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HONG KONG
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The Dynamics of Social Movement IN HONG KONG



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Public Discourses and Collective Identities: Emergence of Women as a Collective Actor in the Women's Movement in Hong Kong¹

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□ The Women's Movement and the Politics of Identity

The 'new social movements' paradigm has drawn analytical attention towards what is called the 'politics of identity'. The women's movement, along with the gay and lesbian movement, the peace movement, the environmental movement, youth and countercultural movements, are the most frequently cited examples of identity politics. Although critics have challenged the idea of 'new social movements',² questioning the claimed 'novelty' in the form of collective action as well as the assumed distinction between identity and interest as basis for mobilization, almost all sociologists of social movements agree on the analytical and empirical significance of identity politics. Identity politics can be understood as politics either starting from or aiming at claimed identities of their protagonists, and 'politics' here includes the creation of new cultural codes, models and symbolic challenges, not just confrontation with the political system and effects on policies.³ One way to grapple with the phenomenon of identity politics — explaining how collective identity is created by movement adherents, how grievances are constructed, how issues framing affects recruitment and how frames emerge out of collective action — is through analyses of public

discourses. It is because these 'socially sustained discourses about who it is possible or appropriate or valuable to be inevitably shape the way we look at and constitute ourselves'.⁴ Or as Jensen explains, the 'universe of political discourse' of a polity functions at any moment to set boundary to a community's political imagination and define the range of meaningful issues and legitimate actors. '[I]ts major impact is to inhibit or encourage the formation of new collective identities and / or reinforcement of older ones. Within a given universe of political discourse, only certain kinds of collective identities can be forged'.⁵

This theoretical perspective, which one writer has called the 'collective identity' approach, informs the discussion here.⁶ I look at the women's movement of Hong Kong as a form of identity politics, and I trace the transformation of Hong Kong women's collective identities through analysing public discourses on selected women's issues.⁷ These issues were pursued by women's groups and were discussed and contested by various social and political actors. A review of these key areas of struggles informs us as much about the ideal ends (identity) of women's groups as their instrumental objectives (interests). As a matter of fact, many historical examples of social movement defy dichotomous categorization into either interest-oriented or identity-oriented movements. Working class' wage struggles, for instance, entailed both types of ends in that wages were as much about maintaining social honour as preserving families and asserting independence in the face of the newly imposed factory regime. As Somers has observed, 'just as an adequate material life is an essential means of preserving normative relations, so cultural and symbolic relations provide material resources for livelihood'.⁸

The following discussion will map both (1) the agenda of policy reforms that were engaged in by women's groups and that had impact on women's material lives, and (2) the rhetoric of public discourses about these policies. In terms of concrete issues, the women's movement in Hong Kong has pushed for legal and institutional changes affecting different arenas of women's life. Hong Kong's 'feminist' agenda can be reflected in the following key concerns: reform of marriage law and the abolition of concubinage (1947 to 1970), equal pay for equal work (1950s to 1971), legalisation of abortion (1969 to 1981), maternity leave benefits (1979 to present), separate taxation (1981 to 1990), campaign for a Women's Commission and Women's Convention (1990s), and land inheritance right for women (1994). Overall, one can say that women's groups have quite a comprehensive range of concerns that in many ways were pursued by the women's movement elsewhere in the world.

In terms of rhetoric, public discourses about women's issues have, since the 1980s, largely shifted from a language of familial / maternal welfare and needs, to a language of women's rights and gender equality. My discussion here argues that when seen as a cultural phenomenon, the women's movement in Hong Kong has over the years created a new collective actor. Towards the 1990s,

'Hong Kong women' has emerged as a political actor with a collective identity based on women's gender, independent of and superseding their familial roles as wives or mothers, and their class membership as professionals or workers.

This chapter does not claim to present a comprehensive or exhaustive account of all the issues and discourses pertaining to women or women's movement in Hong Kong. Neither do I attempt to explain much about the socio-political setting out of which these discourses arose. These have to be done elsewhere. My purpose is more modest and selective. I aim at a thematic overview of a social movement analytically framed as a case of identity politics, with empirical gaps to be filled in by further collection of historical data. Research and data on women's groups in Hong Kong are scarce, but accounts of their history, organization and strategies are available in Yau et al., Tsang, and Cheung et al.⁹ As a background to the following discussion, suffice it to say that the 1980s witnessed the emergence of a number of vocal and grass root women's groups. Prior to the 1980s, the women's movement in Hong Kong was largely the effort made by wives of Chinese elites or expatriate women, including those women founders of the Hong Kong Chinese Women's Club (since 1938), the Hong Kong Council of Women (since 1947) and other service-oriented groups like Zonta Club of Kowloon (since 1977). Then in the 1980s, more grass roots-oriented women's groups were formed, targeting different groups of local Chinese women as their constituencies, while at the same time joined forces with each other in various campaigns. Led by local Chinese women, the Association for the Advancement of Feminism, the Hong Kong Women Workers' Association, the Federation of Women's Centre, the Hong Kong Women Christian Council were among the leading forces which had made women's issues more visible and important on Hong Kong's public agenda.

□ Issues and Discourses

Marriage Law Reform and the Abolition of Concubinage

This was the earliest and longest struggle waged by women's advocacy groups in Hong Kong. The campaign to reform marriage law, including the thorny issue of abolishing concubinage, started in the 1940s and ended with the passage of the Marriage Reform Bill by the Legislative Council in 1970. Women's groups, including the Hong Kong Council of Women, the Young Women's Christian Association and the Kowloon Women's Welfare Club, fought against opposition from reputable and well-known male Justices of Peace, Urban Councillors and Legislators. While women's groups argued for the abolition of concubinage on the grounds of family welfare and harmony, protection of concubines' children, the out-datedness of the custom, and equal rights for women, those in opposition