remained an unexplored area of investigation. What motivates readers to engage with Blue digital media on social networking platforms (RQ3)? This chapter investigates this question by examining the effectiveness of the identity discourses and digital propaganda strategies employed by Blue digital media outlets in generating user engagement on Facebook, such as likes, shares, and comments.

Utilizing user engagement data of Facebook posts obtained from Crowdtangle, a public insights tool by Meta, this study conducted an analysis based on field data. Upon a regression analysis, the findings reveal the following: 1) Outgroup unfavoritism stimulates higher user engagement, whereas ingroup favoritism has only a trivial effect; 2) The propaganda themes promoting the spirit of "self-reliant hard working" and emphasizing "security and order" predicts increased user engagement, while other propaganda themes document no significant mobilizing effect, including patriotism; and 3) Name-calling of political opponents does not significantly impact engagement levels.

In the previous chapter, a new digital propaganda strategy known as "engagement bait" was identified. The present study also explored the effect of this strategy in predicting

user engagement on Facebook. The findings indicate that such a strategy strongly and significantly increases user engagement.

Overall, these findings enhance our understanding of the effects and limits of the online mobilization by Blue Ribbons. Previous research on digital propaganda in nondemocratic contexts has focused on the uses of large-scale human-produced disinformation or irrelevant content (King et al., 2017; Roberts, 2018), bots (Gorodnichenko et al., 2021; Badawy et al., 2019), or clickbaits (Lu & Pan, 2021) to manipulate online opinion. The findings expand our conceptualization of information control strategies online by highlighting the effectiveness of new tactics beyond these measures, suggesting that government propagandists now employ a greater repertoire of strategies to exert their influence online.

3.2 Propaganda Themes and Their Effects

Propaganda is a pivotal element of the standard authoritarian toolkit. However, questions persist regarding what propaganda content can effectively influence its intended audience. In numerous instances, propaganda has proven successful in shaping public opinion and mobilizing supporters of non-democratic regimes. For instance, during the Nazi era, radio exposure contributed to the increased popularity of the Nazi party (Adena et al., 2015). In the Arab world, exposure to transnational Arab TV has played a significant role in fostering an anti-American perception (Nisbet & Myers, 2011). In China, reading anti-Japanese propaganda in state-controlled newspapers has diminished favorable views of Japan among Chinese citizens (Stockmann, 2010), while exposure to state-controlled media has bolstered popular support for the regime (Kennedy, 2009). In experimental settings, scholars have also discovered that China’s propaganda effectively manipulates anti-foreign sentiments and behaviors (Mattingly & Yao, 2022).

However, propaganda does not always yield the desired results, particularly when the themes of the propaganda fail to resonate with the targeted audience's identities, experiences, or perceived reality (Chen & Shi, 2001). For instance, when the propaganda maintains an overwhelmingly positive outlook on economic growth despite citizens experiencing a decline in personal well-being, individuals may reject the propaganda (Chen, 2019). At times, propaganda can push too forcefully, surpassing the audience's acceptance threshold. For example, ISIS's Twitter accounts that display excessively violent content diminish the level of endorsement among the audience, eliciting positive reactions only from the most extreme respondents (Mitts et al., 2022).

Propaganda themes can also be misaligned, resulting in a failure to garner support for the regime. This phenomenon is evident in China, where nationalist propaganda does not consistently succeed in cultivating government support. While nationalist propaganda may evoke nationalist sentiments, these sentiments do not necessarily translate into an enhanced perception of government performance among citizens (Mattingly & Yao, 2022). In addition, the effectiveness of certain propaganda themes can be influenced by the political context and the salience of the issue at hand. For instance, Stockmann's (2010) study on how anti-Japanese propaganda influences Chinese residents' views of Japan was conducted during the 2005 anti-Japanese protests in Beijing. It is plausible that the widespread protest sentiment enhanced the persuasive impact of propaganda.

In the case of Hong Kong, a recent study conducted by Lee (2021) reveals that exposure to pro-establishment online media is linked to reduced support for democratization, more negative attitudes towards the Tiananmen student movement, and a higher level of trust in the Chinese government. Additionally, this exposure can counteract the influence of pro-democracy online media. However, the specific propaganda themes that can effectively mobilize pro-establishment supporters have remained unclear.

Existing research on the effects of propaganda themes has offered limited guidance for this inquiry. This limitation arises not only from the contradictory results generated in the existing studies but also from the differences in research approaches. Existing studies on the effects of propaganda themes predominantly rely on surveys to collect self-reported data about individuals' exposure to propaganda with specific themes and political attitudes (Chen & Shi, 2001; Nisbet & Myers, 2011; Stockmann, 2010) or experimental methods to assess self-reported responses to manipulated propaganda materials with different themes (Chen, 2019; Mattingly & Yao, 2022; Min & Luqiu, 2021). In contrast, the present study employs real-world social media data to explore propaganda effects.

Despite the valuable insights they have provided, both survey and lab experimental methods possess inherent limitations. Survey research, being a form of correlational study, does not say much regarding the causation between media exposure and political attitudes. On the other hand, lab experimental research often suffers from uncertain or even questionable external validity. Therefore, it remains unclear whether the findings derived from survey and experimental research can be observed in real-world instances of state propaganda.

In light of this, this research does not aim to propose directional hypotheses concerning propaganda themes and their effects. Instead, it adopts a more exploratory approach to pose an open question regarding which propaganda themes from the propaganda of pro-establishment media can better predict user engagement online. These propaganda themes encompass traditional and materialist values such as self-reliant hardworking, development and achievement, charity and service, security and order, patriotism, politicization criticism, and filial piety, as well as themes related to progressive nonmaterialist values like democracy and social equality:

RQ3a: Which propaganda themes from the political propaganda of pro-establishment digital media predict higher levels of user engagement on Facebook?

3.3. In/outgroup Favoritism and Their Effects

Researchers of identity politics have long observed that individuals with stronger partisan identities tend to be more politically engaged. This inclination can be best understood through the lens of social identity theory, which posits that individuals naturally exhibit favoritism towards those they perceive as belonging to the same ingroup, while displaying unfavorable attitudes towards those classified as outgroups. This behavior serves the purpose of maintaining a positive distinctiveness for their group (Tajfel et al., 1979).

According to Brewer (2001), the endorsement of ingroups can have an impact on individuals' self, as individuals may have internalized the rules, expectations, and norms associated with specific groups into their self-concepts. Consequently, individuals may adopt the projected images of their ingroups as part of their own identity. Furthermore, by endorsing their ingroups and disapproving of outgroups, individuals can accentuate their perceived differences with outgroups while minimizing their psychological distance from ingroups.

The case of the U.S. is a prime example illustrating how partisan political messages drive political expression and participation. Dilliplane (2011) finds that Americans who are exposed more to news that aligns with their partisan views exhibit increased political participation, whereas exposure to news with an opposing slant diminishes participation. Similarly, Feezell (2016) observes that exposure to political information that aligns with one's view predicts a higher level of online political participation, such as petitioning, sharing campaign news, or engaging in online political discussion.

Based on the above review, it is reasonable to assume that propaganda messages that are loaded with strong ingroup favoritism and outgroup unfavoritism can prompt individuals to express themselves politically. I hypothesize that favorable depictions of ingroups will predict a higher level of Facebook engagement among readers of pro-establishment digital media. It is also plausible to predict that unfavorable depictions of outgroups will similarly stimulate Facebook engagement:

H3a: Facebook posts published by pro-establishment digital media with favorable ingroup depictions will have a higher level of user engagement.

H3b: Facebook posts published by pro-establishment digital media with unfavorable outgroup depictions will have a higher level of user engagement.

3.4 The Effects of Derogatory Political Labeling

Derogatory political labeling is a basic tool of propaganda. In Lee and Lee's (1995) classic research of propaganda semantics, they put forth seven propaganda devices commonly employed by propagandists to discredit their political adversaries, with "name calling" being one of the techniques. According to them, the technique of name calling is to give an object or idea a bad name so that the recipient may reject them without examining the supporting evidence. From a psychological perspective, the technique of name-calling leverages heuristic processing of source cues, simplifying recipients' reasoning of the messages (Mondak, 1993).

While derogatory labels are commonly employed in patriarchal contexts (Stroińska & Drzazga, 2021), ethnic settings (Lampe, 1982), and partisan hate speeches (Tong et al., 2021), empirical evidence regarding their effects on political participation remains fragmented. In many instances, researchers encompass the practice of name-calling within the broader concept of incivility to examine how uncivilized speech influences individuals'

willingness to engage in politics. For example, Borah (2014) finds that uncivil messages polarized individuals' attitudes, potentially leading to a greater inclination to participate in politics both online and offline. Frischlich et al. (2021) observe that exposure to hate speeches predicts higher levels of uncivil political expression, particularly among right-wing populists.

Another line of research about political labeling primarily focuses on the effects of source cues. For example, Stryker et al. (2023) find that people see the same name-calling to be more civil when the source is a fellow partisan rather than an opponent. Goren et al. (2009) reveal that party source cues in political messages can activate latent partisan biases, which in turn affect the degree to which individuals express support for these values. In comparison, outgroup cues tend to be more influential in motivating expression than ingroup cues.

As such, it would be logical to infer that the utilization of derogatory political labels by pro-establishment digital media against their political opponents is likely to stimulate greater engagement from readers. In the previous chapter, the analysis identifies that pro-establishment digital media frequently employ labels such as "yellow people (黃人)" and "black riots (黑暴)" when referring to the opposition[44]. The present study hypothesizes that these political labels are predictive of increased user engagement on Facebook:

> H3c: Facebook posts published by pro-establishment digital media that use yellow-related labels will have a higher level of user engagement.
>
> H3d: Facebook posts published by pro-establishment digital media that use black-related labels will have a higher level of user engagement.

[44] For a detailed discussion, please refer to section 2.8.4, "Political worldviews: Deemphasizing personality cult and color politics."

As mentioned in the previous chapter, pro-establishment digital media have seemingly refrained from mentioning the Chinese Communist Party to avoid triggering anti-communist sentiments. If we consider the name of the CCP as a political label that is to be avoided, then it is reasonable to expect that this label connotes certain negative meanings. Therefore, it is logical to infer that any indications of the CCP in the reportage of the pro-establishment digital media may decrease their readers' intention to engage with the story:

H3e: Facebook posts published by pro-establishment digital media that mention the Chinese Communist Party will have a lower level of user engagement.

3.5 The Effects of Engagement Bait

Nondemocratic governments have long been crafting compelling propaganda messages through traditional mass media, such as TV (Nisbet & Myers, 2011), newspapers (Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011), or radio (Adena et al., 2015; Bleck & Michelitch, 2015; Snyder & Ballentine, 1996). In the digital age, the proliferation of social media and digital technologies has provided extra affordances for nondemocratic regimes to disseminate their content. Previous research has focused on government strategies that use large-scale human-produced disinformation or irrelevant content (King et al., 2017; Roberts, 2018), bots (Gorodnichenko et al., 2018; Badawy et al., 2019), or clickbait (Lu & Pan, 2021) to manipulate public opinions.

The strategy of "engagement bait" is a new strategy in the digital propaganda toolkit. As described in the previous chapter, pro-establishment digital media would release political statements that endorse ingroups or disparage outgroups, accompanied by explicit requests for their readers to like, comment, share, or use emoticons to show support for these statements. It is important to note that the strategy of "engagement bait" differs from "clickbait," which is commonly employed by commercial media to attract clicks on social

media. Clickbait involves crafting headlines and online content in a way that generates curiosity but does not fully satisfy it, thereby compelling readers to click for more information (Chakraborty et al., 2016; Lu & Pan, 2021). In contrast, engagement bait does not rely on readers' curiosity. Instead, it offers a convenient and populist means of political expression, allowing readers to easily convey their political emotions with very light cognitive loading.

Applying "engagement bait" strategy may have several contributions to the successful propaganda of nondemocratic regimes. First, the strategy is especially applicable to highly politicized stories. Therefore, propagandists do not have to rely upon producing nonpolitical content to attract clicks, which may reduce the space available for hard propaganda. Second, high engagement rates are recognized as a crucial factor influencing the reach of content on Facebook (Quesenberry & Coolsen, 2018). If pro-establishment digital media can boost user engagement on Facebook, it helps them compete on a social media platform that China cannot control. Third, allowing users to express themselves through engaging with Facebook posts provides a low-cost, easily accessible way to participate in politics. Since supporters of the pro-establishment camp in Hong Kong are characterized by weak political efficacy and low intention to participate in politics, the pro-establishment camp may have difficulties mobilizing their supporters. Thus, the strategy of "engagement bait" has provided a way out of this conundrum:

> H3f: Facebook posts published by pro-establishment digital media that adopt the strategy of engagement bait will have a higher level of user engagement.

3.6 Data

The data used in the analysis was the same dataset in the content analysis (CA) conducted in the previous chapter. This dataset was collected by Crowdtangle, a public

insights tool from Meta that provides access to all public posts on Facebook. Apart from textual and visual content, the dataset also includes engagement data for each Facebook post. The content categories derived from the previous content analysis were employed as independent variables, while the user engagement data for the Facebook posts served as the dependent variable.

The operationalizations of the key variables are as follows:

3.7 Variables Operationalization

3.7.1 Dependent Variables

User Engagement

For every Facebook post, the dataset contains the number of comments (M = 20.66; SD = 50.78), shares (M = 9.22; SD = 30.35), and emoticon responses, including "likes (👍)," "love (❤️)," "wow(😳)," "haha (😂)," "sad (😢)," "angry (😡)," and "care (🥲)" (M = 282.36, SD = 782.1). All these users responses were added up to construct the variable "user engagement."

Since social media content can spread very rapidly and widely online if they went viral, user engagement is a skewed variable. To address this issue, I logged and standardized this variable, resulting in a DV that range from 0 to 1 (M = .41; SD = .19). The frequency distributions of this variable before and after the log treatment and standardization are shown on Figure 3.1 (on next page).

It is worth noting that among all forms of user engagement, the vast majority were emoticon responses. Therefore, a check was conducted to assess whether using emoticon responses as the DV, excluding comments and shares, would generate a different result. The two results are similar, generating almost identical patterns of statistical significance.

Therefore, it was decided that all comments, shares, and emoticon responses should be added to construct the DV to encompass all users' responses.

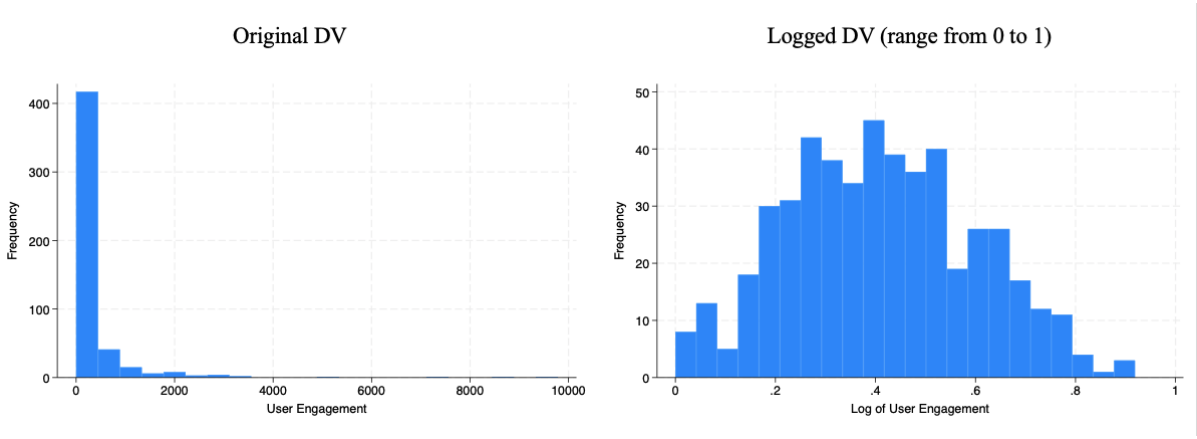

Figure 3.1 The Frequency Distributions of User Engagement Before and After the Log Treatment and Standardization

3.7.2 Independent Variables

Ingroup Favoritism

The coding registered whether the Facebook post depicts any ingroups of the Blue Ribbons favorably. This includes the Chinese nation, the Chinese government, Supreme Leader Xi Jinping, other CCP leaders, the People's Liberation Army, Chinese brands and corporations, Chinese medics, ordinary mainlanders, foreign allies of China, the Hong Kong police, and pro-establishment groups. This variable is a dichotomous variable (counted = 19.8%)

Outgroup Unfavoritism

Similarly, this dichotomous variable registered whether the Facebook post depicts any outgroups of the Blue Ribbons unfavorably. Oppositional groups and supporters, individuals participating in riots, and foreign powers perceived to be introducing troubles in Hong Kong and China are all counted as outgroups (counted = 27.4%).

For more details about how the above variables were operationalized, please refer to section 2.8.3, Table 2.4, and Tables B4 and B5.

Political Label: "Yellow"

This variable examined whether a Facebook post employs any "yellow labels" to negatively portray those who are perceived as aligned with the opposition. Examples of such terminologies include yellow artists (黃藝人), yellow shops (黃店), and yellow reporters (黃記者). The variable is dichotomous (counted = 7.8%).

Political Label: "Black"

This dichotomous variable examined whether a Facebook post has assigned terms related to "black" to those who support or participate in anti-regime protests. Examples include black riots (黑暴) and black-clad individuals (黑衣人) (counted = 7.8%).

Political Label: "CCP"

This variable counted the frequency of pro-establishment digital media mentioned the Chinese Communist Party. Common terminologies include the party (黨), the communist party (共產黨), and the CCP (中共) (counted = 1.4%).

For more details about the variables concerning political labels, please see section 2.8.4, Table 2.5, and Table B6.

Propaganda Themes

Nine variables were constructed based on the propaganda themes of every Facebook post published by the pro-establishment digital media. This includes security and order (17.8%), development and achievement (11.2%), patriotism (9%), charity and services (4.6%), politicization criticism (3.8%), self-reliant hardworking (3%), filial piety (2.4%), social equalities (1.6%), and political freedom (.6%). These variables are dichotomous. However, they are not mutually exclusive. That is, a Facebook post can have multiple

propaganda themes. For more details about propaganda themes, please see section 2.8.1, Table 2.1, and Table B1.

Engagement Bait

This variable registered whether a Facebook post adopts the strategy of "engagement bait" to prompt user engagement, either in the form of calling for comments (.4%), shares (.6%), or emoticon responses (17.8%). Different forms of calls for engagement were added up to construct a dichotomous variable (counted = 18.2%). More details about the definitions of the variable of engagement bait are available in section 2.8.5, Table 2.6, and Table B7.

3.8 Analytical Procedures

To explore the effects of the IVs, I divided my IVs into three groups. First, I constructed an OLS regression model (M1) to test the effects of ingroup favoritism, outgroup favoritism, and all political labels, including "Yellow," "Black," and "CCP." Second, I constructed another regression model (M2) to test the mobilizing effects of all propaganda themes. Third, I tested the effect of engagement baiting in model three (M3). Finally, I pooled these IVs into one block, constructing an integrated model (M4).

The main purpose of constructing M1, M2, and M3 is to better compare the effects of different groups of IVs. On the other hand, the integrated model allows me to access any potential suppressor effects among the IVs, thus increasing the internal validity of my findings.

3.9 Findings

The results of the OLS regression analyses are presented in Table 3.1 (on next page).

Among the three separate models, model one explains 16% of the variance; model two explains 11%, and model three explains 30% of the variance. Model three greatly outperforms models one and two as it has a higher adjusted R2 value. This indicates that

compared to other content variables, the variable "engagement bait" is a better predictor of user engagement. It alone explains more variances than all other IVs combined.

The integrated model (M4) explains 35% of the variance. Since this is noticeably better than model three, and the integrated model contains all IVs, the results of model four were primarily used to determine whether the hypotheses are supported.

Table 3.1 Regression Analysis Results of the Mobilizing Effects of Pro-establishment Media Content

	M 1		M2		M3		M4	
	Beta	P	Beta	P	Beta	P	Beta	P
Block 1: Favoritism and Political Labels								
Ingroup Favoritism	.12	.00*					.07	.12
Outgroup Unfavoritism	.34	.00***					.24	.00***
"Yellow"	.06	.16					-.06	.18
"Black"	.02	.57					-.05	.18
"CCP"	-.04	.35					-.01	.77
Block 2: Propaganda Themes								
Self-reliant Hardworking			.12	.00*			.11	.00*
Development and Achievement			-.06	.20			-.06	.13
Charity and Service			.11	.01*			.06	.16
Security and Order			.29	.00***			.10	.03*
Filial Piety			-.01	.73			.00	.91
Patriotism			.08	.07			-.05	.64
Politicization Criticism			.04	.36			-.01	.79
Democracy			-.04	.36			-.05	.22
Social Equalities			.04	.39			.01	.82
Block 3: Digital Practices								
Engagement Bait					.55	.00***	.44	.00***
R^2	.16		.11		.30		.35	

Notes. To get the DV (User engagement), I logged and standardized the sum of likes, shares, comments, and emoticon responses; Beta stands for standardized effect coefficients; P values with two-tailed significance: *p<.05; **p<.01; and *** p<.001; N = 500.

RQ3a sought to determine which propaganda themes predict higher levels of user engagement on Facebook. In model two of the analysis, three propaganda themes were found to have a positive influence on user engagement. These themes were "Self-reliant Hardworking" (Beta = .12; p = .00*), "Charity and Service" (Beta = .11; p = .01*), and "Security and Order" (Beta = .29; p = .00***).

However, in the integrated model (M4), only “Self-reliant Hardworking” (Beta = .11; p = .00*) and “Security and Order” (Beta = .10; p =.03*) remained statistically significant. The effect of the “Charity and Service” theme became nonsignificant (Beta = .06; p = .16). The effects of the other propaganda themes were found to be statistically nonsignificant across both models two and four.

H3a proposed that there would be a positive relationship between ingroup favoritism and user engagement. However, the results did not support this hypothesis. In model one, ingroup favoritism was found to have a significant positive effect on user engagement (Beta = .12; p = .00*). However, when all IVs were included in model four, the effect of ingroup favoritism became statistically nonsignificant (Beta = .07; p = .12).

On the other hand, the results supported H3b, which suggested a positive association between outgroup unfavoritism and user engagement. The effects of outgroup unfavoritism were significant in both model one, the separate model (Beta = .34; p = .00***), and model four, the integrated model (Beta = .24; p = .00***). This indicates that outgroup unfavoritism consistently and robustly contributes to online user mobilization.

H3c and H3d proposed that the political labels “yellow” and “black” would result in higher user engagement. However, the results do not support these hypotheses. The effects of the “yellow” label were found to be statistically nonsignificant in both model one (Beta = .06; p = .16) and model four (Beta = -.06; p = .18). Similarly, the effects of the “black” label were also found to be statistically nonsignificant in both model one (Beta = .02; p = .57) and model four (Beta = -.06; p = .18).

