The Religion-Based Conservative Countermovement in Taiwan

Origin, Tactics and Impacts*

Ming-sho Ho

Abstract
Taiwan's conservative movement to defend the threatened traditional morality and sexualities is an intellectually fascinating case of countermovement, yet an oft-neglected aspect of Taiwan's civil society. This article locates its origins in the preceding change of Taiwan's Christian community. Protestant and Catholic leaders pioneered the opposition to gender equity and a more relaxed attitude on sexuality, and, over the years, they gained support from other religions. I will analyse the contestations over the issues of abortion, same-sex marriage and gender equity education. On the whole, the conservative movement has largely failed to turn back the clock. However, their presence was powerfully felt and had the potential to usher in a new political alignment that moved beyond the pre-existing cleavage.

Keywords: conservatism, countermovements, same-sex marriage, abortion, Christianity

After the termination of martial law in 1987, Taiwan has witnessed a persistent stream of social movements, making possible a number of social and political reforms. However, it would be erroneous to see Taiwan's civil

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society as populated only by progressive organizations and individuals. In fact, not all protest activism aims at promoting tolerance, protection of minorities and the rights of the disadvantaged. According to Tilly (2005: 435), democratization necessarily equalizes access to power so that the ways different social groups pursue their interests tend to converge. Street protest used to be the signature political activity of the disfranchised, but once its efficacy has been successfully demonstrated, such a ‘weapon of the weak’ lends itself to be imitated and usurped by more affluent and established constituencies. Countermovements, defined as ‘the mobilization of sentiments initiated to some degree in opposition to a movement’ (Zald and Useem 1987: 249), are an expectable phenomenon in the wake of an intensive period of progressive mobilizations or reforms.

In the United States, the New Left movements of the 1960s invited the conservative backlash in the 1970s, as countermovements in opposition to abortion, civil rights and women’s liberation mushroomed (Lo 1982; Mottl 1980). McAdam and Kloos (2014: 104-106) maintain that these conservative reactions have left an enduring political consequence by pushing the Republican Party further towards the right. In Taiwan, following decades of democratization, it should not come as a surprise that those sentiments that oppose changes find protest making a ready-to-use tool to have their voices heard. Incidents such as the attempts to oppose education reforms, the mobilization of power company workers to defend nuclear energy and employer resistance to labour protection (Ho 2005b: 414-416) fall into the category of countermovements. Nevertheless, there has been little scholarly attention on this topic, as most of the existing literature is devoted to pro-reform activism, rather than their opponents in civil society. In an edited volume on social movements under the Ma Ying-jeou government (2008-2016) (Fell 2017), there were thirteen chapters that analysed environmental, student, labour, women’s and other progressive movements, but none of them took a look at the conservative ones. A literature review of the 134 journal articles on Taiwan’s social movements published from 1980 to 2014 (both in English and in Chinese) did not find a single piece that focused on conservative movements (Ho et al. 2018). Such lopsided scholarship fails to do justice to the multifarious and complex contentious politics in contemporary Taiwan.

This chapter redresses this imbalance by taking a closer look at one conservative countermovement. Around the turn of the century, Taiwan’s religious leaders initiated a campaign to defend traditional family values and gender norms that were increasingly eroded by cultural modernization that brought about what they identified as the perverse tendency of ‘sexual
liberation.’ Over the years, abortion, same-sex marriage and gender equity education have successively emerged as the arenas where conservatives and progressives engaged in fierce combat. This article will first describe the genesis of this religion-based countermovement and how it evolved into a sustained campaign with considerable political influences. Secondly, I will offer an interim assessment of its impact. On the policy fronts, conservatives have failed to arrest Taiwan’s transition to a more equal and multicultural society. Nevertheless, they succeed in rallying a considerable pool of supporters, thereby making further progressive reforms more difficult and threatening to usher in a new political realignment. Being a latecomer in protest politics as well as a reaction to the reforms secured by the women’s movement and the gender movement, conservatives took pains to imitate the tactics and framing of their opponents.

In this chapter ‘conservatism’ refers to the effort to restore traditional values in opposition to cultural modernity as exemplified by multiculturalism. Giddens (1991: 241) notices the transition from a ‘politics of life chance’ (income distribution, for instance) to a ‘politics of lifestyle,’ which is at its core about ‘self-actualization’ in an increasingly reflective and changeable world. Thus, conservatism in the cultural sense represented a backlash against the politics of lifestyle in the name of a hallowed orthodoxy. Habermas (1985: 88–93) identified three common components of the ‘neoconservatism’ in the 1970s West: (1) the suspicion of critical intellectuals, (2) the assumption that rational science, universalistic morality and avant-garde art had lost their validity, and (3) traditional values viewed as a solution to contemporary social problems. Habermas viewed the newer conservatism as a reaction to the ‘new social movements’ of women, peace and ecology, which all promoted democratization of the everyday world. In the context of Taiwan, anti-intellectualism and anti-modernization did not emerge as a perceivable force; hence, the more appropriate use of the term ‘conservatism’ should be restricted to the third aspect mentioned by Habermas. Taiwan’s conservatism was characterized by opposition to the women’s movement and the gender movement, which challenged patriarchal values and promoted equality and the diversification of identities. It should be noted that conservatism thus defined is strictly cultural and is unrelated to other public disputes concerning Taiwan’s political future (independence or unification), economic redistribution or environmental protection. As shown in the following, the opposition activists to abortion and same-sex marriage adopted a non-partisan approach by emphasizing that they represented mainstream voices. Hence, Taiwan’s cultural conservatives are not organizationally linked to those conservative tendencies in other issues.
The term ‘countermovement’ also requires some upfront clarification here. I use it to refer to those organized campaigns that specifically oppose the goals of another pre-existing movement. Since most social movements strive for progressive changes in Taiwan and elsewhere in the world, countermovements emerge as a backlash and hence are conservative in orientation. Theoretically, it is possible to have ‘progressive countermovements’ – say, anti-Trump protests in the US – but such usage is rare and easily confusing. Understanding that the great majority of countermovements are conservative, it is still important to conceptually separate ‘countermovement’ and ‘conservatism.’

