

CIVIL SOCIETY IN HONG KONG AND ITS LESSONS FOR MAINLAND CHINA

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For a variety of historical reasons, the political system in Hong Kong is an ambiguous one. It is difficult to find another political entity, other than Macau, that resembles it. Hong Kong's unavoidable connections with the Beijing central government and the heritage of British colonial rule, as well as a rising awareness of individualism and civil rights among local citizens, all increase the complications of this unique system.

With the requirement that the Chief Executive must be non-partisan and approved by Beijing, Hong Kong-based political parties have little chance to affiliate themselves to the top executive position. As an alternative, their best bet is to participate in the Legislative Council (Legco), the most influential stage for debates over political, economic and social issues in present-day Hong Kong.

However, no existing party has ever been able to control the Legislative Council by winning a majority of its seats, and Legco's powers in any case are limited. Therefore, the current political landscape in the Hong Kong Special Administration Region (HKSAR) is both divided and complex. While many have grouped the parties into two categories—pro-Beijing and pro-democracy—the power of any single party is extremely constrained, at least in the current situation.

Because of this, political parties in Hong Kong are more like interest groups or civil organizations and therefore do not possess as much influence as might be expected. Due to the lack of prior experience and professional training, they face both internal organization problems and external communication difficulties. Nevertheless, the parties are capable of fulfilling their joint role as a constraint on many government actions. Their ability to oversee and criticize has contained the power of the Chief Executive and his team and therefore has increased transparency in the Hong Kong government.

Meanwhile, every party represents either specific or a general group of citizens and devotes as much effort as it can to protect the interests of those individuals or groups. This has helped bring about an awareness of civil rights on a broader scale and is likely to consolidate the pursuit of equality and justice within the general population. As most parties do not have large memberships and are headed by

small elite groups, they also become indispensable to informing citizens and enhancing the degree of public discourse in the entire society.

Market Sensitive Media Groups

Besides the traditional platform of Legco, many other venues have become involved in the development of Hong Kong's civil society. Among them, the media is a long-standing player, although market competition in that field can seem extremely harsh. Not only do reporters covering entertainment news have to work hard for exclusive coverage, those who report serious politics must also struggle diligently for the survival of both their organizations and themselves in this market.

Such a media system ensures that citizens will be informed about breaking news at a speed that probably exceeds their prior expectations. This flow of information helps citizens increase their understanding of what is happening right now, and also provides a more diverse range of analyses of the issues.

For example, Chief Executive Donald Tsang made an inappropriate response last year when asked by a Legco member to comment on the issue of the June 4 student movement. He said that "Hong Kong people will make an objective assessment of the nation's development" and mentioned that his "view represents the opinion of Hong Kong people in general." These remarks inevitably generated great controversy, for they suggested criticism of the 1989 pro-democracy movement in Beijing—a movement that had enjoyed broad support in Hong Kong. The local media's subsequent and intensive coverage of his remarks led eventually to an apology.

Keeping in mind that there exists a nearly omnipresent media system, politicians in Hong Kong must be extremely cautious at all times to avoid negative reportage. However, many still pay a high price if they make a mistake. The revelation of former Financial Secretary Anthony Leung's "Lexus-gate" scandal by the local media—he purchased a luxury auto not long before levying a high tax on such vehicles—resulted in his resignation several months later.

The Hong Kong media not only aims to uncover inappropriate behavior by individual politicians, but also keeps an eye on overall social equality and justice in the territory. Opposition to the introduction of anti-subversion legislation under Article 23 of Hong Kong's Basic Law back in 2003 was another vivid illustration of the critical role local media can play in defending the concept of rule of law and advancing the development of civil society. The proposed legal changes were seen as a threat to basic civic rights.

Interaction between Intellectuals and Policy-makers

Academic institutions are always home to intellectuals, including many who engage in ideological disputes among themselves. This liberal atmosphere in Hong Kong-based universities nurtures those who may become opinion leaders in the next generation, with many scholars also trying to influence those who already are society's decision-makers. They also function as a bridge between policy-makers and ordinary citizens, transmitting information as well as explaining innovative concepts.

Normally speaking, intellectuals everywhere are likely to maintain low profiles and concentrate on their special fields. However, if they feel the necessity, they can produce leaders who advocate the interests of those who seem to have been treated unfairly. This principle applies in Hong Kong. For example, the Civic Party, one of the most influential political parties, was founded by legal professionals, university professors and student leaders. Its current chairman, Kuan Hsin-chi, also serves as chairman of the Department of Government and Public Administration at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

College students have been an important group in the annual July 1 public protests on behalf of political reform ever since the 1997 handover to mainland sovereignty. The younger generation, particularly those trained in social sciences and who have strong views regarding the future of Hong Kong, hope for democratic reforms in a larger scale. For example, the impressive candlelight vigil at Victoria Park on last June 4 included many students as participants. These trends suggest the next generation of leaders will try to establish not only a more prosperous Hong Kong, but also a politically more democratic and socially diverse one.

With academics stepping into the political realm and politicians taking positions at universities, the revolving door system is indeed functioning well in Hong Kong. These exchanges have moved the liberal democratic atmosphere from the ivory tower to the reality of policy-making. In the other direction, politicians have provided first-hand experience and primary resources for the academic world. Such a virtuous circle, therefore, is beneficial to both from the strategic perspective.

