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Are Hong Kong people 'politically apathetic'?

A Critical Analysis of Hong Kong Political Culture
Apathy and Activism?

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Introduction

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2011), the word “apathy” signifies indifference, a “lack of interest, enthusiasm, or concern”. The word also can be understood as a loss of confidence in the ability to achieve a particular aim or motivation. To be “politically apathetic”, in the stricted sense of the term, thus suggests political passivity and detachment. Under such terms, labeling Hong Kong people as politically apathetic may seem a radical generalization of a society in transition. Indeed, Hong Kong's “unique” level of political stability, through times of decolonization, structural reformation and economic crisis has fueled academic curiosity concerning the city's socio-political culture (Cheng 2005, Wai-Man 2004, Wong n.d., Lui and Chiu 2000). Despite waves of collective political activity and concern, observers understand Hong Kong political culture as increasingly “apathetic” to the city's current political situation. In addition to analyzing the validity of such a claim, one ought to explore why Hong Kong people have come to be perceived as such. Political stability is not necessarily a sign, consequence nor reflection of public political approval or ambivalence.

In turn, to be politically effective and active, can be understood in multiple ways (Cheng 1988, Lee 2005 and Wai-Man 2004). To analyze the degree of political “apathy”, political efficacy and engagement is interpreted as the counterpoint of this essay's exploration. Political efficacy is to be understood as political interest, concern, participation and awareness. Recognizing political efficacy strictly as voter turnout and party organization is a narrow definition, which constrains the multifaceted nature of political engagements. While Hong Kong tends to have a low voter turnout, its citizens nevertheless have expressed waves of concern, contestation and calls to Hong Kong's political structure and future, in the form of social movements, protests and party formation (Cheng 2005, Lui and Chui 2000, and Wong n.d.). The degree of Hong Kong political efficacy has changed according to shifts in Hong Kong's socio-political context (Wai-Man 2004 and Wong n.d.). In order to analyze the degree of political apathy or efficacy among the Hong Kong people today, a more comprehensive scope of the city's socio-political development is necessary (Wai-Man 2004). Hong Kong's socio-political culture has been subject to change before and after the 1997 “Hand Over” of Hong Kong and the implementation of “One Country, Two systems” (Cheng 2005, Lui and Chui 2000, Wai-Man 2004). Before assessing political attitude and actions of Hong Kong people, one must understand the opportunities and systems through which they can be expressed and received.

In the first section of this essay, I provide a theoretical framework, expanding the notion of political efficacy and participation To contextualize the development of socio-political culture in Hong

Kong, I then address key political developments in Hong Kong before and after 1997. Finally, the degree of political apathy or efficacy of Hong Kong people is weighed within the context of these developments and how they have influenced today's socio-political culture.

Theoretical Framework: Political Efficacy and Participation

According to Professor Francis Lee (2005), *political efficacy* is a three dimensional concept composed of various interplays of internal, external and collective interpretations of the degree to which action can affect and is received by the government. By internal efficacy, Lee (2005) refers to an individual's perception of his or her own *ability* to understand politics. External efficacy refers to an individual's understanding of how the government will most likely *respond* to individual concerns (Lee, 2005). The third facet, collective efficacy, is an individual's belief concerning the degree to which the *collective public* can attain socio-political efficacy (Lee 2005). In his work on Hong Kong people's sense of political efficacy in relation to the gradual democratization of Hong Kong, Lee (2005) postulates that political apathy should not be confused with a low sense of efficacy or effect on government policy. Due to Hong Kong's transitional state, citizens' sense of efficacy often reflects the degree to which citizens are politically engaged. Lee (2005) stresses the influence of Hong Kong's social, political and economic context on individual's belief in collective demands and expectations. By analyzing the degree to which Hong Kongers' sense of political efficacy is re-shaped by Hong Kong's socio-political development, one can better understand the nature of Hong Kong's political culture and identification.