The Religious Roots of the Conservative Movement

With the noticeable exception of the Presbyterian Church, the oldest and largest Protestant denomination in Taiwan, religious organizations have not played a significant role in the transition to democracy, as most religious leaders either shied away from public issues or toed the line defined by the Kuomintang (KMT) regime (Rubinstein 1991: 29). The Presbyterian Church’s advocacy for political reforms and political independence in the 1970s incurred the government’s repression. Some Presbyterian pastors provided lessons on the tactics of non-violent resistance, thus cultivating a cohort of pro-democracy, labour and indigenous activists, adding new blood to the nascent wave of social protests in the late 1980s. However, politically engaged Presbyterians were an exceptional minority to their largely conformist co-religionists. The campaign to end child prostitution in the late 1980s was mounted by some Christian welfare organizations and it later evolved into an anti-human trafficking movement with international linkages (Ho 2010: 544). However, the goals were consensual and mainstream, rather than motivated by an explicitly conservative agenda.

Outside Christian minorities, Taiwan’s economic success and the growth of the middle class enabled a Buddhist renaissance that laid down a political culture of civility, tolerance and cosmopolitanism (Madsen 2007). Such civic virtue helped democracy to take root; nevertheless, Buddhist leaders seldom took a stand in political and social disputes. Traditional folk religion, which arguably attracted the most followers in Taiwan, was intimately involved with the rise of environmental protests in the mid-1980s (Ho 2005a; Weller 1

1999: 115-121). Yet, its essentially localistic orientation entailed that its influences could not extend beyond the community borders. Before the transition to democracy was accomplished with the first peaceful power turnover in 2000, the political visibility of religion-based activism remained minimal. Before Taiwan’s Christian communities spearheaded a conservative intervention into public life, there had been a change in its ecology as a more individualistic, inward-looking and conformist tendency began to take root. In 1987, a collaborative campaign by major Protestant denominations to revive the faith was launched. The so-called Year 2000 Evangelism (Liangqian Nian Fuyin Yundong) aimed to increase the Christian population to two million by the turn of the century. The campaign introduced the methods, materials and training pioneered by evangelicals in the US, Singapore and Hong Kong. In particular, there was an emphasis on applying biblical principles to everyday life so as to ‘solve family problems, youth problems, faith problems, and social problems’ (Shia 1993: 9). Although the campaign failed to meet the growth target, it laid the foundation for the rise of a conservative countermovement in many ways. First, it was a reflection of the political and ethnic cleavage during the authoritarian era. Taiwan’s Protestant communities used to be divided by Taiwanese-speaking churches (best presented by the Presbyterians) and Mandarin-speaking ones. The Mandarin-speaking churches tended to be composed of mainlanders who embraced the KMT ideology of anti-communism. With the participation of some Presbyterians, this evangelic campaign blurred the pre-existing divide and consolidated the Mandarin-speaking pastor leadership. As a result, a more conservative outlook with emphasis on family values became more widespread among Taiwan’s Protestants, hastening the secular decline of the social gospel direction once championed by the Presbyterian Church (Interview NMM 2017). Moreover, Year 2000 Evangelism proceeded with a series of joint prayers and training on a regional basis. As a result, citywide connections between Christians spanning across denominations came into being in many places, thereby weakening the loyalty of churchgoers to their own denominations. Later, when conservative Protestants mobilized for lobbying, protests or electoral campaigning, these networks served as a solid organizational basis (Interview TGF 2017). Not surprisingly, when a gay pride event was first held in 2000, the leading clergymen of Year 2000 Evangelism were among the first to voice criticism. 

2 The rise of Taiwan’s religious conservatism is part of a global phenomenon. The US evangelical campaign is certainly an important source of inspiration for Taiwan activists; however, the influences from Hong Kong, Singapore and South Korea are probably more direct, given their
The Catholic conservative movement began with the establishment of the Human Life Ethics Center (HLEC), originally affiliated with Fu Jen Catholic University, in 1999. While the Protestant activism started with an ambitious proselytization campaign, the Catholic stream initially focused on life education. In the name of teaching students to cherish personal dignity, religious doctrines were brought onto the campus. The HLEC launched an energetic campaign to distribute an American anti-abortion documentary, *Eclipse of Reason*, in high schools as a supplementary material for ‘life education’ or ‘health education’ (Kuan 2011). The HLEC also promoted the value of chastity to discourage pre-marital sex. Taiwan’s Catholic leaders articulated their opposition to surrogate motherhood, gene cloning and the legalization of the morning-after pill on the grounds that these new technologies were said to violate the sanctity of life.

