Urban Social Movements and Housing in Hong Kong: From Antagonism to Guided Participation

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Social movements have been important driving forces behind the so-cial and political development in Hong Kong over the past twenty years. This paper traces the development of such movements from the late 1970s to the present moment and attempts to investigate how such seemingly de-stabilizing forces have evolved to generate a dynamically stable environ-ment in which both the provision of social services and the political system have been enhanced. Yet, political development in the 1990s and the changeover of sovereignty have brought new parameters to the social and political arenas. Party politics and radical movements have emerged in the urban social movement scene. The government has also initiated its own participatory mechanism in collective consumption areas, and a new strategy is beginning to take shape. Such a move is illustrated by the Estate Management Advisory Committee scheme for public housing estates. It signifies the striking of a consensus over a stability strategy in which guid-ed participation (similar to the Singapore style) has been employed. This strategy should impact the delivery of local public services and other as-pects of local politics.

KEYWORDS: **Hong Kong; housing; urban sociology; urban politics; social movement**

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The coexistence of a low level of political participation and apathy with a high level of social stability and continuous economic progress creates a paradox in the development of Hong Kong. Several theses have been put forward to offer an explanation: Lau Siu-kai's thesis of utilitarian familism,[1] the administrative absorption thesis of Ambrose King,[2] and the administrative state theory put forward by Peter Harris.[3] Yet such theses which offer powerful explanations of historical development are less applicable to the post-1980s era. The late 1970s saw the beginning of rapid changes in the sociopolitical as well as social arenas. The grass roots, who were perceived as apathetic, began to articulate their demands, sometimes in a radical manner. The emergence of a new middle class further brought upheaval in the social and political systems. Such changes are accounted for by Castells, Goh, and Kwok who employ the "dynamic stability"[4] framework to describe the impact of urban social movements on both the development of housing policy and the wider political system.

Social movements have been part of daily life in Hong Kong since the 1970s, being an important agent of social change. While the handover of sovereignty has shaped the sociopolitical agenda in recent decades, interaction between various stakeholders is what determines the final outcomes of many social and economic policies. This relationship is particularly apparent in the areas of collective consumption—such as housing, education, and health services—in which the impact of the demands from the grass roots and the middle class cannot be undermined. Such appeals did not only exert an influence on the outcome of social policy, but also formed the substance of many electoral activities upon which the present political system evolved.

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[1]Lau Siu-kai, *Society and Politics in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1982).

[2]Ambrose King, "The Administrative Absorption of Politics in Hong Kong," *Asian Survey* 15 (1975): 422-39.

[3]Peter Harris, *Hong Kong: A Study of Bureaucracy* (Hong Kong: Heinemann Asia, 1978).

[4]Manuel Castells, Lee Goh, and Regnald Y.W. Kwok, *The Shek Kip Mei Syndrome: Economic Development and Public Housing in Hong Kong and Singapore* (London: Pion, 1990).

The return of Hong Kong to China has altered many sociopolitical parameters which shaped pre-1997 Hong Kong and has changed the interaction between various components of this dynamically stable system. Recent development in urban social movements and tenant participation in public housing have also elicited a change in the government's governance strategy. An analysis of the development of urban social movements would help to shed light on the sociopolitical implications of state strategy on users' participation in collective consumption. This paper starts with an overview of the social movements in Hong Kong in the last forty years. Then a more detailed description of the urban social movements in the 1980s and the 1990s is provided with a focus on the strategy of the state toward urban social movements. Finally, a new tenant participation initiative introduced by the Hong Kong Housing Authority (HKHA) will be discussed as an illustration of the latest government measure regarding guided participation.

Urban Social Movements in Hong Kong: An Overview

Urban social movements can be defined as "mobilized groups, which make urban demands which challenge existing policies and practices, which make some use of non-institutionalized methods and which do not take the form of political parties."[5] Compared with pressure groups, social movements have a higher degree of challenge but have been less able to access the government. At the same time, social movements are also less institutionalized and remoter from elections and politics than political parties. Urban demands, which characterize urban social movements, often focus on collective consumption, neighborhood protection, and influencing local institutions.[6]

Urban social movements and social unrest have similar appearances.

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[5]Chris G. Pickvance, "Where Have Urban Movements Gone," in *Europe at the Margins*, ed. Costis Hadimichalis and David Sadler (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1995), 198.
[6]Ibid.

They both use more expressive and sometimes "radical" means in voicing demands. Likewise, they indicate underlying social contradiction, the discontent of the grass roots, and at the same time a collapse of the traditional social control system. Yet, the impact of social unrest on social change is rather limited. Social unrest instead represents an incapacity to bring along social change, being expressed as a drift toward interpersonal violence.[7] On the contrary, urban social movements are viewed as "organizations that consciously and materially alter the balance of class forces in society"[8]— an impact which is more significant to social change.

