Partial Democratization, "Foundation Moment" and Political Parties in Hong Kong*

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Before the late 1980s, political parties were unknown phenomena in colonial Hong Kong. Since then measures of democratization initiated by the British in anticipation of their withdrawal in 1997 made available a portion of political power for public contest. The democratic reforms initiated by Chris Patten, the last colonial governor of Hong Kong, accelerated party formation and competition in the last few years of British rule.

After a decade of development, political parties in Hong Kong have still not yet been institutionalized. Public support for them is still shallow and fragile, and they are still greeted with ambivalence by the Hong Kong people. What is most important – as far as the future prospect of political parties is concerned – is that the partial nature of democratization in Hong Kong and the political context wherein parties were formed are impediments to their development. More specifically, these two factors make it difficult for parties to broaden their base of social support through changing their political positions and policy platforms. Yet the new political situation in Hong Kong brought about by the return of the territory to China and the abrupt economic downturn suffered by Hong Kong in the wake of the Asian financial turmoil does make changes along these lines imperative. Consequently, political parties have found themselves "captives" of history and the past policies of both Britain and China.

This article discusses the effects of partial democratization and the "foundation moment" on the political parties of Hong Kong. The data on the public attitudes towards political parties come from a questionnaire survey conducted immediately after the Legislative Council elections held on 24 May 1998.[1]

1. The sample used in the questionnaire survey was drawn by means of a multi-stage design. The target population was Chinese inhabitants in Hong Kong aged 18 years old or over. Since the full list of such adults was impossible to obtain, we used the list of permanent and residential areas from the Census and Statistics Department's computerized Sub-Frame of Living Quarters. With the assistance of the Department, a replicated systematic sample of 2,500 addresses was selected which, after the exclusion of vacant, demolished and unidentifiable addresses, plus those without Chinese residents, was reduced to 2,127. The next stage of sampling involved the selection of households and eligible respondents. Interviews were required to call at each address. If there were two or more households, only one would

Partial Democratization

The democratic reform in the early 1980s represented an attempt by the British to seek "exit with glory" in light of the inevitable end of colonial rule in 1997. Even before the Sino-British Joint Declaration – which arranged for the return of Hong Kong to China – was formally signed at the end of 1984, the issue of democratic reform had become a bone of contention between Britain and China. Whilst Britain as the outgoing political master tended to take a more liberal approach, China as the incoming master was forever wary of Hong Kong people's hostility towards communism and was only disposed to adopt a conservative stance.[2]

The process of democratization in Hong Kong is categorically different from the so-called "Third Wave" world-wide democratization. It thus had quite different implications for the development of political parties on the one hand, and public attitudes towards them on the other.[3] There are two distinctive features in this process. First and foremost, local political elites played only a secondary role in bringing about democratization in the territory. From start to finish, Britain and China were the dominant political actors. Secondly, democratization in Hong Kong was basically a top-down process where the masses played only a small part in its initiation. The absence of serious social and economic grievances sets Hong Kong apart from the majority of nations in "Third Wave" democratization.

As the two dominant actors, Britain and China were, despite their manifest differences over the pace and form of democratic reform in Hong Kong, strikingly similar in their insistence on the executive-led government and on their determination to restrict reforms only to the legislative institution (the Legislative Council). In their definition, an executive-led government had a monopoly on the making of public policies and exclusive control of the legislative agenda, and neither planned to democratize the executive branch of the government. Hong Kong's democratization can thus be described as only partial in nature.

Moreover, neither Britain nor China intended to enlarge significantly the powers of the legislature as an integral part of their reform effort. The deliberate efforts of Chris Patten to work with the legislature – with the

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footnote continued

be selected according to a random selection table. For each selected household, the interviewer listed all persons aged 18 years old or over, and the respondent was then selected by means of a random selection grid (a modified Kish grid). Face-to-face interviews with structured questionnaires were carried out by interviewers recruited from local tertiary institutions, mainly the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Fieldwork was conducted mostly during 25 May and 26 June 1998. At the end of the survey, 988 cases were successfully completed, yielding a response rate of 46.5 per cent which can be considered satisfactory in the context of Hong Kong.

   2. Lau Siu-kai, "Decolonization *à la* Hong Kong: Britain's search for governability and exit with glory in Hong Kong," *The Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (July 1997), pp. 28–54.

   3. Lau Siu-kai, "Hong Kong's path of democratization," *Swiss Asian Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (1995), pp. 71–90.

explicit purpose of imposing an exemplary executive-legislative model on the chief executives of post-1997 Hong Kong – have succeeded to a certain degree to elevate its symbolic status in Hong Kong's political system. However, in reality it still lacks the constitutional power to make and unmake governments, to propose and formulate policies, or to play a significant role in the appointment or dismissal of top officials. Hong Kong's legislature performs by and large the oversight function.