Political participation can not only be limited to institutional organizations, such as Parties, pressure and interest groups (Della Porta and Mario, 2000). It includes actions through which individuals aim to affect government policies or structure (Degolyer and Scott, 1996). It encompasses a broad range of social engagements and expression of political concern, aims and degrees of loyalty (Degolyer and Scott, 1996). In this essay, political participation encompasses a range of civilian engagements, including grass roots and party organizations, protests and voting. Social movements represent significant forms of political participation and efficacy which reflect shifting opportunities, expectations and developments. Such movements include campaigns, rallies or calls for change in a loosely organized group of shared interest or concern (Della Porta and Mario, 2000). The Deprivation theory states that social movements develop amongst people who collectively lack something and desire to improve their present conditions (Della Porta and Mario, 2000). Political Opportunity Theory states that social movements emerge through organizational capability, shifting political frameworks and a significant degree of collective consciousness (Della Porta and Mario, 2000). Moreover, social

movements are not static nor continuous. They rise and fall, according to degrees of effectiveness, urgency and socio-political context or opportunity (Lee, 2005). The stages through which social and political movements develop in Hong Kong reflect the evolving demands, expectations and capability with which people are politically mobilized or discouraged. The evolving levels of political efficacy, movement and dimension parallel socio-political developments, while contextualizing today's political identification in Hong Kong.

Socio-political Context & Development

Before the Hand Over

Informal Political Involvement 1950s-1970s

During the colonial rule of Hong Kong, there was little opportunity for Hong Kong people to engage in formal political engagements in the British administration. Only local elites, such as the wealthier locals involved in business and trade, could access the government (Cheng, 2005). The colonial government was tagged as a “lame duck” or irresponsible bureaucratic administration (Cheng, 2005).

From the 1950s and through the 1970s, Hong Kong political culture is characterized by the gradual emergence of informal, social and grass roots movements and pressure groups (Cheng, 2005). These “loosely interactive networks” of groups developed in small waves of opposition to the colonial administration, support of capitalism or communism (Lui and Chiu, 2000). In the wake of pro-Taiwan (Kuomintang) or Pro-China (Communist) tensions, Hong Kong youth's identity consciousness formed in and exploration of their Chinese origins (Cheng, 2005). Although the movements had trouble mobilizing the masses and a weak bargaining stance in relation to prospects for government reform, they nevertheless represented an emerging degree of political concern and activity. Placing an emphasis on community and work related issues, the rise of urban protest and student movements localized political engagement in Hong Kong (Cheng 2005, Lui and Chiu 2000).

The 1967 riots were Communist rooted and targeted the Colonial Administration concerning labour issues (Lui and Chiu, 2000). The riots resulted in the deaths of 51 people and marked the first escalated threat to an otherwise stable rule. In the 1970s, social protests merged as the foundation of pressure group politics (Cheng, 2005). Although less violent, protests became more organized and continued in the 1970s and 1980s. The emergence of environmental and social movements pressured the government to respond to increasing demands and concerns.

In 1973, Hong Kong politically and socially concerned Hong Kong citizens established Mutual

Aid Committees (MACs) (Degolyer and Scott, 1996). MACs were established in Hong Kong housing units and were used to facilitate local participation, by raising community concerns and awareness. Through MACs, non-elite locals, including the elderly and poor, could participate in political campaigns concerning social issues in Hong Kong. While informally mobilizing Hong Kong people through an organized and interactive committee, MACs gradually increased local awareness, knowledge and confidence in political efficacy and formal administrative matters (Degolyer and Scott, 1996). They facilitated political networking and in fact, increased political participation in 1982 City District elections (Degolyer and Scott, 1996). MACs thus, represent a significant grassroots movement that further counter allegations of political apathy under colonial rule.

Formal Political Involvement 1980s/90s

With the resurgence of political movements, the administration's concerns shifted to keeping colonial movement at bay for fear of mass dissent (Lui and Chiu, 2000). The secret establishment of the Standing Committee on Pressure Groups (SCOPG) in 1978 highlights the British administrations rising skepticism and closer watch of pressure group activities in Hong Kong (Lui and Chiu, 2000). In addition, the co-optation of certain groups into the government aimed to better control such groups in interest of the administration's authority and stability.

In the 1980s, the administration implemented certain political reforms aimed at closing 'the gap' between Hong Kong people and the government. The riots, protests and petitions of preceding decades warned the government of potential outbursts that may destabilized the colonial administration (Cheng, 2005). Through a series of reforms, the government institutionally localized politics and broadened political opportunities as accessible to the public (Cheng, 2005). The establishment of City District Offices, new labour laws and youth services were largely in defense of the administration's legitimacy and in response to pressure group pleas (Cheng, 1988, 2005 and Degolyer and Scott, 1996). The Consultation Committee reforms created the impression that Hong Kong people had a more active part in the administration's politics.