Protestant and Catholic Christians made up a minority in Taiwan – in a 2015 survey they were 6% of the population (Fu et al. 2016: 168) – yet they pioneered the conservative movement. They achieved this through mounting three campaigns that targeted abortion, same-sex marriage and gender equity education, respectively.

The Anti-abortion Campaign

With the passage of the Genetic Health Act in 1984, abortion became a lawful procedure for women who wanted to terminate pregnancy voluntarily. The only restrictions were that minors needed parental consent and married women required that from their spouses. The legalization of abortion did not come as a result of feminist advocacy, but rather as a top-down decision to implement a population-planning policy. During the legislative review, members of the KMT old guard criticized the act for its negative impact on the ‘anti-communist mission’ and on traditional Chinese culture, and the nascent women’s movement activists stood behind the government by avoiding the use of confrontational terms such as ‘women’s rights’ or ‘bodily autonomy’ (Ku 1995). After the toned-down debate in the mid-1980s, abortion did not emerge as a controversial topic until the religious conservatives launched their campaign. Prior to that, some Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) lawmakers proposed a revision to remove the required spousal consent cultural similarities and the language. Some US right-wing conservative organizations have working relationship with the local campaigners, but it is not an outright export of the ‘cultural war’ to Taiwan.
and some feminists raised a similar demand in the 1990s. However, these demands consciously proceeded in a low-profile manner in order not to stir up a backlash.

In 2002, 61 lawmakers from KMT, DPP and other parties proposed a revision to the law in order to protect ‘foetal rights’ as a result of lobbying by Catholic and Protestant groups. The amendment aimed to restrict abortion by requiring compulsory consultation and adding a six-day waiting period to the abortion process. With the participation of major Buddhist organization leaders, the following year witnessed the formation of the League of All Citizen Movements to Respect Life (Zunzhong Shengming Quanmin Yundong Da Lianmeng). To ward off the anti-abortion drive, in 2003 feminists, with the support of 56 lawmakers, unveiled another revision to the law that took away spousal consent and mandated school authorities to promote sex and gender equality education. To outbid the pro-abortion forces, in 2005 the conservatives put forward another revision that required high schools to implement abstinence-only sex education. The DPP government was clearly caught in the middle of the warfare between the religious conservatives and the feminists as it intensified. Health officials attempted to broker a compromise version of the law in the hope of satisfying the opposing demands. In 2006, a revision proposed by the executive branch established a three-day waiting period and at the same time abolished spousal consent. Three feminists on the Committee for the Promotion of Women’s Rights, a cabinet-level policymaking body that focused on gender issues, immediately resigned in protest (Cheng 2015: 22).

After the flare-up in 2006, both camps continued to propose different revisions, but the identical version from the Executive Yuan was sent in for review in 2008 and 2012, spanning the transition from Chen Shui-bian’s era to Ma Ying-jeou’s. As a result, the existing legal regulation on abortion since 1984 was left intact as neither side was able to secure a unilateral change. In hindsight, the stalemate was not so much a victory for the women’s movement, but rather the diversion of conservatives’ attention to the more ‘alarming threat’ posed by the LGBT movement.

The Opposition to Same-sex Marriage

The 1990s saw the flourishing of the LGBT movement in Taiwan as lesbians and gays began to set up their campus clubs, bookstores, churches and support groups (Damm 2011: 157-159). The official registration of the Taiwan Tongzhi (LGBT) Hotline Association in 2000 represented a milestone for the
sexual minority to claim a public role. The new century witnessed a growing government acceptance of this newly visible identity movement. Ma Ying-jeou had carefully cultivated a pro-LGBT image during his electoral campaign for Taipei mayor in 1998. In 2003, the city government subsidized the annual Taiwan Gay Pride. When Chen Shui-bian became the president in 2000, he vowed to promote the values of human rights, since it was the first time that Taiwan’s opposition party had come to power. In the Basic Law of Human Rights Protection Bill, drafted in 2001, lesbian and gay couples were allowed to form families and adopt children; this, however, did not materialize (Lo 2010).

In 2006, Hsiao Bi-khim, a DPP lawmaker, initiated a bill to legalize same-sex marriage. Hsiao’s draft was quickly voted down by an emergency intervention of religious conservatives who were able to mobilize sympathetic lawmakers. The brief skirmish had contrasting impacts on both camps. For LGBT activists, the failure demonstrated it was still too early to place the legalization of same-sex marriage on the agenda, and hence pursuing civil partnership was thought to be a more realistic path (Chien 2012: 191-194). Prior to the encounter, Taiwan’s religious conservatives had paid little attention to the same-sex issue. A 2003 assessment concluded that the oppositional forces were too weak, so LGBT activists were not considered to be a force that needed to be dealt with (Lai 2003: 104). The conservatives were therefore caught off guard because they had underestimated the advance of the LGBT movement. Consequently, in 2007 Catholic and Protestant conservatives formed a coalition to defend marriage as a heterosexual union – the Taiwan League for Preserving Family (Taiwan Weihu Jiating Lianmeng) – the first countermovement organization to safeguard the traditional family as well as the harbinger of subsequent conservative mobilizations.