In framing the path of democratization, Britain and China also shared an anti-political party bias, though to a lesser degree on the part of the former. In general, both governments realized that the appearance of political parties was inevitable whenever there were elections, particularly popular elections. They nevertheless did not want to see the domination of the legislature by a powerful political party, which then could use the veto powers at the legislature's disposal to "blackmail" the executive or to bring about stalemate between the executive and the legislature. Consequently, the electoral system for the legislature was designed in such a way that the number of members directly elected by the people constitute only a minority of that body. The majority of members are elected by functional constituencies representing business and the professions, and by a small election committee of Hong Kong's elites. The installation of functional elections and the election committee is meant to inhibit the development of popular parties in Hong Kong, by obviating the need of elites to seek political representation through parties as their interests can be directly taken care of by their own legislators.[4]

As a result, the political context wherein Hong Kong's democratization took place and the electoral system devised by Britain and China provide an inauspicious environment for the formation and development of political parties. In the first place, political parties are able to claim only limited credit for the contributions they had made to Hong Kong's democratic achievements. Secondly, the limited role of the people in the democratic process has denied political parties the crucial opportunity to build broad social support for themselves by leading the people in a mass struggle for democratization. Thirdly, democratization as primarily a political matter with limited mass involvement means that within Hong Kong the process entails the intense struggle for power among local political elites. The political parties founded by the elites are not surprisingly mainly "cadre" parties. Fourthly, the diversity of electoral methods for the legislature makes it impossible for a single party to win a majority of seats in both the popular election and the elitist elections (functional elections and election by the election committee). Hence, a fragmented

4. Lau Siu-kai, *From the "Through Train" to "Setting Up the New Stove": Sino-British Row Over the Election of the Hong Kong Legislature* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1998), and "The making of the electoral system," in Kuan Hsin-chi, Lau Siu-kai, Louie Kin-sheun and Timothy Ka-ying Wong (eds.), *Power Transfer and Electoral Politics: The First Legislative Election in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1999), pp. 3–35. See also Kathleen Cheek-Milby, *A Legislature Comes of Age: Hong Kong's Search for Influence and Identity* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1995).

party "system" in the legislature is guaranteed. Lastly, the limited constitutional powers of the legislature and its institutional separation from the executive mean that the executive continued to be the main source of public policies and political patronage.

Public Ambivalence Towards Parties

In addition to stringent constitutional constraints, the political culture of the Hong Kong Chinese is not hospitable to political parties. The cultural heritage of China places overriding emphasis on strong but benevolent authority, unity, harmony and the supremacy of the group. It is hostile to the ideas of opposition and the political party. Nevertheless, the 1997 issue has heightened anxieties and public mistrust of Britain and China. It has led people to receive with more favour organized political forces that can to a certain extent counterbalance the Chinese, British and colonial authorities. The growing importance of political groups in direct elections has made people appreciate the functions that can be performed by parties in a political system undergoing democratization. The active cultivation of political groups sympathetic to the colonial government by Chris Patten provided the opportunities for these groups to develop. His "populist" style and his confrontational stance towards Beijing at the same time led to the appearance of political groups in opposition to his government. As a result of these contradictory influences, the attitude of the Hong Kong people towards political parties is ambivalent. On the one hand people increasingly affirm the importance of parties as an integral component of Hong Kong's political system; on the other they are still not sure about parties' contributions to their political well-being.[5]

In a 1985 survey of 792 residents in Kwun Tong (a industrial-residential community in Hong Kong) by Lau Siu-kai, 34.8 per cent of respondents agreed that the appearance of political parties would make Hong Kong's political system better. The 1990s saw growing public acceptance of parties. Our 1992 Hong Kong-wide survey found that 41.3 per cent agreed that Hong Kong people should form their own political parties. A majority (57.7 per cent) endorsed the view that political parties were indispensable to Hong Kong's democratization. Generally speaking, people have become more positive about the role and functions of parties in the territory. In our 1998 survey respondents were asked whether parties were needed for Hong Kong's political system to function properly, with a five-point scale of answers ranging from 1 ("parties needed") to 5 ("parties not needed"). Only 18.2 per cent did not consider that parties were needed by picking 4 or 5, while 44.7 per cent chose 1 or 2.

Even though Hong Kong people have accepted political parties in principle, in reality they are not prepared to provide them with even a

5. Lau Siu-kai, *Public Attitude Toward Political Parties in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1992).

decent degree of support. Party identification has always been low among Hong Kong people. In 1998 only 21.7 per cent of respondents admitted that they identified with a particular political party. Among those without party identification, only 23.5 per cent mentioned that they felt close to one particular party as compared to others.

