

# **Social Movements and Policy Capacity in Hong Kong: An Alternative Perspective**

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*This article critically examines the policy capacity crisis in post-1997 Hong Kong. In particular, it provides a framework that allows for a more sophisticated analysis of new social movements (NSMs) and their role in challenging the government in policy making and implementation. A number of studies examining recent campaigns conducted by NSMs reveal that the social activists involved have distinctive goals, organizational structures, and political styles, and that the distinctiveness of NSMs has challenged the traditional ways in which public policy has been made, which emphasized rationality, scientific analysis, and policy coherence. However, this article argues that the policy capacity crisis cannot be explained purely in terms of the rise of NSMs. The form and strength of their challenge to policy capacity can only be fully understood in relation to the prevailing political structures which define the connected set of political opportunities/constraints facing the protest groups. In particular, NSMs only become relevant in mobilizing and intensifying antagonistic forces when their values and actions are mediated by the structure of political opportunities. Moreover, any effect on government policy derived from confrontational action also has to be mediated by the political structures. In short, the structural opportunities/constraints enshrined in particular policy areas are equally, if not more, significant*

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*than the internal dynamics of NSMs in understanding the impact of such movements on public policy. Hence, there is no real reason to assert that the rise of NSMs necessarily poses a considerable challenge to the policy capacity of the Hong Kong government.*

**KEYWORDS:** new social movements; policy capacity; political opportunity structures; urban re-development; Hong Kong.

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This paper examines the policy capacity crisis in post-1997 Hong Kong. There are two specific aspects to this crisis. The first is a loss of rationality and coherence in policymaking. In the pre-handover period, and especially before the 1990s, Hong Kong was a putative “administrative state.” Most of the agendas were set and decisions made by a small circle of senior officials who were only subject to limited checks and balances by society at large and representative bodies in particular. However, with the further development of political liberalization after 1997, the government could no longer restrict the politicization of the policy process. Public policy now emerges from multiple-way interactions between government officials and a constellation of interests. As a result, policy outputs have often turned out to be the consequence of messy compromise. The second aspect of the crisis is the way in which policy formulation and implementation has become almost intractable since 1997. It is much easier for social and political forces to get alternative issues and options onto the agenda, and agreement is difficult to achieve. Even when government officials can force others to compromise, some recalcitrant actors are likely to attempt to thwart the implementation of agreed policies. The consequence is either policy stalemate or, even worse, policy inertia in the sense that government officials tend to refrain from putting forward policy suggestions that may arouse controversy.<sup>1</sup> The fraying of policy capacity is a structural crisis that has persisted across policy areas and time frames in post-1997 Hong Kong.

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<sup>1</sup>Ian Scott, *Public Administration in Hong Kong: Regime Change and Its Impact on the Public Sector* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2005), 24.

In explaining the current situation, the existing literature tends to focus on the changes in civil society and the concomitant tensions between government and social groups as one of the major factors contributing to the sharp decline in the government's policy capacity. The social movement sector has grown in strength over the last decade, with the annual number of reported protests increasing from under one hundred before the millennium to around two hundred during the 2000s. Amid the growth in the social movement sector, the rise of new social movements (NSMs) is seen as particularly important. The cases of social protest may have varying goals; however, the pursuit of postmaterialist collective goods such as environmental protection and heritage preservation is clearly having an increasing influence on social activism in Hong Kong.<sup>2</sup> In addition to non-materialist demands, the NSMs have followed a different logic of collective action from their predecessors in the social movement industry. The extant literature focuses on the ways in which the distinctive demands, organizational structure, and political style of NSMs have constituted a challenge to the Hong Kong government in making and implementing policies. The details of this discussion will be laid out in the second section of this article.

The purpose of this article is, however, not to reiterate the local and foreign findings on the impact the NSMs are having on policy capacity.<sup>3</sup> While acknowledging the distinctiveness of Hong Kong's NSMs, this article debunks the view that their rise is one of the major factors contributing to the policy capacity crisis in post-1997 Hong Kong. The fact that the NSMs' policy influence varies from sector to sector (as discussed below) indicates that the challenge to government policy represented

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<sup>2</sup>Elaine Chan and Joseph Chan, "The First Ten Years of the HKSAR: Civil Society Comes of Age," *The Asia Pacific Journal of Public Administration* 29, no. 1 (June 2007): 77-99.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Dave Richards and Martin Smith, *Governance and Public Policy in the UK* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 171-97; Michele Micheletti, "Swedish Corporatism at a Crossroads: The Impact of New Politics and New Social Movements," *West European Politics* 14, no. 3 (December 1991): 144-65; Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981); Luke Martell, *Ecology and Society: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

by NSMs is not a constant phenomenon, which gives rise to the following questions: (1) why does the rapid development of NSMs, with their distinctive goals, organization, and actions, not constitute a sufficient explanation of the policy capacity crisis in Hong Kong? and (2) under what circumstances would the NSMs be able to seriously damage the policy capacity available to the Hong Kong government? This article will address these baffling questions by providing a framework that allows for a more sophisticated analysis of NSMs and their role in challenging the government's capacity to enact and implement public policies. Within this framework, the political structures, and especially the structural features, inherent in policy areas are included in an analysis of the tension between government and society and the resultant change in the government's policy capacity. The emphasis on political structures is important because the social activists involved in NSMs do not operate in a vacuum; rather, they have to act within given contexts that are shaped by stable structural factors. Locating the analysis of NSMs and the policy capacity crisis within the framework of political structures prompts the two major arguments in this article. First, although the NSMs may be distinctive, their ideological appeal only becomes relevant to the mobilization and intensification of antagonistic forces when their values and actions are mediated by the structural opportunities/constraints inherent in policy areas. Second, this article argues that the strength of the challenge to policy capacity stemming from the distinctiveness of NSMs is mediated by the structural parameters within particular policy sectors or sub-sectors. This is not to deny the importance of NSMs in causing policy change or lack of change. However, with the distinctiveness of NSMs being mediated and in many cases cancelled out by the political structures, it is doubtful whether they really can have a crippling effect on the government's policy capacity.

### **NSMs in Hong Kong: Origin and Distinctiveness**

It is important to start a study of NSMs and policy capacity by first discussing the tenor of NSMs and then locating that discussion in the

context of Hong Kong. This is because one major criticism leveled at the NSM approach is that their claim to “newness” has been exaggerated.<sup>4</sup> Here it is argued that the distinctiveness of NSMs is firmly grounded in their ideological orientation, which is different from that of their predecessors in the history of social movements and interest groups, and that this ideological idiosyncrasy shapes their goals, structure, and actions. The NSMs are characterized by distinct postmaterialist elements, while their ideology also reflects the influence of libertarianism, in that they advocate greater opportunities for citizens to participate in decisions affecting their lives. Drawing on the ideology of postmaterialism and libertarianism, many of these groups represent a fundamental change from the traditional goals, organizational structure, and political actions of social movements in Hong Kong. Specifically, the “newness” of the NSMs derives from the fact that they focus on non-materialistic issues that may appeal to socially diverse groups of individuals who share their values and concerns. In organizing activities, they jettison Max Weber’s bureaucracy in favor of a decentralized and open structure, because the latter form is more in line with their craving for participation and direct democracy. For the same reason, the general pattern is that these groups intentionally distance themselves from the political establishment in order to avoid the risk of being co-opted and de-radicalized by dominant political forces. On the one hand, they prefer to seek direct dialogue with government officials and influence policy through the weight of public opinion and perhaps confrontational action. On the other hand, they tend to remain outside partisan politics because most political parties are elitist and hierarchical in nature. These general patterns are visible, one way or another, across organizations that are often cited as representing the “NSM model.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Grant Jordan and William Maloney, *The Protest Business?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 46-74; Alan Scott, *Ideology and the New Social Movements* (New York: Unwin Hyman, 1990).