The establishment of the Taiwan Alliance to Promote Civil Partnership Rights (TAPCPR) (Taiwan Banlu Quanyi Tuidong Lianmeng) in 2009 opened a new chapter for the LGBT community to assert their legal rights. TAPCPR advocated a multiple strategy to liberalize the legal regulations on marriage and family, and in 2013, one of its demands, the equal right to marriage for same-sex couples (hunyin pingquan), was sponsored by DPP lawmakers and was ready for the first reading in the legislature. However, the attempt to liberalize marriage was effectively neutralized by a stronger operation by conservatives. The League of Taiwanese Religious Groups Caring for Family (Taiwan Zongjiao Tuanti Aihu Jiating Dalianmeng) was formed, which not only included the previously involved Catholics and Protestants, but now

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3 See the announcement by the Taiwan Tongzhi (LGBT) Hotline Association, https://goo.gl/Astnq7 (11 August 2017).
obtained the support of the Unification Church and Buddhist leaders. On 30 November 2013, a massive rally to ‘protect’ the next generation’s ‘well-being’ was held, which was claimed to attract 300,000 participants. The Presbyterian Church, which was previously torn between its liberal and conservative wings, decided to take a theological stand to affirm the sanctity of heterosexual marriage and family with a pastoral letter in January 2014, which, however, engendered various interpretations within the church. As a result, the attempt to liberalize the Civil Code’s definition of marriage ended before the first reading was finished.

While conservatives were able to ward off the challenge for equal rights in marriage in 2013 with the help of some KMT lawmakers, they were apprehensive of the party’s declining political strength, particularly after its major defeat in the local election in 2014, largely as a consequence of the Sunflower Movement (Ho 2019a). The Sunflower Movement involved a 24-day student-led occupation of the national legislature in opposition to a free trade deal with China. The incident was the largest episode of political contention to occur in Taiwan since its democratization, and its peaceful and arguably successful conclusion left an enduring impact in the country’s political landscape. Threatened by the prospect that the DPP might win the presidency and the legislative majority in the general election in 2016 as well as the surge of support for the openly pro-LGBT New Power Party (NPP) and the Social Democratic Party (see Kwan and Fell, this volume), conservatives launched a new party, the Faith and Hope League (FHL, Xinxin Xiwang Lianmeng). FHL started a signature-collecting campaign for a referendum that any future changes in marriage should be put to a popular vote. In the end, FHL received 1.7% of the vote in proportionate representation and failed to obtain any parliamentary seats. Although it claimed to have collected more than 150,000 signatures, its referendum application was vetoed by a government committee.

The general election in 2016 resulted in the worst-case scenario for conservatives, as the DPP surged to control both the presidency and the legislature and the NPP emerged as the third-largest party. Spearheaded by LGBT-friendly DPP and NPP lawmakers, the second attempt to liberalize the Civil Code for same-sex marriage was put onto the agenda in October. The conservatives launched a series of large-scale emergency rallies in November and December to oppose the revision and at the same time mounted grassroots campaigns to pressure the pro-gay lawmakers. Some DPP lawmakers balked at providing full-scale support for same-sex marriage by proposing

a special law for same-sex couples to minimize its impact. As a result, the effort to revise the Civil Code only finished the first reading without being able to be reviewed and processed in the subsequent procedure.

In March 2017, the Constitutional Court decided to adjure the same-sex marriage case, thereby taking over the dispute from the legislative arena. Partly because around half of the judges newly appointed by the DPP government were liberal in orientation, the court ruled on May 24 that marriage rights for same-sex couples should be respected and decreed a two-year period for its eventual realization (Ho 2019b). The landmark decision represented a decisive setback for the conservatives as the ruling of the Constitutional Court was very difficult to challenge via existing channels. In the referendums that accompanied the local election in November 2018, same-sex marriage opponents gained a clear victory by winning the popular endorsement to define marriage as a union of a man and a woman. Navigating the narrow path between the Constitutional Court decision and the voter preference expressed in the referendums, the DPP government managed to legislate a special law that allowed same-sex couples to obtain the same rights with heterosexual couples in May 2019. The draft was passed with the support of 56 DPP, 7 KMT, and 5 NPP lawmakers, making the country the first in Asia to implement marriage equality.

Gender Equity Education

Compared to the issues on abortion and same-sex marriage, the dispute over gender equity education appeared smaller in scale because it represented a flanking manoeuvre by conservatives to oppose the legal recognition of the LGBT community. Due to the feminists’ advocacy, Taiwan's government began to implement gender equity education (originally called ‘equity education for both sexes’ [liangxing pingdeng jiaoyu]), with a ministry-level committee established in 1998, and a special law enacted in 2004. The earlier emphasis was on prevention of sexual assault and sexual harassment, hence largely free from dispute. In 2011, conservatives rose to oppose the implementation of a curriculum that taught students to avoid bullying behaviour targeting ‘gender temperaments, sexual orientation, or gender identity’ (Chen 2014). Their main argument was that the government should not create a category to ‘normalize’ the LGBT population and ‘protect’ their ‘deviant’ behaviours.