Public ambivalence towards parties reflects to a certain degree the restrictive political and constitutional environment. Hong Kong people are generally suspicious of the effectiveness of parties and the intentions of party politicians in an executive-led political system. Conversely, as they are fully aware of their political powerlessness in a system dominated by the elites, mass-oriented political parties are their only channel to make their presence felt. Consequently political parties are particularly favoured by people who are dissatisfied in some way with Hong Kong's political configuration. The 1998 survey provides ample findings to support this point of view.[6]

First, attitudes towards democracy were closely related to the way political parties were perceived by the people. Generally speaking, people who were democratically oriented, who felt that Hong Kong's political system needed further democratization or who believed that a more democratic political system would facilitate the solution of many of Hong Kong's problems had more favourable views on political parties. Secondly, respondents who, despite the constitutional weakness of the Legislative Council, continued to believe in its importance in Hong Kong's political system were more positive about political parties. Such people considered elected legislature to be important because they believed that it was the major watch-dog over a government that was not popularly elected. They also realized that without strong political parties, particularly those that were mass-based, the legislature would remain weak and ineffective. Thirdly, people who had a negative view of political authorities were more favourably disposed towards political parties than those holding a positive view. They expected parties to act as a form of political counterweight to the non-elected governing authorities even though they were aware of the limited role parties could play.

Hong Kong people's attitudes towards parties are obviously very much the product of the political environment in the territory brought about by the 1997 issue. Anxieties about their future, suspicion of the intentions of the departing British colonial regime and fear of the incoming Chinese Communists have driven people to put hope in political parties. They expect them – particularly popular parties – to check and balance political authorities when they can, and serve as conduits to vent their anger and frustration when they can't. In a way people assign to the parties an opposition role which they have to take up if they want to obtain mass support. People have a very clear understanding of the limited clout of the parties, and they have practically no illusion about their ability and effectiveness in dealing with Hong Kong's social and

6. All the associations or correlations reported are significant at the .05 level, using either the χ^2 test or the Pearson correlation coefficient.

economic plight.[7] Since people do not see parties as powerful political actors, they set even greater store by the integrity, courage, steadfastness and reliability of the party politicians. In other words, a party that can demonstrate that it has principle or is independent of political authorities is in a better position to win public goodwill. Consequently, style and image rather than substance and achievements are better vote-winners in Hong Kong's political context.

The Development of Political Parties

Notwithstanding the cultural, political and constitutional constraints on party development, public demand for post-colonial leaders, the introduction of elected seats – particularly directly-elected seats – into the Legislative Council and the political impact of the governorship of Chris Patten do provide the long-awaited opening for the politically ambitious in Hong Kong.

Partial democratization has touched off intense struggles for power among local political elites. The scheduled termination of colonial rule in 1997 had changed the distribution of power among them. However there was not a complete displacement of the old political elites by new ones, or a replacement of the former "insiders" in the power centre by the erstwhile "outsiders." Admittedly the elites closely associated with colonial rule have suffered from a decline in status, are facing an uncertain future and are politically disoriented. Nevertheless, they are not destined for political extinction, even though they have no hope of maintaining the dominant position they used to occupy. For one thing, they still enjoy a decent level of support from the masses as a result of the past performance of the colonial government in the social and economic spheres. In addition, their services and support are still needed by China because of the commonality of material interests among them and China's desire to ward off the threat from the emerging pro-democracy and populist forces. Most importantly, many of the pro-London elites have transformed themselves in one way or another into pro-Beijing elites and earned a certain degree of trust from the new political master.[8] Nevertheless, in the process of doing so they have forfeited some public goodwill and invited some suspicion of their political integrity.

The entry of China into Hong Kong's political scene has not surprisingly uplifted the political status and influence of the pro-Beijing politicians, who were the victims of political discrimination, and occasionally persecution, under colonial rule. However, they also suffer severely from public mistrust and ridicule in a community permeated with anti-communist sentiments. Unlike the established elites, who form basically

7. Lau Siu-kai. *Democratization, Poverty of Political Leaders, and Political Inefficacy in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1998).

8. Instead of the labels "pro-London" and "pro-Beijing," the labels of pro-Britain and pro-China are used in common parlance in Hong Kong. However, for the sake of conceptual clarity, the former pair are used in this article.

a privileged stratum, the pro-Beijing elements comprise politicians from different social strata, particularly the lower strata, and lack natural cohesion but for the unifying hand of China. Hence, although their political situation has conspicuously improved since 1997, lack of public trust has limited their ability to expand their political influence.

The biggest beneficiaries of the partial democratization of Hong Kong are indisputably the political "outsiders" under colonial rule. The opportunity to contest directly elected seats has led to the emergence of a large number of political groups. Most of these developed from the pressure and community groups active in the 1970s, and by nature and intention they are opposition forces which are excluded from power.[9] Their small memberships are predominantly middle-class in background and want to change the political system out of political ideals, zeal for social reform and the desire for political influence. In particular, they want to wrench as much power as possible from China, the colonial regime and the post-1997 government. These pro-democracy activists are at the same time anti-communist, and they play upon anti-communist fears and populist sentiments in society as the means to mobilize mass support. They are undoubtedly the most popular forces in society in comparison with the elitist groups and pro-Beijing elements. Their impressive victories in the direct elections of legislators in 1991, 1995 and 1998 attest to their popularity.[10] Nevertheless, in contrast with the political opposition elsewhere in Asia,[11] the chance of achieving governing power by Hong Kong's pro-democracy forces is slim. Given the Hong Kong people's political pragmatism,[12] which can be partly explained by their realization of the constitutional feebleness of the legislature, a "permanent" political opposition faces an uphill battle to build a mass support base.