There are three major incidences of social unrest in Hong Kong after World War II, occurring in 1956, 1966, and 1967. Both the 1956 and 1967 riots were politically motivated. The 1956 riot was organized by the Nationalists as a struggle against an increase in communist influence in the colony whereas the 1967 riot was an orchestrated anticolonialism effort by pro-communist organizations which echoed the Cultural Revolution in the mainland. Neither of the riots directly reflected prevailing social conflicts nor had a more long-term social impact. On the contrary, the riot of 1966, triggered by a fare increase of the cross-harbor ferry services, reflected a general discontent among the grass roots. The apathy of the colonial government toward the well-being of local people, the distrust of people toward the government, and the barriers to communication set by the colonial government are believed to be the underlying causes of the riot.[9]

Organized mass mobilization began in Hong Kong in the late 1960s. So and Kwitko identify three phases of urban movements in Hong Kong.[10] The first phase is the student movement of the late 1960s to the late 1970s. This movement began in college campuses as campaigns demanding university reform and protesting against the Vietnam War. Inspired by the Cultural Revolution and triggered by long-term grievances against the oppres-

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[7]Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements* (London: Arnold, 1983), 52.

[8]Stuart Lowe, *Urban Social Movements: The City After Castells* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1986), 17.

[9]Castells, Goh, and Kwok, *The Shek Kip Mei Syndrome*, 134-36.

[10]Alvin Y. So and Ludmilla Kwitko, "The Transformation of Urban Movements in Hong Kong 1970-90," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 24, no. 4 (1992): 32-44.

sive colonial regime, the movement was soon taken onto the street and evolved into a nationalist, anticolonialism movement. However, the major participants were radical college students and the movement was neither able to involve grass-roots citizens nor successful in moving the agenda beyond moral appeals. Nevertheless, this movement sparked the acceptance of orderly and nonviolent social action as a means of articulating social demands.

The second phase of urban social movements began in the late 1970s, triggered by the social reform introduced by the then newly installed Governor Murray McLehose. In sharp contrast to the social movements in the early 1970s, urban movements in the 1980s had a high degree of grass-roots involvement. The foci of the movements also shifted from vague moral demands to urban issues such as housing, education, and transportation.[11] The emerging middle class, many of whom had been activists in the earlier student movement, was an important underpinning force. They either were directly involved in the social action or served as active organizers of neighborhood mobilization.[12]

The late 1980s saw a gradual transformation of the social movements into a new phase. Counting down to reintegration with China in 1997 and the gradual opening up of the political system stimulated a quest for political participation. The "democrats," the majority of which were active organizers of the community movement, were among the first to grasp such an opportunity to enter the newly opened political system. Urban movements still remain as the most important instrument of electoral appeal. In return, the democrats have been successful in integrating the urban social movements into the political process. At a time when grass-roots mobilization seemed to be overshadowed by political activities, the middle class came back to the front stage—but with different agendas when compared to the role they played in the previous stage.

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[11]Ibid., 35-37.

[12]Castells, Goh, and Kwok, *The Shek Kip Mei Syndrome*, 143.

Urban Social Movements and Housing in the 1980s

Urban social movements in Hong Kong sprouted in the late 1970s in terms of both number and diversity. They range from neighborhood mobilizations in to-be-redeveloped public housing estates to joint estate demonstrations against high rent, from territory-wide demonstrations demanding a tighter monitoring of public transport operations (the majority of which are privately run) to the demand for a more democratic electoral system. However, the majority of the urban social movements in the late 1970s to the late 1980s focused their demands on collective consumption, with housing as an important common theme. Research by Ma finds that the number of neighborhood mobilizations has been on the increase since the early 1970s.[13] The majority of such movements were directed at housing-related issues (see table 1). A similar pattern was also documented by Lui[14] as well as Lui and Kung.[15]

One would expect people who suffered from the appalling living conditions prevalent between the poverty line would easily be provoked and thus threaten social stability. Paradoxically, however, social movements centering on housing did not emerge at a time when housing problems were at their severest. Instead, such movements sprouted and bloomed when housing provisions, both in terms of quantity and quality, were by that time the highest in the history of public housing development. Despite the relatively early start of public housing construction and the sheer volume of public housing that was produced, standards of the dwelling units and the living environment were both poor. From 1954 to 1970, over a quarter of a million dwelling units were constructed. Yet the majority of such resettlement units lacked basic facilities such as indoor kitchens and toilets, and the allocation standard was only 2.2 square meters per adult.

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[13]Fook Tong S. Ma, "Urban Neighborhood Mobilization in the Changing Political Scene of Hong Kong" (Unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Hong Kong, 1986), 75, 80, 83.

[14]Tai Lok Lui, "Urban Protests in Hong Kong" (Unpublished M.Phil thesis, University of Hong Kong, 1984), 95, 98, 100.

[15]Tak Lok Lui and Kai Shing Kung, *Chengshi zongheng: Xianggang jumin yundong ji cheng-shi zhengzhi yanjiu* (A study on the citizen movement in Hong Kong) (Hong Kong: Guangjiaojing, 1985), 62.