Additionally, H3e predicted that Facebook posts mentioning the CCP would have a negative association with user engagement. However, the results do not support this hypothesis. In both model one (Beta = -.04; p = .35) and model four (Beta = -.01; p = .77), the effects of mentioning the CCP were found to be statistically nonsignificant.

Finally, H3f suggests that the strategy of engagement bait can solicit more user engagement. The result supports this hypothesis. In both model three (Beta = .55; p = .00***) and model four (Beta = .44; p = .00***), there is a significant and positive association between the application of this strategy and user engagement.

Table 3.2 Summary of Findings Corresponds to all RQs and Hypotheses

RQs and hypothesis (with simplified wordings)	Findings	Hypothesis supported?
RQ3a: Which propaganda themes positively predict user engagement?	Positive effect of "Self-reliant hard working" and "Security and order." The effects of other propaganda themes are all nonsignificant.	/
H3a: Ingroup favoritism positively predicts user engagement.	Nonsignificant effect	N
H3b: Outgroup unfavoritism positively predicts user engagement.	Positive effect	Y
H3c: The use of yellow-related labels positively predicts user engagement.	Nonsignificant effect	N
H3d: The use of black-related labels positively predicts user engagement.	Nonsignificant effect	N
H3e: Mentioning the CCP predicts fewer user engagement.	Nonsignificant effect	N
H3f: The strategy of engagement bait predicts more user engagement.	Positive effect	Y

3.10 Discussion

3.10.1 Evaluating the Effect Significance of Every IV

Previous research about the propaganda effects often generates mixed results, with some studies finding that exposure to propaganda results in intended effects (e.g., Adena et al., 2015; Kennedy, 2009; Nisbet & Myers, 2011; Mattingly & Yao, 2022; Stockmann, 2010), whereas others find that propaganda can backfire (e.g., Chen, 2019; Chen & Shi, 2001; Mitts et al., 2022). By exploring the mobilizing effects of the identity discourses

disseminated by pro-establishment digital media on Facebook, this study illustrates the importance of closely examining the content and strategies of propaganda. The findings show that the effects of propaganda might be contingent upon its content, strategies, and issue salience.

Before explaining the theoretical implications of these findings, I will first address the effect significance of every individual IV in this section.

As the findings reveal, most propaganda themes fail to mobilize online political engagement from pro-establishment readers. Only two propaganda themes, namely "self-reliant hard working" and "security and order," exhibit significant positive mobilization effects.

How to explain the lack of mobilizing effects from most propaganda themes? Given that postmaterialist values such as "democracy" or "social equalities" are not aligned with the core beliefs of the Blue Ribbons, it is understandable why pro-establishment readers show a lack of interest in these themes.

However, some propaganda themes about materialist values surprisingly do not exhibit significant predictive effects. This deserves an explanation. There are several possible explanations. The first possibility is multicollinearity. My IVs are non-mutually exclusive. For example, a Facebook post can have more than one theme. From a statistical perspective, one may attribute the lack of statistical significance to the problem of multicollinearity between IVs. However, a robustness check was conducted, and it revealed no indications of multicollinearity. This is evident from the mean of the variance inflation factor of all variables, which is only 1.22, with no IVs having a value higher than 1.7.

The second possible explanation is related to issue salience. It is worth noting that this study uses behavioral consequences but not latent attitudes as the dependent variable. Therefore, the obtained results should reflect individuals' situationally triggered responses,

wherein they act upon their latent beliefs and attitudes in response to external stimuli, which are the Facebook posts they read. Consequently, the salience of the issues discussed in the posts should play a pivotal role in predicting the outcomes. Certain propaganda themes examined in this study, such as "charity and service"[45] and "filial piety," may not hold much salience within the period of research in Hong Kong, which is right after the end of the anti-ELAB protests. In addition, seeking independence from China was not the major demand of the protests (Pomfret & Jim, 2019). Therefore, the patriotic sentiment of pro-establishment supporters might not be readily triggered. Moreover, Hong Kong has experienced an economic downturn following the anti-ELAB protests and the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, the propaganda theme highlighting the "achievement and development" of society may not aligned with the personal experiences of Hong Kong citizens regarding the actual progress of societal development (Chen, 2019). Hence, it becomes more comprehensible that readers responded indifferently toward the themes of "charity and service," "filial piety," "patriotism," and "achievement and development."

From this perspective, it is also explainable why pro-establishment readers are responsive to the themes "self-reliant hard working" and "security and order." The anti-ELAB protests in Hong Kong were marked by political turmoil and disruptions to everyday commercial activities, with an emphasis on tolerating these disruptions in pursuit of nonmaterialistic ideals like democracy and social justice. Given this context, the promotion

[45] It is worth noting that the propaganda theme "Charity and service" initially showed a significant effect in model two, where I examined the effects of propaganda themes alone. However, in the integrated model, i.e., model four, where I added all IVs, "Charity and service" becomes nonsignificant. A post-hoc analysis reveals that the addition of the IV "Engagement bait" accounted for most of the statistical covariances previously associated with "Charity and service." This suggests that the theme of "Charity and service" itself does not have a substantial mobilizing effect. However, it is possible that this theme can predict the media's tendency to employ the strategy of engagement baiting, which is an effective mobilizing strategy as the finding suggests. That is, when a post is about charity and service, pro-establishment media may bait readers to engage with the posts. The post-hoc analysis reveals a notable correlation between "Charity and service" and "Engagement bait" ($r = .12$; $p = .01$*). This finding supports the argument that the significance of "Charity and service" observed in model two is likely mediated through its influence on increasing the likelihood of engagement baiting, rather than having a direct effect in itself.

of the importance of "security and order" may appeal to individuals seeking stability and a sense of order amidst the protests, while the promotion of a "self-reliant hard working" spirit, which connotes a "no complaints, work hard" life philosophy, may resonate with readers who have a strong aversion to the overly idealistic nature of the anti-ELAB protests.

However, it is somewhat intriguing that the propaganda themes "politicization criticism" did not significantly elicit user engagement. Upon revisiting the data, one possible explanation comes to light: This theme may have become somewhat cliché and were often presented without detailed storytelling in the reporting. For example, terms like "political trickster (政棍)" have become common catchphrases adopted by pro-establishment digital media in a wide range of stories that seek to attack their political opponents. Consequently, these themes may come across as overly sloganesque and lacking depth, thereby failing to capture users' attention. This explanation might also account for the limited impact of political labeling on user engagement. If pro-establishment supporters have grown accustomed to the political labels frequently employed by pro-establishment media, their responses may not be as readily triggered by them.

Another major finding of this study is that the online mobilization of pro-establishment digital media readers was effectively achieved through outgroup negation. However, ingroup favoritism did not produce equally robust effects. As the findings indicate, while ingroup favoritism predicts user engagement in model one, it fails to generate a significant effect in the integrated model.[46] There are two possible explanations. The first

[46] Similar to the case of the propaganda theme of "Charity and service," a post-hoc analysis discovered that the addition of the IV "Engagement bait" accounted for most of the statistical covariances previously associated with ingroup favoritism in model one. This suggests that ingroup favoritism itself does not have a substantial mobilizing effect. However, this theme may predict the media's tendency to apply the strategy of engagement baiting, which is an effective mobilizing strategy as the finding shows. That is, when a post is about the merits of ingroup, pro-establishment media may bait readers to engage with the posts. The post-hoc analysis also reveals that ingroup favoritism is correlated with "Engagement bait" ($r = .19$; $p = .00$***). This finding supports the argument that the significance of ingroup favoritism observed in model one is likely mediated through its influence on increasing the likelihood of engagement baiting, rather than having a direct effect in itself.

possibility is that people may just tend to be more responsive to negative information compared to positive information (Fiske, 1980; Hamilton & Zanna, 1972; Ohira et al., 1998).

Another possibility to consider is that the lack of significance in the result may reflect a lack of strong ideological bonds within the pro-establishment camp. Pro-establishment supporters are predominantly conservative and pragmatic in nature, driven by self-interest. Consequently, they may not possess unified political beliefs that make them easily swayed by every value, norm, or symbolic figure actively promoted by pro-establishment digital media. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that they may not respond well to ingroup favoritism.

This line of reasoning can also explain why most propaganda themes fail to mobilize pro-establishment readers effectively. Some propaganda themes, such as the emphasis on hard work without complaining or the importance of security and order as prerequisites for personal success, may appear more persuasive to them. On the other hand, notions like a thriving economy or Chinese nationalism may be less convincing to this particular group.

Indeed, as I will discuss in the next chapter, this is a likely explanation. Interviewing pro-establishment group members, I find that their innate political thoughts and beliefs are more fragmented than expected, and they demonstrate a general sense of political passivity that may make them less responsive and more difficult to mobilize.

Lastly, the findings also reveal the effectiveness of "engagement bait" in capturing users' attention and mobilizing them online, thereby highlighting how digital media is transforming government propaganda. While previous research suggests that state propagandists have been increasingly employing strategies such as soft content (Zhu & Fu, 2023), distracting content (King et al., 2013), or clickbait (Lu & Pan, 2021) to manipulate public opinion, these strategies have their limitations. Excessive production of nonpolitical and distracting content may reduce the space available for hard political propaganda. The use of clickbait may undermine their credibility (Molyneux & Coddington, 2020). In contrast, the

use of engagement bait circumvents these issues. Given its applicability to political stories, this strategy can be used to promote hard propaganda content. As such, it exhibits a relatively pervasive presence, accounting for 18.2% of the analyzed posts.

3.10.2 Theoretical Implications

In conclusion, the findings provide additional evidence that pro-establishment supporters, known as the Blue Ribbons, exhibit conservative and pragmatic characteristics in their political identity. As argued in the previous chapter, the conservative fraction of Hong Kong society is often associated with low political efficacy and a limited inclination toward political participation. Given their political passivity, it is reasonable to suggest that the Blue Ribbons may not be easily mobilized by ideologies and grand political goals.

The findings from this chapter strongly support the argument that readers of pro-establishment digital media do not easily or uniformly respond to the values, norms, and symbolic figures promoted by state propagandists. This is evident in the lack of significant mobilizing effects observed for most propaganda themes and ingroup favoritism.

It appears that pro-establishment readers, who believe in individual self-reliance, may not share many common political perspectives or ingroup bonds, except for the belief that security and order are crucial for personal progress, as maintaining a stable society is usually a prerequisite for individuals' advancement and success. Additionally, they may hold a negative stance towards those who disrupt their personal pursuits, such as opposition forces, rioters, and foreign powers supporting these troublemakers. As a result, outgroup negation likely acts as a more potent mobilizing force for them.

This logic also explains why engagement calls can effectively mobilize readers of pro-establishment media. These engagement calls provide politically passive pro-establishment supporters with a convenient, quantifiable, and clicktivist means of political expression, allowing them to engage with politics or feel engaged with minimal effort. In the

digital age, the influence of political messages can be easily quantified. Digital technology reinforces the impulse toward quantification in various forms of communication, including journalism (Christin, 2018; Koo, 2021; Vu, 2014) and political campaigns (Schroeder, 2018). Propagandists and Internet users alike can employ quantification tools to generate a large number of likes, shares, and comments on Facebook, which imbue symbolic meaning to message recipients and enhance the message's appeal (Phua & Ahn, 2016; Bhattacharyya, 2020). Through liking the posts, politically passive individuals can express their thoughts online with minimal effort. Through the strategy of engagement bait, propagandists can amplify the engagement with their content, conveying the power of the regime or attacking political opponents.

Analyzing how user engagement is generated can also facilitate our understanding of the creation of identity discourses. The construction of discourses is not merely about textual or linguistic expression. It is a communication process of symbolic meaning creation upon the social cultures, beliefs, ideologies, as well as communication infrastructures. In addition to their message appeals, web metrics influence the editorial decisions of online communicators (Vu, 2014) and interact with the algorithm of social networking platforms, altering the way propaganda content reaches readers (Quesenberry & Coolsen, 2018). Thus, the generation of web metrics is a significant part of the construction of discourses, as it influences people's communication motivation and the reach and the symbolic persuasive power of the content.

Nonetheless, the present study has its limitations. First, the research was conducted during a specific period, namely, immediately after the anti-ELAB protests and the implementation of the national security law in Hong Kong. During this period, some issues are more salient than others, thereby influencing users' responses to propaganda content. While this approach sheds light on the significance of political context and issue salience in

relation to propaganda effects, it is essential to exercise caution when interpreting the findings, as they need to be contextualized and may not be directly applicable to other research periods and contexts.

Second, the study uses field data to assess Facebook users' responses in an uncontrolled environment. While this approach enhances the ecological validity of the findings, it does not directly access users' latent political attitudes. Although liking a Facebook post can generally indicate users' endorsement of the content (as it is a "like"), the absence of responses may merely signify a lack of interest but not disagreement. Consequently, this study offers more insights into what successfully mobilized users rather than revealing underlying values and norms.

In the next chapter, I shift the focus to the reader's perspective of the pro-establishment identity discourses. In addition to analyzing pro-establishment media content, I present a study based on in-depth interviews with members of pro-establishment groups. By doing so, I aim to move beyond a quantitative analysis of media content and instead allow the members of pro-establishment groups to provide a rich and explanatory account of their identity. Through these interviews, we can gain a deeper understanding of their media preferences, underlying values and norms, and motivations for political participation online and offline.

CHAPTER FOUR: PRO-ESTABLISHMENT IDENTITY: MEMBERSHIP BASED ON OUTWARD CONDUCT

4.1 Introduction

Group identities are partially socially ascribed. In every society, there are externally ascribed definitions for groups, and individuals must acquire and internalize societal expectations associated with their membership in particular groups (Greenfeld & Eastwood, 2007). Inevitably, individuals assimilate widely accepted ideas about their group affiliation during this process.

In chapter two, I examined the identity discourses propagated by the pro-establishment digital media. These political discourses provide models of what it means to be morally and politically correct as pro-establishment supporters. At its core, these discourses are political notions ascribed from the top down by state propagandists. They represent political values that the regime seeks to impart to its supporters, as well as the political identity it aspires to forge.

Nonetheless, the analysis conducted in the preceding chapter has unveiled that pro-establishment readers do not readily or uniformly mobilize by the propaganda content they consume. This underscores that even pro-establishment supporters possess agency in their decision-making and do not unquestioningly mobilize by the regime's political discourses.

Identities are not solely ascribed constructs. Similar to other collective social and political concepts, identities can also be generated at the individual level and subsequently interact with identity notions ascribed from the top down by powerholders. So far, it remains unclear how supporters of pro-establishment groups conceptualize their identities from the bottom.

In this chapter, I present a qualitative study on pro-establishment groups in Hong Kong, conducted through in-depth interviews with fourteen informants recruited from pro-

establishment organizations using a snowballing approach. These informants include both core organizers and regular members.

The purpose of this investigation is threefold. First, it explores how pro-establishment supporters self-conceptualize the Blue Ribbons' identities. For them, what is "Blue Ribbons" (RQ5)? This study allows them to articulate their beliefs and thoughts, providing insights into how pro-establishment group members shape their political identities at the individual level and from a bottom-up perspective.

Second, the analysis offers a rich interpretation of the audience's responses to the content of the pro-establishment digital media. In chapter three, I presented a quantitative analysis of what motivates readers to engage with pro-establishment digital media on Facebook. In this chapter, I supplement the quantitative analysis with a qualitative inquiry: How do readers of Blue digital media perceive and understand the political discourses they promoted (RQ4)? This qualitative study addresses this research question by providing a reader's perspective on the discourses disseminated by pro-establishment digital media.

Third, while countermobilization by nondemocracies has garnered growing academic attention (Ekiert et al., 2020; Hellmeier & Weidmann, 2019), little is known about its enabling mechanisms. Previous studies propose that the Chinese government rewards and incentivizes pro-regime elites who can organize and mobilize the masses, thereby indirectly orchestrating countermobilization against the democratic movement in Hong Kong (Lee, 2023; Yuen, 2023). However, these studies predominantly rely on open data, such as biographical data and public organizational data, rendering a lack of in-depth fieldwork that examines the actual internal dynamics of pro-establishment groups. What motivates pro-establishment supporters to participate in politics (RQ5)? By answering this question, the inquiry provides a valuable explanation of the mobilizing mechanism of countermobilization in nondemocratic regimes.

In the following sections, I first review theories about individuals' conceptualization of group identities and existing studies of state-led mobilization. Then, I explain what deters researchers from studying pro-government groups in nondemocratic regimes and how I recruit the informants in Hong Kong. Then, I present my findings and discuss their implications for the rise of Blue Ribbons in Hong Kong and the literature on state-led mobilization.

4.2 Identity Formation: Conceptualization at Individual Levels

To comprehend their identity, individuals must grasp and internalize the social norms associated with being a member of specific groups (Greenfeld & Eastwood, 2007). Throughout this process, individuals unavoidably absorb commonly ascribed notions about their group affiliation.

Mass media is a powerful source that provides these ascribed notions about social groups. As Thompson (1995) argues, with the advent of media technologies, individuals are now able to draw upon a wide range of mediated symbolic resources to construct their identities. Kellner (1995) also highlights the significance of the media in the process of identity formation, arguing that the media "produce the fabric of everyday life…shaping political views and social behavior, and providing the materials out of which people forge their very identities" (p.1).

In particular, pro-establishment media content can be an important discursive resource for pro-establishment group members to build their political identity. However, group identities, just like any other collective social and political concepts, are not entirely ascribed from the top down, as they must also be generated at individual levels from the bottom up.

Identity theorists widely accept that group identities are co-constructed by externally ascribed and self-conceptualized notions. For example, McClain et al. (2009) posit that some

aspects of identity attributes, such as group membership, are usually historically developed and externally ascribed (e.g., Hong Kong people are legally citizens of The People's Republic of China; The Chinese government used to provide a set of criteria to define who is "patriots (愛國者)"). However, some aspects of identities, such as group identification and consciousness, are often subjectively defined. Similarly, Weiner and Tatum (2021) suggest that identities can be dissected into self-conceptualization and social recognition, in which people's self-conceptualization and social recognition of these concepts constantly exchange and interact.

In chapter two, I provide an analytical account of the identity discourses propagated by pro-establishment media (the top-down notion). However, it remains unclear how pro-establishment supporters themselves imagine and conceptualize their own groupness from the bottom. Having them articulate their own identities, therefore, can shed light on how pro-establishment identities are generated at individual levels and how they interact with the media-ascribed notion of identity.

Theoretically, this approach also incorporates both media and audience perspectives in identity research. Thus far, the majority of the existing qualitative studies about media's role in the formation of identity discourses entirely focus on the symbolic presentation of political identities in various forms of news media, such as newspapers (Brookes, 1999; Li, 2009), television (Ma, 2005; Van den Bulck, 2001), and social media (Bonacchi et al., 2018; Gerbaudo, 2015). Yet, the construction of discourses is not solely a process of content production and dissemination. It involves dynamic, intersubjective, and continuous exchanges of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs between communicators. Therefore, this approach, which compares political narratives propagated by pro-establishment digital media with readers' interpretations of them, aims to interweave media and audience perspectives, thereby deepening our understanding of the formation of pro-establishment discourses.

4.3 The Case of Hong Kong: An Incentive Structure of Mobilization

Although pro-establishment digital media outlets have maintained a robust online presence in Hong Kong over the past decade, the emergence of the Blue Ribbons is not solely a digital media phenomenon. They have also established a significant offline presence.

China has been cultivating numerous pro-regime groups that act as its proxies to set up pro-regime supporter bases in Hong Kong (Fong, 2014). This countermobilization is a form of state-initiated contention arising to curb dissident movements that challenge existing political orders. Overall, the regime "strives to marshal available state apparatuses to discipline activists while instigating nonstate actors to confront the opposition during elections and protests" (Cheng, 2020, p.4).

To operationalize these efforts, China has been employing the tactic of "united front" to coopt business and political elites in Hong Kong who possess the capability and resources to mobilize the masses. The tactic of "united front" is a political strategy that the CCP employs to influence beyond its immediate circles while downplaying direct associations with the CCP (Van Slyke, 1967). The key to this strategy is to build alignments between the CCP and non-Communist political units while the alignments remain flexible in principle (Armstrong, 1980).

One of the most important devices of the united front's elite patronage is the national consultative bodies in China. Business elites in Hong Kong are often appointed as members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). According to Cheng (2020), the CPPCC allocates 124 out of 2300 seats to the Hong Kong constituency every year. Over time, business elites continued to be the primary focus of cooptation, with a presence of state-owned corporations' executives in the CPPCC. Additionally, the targets of cooptation underwent a gradual shift, moving towards those who can fulfill grassroots mobilizational roles. Representatives of the mass societies, such as the executives of

hometown associations and service-oriented NGOs, were more likely to be appointed in the two most recent sessions of CPPCC. According to Cheng (2020), the percentage of representatives from the mass societies went up from 27% (Tenth Session, 2003-08) to 42.7% (Thirteenth Session, 2018–23), and the percentage of representatives from Service NGOs increased from 9.8% (Tenth Session, 2003-08) to 24.2% (Thirteenth Session, 2018–23) (See Table 4.1). This indicates that the united front efforts from the state were mainly made to coopt business elites and the leadership of mass societies, including three types of organizations: local federations (地區聯會), hometown associations (同鄉會), and service-oriented NGOs

Table 4.1 Hong Kong Sectoral Representation in the CPPCC, 2003–23

	State sector		Business sector		Professional sector		Service NGOs		Mass Societies		Total
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
Tenth Session (2003–8)	25	20.5	66	54.1	50	41	12	9.8	33	27	122
Eleventh Session (2008–13)	25	19.8	79	62.7	49	38.9	12	9.5	38	30.2	126
Twelfth Session (2013–18)	24	19.4	79	63.7	54	43.5	23	18.5	55	44.4	124
Thirteenth Session (2018–23)	22	17.7	86	69.4	38	30.6	30	24.2	53	42.7	124

Source: Cheng (2020).
Note: The total percentage in each session exceeds 100 percent because each member from Hong Kong often served multiple roles.

There are some reasons why the Chinese government has to cultivate patronaged pro-regime groups in Hong Kong as proxies of countermobilization. First, because of the “one country, two systems” institutional arrangement, Hong Kong can be considered a hybrid regime where there is a strong market economy under which the state cannot exert total control over the society. As such, there are few dependent organizations of the regime in Hong Kong to operationalize the state-led mobilization. Therefore, China has to resort to other indirect means to build its supporter base in Hong Kong (Cheng, 2020; Levitsky & Way, 2002). Second, nondemocratic governments may want the state-led mobilization to

look less manipulated. Therefore, they do not want to be seen as the sole orchestrator behind the scenes (Tilly & Wood, 2015).

As Yuen (2023) concludes, by rewarding these elites with offices in political institutions, China has built an incentive structure of mobilization in Hong Kong. He finds that societal elites with more leadership ties to grassroots organizations are more likely to be appointed to political institutions. In comparison, social elites who behave defiantly against the regime might be compelled from the national consultation bodies (Cheng, 2020).