Hong Kong's labyrinthine electoral system for the legislature does provide opportunities for both elitist and popular parties to coexist.[13] Pro-establishment parties such as the Liberal Party (LP) (*ziyoudang*) and the Hong Kong Progressive Alliance (*Xianggang xie jin lianmeng*) obtain their electoral support from the functional constituencies and the election committee. Direct elections are the breeding ground of pro-democracy and opposition parties such as the Democratic Party (DP) (*minzhudang*),

9. See for example Lo Shiu-hing, "Political opposition, co-optation and democratization: the case of Hong Kong," in Li Pang-kwong (ed.), *Political Order and Power Transition in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1997), pp. 127–157.

10. See Lau Siu-kai and Louie Kin-sheun (eds.), *Hong Kong Tried Democracy: The 1991 Elections in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1993); Rowena Kwok, Joan Leung and Ian Scott (eds.), *Votes Without Power: The Hong Kong Legislative Council Elections* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1992); Kuan Hsin-chi, Lau Siu-kai, Louie Kin-sheun and Wong Ka-ying (eds.), *The 1995 Legislative Council Elections in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1996); and Kuan *et al.*, *Power Transfer and Electoral Politics*.

11. See Garry Rodan (ed.), *Political Oppositions in Industrialising Asia* (London: Routledge, 1996).

12. Kuan Hsin-chi and Lau Siu-kai, "The partial vision of democracy in Hong Kong: a survey of popular opinion," *The China Journal*, No. 34 (July 1995), pp. 239–264.

13. Chris K.H. Yeung, "Political parties," in Joseph Y.S. Cheng (ed.), *The Other Hong Kong Report 1997* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1997), pp. 49–70.

the Frontier (*qianxian*) and the Association of Democracy and People's Livelihood (*minzhu minsheng xie jin hui*). Interestingly, braving enormous obstacles, the pro-Beijing Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong (DAB) (*minzhu jianGang lianmeng*) is determined to try its luck in direct elections with the aim of becoming a popular party and a serious competitor of the DP. The political parties are differentiated mainly by their positions on the pace and form of democratization and their positions toward the political authorities. By comparison, their differentiation on socio-economic issues is less visible and of less significance to the people of Hong Kong. This will prove to be of crucial importance to party development in post-colonial Hong Kong.

The short history of party development and the fast-changing political landscape mean that Hong Kong still does not have an institutionalized party system. The number of parties varies, and they by and large remain small and weak political organizations with shallow roots in society, limited financial resources and minimal support from social and economic organizations. Though the pro-democracy or popular parties display a higher degree of internal discipline in comparison with the others, party cohesion is often loose and organizational work is under-emphasized. Nevertheless, it is still the case that these weak parties, like their counterparts elsewhere, can "recruit political leadership and help create a conceptual universe that orients citizens and elites."[14] In fact, they do provide reference points and cues to the voters in the Legislative Council elections. The next section concentrates on the three largest political parties in Hong Kong – the DP, the LP and the DAB. Public attitudes towards them can show the major political cleavages in Hong Kong and the way they affect the future development of political parties there.

The DP, the flagship party of the democratic activists, was founded in October 1994 with about 550 members from various pro-democracy groups. Its membership since then has remained more or less stable despite its explicit aim to unite all the democratic forces in Hong Kong. Martin Lee (Li Zhuming) – a barrister – has been its chairman ever since its inception. It advocates a democratic, open and accountable government, and, in contrast, a moderate socio-economic reform agenda. Loosely allied with the DP are a large number of civic, community, religious and pressure groups as well as independent trade unions (not affiliated with Beijing or Taipei). Of enormous importance to the DP is the fact that the news media are on the whole biased in its favour.

Leading members of the DP played an active role in supporting the pro-democracy movement in Beijing in 1989. The party is perceived by Beijing as an anti-communist enemy. Since directly elected seats were introduced into the legislative elections, the DP has been the long-term winner. Its predecessor – the United Democrats of Hong Kong (*Xianggang minzhu tongmeng*) – won 12 of the 18 directly elected seats in 1991

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14. Scott Mainwaring and Timothy R. Scully, "Introduction: party systems in Latin America," in Mainwaring and Scully (eds.), *Building Democratic Institutions: Party Systems in Latin America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 20.

plus two seats elected by functional constituencies in a legislature of 60 members. In 1995, it won 12 of the 20 directly elected seats, five of the functional constituencies seats and two of the seats returned by the election committee. In the 1998 election, the DP had to compete under less favourable conditions as a result of a change from the first-past-the-post system to the proportional representation system in the direct election. Nevertheless, it still managed to win 13 seats (nine from direct election and four from functional elections). In the last few years of colonial rule, the DP had developed a cordial relationship with the last governor, Chris Patten. The end of colonial rule has however seen the reversion of the party to an opposition role against the new government headed by Tung Chee-hwa.