Local NGOs on the Rise

In addition, local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are playing an increasingly important role. Many concentrate on specific areas within the public domain. For instance, Christine Loh, a former Legco member and a veteran of the pro-democracy camp, founded an independent non-profit think tank called Civic

Exchange. The British-educated Ms. Loh is able to fit a western non-governmental mode of operation into the Hong Kong environment. As one of the most influential local NGOs in Hong Kong, Civic Exchange focuses on public participation and social development, environment and conservation, among other issues. By maintaining its independence, it is able to exert pressure on relevant government policies and win public support.

In fact, a number of NGOs have recognized the unique status of Hong Kong by establishing local offices and paying close attention to the greater China area. As civic participation in political issues is far more limited on the mainland, and Hong Kong is geographically convenient for getting primary materials there, many take Hong Kong as a base for sensitive research. The Sheung Wan-based China Labor Bulletin is one of these organizations; it publicizes inequalities in the labor arena and promotes workers' rights on the mainland. Oxfam Hong Kong is another. In recent years, it has become more actively involved in philanthropy inside China, with many mainland residents becoming beneficiaries of its programs.

Lessons for the Mainland

The current leaders in Beijing's Zhongnanhai compound consider stability a top concern and deploy whatever resources considered necessary to maintain a politically stable and socially harmonious environment for long-term prosperity. Therefore, greater civic participation calling for universal suffrage in Hong Kong has challenged and will continue to challenge them. A compromise could occur if Beijing's calculations eventually demonstrate that some concession on political reform is necessary to avoid social chaos in Hong Kong. Seven years ago, pressure from Hong Kong calling for greater transparency and openness during an outbreak of SARS vividly illustrates how a robust civil society in Hong Kong can stimulate a policy change. Furthermore, changes in Hong Kong are likely to awake the acquiescent majority on the mainland in a gradual and incremental way.

In addition, the number of mainland students studying in Hong Kong is steadily increasing each year. This flow of human capital will promote academic and social interaction among them and facilitate the exchange of ideas. All of these factors suggest that Hong Kong's strong civil society will influence the mainland significantly over time.

This raises the question: what can Beijing learn from the development of the Hong Kong-based civil society?

As a rising superpower, China has already made impressive gains in terms of economic development. However, its record in democratic governance is still far from satisfactory. Fortunately, some liberal members within the leadership have noted this imbalance and considered responsive measures. Announced plans for a more democratic internal decision-making system for the ruling party and direct elections at the grassroots level are among proposed improvements in this field.

Within this trend, regulations in some fields have indeed been reduced. Thanks to technological progress, Chinese citizens nowadays also have much better communication with the outside world. Even though the so-called “Great Firewall” can reduce these links, many still find alternative means of accessing information they need. These developments have increased awareness of the potential for civic participation and a desire to restrict and supervise government officials. The practices and methods that have contributed to civil society in Hong Kong should also be considered for application in the mainland.

First of all, most media groups in the mainland have adopted free-market principles in recent years. However, most are still controlled by the government and must obey guidance issued by propaganda departments at different levels. As a result, the freedom for reporters to cover sensitive issues and conduct in-depth analyses remains limited.

The Caijing Example

At the same time, an undeniable fact is that some liberal media groups are on the horizon. The Guangzhou-based Southern Daily Group is one of them. Its Southern Weekly is often regarded as the most popular and influential newspaper in China. Likewise, Caijing Magazine, founded in 1998, has gradually become essential reading for the Chinese middle-class. Though banned from time to time, it has influenced readers with its “independence, exclusiveness and uniqueness”, principles that have guided its coverage. The Caijing example also illustrates the limits of press freedom; a recent dispute over news coverage has led to the resignation of its well-known editor and most of her senior staff, who have announced plans for a new publication.

Despite some positive changes, the overall image of mainland-based media is still tarnished. But perhaps an example of the Hong Kong experience regarding politically non-sensitive issues could serve as a breakthrough. Despite various restrictions, liberals within the mainland media could still try to influence public administration in certain areas, including economic reform, social change and cultural events. As soon as citizens begin to pay attention to such public elements

of the society, they may then recognize a need for greater equality and justice within society and call for more democracy and the rule of law.

When it comes to the issues of intellectuals and NGOs, the mainland actors might adopt a strategy that combines the two elements. Like their Hong Kong counterparts, mainland intellectuals often want to become involved in the public arena and contribute to its development by using their individual expertise and energy. Nevertheless, within this group there is a lack of teamwork. As a Chinese proverb says: "Men of letters tend to despise each other." The individual efforts of any single intellectual can be so trivial that a collaborative mechanism must be established if practical results are sought. When intellectuals communicate with each other in a professional way and work collectively, the civic action system will become more developed.

As those trained in social sciences gradually enter China's leadership and the role of technocrats decreases, it is reasonable to expect that more Chinese intellectuals, particularly those with backgrounds in law, political science and economics, will contribute to democratization in China. They are likely to be more interested in enhancing the rights of underprivileged groups and establishing a governance system that protects a broader range of citizens.

In many ways, Hong Kong is unique. Many ambiguities are still present in its politics, yet a comparatively well-developed civil society ensures that its citizens continue to enjoy a decent degree of freedom. The media, the intellectual elite and local NGOs are among the factors making this possible.

While the timetable for eventual universal suffrage in Hong Kong remains uncertain, the ongoing development of civil society may serve as a catalyst to accelerate a Hong Kong-brand of democratization. Furthermore, developments in Hong Kong are likely to become a model for mainland China, where the desire for a well-rounded civil society is an irresistible trend.

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