To mobilize the masses, patronaged sociopolitical elites often offer community services in exchange for supporters' loyalty (Lee, 2020). For example, with their superior resources, pro-regime parties in Hong Kong are capable of offering individualized services, such as professional courses, community shows and entertainment, and material goods, to their targeted recipients (Wong, 2014; Wong et al., 2019; Wong & Or, 2020). In a similar vein, hometown associations and local federations provide assistance to immigrants from specific hometowns and organize economic support for hometown developments. In addition, these grassroots associations also offer cultural spaces within which people cultivate native-place identities, create collective meanings, and develop a more tightly-knit network among members (Lee, 2023; Yuen, 2023).

Empirically, scholars find quantitative evidence to support these claims. Yuen (2023) and Cheng (2020) document an increase in the number of patronage grassroots organizations in Hong Kong in recent years. Using survey methods, Wong et al. (2019) find that services from pro-regime parties effectively predict people's intention to vote. Similarly, Lee (2023) finds that the presence of hometown associations was related to higher voter turnout.

The cultivation and mobilization of patronaged groups is an integral component of the building of the pro-establishment supporter base in Hong Kong. As discussed above, existing

studies have offered important insights into this process. However, these studies have certain limitations. Most importantly, they heavily rely upon quantitative data.

Existing empirical studies about the mobilization of pro-establishment groups in Hong Kong have been either conducted by survey (Lee, 2023; Wong, 2014; Wong et al., 2019; Wong & Or, 2020) or by utilizing open data, such as newspaper reports or organizational data on the websites of grassroots organizations (Cheng, 2020; Lee, 2020; Yuen, 2023). Typically, these studies explore the boom of grassroots organizations by counting their numbers (Cheng, 2020; Lee, 2020; Yuen, 2023) or looking for statistical associations between some key variables, such as political appointments in CPPCC and candidates' ties with grassroots organizations, regional community services, and voter turnout (Wong et al., 2019; Lee, 2023), in order to support their proposed theories of the united front.

So far, there is a lack of in-depth fieldwork about pro-establishment groups in Hong Kong. Even though some existing studies have attempted to get access to the pro-establishment camp, they usually merely use fieldwork as a supplementary method to their quantitative works. Consequently, the fieldwork in these studies was usually conducted on very small scales and presented with sketchy methodological details. For example, in Cheng's (2020) research about the united front work in Hong Kong, he uses multiple methods for data collection, including online open data collection and interviews with pro-establishment politicians, activists, and grassroots officials. However, Cheng did not specify how many informants he interviewed and how he picked them. Eventually, only a few interviews were briefly mentioned in the manuscript[47]. In Wong et al.'s (2019) research about

[47] These include one pro-establishment group organizer who mentioned they have to submit reports to the Chinese government. One interviewer explained that they may use money to recruit participants in counterprotests. Another interview reveals that some participants in counterprotests are triad members. A company representative said the government requested them to do something to end the dissident protests. One attendee of counterprotests said they had not done enough. Lastly, one government official said pro-

pro-establishment parties and voter turnout, they interviewed 30 district councilors and used the data to support their survey's findings, which are primarily about election strategies. Moreover, they interviewed informants from both pro-establishment and pro-democracy camps and did not specify how many of them were from the pro-establishment side. Overall, these studies did not seek to and have not provided a coherent account of the internal dynamics of pro-establishment groups.

This results in a lack of systematic qualitative assessment of the internal dynamics and operational mechanisms of the pro-establishment groups in Hong Kong, rendering some important questions remain unanswered: How do patronaged organizations distribute resources among their members to encourage their participation? In addition to monetary incentives, were there any internal mechanisms that encouraged them to participate in politics, both online and offline? Does media play a role? How do discourses propagated by pro-establishment digital media influence their identity and political views? How to define who is "pro-establishment?" Investigating pro-establishment groups can offer insights into these inquiries.

4.4 Method: Data Collection

Getting access to the field to study political identities is challenging in Hong Kong. Since the enactment of the national security law in 2020, getting honest opinions from informants about sensitive political topics has become more difficult. On the other hand, pro-establishment individuals typically have no trust in scholars as they assume scholars are too liberal and westernized. In a press column, a Hong Kong communication researcher, Francis Lee, once wrote about conducting surveys during the anti-ELAB protests. He mentioned that surveys targeting the pro-Beijing groups typically have a low response rate. Many non-

establishment organizers may blame the Hong Kong government for damaging their support network at the grassroots.

respondents, especially those hometown association members who are usually directly affiliated with the Chinese government, explicitly stated that scholars were not trustworthy[48]. The lack of trust from these Blue Ribbons is perhaps why Hong Kong identity and political mobilization research has thus far largely focused on the Yellow side.

To attenuate these difficulties, I used my networks to access the field. As a former journalist working in Hong Kong for a decade, I utilized my professional networks with people from different political camps to recruit informants. Therefore, there are resources that I can use as a springboard to get access to the field and then gradually snowball the samples. These include representatives of pro-establishment parties and organizations that I have interviewed in the past and informants who were referred to me by former colleagues.

I collected the data in Hong Kong from January 2023 to May 2023 through in-depth interviews with key members or volunteers in pro-establishment groups. I began my recruitment of informants with a local federation (地區聯會), a hometown association (同鄉會), and a pro-establishment political party (建制政黨). Then, the informants recommended others in a snowball manner. In the end, I was able to conduct in-depth interviews with 14 informants. They are from six different pro-establishment organizations. Eight of them are males, and six of them are females. Their ages range from 26 to 78 (M = 58) (See Table 4.2 for further information).

Table 4.2 Descriptive Demographics and Background of My Informants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Position
K	M	78	Member and volunteer of a local federation
U	M	72	Member and volunteer of a local federation
C	M	73	Member and volunteer of a local federation
D	M	73	Member and volunteer of a local federation
F	F	68	Director of Canton-based hometown association A
O	F	70	Director of Canton-based hometown association A
T	M	60	Director of Canton-based hometown association B
Y	F	72	Full-time staff of a Canton-based hometown association B
S	F	70	Full-time staff of a Fujan-based hometown association

[48] Link to the story:
https://theinitium.com/article/20190802-opinion-francis-investigation-governement-and-police-supporters/

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Position
N	M	26	Executive committee of pro-establishment party C
J	M	32	Executive committee of pro-establishment party C
M	M	39	Executive committee of pro-establishment party C
R	F	42	A district councilor affiliated with pro-establishment party D
A	F	36	Member of a police group

Since I expected my informants to talk about sensitive internal information, I promised them anonymity. Approval was granted to this study by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Each interview lasted for approximately 2-3 hours and followed a semi-structured format. This approach allowed for open-ended discussions, fostering unguided introspection. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for further analysis. The coding process involved two cycles (Miles et al., 2014). Initially, first-cycle codes were identified from the transcripts, which were then organized thematically during the second-cycle coding. Throughout the analysis, I continuously compared and revised both new and existing codes. Finally, I translated the excerpts from Cantonese interviews into English.

4.5 Methodological and Ethical Challenges

In this study, I used personal connections in Hong Kong as a springboard to get access to the field and then gradually snowball my samples. This method, i.e., using one's biographic experiences and connections to kickstart fieldwork, constitutes what has been called "opportunistic research" (Riemer, 1977). Opportunistic research is efficient and convenient. It is common for fieldworkers to begin with whom they are familiar with in their works (Lofland, 1995, p.10). However, this method also comes with a risk of potentially biasing data and reinforcing personal prejudices in the analysis, as the data was generated with people close to my social circle.

One way to tackle the problem of biased data is to diversify my participants. During the snowballing process, I purposefully asked the participants to recommend informants from other pro-establishment organizations. Since they sometimes connect and collaborate, I was able to recruit informants from six pro-establishment groups. Another way to increase the validity of my findings is to read the data reflectively and triangulate the results. If data from multiple methods point to the same conclusion, then the validity of the findings could be enhanced (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p.274). Therefore, I constantly compare my findings with insights from existing literature and the analysis of media reports to validate the findings.

In addition to the challenge of collecting valid data, studying political identities and mobilization in a politically restrictive context like Hong Kong can be potentially risky to both research participants and the researcher. The major risk in a nondemocratic context is the security harm. In nondemocratic contexts, participants of political research and researchers themselves may become a target for local security agents and come under personal and digital surveillance (Peritore, 1990). As shown in some extreme cases, such as the conflict zones of the Middle East (Romano, 2006), respondents may risk arrest or torture for simply speaking with the researchers.

To attenuate the security risk, it is important to make an ethically informed risk assessment about contacting the informants in the safest possible ways and protecting their confidentiality during and after the research (Bronéus, 2011). Following the suggestion of Peritore (1990) and Reny (2016), I used relatively unobtrusive data collection methods to avoid unnecessary attention. These methods include conducting “quiet” interviews in safe, indoor areas within a limited time. Indeed, many informants expressed concerns about discussing politics due to the newly enacted national security law. As such, I asked them to pick the sites for interviews. Many of them decided to talk in private places like their homes. All informants were informed about the scope of this study and how their data were to be

used. All of them provided either written or verbal consent to participate. Another method I used to protect both the researcher and the interviewees is to keep the identity of the sources anonymous. Interview materials, such as the audiotape, were de-identified and stored on an encrypted and password-protected hard drive (Wackenhut, 2017).

The data collection often takes multiple rounds of interviews. There are two reasons behind this. First, many of my informants are elderly individuals who were not able to maintain focus and energy during lengthy interviews. Therefore, the approach of conducting multiple interviews to lengthy conversations appeared to be an obviously better option for data collection. Second, when getting to know elderly individuals in Canton culture, it is often more appropriate to start the meeting with small talks (寒暄) or accompanying the elders to "Yum Cha (飲茶)," which is a type of Cantonese meal that traditionally used as a way to show care and respect for the elderly, before the formal conversation. These formalities significantly increased the required time to gain access to the field and the interviews. Furthermore, eight of the informants were interviewed twice or more. Each interview lasted roughly between 30 minutes and 2.5 hours. For these reasons, the sample offers relatively few interviews, but they were rich in yielding answers to my inquiries.

In the results below, I describe how the informants I interviewed discussed their experience participating in activities organized by pro-establishment groups, confessed their internal political thoughts, evaluated the content of pro-establishment media, and articulated their motivations for engaging with pro-establishment groups. Then, I will discuss the implications of these findings.

4.6 Findings

4.6.1 Group Membership Based on Outward Conduct

During the course of the interviews, two stories were related to me that left a lasting impression. The first story took place amidst the pro-establishment camp's countermobilization in 2019. R (46), an executive member of a pro-establishment party, had to help organize a "national anthem flash mob (快閃國歌)" event on September 12, 2019. This gathering brought together hundreds of pro-establishment supporters in a shopping mall, where they sang Mandarin patriotic songs to demonstrate popular support of the regime and counter the anti-ELAB movement. In addition to the national anthem, March of the Volunteers (義勇軍進行曲), they also sang Ode to the Motherland (歌唱祖國), a socialist song commonly heard at public events in Mainland China.

However, as R recalled, this was a challenging task for her. Having grown up and received education during the colonial era, R was unfamiliar with the socialist song, confessing, "My Mandarin is terrible, and I did not know how to sing the other song." Consequently, R resorted to lip-syncing, as she knew that as long as she could get through the performance, no one would take notice.

The second story revolved around the National Security Education Day on April 15, 2020. On that day, N (26), a young pro-establishment party executive member, was tasked with organizing a booth and presenting posters aimed at nurturing patriotism, emphasizing the importance of national security, and urging visitors to sign in support of the impending implementation of the national security law, scheduled to take effect two months later on June 30.

N is a native Hongkongese who rarely visits the mainland. He candidly shared his feelings about holding the poster presentation, saying, "I was born in Hong Kong, educated in Hong Kong. When I visit the mainland, I feel like a tourist and lack desires to truly

understand what is happening there…[to me,] the emotional value of China is zero." Nonetheless, at the event, he managed to simulate a compelling sense of enthusiasm to fulfill his responsibilities.

Having previously run as a candidate representing a pro-establishment party in district council elections, N possesses fluency in the rhetoric of patriotism. He employed this rhetoric to express gratitude to visitors for their love of the nation and their support of the central government. In addition, he encouraged them to "oppose violence, and stop chaos (止暴制亂)." Eventually, he amassed hundreds of signatures, and stated, "As long as I know what needs to be said, everything falls into place."

In summarizing the event experience, N described these political performances within his circle as "submitting homework (交功課)." — a metaphorical expression used to depict the act of taking noticeable actions to showcase loyalty and affection towards the Chinese nation in ways that serve the regime's agenda. N concluded, "You just need to show everyone that you are patriotic, then no one care about your genuine thoughts."

What the testimonies of R and N depicted is an important aspect of the political life within pro-establishment groups: For anyone to be recognized as "pro-establishment" in pro-establishment groups, they should constantly exhibit what I am terming *outward conduct* that signifies supporting attitudes to the official ideology, which is based on Chinese nationalism and the claim that the Communist Party can lead the nation — and Hong Kong as well — towards its historical "great rejuvenation (偉大復興)" (Carrai, 2021).

To further elaborate on the matter, two key features of such outward conduct are worth more explanation. Firstly, the conduct is considered "outward" because pro-establishment organizations spend little effort to delve into the "inward." While they highly prioritize the political posturing of Chinese nationalism, internal discussions surrounding these ideas and ideologies are rarely, if ever, held.

As the findings reveal, pro-establishment group members indeed harbor diverse, or even fragmented, political opinions, with many not entirely subscribing to the norms and ideologies espoused by the regime. Therefore, there exists a disconnection between their internal political thoughts and the public image they must project as unwavering regime supporters. Consequently, pro-establishment groups and their members need to establish an environment that allows for the coexistence of implicit political grievances and apathy alongside the outward manifestation of nationalist fervor. Emphasizing the "outward" aspect of the pro-establishment identity thus becomes a means to cultivate such a space.

Certainly, this is not to suggest that my informants are all secretly rebellious or blindly obedient. Rather, they demonstrated different levels of faith in the regime. Some informants are more fervent believers of the official ideology. C (73) and K (78), two active members of a local federation, are two of them. During the interviews, they repeatedly emphasized an aspiration for national prosperity and their trust in the CCP based on the economic growth China has witnessed in recent decades. C stated, "If you take a look, China is completely transformed. You can't even recognize the country compared to the past." Likewise, K attributed his support of the regime to the exemplary governance of the CPP that led to the rise of the international standing of China, noting, "Now even the United States is wary of China. They consider China its primary competitor."

However, more informants are just like N. In personal conversations, political apathy and criticism can and do thrive. Some informants do not endorse the ruling ideology of the CCP. F (68), a director of a Canton-based hometown association, embraces the idea of Chinese nationalism but refuses to extend the patriotic sentiment to the communist administration, saying, "I love the nation, because I am Chinese. Otherwise, who should I love?...But I don't love the party, and I never will." S (70), a full-time staff in a Fujan-based

hometown association, shares a similar feeling. She stated, “I immigrated from the mainland, I grew up there…I love China, but the CCP is not the nation.”

Furthermore, the informants complained about a range of policies, including the housing policies that allegedly led to the overly-expensive property market in Hong Kong and even highly sensitive ones like the removal of presidential term limits in China. For instance, U (72), an active member and volunteer of a local federation, voiced concerns by stating, “Xi should be content with two terms. He cannot remain in power indefinitely, just like Kim Jong Un.”

Holding political views not entirely congruent with their affiliated organizations, one may expect they would at least occasionally encounter internal conflicts with other fellow group members. However, their testimonies suggest otherwise. My informants have rarely encountered any ideological disagreement within pro-establishment groups. In part, it is because hardly anyone seems to invest enough interest to initiate related discussions, as their grievances do not amount to be strong and are usually expressed together with an additional sense of apathy. Research about the political culture in Hong Kong suggests that the conservative fraction of the society still exhibited a general sense of political passivity and a lack of political efficacy (Kuan & Lau, 1995). This is also the case of my informants. Often, after lashing out a series of criticisms against the political establishments, the informants would mitigate the intensity of their criticism. Typical lines include, “But it does not matter if I disagree,” “The CCP rulership is a reality that will not change,” and “It is useless to argue.”

Secondly, the exhibition of the outward conduct of Chinese nationalism is meaning generative and ritualistic. It is crucial to refrain from labeling these actions as “fake” or “deceptive” solely based on their performative nature. Instead, by offering tangible manifestations of their commitment to Chinese nationalism and the regime, pro-establishment

group members can claim they are “pro-establishment” and earn acceptance within their respective groups.

The existing literature on nondemocratic rule often depicts nondemocratic regimes as characterized by widespread apathy and political demobilization (Hellmeier & Weidmann, 2020). In part, this holds true for Hong Kong, where politically conservative individuals are typically associated with pragmatism and a low inclination towards political participation. Driven by a sense of political pragmatism, conservative Hong Kong citizens are likely to oppose costly and unrealistic democratic movements that could potentially incite social unrest and invite repression. Consequently, they become potential recruits for the nondemocratic regime. However, political apathy and demobilization can be a double-edged sword, as politically pragmatic citizens may simply abstain from political participation altogether or exhibit limited interest in the norms and ideologies promoted by the regime.

The emphasis on outward conduct offers a solution to this predicament, enabling both pro-establishment organizations and their members to navigate the challenge posed by members’ internal apathy or defiance. Despite not fully subscribing to the political ideologies promoted by the regime, many informants justify their participation by believing that their internal thoughts and political performances are not actually incongruent but just reasonable and strategic actions given the existing external constraints. For them, the identity of being a pro-establishment group member is not contingent upon their internal values, opinions, and beliefs but rather emerges from what they committed to do for their respective groups.

During the tenure of many informants with their respective organizations, they were rarely called upon to vocalize their thoughts. Recollecting their over 30 years of service in hometown associations, both F and S cannot recall any occasions that they were invited or required by their supervisors — usually the funders of the organizations — to discuss politics. However, they were regularly called upon to act for the groups. As F explained,

“They don’t care [what you think]. As long as you attend their events or do something [to show support], then it is enough.”

At the minimum, “to do something” entails embracing the clichéd rhetoric of patriotism within the realm of their organization’s life — just like what N did on National Security Education Day — irrespective of their genuine sentiments towards the official ideology, whether it be apathy or discreet disapproval.

To perform this script of Chinese nationalism, members are expected, but not necessarily coerced, to do more than display verbal compliance. To strengthen influence and positions with their groups, members may take actions that benefit their organizations. Elite members may offer financial resources. Examples include providing venues for group activities, funding the daily operation of organizations, and sponsoring tables at important events like the National Day Reception Dinner (國慶酒會). Mid-level members with administrative capacity, like R and N, may serve as facilitators and organizers of groups’ activities and events.

The pool of useful talents extends beyond providing financial resources and administrative capacities. F (68) and O (70), two directors in a hometown association, are very illustrative examples. Coming from disadvantaged families and growing up during the cultural revolution in the Mainland, F and O were deprived of the opportunity to receive regular education as schools once stopped normal operation during their childhood. However, they were terrific singers and familiar with patriotic songs. Hence, on top of their attendance in regular group activities, their organizations often called upon them to join entertainment performances in important nationalist events, such as National Day Reception Dinners (國慶酒會). Their sustained participation in these events over the long term contributes to their attainment of directorial positions within their respective organizations. This shows that by

participating in the public simulation of patriotism, non-elite members can also expand their influence with pro-establishment groups.

Only through enacting these political performances can a pro-establishment group member consolidate their membership and strengthen their position within the organizations, thereby becoming more "pro-establishment." Power, during this process, is generated, endowing those who excel in nationalist displays with amplified influence and enhanced access to valuable resources, including financial rewards and political appointments. The expectation placed upon pro-establishment group members is not necessarily rooted in genuine faith in the regime but instead in their capacity to comprehend and perform the prescribed roles, just like what my informants showcased above. Thus, the construction of a pro-establishment political identity thrives on the active and obedient execution of these performances. These performances are not inauthentic or deceptive; Rather, they constitute genuine, willing, informed, and deliberate life choices made by pro-establishment group members.

4.6.2 The Role of Media in Facilitating Political Performances

Do the pro-establishment media play a role in shaping the political identities and opinions of pro-establishment groups? Interestingly, all informants deny being influenced by pro-establishment media, confidently asserting their ability to think independently. This suggests that if any persuasive effects of the pro-establishment media exist, they are likely implicit and not immediately apparent.

However, pro-establishment digital media serve at least two distinct functions for my informants. Firstly, it provides a political space where pro-establishment supporters can safely connect with like-minded individuals and express their opinions. Previous research indicates that pro-democracy individuals in Hong Kong have been engaging in "disconnective practices" online, such as avoiding connections with pro-establishment

contacts or unfriending them (Chu & Yeo, 2020). In line with the literature, some informants, particularly younger members of pro-establishment groups, have reported facing criticism from peers and experiencing a loss of connections due to their political affiliation. However, pro-establishment digital media offers them a space to engage with those who share similar beliefs, reaffirming their convictions without encountering uncomfortable responses or potential conflicts (Vraga et al., 2015).

One informant, M (39), an executive member of a pro-establishment party, described these pro-establishment digital media as "a fireplace for warmth[49] (圍爐取暖)." M explains, "The society is too polarized, so I gather around a fireplace for warmth. Having more voices that shared the same views around me made me feel more at ease."

M is also aware of the "engagement bait" strategy frequently employed by pro-establishment digital media to elicit "likes" on Facebook. M admitted that he frequently responded to these calls to online action. Conventionally, researchers believe that the act of merely "liking" a post, often referred to as "clicktivism," can be politically disempowering due to its lack of real-world impact (Shirky, 2011; Vitak et al., 2011). However, as M argued, these calls to online action serve as valuable outlets for emotional expression. He recounted how, prior to the 2019 anti-ELAB protests, he had never been politically active and had no idea how to express himself politically. However, the action calls from pro-establishment digital media provided him with a convenient and low-cost way to initiate his political participation.

Secondly, pro-establishment digital media generates and disseminates discursive narratives, including political statements, metaphors, imagery, and slogans, to pro-establishment group members. This process contributes to the construction, standardization,

[49] The term "gathering around a fireplace for warmth (圍爐取暖) is a common saying among Hong Kong internet users. It metaphorically represents how people connect with like-minded individuals for gratification in the polarized society of Hong Kong.

and promotion of the script of Chinese nationalism that pro-establishment group members must understand, memorize, and perform in their organization's life.

For individual members of pro-establishment groups, effectively showcasing their loyalty to the regime, or at least the semblance of obedience, requires them to remain well-informed and attuned to the ever-changing political climate. Pro-establishment digital media serves as a source of updates, constantly renewing their understanding of the symbolic universe of the Blues. It sustains the rhetorical iterations of all patriotic repertoires by providing guidance on what to say, which terminologies to employ, whom to support or oppose, when to take action or remain passive, and more.