The LP is pro-business and mildly pro-Beijing with a long-term ambition to develop into a popular party. It was founded in July 1993 with about 500 members and chaired by Allen Lee (Li Pengfei), a businessman turned politician under colonial patronage. Except for the 1995 legislative election, when Allen Lee won a directly elected seat for the party, the LP has been singularly unsuccessful in the direct electoral arena. Most of the party's core members were pro-London politicians before 1997, but they succeeded in gaining entry into the united front crafted by China even before the end of colonial rule. Since Hong Kong's return to China, the LP has become chiefly a pro-government party. Most of its members in the legislature secure their seats through functional constituencies and election committee elections. The party obtained ten seats (nine from functional elections and one from direct election) in 1991. In 1998, it again won ten seats, this time with nine seats through functional elections and one returned by the election committee. Dependence on functional elections has however proven to be the scourge of the party. As its legislators owe their primary allegiance to their functional constituencies, party organization is loose, discipline is weak and the position of the party is too unstable to be recognizable.

The DAB was founded in July 1992 under the chairmanship of Tsang Yok-sing (Zeng Yucheng), a principal in a pro-Beijing middle school, with more than a thousand members. Its appearance was the result of China's determination to counter the increasing political influence of the democratic activists by launching a popular party of its own. Its orientation is steadfastly pro-Beijing, strongly pro-grassroots and mildly reformist in the socio-economic sense. The DAB is closely allied with the pro-Beijing Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions (*Xianggang gonghui lianhehui*) and other pro-Beijing social, economic and cultural organizations. The achievements of the party in direct elections have not been impressive. In 1995 it only won one directly elected seat, though it secured two seats through the election committee and two through functional elections. However it obtained impressive results in the 1998 elections. It took a total of nine seats, five from direct election, two from functional elections and two through the election committee. The DAB was without any doubt acting as a political opposition under colonial rule. Today it is a steadfast supporter of the Tung administration.

Political Cleavages and the Political Parties

In all societies with popular elections, political parties place themselves on different sides of the major political, social and economic cleavages. Given the unique political and constitutional context of Hong Kong, political cleavages are far more important than non-political ones and parties place top priority on distinguishing themselves from their competitors on political issues. From the perspective of the parties as well as in the public mind, political differences also reflect the moral integrity and political courage of party politicians. Parties deliberately magnify the political differences among themselves to expand their influence at the expense of their foes.

There were several major political cleavages in Hong Kong before 1997. The most important was whether or not to trust Beijing. Hong Kong was only a British colony on China's sufferance and could not become an independent nation. As a substantial proportion of Hong Kong people are refugees from political persecution in China, there is a pervasive fear of the Chinese Communists in the territory. The scheduled return of Hong Kong to China aroused an immense amount of political hostility towards Beijing, which was greatly exacerbated by the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989. Public trust that Beijing would fulfil its promise to allow the Hong Kong people to rule themselves autonomously was low, and there were perennial fears of political suppression after the protective shelter provided by Britain was gone. The DP positions itself unmistakably on the "mistrust Beijing" side of the cleavage. The LP and the DAB, though adamantly denying their pro-Beijing predisposition, are however widely perceived to have strong political ties with Beijing.

The second, and less important, political cleavage was brought about by Britain's decision to initiate democratic change in Hong Kong. "Pace of democratization" divided political actors into conservatives, moderates and democratic activists. This cleavage overlapped with the first one. As a result, conservatives and even moderates were also seen as pro-Beijing.

The third political cleavage was over whether or not to trust the government. This cleavage is caused by Hong Kong's executive-led political system wherein the executive is not popularly elected and is checked and balanced by a weak legislature. It has become even more significant since 1997 because of the lackadaisical performance and low popularity of the new government. It also overlaps with the "trust Beijing versus mistrust Beijing" cleavage, and it might be expected that elitist parties and popular parties are clearly positioned on opposite sides. However this is not the case. As expected, the DP is squarely on the "mistrust the government" pole whilst the LP is definitely pro-government. The position of the DAB, however, is ambiguous. As an aspiring popular party, it should take the "mistrust the government" stance. Yet, given Beijing's staunch support for the Tung administration, the DAB's pro-Beijing proclivity frequently spurs it to defend the government.

Socio-economic cleavages are insignificant as factors in party divi-

sions, as is clearly shown in the 1998 survey data. Basically, people's perception of Hong Kong's economic and social issues is only weakly related to their attitudes towards the DP, the DAB and the LP.