Table 1
Urban Social Movements in Hong Kong, 1966-85

Year	Number of Mobilization Events		Proportion of Housing-Related Events (%)
	In general	Related to housing	
1966	5	1	20
1967	1	1	100
1968	6	0	0
1969	16	6	38
1970	12	8	67
1971	8	8	100
1972	14	7	50
1973	11	3	27
1974	20	10	50
1975	15	7	47
1976	20	11	55
1977	30	19	63
1978	37	18	49
1979	21	19	90
1980	35	19	54
1981	30	10	33
1982	28	14	50
1983	37	15	41
1984	30	17	57
1985	29	12	41

Source: Fook Tong S. Ma, "Urban Neighborhood Mobilization in the Changing Political Scene of Hong Kong" (Unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Hong Kong, 1986), 75, 80, 83.

A new governor, Murray McLehose, was appointed in the aftermath of the two riots in the mid-1960s. His major political mission was to foster steady economic development, to prepare for the negotiations with China over the future of Hong Kong, and to pacify criticism being leveled from the Labour government in London.[16] Inspired by the British welfare state tradition, McLehose perceived social programs as the major instrument to be used in achieving his missions in which a large-scale housing program

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[16]Castells, Goh, and Kwok, *The Shek Kip Mei Syndrome*, 140.

constituted an important pillar stone. He launched an aggressive ten-year housing program targeted at an annual production of 35,000 flats. Substandard public housing units were redeveloped and squatter areas cleared.

Yet, such a large-scale social reform has not brought social stability but has rather escalated the demand of the masses and "triggered a series of social movement aiming at collective consumption"[17] as shown by the figures of Ma,[18] Lui,[19] as well as Lui and Kung.[20] Lui and Kung hypothesized that the initial increase in housing protests be explained by the following features: (1) such protests were provoked by the government's housing policy; (2) the lack of an appropriate platform to resolve conflicts, owing to a relatively closed system of decision-making; (3) there was a network of community agencies staffed by professional social workers to organize social actions and grass-roots organizations.[21] These two scholars concluded that the failure to open up the political system would provoke more social actions. Therefore, social actions would recede if grass-roots organizations were to be represented in the decision-making machinery.

However, this static explanation is unable to account for what happened subsequently. In sharp contrast with what its predecessor did in suppressing the movements, the McLehose administration was quietly adjusting to a much milder strategy. Yet, such a strategy did not immediately pacify social groups but instead triggered even more demands (see table 1). This increase was motivated partly by the success of previous mobilizations in grasping more resources and privileges and partly by the need to accumulate more political support in local elections. The District Board, a more democratic communication channel at the local level, was set up in the early 1980s. Activists in the grass-roots mobilizations had a much higher rate of success in such local elections, particularly in areas with a high concentration of public housing.[22] In addition, remuneration from the

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[17] Ibid.

[18] Ma, "Urban Neighborhood Mobilization," 80, 83.

[19] See note 14 above.

[20] See note 15 above.

[21] Ibid., 104-12.

[22] Castells, Goh and Kwok, *The Shek Kip Mei Syndrome*, 143.

public offices of movement activists also fueled the movement financially.

Although the number of urban social movements remained the same in a quantitative sense, the new strategy had a qualitative impact on mobilizations. Ma[23] has observed an increased use of institutionalized action which began to dominate neighborhood mobilization toward the mid-1980s.[24] Activists found that institutionalized actions were more effective "not only in housing policy but also in the political system as a whole."[25] Thus, both the agenda and the personnel originally belonging to the housing movement penetrated into the newly opened political institutions as a result of the success of movement activists in the District Board and Urban Council elections in the mid-1980s. This crossover generated a "stable conflictual system" whereas more militant social actions were pacified by the granting of increased say to the grass roots in the formulation of housing policy and in participation in running the local public housing estates.[26]

The strategy of the government in tackling the urban social movements in the 1980s can be perceived as, in Thornley's terms, a strategy of "containment and bargaining."[27] This strategy focuses on the containment and institutionalization of conflict. Participation can then act as an arena in which interest groups can undertake bargaining, mediation, or arbitration in order to resolve the conflict. This strategy has two components: the legitimization of conflict and the organization of interest groups.[28] Formal institutionalized structure of bargaining as well as assistance to organized interest factions are necessary for the strategy to be successful. The legitimization of conflict began with the relinquishment of a repressive strategy toward social conflict which was employed as a standard measure in the 1950s to the mid-1970s. Only through the endorsement of interest group conflict as a normal state of affairs would the bureaucracy no longer regard

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[23]Ma, "Urban Neighborhood Mobilization," 80, 83.

[24]Ibid., tables 4.2, 4.3, 4.4.

[25]Castells, Goh, and Kwok, *The Shek Kip Mei Syndrome*, 149.

[26]Ibid., 150-51.

[27]Andrew Thornley, "Theoretical Perspectives of Planning Participation," *Progress in Planning* 7, no. 2 (1977): 47.