Throughout my interviews, I observed a recurring pattern in the vocabularies and phrases employed by my informants, which closely mirrored the discourse prevalent in pro-establishment digital media. Black-clad protests were referred to as "Black riots (黑暴)." Leaders of democratic protests were labeled as "political tricksters (政棍)." The concept of "A rising East, a declining West (東升西降)" was frequently invoked by informants to describe the competition between China and the U.S. The slogan "Transition from chaos to order (由亂及治)" was used to summarize the post-national security law era in Hong Kong. This highlights how the propaganda disseminated by pro-establishment media has effectively imbued pro-establishment group members with essential rhetoric they could use in daily political performances.

The story of N that I present at the beginning of the finding section serves as a good example of this. When N worked for his organization to hold a poster presentation promoting the national security law, he needed to know what to say to fulfill the task. In order to act "pro-establishment," he knew he had to address the opposition's leaders as "political tricksters," refer to black-clad protests as "Black riots," and utilize slogans like "oppose

violence, and stop chaos." Only by adeptly mastering these nationalist rhetorical strategies can he effectively conduct the political performances of being "pro-establishment."

On multiple occasions, my informants quickly noticed that certain notions and expressions I used were "not patriotic." For instance, when I brought up the concepts of "Hongkongese identity" and "Chinese identity" in an interview question, K, an active member of a local federation, promptly pointed out that "only Yellow Ribbons would say these things." As he elaborated, framing Hong Kong and Chinese identities as two separate concepts is politically suspicious, as this may be perceived as an attempt to provoke tensions between Hong Kong and China. According to K's recollection, he has encountered these concepts only from opposition leaders or in what he refers to as "Yellow" media.

Therefore, to be "pro-establishment," in addition to knowing what needs to be said, group members must also avoid touching on political taboos. Pro-establishment digital media functions as an ongoing resource, continuously updating members' knowledge of the script. It serves as a reminder of what is acceptable and what is not in the context of being a pro-establishment group member. In this regard, the function of pro-establishment media may not primarily revolve around persuading its readership. Instead, it serves as a source of ideological and behavioral guidance for pro-establishment group members, bridging the gap between the top-down identity framework promoted by the regime and the actual political performances enacted by individual members at the individual level.

4.6.3 Why Participate? Material Incentives

When questioned about their motivations for participating in pro-establishment groups, two distinct sets of reasons emerged among my informants, namely the material and ideological incentives.

Previous research about the united front's efforts from the regime in Hong Kong typically focuses on how they use material incentives to buy supporters' loyalty (Lee, 2020).

These incentives include political appointments (Cheng, 2020; Yuen, 2023), individualized services (Wong et al., 2019; Wong, 2014; Wong & Or, 2020), and immigrant assistance (Lee, 2023).

My findings suggest that material incentives have motivated the participation of some informants. As many informants observed, top members of their organizations are usually dedicated to personal advancements in the rank of the existing political establishment. These usually include holding offices in national-level political positions in the National People's Congress (NPC) and the CPPCC. These positions provide valuable access to sources of policy goods and connections with government officials, which can greatly benefit the careers of these top members, who are mostly business elites.

Less ambitious members, however, may just want to get a job. N is a good example. As he revealed, compared to the same position in a pro-democracy party, the salary of working in a pro-establishment party is usually significantly higher. Hence, the more lucrative wage has attracted him to join.

Some financial benefits are indirectly delivered. To reward the service of mid-level members, the Chinese government has been allocating them to offices in the province- or city-level committee of the CPPCC. These positions can be valuable conduits to private economic rent. For example, Hong Kong citizens who are members of the province- or city-levels committee of the CPPCC can apply for a cross-boundary vehicle license[50]. These licenses have been limited economic goods on the black market, with reports revealing that each license was once worth more than a million yuan[51] (Li, 2012).

[50] Policy document published by the Guangdong Provincial Public Security Department. Section four stipulates how members of CPPCC at the province and city levels can apply for a license. See the link: http://gdga.gd.gov.cn/bsfw/bmts/content/post_2654285.html (in Chinese)

[51] As of October 2013, it roughly amounts to 140,000 USD.

In addition to monetary rewards, certain informants view pro-establishment organizations as a valuable source of support and assistance. This is particularly true for immigrants from China, who often maintain strong connections with their families back home. Consequently, when the need arises to seek support or assistance for their families in their hometowns, pro-establishment organizations, given their close ties to the Chinese government, can provide aid that may not be accessible through other channels.

F, the director of a hometown association, recalled a situation where her family's house in her hometown was subjected to forced evictions (強拆). In order to secure better relocation and compensation, she reached out to her hometown association and, through the organization, contacted the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government — the representative office of the Chinese government in Hong Kong. The Liaison Office then facilitated negotiations with the local government on her behalf. Ultimately, her family obtained more generous compensation compared to other families.

4.6.4 Why Participate? A Complex Mix of Motivations

It should be noted that material incentives do not solely drive the involvement of my informants in pro-establishment organizations. Ideological incentives also play a significant role. Many interviewees stressed that their participation is driven by sincere aspirations to advance their political goals.

Among all ideological incentives, the most notable commonality lies in the pursuit of reinstating political and economic stability within Hong Kong society, which has been tumultuously affected by the upheaval brought about by democratic and localist movements. As previously indicated, my informants consist of individuals with varying degrees of trust in the governing regime. Nonetheless, they have managed to arrive at a general consensus marked by the disapproval of the radical and confrontational dissident movements that have

emerged in Hong Kong in recent years. This collective consensus has motivated them to align themselves with the pro-establishment camp.

More conservative informants tend to interpret dissident movements in Hong Kong through a nationalist lens. For example, K, an active member of a local federation, subscribes to the theory that opposition leaders are predominantly foreign agents who are controlled by countries like the United States. K is also convinced by the narrative that Yellow Ribbons have been subjected to brainwashing, attributing this to the dominance of foreign agents in the education and media sectors of the city. Motivated by these beliefs, K actively participated in multiple counterprotests in 2019 to express support for the police, stating, “If it is not the police, who can stop the black riots? If we don’t support the police, Hong Kong would have descended into complete chaos.” Furthermore, he spontaneously joined his friends in removing the slogans on the Lennon Wall that denigrated the police.

On the other hand, less nationalist informants typically refrain from outright negation of the ideal of democracy. Nevertheless, they perceive democratic protests as impracticable due to the significant power disparity between the dissenters and the ruling regime. Consequently, engaging in what they perceive as a futile confrontation holds little meaning and only leads to chaos.

As J, an executive member of a pro-establishment party, explained, “When the punishment from the central [government] came, democrats struggled to even survive, let alone make a meaningful contribution to Hong Kong.” Similarly, R, a pro-establishment district councilor, agreed that the political resistance initiated by the democrats and localists is unrealistic and has imposed an unbearable cost on Hong Kong society. The protests have resulted in casualties and severely disrupted the city's normal economic activities. R stated, “Democracy is not a panacea, and not everything needs to be politicized. Creating chaos has consequences, and ultimately, no one benefits from it.”

Therefore, joining pro-establishment groups represents a response from my informants to some extent, as they aim to rectify the perceived wrongs, seeking to curb violent conflicts, reduce the excessive politicization of social affairs, and restore Hong Kong's tradition of prioritizing political stability, economic development, and good governance over unrealistic political ideals.

It is worth noting that this general aversion against the idea of politicization of social affairs drives my informants to reject using the term "Blue Ribbons" to label themselves. Many of them considered this term as overly politicized and was imposed upon them against their will by the media. When asked who they are, many of them regularly referred to themselves as people not interested in politics but only concerned about Hong Kong society. Examples of their responses include "I do not align with specific colors (我無分顏色)" and "I am just ordinary citizens with moderate views (意見溫和的普通人)." This implies that the label of "Blue Ribbons" may carry little weight in their political identity formation.

Finally, some informants consider joining pro-establishment organizations as an alternative strategy to seek political empowerment. Despite pro-establishment members having to constantly provide external evidence of obeisance, some consider the display of outward conduct as merely a necessary cost in exchange for valuable political room to pursue their political aspirations. The network of the pro-establishment camp sometimes enables them to better assist citizens in contacting officials and also provide a channel for expressing opinions to the government internally. J summarized, "If I join the pro-democracy camp, none of these is possible. But now I can better serve the community."

Certain interviewees perceive the pro-establishment camp as offering them a platform to demonstrate their political abilities. Existing survey data suggests that pro-establishment

supporters tend to be older and have lower levels of education.[52] As some informants perceived, the demographic composition is reflected in the member base of pro-establishment groups. As noted by N, members of pro-establishment groups are generally less educated and may lack political eloquence. However, this situation has paradoxically created an opportunity for young individuals like him to shine. Pro-establishment groups ultimately require talented individuals who possess the capacity to craft compelling political rhetoric, and this demand allows young talents to find their space within these groups and make an impact.

4.7 Conclusion

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the development of political identity among members of the pro-establishment group, commonly referred to as the Blue Ribbons, and the countermobilization mechanism employed by a nondemocratic regime in Hong Kong.

Previous research on pro-establishment supporters has often portrayed them as fervent nationalists or unwavering regime supporters (Chan, 2021; Chen & Szeto, 2015; Song et al., 2023; Ngai, 2020). However, my findings suggest that the reality is more nuanced. Overall, the participants do not hold homogenous political opinions and beliefs. Many privately express varying levels of apathy and grievances toward the idea of Chinese nationalism, the Chinese government, and the Hong Kong administration.

It follows the logic that the political identities of pro-establishment group members are not solely determined by their inner thoughts and beliefs. Rather, it is more dependent on their outward conduct. Specifically, their fluency in the symbolic language of nationalist and

[52]According to the survey conducted by The Chinese University of Hong Kong: https://campaign.theinitium.com/20200820-opinion-hk-citizen-attitude-future/index.html (in Chinese)

pro-regime nationalist rhetoric, as well as their engagement in related political performances, plays a crucial role in defining their identity as pro-establishment group members. To be considered "pro-establishment," group members must possess a deep understanding of the disciplinary and symbolic effects of pro-regime rhetoric and know what to say and do at the appropriate times.

The emphasis on outward conduct may serve certain purposes within the formation of pro-establishment groups. Previous research indicates that politically conservative individuals in Hong Kong often exhibit a materialist orientation. They prioritize pragmatic objectives such as good governance and economic stability over democratic ideals and the advancement of civil society (Lau, 1984; Sing, 1996; Kuan & Lau, 1995; Lau & Kuan, 1995). As a result, politically pragmatic individuals may view democratic protests as unrealistic and costly, making them potential supporters of the pro-establishment camp. However, political pragmatism presents a double-edged sword, as these individuals may also disengage from politics altogether. This is evident in the findings presented in chapter three, where readers of pro-establishment media show little responsiveness to almost all normative themes, except for those related to a self-reliant working spirit suggesting that everyone should take care of their own business. Taken together, these factors pose a challenge for the pro-establishment camp in mobilizing their supporter base.

The emphasis on outward conduct provides a potential solution to this challenge. It allows pro-establishment groups to recruit citizens who may not hold strong ideological beliefs but are willing to conform to a nationalist and pro-regime script out of pragmatic incentives. This approach aligns with the principle of China's united front work, which seeks to establish alliances between the ruling regime and non-communist political entities while maintaining flexibility (Armstrong, 1980).

My informants also comment on the role of media in shaping their political identity. The emphasis on outward conduct of loyalty and obedience necessitates that members of pro-establishment groups understand what to say and what actions to take in their organizational life, highlighting the need to stay informed about the ever-changing script promoted by the regime. Pro-establishment digital media serves as a constant source that updates the members' understanding of this script, providing them with a stock of terminologies and narratives that they can draw upon to reproduce the iconography of their groups.

This illustrates how state propagandists influence the formation of political identities among their supporters in a top-down manner. Most existing qualitative studies on the role of media in identity formation solely focus on the symbolic representation of political identities in news media. In contrast, this study offers a rare account that encompasses both the perspectives of the media and the audience in the formation of identity discourses. It demonstrates how identity discourses can be generated through the interplay of power dynamics between the media and the audience in a nondemocratic context. In the case of Hong Kong, state propagandists consistently generate political discourses to update the defining content and boundaries of pro-establishment groups, creating a symbolic universe that ascribed a script of acceptable political performances for its members.

Existing research about countermobilization in Hong Kong often uses this case to illustrate how a nondemocratic regime builds an incentive structure by patronizing social elites who possess resources and networks to mobilize the mass. This approach allows the regime to garner support without overtly appearing to be orchestrating the efforts. Within this literature, pro-establishment groups are often referred to as "outsourced agency" (Cheng, 2020, p.13), as these groups typically claim to be independent and represent the silent majority, comprising "real" citizens who act voluntarily in support of the regime (Cheng, 2020; Yuen, 2023).

Nevertheless, to showcase their independence to the public, pro-establishment grassroots groups must at least maintain structural independence from the administration. This can pose additional challenges for the regime, as they must find a way to coordinate these decentralized groups without establishing official affiliations with them. The findings of this study provide a possible explanation for how this coordination can be achieved. By disseminating political information from the top-down, pro-establishment digital media can help facilitate the coordination of these decentralized groups.

The notion that a nondemocratic regime can enforce compliance without winning the hearts and minds of its supporters is not a new concept. In Wedeen's (2015) influential research on the formation of political identities in Syria, she suggests that the Assad regime engages in preposterous propaganda that does not convince citizens but clutter public space, provide the formula for acceptable speech, and thus habituate citizen to obey most of the time. In China, hard propaganda does not persuade people to support the state but does make them more politically quiescent (Huang, 2015). However, while these studies have illustrated how nondemocratic regimes can signal their strength by creating "guidelines for acceptable speech and behavior" (Wedeen, 2015, p.6), they typically base the analysis on the assumption that forcing people to display outward compliance robs their civil enthusiasm. As individuals without civil enthusiasm are less likely to rebel, these regimes can secure popular obedience at a relatively low cost.

But in the case of Hong Kong, the sinew of authoritarian power is sustained in a distinctly different manner. Unlike in Syria and China, where fully controlling public opinion is possible, the Hong Kong government cannot fully censor and clutter public opinion so that alternative competing political discourses are readily available in society. Thus far, the regime has refrained from implementing any form of Internet censorship system in Hong Kong, allowing opposition political discourses to thrive online. This can be attributed to the

institutional framework of "one country, two systems," which grants the Hong Kong administration considerably less operational control over society compared to its mainland counterpart. As a result, the administration lacks the authority to directly mobilize pro-regime political participation online and offline. Consequently, pro-establishment groups in Hong Kong must compete for popular support. This creates a special agentic context in which pro-establishment groups must offer incentives to attract individuals to participate, and citizens can choose whether or not to engage with pro-establishment groups.

In this context, the requirement for pro-establishment group members to display outward compliance cannot be seen as coercion but as an option the regime offers to most citizens. As the finding suggests, my informants choose to participate in pro-establishment groups for a variety of reasons, including expressing genuine ideological support, seeking monetary return and community service, advancing their own careers, or even pursuing political space and power to promote their political ideals. This indicates that the strategy of required compliance may operate under a different logic in the context of Hong Kong. In cases such as China and Syria, where the state monopolizes public political discourses, the regime can forewarn the society about how strong the regime is via the act of forced compliance. In the case of Hong Kong, where the state cannot monopolize political discourses and political participation remains largely optional, the requirement of superficial compliance becomes a strategy for pro-establishment groups to recruit more members. Regardless of people's inner political thoughts, those who are willing to conform to a nationalist and pro-regime script will be accepted by pro-establishment groups. This, in turn, creates an opportunity for individuals to seek political empowerment by participating in pro-establishment groups, where their civic enthusiasm is not diminished but can thrive in alternative ways.

Using the case of Hong Kong, this study presents a potential explanation for the production of pro-establishment political discourses and how state propagandists and the regime were able to mobilize supporters both online and offline in response to opposition threats. Thus far, this dissertation has utilized textual analysis, regression analysis, and ethnographic work. In the subsequent chapter, I will aim to provide a comprehensive overview of the rise of the Blue Ribbons, offering a summary that concludes all the findings. Additionally, I will engage in a discussion regarding the overall insights we can gain about communicative and mobilization strategies within nondemocratic regimes.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION: HOW TO INTERPRET THE RISE OF BLUE RIBBONS?

5.1 Introduction

Hong Kong's political landscape has been characterized by a clear division between the anti-regime pro-democracy camp, popularly known as the Yellow Ribbons, and the pro-establishment camp, commonly referred to as the Blue Ribbons. While numerous studies have shed light on anti-regime groups and movements in Hong Kong, a notable gap persists in the scholarly understanding of pro-establishment identity formation within the city. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of field studies that delve into the intricate dynamics of pro-establishment organizations.

The primary objective of this dissertation is to address this knowledge gap by examining the formation of identity discourses, the dissemination of digital propaganda, and the countermobilization efforts within the often-overlooked pro-establishment camp. By shedding light on these aspects, this research provides a more comprehensive understanding of the Blue Ribbons phenomenon and contributes to the literature of digital propaganda and countermobilization in nondemocratic regimes.

To accomplish these objectives, I employed a mixed-method approach to conduct three studies. First, I examined the political discourses and propaganda strategies adopted by pro-establishment digital media. Second, I ran a regression analysis to test the mobilizing effects of these observed discourses and strategies on Facebook. Finally, I interviewed active members of pro-establishment groups to gather an individual's and reader's perspective of pro-establishment identity and investigated the motivation of their political participation online and offline.

In this concluding chapter, I will summarize my major findings and discuss their profound political consequences to Hong Kong and academic implications to the literature.

During the discussion, I will also suggest how the findings may inspire future studies. Specifically, the discussion addressed RQ6: What can we learn about the communicative and mobilization strategies in nondemocratic regimes from these findings? What can we say about how nondemocratic regimes counter subversion via online and offline platforms?

5.2 Final Discussion

5.2.1 Invoking Cultural Backlash Against the Liberals

In chapter two, I present an analysis that delves into the political discourses disseminated by twelve pro-establishment media on Facebook, with a specific focus on their efforts to foster a pro-regime identity. My major argument centers around the observation that these pro-establishment media outlets heavily rely on materialistic values as the foundation of their digital propaganda, strategically aligning themselves with the conservative segments of Hong Kong society.

This strategic approach is manifested through the conservative norms underpinning their news coverage, encompassing themes such as security and order, development and achievement, patriotism, charity and services, politicization criticism, self-reliant hardworking, and filial piety. In contrast, postmaterialist values, such as social equality and political freedom, have received minimal attention in their political messaging. Accordingly, groups and individuals associated with the regime were portrayed as protectors of the material development progress of society, while the political enemies of the regime, including the Yellow Ribbons and Western democratic states, were depicted as disruptive forces hindering such progress.

These findings shed light on how Chinese state propagandists counter democratic movements in Hong Kong that challenge the existing political status quo: By actively harnessing support from conservative citizens through materialist and traditional values to provoke a backlash against the liberals.

This approach to soliciting support from the conservative fraction of society to counter the liberals resonates with the concept of "cultural backlash" put forth by Norris and Inglehart (2019), which elucidates the emergence of authoritarian populism in advanced democracies, suggesting that as Western societies undergo rapid industrialization and become increasingly liberal (Inglehart, 2015), conservative citizens in these societies have aligned themselves with authoritarian-populist parties that pledge to curtail the ongoing liberal revolution. According to the theory, such cultural backlash has led to the rise of authoritarian-populist parties in the West, including the Trump supporters in the U.S. and the U.K. Independence Party in Britain.

Nonetheless, my findings show that the alliance between authoritarians and conservative masses resistant to liberalism is not confined solely to Western democracies. In nondemocratic regimes that have similarly undergone rapid industrialization, such as Hong Kong, a cultural backlash against the liberal forces can also manifest, in which the regime may assume a proactive role in orchestrating the entire scenario.

This highlights the potential for research on the phenomenon of cultural backlash to transcend the boundaries of Western democracies. In rapidly developing nondemocratic regimes such as Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, or Brunei, where economies are experiencing significant growth, regimes may also employ traditionalism and materialism as a means to counterbalance the potential liberalizing effects accompanying rapid economic progress. By expanding the scope of this line of inquiry, scholars can explore whether and how pro-government propaganda in these countries shapes political discourses within the framework of the materialist/non-materialist dichotomy, thus contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the global dynamics of cultural backlash.

At the local level, my research findings also hold the potential to inspire future studies on pro-government propaganda within the context of Hong Kong. Existing studies typically

use the framing theory to explain how the pro-establishment propaganda in Hong Kong defames democratic movements and pro-democracy supporters. These efforts involve framing the movements as violators of the "rule of law" (Liu, 2015), sources of public disturbance, or influenced by foreign governments (Lee & Chan, 2018). Despite the theoretical usefulness of these frames, they have often been examined in isolation, obscuring the understanding of the interconnections between them.

In contrast, my research findings indicate that these frames are not disparate entities but integral components of a coordinated propaganda campaign orchestrated by the regime. They serve to construct discourses that position democratic movements as antithetical to traditional and materialist values, thereby impeding the normal material progression of Hong Kong society. My research offers a valuable analytical framework that establishes linkages among the existing frames of pro-establishment propaganda, suggesting that they could be interpreted through the lens of the materialist/non-materialist dichotomy. This approach underscores the significance of accounting for social value shifts when analyzing pro-government political framing within the context of Hong Kong.

Certainly, the use of traditional values to counter liberal subversion is not a novel tactic in authoritarians' toolkit. Singapore, for instance, serves as a prime example of a nondemocratic regime that has undergone a remarkable phase of rapid industrialization and exceptional economic growth in previous decades. However, Singapore has consistently made efforts to resist the inclination toward liberalization that typically accompanies such economic progress. Since the era of Lee Kuan Yew, the Singaporean government has diligently cultivated the concept of "Asian values" as its governing ideology, serving to justify and sustain the country's paternalistic and illiberal political system (Barr, 2000). According to Lee Kuan Yew, Asian cultures diverge significantly from their Western counterparts, thereby warranting a distinct focus on material progress while exempting Asian

countries like Singapore from embracing progressive social reforms commonly observed in Western societies.

Another notable case is China, where Xi Jinping has championed the concept of "modernity with Chinese characteristics" (Buzan & Lawson, 2020, p.25) since assuming office in 2012. In shaping this governing ideology, Xi emphasizes the uniqueness of Chinese culture in comparison to Western cultures. He argues that Western models of liberal democracy are products of the specific historical development of the West and should not be blindly applied to China. Instead, he asserts that China's path to modernization must be rooted in traditional Chinese values, Chinese nationalism, the centralization of power, and effective governance, all of which have contributed to the continuous material progress of society.

These cases serve as compelling evidence that Francis Fukuyama's concept of the "end of history" (2006) has not unfolded as originally envisioned. The enduring conflicts and clashes between liberal and liberal political ideologies on a global scale challenge the notion that Western liberal democracy would inevitably triumph, highlighting the persisting nature of ideological struggles in contemporary societies.