The Taiwan True Love Alliance (Taiwan Zhen’ai Lianmeng) was then formed and its lobbying succeeded in obtaining the legislature’s support
in preventing the Ministry of Education from implementing the pro-LGBT curriculum guidelines. The contention focused on a teacher manual for use in junior high schools which encouraged students to explore their sexual orientation and gender temperaments. With the intervention of feminists and gender movement activists, the new curriculum guidelines still included ‘gay and lesbian education’ and only a relatively minor concession was made to appease the conservative opponents (Huang 2017a: 267-269). In 2014, the government appointed two scholars associated with the Taiwan True Love Alliance to the Ministry of Education’s Commission on Gender Equity Education, marking the first time openly anti-gay persons were allowed into the agency. In 2018, the conservatives won a referendum to exclude ‘same-sex education’ from the teaching of gender equity education. In response, the Ministry of Education revised the related bylaw to replace the term with a lengthier description, ‘different gender, gender characteristics, gender temperaments, gender identity, and sexual orientation,’ and insisted on the necessity of teaching understanding and tolerance for sexual minorities.

While conservatives were mostly unsuccessful in forestalling the advance of a more inclusive gender equity education at the national policy level, they appeared more adaptive with local participation channels. The gender equity education plan included ad hoc commissions at city/county and school levels, which made it possible for conservatives to prevent what they identified as ‘inappropriate materials’ to be used in schools. Conservatives mobilized parents to pressure local authorities or schools to include ‘chastity’ and ‘moral character’ teaching materials in the gender equity education (Interview TT 2017).

The Consequences and Implications

Table 6.1 summarizes these three campaigns of Taiwan’s conservatives. Religion-based conservatives were mostly unsuccessful in realizing their main agenda in spite of their activism over a decade, as Taiwan’s government and society gradually evolved in a more tolerant and inclusive direction. Nevertheless, the countermovement left enduring impacts by reconfiguring the existing state-society pattern in many ways.

First, let us look at the timing of its emergence. Zald and Useem (1987: 254) maintained ‘a countermovement is likely to emerge if the movement appears to be accomplishing its goals.’ Countermovements came into being when the previously privileged sectors felt threatened but still possessed the resources to resist (Andrews 2002: 919; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996:
The characterization of a countermovement as a status quo-maintaining reaction is applicable to the campaigns against same-sex marriage and gender equity education, but not to the abortion issue. In 2002, Taiwan’s religious conservatives actually mobilized to modify an abortion regime that had been in place for nearly two decades. In retrospect, the anti-abortion agitation signified the first joint public intervention by religious leaders. At that time, they were largely unfamiliar with the rules of the game. A Lutheran pastor remembered that they did not mount follow-up actions after petitioning in 2003 because they thought the lawmakers would automatically carry out their promise to narrow the access to abortion. They later found out that large-scale rallies and demonstrations are a necessary means to prod legislators to redeem their promises (Interview TGF 2017). Afterwards, Taiwan’s conservatives apparently became more sophisticated, which explained why they could quickly launch preventive actions on same-sex marriage in 2006 and on gender equity education in 2011.

The rise of conservatives as political actors modified and complicated the interactions between social movements and the state. Previously, reform advocates mobilized in the name of civil society and challenged the government as the latter stood for the existing order; now civil society became divided and a complicated three-way interaction among movements, countermovements and the state ensued. Inevitably, the rise of countermovements increased the cost of concession for government officials in their

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<td>Policy Results</td>
<td>(1) Failure to restrict the abortion access (2) Preventing the feminist attempt to remove the spousal consent</td>
<td>Failure to stop the Constitutional Court’s recognition of same-sex marriage</td>
<td>(1) Failure to stop the inclusion of LGBT education in school (2) The attempt to insert conservative curriculum locally as undecided</td>
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Source: Own compilation
deals with progressive movements (Luders 2016: 206). The shift in the political landscape brought a greater challenge to the women’s movement than to the LGBT community because the former traditionally prioritized state agencies as a source for change. Feminist leaders had successfully maintained their presence in the government via a number of participatory channels, such as the Executive Yuan’s Gender Equity Committee (formerly the Committee for the Promotion of Women’s Rights) and the Ministry of Education’s Commission on Gender Equity Education. These policy interventions have been identified as ‘state feminism’ in Taiwan, which offered a critical leverage to implement pro-women measures (Huang 2017; Hwang and Wu 2017; Peng 2008; Yang 2004). The rise of conservatives threatened to neutralize these participatory channels. As said above, the KMT government appointed anti-gay representatives to the Commission on Gender Equity Education in 2014. Again, in the wake of the pro-LGBT ruling of the Constitutional Court, the DPP government made a promise to nominate conservatives to alleviate their opposition, although the promise did not materialize.5

Other policy channels pioneered by Taiwan’s human rights movement were in danger of being ‘surprised’ by conservatives. In 2013, conservatives sent their delegates to take part in the review meetings of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) with the intention to offset the demand for marriage equality (Interview TAPCPR 2017). In the 2017 review meeting of two human rights conventions (the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights), anti-gay activists filed shadow reports that asserted that the promotion of lesbian and gay rights violated the rights of heterosexual persons.6 With the conservatives’ participation, it has become more difficult to promote progressive changes by these official mechanisms. There was evidence that governmental agencies and bureaucrats learnt to take an unclear policy stand to avoid controversies. The Department of Health proposed three identical revision drafts on abortion (in 2006, 2008 and 2012) in a futile attempt to appease both camps. The Ministry of Justice appeared reluctant to include the same-sex marriage issue in its human rights review. Its officials avoided taking a stance so that when proponents and opponents were engaged in a heated battle in the legislature in 2016, the executive branch remained conspicuously silent.