[28]Ibid., 47-48.

such conflict as antagonistic. Thus the government began to tolerate—and even passively encourage—the organization of interest group conflict. This is evidenced by the subsidies the government granted to voluntary agencies in community development work upon which many neighborhood organizations evolved.

The adoption of a "containment and bargaining" strategy induced the government to bargain and to make concession. For the residents, the quality of public housing management was greatly improved and public tenants were also more favorably treated vis-à-vis other groups equally in need of public housing. For instance, sitting tenants who were affected by redevelopment received more favorable allocation of new public housing flats in centrally-located sites as well as priority in buying public flats for sale (e.g., the Home Ownership Scheme flats). On the policymaking level, the HKHA began to coopt grass-roots members by appointing a Mutual Aid Committee (MAC) chair to the HKHA. Yet, this was only considered by the urban social movement participants as an insincere gesture (the movement did not identify the chair as their representative). It was not until the late 1980s when Fung Kim Kai, one of the prominent leaders of the urban social movement, was appointed to the HKHA did the movement achieve the power they demanded. On the other hand, the middle-class organizers also benefited, albeit in an indirect way. Movement organizers were appointed to government consultative bodies and the electoral success of many movement organizers in local politics was largely related to what they have capitalized from the urban social movements.

Equally necessary for the containment and bargaining strategy to be successful was the willingness of the movement participants to utilize a more institutionalized strategy which is evidenced in the research by Ma.[29] Such willingness can be explained by the motivation and ideology of the social movements. The urban social movements in the 1980s, particularly the housing movement, were the amalgamation of the interests of two groups.[30] The urban poor formed the "mass base" of the movements,

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[29]Ma, "Urban Neighborhood Mobilization," tables 4.2, 4.3, 4.4.

[30]So and Kwitko, "The Transformation of Urban Movements in Hong Kong," 36-37.

whereas a group of young professionals—many of whom have the experience of the urban movements in the 1970s—constituted the backbone of the movements. While the "masses" demanded material improvement in the physical living environment, the middle-class professionals were driven by the belief of social conscience and social reform.[31] This pushed the urban social movements in the 1980s not only to concentrate on issues related to the livelihood of common people but also to pressurize the government to reform as well as to share power. This mix of pragmatist and reformist sentiments among the movements was targeted at the incremental improvement of the material conditions of the people and the political openness (rather than overthrow) of the government.[32] Thus the gains of both the "masses" and the "organizers" of the movements, described in the previous section, reinforced the further use of institutionalized action with the hope of furthering material and political gains.

To sum up, what Castells, Goh, and Kwok attempt to demonstrate by the "dynamic stability" framework is the complex interaction between political strategy, urban mobilization, and collective consumption.[33] Social reform was driven by the colonial government's quest for social stability and legitimization. Yet, the proposed social reform was unsuccessful in the first attempt to pacify social protests. Instead, "[the reform] simulated demand, fostered community organization, and politically enfranchised the residents at the local level."[34] Collective consumption was one of the major contributing factors through which effective mobilization of the neighborhood was achieved. The government's strategy facilitated the formation of a dynamically stable system. A timely opening up of the political system and the successful cooptation of the activists in local affairs and housing policymaking helped to institutionalize this mobilization. Although such mobilization continued, a "stable conflictual system" was established and "dynamic stability" achieved. Through the movements, the grass roots received the material improvements they demanded and the organizers in

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[31]Ibid.

[32]Ibid., 36.

[33]Castells, Goh, and Kwok, *The Shek Kip Mei Syndrome*, 150.

[34]Ibid.

turn were able to enjoy a wider participation in the political system.

Urban Social Movements in the 1990s

While housing movement in the 1980s contributed to the democratic development of Hong Kong, very few resident organizations survived long and the movement seems to have lost steam in the mid-1990s. Active resident groups from "squatter clearance" or "to-be-redeveloped" resettlement estates lost their base in the community once they were reallocated. Others who were united on an ad hoc basis around demands for material rights found themselves unable to advance to a higher level of appeal once the material demands were fulfilled. The withdrawal of material support from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), either in the form of finance or manpower, stripped the resident movement of the resources they needed to sustain the movement. For instance, the People's Council on Public Housing Policy—which was the most influential actor in the urban social movements—was in financial difficulties when overseas donations shrank. The council's capacity as a front runner of social action has thus been greatly reduced.

However, the overall level of urban social movements has not declined. Research by Wong indicates that the level of social action in the mid-1990s is comparable to that of a decade ago.[35] Yet the actors involved in social action during the 1990s have changed. The Society of Community Organizations has replaced the People's Council on Public Housing Policy as the most active organizer whose major clientele is private-sector tenement block dwellers and underprivileged groups. At the same time, such social action has become more institutionalized as political parties emerged as an important driving force of neighborhood mobilization (see table 2). An increase in neighborhood mobilization is expected due to a series of local and central elections that were held in these few years. Participants

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[35]Hon Ming Wong, "An Analysis of the Scheme of Estate Management Advisory Committee" (Unpublished M.A. dissertation, City University of Hong Kong, 1997), 21-22, 25-26.