The survey asked respondents to place themselves a ten-point left–right continuum to measure their political position. Most positioned themselves on the mid-point, 5, with 22.7 per cent on the right (6 to 10) and 5.1 per cent on the left (0 to 4). Apparently people tend to define "left" as either pro-Beijing or pro-communist whereas "right" has no clear meaning.[15] Respondents perceived the DP as relatively "rightist," and the LP and the DAB – especially the latter – as "leftist." It therefore comes as no surprise that the correlation between the respondents' self-placement on the left–right continuum and their placement of the DP (r = .32) is stronger than those of the LP (r = .05) and the DAB (r = .07). The stronger feeling of closeness to the DP by Hong Kong people is indisputably the major factor explaining its electoral victories in the direct legislative elections.

The positioning of the DP, the DAB and the LP on the three political cleavages is the most important factor underlying the differences in their political popularity. There was a tendency for respondents who trusted the Chinese government also to have favourable attitudes towards the DAB and the LP, and towards their chairmen Tsang Yok-sing and Allen Lee. But there is no statistically significant association between trust in the Chinese government and attitudes towards the DP and Martin Lee. Evidently, despite the improving relationship between Beijing and the Hong Kong people since Hong Kong's return to China, public mistrust of Beijing still has a powerful influence on public attitudes towards political parties.

Concerning the "pace of democratization" cleavage, people who are pro-democracy are obviously more supportive of the DP. Ironically, despite its strenuous efforts to become a popular party, the DAB was perceived by respondents as even more conservative in its position on democratic development than the pro-business LP.

Finally, findings from the 1998 survey show that people who held favourable attitudes towards Tung Chee-hwa, who trusted the Hong Kong government and who appreciated its performance, were more likely than those who didn't to support the DAB and the LP and their leaders. Conversely, people having negative views towards Tung, his government and its performance are likely to support the DP. In other words, the DP is seen as an opposition party by the people whereas the DAB and the LP, despite their strident disclaimers, are perceived as "pro-government" parties.

Clearly, the "mistrust Beijing", pro-democracy and "mistrust the government" images of the DP, and the pro-Beijing, politically conservative and pro-government images of the DAB and the LP as perceived by Hong Kong people are wide apart.

15. In the past "right" meant pro-Nationalist China. But this meaning has been much diluted with the dissipating political influence of Taiwan's Nationalist regime on Hong Kong.

The "Foundation Moment" and Constraints on Party Development

Many of the classic works on political parties have underlined the centrality of a party's "foundation moment" for understanding its subsequent development. In the words of Panebianco,

A party's organizational characteristics depend more upon its history, i.e. on how the organization originated and how it consolidated, than upon any other factor. The characteristics of a party's origin are in fact capable of exerting a weight on its organizational structure even decades later. Every organization bears the mark of its formation, of the crucial political-administrative decisions made by its founders, the decisions which "molded" the organization.[16]

Hong Kong's parties were born in a context dominated by pressing issues, notably the territory's political future, Sino-British confrontation, conflict and mistrust between the Chinese government and the Hong Kong people, and disputes over the pace and form of democratic reform. Even though the salience of Hong Kong's socio-economic issues – de-industrialization, the bubble economy sustained by escalating property prices, the "brain drain," the widening gap between the rich and the poor, and the inadequacy of public services and social welfare – has been mounting since the early 1980s, they were overshadowed by the political conflicts and the 1997 political malaise.[17]

As the result of an unexpectedly smooth political transition in mid-1997 and the withdrawal of both Britain and China from the local political scene, the early months of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region witnessed a rapid subsidence of political issues.[18] Public attention began to shift to the outstanding socio-economic problems, abetted by the Tung administration's attempts to gain political legitimacy and de-politicize society through achievements in the non-political realm.[19] Consequently, the return of Hong Kong to China has unexpectedly resulted in the displacement of political by socio-economic issues. This change in Hong Kong's situation has been greatly strengthened by the Asian financial turmoil and its grave socio-economic impact on Hong Kong.

Opinion polls since late 1997 have consistently found the salience of socio-economic issues in society. According to the regular polls conducted by the government since May 1998, the major problems perceived were economic recession, unemployment, the price of private housing,

16. Angelo Panebianco, *Political Parties: Organization & Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 50.

17. Lau Siu-kai, "The fraying of the socioeconomic fabric of Hong Kong," *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (1997), pp. 426–441.

18. Lau Siu-Kai, "The eclipse of politics in the Hong Kong Special Adminstrative Region," *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Spring 1998), pp. 38–46.

19. Lau Siu-kai, "The rise and decline of political support for the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government," *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (Summer 1999), pp. 352–371.

medical and welfare services, environmental pollution and transportation problems.[20]

The Legislative Council elections were held on 24 May 1998, at a time of widespread socio-economic malaise. Studies on the elections reveal the all-importance of socio-economic issues to voters. Timothy Wong, for example, found in a telephone poll of 1,117 respondents on 2–4 June 1998 that 50 per cent viewed the economic issue as the most important factor affecting their vote, followed by class conflict (18 per cent), social stability (12.3 per cent) and attitude towards the Chinese nation (8 per cent).[21] However, this was not reflected in the platforms and agenda of the parties and candidates contesting the elections. They did not provide cogent analyses of Hong Kong's socio-economic situation, put forward coherent policy programmes to promote economic and social development, or engage the public in discussions of the community's pressing problems.