<sup>5</sup>Russell Dalton, Manfred Kuechler, and Wilhelm Burklin, “The Challenge of New Social Movements,” in *Challenging the Political Order: New Social and Political Movements in Western Democracies*, ed. Russell Dalton and Manfred Kuechler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 3-20.

In analyzing the NSMs and policy capacity in Hong Kong, another central question is whether the ideological bases upon which NSMs were founded in Western democracies have been sufficient to shape the social action groups in Hong Kong into powerful critics of the government. Generally speaking, there have been three major turning points in the history of Hong Kong's social movements, and these events combined to produce the local NSMs of the 2000s. The first turning point occurred during the 1970s when a local identity began to take shape and increasing numbers of people began participating in social movements in an effort to correct the injustices of the earlier colonial era. In response to this, the government restructured state-society relations and set up a network of advisory committees. These gestures toward "consultative democracy" were initially welcomed. However, social action groups soon found that gaining access to the government was a highly selective process, and they came to understand that opportunities to effect change inside the corporatist system were restricted.<sup>6</sup> Direct elections were introduced for district boards and the Legislative Council (LegCo) in 1982 and 1991 respectively, and these changes constituted the second turning point in the history of Hong Kong's social movements.<sup>7</sup> For the social action groups, the district boards and LegCo represented an alternative source of contestable institutional power. They were soon drawn into the arena of electoral politics, either through nominating their own candidates or endorsing candidates from political parties.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, as a minority on most of the elected bodies, the social activists encountered intractable difficulties in pushing through changes. Their disillusionment with electoral politics was further compounded by their hollow alliance with political parties. The political

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<sup>6</sup>Tai-lok Lui et al., "Friends and Critics of the State: The Case of Hong Kong," in *Civil Life, Globalization, and Political Change in Asia*, ed. Robert Weller (New York: Routledge, 2005), 58-75.

<sup>7</sup>The Legislative Council (LegCo) is Hong Kong's law-making body, while the district boards, renamed district councils in 1999, were elected consultative bodies in the territory's eighteen districts.

<sup>8</sup>Tai-lok Lui, "Two Logics of Community Politics," in *Hong Kong Tried Democracy*, ed. Siu-kai Lau and Kin-sheun Louie (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1993), 331-44.

parties had to operate within the logic of electoral politics, which required them to accommodate wider concerns and make compromises. By contrast, the social action groups were not afraid to actively contest individual issues.<sup>9</sup> A third and final turn in the history of social movements happened in the 1990s and 2000s. During this period, Hong Kong achieved a decent level of economic growth, which made it one of the richest places in Asia. This prosperity gave rise to a populace that was increasingly inclined toward postmaterialist values.<sup>10</sup> Having been frustrated by the corporatist structure in the 1970s, and disenchanted with electoral politics in the 1980s and 1990s, the change in values in the 1990s and 2000s caused Hong Kong's social groups to become susceptible to "NSM ideas" in that decade.

In the 2000s, a new wave of social movements emerged in Hong Kong, which cut across social strata but was particularly initiated by the middle class who were eager to promote changes related to social inequality, urban (re)development, pollution, culture, and quality of life.<sup>11</sup> These social movements constituted a radical departure from their predecessors and, perhaps more importantly, epitomized many key elements of the "NSM model" in Western democracies. The distinctiveness of this new generation of social activists can be broadly summarized as follows. First, unlike previous social movements, which had emphasized private gain and materialist interests, their demands focused instead on non-materialist and collective goods. This change in goals was closely associated with a broader shift toward postmaterialist values as issues of popular concern.<sup>12</sup> Second, they were eager to develop alternative, nonhierarchical forms of

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<sup>9</sup>Tai-lok Lui and Stephen Wing-kai Chiu, "Introduction—Changing Political Opportunities and the Shaping of Collective Action," in *The Dynamics of Social Movements in Hong Kong*, ed. Stephen Wing-kai Chiu and Tai-lok Lui (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2000), 1-19.

<sup>10</sup>Ka-ying Wong and Po-san Wan, "New Evidence of the Postmaterialist Shift: The Experience of Hong Kong," *Social Indicators Research* 92, no. 3 (July 2009): 497-515.

<sup>11</sup>W. K. Chan, "Urban Activism for Effective Governance: A New Civil Society Campaign in the HKSAR" (paper presented to the conference "First Decade and After: New Voices from Hong Kong's Civil Society," Hong Kong, June 9, 2007).

<sup>12</sup>Chan and Chan, "The First Ten Years of the HKSAR."

organization, and therefore they emphasized participatory democracy and community. Instead of allowing themselves to be dominated by professional organizers, they valued collective decision-making with regard to goals and actions. Third, in reaction to the way political corporatism excluded meaningful public participation and the only partially-elected councils, they pursued direct dialogue with the power-holders, probably with the support of public opinion and through more confrontational action, thus rejecting the mediation of politicians. In other words, their style of political action was to distance themselves from partisan politics and co-optation through regular contact with government officials in order to avoid distortion of their concerns and demands.<sup>13</sup>

### **Discussions of the Policy Impact of NSMs in Hong Kong**

A number of studies have attempted to account for the changes in state/society relations in Hong Kong and the vicissitudes of the post-colonial government in terms of policy capacity. One theme of all these studies is the way that changes in civil society have challenged the government's ability to make and implement policies. Although it is not explicitly spelt out, these studies have alluded to the rise of NSMs and how their ideological distinctiveness in goals, organization, and action has contributed to the Hong Kong government's predicament.