The case of Hong Kong is another example demonstrating what strategies and tactics nondemocratic regimes can employ to engage in this ongoing ideological war. Moreover, Hong Kong presents an even more unique situation compared to countries like Singapore and China. Unlike these countries, where governments have invested significant efforts over the course of decades in developing and fine-tuning their systems of social control through pro-government education, propaganda, and harsh repression, Hong Kong had maintained a relatively repression-free environment prior to China's takeover in 1997. According to scholars like Lipset (1959, 1994) and Huntington (1984), Hong Kong had attained most of the "prerequisites" conducive to democracy, with considerable wealth, a rising middle class,

no extreme inequalities, and a high level of socioeconomic development. Culturally, the city was also characterized by a dynamic blend of Eastern and Western influences that fostered a flourishing liberal cultural landscape, setting it apart from many other nondemocratic regimes.

Even after the handover, Hong Kong was allowed to operate under the "One Country, Two Systems" principle, which ensured media freedom, independent courts, and lively protests, as China aimed to showcase a peaceful solution of reunification to convince Taiwan (Mahtani & Mclaughlin, 2023). Within this context, political actors who favored democratization emerged in Hong Kong, forming political groups, participating in elections, organizing protests, and advocating for direct elections of the legislature and the Chief Executive (So, 2000). These political and cultural conditions have altogether provided the essential foundation for the subsequent emergence of large-scale street democratic movements in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong has witnessed a longstanding political competition between the democratic and pro-regime forces that was unseen in relatively "consolidated" authoritarian regimes like Singapore and mainland China. Consequently, Chinese state propagandists in Hong Kong are confronted with more intricate challenges in their efforts to secure popular support compared to their counterparts. Interpreting from this perspective, it is not surprising that this city, which existed as a liminal space between East and West, has become an ongoing battleground for competing political ideologies. This makes the situation faced by the pro-establishment media and groups in Hong Kong stands out as a truly unique case in the history of authoritarianism, as it demonstrates how China, known as one of the most sophisticated authoritarian regimes in history, adapted to a challenging environment to compete for popular support against influential domestic liberal rivals.

So far, their project has yet to be entirely successful. Until the late 2010s, many Hong Kong citizens continued to uphold pro-democracy and liberal values and a notable inclination towards localism (Charm & Lin, 2023; Huang, 2022; Tang & Cheng, 2021). In the short run, Chinese state propagandists in Hong Kong would have little hope to indoctrinate authoritarian ideologies to these liberal-leaning citizens. Nonetheless, Chinese state propagandists are compelled to cut short the trend of liberal transformation in Hong Kong to protect the regime. As a result, strategically targeting the remaining conservative segments of society becomes a pragmatic approach for them to build a supporter base quickly.

What are the implications and ramifications of this observation? I show that seeking to build supporter bases upon politically apathetic citizens has profound political consequences for the pro-establishment camp, as their supporters may not be easily mobilized. In chapter three, I conducted a regression analysis showing that readers of pro-establishment media are not readily or uniformly mobilized by pro-establishment political figures or the political norms promoted by state propagandists. Instead, their mobilization is contingent upon values that align with the defense of their materialist and pragmatic way of life. In chapter four, my findings further suggest that pro-establishment group members lack unified political beliefs, with many demonstrating a sense of apathy and demobilization toward the regime and its ruling ideologies.

Motivated by political pragmatism, conservative citizens in Hong Kong are likely to resist costly democratic movements that incite serious internal conflicts in Hong Kong and invite political repression, making them potential allies for the nondemocratic regime. However, political apathy and demobilization can be a double-edged sword, as politically pragmatic citizens may choose to abstain from political participation altogether or display limited genuine interest in the norms and ideologies propagated by the regime; this disengagement poses a special challenge to the regime.

In light of this, in order to effectively mobilize potential supporters of the regime who may lean towards materialism and display political apathy, pro-establishment media and elites face pressure to devise more strategic and innovative methods. In sections 5.2.3 to 5.2.4, I will further summarize these strategies and elucidate their theoretical implications to the literature on digital propaganda and countermobilization in nondemocratic regimes. Before delving into these aspects, I will continue summarizing and elaborating on the political identities of pro-establishment supporters and the implications of my observation in the next section (section 5.2.2).

5.2.2 The Fragmented and Politically Passive Blue Ribbons

In chapter four, I conducted interviews with active members of pro-establishment groups, unearthing a lack of cohesive beliefs within this cohort. Their faith in the regime and its governing ideologies varied considerably, with some displaying fervent support for the official ideology and some not. Many informants even candidly acknowledged that their involvement in pro-establishment groups was driven by personal incentives rather than a genuine intention to express support for the regime.

This finding challenges the conventional assumption that pro-establishment supporters in Hong Kong are primarily fervent nationalists or unwavering backers of the regime (e.g., Chan, 2021; Chen & Szeto, 2015; Song et al., 2023; Ngai, 2020). It prompts a re-evaluation of how we should conceptualize the construct of "pro-establishment" in the Hong Kong context. Conventionally, public opinion scholars categorize Hong Kong citizens who oppose the regime into two distinct groups: localists and democrats. In comparison, pro-government supporters are often indiscriminately labeled as "pro-establishment" in research. This classification scheme has permeated virtually all survey studies on public opinion in Hong Kong and contributed to the theoretical frameworks upon which many identity and public opinion research projects were built.

Nevertheless, my research findings challenge this overly simplistic characterization and categorization of pro-establishment supporters. The findings reveal a nuanced and diverse landscape, indicating that pro-establishment supporters exhibit a range of political motivations and perspectives. These include fervent nationalists who staunchly believe in the regime, as well as pragmatists who oppose any radical political changes.

Examining pro-establishment supporters through this lens raises intriguing questions and necessitates additional research. For instance, while nationalists and pragmatists within the pro-establishment camp may unite in opposition to democratic movements, do they align their views on other policy issues? Would hawkish nationalists be more inclined to advocate for complete integration with mainland China? Would pragmatists be more supportive of the idea of maintaining the political status quo under the principle of "One Country, Two Systems"? Future research could benefit from re-evaluating the conceptualization and measurement of pro-establishment political identity to capture the nuanced range of perspectives within this group.

The findings can also provide insights into a few theoretical puzzles in the research about the pro-establishment camp in Hong Kong. As previously mentioned in section 1.5, scholars and critics have attributed divergent, and at times contradictory, political labels and descriptions to the Blue Ribbons. Pro-establishment supporters have been characterized as immigrants who have "experienced the hardship when migrating to Hong Kong and simply wanted the social order to be restored so that the city can continue to prosper" (Wong & Liu, 2018, p.162), as pro-regime enthusiasts who "justified their violent act in the name of homeland protection" (Luk, 2021, p.5), and even as "political disinterested self-seekers (港豬)."[53] This inconsistency in understanding the political nature of the Blue Ribbons begs for an explanation.

[53] https://evchk.fandom.com/zh/wiki/%E8%97%8D%E7%B5%B2%E5%B8%B6

My findings offer an explanatory account of this phenomenon. Given that the pro-establishment group comprises a diverse range of individuals, including fervent regime supporters, social conservatives seeking to restore political harmony in Hong Kong, and self-interested individuals, it is unsurprising that they are described in chameleonic ways by different writers. These descriptions may simply accurately reflect the multifaceted nature of these groups and the complexities inherent within them.

Furthermore, my research findings provide valuable insights into the resistance displayed by pro-establishment supporters toward being reductively labeled as Blue Ribbons, as suggested by existing literature (Kong et al., 2021). In a similar vein, the findings of my interview research reveal that many pro-establishment group members refuse to identify themselves as "blue" simplistically. This phenomenon is intriguing, particularly in contrast to pro-democracy supporters who actively embrace their partisan identity as Yellow Ribbons, as evident in their fervent economic activism that is keen on "buycotting" pro-democracy shops and merchants while boycotting pro-government and police-supporting ones (Wong et al., 2021). Survey research reveals that between September 2019 and January 2020, over 98% of democratic protestors participated in buycotting Yellow shops and boycotting Blue ones, surpassing other forms of political engagement (Chung, 2020, p. 61).

What accounts for this disparity between pro-establishment and pro-democratic supporters? The insights from my interview-based research indicate that political pragmatism may be a contributing factor. Previous studies have highlighted that conservative individuals in Hong Kong exhibit a remarkably low political efficacy and inclination towards political participation (Lau & Kuan, 1995). As my findings suggest, this inclination may foster a deep-seated aversion to politicizing social affairs. Within this context, the term "Blue Ribbons" is perceived as excessively partisan and is consequently considered a stigma and rejected by pro-establishment supporters. From their standpoint, the Yellow Ribbons are brainwashed

political fanatics representing social chaos, while pro-establishment supporters themselves are ordinary citizens who courageously step forward to resist the influence of "dirty politics" and work towards restoring normalcy in Hong Kong.

This shared aversion against the Yellow Ribbons is a more powerful mobilizing factor for pro-establishment supporters compared to the norms and values promoted by the regime. This is evident from the regression analysis results showing a significant correlation between outgroup unfavoritism and user engagement on Facebook. In contrast, ingroup favoritism does not yield similar effects. These findings are further triangulated by insights gleaned from my interviews with pro-establishment group members, who generally express disapproval toward pro-democracy individuals and groups but a varying degree of affection toward the regime.

Therefore, this dissertation arrives at the conclusion that the primary bonding factor among pro-establishment group members lies in their shared desire to resist the outgroups rather than a shared affection toward ingroups or endorse the regime. This finding suggests that the internal dynamics of the Blue Ribbons may significantly differ from those of the Yellow Ribbons, as pro-democracy supporters demonstrate a greater willingness to provide mutual support, as exemplified by their economic activism through targeted boycotts based on political alignment. This observation opens up avenues for future research. For example, quantitative researchers may use surveys or experimental methods to examine the association between ingroup affection or outgroup hatred and the intensity of pro-establishment identity. This could provide further insights into the formation of economic activism and pro-regime mobilization within Hong Kong and other democratic regimes.

Finally, the insights gained from these findings shed light on the overall profile of pro-establishment supporters, commonly referred to as "Blue Ribbons." I argue that pro-establishment supporters are not a uniform and unwavering group of loyalists to the regime.

Rather, they are individuals with varying degrees of trust in the government and driven by their own personal motivations in their political engagement. However, it is important to note that "Blue Ribbons" do share certain ideological commonalities, particularly a collective mindset of political pragmatism and materialism. This shared perspective leads them to prioritize personal material gains and resist compromising them for social ideals, such as democracy. Within this politically mobilized conservative citizenry, the "Blue Ribbons" represent those who have been motivated by the regime, whether through ideological indoctrination or the provision of material incentives, to actively participate in pro-regime politics and counteract democratic movements.

5.2.3 Online Mobilization: Tailored Strategies for Local Circumstances

As previously posited, pro-establishment group members exhibit a general sense of political pragmatism and passivity, which may present unique challenges for the regime in terms of mobilizing them to engage with politics. Within this context, how could the regime effectively mobilize its supporters online?

This dissertation posits that Chinese propagandists are adaptive and flexible to external constraints, such as the digital affordances of foreign social media platforms and the social norms of foreign audiences. This argument is in line with the observation of previous research (Fan et al., 2023; Lu & Pan, 2021; Zhu & Fu, 2023).

In the early 2010s, Hong Kong witnessed the emergence of a number of pro-democracy alternative media outlets that quickly gained dominance in the digital public opinion sphere. This facilitated the formation of an online "insurgent public sphere" (Lee et al., 2015) that provides spaces for advocates to promote anti-government discourses and mobilize collective action. In the face of this challenging environment, pro-establishment media have been seeking online support by employing carefully calibrated strategies that suit the unique local circumstances.

In addition to seeking to resonate with conservative citizens through the use of materialist values (as discussed in section 5.2.1), pro-establishment media strategically avoid sensitive political taboos, such as communism and personality cults, that may provoke a backlash. This cautious approach is possibly influenced by the prevalent anti-communist sentiment among older generations in Hong Kong, many of whom fled from the political turmoil during Mao's era in China. As revealed by my DA and CA, pro-establishment media dedicate minimal editorial space to the CCP and Xi Jinping in their news coverage. They also tend to employ politically neutral terms like "the state," "the nation," or "the central government" to refer to the Chinese administration rather than more partisan terms like "the party." This approach diverges from mainland propaganda practices that place greater emphasis on highlighting the role of the CCP and Xi in political news coverage (Luqiu, 2016; Shirk, 2018).

Furthermore, pro-establishment media in Hong Kong have developed a novel propaganda strategy to leverage the digital affordances of Facebook, a foreign social media platform. They frequently employ a strategy that I refer to as "engagement bait" to utilize features on Facebook, such as the "like" button and emoticons, to entice users to interact with their content. Typically, they make political statements endorsing ingroups or disparaging political opponents, followed by explicit requests for users to like, comment, share, or use emoticons to show support for these statements. The regression analyses demonstrate that these engagement baits effectively predict user engagement. Through my interview research, it also became evident that these engagement baits have provided politically passive pro-establishment supporters with a convenient, quantifiable, and clicktivist means of expressing their political views, allowing them to engage with politics or feel engaged with minimal effort.

The utilization of engagement baits as a propaganda technique highlights the transformative impact of digital affordances on government propaganda efforts. This transformation is not merely an escalation in propaganda volume and intensity but represents a qualitative shift. In comparison to other prevalent forms of propaganda employed by China, such as soft content (Zhu & Fu, 2023), distracting content (King et al., 2013), or clickbait (Lu & Pan, 2021), engagement baits offer distinct advantages. While the excessive production of non-political and distracting content encroach upon the space available for hard political propaganda and the use of clickbait strategies may erode the credibility of the content (Molyneux & Coddington, 2020), the utilization of engagement baits circumvents these issues. Furthermore, this strategy demands readers to endorse political statements. Therefore, it is highly applicable to hard propaganda content. Consequently, it is worthy for future researchers to delve into the effects of this strategy and continue to unravel it transferability in other propaganda contexts.

The distinct characteristic of the engagement bait strategy lies in its capacity to elicit simple expressions of online users' support without requiring them to engage in political deliberation. Traditionally, scholars have considered such expressions as superficial and ineffective for fostering civic engagement, as they are often labeled as "clicktivism" lacking the potential to generate significant political change (Shirky, 2011; Vitak et al., 2011). Ironically, this tactic serves the political purposes of authoritarian-populist governments perfectly if they just want to tap into the populist sentiment of supporters to showcase the popularity of the regime. To them, whether this expression of support translates into genuine political empowerment may be of very little concern. As such, this strategy of engagement bait also illustrates how political-cultural factors and technological affordances can intertwine to shape digital propaganda strategies in tandem.

The case of pro-establishment media in Hong Kong, with their initial lack of a strong readership base, shares similarities with many nondemocratic regimes that also commence their propaganda efforts without a strong supporter base. This includes hybrid regimes that have taken an authoritarian turn (e.g., Turkey) or military regimes that have come to power through revolutions or coups d'état (e.g., Egypt, Thailand). In these regimes, state propagandists may face a similar challenge of not being able to dominate the online public opinion sphere at the outset of their reign. Thus, the digital propaganda strategies adopted by pro-establishment media in Hong Kong offer valuable insights into how state propagandists could effectively counteract opposition threats despite their initial weaknesses.

5.2.4 Offline Mobilization: The Emphasis on Outward Conduct

The influence of pro-establishment forces in Hong Kong extends beyond the realm of online mobilization and encompasses offline engagement as well. The question then arises: How can the regime effectively mobilize its supporters to participate in pro-regime offline political activities?

Scholarly literature has brought to light China's strategy of rewarding and incentivizing pro-regime elites in Hong Kong to mobilize the masses offline (Lee, 2020). These elites, who enjoy patronage from the regime, often employ material incentives as a means of recruiting supporters. Such material incentives encompass a range of offerings, including professional courses, community events, entertainment programs, and tangible goods (Wong et al., 2019; Wong, 2014; Wong & Or, 2020). Consistent with these research findings, my own interviews revealed that a significant number of participants cited material incentives as the primary driver behind their involvement in pro-establishment groups.

However, these observations only provide a partial understanding of the countermobilization dynamics in Hong Kong. As I have argued earlier, pro-establishment groups specifically target pragmatic individuals who prioritize material gains. In light of this

context, it is unsurprising that pro-establishment groups utilize material incentives to mobilize their members. Nevertheless, fostering unified political beliefs among pro-establishment group members can become challenging, particularly if a significant portion of them are motivated solely by personal interests without strong political convictions and genuine interest in politics. This predicament is reflected by the findings of my interview-based research, where participants exhibited varying levels of faith in the regime.

How do pro-establishment organizations navigate this complex situation? Specifically, how do they reconcile the need for members to demonstrate loyalty and obedience to the regime with the potential lack of inner conviction and enthusiasm? I have discovered that these organizations tend to avoid delving deeply into the internal political beliefs of their members. Instead, they place a strong emphasis on outward conduct as a determinant of group membership. To be considered "pro-establishment," pro-establishment group members are required to exhibit external evidence of loyalty to the regime, proficiently engage in nationalist rhetoric, and actively participate in the countermobilization against the opposition.

This emphasis on outward conduct provides a possible solution to the challenge of reconciling the necessity for external demonstrations of complicity with the prevailing internal political apathy observed among pro-establishment group members. This strategic approach enables pro-establishment groups to effectively recruit individuals who may not harbor deeply ingrained ideological beliefs but are nonetheless willing to conform to a prescribed nationalist and pro-regime script in exchange for personal gains. This calculated strategy not only accommodates the diverse motivations and preferences of potential supporters, but also serves to bridge the gap between individual interests and the broader objectives of the regime. Consequently, the regime can successfully galvanize support from a

traditionally politically disengaged and self-seeking conservative fraction within Hong Kong society, overturning their previously disadvantaged position in the public opinion sphere.

The significance of this observation becomes evident when considering the rapid proliferation of pro-regime groups in Hong Kong throughout the 2010s, as extensively discussed in the literature (see Cheng, 2020; Lee, 2020; Yuen, 2021 for comprehensive accounts). Notably, Yuen (2021) highlights the establishment of over 200 such organizations in Hong Kong since 1997, a striking figure compared to the mere 230 formed during the entire 156-year period of colonial rule. Drawing upon my own findings, an explanation emerges as to how the regime managed to swiftly initiate mobilization efforts even in the absence of an elaborate indoctrination system, such as a "brainwashing" education program that is commonly observed in other authoritarian regimes. The regime achieved this by offering material incentives to attract individuals who were willing to comply without seriously scrutinizing their internal political beliefs.

The observation that a nondemocratic regime can enforce compliance without winning the hearts and minds of its supporters is by no means entirely new. Still, the case of Hong Kong could provide additional insights into the literature of propaganda and countermobilization in nondemocratic regimes.

Traditionally, scholars studying propaganda have focused on how nondemocratic regimes convince their citizens to uphold political control over societies. This perspective emphasizes the creation of a sense of "hegemony" (Gramsci, 2011) or the cultivation of political leaders' "charisma" (Joosse, 2014) as a means to generate genuine public support.

However, scholarly research has also recognized the capability of nondemocratic regimes to effectively enforce compliance among their citizens, even in the absence of genuine support. This line of inquiry often highlights fear as a central factor contributing to people's quiescence. For instance, in contexts such as Syria and China, regimes employ costly

and preposterous propaganda that may not necessarily indoctrinate citizens but instead inundates public spaces. This serves the purpose of showcasing the regime's strength, providing citizens with prescribed boundaries for acceptable speech, and ultimately habituating them to obedience (Huang, 2015; Wedeen, 1998). These analyses are typically grounded in the premise that making people display outward compliance diminishes civil enthusiasm (Huang, 2015; Mattingly & Yao, 2022; Wedeen, 1998, 2015). As a consequence, individuals with reduced civil enthusiasm are less likely to engage in rebellion, allowing these regimes to maintain popular obedience at a relatively low cost.

This assumption permeates many existing analyses on how nondemocratic regimes enforce compliance without indoctrination. For example, in Wedeen's research about how the Assad regime maintains political control in Syria, she writes, "The fear of coercive retaliation combined with the habit of representing oneself strategically, of behaving as if Asad is God-like, may not make Syria's leader divine, but it does help make him powerful" (Wedeen, 1998, p.519). Havel, in his book *The Power of the Powerless*, shares a story about a greengrocer in post-totalitarian Czechoslovakia who displays barely noticeable political slogans among the fruits and vegetables he sells. As Havel observes, the act of showing the slogans does not reflect the grocer's belief in communism but rather signifies his desire to maintain a peaceful life. He concludes, "these things must be done if one is to get along in life. It is one of the thousands of details that guarantee him a relatively tranquil life 'in harmony with society' " (Havel, 1986, p.41). Similarly, Huang (2015), in his research about how hard propaganda in China does not persuade people to support the state but makes them quiescent, writes, "Citizens are then deterred from rebellion…because they now know that the government has a strong capacity for defeating a rebellion and maintaining political control" (p.423).

However, the dynamics of how pro-establishment groups recruit supporters in Hong Kong unfold in a different manner. Interestingly, among the informants who have participated in pro-establishment political activities, none of them were coerced into joining these groups. While they may not fully endorse all the political beliefs propagated by their respective organizations, they willingly engage in the acts of supporting the regime. Their agency in making political choices remains intact, and this is manifested through their voluntary decision to participate in pro-establishment groups.

The findings reveal that their involvement with these groups is purposeful and driven by a range of incentives. Some express genuine ideological support, while others are motivated by monetary rewards, community service, career advancement, or the desire to acquire political space and power to advocate for their own political ideals, such as influencing policy-making or enhancing governance. Although their support of the regime may not be entirely genuine, they can still actively pursue political empowerment by participating in pro-establishment groups, where their civic enthusiasm is not diminished but rather finds alternative avenues to thrive.

What sets the case of Hong Kong apart from countries like Syria, Czechoslovakia, and China? The crucial factor may lie in its unique political system. Hong Kong can be classified as a hybrid regime, distinguishing it from its more authoritarian counterparts. Unlike governments in Syria, Czechoslovakia, and China, the Hong Kong government has relatively less operational control over society. Notably, there has been no implementation of an Internet firewall in Hong Kong, and political allegiance is not a prerequisite in daily life for the citizens, except for civil servants.

Furthermore, the presence of foreign social media platforms makes complete online censorship impractical in Hong Kong. Survey research indicates that, even after the enactment of the national security law, Hong Kong citizens have maintained their online

political engagement by strategically limiting the visibility of their communication content (Mak et al., 2022). Consequently, the Hong Kong government cannot fully monopolize the public opinion sphere, and alternative and competing political discourses remain readily accessible within society.

This openness and availability of diverse viewpoints contribute to the distinct political landscape in Hong Kong, creating a unique agentic context. In many authoritarian regimes, the government exercises an exceptionally high, if not complete, degree of control and regulation over public and private life. This creates immense pressure on citizens to publicly pledge allegiance to the regime in exchange for safety and tranquillity. However, in a hybrid regime like Hong Kong, the government has relatively less control over the private lives of its citizens. This enables Hong Kong citizens to navigate the expectation of overt allegiance easily.