In terms of mobilizing structure, the conservative countermovement represented the mirror image of Taiwan's feminist movement. The former possessed a stronger mobilizing capacity and political influences at the local level due to the church connections, whereas the latter enjoyed a number of tactical advantages at the national level because of the ‘femocrat’ network. The conservative activists I interviewed commonly complained about the bias of the mainstream media that tended to underreport their rallies and demonstrations so that they had to rely on the church-managed newspapers and TV channels. One Buddhist leader in the League of Taiwan Guardians of the Family embraced a conspiracy theory that held that the government pressured the mainstream media to ignore the anti-LGBT events (Interview NTCBA 2017). On the other hand, the LGBT activists whom I interviewed were surprised to find that conservatives were able to launch initiatives in the name of parents and obtain support from local councillors. While the conservative countermovement appeared pyramid-shaped with a mass followers, their rivals were more represented by individual professionals. Weng and Fell (2006: 159) have described Taiwan’s women’s movement as ‘rootless’ due to its lack of a mass base. As such, women and gender activists find it difficult to compete with the conservatives when it came to staging large-scale rallies. In several confrontations, opponents of same-sex marriage easily outnumbered its supporters.

Finally, although the conservative countermovement has not succeeded in realizing its policy demands so far, its political ascendancy was clearly felt and threatened to usher in a new political realignment. Previously, they considered the KMT as their natural ally and occasionally were able to secure the support from individual DPP politicians. The dwindling of the KMT’s political strength prompted the formation of the FHL as a religion-based conservative party in 2015. Led by a pro-unification mainlander politician Joanna Lei, the FHL struggled to convince the voters that it signified an independent choice beyond the DPP/KMT rivalry. With the eruption of the same-sex marriage dispute in 2016, political opportunities for conservatives surfaced. DPP lawmakers who supported marriage equality began to face angry complaints from their voters. Southern Taiwan has been the DPP’s stronghold, as the party won a clear sweep there in 2016 by obtaining all 22 legislative seats located below the Zhuoshui River, and yet the grassroots reaction was particularly strong there. As a result, many southern lawmakers shifted to the ‘special law’ position or decided to keep silent in order to avoid the controversy (Interview DPP 2017a). The DPP mayors’ symbolic gesture to hoist a rainbow flag on International Human Rights Day was met with strong protests, and even local DPP politicians were not supportive
(Interview DPP 2017b). Particularly deleterious to the DPP was the defection of some Presbyterian leaders. A Presbyterian pastor in Tainan who took part in the pro-democracy movement in the past now led a campaign to recall the DPP lawmaker Wang Ding-yu after he expressed a pro-gay stance. Acknowledging that many of his church followers were staunch DPP supporters, he insisted on prioritizing the LGBT issues because a person's partisan identity should not impede ‘the moral judgement on what is right and what is wrong’ (Interview PTCMRC 2017). Two southern presbyteries issued a strongly worded statement to challenge the Constitutional Court’s pro-gay ruling.7 It remains to be seen how the disenchantment on the part of DPP’s conservative rank and file will affect its support.

An unpublicized survey by a Taiwanese think tank8 in December 2016 indicated the anti-gay marriage sentiment cut across the partisan divide. Among the 58.6% of respondents who indicated their disapproval or strong disapproval, 34.3% was from the pan-green camp (29.7% DPP and 4.6% NPP supporters) and 36.9% from the pan-blue camp (29.6% KMT, 5.3% People First Party, and 1.1% New Party supporters). If these conservative citizens were successfully persuaded to defect by voting for a new party, they could have represented a bona fide independent force. As mentioned in the introduction by Chiavacci and Grano (in this volume), East Asian conservative movements appear to share a pro-establishment origin and outlook, and they have not evolved into the radical populist strain nowadays commonly seen in the West. Taiwan’s conservative opponents to abortion, same-sex marriage and gender equity education fitted into this description because they tended to characterize themselves as ‘nonpartisan’ and ‘apolitical’ parents who were concerned about their children’s well-being and social stability. As such, this framing helped gain sympathy from pan-green and pan-blue voters. The conservative countermovement had powerfully demonstrated its strength without having given rise to a viable political force. Yet, it has the potential to do so as favourable opportunities have emerged. Just like the US Supreme Court decision Roe v. Wade (1973) that energized the anti-abortion movement (Luker 1984: 126-127), the landmark decision of Taiwan’s Constitutional Court in 2017 might give a short-term boost to the LGBT movement, while planting the seed of a stronger backlash. The future viability of a culturally conservative party hinges upon the following

8 Taiwan Thinktank is a policy research organizations with links to DPP politicians. The author was briefly involved with its opinion survey program. The data cited here came from one poll result, which was not announced for some political reason.
factors: (1) whether the KMT can recoup after the unprecedented defeat in 2016 and regain the allegiance of its previous voters, (2) whether the DPP can stem the haemorrhage of its conservative voters, and (3) whether the conservative countermovement can expand its reach beyond its religious network. All these remain to be observed.