Ian Scott, a long-time observer of Hong Kong public administration, puts it succinctly when he says that "the most significant new factor affecting policy-making in post-1997 Hong Kong has been the rise of civil society." The change in civil society, especially the rise of civic associations which have bought into NSM ideas, has meant that the government must cope with an increasingly turbulent relationship with social action groups and "deal with policy issues in rather different ways from its pre-

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<sup>13</sup>Ma Ngok, "Social Movements and State-Society Relationship in Hong Kong," in *Social Movements in China and Hong Kong*, ed. Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce and Gilles Guiheux (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 50.



decessors.” With the rise of NSMs, the government was no longer able to contain the politics of policymaking, which has frequently led to policy incoherence, stalemate, and/or inertia.<sup>14</sup> This change in civil society with the development of NSMs unsettled the policy context in three specific ways. First, the NSMs, by proffering new values, issues, and demands shook up the traditional policy agendas of government and society. Issues other than the transcendent imperative of economic growth and welfare provision were being canvassed in society. In consequence, the government no longer had a monopoly over policy proposals; instead, ideas could be picked up from a variety of sources.<sup>15</sup> Second, the challenge of NSMs emanated from their loose structure in mobilizing the general public to confront the public authorities. Of course, civil society organizations, as watchdogs of government behavior, had always questioned whether government policies were valid and correct. The difference with the NSMs lay in the way they emphasized ad hoc united fronts of social action groups and keeping a clear distance from the political establishment, making it “difficult [for the post-1997 government] to aggregate demands and to gauge possible public responses to policy initiatives.”<sup>16</sup> The government was now facing a situation where “objections to its proposals often arose after the formal period of consultation had taken place.”<sup>17</sup> This high degree of uncertainty dissipated the willingness and ability of government to initiate policy change. Third, with their ideological appeal and emotional ties, the NSMs were often successful in enlisting support from a cross-section of society and gaining the ear of the media. Being well-informed and well-mobilized, these groups “have the power to disrupt implementation but they are not fully incorporated into the policy process. Consequently, realizing policy goals is often dependent on bargaining at the point when the policy is about to be implemented, which

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<sup>14</sup>Ian Scott, *The Public Sector Reform in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 177.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 190-94.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 219.

is costly and results in delays or even the abandonment of the policy or decision.”<sup>18</sup>

Like Scott, Anthony Cheung is concerned about policy incoherence and the policy impasse that has typified the decision-making process in post-handover Hong Kong. According to Cheung, the crux of the issue is the increasingly uncertain policy environment, which he sees as the consequence of several factors, including the remarkable shift in state-society relations. Due to political liberalization, which started out as the centerpiece of the British decolonization project, “the actors now occupying that inherited architecture, their interests and thinking, and both the internal and external habitats, [have] undergone subtle but significant changes.”<sup>19</sup> He identifies a number of categories of new policy actors, including civil society groups that operate either in social movements or in policy advocacy. Central to these groups was that, in line with the central tenets of NSMs, their understanding of governance was different from that held by government officials. They detested the traditional paradigm of top-down administration and political incorporation; rather, they clamored for meaningful participation in the policy process that would affect their daily lives. In view of the limited mechanisms for the orderly channeling of policy participation after 1997, this call for genuine participation introduced new dynamics into the policy environment.<sup>20</sup> New policy habitats were gradually taking shape. On the one hand, “the conventional methods of administrative absorption and advisory politics began to give way to outright political agitation, protest and bargaining.” On the other hand, the social action groups were “also taking the issues to the courts and using judicial review as an extended political arena for agenda setting

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 221-22.

<sup>19</sup>Anthony B. L. Cheung, “Policy Capacity in Post-1997 Hong Kong: Constrained Institutions Facing a Crowding and Differentiated Polity,” *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Administration* 29, no. 1 (June 2007): 52-53.

<sup>20</sup>Anthony B. L. Cheung, “Hong Kong’s Post-1997 Institutional Crisis: Problems of Governance and Institutional Incompatibility,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 5, no. 1 (January 2005): 135-67.

and bargaining.”<sup>21</sup> In addition to the emergence of new policy actors and policy habitats, a further complication was the way in which a connected set of new values derived from postmaterialism gained influence over public sentiment and collective action.<sup>22</sup> Taken together, the emergence of new actors, policy habitats, and values led to the crowding of the policy scene. This overcrowding and increased cleavages produced “increasingly less manageable policy sectors, a reduced sense of cohesion and loyalty by policy actors, escalating problems of control and order, fragmentation and disintegration of the political and policy structures, and even policy immobilism in terms of the impossibility of reaching agreement.”<sup>23</sup>

In a similar vein, Agnes Ku and Elisa Lee point to the heightened desire for public participation to explain the policy impact of the rise of NSMs. Their common concern is the structural constraints hobbling the post-1997 government as it attempts to formulate and execute key policies efficiently and effectively.<sup>24</sup> The structural challenges to post-1997 governance have taken various forms, one of which is the ever greater ideological divergence of government officials and civic associations. Ku is of the opinion that the social groups were “looking for and articulating a new mode of state-society relations that outgrows the conventional model of citizenship.”<sup>25</sup> Traditionally, the Hong Kong government put a great deal of emphasis on civil liberties, which constituted one facet of citizenship, at the expense of other facets such as electoral rights, social rights, and participatory democracy. The emphasis on civil liberties was part of the government’s effort to promote its legitimacy and a sense of

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<sup>21</sup>Cheung, “Policy Capacity in Post-1997 Hong Kong,” 58.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 64.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 66.

<sup>24</sup>Stephen Wing-kai Chiu, “Introduction: Repositioning the Post-Colonial Hong Kong Government,” in *Repositioning the Hong Kong Government: Social Foundations and Political Challenges*, ed. Stephen Wing-kai Chiu and Siu-lun Wong (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 1-21.

<sup>25</sup>Agnes Shuk-mei Ku, “The Development of Citizenship in Hong Kong: Governance without Democracy,” in Chiu and Wong, eds., *Repositioning the Hong Kong Government*, 123.

belonging to the community during the 1970s. However, the development of civil rights could not obliterate the social inequalities inherent in the unfettered capitalist economy of Hong Kong. In the 2000s civil society was articulating a new vision of democratic governance in response to the rigid structure of class inequalities. A number of social groups in the NSMs ventured beyond the notion of electoral democracy and pursued a participatory form of democracy that would allow for “genuine participation by the citizens, both inside and outside the government, and for effective communication between the government and civil society.”<sup>26</sup> Despite the demand for participatory citizenship, it is pointed out in Lee’s study that by and large the policy process “remains in the hands of a centralized bureaucracy. The crux of the problem currently lies in the lack of an effective institutional mechanism at the local level that can allow stakeholders and decision-makers to come together to discuss such matters.”<sup>27</sup> Divergent understandings of governance and citizenship triggered waves of ferocious attacks on public policymakers from outside the post-1997 government.

Ma Ngok provides some important perspectives on the challenge that the NSMs have posed to the post-1997 government, although his analysis is not exactly focused on policy capacity. He sees social action groups and civic associations as being “relatively good at self-defense against encroachments from the state, but weak in organizing progressive reforms.”<sup>28</sup> What is intriguing is that both the strengths and weaknesses of civil society in relation to the state are closely associated with the organizational distinctiveness of NSMs. The ad hoc united front format allowed for a great deal of flexibility in mobilizing collective action. With such organizational flexibility and dynamism, it was easier for groups to stage strong resistance against state intervention. On the minus side,

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 141.

<sup>27</sup>Elisa Wing-ye Lee, “Civil Society Organizations and Local Governance in Hong Kong,” in Chiu and Wong, eds., *Repositioning the Hong Kong Government*, 164.