Table 2
Urban Housing Movements in Hong Kong 1995-97, by Sponsor

Sponsors	Number of Mobilization Events		
	1995	1996	1997*
Political Parties	4	9	9
NGOs	15	8	0
Pressure Groups	3	11	2
Others	6	10	2

*January-March 1997.
Source: Hon Ming Wong, "An Analysis of the Scheme of Estate Management Advisory Committee" (Unpublished M.A. dissertation, City University of Hong Kong, 1997), 21-22, 25-26.

in social movements are becoming more diversified. They include not just public tenants, but also homeowners in both the public and private sectors. More militant actions have also emerged; there were several such incidences in the early 1990s which involved suicidal-style action and blockage of traffic in the central business district.

The opening up of the political system has further reinforced interest group bargaining. Although the housing movement in the 1980s did not produce any apparent and tangible outcome—such as new legislation on housing or a radical transformation of the HKHA[36]—the indirect impact was eminent. The movement helped to force the government to open up the political system, and the movement activists were also able to grasp the newly established public offices to exert their influence. At the same time, the housing movement also successfully transformed public tenants into a powerful electoral base. Not only are public tenants easier to contact physically due to the physical design of public housing blocks, their common interests in terms of collective consumption are also simpler to identify. Eager to attract political support from public tenants, a common front across parties can be established without difficulty in order to protect pub-

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[36]One seemingly direct outcome of the urban social movements in the 1980s was the appointment of a grass-roots member to the government body of public housing, the HKHA. Yet the grass-roots representative was a Mutual Aid Committee (MAC) member who was regarded to have no relationship with the urban movements.

lic tenants' material interests. An obvious example is the amendment to the Housing Ordinance[37] in the last legislature of the colonial regime that circumscribes the maximum rent the HKHA can charge to a rent-to-income ratio not exceeding 10 percent.[38] The amendment secures a low level of rent public tenants can enjoy.

In addition, the significance of public housing tenants as an important electoral base also has driven political parties to set up their own resident organizations so as to grasp the emerging issues. Not only do pro-democracy parties have experience in the use of neighborhood action as a means of electoral campaigning, even the pro-China parties also started to adopt such a strategy. This accounts for the evidence of an increased organization of neighborhood action by political parties in Wong's research.[39] Such a move has produced two contrasting effects. On the one hand, this trend indicates a further legitimization of conflict and further development of a "containment and bargaining" strategy of participation. On the other hand, the institutionalization of social action will inevitably lead to a decline in social action.[40] The overinvolvement of political parties in urban social action will also likely produce a "social shadow" which subjects the activities of the movement to the interests of the political parties and makes social action lose both independence and eventually significance.[41]

Despite the fact that Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty was an important social and political event, the changeover's impact on urban social movements is rather subtle. On the one hand, as the Basic Law reiterates, the people of Hong Kong would continue to enjoy the freedom of expression and the right of assembly under Art. 27. On the other hand, it is embarrassing for the Special Administrative Region (SAR) government not to follow the colonial government's basic approach toward urban social movements. Thus, open petitions and demonstrations continue apart from

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[37]The Housing Ordinance is the legislation which governs the operations of the HKHA.

[38]Technically this only applies to new buildings but it will exert pressure on the decision to raise the rent level of existing stocks.

[39]See note 35 above.

[40]Pickvance, "Where Have Urban Movements Gone," 207-8.

[41]Castells, *The City and the Grassroots*, 284.

some minor restrictions.[42] Unsurprisingly, we find no apparent change both in the way urban social movements express themselves and the coping strategies adopted by the government. On the other hand, there is an urgency for the SAR government to regain the power and influence lost to the legislature under the electoral reforms of the outgoing governor Chris Patten. Democracy has now retreated to the level found in the early 1980s. Although the proportion of directly elected councilors in the SAR legislature remains the same, the electoral basis of some functional constituencies has narrowed.[43] One-sixth of the seats were even elected by a 400-member electoral college, the overwhelming majority of which was from business and pro-China groups. The same electoral college was also entrusted with the election of the Chief Executive, who heads a relatively small team of senior civil servants inherited from the colonial government. In addition, the appointment system has been resumed in the District Boards (renamed District Councils after the changeover of sovereignty). Ironical is that many pro-government candidates who lost in the election to their pro-grass-roots opponents were recently appointed to such councils.

However, housing movement after the changeover of sovereignty continues to follow the trajectory that has begun to take shape from the early 1990s. While public tenants have begun to move away from the front stage of urban social movements, this group's electoral importance has driven political parties to take over the organizing role in neighborhood mobilization. This has been leading to a further institutionalization of urban social movements and may suggest their further decline as independent movements. At the same time, the emergence of militant, uninstitutional-

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[42]For instance, the establishment of a demonstration zone in some popular demonstrating sites and tighter security control for demonstrators when eminent figures are present or the nature of the demonstration is highly political (e.g., those protesting against the June Fourth Incident).