In this hybrid regime, the state-society relationship achieves a greater balance compared to other authoritarian counterparts, where the regime actively provides incentives to encourage pro-regime political participation among potential supporters. Therefore, the regime does not rely on coercion to compel citizens' pro-regime political engagement, but rather seeks to entice their involvement in pro-regime politics in Hong Kong. As such, the requirement for members of pro-establishment groups to outwardly display compliance should not be seen as coercive, but rather as an option extended by the regime to Hong Kong citizens. Consequently, the narrative of countermobilization in Hong Kong is characterized not by enforcement, but rather by mass mobilizing clientelism and co-optation.

This sheds light on the co-construction of pro-establishment identity by both the regime and its members. The emphasis on outward displays of obedience within pro-establishment groups necessitates that members understand what to say and do in their organizational lives and highlight the need to stay informed about the regime's ever-changing

political requirements and nationalist rhetoric. Through my interview research, it became evident that pro-establishment digital media serves as a constant source of updates for members, enhancing their understanding of these requirements and rhetoric. Pro-establishment digital media inform the acceptable boundaries of speech and behavior for pro-establishment group members and provide them with a repertoire of terminologies and narratives to perpetuate the iconography of their groups.

As such, the observation provides a nuanced understanding of the media's role in constructing a pro-establishment identity within the Blue Ribbons group. While existing studies on propaganda in nondemocratic regimes typically focus on its functions to indoctrinate citizens with pro-government attitudes or signaling government strength, my findings reveal an instance where media propaganda is used to bridge the political gap between the regime and its supporters, in which the media propaganda simultaneously appeals to the interests of supporters and provides them with behavioral guidance.

Within this context, the creation of pro-establishment identity discourses is a mutual process. On one hand, pro-establishment media carefully calibrate their propaganda strategies to elicit support from their target audience. They cater to the values they believe their supporters hold, avoid political taboos that may trigger a backlash, and reward members with group membership and material benefits as long as they display outward compliance without interrogating their inner beliefs. On the other hand, the media narratives constantly shape and update the boundaries of acceptable speech and behavior for pro-establishment group members. This co-construction process highlights how the pro-establishment identity is a product of both the Chinese regime and its pragmatic and conservative supporters in Hong Kong.

5.3 Looking into the Future of Hong Kong Politics

Finally, it is worth bringing the national security law (NSL) in Hong Kong to the fore, as its implementation marks a pivotal moment for the city's freedom. The NSL was unilaterally imposed by China on July 1, 2020, in response to the widespread Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement in 2019. This law establishes severe penalties, including a maximum sentence of life imprisonment, for crimes related to secession, subversion, terrorism, and collusion with foreign forces.[54] Building upon the insights provided by this study, it might be possible to speculate on the future trajectory of pro-establishment identity construction, propaganda, and countermobilization in Hong Kong.

With the implementation of the national security law, the erosion of press freedom, and the impending introduction of pro-regime national education programs, the equilibrium of the state-society relationship in Hong Kong appears to be further shifting in favor of the regime. It may amplify the control exerted by the Chinese and Hong Kong governments over society, transitioning from indirect orchestration of countermobilization to more direct intervention. Moreover, the influence of the opposition and the presence of diverse opinions and political pluralism in Hong Kong may continue to diminish. As such, Hong Kong citizens may increasingly feel obliged to demonstrate obedience in their daily lives, viewing compliance as an unavoidable political task.

If such a scenario unfolds, certain observations made in this dissertation may no longer hold true. For instance, pro-establishment media might gradually normalize discussions about the Chinese Communist Party. If outward compliance becomes widely accepted as the norm in society, pro-establishment groups may impose stricter demands on

[54] https://www.gld.gov.hk/egazette/pdf/20202448e/egn2020244872.pdf

their members, prompting them to delve deeper into their political beliefs and assess their alignment with the ruling authority.

Nonetheless, there are reasons to believe that the opposition's political discourses will not be completely eradicated from the public opinion sphere in the near term. First of all, the process of instilling a pro-regime identity within the general population is not easily accomplished within a short timeframe. Secondly, repression does not always yield the desired results, as politically empowered individuals may find alternative ways to circumvent surveillance, such as utilizing Internet proxies (Hobbs & Roberts, 2018) or managing privacy settings on social media platforms (Mak et al., 2022).

Lastly and most importantly, while Beijing has gradually tightened the autonomy of Hong Kong, the principle of "one country, two systems" has not been revoked. China has yet to propose any plans for blocking the Internet in Hong Kong. In addition, while the implementation of the national security law has led to the dissolution of numerous oppositional media outlets and organizations in Hong Kong, it has also sparked a global wave of activism among the city's overseas diaspora of students and migrants, ensuring the continued presence of oppositional political narratives online (Ho, 2023). This suggests that China will encounter difficulties in fully dominating the realm of public opinion in Hong Kong. Consequently, state propagandists and pro-establishment groups will likely have to continue competing for popular support within the city. Therefore, the strategic interactions between the state and Hong Kong citizens, as observed in this dissertation regarding propaganda and countermobilization strategies, are likely to remain relevant for an extended period in Hong Kong.

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APPENDIX A

Additional Tables

Table A1 Distribution of Posts across Outlets for DA

	Count	Percentage
Taikungpo.com (大公網)	1	.7%
TaiKungPo (大公報)	6	4%
WenWeiPo (香港文匯報)	6	4%
TaiKung WenWei (大公文匯全媒體)	6	4%
Today review (今日正言)	4	2.7%
Kin Liu (堅料網)	4	2.7%
Bastille post (巴士的報)	37	24.7%
Silent Majority (幫港出聲)	20	13.3%
Think HK (思考香港)	10	6.7%
Hong Kong Good News (時聞香港)	23	15.3%
Orange News (橙新聞)	12	8%
HKGpao (香港 G 報)	21	14%
Overall	150	100%

Note: N = 500

Table A2 Number of Likes and Followers on Facebook of Pro-establishment Digital Media Outlets

	Followers
Taikungpo.com (大公網)*	/
TaiKungPo (大公報)	38,682
WenWeiPo (香港文匯報)	21,062
TaiKung WenWei (大公文匯全媒體)	15,491
Today review (今日正言)	129,135
Kin Liu (堅料網)	88,498
Bastille post (巴士的報)	1,038,451
Silent Majority (幫港出聲)	295,433
Think HK (思考香港)	211,316
Hong Kong Good News (時聞香港)	425,159
Orange News (橙新聞)	271,717
HKGpao (香港 G 報)	66,399

Note: Data collected as of 1 November, 2023;
*The number of likes of Taikungpo.com is not available as Crowdtangle does not record the number of page likes of pages that have fewer than 5,000 likes.

Table A3 Distribution of Posts across Outlets for CA

	Count	Percentage
Taikungpo.com (大公網)	2	.4%
TaiKungPo (大公報)	12	2.4%
WenWeiPo (香港文匯報)	28	5.6%
TaiKung WenWei (大公文匯全媒體)	18	3.6%
Today review (今日正言)	16	3.2%
Kin Liu (堅料網)	11	2.2%
Bastille post (巴士的報)	149	29.8%
Silent Majority (幫港出聲)	40	8%
Think HK (思考香港)	29	5.8%
Hong Kong Good News (時聞香港)	101	20.2%
Orange News (橙新聞)	30	6%
HKGpao (香港 G 報)	64	12.8%
Overall	500	100%

Note: N = 500

Table A4 Depictions of Ingroups, Outgroups, and Intermediate Groups by Pro-establishment Digital Media Outlets

	No clear favoritism	Favorable	Unfavorable
Ingroups			
The nation	1.2% (6)	6.4% (32)	0% (0)
Ordinary mainlanders	2.4% (12)	5% (26)	.4% (2)
Chinese brands/ corporations	.6% (3)	1.2% (6)	.2% (1)
Chinese medics	.6% (3)	0% (0)	0% (0)
The government	4.6% (23)	3.8% (19)	0% (0)
The People's Liberation Army	.4% (2)	.6% (3)	0% (0)
Supreme leader Xi	.4% (2)	.8% (4)	0% (0)
Other national leaders	.2% (1)	.2% (1)	0% (0)
Intermediate groups			
The city of Hong Kong	1.4% (7)	1.2% (6)	.4% (2)
Ordinary Hongkongeses	7.4% (37)	2% (10)	3.4% (17)
Hong Kong brands/ corporations	4.4% (22)	.4% (2)	.8% (4)
Hong Kong medics	0% (0)	.2% (1)	.8% (4)
Hong Kong government	16.4% (82)	2.2% (11)	2.2% (11)
Hong Kong public organizations	3.2% (16)	.4% (2)	.4% (2)
Hong Kong legislatures	1.8% (9)	.2% (1)	.4% (2)
Outgroups			
Hong Kong oppositional groups	2.4% (12)	0% (0)	14.6% (73)
Rioters	.2% (1)	0% (0)	4.4% (22)
Foreign Power	5.4% (27)	.6% (3)	12% (60)

Note. N = 500.

APPENDIX B

Codebook for Content Analysis

General instruction of the codebook:

Examine texts and pictures of the Facebook posts only.
Also, examine the major news story that the Facebook post promoted, which may require coders to click on the link attached to the post.
Do not examine recommended story links attached to the concerned post. Only read the major story that is directly related to the post.
Do not examine videos, but examine the video's thumbnails (they are counted as pics).
If it is a post shared from other Facebook pages, coders should examine texts and pics in both the original post and the shared post.

Table B1 Normative Themes

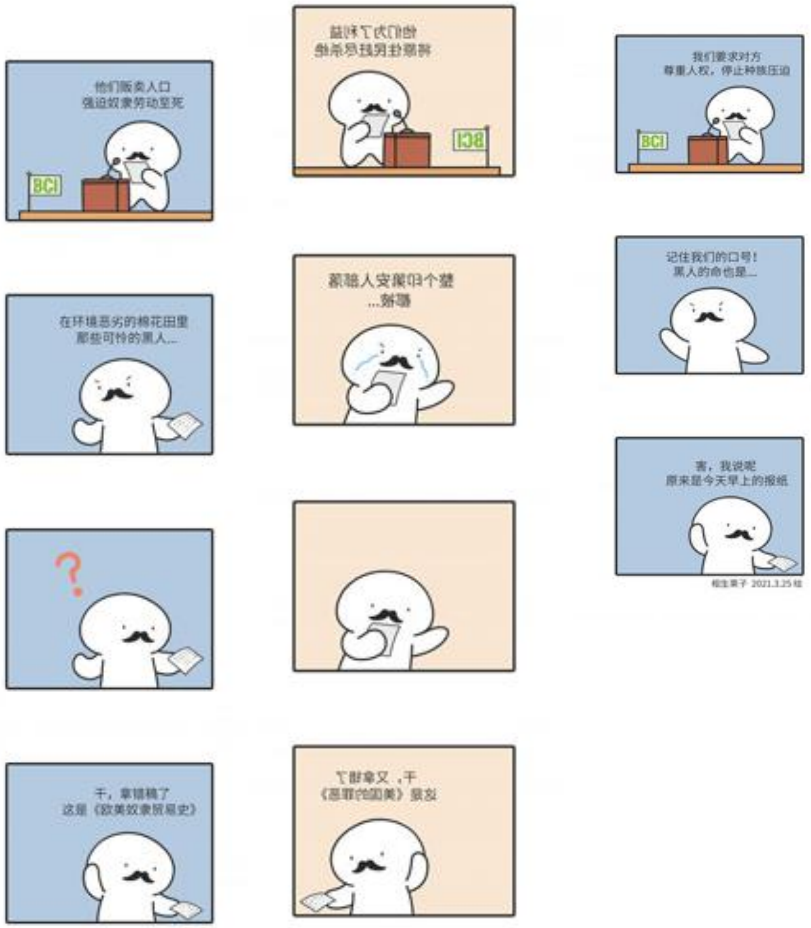
Items	Definition	Examples
Self-reliant hard working	The stories depict individuals' willingness to endure hardships or work diligently without complaints, highlighting their perseverance, criticizing laziness, or advocating for such behaviors.	Example 1: Leung Yuk-wing: As long as you have ***dreams, perseverance***, and put in effort, there is nothing that is impossible. (梁育榮：只要有夢想恆心及努力　沒有事情是不可能) Source: https://www.facebook.com/883534741671087/posts/4575091995848658 ========== Example 2: ***Despite the pain of losing both parents***, a 10-year-old orphan in ***Vietnam remains strong and resilient***, persisting in living alone and cultivating the land to support himself. (痛失雙親仍堅強 越南 10 歲孤兒堅持獨居種田養活自己) Source: https://www.facebook.com/127413667428891/posts/1503315599838684

		========== Example 3: My own approach is to ***tolerate the hardship*** and start by renting a small unit in remote areas such as Tuen Mun or Yuen Long to save money. If I can't catch up with the soaring property prices, I would consider buying a small unit first, like laying a small foundation stone, and then gradually adding cement to make it grow bigger. (我自己的方法是辛苦一點，先在遍遠地區如屯門、元朗租住小單位，存一筆錢。追不上樓價就先買小單位，先有小石頭，然後慢慢加水泥，將石頭變大。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/127413667428891/posts/1473296572840587 我自己的方法是辛苦一點，先在遍遠地區如屯門、元朗租住小單位，存一筆錢。追不上樓價就先買小單位，先有小石頭，然後慢慢加水泥，將石頭變大。
Development and Achievement	The stories celebrate or advocate taking actions to achieve various accomplishments or advancements, encompassing economic development, infrastructure projects, scientific breakthroughs, and sports achievements of China and Hong Kong.	Example 1: Today, ***Hong Kong representative Leung Yuk-wing*** competed in the Tokyo Paralympics Boccia BC4 individual event on the hard court. He defeated national team player Zheng Yuansen with a score of 5-4 and won a bronze medal. (港隊代表梁育榮今日在在東京殘奧硬地滾球混合 BC4 級個人賽，以大分 5：4 擊敗國家隊鄭遠森贏得一面銅牌) Source: https://www.facebook.com/883534741671087/posts/4575091995848658 ========== Example 2: more stories on the ***development*** in China (…更多中國發展的故事) Source: https://www.facebook.com/263384634045118/posts/1458013254582244 ========== Example 3:

		Chinese scientists have ***achieved a new record*** by "sealing" a light beam for one hour, which opens up possibilities for quantum communication anytime and anywhere in the future. (中國科學家「封印」光束一小時刷新紀錄　未來可隨時隨地量子通訊) Source: https://www.facebook.com/512700315470576/posts/5880928821981005
Charity and Services	The stories celebrate or advocate for charity, voluntary works, or the serving spirit to the society. Example: the most beautiful volunteer, Free lunch distribution in SSP	Example 1: Although the Youth Flash Mob Community Cleanup Brigade has concluded its action, the small teams will continue their rapid cleaning operations. Yesterday, they posted a photo on Facebook showing the cleaning scene, claiming that as long as the citizens need it, they will guard every public place in Hong Kong! They call on everyone to put aside their political views and fight the epidemic together! Please share and give likes to these unsung heroes! (青年快閃社區清潔大隊行動雖已結束，但小隊快速清潔行動仍會繼續。他們昨天又在 Facebook 發相展示清潔現場，表明只要市民需要，他們就會守護香港每一處公眾地方！他們呼籲所有人放下政見，同心抗疫！請大家 Share 出去一齊畀 Like 多謝這班無名英雄！) Source: https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/211985720361795 ========== Example 2: Being a Winter Olympics volunteer is not an easy task. It involves a rigorous selection process and requires undergoing a series of training programs. Volunteers need to have comprehensive knowledge ranging from venue information to social etiquette. It is essential to be well-versed in all aspects of the event. (擔任冬奧志願者，過程絕不容易，不但要經過嚴格挑選，而且還要接受一系列培訓，上至場館知識，下至社交禮儀，定要精通。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/4997991960289870

Security and order	Stories about how orders are restored and security is protected, or how good people are following the law, or bad guys are breaking the law. Or direct advocacy, for example, advocating that Hong Kong needs to stop violence and curb disorder (止暴制亂) Do not count if only the term “black violence” (黑暴) is mentioned	Example 1: Another significant role is being a former Auxiliary Police Inspector. By running for office, they hope to advocate for the rights and interests of the police force and accelerate efforts to ***restore law and order***. (另一重身份就是前輔警總督察，希望透過參選爭取警察權益，加快止暴制亂！) Source: https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/3247193742036376 ========== Example 2: Under the spread of yellow-black propaganda, the distorted culture of violence in Hong Kong persists. For example, the ad hoc executive committee of the Student Union at the Chinese University of Hong Kong recently posted a "family letter" on Facebook to new students, ***openly glorifying violence*** and taking pride in being called "students from the violence university"... (在黃黑邪說散播之下，香港暴力歪風揮之不去。例如中文大學學生會幹事會臨時行政委員會早前便在 Facebook 向中大新生發「家書」，公然美化暴力，以被稱為「暴大人」為榮...) Source: https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/3355609221194827
Filial Piety	The stories portray or advocate for actions of filial piety, such as explicit expressions of love, taking care, or purchasing gifts for one’s parents	Example 1: Today is the annual Mother's Day, and many ***filial children*** have already prepared gifts or celebrated extensively to express their gratitude for their mother's hard work and dedication to the family. (今日為一年一度的母親節，不少孝順的子女都已準備禮物或大肆慶祝，以感謝媽媽為家庭辛勞的付出。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/127413667428891/posts/1650938308409745 ========== Example 2:

		Chan Man Chi also praises Wu Ting Yan as a good girl ***who is filial and beautiful.*** (敏之都讚定欣是好女仔，孝順又靚女) Source: https://www.facebook.com/127413667428891/posts/1923241637846076
Political Freedom	The stories celebrates or advocate for democracy, political freedom, freedom of expression or the protection of political rights.	Example 1: Showed the examples of foreign countries violating ***human rights or racial equalities*** Source: https://www.facebook.com/105073301637072/posts/120369496774119



Example 2:
The Chinese representative counterattacks the United States!

		The Chinese representative called on the Human Rights Council to pay attention to the issue of ***forced labor*** in the United States. (中國代表反擊美國！ 中國代表呼籲人權理事會關注美國強迫勞動問題) Source: https://www.facebook.com/512700315470576/posts/5830027253737829
Social equalities	The stories celebrate or advocate for social equalities, including racial, gender, or class equalities.	Example 1: The most successful aspect of the South African reconciliation was that white people did not suffer from organized retaliation, and most white capital remained in place. The South African economy did not experience a steep decline. ***However, the situation of black people in South Africa has not improved much, except for some political leaders. About one-third of black people still do not have stable jobs, and most of the welfare promised by political leaders cannot be fulfilled. The right to vote, which once excited black people, has been proven to be unable to change the tragic fate of black people.*** (大和解最成功的地方是令白人沒有遭到有組織的報復，大部分白人的資本都有留下來，南非的經濟並沒有出現斷崖式的下跌。然而，南非黑人的處境，除了個別政治領袖外，並沒有得到多大的改善。約三分之一的黑人，依然沒有固定工作，而政治領袖承諾的福利，卻大部分無法兌現。曾經一度令黑人興奮莫名的投票權，已被證明改變不了黑人的悲慘命運。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/375106630716369
Patriotism	The stories emphasize or advocate individuals' contributions and sacrifices in service to the nation, support for	Example 1: Emphasizing China's determination and unwavering will to defend ***national sovereignty and territorial integrity***, resolutely crushing any separatist attempts for "Taiwan independence."

	the Chinese nation, or condemn those who betray their country, including Quislings.	(強調中方捍衛國家主權和領土完整的決心與意志堅定不移，堅決粉碎任何「台獨」圖謀。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/4608071482615255 ========== Example 2: Due to the lack of national education, many Hong Kong youth have gone astray. This event aims to foster ***a sense of patriotic consensus*** among the youth in Hong Kong. (由於國民教育的缺失，不少香港青年誤入歧途，這次活動正是為了凝聚香港青年心中的愛國共識。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/101385831699542/posts/297243158780474
Politicization criticism	The stories criticize the politicization of social affairs or overly-partisan performance of individuals or groups. Be aware of terms that implies a criticism of politicization, such as politicization (政治化), political meanings (政治意味), Political trickster (政棍), academicus (學棍), not distinguishing the colours (不分顏色), citizens with no political stances (無立場的市民)	Example 1: The U.S. government ***prioritizes playing politics*** at the expense of human lives. (美國政府只顧玩政治枉顧人命) Source: https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/192519005641800 ========== Example 2: The situation in Hong Kong, including the protests, opposition movements, and social divisions, has indeed been ongoing for a year. Factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the ***politicization of schools*** have further exacerbated the divisions within society. It is unfortunate to see Hong Kong facing such challenges. (黑暴、反對派亂港，已一年之久了，加上疫情及校園被政棍政治化，社會分裂情況比佔中更深，我們香港人，幾時變成如此？) Source: https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/3295573157198434

Table B2 Relaying Information

Items	Definition	Examples
For Chinese government	Relay government's press information or provide plain updates about policies and politics, like political party personnel changes	Example 1: 15 districts in Shanghai have achieved zero local transmission of COVID-19 cases, and they are aiming for a full return to normalcy starting in June. (上海 15 區實現社會面清零 冀 6 月起全面復常) Source: https://www.facebook.com/127413667428891/posts/1928944830609090 ========== Example 2: The Greater Bay Area has launched the "Returning Home Plan" in Qianhai, which offers rental subsidies ranging from 20% to 50% to attract companies that were previously registered in Qianhai but did not establish offices there to return. (#大灣區 前海推出「歸巢計劃」提供 20%至 50%的租金優惠政策，吸引早前在前海註冊但未能設置辦公室的公司回流。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/263384634045118/posts/1288735691510002 ========== Example 3: In January, the manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) in mainland China showed a slowdown in expansion, while the non-manufacturing PMI index declined. (#中國經濟 1 月內地製造業 PMI 指數擴張放緩，非製造業 PMI 指數回落。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/263384634045118/posts/1521772834872952
For Hong Kong government	Relay government's press information or provide plain updates about policies and	Example 1: Inspector Yeung Chun-yu of the Sham Shui Po District Crime Investigation Team 10 is now ***briefing the media*** on the case.

	politics, like political party personnel changes	(深水埗區刑事調查隊第十隊楊震宇督察現向傳媒簡報案情。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/512700315470576/posts/5046289335444962 ========== Example 2: The Hong Kong Tourism Board's "Enjoy Eating Out" campaign, offering half-price cash vouchers, experienced high demand in its first week, with the vouchers selling out quickly. Over the next five weeks, additional batches of vouchers will be released in stages. (旅發局「賞你食」半價現金券 首周優惠售罄 未來 5 星期陸續分批推出) Source: https://www.facebook.com/127413667428891/posts/1942308609272712

Table B3 Types of Policy Suggestion

Items	Definition	Examples
Freedom restriction	Proposing policy or law that can restricting "excessive" political freedom or restore order e.g., Call for passage of Article 23, Restrict the right to search for information, Criminalising Insults Against the Police, Judicial reform that aims at restricting freedom like judicial review, suggesting the police to expand their labour power etc.	Example 1: In order to achieve stability in Hong Kong, there are three key aspects that are considered important. Firstly, eradicate the idea of Hong Kong Independence. Second, promote national education and thirdly ***implement Basic Law Article 23***. (香港要大治，說來不容，但亦有路可循，基本上有三大路向不可缺，一是清除港獨，二是做好國民教育，三是 23 條立法。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/365476371679395 ========== Example 2: Another key point of judicial reform is that ***civil and criminal judges must be separated.***