<sup>28</sup>Ma Ngok, *Political Development in Hong Kong: State, Political Society, and Civil Society* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 162.

however, without a stable and resourceful core, it was difficult to sustain a social movement for long.<sup>29</sup> Taken together, faced with this hostile environment, the policy capacity of government was severely constrained by the fear that any policy change would provoke acute opposition from society.

### **Re-conceptualizing the Relationship between the NSMs and Policy Capacity**

In this section I shall critically analyze the causal relationship between the rise of NSMs and the policy capacity crisis in Hong Kong, examining whether there is a fundamental tension between the NSMs and the government that makes policy inertia, stalemate, or mess a natural consequence of the new form of social activism, as some studies have suggested. To start with, a comparison between the social movement against the construction of a golf-course country club in Sha Lo Tung in the 1980s and that against the government's decision to demolish the historic Star Ferry Pier in 2006 provides an interesting reference point. In the former case, the dispute with property developers and the government was largely handled within the legal-administrative framework, while in the latter, the social activists participated in a series of confrontations with the police.<sup>30</sup> On reflection, it seems that different NSMs adopt different forms of opposition to power-holders. These variations suggest that the dynamics of individual NSMs cannot be sufficiently understood by merely focusing on their ideological distinctiveness. It is important to study the manner in which abstract values are translated into practice. In this article, the study of the ways in which ideology is translated into action

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 199-219.

<sup>30</sup>For information about the Star Ferry case, see Center for Civil Society and Governance, *From Consultation to Civic Engagement: The Road to Better Policy-making and Governance in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Bauhinia Foundation Research Centre, 2007), 38. For information about the case of Sha Lo Tung, see On Kwok Lai, "Greening of Hong Kong," in Chiu and Lui, eds., *The Dynamics of Social Movement in Hong Kong*, 271-74.

and challenge to the government is informed by the approach of political opportunity structure. Central to this approach is the idea that political structures define the socio-political constellations that face social activists; these in turn give rise to a structure of opportunities and constraints for various patterns of collective action.<sup>31</sup> Informed by this analytical approach, it is therefore important to recognize the interactive relationship between internal dynamics and the external environment. Rather than being defined in a social vacuum, the challenge (form and strength) of protest groups is structurally defined and opportunity-driven.

In general, political structures denote institutions like bureaucratic agencies, legislative committees, and advisory bodies, as well as formal and informal rules that structure the relationships between political and social actors inside and outside these institutional arenas. Crucially, the concept of political structures can be unraveled into two particular levels of analysis—the macro-level and the meso-level. Macro-level analysis sees political structures as the broader system and processes of government within which any social and political actors have to operate. In general, the political system of Hong Kong is characterized by executive dominance and elitism. Power is concentrated in the hands of government officials, who make most of the policy decisions which are formally approved, in some cases, by LegCo. In the process of enacting policies, government officials may solicit inputs from society. In this regard, apart from government officials, business groups and related professional interests are seen as constituting an elite class, as they dominate the principal sources of information and other resources feeding the government agencies.<sup>32</sup> The broader pattern in politics is reflected in the process of policy-

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<sup>31</sup>John D. McCarthy, David W. Britt, and Mark Wolfson, "The Institutional Channeling of Social Movements by the State in the United States," *Research in Social Movements: Conflicts and Change* 14, no. 1 (1991): 45-76; Hanspeter Kriesi et al., "New Social Movements and Political Opportunities in Western Europe," in *Readings on Social Movements: Origins, Dynamics, and Outcomes*, ed. Doug McAdam and David A. Snow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 71-86.

<sup>32</sup>Peter Harris, *Hong Kong: A Study in Bureaucracy and Politics* (Hong Kong: Macmillan, 1988).

making. The absence of a full-fledged legislature and the abundant resources available to business and professional interests mean that the policy process tends to be highly exclusive and the structure of policy opportunities is closed. However, with these propensities taken into account, it is important not to overestimate the general pattern of policymaking. Past studies have indicated that there are exceptions to the overall pattern augured by the macro-level variables. There are cases in which social action groups were not denied access to the policy domains.<sup>33</sup> This is where the meso-level analysis of political structures comes into play. In order to develop a fuller understanding of how policy is made and changed, it is essential to examine the pattern of interest group intermediation in a specific policy area.<sup>34</sup> The political structures in a specific policy area can be examined along the lines of the openness/exclusiveness of the policy process.

In a specific policy area, openness/exclusiveness of the political structures refers to the extent to which social action groups can get access to the policy process, put forward their policy proposals, and affect final decisions. The variation in openness/exclusiveness prompts an important question: why do different types of political structures develop in different policy areas? It appears that the development of any specific political structure depends on a range of meso-level variables that are enshrined in a particular policy sector or sub-sector rather than in the political system as a whole. First of all, outsiders may gain policy access in areas where the government does not need the elite groups for policy implementation and has alternative groups from which it can seek political support. In these circumstances, the political structures are likely to be relatively

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<sup>33</sup>For example, in the sector of labor policy, a number of trade unions were able to access the policy process and influence the arrangements for labor importation during the mid-1990s. For details, see Ng Kai Hon, "Capital in Hong Kong: An Overstated Face of Power?" *Policy and Politics* 38, no. 4 (October 2010): 619-37.

<sup>34</sup>Hanspeter Kriesi, "The Organizational Structure of New Social Movements in a Political Context," in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, ed. Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 152-84.

open for social action groups. Second, the political structures tend to be relatively open in areas where there are a wide range of stakeholders, conflicts between government officials and integrated groups over policy agendas, and the absence of institutionalized means for exclusion. In these situations, it will be easier for opposition groups to break through into the policy process. Third, the degree of openness depends on the extent to which LegCo members can play an intermediary role which provides outsider groups with alternative access points to the policy process. Despite the propensity for LegCo to play little more than an innocuous watchdog role due to the post-1997 institutional constraints, in some areas legislators can wield influence through financial control and the power to amend bills put forward by the government. To recapitulate, on top of the political system in Hong Kong, there are a number of meso-level variables determining the political structures within particular policy areas. As such, the political structures that social action groups have to deal with tend to vary across sectors in terms of openness/exclusiveness.

To integrate the concept of political structures into discussion of the challenges that NSMs pose to policy capacity, it is important to examine the openness/exclusiveness of policymaking and its impact on social actors in terms of expected outcomes and the influence they can exercise. The degree to which social movement groups can influence agenda setting and decision making gives rise to the pattern of opportunities and expected outcomes when campaigns against the government are organized. These opportunities and expected outcomes, in turn, affect the willingness of social actors to become involved and shape their course of action.<sup>35</sup> Here, this article ventures to suggest that the parameters of political structure not only affect the trajectory of action undertaken by social action groups, but also determine the scope of influence emanating from their action. Due to the variation in meso-level variables, the political structures can be seen as a continuum, which runs from complete exclusiveness,

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<sup>35</sup>J. Craig Jenkins, David Jacobs, and Jon Agnone, "Political Opportunities and African-American Protest, 1948-1997," *American Journal of Sociology* 109, no. 2 (September 2003): 277-303.



through a structure in which the mechanisms for exclusion are porous to a situation where the policy process is open. With a certain amount of simplification, there are three possible scenarios in terms of the challenge of NSMs in accordance with the various types of political structures on the continuum.