[43]From the early 1990s onwards, the legislature was carefully opened up to allow a minority of councilors to be directly elected. A safety mechanism of "functional constituency" (councilors elected by business groups and professionals) has also been installed to prevent pro-democracy and pro-grass-roots councilors to dominate the legislature. Yet, through a "technical" adjustment introduced by the controversial outgoing Governor Chris Patten, pro-democracy and pro-grass-roots parties were able to win a landslide victory in the last Legislative Council election held two years before the handover, thus becoming the majority in the legislature.

ized action also signifies the limit of the institutionalization of social ac-
tion. Meanwhile, a large-scale tenant involvement initiative was promul-
gated on the eve of the changeover of sovereignty. The HKHA set up an
Estate Management Advisory Committee (EMAC) in each housing estate
to involve public tenants in the running of their estates. This indicates an
attempt of the government to install large-scale "guided participation" at
the local level. The development and impact of this plan on urban social
movements will be examined in the section that follows.

Estate Management Advisory Committee:
A Move Toward Guided Participation

When democratization began at the local level in the early 1980s,
middle-ranking housing officials were coopted into the District Boards to
explain housing policy and to take in feedback from councilors. Estate
housing managers also began to hold regular but informal meetings with
MACs—organizations under the auspices of the government as opinion
representative of the grass roots[44]—to collect local information as well as
to do lobbying. Such an informal arrangement has been going on for nearly
two decades. In 1994, without obvious demand from nor prior consultation
with tenants, the HKHA announced a plan to reform tenant involvement in
estate management. EMAC began as a pilot project in eight estates to re-
place the informal meetings and was subsequently extended to all housing
estates in 1995 even before a formal review was finalized.

EMAC is an advisory body to the estate housing managers on estate
management issues. The stated objectives of EMAC are just not limited to
consultation on management issues but embrace more progressive notions
of improvement in communication, opportunity of participation, and fur-
ther decentralization of management.[45] Chaired by the estate housing man-

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[44]Norman Miners, *The Government and Politics of Hong Kong*, fifth edition (Hong Kong:
Oxford University Press, 1998), 175.

[45]Hong Kong Housing Authority, *Memorandum for the Hong Kong Housing Authority: Es-
tate Management Advisory Committee Pilot Project MOC 5/95* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong
Housing Authority, 1995).

ager, EMAC is composed of elected representatives of MAC in each tower block, District Board members whose constituency covers the estate, and representatives from eligible resident associations.[46] Officials from the Housing Department and representatives of service contractors also attend on a regular or as-needed basis. As much of the concern of public tenants is about repair and maintenance issues, an important regular attendant is the estate maintenance surveyor.

EMAC can be regarded as a proactive move of the HKHA to set up a formal arrangement for tenant involvement. EMAC is also the largest consultative mechanism on collective consumption of this kind in Hong Kong. Although EMAC is entrusted with no concrete decision-making power, like other consultation bodies at the local level (e.g., District Board), there are measures to simulate such power. For instance, a budget for estate improvement works and community activities is given to each EMAC and members are asked to assess service contractor performance. EMAC also has a collective bargaining appearance as the members of EMAC are appointed on their official capacity in relevant organizations.

Although the government was pursuing a "containment and bargaining" strategy toward the urban housing movement in the 1980s, such a strategy is not necessary in the late 1990s. First, as the turbulence in the sociopolitical environment arising from the negotiations on the changeover of sovereignty has largely been settled, there is no need to grant such a degree of concession in exchange for political support. Second, overshadowed by the pro-democracy legislature in the last days of the colonial government, the government was eager to restore public confidence and thus introduced new initiatives that emphasized innovation and efficiency. Against such a context, EMAC emerged as an illustration of a "stability and consensus" strategy as described by Thornley.[47] Such a strategy views participation as a means of fostering consensus and stability in which the adaptability of the system to the environment is pivotal. This is achieved

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[46]Eligible associations refer to residential tenant associations whose membership constitutes 15 percent or more of the estate households and commercial tenant associations with membership constituting 50 percent or more of the estate's commercial tenants.

[47]Thornley, "Theoretical Perspectives of Planning Participation," 43-45.

by a two-way exchange of information between the authority and the public. Efficiency and value consensus are regarded as the most paramount goals in achieving stability of the system whereas participation is only instrumental in enhancing information exchange and efficiency. EMAC appears to match very well with such images.

Unlike the previous informal arrangement, EMAC is a formal mechanism which enhances the two-way exchange of information. Both quality and quantity of information that is provided to tenant representatives are substantial as illustrated by the volume of meeting papers as well as the number of Housing Department officials that attend the meetings. In addition to the estate management staff, the maintenance surveyor and representatives of the service contractors regularly attend, whereas representatives from various sections of the Housing Department participate whenever there is a related agenda. The number attending EMAC meetings very often exceeds the number of official members on the committee. This facilitates direct communication between the various stakeholders of estate management.