The Learning Curve of a Countermovement

In a 2007 interview, a Catholic priest recounted his experience in initiating a pro-family campaign:

We were praying every day for God’s guidance. Especially since we [the HLEC] were the first institute in the Chinese society in Taiwan, we needed to proceed cautiously under God and every effort was a new trial. If we caused harm, it would have damaged all Christians. […] When we began to enlist the support of the churches on the draft [to restrict access to abortion], many thought it was enough to ‘spread the gospel.’ They did not want to engage in politics for fear of involvement with the political parties.

Since religious conservatives had been political outsiders for a long time, they had to build everything from scratch. Most of their leaders and followers were new to movement politics. An FHL legislative candidate in 2016 admitted her only previous experience with social movements was participation in commemorating the Tiananmen Incident in 1989 (Interview FHL 2017). As a latecomer, conservative activists encountered a political arena that has been largely shaped by progressive movements. Even the detail about how to manage a petition booth, for instance, had to been learned from their opponents. A recall campaign leader acknowledged having consulted DPP activists with experience of street activism. ‘They recommended the use of songs, banners, and slogan to promote ourselves, and we had to learn by doing’ (Interview SL 2017).

Countermovements were likely to adopt their opponents’ tactics when the latter demonstrated their utility (Burstein 1991: 512). When it came to contestations over media representation, countermovements tended to ‘piggyback’ on their rivals in order to make use of the journalistic balance norm (Rohlinger 2002: 495). In the case of Taiwan’s conservative countermovement, its religious basis allowed it to bring certain protest repertoires

that were not available to the secular movements, for example, the use of mass prayers and the ‘exorcism’ of gays and lesbians. However, while these actions might have strengthened the solidarity among faithful followers, they turned out to be useless, if not counterproductive, in appealing to the non-Christian majority. Lesbian and gay activists wasted no time in highlighting these seemingly bizarre, outlandish and even superstitious gestures and ways of speaking to the public. An FHL activist explained her experience (Interview FHL 2017):

I learnt from my last electoral campaign that people would not pay attention to me if I told them God wanted me to affect the election. So I had to learn to speak the language of people, not that of God. I could not say, ‘God ruled the world.’ I needed to address their immediate concerns. Some Christians used to say that gay people would go to hell. But saying things like that made us seem cruel.

As such, conservative leaders took pains to downplay their religious backgrounds. What was initially called the League of Taiwanese Religious Groups Caring for the Family was renamed as the League of Taiwan Guardians of the Family in order to hide its religious identity (Huang 2017b: 122).

There were many incidences where conservatives consciously imitated the tactics practiced by preceding movements. The FHL’s 2015 signature-collecting campaign to demand that any change of the legal definition of marriage would need to be approved by a referendum was clearly inspired by a preceding campaign to revise the referendum law. The attempts to storm the legislature in order to disrupt the review meeting as well as the subsequent claims of police violence against them in December 2016 could be seen as an echo of actions taken by the Sunflower Movement.10 The ensuing campaign to unseat avowedly pro-gay lawmakers closely followed the script of post-Sunflower recall campaign, which targeted some KMT lawmakers.

While the women’s movement and the gender movement have established a number of advocacy organizations that have gained public visibility and credibility, conservatives managed to set up their own to present their claims. For instance, while the Gender/Sexuality Rights Association of Taiwan (Taiwan Xingbie Renquan Xiehui) has been a recognized representative of the LGBT community, another emerged – the Gender Human Rights Preservation Association of Taiwan (Taiwan Xingbie Renquan Weihu Cujin Xiehui) – making opposite demands. Similarly, the Taiwan Gender Equity

Education Association (Taiwan Xingbie Pingdeng Jiaoyu Xiehui), a veteran campaigner for tolerance, now faced a challenge by an explicitly anti-gay organization, the Taiwan Gender Education Development Association (Taiwan Xingbie Jiaoyu Fazhan Xiehui).\textsuperscript{11} Forming parallel and confusingly sounding organizations not only diluted the conservative groups’ religious origins, but also helped to bring out an alternative voice in civil society.

The rhetoric and framing by conservatives evolved as their countermovement became more mature. According to the observation of an LGBT activist, the early use of fire-and-brimstone language by conservatives actually backfired by alienating the public; later on, they refrained from cursing lesbian and gays by concentrating their message on the ‘protection of the family.’ The activist acknowledged that the revised rhetoric made the anti-gay campaign more socially acceptable (Interview TAPCPR 2017). In place of references to Sodom and Gomorrah, conservative activists had learnt how to avoid using explicitly discriminatory language. The typical statement of their revised position was that they ‘respected’ lesbians and gays, but they opposed the ‘homosexual movement’ with its sexual liberation agenda which was bound to bring about promiscuity, cause gender confusion and foster the AIDS epidemic. Conservatives mastered the art of conveying their message by using their opponents’ vocabulary. For example, ‘sexual bullying’ was a term created to name and fight against the marginalization of LGBT students. Conservatives quickly usurped this notion by arguing that ‘normal’ students (read: heterosexual ones) were now being ‘bullied’ by gender equity education which was said to encourage homosexuality.\textsuperscript{12}

Studies found that the movement claims previously used by progressives were often taken over and redefined to match the conservative agenda. The examples included the use of ‘multiculturalism’ to refer to white separatism (Berbrier 1998) and church schools (Davies 1999), ‘civil rights’ to mean anti-abortion activism (Johnson 1999), and ‘community control of schools’ to support the kinds of religious schools favoured by the Christian Right (Naples 2002). Regardless of the creditability of these reinterpretations, these incidences indicated that ideas and notions which were invented by progressive movements and introduced into the public domain lent themselves to be re-appropriated by those who resisted change. Conservatives borrowed these pre-existing movement frames precisely because the latter had gained legitimacy, more or less.