First of all, when political structures are open, social activists tend to work through institutional channels. This is because they are able to access the policy process and expect to achieve at least some of their goals by doing so. The second scenario is in sharp contrast to the situation above. When political structures are closed, social action groups have little alternative but to orchestrate radical action outside the institutional arena in protest against government proposals and in the hope of exerting some policy influence. Faced with a closed policy-making structure, however, launching ferocious attacks on government from outside is almost tantamount to fighting a rearguard action. This is especially the case in Hong Kong, with its asymmetric power relationship between government and society. Being excluded from the policy process, social movements have to rely on pricking the conscience of ordinary people and bringing third parties like the media and legislators on board. This may often happen, due to Hong Kong's pluralistic media industry and partially democratized legislative body. Yet the ability of protest groups to enlist public support may not appreciably enhance their political efficacy. In policy domains where financial control and legislative oversight by LegCo are considerably constrained, the government is likely to have a great deal of space to act independent of social groups and media outcries. This space enables government officials to push forward controversial policies as long as they have a strong consensus with social and economic elites. The third scenario occurs in policy areas where the structures of policymaking are partially open, in the sense that social action groups have a certain chance of penetrating the policy process. This is the case when the policy initiatives put forward by the government are subject to legislative scrutiny. When policy initiatives have to go through LegCo, legislators may play an intermediary role which provides the social action groups with access points to the policy process. The political structures

are partially open also because the consensus between government officials and incorporated elites on specific policies may not be cast-iron, to the extent that schisms can be opened up in the face of contextual change and external pressures. With the breakdown of policy consensus, outsider groups may be drawn in, either by government officials or integrated elites, to strengthen their case. In exchange for their political support, the outsider groups are accorded certain influence on policy. In either case, the social action groups can expect to obtain policy influence by using institutional means and manipulating the divergences inherent in the policy process. As such, it is reasonable to expect the social action groups not to distance themselves from engagement in institutional channels, and they are likely to pull off some significant reforms.

The remainder of this article seeks to verify the foregoing propositions by examining the movement in opposition to the redevelopment of Lee Tung Street in central Hong Kong. This heritage preservation battle is widely seen as typifying the crucial elements represented by the new generation of social movements in Hong Kong.<sup>36</sup> As discussed above, the new wave of social movements in Hong Kong by and large fits into the “NSM model.” In this regard, the Lee Tung Street movement enables the researcher to examine the interactive relationship between the internal dynamics of NSMs and the parameters of political structure and how this affects the ebb and flow of policy capacity.

### **The Lee Tung Street Heritage Preservation Movement**

Lee Tung Street was one of the most historic parts of Hong Kong’s cultural landscape. The streetscape was made up of a series of post-war tenement buildings and shop-houses, which produced traditional wedding invitations and red pocket envelopes. Yet in the early 2000s, the entire street was slated for redevelopment by the Urban Renewal Authority

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<sup>36</sup>Chan, “Urban Activism for Effective Governance.”

(URA). In response, local residents and shop-owners, social workers, urban planners, architects, cultural workers, and community activists formed the H15 Concern Group, which led various campaigns to save the local character of the street.

### *Self-identified Worldviews*

Members of the H15 Concern Group held a number of core values in tune with the “NSM model.” First, in marked contrast to protests against urban redevelopment projects in the 1970s, in which compensation was the central concern of those affected, the movement against the Lee Tung Street redevelopment was based on postmaterialist concern for social networks, culture, and history.<sup>37</sup> Second, the movement appealed to a socially diverse group of individuals. While the local residents and shop-owners might be active in indemnifying themselves against the loss of social networks, such instrumental motivations were secondary to other participants. The movement garnered support from a group of architects and urban planners who were motivated by the goal of preserving the pre-war history and culture. Likewise, the redevelopment project prompted the community activists to rethink the basic tenets of capitalism in the light of sustainable development. Besides the ideological bond of post-materialism, the broad base of support captured another major element of NSMs.<sup>38</sup> Third, participants in this movement craved participatory democracy. In line with their expectations, the H15 Concern Group was marked by an open and decentralized structure. Individuals were allowed to access and leave the cause without any threat of losing specific benefits. The social support base of the group was therefore constantly changing.

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<sup>37</sup>In a survey conducted by Hong Kong University, 44 percent of local residents sought non-cash compensation. Of these, 80 percent demanded local re-housing and more than half were prepared to pay the price difference to purchase the new units that were to be erected in the street. For details, see Home Affairs Bureau of HKSAR, *Research Study and Analysis of Data Regarding Urban Renewal Project at Lee Tung Street (H15)* (Hong Kong: Home Affairs Bureau of HKSAR Government, 2004).

<sup>38</sup>Author’s interview with a social worker who was a core participant of the H15 Concern Group, June 2, 2010.

Here, it is important to point out that this fluid base of social support was not integrated by strong leadership. In fact, traditional professional organizers such as social workers and community activists took a less dominant role in the movement. Decision making on goals and tactics was conducted collectively in “town hall meetings” through which information was shared and options discussed. Instead of having hierarchical leadership, the “supporters” were integrated on the basis of close neighborhood and ideological orientation toward postmaterialism.<sup>39</sup> Fourth, as a natural extension of their emphasis on community, history, and culture, the participants saw themselves as possessing rights to the city and repeatedly proclaimed “this is our Lee Tung Street.” As a reflection of their belief, they sought direct dialogue with the public authorities that would enable them to become directly involved in the policy process. They identified themselves as constructive partners in the planning process. On many occasions, government officials and social elites fretted that NSMs represented an irrational and irreconcilable force detrimental to the governance of Hong Kong.<sup>40</sup> However, the members of the Concern Group did not regard themselves as troublemakers. It was not their intention to become locked into a winner-takes-all situation and trump the voices of government and property developers by engaging in aggressive tactics. They simply called for round-table and pragmatic discussions with the government and the developers on a relatively equal footing.<sup>41</sup>

#### *Moderate Expressions of Discontent*

Influenced by these self-defined elements of pragmatism, the actions of the H15 Concern Group can be classified as a softer form of protest. Their intention was to seek opportunities for direct dialogue in a bid to

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid. It was not easy to collect information about the organizational structure of the H15 Concern Group because of the absence of documentary records. Hence, I had to rely on interview data. The lack of documentary records in itself indicates the fluid structure of the group.

<sup>40</sup>Hong Kong Legislative Council, *Hong Kong Hansard*, July 8, 2010, 11191-232.