With the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984, formal political involvement opportunities were deemed acceptable by the British government (Degolyer and Scott, 1996). The declaration guaranteed the continuity of capitalist economic system of Hong Kong, free of socialist politics until 2047 (Cheng, 1984). Deng Xiaoping's 1978 Open Door Policy made Hong Kong's

economic system a valuable asset to the country's vision of economic growth and modernization (Cheng, 1984, Degolyer and Scott, 1996). Although the ambiguity of 2047 was not ignored, the principle of “One Country Two Systems” disillusioned Hong Kong people's hopes for democratization and political reform in a 'Hong Kong' way (Cheng, 1984).

The opening up of “opportunity” and venues, through which Hong Kong people felt they could affect government policy, fueled a rise in political participation in more formal sectors during the 1980s. By 1995, Hong Kong's first ten political parties were officially founded (Degolyer and Scott 1996). Voter turnout increased from about 30,000 to over 3 million, while the number of cast votes rose to 2.6 million versus the 1981 amount of 6200 (Degolyer and Scott, 1996). Moreover, a significant number of campaign and election workers increased to over 10,000 people (Degolyer and Scott, 1996). The 1991 and 1994 Direct Board elections ignited a festive vibe through out the city, colored by campaign promotion and reflecting the decade's more hopeful sense of political efficacy among Hong Kong people (Degolyer and Scott, 1996).

Hand Over Politics

While the above section is a valid representation of one particular development of political participation, evidence (Cheng 1984, 1988) shows that Hong Kong 'citizens' also became increasingly unconfident concerning Chinese and British commitments to its political future. Measures previously taken by the British rule towards 'closing the gap' between people and government were countered by the government's loosening of responsibility to Hong Kong's future (Cheng, 1984). The implementation of a New British Nationality Act in 1983 meant that after the Hand Over, Hong Kong people would no longer be citizens of the 'British dependent territory'. According to the Hong Kong Observers' survey (in Cheng, 1984), a majority of people were optimistic and wanted the British to “maintain the status quo” and responsibility to Hong Kong as a 'trust territory'. For this reason, the Nationality Act was a stark signal that Hong Kong's future was not heading in the direction many had hoped for. Many Hong Kong people were in fact, content with the economic growth and stability opening up under British rule (Cheng, 1984). The lack of transparency, secrecy and exclusivity of Hand Over debates came as quite a shock to Hong Kong people, who were little aware of each government's position (Cheng, 1984).

In the discourse of Hong Kong's Hand Over, the PRC, Britain and Hong Kong people all present different perceptions of political agendas and interests. Conflicting understandings of Hong Kong people's political position and relevance, between the PRC and Britain, subordinated local concerns (Siu-Kai and Hsin-Chi, 1995). On the one hand, international media and academic attention

brewed speculation over Hong Kong's political future and potential democratization. Nevertheless, the discourse of 'Hand Over politics' emphasized a smooth transition, in which PRC interests favored the maintenance of an apolitical (or colonial attitude) of Hong Kong people.

The British largely believed that until 1982, Hong Kong people did not demand political participation so long as British rule maintained local (elite) consultation and abstained from adopting political limitations and Chinese laws (Degolyer and Scott, 1996). In comparison to China's "barbarous" and "backward" rule, the Brits believed that Hong Kong people preferred colonial rule (Degolyer and Scott, 1996).

What the British interpreted as Hong Kong people's apolitical nature was understood as "patriotic disdain" of British rule by the PRC (Degolyer and Scott, 1996). The PRC recognized the 1950s/60s/70s protests of Hong Kong people as a reaction to colonial suppression, subversion and forceful subjugation (Degolyer and Scott, 1996). While the British suggested the Basic Law be a stepping stone to Hong Kong's autonomy and gradual democratization, the PRC viewed it as a means to gradually reintegrate Hong Kong, under its 'legitimate' rule. Moreover, the PRC predominantly understands Hong Kong as a Special Administrative Region, serving national interests rather than local concerns. The international and economic value of the city, the interests of its business elites, and the need to maintain and improve this, trump local pleas for democratization and political reform.

In the heat of Hand Over discourse, Hong Kong people felt increasingly left out – their voice and visions little addressed by either the Brits or the Chinese (Cheng 1984, 1988). Through Hong Kong peoples' rising perception of a *lack* of venues of expression and government response capabilities, concerns for the city's political future shifted towards mounting social and economic worries (**source**). People began to understand the Hand Over less as a return of sovereignty to Hong Kong people and more to the PRC.

The Eve of the Handover: Towards Political Apathy?