There are several reasons why socio-economic issues were marginalized by parties in 1998 in spite of their importance in the public mind. First, the parties' weakness and limited resources meant they were unable to present alternative policy programmes that could inspire public confidence and stimulate interest in the elections. Secondly, thanks to the fact that the business community and conservative interests had by and large abstained from the direct elections, the spectrum of policy proposals among the parties contesting these elections was narrowed. Voters could hardly detect any difference among the candidates regarding their socio-economic platforms.

Most importantly, there was a deliberate attempt on the part of the political parties contesting direct elections to present only a moderate stance on socio-economic issues, with the result that their differences on these matters were further narrowed. The rationale for this was the avoidance of internal dissension within the parties. Since all the major parties in Hong Kong were founded before the territory's return to China, their *raisons d'être* were their firm positions on particular sides of the dominant political issues of the day. The predominance of political issues and the presence of visible political enemies meant that parties could easily accommodate the differences on socio-economic issues among their members and achieve internal solidarity. The sudden displacement of political issues by socio-economic issues after 1997 caught the parties off-guard. In order to conduct an effective electoral campaign in a context of economic difficulties and social grievances, a party should be able to present strong and clear position on socio-economic issues. However, this risked aggravating the socio-economic differences within the party and possibly splitting it. The predicament is particularly painful for the DP which, as a party largely oriented to the basically moderate middle class,

20. See the bi-monthly polls conducted by the Home Affairs Department of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government since May 1998.

21. Timothy Ka-ying Wong, "Issue voting," in Kuan *et al.*, *Power Transfer and Electoral Politics*, pp. 105–129.

had to avoid scaring away its backbone support by embracing radical socio-economic positions. The small number of LP candidates in the direct elections were restrained by their colleagues in a party that depended primarily on success in the functional constituencies and hence could not afford to alienate the business and conservative interests. Its close ties to the government also prevented it from doing anything to undermine its cosy relationship with the Tung administration. The DAB had become increasingly grassroots-oriented as a result of its limited success in cultivating middle-class support. Nevertheless, its pro-Beijing background and its collaboration with the government limited its room for manoeuvre. It could thus only file moderate demands for remedial welfare measures in its vote-getting efforts.[22]

The "foundation moment" has therefore seriously constrained the ability of the parties to adjust to the new political environment. Further-more, notwithstanding their preoccupation with socio-economic issues, the Hong Kong people continue to base their attitudes towards parties on the now less salient political cleavages. It is thus difficult for them to change their party allegiance on the basis of socio-economic consider-ations, particularly as the similarities among parties on socio-economic issues do not make such shifts necessary. The fact that parties are publicly expected to play a watch-dog role over the government in an executive-led system means that people generally prefer leaders who are politically reliable. In a milieu of lingering political uncertainties and anxieties, people are unlikely to accept parties that are judged to be changeable and opportunistic.[23] Parties are rightly worried about their image when they contemplate changing or adapting their platforms in response to new public concerns. The outcome is that they prefer to play safe and stay put.

Therefore, while it is true that the political issues dominant in previous legislative elections had become less salient in 1998, their impact on party and voter behaviour is still palpable. As parties were unable to differentiate themselves by means of their socio-economic platforms, they had to focus on image-building. A lot of negative campaigning against adversaries appeared during the elections.

The electoral results in 1998 show that party realignment had not taken place. By and large, the way the Hong Kong voters voted in 1998 is similar to that in 1991 and 1995, supporting the candidates based on their positions on the political cleavages. The division of the popular vote between the pro-democracy camp and the pro-Beijing camp remained basically unchanged since 1991.

Nevertheless, the inability of political parties to address the salient

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22. Lau Siu-kai, "Livelihood issues take a back seat," *South China Morning Post*, 17 May 1998, p. 11.

23. Based on survey data, Milan Tung-wen Sun found that party voting (defined as vote for the candidates from the party with which the voters identified) in Hong Kong was strongly associated with the strength of partisanship. This was in turn affected by the retrospective evaluation of the party's past performance rather than by the perceived expectation. See Sun, "Party identification re-examined: retrospective or prospective voting," in Kuan *et al.*, *Power Transfer and Electoral Politics*, pp. 131–153.

socio-economic issues and their use of negative campaigning have weakened public support for them and the legislature.[24] An opinion poll conducted in December 1998 found that more than 60 per cent of the respondents did not believe that the DP under the leadership of Martin Lee could do anything about the economy and the problem of rising unemployment.[25] There is also increasing public dissatisfaction with all the political parties in Hong Kong. The telephone polls conducted by the Hong Kong Transition Project of the Hong Kong Baptist University find that whereas in October 1998 63 per cent of the respondents were satisfied with the DP, the figures for April 1999 and July 1999 are 55 and 45 per cent respectively. The corresponding figures for the DAB are 50, 43 and 45 per cent, and those for the LP are 44, 31 and 42 per cent.[26] Ironically the people of Hong Kong have played a significant part in bringing about the declining popularity of political parties. In a way both the parties and the Hong Kong people are the "captives" of the historical moment when the parties were founded.