\textsuperscript{12} Newtalk, https://goo.gl/xar7x1B (18 August 2017).
Particularly after the flare-up of the dispute over same-sex marriage at the end of 2016, such ‘frame borrowing’ became more frequent. Opponents of same-sex marriage self-styled themselves as a ‘citizen movement’ (gongmin yundong), a term that had become a popular way to characterize protest activism leading up to the Sunflower Movement in 2014. Some student protesters named their action as a ‘Gypsophila paniculata movement’ (mantianxing yundong), meaning ‘baby’s breath movement,’ following Taiwan’s time-honoured practice of characterizing a successful student movement by the name of a flower (such as the Sunflower Movement or the Wild Lily student movement of 1990). The legislative process on the Civil Code revision was also criticized as a ‘black box review’ (heixiang shencha), reminiscent of the way the KMT government dealt with a controversial free-trade agreement with China. Finally, while feminists championed the idea of gender mainstreaming and successfully incorporated it into government policies, conservatives attempted to implement their version of ‘family mainstreaming’ (jiating zhuliuhua) in the same way.

Taiwan’s LGBT movement started with a non-essentialist assumption of gender identity and sexuality, which were seen as culturally constructed and fluid, whereas conservatives tended to see them as natural, biologically determined or designed by God. As early as the mid-1990s, there had been a Christian association that aimed at ‘helping’ lesbians and gays to find their ‘God-created’ gender roles in Taiwan. While there has been a long history of ‘curing’ lesbians and gays by coercion, medicine or faith, the recent development witnessed a breakthrough in framing. Some conservatives began to embrace a ‘post-homosexual’ (houtong) theory, which viewed homosexuality in a person as a transient and unstable identity that would eventually return to the normal one. Same-sex marriage opponents staged reverse ‘coming out’ ceremonies in which post-homosexual people shared their personal stories. A typical narrative contained two plot elements: (1) traumatic experiences (incest or childhood sex abuse) had led to gender confusion and same-sex behaviour, and (2) they found true happiness after accepting their ‘natural’ gender and sexuality. The post-homosexual theory actually turned the table on LGBT activists by claiming their identity was not fixed and thus malleable to intervention or correction.

Like their global counterparts, Taiwan's conservative countermovement imitated the tactics and framing used by the rival movements. The resulting surge of social movements during Ma Ying-jeou's government (2008-2016) meant that conservatives had a large menu from which they could learn on how to package their messages. Taiwan's conservatives were eager students of the movement activism that preceded them, partly because they made an effort to shed their religious roots by learning the art of being a secular movement.

Conclusion

The conservative opposition to abortion, same-sex marriage and gender equity education is an intellectually fascinating case of the development of a countermovement, one that intended to undo the achievements accomplished by the Taiwan women's and gender movements. An analysis of Taiwan's civil society would be incomplete if we fail to take these campaigns into consideration, because they were equally self-organized, mass based and policy oriented, just like their progressive rivals.

This chapter has argued that the emergence of a religion-based countermovement has a historical origin in that Taiwan's Protestant Christians underwent a profound ecological change which facilitated the hegemony of conservative evangelicals. Protestant and Catholic leaders pioneered the opposition to gender equity and multiculturalism, and over the years, they gained support from other religions. On the issues of abortion, same-sex marriage and gender equity education they have largely failed to turn back the clock; yet, their emergence threatens to usher in a new political alignment in Taiwan. As a countermovement, Taiwan's conservatives were latecomers to movement politics. They have demonstrated remarkable adaptability, however, by imitating tactics and framing from their opponents successfully. Their further evolution and impact remain to be observed.

Finally, does the emergence of the conservative movement signify a cultural change in Taiwan, in the sense that more and more people are embracing traditional values regarding sex, gender and family as a conscious choice? Demographic evidence indicates that Taiwanese are marrying late, giving birth to fewer children and more likely to divorce over the years. In other words, people are increasingly choosing a lifestyle that clearly deviates from the idealized family pattern. The growing acceptance of lesbians and gays is particularly noticeable among members of the younger generation. The Taiwan Social Change Survey data shows a significant rise in tolerance.
In 1991, only 11.4% of respondents approved of same-sex marriage, a figure that rose to 54.2% by 2015.\(^9\) Therefore, the conservative movement in Taiwan does not originate from a society-wide value change, nor does it represent a mainstream voice. More likely, conservative activists are resisting the inevitable trend of cultural modernity – one that values individual autonomy and freedom – that is gradually taking root in Taiwan.

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About the Author

Ming-sho Ho is Professor of Sociology at National Taiwan University, Taiwan. He specializes in social movements, labour and environmental issues in Taiwan. His recent works have been published in Environmental Politics, Sociological Inquiry, Sociological Perspectives, China Quarterly and the Journal of East Asian Studies. He has also published Working Class Formation in Taiwan: Fractured Solidarity in State-Owned Enterprises, 1945-2012 (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), and Challenging Beijing’s Mandate of Heaven: Taiwan’s Sunflower Movement and Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement (Temple University Press, 2019).