1990s

Surveys on Hong Kong political attitude and knowledge before the Hand Over, may suggest a certain degree of political apathy (Degolyer and Scott, 1996). In a 1994 Survey (in Degolyer and Scott, 1996) conducted by the Hong Kong Transition Project, 636 Hong Kong citizens were asked questions concerning their trust in the government administration and the Basic Law. A mere 4 % claimed to have a strong degree of trust in their government, while 42 % indicated none at all (Degolyer and Scott, 1996). Moreover, 26% of participants stated that they did not know which political administration will

best protect citizen interests. The establishment of Beijing's Preliminary Working Committee (PWC) in 1993 did not prove more comforting to Hong Kong people (Degolyer and Scott, 1996). When inquired as to whether they trust PWC to execute and preserve the fundamentals of Basic Law, nearly one-fourth claimed “no” while another 36% remained uncertain (Degolyer and Scott, 1996).

In turn, Degolyer and Scott (1996) suggest that *disinterest and uncertainty* should not be mistaken as political apathy. Rather, the survey results are “superficial” indicators of a rising sense of political inefficacy, confusion and skepticism. Since the Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed in 1984 and the Tienanmen Square crackdown in 1989, Hong Kong people expressed increased distrust and concern for their political future (Cheng, 1988). Beijing's handling of the Tienanmen protestors call for democracy cast a grim shadow on hopes for Hong Kong sovereignty and democratization after 1997. Mistrust and ambivalence concerning the administration's promise to implement Basic Law under Beijing influence does not indicate political apathy. While political concern was high during this time, Hong Kong people did not see “avenues” in which their interests could be effectively addressed (Degolyer and Scott, 1996). In this context, the overall internal and external sense of efficacy seems quite low – as it remains unclear as to how individual concerns will be dealt with by external government authorities (Wai-Man, 2004).

Abstaining from political activity, such as voting, can also be a political statement. Degolyer and Scott (1996) claim that since 1991, a collection of 11 surveys indicate that a constant 15% of Hong Kong people abstain from political engagement because they do not support Beijing or Colonial politics and disapprove a constrained and limited democracy. While low voter turnout or party membership can not be exclusively explained by this position, such results nevertheless represent a persistent problem in Hong Kong's socio-political context. Many people have lost and gained hope for gradual democratization or reform in Hong Kong (Cheng, 1988). A significant understanding remains that the government does not demonstrate a legitimate agent of Hong Kong autonomy nor interest in future democratization. Although such perceptions contribute to times of low political activism, it does not signify political apathy, disinterest or indifference but rather, a lack of political opportunity.

After the 1997 Handover

Hong Kong political culture and social movements grew in response to mounting socio-economic issues and dissatisfaction with the new government. The 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and the transfer of

power to the Tung Chee-Hwa administration yielded numerous problems for Hong Kong people. Political participation shifted to concerns over livelihood (Cheng, 2005). For the first time ever, Hong Kong experienced negative economic growth and decline in the manufacturing center in 1998 (Cheng, 2005). Moreover, high levels of unemployment and widening income gap reduced public confidence in the transitional government's capability to deal with Hong Kong's problems.

The Tung Administration showed no clear sign of gradual democratization. The new government was highly paternalistic and conservative – supporting a pro-business agenda and yielding to Beijing influence (Cheng, 2005). Due to fear of China's political intervention and a tightening of control, it became difficult to mobilize people in public (Cheng, 2005). Under the Tung Administration's reluctance, public confidence in Hong Kong's future democratization decreased.

Although the number of political parties had increased and amassed more resources to organize, 50% of voters prioritized *economic* concerns over a mere 8% worried about *Beijing's* role in 1998 elections (Grundstrom, 2006). While political parties became largely diversified in Hong Kong, representing pro-Beijing, pro-business or pro-Democracy interests, the 1998 voting priorities signals the prevailing influence of economic concerns over the democratization of Hong Kong (Grundstrom, 2006). This highlights the role of shifting socio-economic environments in shaping people's political priorities. Moreover, the efficacy of political parties lowered, as it failed to offer effective policy recommendations to the Tung administration.

Despite an ebb of political activity before the millennium, Hong Kong political activity rose within the shifted political parameters post Hand Over (Lui and Chiu, 2000). While the poor socio-economic conditions prioritized economic concern, an increase of protests and marches testified Hong Kong's concern for its political future and rights within the shadow of 'One Country, Two Systems'. Although Hong Kong people have a low sense of external efficacy concerning the government's response to the democratization of Hong Kong, they nevertheless have shown a high degree of collective efficacy (Lee, 2005).