<sup>41</sup>Author’s interview with a district councilor whose constituency was in Wan Chai, July 15, 2010.

change the economic-oriented mind-set of government officials, and they therefore tended to work within the existing legal-administrative framework. For example, the group strove to establish ties with sympathetic political parties that held seats on LegCo, in the hope that these ties would provide them with access points to government bodies.<sup>42</sup> According to the Urban Renewal Strategy, representatives of the URA were obliged to attend the LegCo public hearings.<sup>43</sup> With the support of sympathetic parties, the group participated fully and actively in these public hearings. The moderate approach to protest is most apparent in the way in which the social activists were willing to put up with the high thresholds for public participation. The representatives of the protest group had to attend technical hearings where they were required to base their demands on scientific data and analysis.<sup>44</sup> By all measures, it is reasonable to expect that these procedural requirements would have deterred the representatives from following the government's rules of engagement, especially in light of their stress on autonomy and equality as mentioned above. But in reality, they braved the technocratic and cumbersome procedures to engage in thorough discussion with the government officials. To accommodate the procedural requirements, the group drew on professional input from friendly architects to design an alternative redevelopment plan that was intended to allow for local rehousing and preservation of at least half of the tenement blocks in Lee Tung Street.

### **The Second Phase of the Heritage Preservation Action**

After a period of resignation, the H15 Concern Group became increasingly radical in contesting the limits of the government's economic-

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<sup>42</sup>Based on the author's interview with a social worker who was a core participant of the H15 Concern Group, June 2, 2010.

<sup>43</sup>Urban Renewal Authority, *Annual Report 2007-08* (Hong Kong: HKSAR Government, 2008).

<sup>44</sup>Christine Loh, *The User's Guide to the Town Planning Process: How the Public Can Participate in the Hong Kong Planning System* (Hong Kong: Civic Exchange, 2006).

oriented policy of urban redevelopment. In this section, I argue that the reason for the change in action lies with the structure of political opportunities. Before discussing the causal relationship, I will begin by examining the political structures of urban redevelopment in Hong Kong.

*Exclusiveness of the Decision-making Process*

The major characteristic of the political structures concerning the Lee Tung Street urban renewal project was a high degree of exclusiveness. This was reflected in the setting of the URA and LegCo and in the structured relationship between government officials, social elites, and participants of the H15 Concern Group within that.

The URA was the single most powerful authority in making decisions on urban renewal. Indeed, according to the Urban Renewal Authority Ordinance (2001), the URA was a statutory public organization responsible for making plans to improve the built environment of Hong Kong by replacing old areas with new development, while the Board of Directors was the governing and executing body of the organization.<sup>45</sup> The board consisted of two types of directors—government officials (four) and nonofficial members (at least eleven). Ostensibly, the nonofficial members were appointed to represent views across society. However, it was difficult for opposition voices to access the URA because of the composition of its nonofficial membership. Based on information from the online database Webb-site.com,<sup>46</sup> members of the URA Board between 2005 and 2007 have been identified and divided into categories according to their socioeconomic status.<sup>47</sup> The results, presented in table 1, show that the H15 Concern Group faced an eminently closed political structure. Besides the chairman, managing director, and executive director,

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<sup>45</sup>*Urban Renewal Authority Ordinance*, L.N.92 of 2001, May 1, 2001.

<sup>46</sup>Webb-site.com is analogous to an online “who’s who” for Hong Kong, which contains concise biographical information on “successful” individuals with expertise in various areas.

<sup>47</sup>Most of the controversy surrounding the redevelopment of Lee Tung Street occurred between 2005 and 2007. Therefore, a study of the URA membership during this period is particularly important.

**Table 1**  
**Sectorial Breakdown of Unofficial members of URA Board (2005-07)**

| URA directors    |  |        |
|------------------|--|--------|
| Sector           | Sub-sectors  | Number |
| Real estate      | Property development and management                          | 9      |
|                  | Mortgage finance   | 1      |
|                  | Construction   | 1      |
|                  | Property surveying   | 2      |
| Profession       | Law  | 2      |
|                  | Academia (e.g. research fields in health and social history) | 4      |
| District Council | Sai Kung District Council                                    | 1      |
| Transport        | Mass Transit Railway Corporation                             | 1      |
|                  | Kowloon Motor Bus Company                                    | 1      |
| Political party  | DAB (pro-government)   | 1      |
|                  | Democratic Party (sympathetic with the H15 Concern Group)    | 1      |
|                  | Civic Party (sympathetic with heritage conservation)         | 1      |
| Community work   | Wan Chai Kaifong (Neighborhood) Welfare Association          | 1      |
| Total            |  | 26     |

**Source:** Author's own calculation based on URA annual reports and the online database (<http://Webb-site.com>).

all of whom were officials, twenty-six nonofficial members served on the URA Board during this period. Among them, the first and largest category (thirteen out of the twenty-six) comprised directors of private organizations directly involved in property development.<sup>48</sup> The second-largest category consisted of nine members with a variety of occupational backgrounds, including law firm partners and district councilors.<sup>49</sup> Given their backgrounds, there was little chance of them being concerned about the preservation of Lee Tung Street. The third category included a member of the Central Committee of the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong (DAB), a political party widely regarded as a strong supporter

<sup>48</sup>Of this group, nine were directors of private enterprises whose major business was property development, investment, and management, while the other four included a mortgage finance banker, a director of a construction company, and two leaders of a professional institute advancing the interests of property surveyors (see table 1).

<sup>49</sup>These district councilors did not come from Wan Chai constituencies, so were unlikely to be concerned with the fate of Lee Tung Street.

of government policy. This director was unlikely to have placed the issue of culture and community onto the agenda.<sup>50</sup> Out of a total of twenty-six nonofficial members, only three could be deemed likely to sympathize with the H15 Concern Group.

The exclusiveness of the URA is perhaps all the more apparent from the fact that there was a high degree of consensus between government officials and nonofficial members on the parameters of policymaking. In theory, urban renewal was a comprehensive concept consisting of four different elements, notably redevelopment, preservation, rehabilitation, and revitalization.<sup>51</sup> The Concern Group called on policymakers to redress the balance by putting greater emphasis on rehabilitation and preservation. However, it is clear from the qualitative data that both the public officials and corporate actors clung to the belief that it was more important to ensure the economic benefits resulting from redevelopment programs. Given their business interests, it is no surprise that the first category of nonofficial directors placed a premium on economic returns. What is intriguing is that even those in the second and third categories embraced the economic aims of the project because the cost of urban renewal was alarmingly high. It was believed that without the cooperation of the market, many of these government-sponsored projects could not be carried out,<sup>52</sup> but that cooperation would not be forthcoming unless the projects included plans for high-density construction. In comparison, the government officials adopted a seemingly subtler position. On the one hand, they flirted with the idea of striking a balance between the different elements of urban renewal.<sup>53</sup> However, the balance was clearly biased toward economic values. The importance of land resources to Hong Kong's

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<sup>50</sup>Peter Hills, "Administrative Rationalism, Sustainable Development and the Politics of Environmental Discourse in Hong Kong," in *Sustainable Development in Hong Kong*, ed. Terri Mottershead (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 13-41.