Such an elaborate and expensive structure of tenant involvement cannot just be a political or ceremonial gesture; previous informal coordination (between housing managers and MAC) and existing local consultative bodies (like the Area Committee which used to cover two to three housing estates before it was reformed) should have served the purpose of information exchange. However, the importance of EMAC in enhancing management functions via the intensive exchange of information is quickly recognized. For instance, the transfer of the ownership of estate activities to EMAC helps to motivate the MAC, which constitutes the overwhelming majority in EMAC, to involve more residents. The appraisal of EMAC on service contractor performance also facilitates the process whereby the housing managers consider the views of end-users. Moreover, EMAC members are often asked to relay new management measures to residents so as to lessen the burden of the estate office and at the same time enhance the system of redress.

However, without some degree of power transfer, the new participation mechanism can neither prove itself to be superior over the previous informal arrangement nor be distinguished from the existing local ceremonial

consultative system. Over this issue of power transfer, the Hong Kong Housing Authority was obviously ambivalent. On the one hand, a power transfer of some kind is inevitable. On the other hand, however, there is a fear of losing control and thus creating instability. Such ambivalence is indirectly reflected by the skepticism of top Housing Department officials toward resident organizations whose leadership is likely to either be activists of the urban social movements in the 1980s or have affiliation with political parties. There was even a suggestion from the Housing Department to exclude resident organizations from EMAC which was, however, eventually rejected by the HKHA.[48]

To minimize the threat of a more open participatory mechanism and to enhance the stability and consensus strategy, the reliance of EMAC on MAC cannot be more creative. As the political system has gradually opened up, MAC has, over the years, lost most of its significance. Given that the HKHA was desperately looking for a pseudo-collective bargaining set-up with extensive representation, MAC was an effortless choice. Elected by residents in the tower block, MAC thus has an extensive representation base in principle. Although turnout rates in MAC elections are in practice extremely low, MAC has its own mobilization networks which are valuable as a consultative tool.

Yet, such a move may bring two contrasting effects. On the one hand, EMAC rejuvenates the ailing MAC in public housing estates and enables them to reestablish linkages with as well as have influence on the residents they represent. However, being a political mechanism by design, the extension of MAC influence may have an impact on local political ecology whereas political forces would try to compete in MAC and EMAC to extend their political influence. This phenomenon may alter the stability that EMAC is eager to maintain. On the other hand, a number of resident organizations which were active in previous waves of urban social movements have joined EMAC.[49] With reference to Pickvance's thesis, further

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[48]Hong Kong Housing Authority, *Memorandum for the Hong Kong Housing Authority: Estate Management Advisory Committee Pilot Project MOC 4/96* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Housing Authority, 1996),

[49]See note 35 above.

institutionalization of urban social movement would likely have a damp-
ening effect on the intensiveness of the movement.[50] Thus the incorpora-
tion of tenant organizations would further weaken the impetus of urban
social movements among public tenants. Furthermore, the active pivotal
role that District Board members have performed in EMAC, as reflected
by the initial results of a research on EMAC currently undertaken by this
author, would lead to a deeper involvement of the political parties in
EMAC given the intensive party affiliation of District Board members.
This would indirectly reinforce the further institutionalization of urban
social movements as evidenced in research undertaken by Wong.[51]

Thus, EMAC creates a dynamic interaction between management of
local services and local politics. On the one hand, there is a need for the
HKHA to improve the efficiency of housing management in public estates
by incorporating residents in the running of the services. In this respect, the
HKHA adopted a strategy of information exchange enhancement via a
formal communication structure at the local estate level. Despite such an
elaborate structure of participation, EMAC remains to be an advisory in-
strument, especially on the subject of management efficiency. Yet, such a
participatory mechanism cannot remain simply ceremonial. A certain de-
gree of power transfer is inevitable to motivate tenant representatives and
to create "added value" in order to justify the huge investment. However,
there is also a need for the HKHA to ensure that the new structure is po-
litically safe and administratively manageable. The choice of MAC as the
major players of EMAC, which have in name broad grass-roots represen-
tation and at the same time have proven to be a keen supporter of the status
quo, seems to be the best choice.