		(司法改革另一要點是民事及刑事法官須分家) Source: https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/3689517491137330
Sino-Hong Kong integration	Included any mutual recognition of qualification between Hong Kong and China, law and information exchange, encouraging economic integration, or border loosening for general population or professionals	Example 1: To enhance the promotion of Mandarin in the Greater Bay Area, it is suggested that Hong Kong should clarify the legal status of Mandarin Chinese and simplified Chinese characters. Additionally, ***integrating Mandarin education*** appropriately into the assessment system would be beneficial. (要加強大灣區的普通話推廣，香港應在法律上明確普通話與簡化字的地位、將普通話教育適度融入考評體系) Source: https://www.facebook.com/193439447353622/posts/4322489291115263 ========== Example 2: The Hong Kong government ***provides a subsidy*** of no less than HK$10,000 ***for Hong Kong youths who work in the Greater Bay Area***. This subsidy program lasts for a period of 18 months. (港青到大灣區工作　政府補貼薪金不低於一萬為期 18 個月) Source: https://www.facebook.com/263384634045118/posts/1227887047594867
Development and advancement	Any policy suggestions based on the development goal, including science research, infrastructure and enhancement on people's livelihoods	Example 1: Wan Chao, co-director of the laboratory, said he hoped that more collaborative funds could be opened up for direct access by Hong Kong research teams, which would not only facilitate the development of the Bay Area, but also enable the flexible flow of research funds in the Greater Bay Area; in the future, consideration could even be given t***o establishing a "9+2" mutual circulation of research funds in the Bay Area.***

		(實驗室聯席主任萬超指，希望能夠開放更多合作基金，讓*香港*科研團隊可直接使用，既利於灣區發展，又能令科研資金在大灣區靈活流動；未來甚至可以考慮建立灣區「9+2」相互流通的科研基金。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/193439447353622/posts/4192759784088215
Curb Covid	The suggestion of adopting a policy that deals with the spread of Covid.	Example 1: In the recent outbreak of the fourth wave of COVID-19, artists have shown great concern about the development of the pandemic. Many of them, in media interviews, ***expressed their hope for stricter government regulations and a swift achievement of "zero cases"*** in order to control the situation effectively. (近期第四波新冠肺炎疫情大爆發，一眾藝人亦非常關心疫情發展，不少人接受傳媒訪問時均希望政府要更嚴厲規管，盡快達到「清零」。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/203107431719594 7/posts/2531154293854611 ========== Example 2: The potential risk of COVID-19 transmission in bars should not be taken lightly, and it is crucial to ***strengthen inspection and control measures***. (對酒吧潛在的播疫風險，絕對不能掉以輕心，必須加強巡查管控) Source: https://www.facebook.com/105073301637072/posts/400534412090958 ========== Example 3: Leung Chi Chiu pointed out that the government's epidemic prevention measures were "too slow to start," and he suggested ***suspending face-to-face classes and reducing pedestrian flow in public areas by half***. (梁子超指政府防疫 「輸在起跑慢」 建議停面授課減市面一半人流) Source: https://www.facebook.com/127413667428891/posts/1841887829314791

Table B4 Definition of Grouping

Items	Definition	Examples
The nation	Count when China as a concept overall or the Chinese nation are mentioned or evaluated in the story. If the terminologies of nation/state merely appear as a part of a title, do not count. (e.g., The country leader Xi Jinping (國家領導人習近平) is not about the country but also Xi Jinping; similar logic when Chinese athletes mentioned, it is about athletes, but not China).	Example 1: The Solomon Islands and ***China*** signed a security cooperation agreement and the latter is waiting for the right moment to exert its influence. (中所兩國簽定安全合作協議 中國等待時機發揮大影響力) Source: https://www.facebook.com/100067010017608/posts/323645409879124 ========== Example 2: Secretary-General of the Committee and National Committee member stated that the theme of this evening's event is "***Love the Country***, Love Hong Kong, Moving Forward." The theme resonates with this year's National Day celebration, which marks the first National Day after the implementation of the Hong Kong National Security Law, to express gratitude to the central government for its support, which has successfully quelled violence, restored order, and resolved underlying issues, and eventually resulting in to the stability of Hong Kong society. (委員會秘書長、全國政協常委蔡冠深表示，是次次晚會主題為「愛國愛港，向前邁進」，主題呼應今次為《港區國安法》後首個國慶，感謝中央對香港的支持，成功止暴制亂，解決深層次問題，使香港社會恢復穩定。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/420130692880629 ========== Example 3: Thanks to ***our motherland*** for extending a helping hand and providing Hong Kong with safe and effective vaccines. This assistance has helped Hong Kong overcome the challenges posed by the pandemic and emerge from the crisis. (感謝祖國伸出援手，為港輸入安全有效的疫苗，助香港徹底戰勝疫魔，走出疫境。)

		Source: https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/231774091716291
Supreme leader: Xi	Count when Xi Jinping is mentioned or evaluated in the story. Count him only. Do not count other national leaders including former leaders.	Example 1: Today (16th), Hong Kong's Chief Secretary for Administration, John Lee, posted on social media expressing heartfelt gratitude for ***President Xi***'s important instructions regarding the COVID-19 situation in Hong Kong. He stated that his instructions have allowed the people of Hong Kong to feel the warm and uplifting concern from the dear country. (香港政務司司長李家超今日（16 日）在社交平台發文，表示衷心感謝習主席對香港疫情作出重要指示，讓香港市民感受到國家對港人親切關懷，振奮人心。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/101385831699542/posts/491201969384591 ========== Example 2: ***Xi Jinping***'s speech on Taiwan induced so much enthusiasm with three rounds of applause lasting 10 seconds each within one minute. (習近平講話談台灣　現場氣氛熱烈　1 分鐘內響起 3 次長達 10 秒的掌聲) Source: https://www.facebook.com/105073301637072/posts/240695388074862
Other national leaders	Other incumbent or retired national leaders. National leaders are defined as “State-level leaders (正國級領導人),” which are refer to those in the Standing Committees of the Politburo (中央政治局常委) of the Chinese Communist Party.	Example 1: ***Prime Minister Li***, with a delightful smile and a commitment to the nation and its people. :) (笑容可掬、為國為民的李總理：）) Source: https://www.facebook.com/512700315470576/posts/4720510451356187 ========== Example 2: The 59th Annual Meeting of the Asian-African Legal Consultative Organization was held for the first time in Hong Kong. During a video conference, ***Premier Li Keqiang*** announced that the organization would establish its sixth regional arbitration center in Hong Kong. He emphasized the continued adherence to the principle of "One

	Include former top leaders like Hu Jintao (胡錦濤) and Jiang Zhemin (江澤民) in this categories.	Country, Two Systems" as the core and the commitment to maintaining long-term prosperity and stability in Hong Kong. (亞洲-非洲法律協商組織第 59 屆年會首次在香港舉行，國務院總理李克強在視像會議上宣佈，亞非法協將在香港設立第六個區域仲裁中心，強調繼續堅持一國兩制為核心，以維護香港長期繁榮穩定。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/460649325495432
Chinese government	Include all Chinese government departments and their officials Examples including e.g., the Deputy Director of the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office (港澳辦副主任), Deputy Director of National Development and Reform Commission (發改委副主任), The Deputy Mayor of Huiyang (惠陽副市長) and Vice Premier of the State Council (國務院副總理). Do not count frontline civil servants who do not appear as the representatives of the government. Count them as ordinary Chinese.	Example 1: ***The spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Wang Wenbin*** (外交部發言人汪文斌) is mentioned in the excerpt. Source: https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/4267452736677133 ========== Example 2: ***The State Council Joint Prevention and Control Mechanism*** held a press conference this morning to introduce the COVID-19 vaccine administration for key populations and answer questions from reporters. (國務院聯防聯控機制今早舉行新聞發布會，介紹重點人群新冠病毒疫苗接種工作，並答記者問。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/2031074317195947/posts/2536139940022713 ========== ****Case that does not count**** A post-90s cadre in Guangdong Province was swept away by a flash flood while fighting against the flood situation and is still being searched for. (廣東一 90 後幹部抗擊汛情時被山洪被沖走，仍在搜救) Source: https://www.facebook.com/105073301637072/posts/376101354534264 The post-90s cadre is just merely a background of the story. The subject is not presented as a government representative.

People's Liberation Army	Include all military types and their subsidiaries. Also count when the PLA identity of individual soldiers is highlighted in the story.	Example 1: Today is the Qingming Festival, and the ***Hong Kong garrison (of PLA)*** commemorates the martyrs in their own way. (今天是清明節，駐港部隊自己的方式來緬懷先烈。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/512700315470576/posts/5405306489543243 ========== Example 2: Chinese Ambassador to North Korea, Li Jinjun, and embassy diplomats visited Changjin County, South Hamgyong Province in North Korea, to lay wreaths at the ***Martyrs' Cemetery*** of the Chinese People's Volunteers who sacrificed their lives during the Battle of Chosin Reservoir in the Korean War. They paid their respects and expressed deep condolences and remembrance on behalf of the Chinese people. (中國駐朝鮮大使李進軍及使館外交官來到朝鮮咸鏡南道長津郡長津邑，代表祖國人民向抗美援朝長津湖戰役中犧牲的中國人民志願軍烈士陵敬獻花籃，表達深切緬懷與追思。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/193439447353622/posts/4759284737435714 ========== Example 3: Taiwan can serve as a "key core for expeditionary forward base operations" and collaborate with the United States Marine Corps in conducting counter-landing operations to encircle ***the People's Liberation Army.*** (台灣可作為"遠征前進基地作戰的關鍵核心"與美國海軍陸戰隊協同進行逆登陸作戰，夾擊解放軍。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/512700315470576/posts/5631334493607107
Ordinary mainlanders	Mainlanders who are not presented as government officials/representatives, politicians, company	Example 1: A small village in Henan province was placed under lockdown due to the pandemic. ***Migrant workers*** who left their hometown contribute money and effort to take care of the elderly in their hometown.

	representatives, soldiers, or entertainment celebrities. Including athletes. Or the word "Mainlanders" being used as the subject of reporting or commentary.	(河南小村因疫情封閉 離鄉打工仔出錢出力照顧同鄉老人) Source: https://www.facebook.com/127413667428891/posts/1844132525756988 ========== Example 2: A recent incident occurred in Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, where a dangerous accident took place. Bystanders and shop owners who witnessed the car accident rushed forward and managed to lift the private car within two minutes, successfully rescuing the boy trapped inside. (浙江寧波市日前出現驚險意外...目擊車禍的路人及商店店主隨即衝上前抬起私家車，不消 2 分鐘便成功將男童救出。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/127413667428891/posts/1620268978143345 ========== Example 3: It is reported that 12 men, who are ***mainland Chinese*** from Guangdong and Guangxi provinces, have been arrested on suspicion of "illegal entry." (…據悉，12 名男子***為***內地人，來自廣東及廣西，涉嫌「非法入境」被捕…) Source: https://www.facebook.com/512700315470576/posts/5916690771738143
Mainland brands/Corporations	Include all China's brands or corporations. When individual staff are mentioned, only count when they are presented as representatives of a corporation. Do not count when the job is just the background of	Example 1: Claiming to be the world's largest vaccine manufacturing facility, ***the Beijing Institute of Biological Products***, a subsidiary of China National Pharmaceutical Group (Sinopharm)... (號稱全球最大疫苗廠房，***國藥集團***中國生物北京生物製品研究所...) Source: https://www.facebook.com/512700315470576/posts/5576732985733925 ========== Example 2: The effectiveness of the ***Sinovac*** COVID-19 vaccine has faced some criticism from certain Western opinions in the past. However, Bloomberg now provides a "rebuttal"

	the subjects (count as ordinary mainlanders).	by stating that the Chinese vaccine has shown better results in real-world application than in clinical trials. (***科興***新冠肺炎有效率曾遭西方一些輿論質疑，但如今彭博社為之「平反」，指這款中國疫苗在實際應用時，表遠優於臨床試驗的結果) Source: https://www.facebook.com/512700315470576/posts/5598850576855499 ========== Example 3: ***AlipayHK***, in collaboration with Alipay (Macau), has announced its intention to facilitate users' travel and daily life in both the local area and the Greater Bay Area. (AlipayHK 聯合支付寶（澳門）宣布，為方便用戶在本地及大灣區出行和生活) Source: https://www.facebook.com/101385831699542/posts/385211179983671
Foreign allies	Countries which are traditionally friendly to China (e.g., Russia, Pakistan, North Korea, Hungary, Serbia, Burma, Kazakhstan, Singapore) Note that Hungary is counted as an ally of China, and would not be counted as an European country. Or countries being framed as an ally.	Example 1: Singapore However, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, seemingly undeterred by U.S. hegemony ... expressed his refusal to exclude Huawei from participating in the construction of 5G infrastructure. (然而新加坡總理李顯龍，卻無懼美國霸權....拒絕排除華為參與建設 5G) Source: https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/3278586322230451 ========== Example 2: The Solomon Islands ***The Solomon Islands*** and China signed a security cooperation agreement and the latter is waiting for the right moment to exert its influence. (中***所***兩國簽定安全合作協議 中國等待時機發揮大影響力) Source: https://www.facebook.com/100067010017608/posts/323645409879124 ========== Example 3: Russia

		 The spokesperson of ***Russian*** Ministry of Foreign Affairs: I ask the British and American newspapers which spread the fake information like Bloomberg, New York Times and The Sun to announce the invasion timetable of Russia in the coming year, so I could mark my holiday accordingly. Source: https://www.facebook.com/512700315470576/posts/7155629084510966
Hong Kong police	Hong Kong police forces. Also count when the police identity of individual officers is highlighted in the story.	Example 1: Individual police officers On October 31st, two years ago, the defendant, Lee Kwun-lam, an 18-year-old culinary school student, launched an attack on ***Police Long Bo-kin*** at the intersection of Nathan Road and Lai Chi Kok Road in Mong Kok. (前年 10 月 31 日，被告李冠霖(18 歲，廚藝學院學生)在旺角彌敦道及荔枝角道交界康民角，襲擊警員龍柏勤。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/3858442670911477 ========== Example 2: Discuss the police in general

		The Police Force's National Security Department shoulders the responsibility of safeguarding national security. We hope that they will enforce the law rigorously and prevent any form of Hong Kong independence. (警隊國安處承守護重責，還望嚴加執法，杜絕港獨！) Source: https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/178915043668863 ========== Example 3:Highlight the police identity of individual officers Despite part of their routine duties, ***The female auxiliary officer*** cherishes the "touching embrace" when assisting the Imam in finding his son. (助清真寺教長尋回兒子 雖是日常警務工作 女輔警難忘「動人相擁」) Source: https://www.facebook.com/127413667428891/posts/1855012768002297
Hong Kong leaders	Upcoming, incumbent, and former chief executives of Hong Kong. Include Tung Chee-hwa, Donald Tsang, Leung Chun-ying, Carrie Lam, and John Lee (董建華, 曾蔭權, 梁振英, 林鄭月娥, 李家超) Note that John Lee had not become the Chief Executive of Hong Kong when the data was collected, but he should still be counted as one of the leaders of Hong Kong.	Example 1: Leung Chun-Ying: ***Leung Chun-ying:*** Hong Kong has better conditions to restart again. Hong Kong, keep going! (梁振英:香港再出發有了更好條件 香港加油!) Source: https://www.facebook.com/263384634045118/posts/1351286461921591 ========== Example 2: John Lee ***Chief Executive election candidate John Lee Ka-chiu*** expressed gratitude yesterday for the establishment of the Chief Executive-elect's Office by the current government and the provision of sufficient manpower. He stated that once the Chief Executive election is over and he is elected, he will immediately utilize the Chief Executive-elect's Office to organize his team and advance the work of future governance. (行政長官選舉候選人李家超昨日表示，感謝現屆政府成立候任特首辦，並提供充足人手。他說，當行政長官選舉結束，自己當選後，會立即利用候任辦工作，包括籌組班子及推進將來施政的工作。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/2031074317195947/posts/2877388125897891

		========== Example 3: Carrie ***Chief Executive Carrie Lam*** met with pro-establishment legislators yesterday (12th) to discuss the resumption of the Legislative Council's operation. (行政長官林鄭月娥昨日(12 日)同建制派議員會晤，商討立會恢復運作事宜) Source: https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/192519582308409
Hong Kong government	Include all Hong Kong government departments and their officials. Do not count frontline civil servants who do not appear as the representatives of the government. Count them as ordinary Hongkongeses. Do not count Chief Executives. Do not count police.	Example 1: Mentioning government representatives ***Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Erick Tsang*** recently (15th) stated that approximately 180,000 serving civil servants have already signed a declaration affirming their support for the Basic Law and their allegiance to the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. (政制及內地事務局局長曾國衞日前（15 日）表示，約 18 萬名在職公務員都已簽署擁護《基本法》、效忠香港特區等嘅聲明) Source: https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/5338420082913721 ========== Example 2: ***Chan Shui-fu*** has resigned from the position of ***Deputy Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs*** due to health reasons. His resignation will take effect at the end of this month. (陳帥夫以健康原因辭任政制及內地事務局副局長一職，將於本月底生效。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/512700315470576/posts/5155971757810052 ========== Example 3: Mentioning the term government According to reports, if the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress announces its decision today, ***the Hong Kong government*** will promptly implement the decision and announce the disqualification of Democratic Party members Yeung

		Yue-kwong, Kwok Wing-hang, Kwok Ka-ki, and Leung Kai-chi from the Legislative Council. (據悉，若人大常委會今日公布決定後，港府隨即會執行決定，宣布 DQ 公民黨楊岳橋、郭榮鏗、郭家麒及專業議政梁繼昌。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/218127626414271
Hong Kong public organizations	Include all non-governmental organizations established as the law of Hong Kong demanded. Including universities and schools.	Example 1: University ***The PolyU*** research team has developed a 3D-printed material that can effectively combat viruses. It is capable of killing over 90% of the novel coronavirus within 10 minutes. (理大研發 防病毒三維打印物料 10 分鐘殺滅逾 90%新冠病毒) Source: https://www.facebook.com/127413667428891/posts/1836943776475863 ========== Example 2: Secondary schools ***Pui Ching Middle School*** has faced repeated incidents involving teachers associated with the pro-democracy movement, leading to scrutiny from the society. (培正多次發生黃絲教師事件而受社會質疑) Source: https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/241670290726671 ========== Example 3: HA statutory body The Department of Health and ***Hospital Authority*** held a press briefing at 4:30 PM at the Information Dissemination Center located on the ground floor of the Yau Tsim Mong Jockey Club Health Protection Centre in Mong Kok. The briefing was held to provide updates on the latest situation regarding the epidemic. (衛生署及醫院管理局下午 4 時 30 分在旺角亞皆老街衛生防護中心大樓地下信息發布中心就疫情最新情況舉行簡報會。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/127413667428891/posts/1555791997924377

Hong Kong legislatures	The court and the judge.	Example 1: ***Principal Magistrates Peter Law*** stated that there is no evidence linking the defendant to the protest activities ... Please give a like to support the honorable justice judge! (主任裁判官羅德泉指，雖無證據指被告與示威活動有關... 請畀 like 支持正義法官！) Source: https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/304811351079231 ========== Example 2: On his first day in office, the newly appointed Chief Justice of the Court of Final Appeal, Andrew Cheung, expressed his hope to lead ***the judiciary*** in maintaining professionalism, efficiency, and keeping pace with the times. (新任終審法院首席法官張舉能於履新首日亦表示，希望自己能帶領司法機構保持專業、高效和與時並進。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/2031074317195947/posts/2557413497895357
Hong Kong pro-establishment groups (“Blue ribbons”)	Any pro-establishment supporters, organizations (including any parties, schools, pressure groups), politicians, or influencers. Also count when words that are traditionally used to represent them are mentioned, e.g., “pro-establishment (建制派),” “Blue ribbon (藍絲帶),” “patriot (愛國者)”	Example 1: The heroic acts of the "Lamp-lighters," six individuals who stood up against the violence and chaos, were retold during the book launch and forum at this year's book fair. One of the "Lamp-lighters," ***Legislative Council member Ho Kwan-yiu***, also attended the event. (將 6 位力抗暴亂的「點燈人」事跡重現，而今屆書展的新書發布會暨論壇上，其中一位「點燈人」立法會議員何君堯亦有出席。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/375092884051077 ========== Example 2:

	Also count blue entertainment celebrities.	Huang Guo, the Chairman of ***Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions*** and a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), is knowledgeable about labor issues and has a good understanding of the national situation. (工聯會理事長、全國政協委員黃國，熟悉勞工，了解國情。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/467037998189898 ========== Example 3: ***The pro-establishment camp*** is amending the rules of procedure to prevent filibustering. (建制派修改議事規則防拉布) Source: https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/208306687396365 ========== Example 4: Pansy Ho Chiu-king, Chairperson of ***the Hong Kong Federation of Women***, is representing the Women's Federation as a Hong Kong member of a national organization in the candidacy for the fifth functional constituency. (香港各界婦女聯合協進會主席何超瓊代表婦聯，以全國性團體香港成員參選第五界別選委。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/193439447353622/posts/4507643272599863
Chinese medics	Chinese medical professionals, including medical scholars. Exclude public health government officials. They are counted as government's representatives.	Example 1: Ho Kwan-yiu makes a good point! Let's support the ***healthcare workers of our motherland*** together. (何君堯有道理！一齊撐祖國醫護) Source: https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/3292455957510154 ========== Example 2:

		The central government has repeatedly dispatched ***medical teams from mainland China*** to Hong Kong to provide support. They are currently working together with healthcare professionals in treating patients at the AsiaWorld-Expo Community Treatment Facility. (中央接連派遣內地醫療團隊來港支援，正在亞洲博覽館社區治療設施與香港醫護共同治療患者) Source: https://www.facebook.com/193439447353622/posts/5256450304385819 ========== ****Case that does not count**** Dr. Chuang Shuk-kwan, Director of the Communicable Diseases Branch of the Centre for Health Protection, and Mr. Lau Ka Hin, General Manager (Quality and Standards) of the Hospital Authority, will be in attendance. (衛生署衛生防護中心傳染病處主任張竹君，和醫院管理局總行政經理（質素及標準）劉家獻將會出席。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/127413667428891/posts/1555791997924377 It only involves discussion of Hong Kong medical professionals but not those from China.
The city of Hong Kong	Count when the posts or stories mention or evaluate Hong Kong as a whole. If the terminologies of nation/state merely appear as a background of the story, or part of a title, does not count.	Example 1: Evaluating Hong Kong ***Hong Kong*** has integrated its unique experience into the magnificent epic of the Communist Party of China's centennial achievements. The "One Country, Two Systems" principle has become a shining chapter in this endeavor. (香港以自己的特殊經歷融入了中國共產黨百年偉業這部壯麗史詩，「一國兩制」事業成為其中的華彩篇章。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/193439447353622/posts/4349445801752945