<sup>51</sup>Urban Renewal Authority, *Annual Report 2008-09* (Hong Kong: HKSAR Government, 2009), 2.

<sup>52</sup>Hong Kong Legislative Council, *Hong Kong Hansard*, May 17, 2006, 7540.

<sup>53</sup>Donald Tsang, *Chief Executive Policy Address* (Hong Kong: HKSAR Government, 2007), para. 49-56.



economy meant that the economic goals of urban planning were widely accepted. This was especially the case after the court had ruled that harbor reclamation had to be minimized after 2003.<sup>54</sup> In addition, the public officials shared the concerns of the nonofficial directors about maintaining the financial sustainability of urban renewal works.<sup>55</sup>

The exclusiveness of the political structures was also exemplified in the structured relationship between LegCo and the URA. According to Section 9 of the Urban Renewal Authority Ordinance, “the committees and subcommittees of the Legislative Council may request the Chairman and the executive directors [of the URA] to attend its meetings and they shall comply. The Chairman and the executive directors shall answer questions raised by the Members of the Legislative Council at the meetings.”<sup>56</sup> Despite this clause, nowhere in the Ordinance was LegCo authorized to issue binding recommendations to the URA. In this situation, any efforts by the H15 Concern Group to present their case to government officials through LegCo would be futile. In fact, as a result of active canvassing by the group, LegCo did pass a motion in 2005 urging the government to accord local residents a say in the fate of Lee Tung Street.<sup>57</sup> However, in the face of executive dominance, the support of LegCo was not able to bring about any substantial change. All in all, given the structured relationship between government officials, incorporated elites, and social activists discussed above, the Concern Group had minimal involvement in the planning process. This involvement amounted to little more than the group sending in a submission on the URA’s proposal.

### *Change in the Course of Action*

The failure of LegCo to influence the URA did not necessarily mean that the H15 Concern Group was completely thwarted in its efforts to ac-

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<sup>54</sup>Author’s interview with a former principal assistant secretary for housing, planning and lands of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, September 2, 2010.

<sup>55</sup>Hong Kong Legislative Council, *Hong Kong Hansard*, May 17, 2006, 7578.

<sup>56</sup>*Urban Renewal Authority Ordinance*, L.N.92 of 2001, May 1, 2001.

<sup>57</sup>Hong Kong Legislative Council, *Hong Kong Hansard*, November 24, 2004, 1954-2024.

cess the planning process. As stated in Section 24 of the URA Ordinance, any person affected by a redevelopment project who wished to object to its implementation had the right to submit a written statement of objections. The URA had to consider all objections and deliver its verdict with full justifications.<sup>58</sup> The group drew heavily on this mechanism to influence the agenda within the URA. However, in policymaking, there is a major distinction between systemic and institutional agendas. Basically, the systemic agenda consists of issues that attract widespread attention and facilitate heated debate, whereas the institutional agenda contains items up for the serious consideration of authoritative decision makers.<sup>59</sup> The fact that an issue is the subject of political debate is simply the first stage in a long process of policymaking. The issue may not get any further attention. To relate this to the conflict over Lee Tung Street, the activities of the H15 Concern Group may have led to the issue of heritage preservation being successfully raised on the systemic agenda. However, the closed membership of the URA, the policy consensus between public officials and socioeconomic elites, and the domination of the planning process by the executive meant that the determination of the social activists to brave the high procedural thresholds for public participation failed to propel their concerns onto the institutional agenda. In 2004, for example, they proffered an alternative redevelopment plan to replace the URA's economic-dominated program. Yet they were unable to influence the URA, because its Board of Directors had the final say on the credibility of any objections and alternative plans. Consequently, it was ruled that the alternative plan was legally and financially impracticable, in effect keeping new problems and new solutions off the institutional agenda.<sup>60</sup>

Members of the H15 Concern Group evaluated their political opportunities and expected outcomes in relation to various forms of action.

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<sup>58</sup>*Urban Renewal Authority Ordinance*, L.N.92 of 2001, May 1, 2001.

<sup>59</sup>For details, see Roger Cobb and Charles Elder, *Participation in American Politics* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University, 1983), 85.

<sup>60</sup>Panel on Planning, Lands and Works, Hong Kong Legislative Council, *Minutes of Meeting*, November 23, 2004.

This evaluation was a learning process, in which they interacted with the openness/exclusiveness inherent in the political structures. From past experience, it was clear that the group would be powerless in the face of a planning process that was cut off from outsiders. As one activist pointed out, “around 2006 and 2007, we reflected on previous campaigns and came to the conclusion that no matter how we tried to appear moderate and followed the rules of the game, the game would only be unfair under the existing institutional arrangements.”<sup>61</sup> Obviously, the activists became increasingly aware that the redevelopment program could not be changed using institutional means. As a result, they enlarged their action repertoire and gradually stepped up the rhythm of their opposition during the second half of the 2000s. These changes in action coincided with several occasions upon which oppositional voices were drowned out and the redevelopment program was pushed through in a heavy-handed manner.

The first occasion occurred in January 2007 when the URA bluntly rejected the alternative redevelopment plan put forward by the group. In response, they marched in procession to the government headquarters in protest against the economic principles underpinning the policy of urban renewal. In mid-2007, the Town Planning Board (TPB) was due to approve the URA’s master plan for transforming Lee Tung Street. This led to the second confrontation between the social activists and the public authorities. Institutionally speaking, the TPB was another important statutory body concerned with managing the built environment of Hong Kong, as it had the legal authority to determine the layout plan for land use and the buildings to be erected in a geographical district. As enjoined by Section 25 of the URA Ordinance, the URA had to submit redevelopment plans to the TPB for consideration. Having reviewed any single submission, the TPB could (1) deem the plan suitable for implementation, (2) consider the plan suitable for implementation subject to specific amendments, or (3) refuse to approve the plan.<sup>62</sup> From the institutional perspective,

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<sup>61</sup>The quotation was derived from an interview conducted by the author on August 7, 2010.

<sup>62</sup>*Urban Renewal Authority Ordinance*, L.N.92 of 2001, May 1, 2001.

the TPB might be seen as a gatekeeper for redevelopment plans hatched within the URA, and it was expected by the social activists to act as such in the conflict over Lee Tung Street. However, public expectations were eventually disappointed when the TPB announced that it was prepared to approve the URA's master plan without any amendments. In a bid to stop the TPB rubber-stamping the URA's redevelopment plan, ten protestors broke through the police cordon and stormed into the conference room at the TPB's headquarter as the deliberations on the future of Lee Tung Street were underway.<sup>63</sup> The actual demolition sparked off the third and probably the most violent clash with the public authorities. On this occasion, a group of protestors trespassed on the site and hectorated the construction workers to halt the demolition. Police reinforcements were called to remove the protestors and scuffles broke out between the two sides. Shortly afterwards, two social activists climbed onto a steel structure inside the site with a banner reading "preserve the social network."<sup>64</sup> As a last resort, a core member of the Concern Group went on hunger strike. In the words of the hunger striker, "I had no other choice but to use my body to exert pressure on government."<sup>65</sup>

This change in the style of action did not mean that the H15 Concern Group was bound to exercise greater power. On the surface, the URA directors were compelled to revise the original redevelopment plan that had already gone through due process. In late 2007 the URA announced that a "wedding city" would be created in Lee Tung Street, which would contain a gallery showcasing wedding traditions in Hong Kong and a retail area catering for wedding-related trades. In addition, social enterprise operators with good local connections would be invited to run a center aimed at pre-

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<sup>63</sup>Chloe Lai, "Protestors Halt Planning Board Talks," *South China Morning Post*, May 19, 2007, CITY 4.

