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Civil Society Organizations and Community Politics in Postcolonial Hong Kong

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Ever since the early days of colonial rule, associational life has been subjected to selective intervention by the colonial authority, ranging from passive tolerance, cooptation, administrative control to political suppression. This paper seeks to show how proliferating civil society organizations (CSOs) are contending state institutions from below in the postcolonial era. The case of political activism against urban renewal projects imposed by the state will be studied to illustrate the modes of interaction between CSOs and the state.

Two legacies of the colonial institutions prescribe the space for community participation. The first is district administration. A district administrative system called the City District Office Scheme has been instituted since the early 1970s. Each administrative district is served by a District Office. These District Offices give support and direction to local administrative institutions and neighborhood-based organizations to make certain that they are dominated by conservative and pro-government forces. Thus neighborhood democracy and collaborative governance fail to emerge, even though a wide range of community-based organizations exist at the local level, ranging from neighborhood associations, civic clubs, neighborhood-level business associations, community development centers, neighborhood-based service organizations, schools, churches, and local councils and committees.

The second legacy is the top-down policymaking process. Public policymaking remains largely the domain of policy elites where citizens have little input. Such policymaking style is evident in the case of urban renewal, where residents within the community that are affected by a redevelopment project can hardly have their voices heard. Public discontent and popular resistance are common and repressive measures are often taken by the state to secure compliance.

In the 1980s, Hong Kong entered a stage of political transition, as Britain agreed to hand over the sovereignty of Hong Kong to China in 1997. The political system was partially democratized through the introduction of elections in the legislature and the local councils. The opening up of the political system and the social transformation brought about by political transition posed challenge to the state-dominated system of local administration, as elected politicians and political parties started to permeate the District Boards (the local councils). At the same time, in the past two decades there has been a proliferation of CSOs that covered a wide range of social issues, including labor, social service, housing, gender, environment, democratization, community building, and so on, and have led numerous community actions that fostered democratic consciousness and shaped the sense of citizenship.

Using case studies in urban renewal this paper will examine how CSOs interact with state officials at the community level in the postcolonial era. It will explicate how community politics is increasingly shaped by networks of CSOs, and how such networking might empower these organizations to contend state power. The study will help illuminate how CSOs can play a role in enhancing citizens participation in urban renewal projects in semi-authoritarian states.