		========== Example 2: The opening of the cross-harbor section of the East Rail Line signifies ***the progress of Hong Kong*** and provides greater convenience for the residents. (但東鐵線過海段通車，見證香港的進步，為市民提供更多便利) Source: https://www.facebook.com/100067010017608/posts/336094645300867
Ordinary Hongkongeses	Hongkongeses who are presented not as government officials, police officers, politicians, political influencers, company representatives, or entertainment celebrities. Including athletes. Or the word "Hongkongeses" being used as the subjects of reporting or evaluation.	Example 1: Railway Enthusiast Many ***railway enthusiasts*** visited Hung Hom Station yesterday to take photos and bid farewell to this old friend that they have known for 47 years. (不少鐵路迷昨日前往紅磡站，在舊月台上打卡留念，送別這相識 47 載的老朋友) Source: https://www.facebook.com/100067010017608/posts/336094645300867 ========== Example 2: Athletes Today, ***Hong Kong representative Leung Yuk-wing*** competed in the Tokyo Paralympics Boccia BC4 individual event on the hard court. He defeated national team player Zheng Yuansen with a score of 5-4 and won a bronze medal. (港隊代表梁育榮今日在在東京殘奧硬地滾球混合 BC4 級個人賽，以大分 5：4 擊敗國家隊鄭遠森贏得一面銅牌) Source: https://www.facebook.com/883534741671087/posts/4575091995848658
Hong Kong brand/corporations	Include all Hong Kong's brands or corporations. When individual staffs are mentioned, only count when they are presented as representatives of a	Example 1: After a four-year hiatus, the fireworks show at ***Hong Kong Disneyland*** has returned. (闊別 4 年，香港迪士尼煙花匯演今回歸) Source: https://www.facebook.com/105073301637072/posts/400592608751805 ========== Example 2:

	corporation. Do not count when the job is just the background of the subjects (count as ordinary Hongkongeses).	***The MTR*** announced early this morning (5th) that the new track connection project of the East Rail Line was successfully completed yesterday as planned, and train tests have been conducted to ensure safe operation. The train service between Hung Hom Station and Sheung Shui Station on the East Rail Line resumed normal operation today. (港鐵今日(5 日)清晨宣布，東鐵綫新軌道接駁工程於昨日按計劃成功完成，並已進行列車測試，確保運作安全。東鐵綫往來紅磡站至上水站的列車服務，今日回復正常運作。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/193439447353622/posts/4413413788689479 ========== ****Case that does not count**** 12 more confirmed cases today. Variant virus confirmed female working as clinic staff in Central Plaza, Central. (今增 12 宗確診　變種病毒確診女中環中央廣場任診所職員) Source: https://www.facebook.com/883534741671087/posts/4173478392676689 In this case, the staff member is not a company representative. Should count as Ordinary Hongkongese.
Hong Kong oppositional groups (Yellow ribbons)	Any oppositional camp supporters, organizations (including any parties, press, or pressure groups), politicians, or influencers. Also count when words that are traditionally used to represent them are used, e.g., “Pro-democracy (民主派),” “Localist (本土	Example 1: ***Activist Lau Wing-hong***, who participated in the democratic primaries of the pro-democracy camp known as "35+", has been remanded in custody at Lai Chi Kok Reception Centre on charges of violating the Hong Kong National Security Law. (參與民主派「35+」初選，涉嫌違反《港區國安法》而被還押於荔枝角收押所的社運人士劉頴匡) Source: https://www.facebook.com/512700315470576/posts/7272148902858983 ========== Example 2:

	派),” “Oppositional Groups (反對派),” “Politikus (政棍),” “Yellow people (黃人),” etc. Also count pro-democracy entertainment celebrities	***Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions*** has announced the initiation of dissolution procedures and will convene a general meeting of its members on October 3rd to make a decision. (職工盟宣布啟動解散程序　10.3 召開會員大會決議) Source: https://www.facebook.com/512700315470576/posts/6246884868718730 ========== Example 3: Apart from continuing to monitor the government and upholding core values and political beliefs, ***the non-establishment camp*** also has a responsibility to provide viable solutions for the people of Hong Kong. (非建制派除了持續監察政府，堅守核心價值和政治理念外，也有責任為香港市民提供良策出路) Source: https://www.facebook.com/263384634045118/posts/1154751571575082 ========== Example 4: ***Yellow ribbons, opposition parties, and black-clad protesters*** have not shown any intention to cease their disruptive activities. In recent days, these anti-China and anti-Hong Kong gangs continue to engage in acts that incite violence and unrest. (黃絲、反對派、黑衣人，仍未打算停止黑暴攪炒，近日這班反中亂港者，仍四出生事) Source: https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/186167652943602
Hong Kong medics	Hong Kong’s medical professionals, include medical scholars. Exclude public health government officials. They	Example 1: ***Eye doctor*** Pong Chiu Fai 's regular work routine involves meeting many patients. (眼科醫生龐朝輝平時的工作會與很多病人見面) Source: https://www.facebook.com/512700315470576/posts/4443250172415551 ==========

	count as government's representatives. The term "Hospital Authority" refers to a public organization, but not medics. People who work for HA can be counted as medics, except top executives.	Example 2: ***Professor Lai Ching-lung***, a renowned authority in liver diseases and adjunct professor of the Department of Medicine and Hepatology at the University of Hong Kong, did not have his contract renewed by the university. (有份聯署的肝病權威、香港大學醫學院內科及肝臟科兼職講座教授黎青龍不獲港大續約。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/288308402729526
Rioters	Individuals described as rioters in former social movements in Hong Kong. Including those suspects are charged with the felony of rioting. Random protesters should be counted as oppositional camp unless the element of "violent/riot" is mentioned. Also count when words that are traditionally used to represent them are used, e.g., "Rioters (暴徒)," "Black Violence (黑暴)," "Dragon Slaying Brigade (屠龍小隊)," etc.	Example 1: Starting from July of this year, the police arrested 14 individuals suspected of being ***members of the "Returning Valiant" organization***, which advocates for Hong Kong independence. They are accused of plotting and planning terrorist attacks. (警方今年 7 月起拘捕「港獨」組織「光城者」14 名疑犯，涉嫌圖謀策劃恐怖襲擊) Source: https://www.facebook.com/193439447353622/posts/4585649091465947 ========== Example 2: To combat the ***black violence***, it is important to address the root causes and take decisive actions. (打擊黑暴要斬草除根！) Source: https://www.facebook.com/105073301637072/posts/258246136319787

Foreign Power: US	United State, its government officials, or any reports wherein highlight the American identity of the subjects. If the U.S just appears as a destination or a mere story background, do not count.	Example 1: ***New York City Mayor*** announces to dismiss the civil servants who participated in the demonstrations.  Source: https://www.facebook.com/512700315470576/posts/5029468163793746 ========== Example 2: ***President Biden***'s first visit to Asia since taking office seems to have encountered some initial challenges on the first day.

		(美國總統拜登上任以來的首次亞洲之行，第一天就似乎進展不順) Source: https://www.facebook.com/193439447353622/posts/5429250663772448
Foreign Power: UK	Same as US	***The UK*** has announced an expansion of the British National Overseas (BNO) scheme, allowing Hong Kong residents born in or after 1997 to apply. (英國宣布放寬 BNO 計畫 容許 97 後出生港人申請) Source: https://www.facebook.com/127413667428891/posts/1868385856664988
Foreign Power: EU	Same as above. Include all European countries, or the word European Union. Hungary and Serbia are counted as an foreign allies.	After the implementation of the National Security Law in Hong Kong, ***German Chancellor*** Angela Merkel responded to the pressure from those with ill intentions regarding the Hong Kong issue yesterday (2nd). (「港區國安法」實施後，面對不懷好意者在涉港問題上的施壓，德國總理默克爾昨天（2 日）回應了。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/512700315470576/posts/4124361947637710
Foreign Power: Ukraine	Same as above	Example 1: In recent weeks, Russia has continuously accused the ***Ukrainian military*** of targeting Russian territory, including the two villages of Belgorod. (俄羅斯近幾周持續指控烏克蘭軍隊打擊俄羅斯境內目標，包括貝爾哥羅德兩座村莊等。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/512700315470576/posts/7461640900576448 ========== Example 2: On the other hand, ***Ukraine*** has proposed a "neutral status" and seeks international guarantees to protect itself from attacks. (而烏克蘭方面則提出了「中立地位」的提議，希望得到國際社會的保障，以保護其免受攻擊)

		Source: https://www.facebook.com/2031074317195947/posts/2852225305080840
Foreign Power: Canada	Same as above	***Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau*** announced on Wednesday local time that Canada will join the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia in a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics. This decision is based on concerns about human rights issues in China. (加拿大總理特魯多當地時間周三表示，加拿大將加入美國，英國和澳大利亞的隊伍，以所謂人權問題為理由「外交抵制」北京冬奧會) Source: https://www.facebook.com/193439447353622/posts/4907430642621122
Foreign Power: Australia	Same as above	***Australia*** has been following the lead of the United Kingdom and the United States for months, consistently accusing China of issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang. (澳洲連月來隨英美的指揮棒，一直就新冠疫情、台灣香港及新疆問題指責中國) Source: https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/4558023700953367
Foreign Power: Japan	Same as above	Heavy rainfall in Kyushu, ***Japan*** has caused disastrous effects. (日本九州豪雨成災) Source: https://www.facebook.com/127413667428891/posts/1401587173344861
Foreign Power: Korea	Same as above	During his visit to the Samsung semiconductor factory the day before yesterday, he mistakenly called the newly inaugurated ***President of South Korea***, Yoon Suk-yul, by the name of former President Moon Jae-in. (他前日參觀三星半導體廠房期間，誤把剛上任的韓國總統尹錫悅叫成前總統文在寅) Source: https://www.facebook.com/193439447353622/posts/5429250663772448
Foreign Power: Taiwan	Same as above	***The Democratic Progressive Party*** is well aware of their actions. Over the years, they have been emboldened by the support of the United States and have engaged in

		efforts to promote "de-Chinaization" and advocate for ***Taiwan*** independence without fear of consequences. (民進黨鷄食放光蟲，心知肚明。 多年來，他們仗著美國的撐腰，有恃無恐地大搞去中國化和台獨。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/393542898872742
Foreign Media	Any international media which are not directly or indirectly controlled by the state of China Do not count when the media is not an actor in the news or subject of evaluation, but just a news source	Example 1: Framed as an actor The effectiveness of the Sinovac COVID-19 vaccine has faced some criticism from certain Western opinions in the past. However, ***Bloomberg*** now provides a "rebuttal" by stating that the Chinese vaccine has shown better results in real-world application than in clinical trials. (科興新冠肺炎有效率曾遭西方一些輿論質疑，但如今彭博社為之「平反」，指這款中國疫苗在實際應用時，表遠優於臨床試驗的結果) Source: https://www.facebook.com/512700315470576/posts/5598850576855499 ========== Example 2: Subject of evaluation Just as long as they are ***Western journalists***, they will never speak positively about China. If a foreign journalist reports on China differently from many Western media outlets, then they are definitely not a Western journalist, and they might even be engaged in false propaganda on behalf of China. Such thinking is very unhealthy. (就是只要是西方記者就一定不會說中國的好話，如果外國記者報道中的中國跟很多西方媒體報道中的不一樣，他一定不是西方記者，甚至可能是中國在虛假宣傳。這樣的思維是非常不健康的。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/512700315470576/posts/5391459404261285 ****Does not count if the foreign media is merely cited as a source**** According to ***The New York Times***, the World Health Organization had been preparing to release a global report on the death toll related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

		(據《紐約時報》報道，世界衞生組織原本準備發布一項覆蓋全球範圍、有關新冠疫情的死亡人數統計) Source: https://www.facebook.com/193439447353622/posts/5336554576375391
Foreign Power: Others	Other countries, and international organizations. Open-ended coding	Example including India: The report stated that the number of COVID-related deaths in India reached 4 million, which is seven times higher than the official figures. However, ***the Indian authorities*** raised objections to the report, leading to a delay in its publication. (當中指出印度與新冠有關的死亡人數達 400 萬人，較官方數字高 7 倍，印度方面提出反對，導致需推遲公布報告。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/193439447353622/posts/5336554576375391

Table B5 Coding Options for Table B4

Coding Options	Definition	Examples
Does not mention	The items were not mentioned in the story.	/
Positive description	The items are not only mentioned but also with some descriptions/evaluations in the story, in which these descriptions/evaluations are positive overall. Evaluation includes direct commentary or comments in quotes. A positive description can established without direct	Example 1: Advocacy of support If the police collaborate with KMB (Kowloon Motor Bus) to block loopholes in criminal activities and expedite the apprehension of fugitives. ***Support the police*** in implementing such measures promptly. (若警方與九巴合作，既堵塞犯罪手法漏洞，又能盡快將逃犯繩之於法，**支持警方**盡快落實做法。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/429662425260789 ========== Example 2: Positive direct commentary The Chinese people ***are known for their reverence for justice and their fearlessness in the face of violence.***

	commentary about an subject simply by giving overwhelming advantageous factual information (e.g., Decrease of Hong Kong unemployment rate, Chinese athletes won three gold medals)	(中國人民是崇尚正義、不畏強暴的人民。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/512700315470576/posts/6119210544819497 ========== Example 3: Positive factual description Known as the "Flying Fish," Siobhan Haughey won two silver medals at the Tokyo Olympics. Although she did not use social media during the competition, she received many encouraging messages. ***Her mindset has matured for this year's Olympics, and with increased competition experience, she was able to perform better.*** (在東京奧運贏得 2 面游泳銀牌的港隊「女飛魚」... 比賽期間雖然沒有使用社交平台，但收到很多鼓勵的訊息 今次東京奧運心態變得成熟，加上比賽經驗增多，故發揮相對更好。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/883534741671087/posts/4538409929516865
Neutral description	Mentioned without further description or evaluation. Or the positivity of the description / evaluation is not clear.	Example 1: Entertainment celebrities ***Mirror's*** concert offers priority ticket booking for credit card holders, as well as lottery-based subscriptions for fan clubs. There may also be internal subscriptions available. It is uncertain whether a fully implemented real-name registration system will be in place. (Mirror 演唱會有信用卡優先訂票及歌迷會抽籤認購，還有內部認購，未知能否完全實施實名制。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/518758878276908/posts/2189028361249943 ========== Example 2: Oppositional political leader ***Lau Wing-hong***, an activist who participated in the democratic primary "35+" and was remanded in custody at Lai Chi Kok Reception Centre on suspicion of violating the National Security Law, tested positive for COVID-19 during a rapid test yesterday (13th) and showed symptoms of a cold.

		(參與民主派「35+」初選，涉嫌違反《港區國安法》而被還押於荔枝角收押所的社運人士***劉頴匡***，他昨日(13 日)做快速測試時，亦證實染疫，有感冒症狀。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/512700315470576/posts/7272148902858983
Negative description	The items are not only mentioned but also with some descriptions/evaluations in the story, in which these descriptions/evaluations are negative overall. Evaluation includes direct commentary or comments in quotes. A negative description can also be established without direct commentary about an subject simply by giving overwhelming disadvantageous factual information	Example 1a: Negative direct commentary The inclusion of "contain China through Hong Kong" and support for Taiwan independence in the competition bill by the United States reflects its ***hegemonic ambitions***. (美國將「以港遏華」和支持台獨的骯髒勾當，綑綁在競爭法案內，已說明了美國的霸權野心。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/518758878276908/posts/2104289563057157 ========== Example 1b: Regina Ip openly stated that some production personnel in RTHK have been ***corrupted***, and she further expressed that certain individuals frequently challenge the government's bottom line, which ***puts the Director of Broadcasting in an unjust position***. (葉太席間明言有港台製作人員已被縱壞，更表示有人常挑戰政府底線，陷廣播處長不義) Source: https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/314950956731937 ========== Example 1c: The SAR government has ***completely failed*** to make any preparations for disaster response and has been ***complacent*** and ***self-satisfied*** without taking any proactive measures. (特區政府完全沒有作出任何處理災難的應變準備，只一味在夜郎自大，洋洋自得) Source: https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/4991996297556103

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Example 2a: Negative factual description [One-sided quote]
Russian media photographer Dombass has been injured in artillery shelling and ***blames the Ukrainian military*** for the attack
(俄媒攝影師頓巴斯遭炮擊受傷　指烏軍應負責)
Source: https://www.facebook.com/883534741671087/posts/5393487067342476

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Example 2b:
In recent years, the United States has unilaterally imposed tariffs on imported goods from countries such as China. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine conflict, these high tariffs have actually ***intensified pressure*** on some U.S. companies that rely on imported goods and raw materials. This has led to ***increased production costs and prices***, resulting in a "punitive" inflation that ultimately affects consumers who bear the burden.
美國近年單方面對來自中國等國家的進口商品徵收關稅，不過在新冠疫情及俄烏衝突期間，高額關稅反而加劇一些依賴進口商品及原材料的美企壓力，導致生產成本和價格攀升，這種「懲罰性」通脹最終由消費者埋單。
Source: https://www.facebook.com/193439447353622/posts/5379724688725046

Table B6 Political Terminologies

Items	Definition	Examples
Central government	Count when they mention "central" (中央), the central government (中央政府)	Example 1: Hong Kong cannot handle the problems on its own, and finally the ***central government*** has stepped in. The implementation of the "Hong Kong National Security Law" prevents the troublemakers from continuing to disrupt the city. (香港自己無法處理的問題，終於由中央出手，《港區國安法》令攪炒派難再拉布...) Source: https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/365476371679395 ========== Example 2: In particular, Cheng Yeuk-wah has gained the trust of ***the central government*** and has a good working relationship with John Lee. Unless she herself decides not to continue, her re-election is highly likely and not in question. (特別是鄭若驊甚得中央信任，與李家超亦合作愉快，只要不是她自己想走，她連任是最無懸念...) Source: https://www.facebook.com/518758878276908/posts/2181281025358010
Chinese Communist Party	Count when they mention CCP (中共), the party (黨), the central party (黨中央), The Communist Party (共產黨)	Example 1: Xia Baolong stated yesterday that General Secretary Xi Jinping reaffirmed the firm position of fully and accurately implementing the "one country, two systems" policy in his important speech at the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the ***Communist Party of China***. (夏寶龍昨日表示，習近平總書記在慶祝中國共產黨成立 100 周年大會上的重要講話中重申全面準確貫徹「一國兩制」方針一以貫之的堅定立場) Source:https://www.facebook.com/101385831699542/posts/349404790230977 ==========

		Example 2: Leung Oi-sie also pointed out that the Constitution constrains Hong Kong, and the current national system is a multi-party cooperation led by ***the Communist Party***. The Communist Party is the ruling party, and everyone should have respect for the Communist Party. (梁愛詩亦指出，憲法約束香港，現時國家體制是共產黨領導的多黨合作，共產黨是執政黨，大家應對共產黨有尊重) Source: https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/323405772553122
The nation	Count when they mention the Chinese nation (中華民族), the nation (國家)	Example 1: With the full support ***of the country***, Hong Kong is purchasing domestically developed vaccines to combat the epidemic. (有國家全力支持，購買國家研發的疫苗，以治香港受疫之患。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/3687353328020413 ========== Example 2: John Lee continued to say that under the guidance of President Xi, Hong Kong is assured that the well-being of its citizens is protected by the immense power and care of ***the country***. (李家超續說，習主席的指示，讓香港知道在國家的強大力量和無邊的眷顧下，市民的福祉肯定獲得保障。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/101385831699542/posts/491201969384591
Blue	Count when they mention blue people (藍人), blue camp (藍營), blue ribbon (藍絲), blue celebrities (藍藝人), blue shops (藍店)	Example 1: ***Blue camp***'s two most popular Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) and Legislative Council members, Chan Wing Yan and Li Tsz King, have stated that they will not be intimidated by the power.

		(藍營兩大最受歡迎的 KOL 兼立法會議員陳穎欣和李梓敬表明，不會受強權所嚇) Source: https://www.facebook.com/100067010017608/posts/320462853530713 ========== Example 2: They show no concern for people's livelihoods, even going to great lengths to obstruct funding for local activities. They have even hung a sign saying "***Blue ribbons*** and dogs are not allowed inside" at their office door. In short, their actions are destructive rather than constructive. (對民生毫不關心，就連地方活動撥款也千方百計卡住，甚至將「藍絲與狗不得內進」掛在辦事處門口，總之就是有破壞無建設) Source: https://www.facebook.com/512700315470576/posts/5586958094711414 *No example was found in content analysis of the original dataset. These two examples were found in post-hoc exploration for the purpose of better illustration of the coding criteria.
Yellow	Count when they mention yellow people (黃人), yellow camp (黃營),yellow ribbon (黃絲), yellow celebrities (黃藝人), yellow shops (黃店), yellow and blue power (黃黑勢力)	Example 1: Remove the ***yellow and black***, prioritize the development!

Source:
https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/4792665384155863

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Example 2:

Due to Ma Chun Wai's remark of "no constraints," it has sparked mockery and skepticism from yellow camp, including ***"yellow" artist To Man Chak***.

卻因馬仔一句「沒掣肘」，引來黃營揶揄質疑，當中包括黃藝人杜汶澤！

Source: https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/375243044036061

Black	Count when they mention black riot (黑暴), black power (黑色勢力), yellow-black power (黃黑勢力)	Example 1: The cases related to the ***"black" riots*** have become a problem, and the Chief Justice Ma Tao-li bears responsibility for this. Former Court of Final Appeal judge, Henry Litton, strongly criticized the situation and expressed his outrage. (黑暴案積壓，司法界之首馬道立難辭其咎，前終院法官烈顯倫開火鬧爆。) Source: https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/3403905506365198 ========== Example 2: On July 1st last year, ***black-clad individuals*** caused chaos throughout Hong Kong. (去年 7.1，黑衣人四處全港到處搞亂檔) Source: https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/304811351079231

Table B7 Engagement bait

Items	Definition	Examples
Comment	Calling for user's comment.	https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/4222174251204982 一拖再拖，終有定數，不知大家有何感想，開放留言，任你點講！ One delay after another, there is always a final outcome. I wonder what everyone's thoughts are. Feel free to ***leave your comments***!
Like	Calling for user's like response.	https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/192519582308409 
Share	Calling for user's share.	https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/3247193742036376 支持請 Like and Share！ Please ***like and share*** to support us!
Sad	Calling for user's like response.	https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/3403905506365198

		
Angry	Calling for user's angry emoji response.	https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/3354006024688480 
Love	Calling for user's love emoji response.	https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/246943530199347

		
Care	Calling for user's care emoji response.	https://www.facebook.com/2031074317195947/posts/2737289549907750 
Haha	Calling for user's haha emoji response.	https://www.facebook.com/108186094075092/posts/282963146597385

		
Wow	Calling for user's wow emoji response.	None