<sup>64</sup>Helen Wu and Dennis Chong, "Protesters Clash with Police over Wedding Card Street Demolition," *South China Morning Post*, October 6, 2007, CITY 1.

<sup>65</sup>Author's interview with a local resident who set up the H15 Concern Group, August 14, 2010.

serving local networks.<sup>66</sup> On closer inspection, however, the URA directors were not prepared to give much ground to the social activists. They were simply conceding what had already been conceded. The “wedding city” idea had been raised as early as July 2005 when the Concern Group was still insisting on resolving the issue through dialogue.<sup>67</sup> With the gentrification effects of the redevelopment, the promise to preserve the traditional character of Lee Tung Street by building a “wedding city” was no more than an empty gesture.<sup>68</sup> Above all, the demand for local rehousing, which was seen as the best means to preserve the social networks of the area, drew no response from the policymakers. In other words, apart from causing some minor delays, the confrontational actions of the H15 Concern Group did not upset the coherence of the redevelopment plan. Nor did they lead to any signs of policy inertia or policy deadlock. The disconnection between increasing militancy and policy influence can be understood by examining the relationship between direct action and the political structures inherent in urban redevelopment policy. In policy areas where the political structures are closed in the sense that government initiatives are not subject to legislative scrutiny and the policy consensus between government officials and socioeconomic elites remains strong, the ability to enlist public support does not translate into enhanced political efficacy.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has substantiated the significance of meso-level political structures in explaining state-society relations, particularly with regard to NSMs and their impact on policy capacity. In focusing attention on the

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<sup>66</sup>Urban Renewal Authority, *Annual Report 2007-08*, 33.

<sup>67</sup>Town Planning Board, *Annual Report 2006-07* (Hong Kong: HKSAR Government, 2007), 41-2.

<sup>68</sup>In fact, it is hard to imagine that the government officials were incognizant of the adverse effects of gentrification, as a number of social activists had already pointed out the potential pitfalls in the development plan.

way the environment facilitates or suppresses particular forms of social activism, the paper has implicitly taken issue with an extensive volume of American, European, and Hong Kong-based research on NSMs, in which the internal characteristics of social movements are considered to be central to their course of action and the extent to which they challenge the government's policy capacity. There are two major arguments central to the foregoing discussion. First, the internal dynamics of social movements only become relevant for the mobilization of particular forms of collective action if they are mediated by the political structures inherent in a specific policy area. With regard to the conflict over the Lee Tung Street redevelopment, it was the structural failure to incorporate new ideas into the policymaking process that precipitated the social activists' engagement in radical opposition. Second, the extent to which NSMs challenge policy capacity depends on the meso-level political structures in which social activists have to operate. Undoubtedly, some among the new generation of social activists are able to challenge the government by raising new issues for political debate, attracting public attention, and mobilizing oppositional forces to confront the policymakers. Nevertheless, the impact of this challenge tends to be mediated by the political structures in particular policy areas. Faced with the highly closed political structures in urban redevelopment, the growing militancy of the H15 Concern Group did not give it substantial power to resist controversial policies. It is not the intention of this article to deny the change in state-society relations and the fraying of policy capacity with the rise of NSMs in Hong Kong. However, it is clear from the discussion above that the importance of NSMs may have been overstated. The rise of NSMs may not be a sufficient explanation of the tumultuous policy environment of Hong Kong since 1997. In order to attain a better understanding of NSMs and policy capacity, the political structures in specific policy areas have to be included in the policy analyses. As a corollary of this shift in analytical focus, it is likely that the challenge (form and degree) of NSMs to government policy varies across sectors and time.

Recognizing the importance of political structures does not mean that the rise of NSMs is negligible, or that there is nothing "new" about

NSMs, as some studies of social movements have suggested.<sup>69</sup> From the case of Lee Tung Street, it is clear that the NSMs are distinctive in their goals, organization, and political style. Unlike pressure groups, NSMs do not seek the mediation of parties and politicians; rather, they emphasize direct dialogue with policymakers in pursuing their values and goals. The mobilization of these distinctive features can be seen as a necessary component of any significant instance of collective action within the “NSM model.” These idiosyncratic features render political co-option, which is supposed to have underpinned colonial rule with government officials setting the rules of the game for cosmetic consultation, obsolete and less effective. The desire for direct dialogue with power-holders also vitiates the intermediary role of elected legislators. Having said that, based on the empirical data presented in the case study, this paper suggests that NSMs do not exist in complete isolation from the external environment. While their values and goals may run their own course, the trajectory of their collective action is clearly subject to the prevailing political structures embedded in particular policy sectors or sub-sectors. In this respect, it is the openness/exclusiveness of policymaking that affects their strategic calculation and choice of action.

This article suffers from a major limitation that needs to be taken into account in future studies. A single case is not sufficient to fully establish the complex relationship between the rise of NSMs and challenges experience by government policymaking. In this regard, further studies need to be conducted in two possible directions. First, it is necessary for future studies to take a longer historical perspective and compare the Lee Tung Street protest with other heritage preservation movements. Only then will the significance of political structures and the cumulative effects of NSMs on public policy be completely understood. Second, it is important to broaden research to include more policy areas that involve the emergence of NSMs and various kinds of political structure. To juxtapose the similarities in macro variables and NSMs’ dynamics with differences

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<sup>69</sup>See the discussion in the second section of this article.

in political structures enshrined in particular policy areas would make it possible to further examine the proposition that the challenge of NSMs to policy capacity greatly depends on the structures of opportunities at meso-level and, therefore, varies from one sector to another. In this regard, the social movement against the imposition by the government of a national education curriculum in 2012 may be a useful case for comparison as the political structures involved were apparently different from those in urban redevelopment, in that the policy process in curriculum policy had long been partially open to issues and demands raised by the representatives of schools, principals, teachers, and parents.<sup>70</sup> To incorporate these different structural features into the conclusions drawn from this article, it may be that the social movement involving parents and students, who were the constituents to whom the representatives had to be accountable, had a greater influence on government policy. More detailed comparative studies are necessary. However, this paper has, to a substantial degree, illustrated the significance of meso-level political structures in explaining state-society relations, particularly with regard to NSMs and their impact on policy capacity.

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<sup>70</sup>Ng Kai Hon, "Political Context, Policy Networks and Policy Change: The Complexity of Transition in Hong Kong," *Pacific Review* 20, no. 1 (March 2007): 101-26.



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