On July 1, 2003, half a million Hong Kong people amassed in the streets to protest the new security legislation known as Article 23 (Lee, 2005). Under this proposed law, the government would gain the right to accuse people of sedition and treason. In response to the protests, the SAR shelved the article to maintain legitimacy and social order. In 2009, Hong Kongers assembled in the thousands in vigil of the Tiananmen square massacre. The traditional repetition of this memorial vigil since 1989 is central to Hong Kong's unique political ethos and a symbol of the peoples' calls for democracy and freedoms.

In 2004, 100,000 Hong Kong people gathered in the pursuit of the direct election of the Chief Executive (Liu, 2000). While their pleas were not granted, their protest symbolizes a crucial factor shaping Hong Kong political efficacy. The Chief Executive is still elected through Beijing appointment and committee votes (Lee, 2005). Moreover, government positions are associated to corruption, allegiance to China and little opportunity for change.

Although Hong Kong people can directly vote for District Committees, few are motivated because they believe that this will have little effect on Hong Kong's overall political structure and policy. According to Liu (2000), 91.1% of interviewed Hong Kongers believe that they possess no ability to influence the government. In addition, 96.7% surveyed think that they cannot change government policies (Liu 2000). Liu (2000) suggests that while this mistrust may foster political passivity, it can also foster radical calls for fundamental reform.

Discussion

The gap between Hong Kong people and the government has led to discouragement and a low sense of individual efficacy towards political change (Lee, 2005). If one judges political efficacy as the degree to which political reform and change can be achieved, then Hong Kong people struggle through little opportunity to manifest their concerns. Alice Wong (1970) claims one must look to the role which Hong Kong people are permitted to play in Hong Kong's political culture before judging them as indifferent to politically apathetic. A sense of powerlessness can encourage people to mobilize at opportune times, while it can also lead to disinterest in times of socio-economic and political constraint.

On another note, a low level of *formal* political participation in Hong Kong should not be interpreted as overall political apathy. (Degolyer and Scott, 1996 and Wong, 1970). Informal political participation and engagements reflect political involvement and concern. While Hong Kong people have a low level of formal involvement in administrative politics (if they are outside the local and business elite), corruption, illegal party membership and bribery are also informal means through which political activity is also manifested (Degolyer and Scott, 1996).

On the contrary, some claim Hong Kong people to be predominantly concerned with economic interests rather than political stability (in Liu, 2000). As long as the economic system is stable and growing, Hong Kong citizens are happy. Yet, even the business elite who support this premise, are not necessarily politically apathetic. To them, it is crucial that their interests are represented and maintained by the government. Moreover, to categorize Hong Kong people as predominantly guided by utilitarian

familism and a traditional refugee mentality is to minimize the inherent entanglement of political policy and socio-economic conditions of Hong Kong (Liu, 2000). Socio-economic issues that impact Hong Kong families are prevalent and mounting. Problems with public housing and the widening income gap still need to be addressed through political reform. To claim that Hong families are politically passive or apathetic, due to family and economy-based preoccupations, is to suggest that they do not recognize that politics plays a key role in changing socio-economic realities. Although lower class Hong Kong people may have little confidence in the government's responsiveness to their issues and in turn, resort to social services, such people nevertheless recognize the necessity of political action to achieve drastic reform.

Conclusion

To say that Hong Kong people are 'politically apathetic' is to claim that they are indifferent to the city's political state and development. This premise undermines evolving degrees of political efficacy and opportunity available to Hong Kong people. If political apathy is a strict concept limited to voter turnout, registration and demand for constitutional change, than indeed, Hong Kong residents may be regarded as politically apathetic. In truth, this concept of political apathy is narrow and thus, neglects to take into account other forms of political participation, activism and concern of the Hong Kong people. One must understand Hong Kong political participation in a multi-integrative manner, in which its numerous social movements, attitudes and concerns are framed within particular contexts. Although Hong Kong people may be less engaged in formal politics, they are indeed active in informal political activity. Political participation of Hong Kong has evolved in reflection of political opportunities available within different time periods.

Dimensions of political expression have shifted according to activity permitted by the government and the degree of political efficacy imagined by the Hong Kong people. Hong Kong's traditional ethos of protests and mass movements represents a high sense of collective efficacy, regardless of low government responsiveness (Lee 2005). Even though Hong Kong social movements have not resulted in social or political instability and conflict, they still are significant examples of disrupted, yet recurring political activity. While protests or petitions have done little to change the political system, Hong Kong people's initiatives nevertheless reflect concern for the city's future political development. In relation to Hong Kong's socio-political context and history, the city's political culture evolves in shifting waves of political confidence, participation and efficacy.

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