EMAC demonstrates the confidence of the HKHA in enlarging grass-
roots participation in public services. It also indicates a step forward in the
embracement of guided participation of the grass roots and a further de-
parture from the antagonistic approach toward urban social movements.
When organized urban social movements sprouted in the late 1960s, they

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[50]Pickvance, "Where Have Urban Movements Gone," 205-6.
[51]Wong, "An Analysis of the Scheme of Estate Management Advisory Committee."

were often received with brutality by the oppressive colonial regime. Although the use of state violence in controlling the movements has been lessened immensely since the end of the 1970s, the movements and in particular the organizers were regarded as endangering social stability. Even in the late 1970s, social workers were arrested and convicted for illegal assembly when they were organizing community action.[52]

Categorical antagonism ended when the government adopted the containment and bargaining strategy in the 1980s. Very few arrests were made and urban social movement leaders began to be absorbed into various consultative bodies. Yet, the suspicion of the colonial government toward the movements continued. The semi-secret Standing Committee on Pressure Groups was established to monitor the activities of the movements.[53] What made such scrutiny in the late 1980s unnecessary were the opening up of the political system, the mass exodus of the movement leaders into politics, and the institutionalization of the movements. However, the suspicion toward grass-roots participation still continues—direct election is curtailed in the legislature and even the District Boards have to reintroduce appointed councilors so as to ensure the government has an upper hand to balance off the influence of pro-grass-roots, pro-democracy councilors.

EMAC signifies a large-scale grass-roots participation in public services. Although the scope of influence and the importance of EMAC is limited, the degree of grass-roots participation is extremely high. Despite the lack of real decision-making power and the political precautions (such as picking up the politically prudent MAC delegates as members) that have been taken, such a large-scale participation experiment can go astray if not carefully controlled. The quest for more participation is difficult to resist. This section has shown that EMAC has been carefully designed in terms of the selection of membership, function, organization, and monitoring. A cautiously guided participatory system is apparent. Thus, opening up par-

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[52]In 1972 and 1978, the government prosecuted social workers for illegal assembly with the Public Order Ordinance. See Jeo Leung, "Community Participation: Past, Present, and Future," in *Twenty-Five Years of Social and Economic Development in Hong Kong*, ed. Benjamin K.P. Leung and Teresa Y.C. Wong (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press, 1994), 267.

[53]Ibid.

ticipation channels in the management of public housing would represent a proactive move in response to such a development. Carefully guided participation seems to be a logical way to proceed.

Conclusions

A brief review of urban social movements in Hong Kong in the past several decades illustrates the increasing incorporation of these forces into the main stream of society, particularly in the area of housing. The postwar years (up to the 1960s) were largely a peaceful and stable era with sporadic outbursts of violent social unrest. Yet, organized but antagonistic movements against the establishment with ideological and cultural demands broke out in the late 1960s and early 1970s. More extensive movements, which involved a wider spectrum of people and a variety of demands, began to emerge in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Such movements in turn created a "dynamic conflictual" situation and achieved "dynamic stability" in the colony.

This can be regarded as a win-win scenario for both the government and urban social movements. For the government, the "containment and bargaining" strategy has successfully incorporated urban social conflict as a legitimate part of social life. Concomitant with the concessions the government made in both the social and political arenas, the movements were gradually institutionalized. This produced a favorable environment in the development toward a pluralistic civic society. Such effort helped create both the legitimacy desperately needed by the outgoing colonial government and the social stability needed in the wake of the change of sovereignty. For the movements, the grass roots saw their material demands on collective consumption largely fulfilled, and the middle-class organizers in return expanded their political influence while at the same time increasing their participation in the political system.

The change of sovereignty in 1997 brought along not only a new political system but also a new political ecology. Under the Basic Law, Hong Kong is a highly autonomous Special Administrative Region. That the colonial government which enjoyed relative autonomy would initiate mild

but progressive reforms[54] contrasts sharply with the fact that the incoming SAR government is constitutionally bound to protect the status quo of the interests of the business and pro-China groups. In the area of collective consumption, the old method of coopting the grass roots is no longer effective. Material concession is not only increasingly expensive but also lags behind the expectations of the grass roots. A proactive strategy of enhancing grass-roots participation in the area of collective consumption seems to be a constructive way out. On the one hand, such a strategy would produce, at least on face value, a sense of belonging to the community and on the other hand, contain the gap between the expensive provision of collective consumption goods and the expectations of public service consumers.

A strategy of "consensus and stability" participation seems to have emerged, particularly in the area of collective consumption. Yet, in the course of developing such a strategy, precautions have been taken to ensure that such involvement cannot evolve into a "conscience-inducing" apparatus. Thus, a carefully monitored and "guided" participatory mechanism is essential. The Estate Management Advisory Committee exemplifies the early stage of such a development. More evidence has to be collected in order to determine whether such a mechanism would induce the conscientiousness of the citizens, thereby increasing demands for more participation, thus leading to a power shift. Alternatively, the government may be successful in containing any such demands and effectively extend such a mechanism to other collective consumption areas to produce a "Singapore style" of citizen participation.[55]

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[54]Ian Scott, *Political Changes and the Crisis of Legitimacy in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1989), 330-32.

[55]Beng-Huat Chua describes Singapore as an anti-liberal, pragmatic, and communitarian democracy in which the rights to consultation and participation are circumscribed. For organizations, such rights have to be exercised within their "registered" interests, whereas for both individuals and institutions, they are constrained by the communitarian ideology that obliges people to defer their personal interests to the "national interest" which is largely an empty concept with only contingent substance. For detail, see Beng-Huat Chua, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1995), 195-97.