In any case, Hong Kong's political parties are currently fixated on political issues inherited from the pre-1997 past. They are incapable of rising to the new post-1997 challenge of socio-economic issues. As the old political issues of the Beijing–Hong Kong relationship and democratization, and the new issue of government–people conflict, overlap with one another, the divisions among political parties cannot easily be bridged. There continues to be a chasm between parties that are pro-democracy, mistrustful of Beijing and antagonistic to the post-1997 Hong Kong government on one side, and parties that are conservative on the pace of democratization, pro-Beijing and supportive of the post-1997 government on the other. The possibility of coalitional realignment among existing parties is limited despite the growing internal divisions within some political parties stemming from differences on socio-economic issues.[27] On the other hand, the probability of intensified acrimony among them is still substantial. The Hong Kong people are partly responsible for inhibiting party realignment, but that does not prevent them from being critical of the performance of the parties at a time of economic hardship. Declining public support for the legislature and party leaders constitutes a sign of political disillusionment that does

24. The telephone polls conducted by the Social Science Research Centre of the University of Hong Kong have found gradual weakening of public support for political parties. In the March 1999 poll, it was found that the pro-Beijing Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions, which focused primarily on labour and livelihood issues, enjoyed a level of public support higher than any of the political parties in Hong Kong. See *Ming bao*, 24 April 1999, p. A6.

25. The poll was conducted by the Social Science Research Centre of the University of Hong Kong. See *Pinguo ribao* (*Apple Daily*), 5 January 1999, p. A18.

26. See the Hong Kong Transition Project, *The Matrix: What's Real and What's Not in Hong Kong Public Opinion* (July 1999), mimeo., p. 28.

27. The most visible internal rift appears in the DP. It is in the midst of a mounting crisis in reconciling its grassroots and middle-class orientations. See Chris Yeung, "Struggle to strike a balance," *South China Morning Post*, 17 December 1998, p. 19; and "Call for calm at party crossroads," *South China Morning Post*, 1 January 1999, p. 13.

not portend well for Hong Kong's parties and its democratic future.[28] The stagnant membership of the parties in recent years attests vividly to their unattractiveness as a means of realizing political aspirations.[29]

Conclusion

Hong Kong does not provide an auspicious environment for political parties. The absence of the option of political independence during colonial rule precluded the emergence of strong parties as significant political actors. Partial democratization stemming from the termination of colonial rule and the return of Hong Kong to China did create an opening for political parties, but the impossibility of attaining the power to govern confines them to the role of watch-dog over a strong executive. While mass-oriented parties differ in their closeness to the government, in a broad sense they are all political outsiders and have to play the role of the opposition in one way or another in order to retain the support of their constituents.

The time when parties were founded to a considerable extent defined their political character and public image. They positioned themselves clearly on different sides of the major political issues created by the transformation of Hong Kong from a British colony to an autonomous part of China. As a result they have difficulty changing their images and platforms to adjust to a new environment characterized by the salience of socio-economic issues. The fact that they have no opportunity to govern and have to be content with an oversight function means that their political platforms, image and style remain important in their appeal for public support. Attempts to change carry enormous risks and uncertainty. And the Hong Kong people, still wary of the intentions of China and suspicious of the governing authorities in Hong Kong, expect parties to provide some check and balance against Beijing and the post-1997 government. By looking for political steadfastness and political courage, the Hong Kong public in fact discourages the parties from adapting. Needless to say, the ability to adapt is further hampered by the lack of courageous and far-sighted party leadership.

The failure of parties to respond and adapt to the new environment in post-1997 Hong Kong has left them in limbo. While they can still hold on to their existing supporters, the irrelevance of parties in the socio-economic arena inevitably weakens their social base. More importantly, their ineffectiveness in coping with Hong Kong's socio-economic difficulties has undermined their public appeal and their strength as a counterbalance to Beijing and the Tung administration. As a result, the period of prosperity in party development before 1997 has been succeeded by a period of party stagnation if not decline.

28. Opinion polls show that public support for the Legislative Council had fallen over the past year. In addition, party leaders trailed behind senior government officials in popularity. See for example, *Pinguo ribao*, 28 December 1998, p. A1; *ibid.* 5 January 1999, p. A18; and *Hong Kong Standard*, 1 April 1999, p. 4.
29. Clarence Tsui, "Search for successors proves an uphill job," *South China Morning Post*, April 5, 1999, p. 13.