The political activities of social workers in the context of changing roles and political transition in Hong Kong

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Hong Kong, renowned as the ‘Pearl of the Orient’, underwent unprecedented political transition from a British colony to a ‘Special Administrative Region’ of the People’s Republic of China in 1997. In its 155 years of British colonial history (1842-1997), Hong Kong has yet to experience fully-fledged democratization. Political participation was not encouraged under the colonial regime where the local people were characterized as having ‘refugee sentiment’ (Hoadley, 1970; Shivley, 1972). They were seen as merely looking for a living, and thus as apolitical. Nevertheless, there were occasional incidents of social unrest precipitated by the public discontent of government policies, or aroused by a spill over from the political upheavals on the Mainland. Nevertheless, beginning in the 1970s, there emerged the ascendancy of a cohort of locally born second generation ‘Hong Kongers’, who identified themselves with the society of Hong Kong, if not with its polity. They became more apt to take political action to protest against government policies. Among them, the social workers

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had played a significant, even a vanguard role in catalyzing political participation in general. However, the politicization of social workers waxed and waned in the process of political transition towards the historic 1997 handover.

**Background to the politicization of social workers in Hong Kong**

The politicization or the increasing political activity of social workers in Hong Kong reflects the evolution of Hong Kong’s political development. Upon the change of regime in Mainland China in 1949, Western missionary-based social service agencies took root in British Hong Kong moulding the shape of service provision. The colonial government was reluctant to provide social services, given its rudimentary administrative machinery in the period of social recovery following the Second World War, and the lack of government revenue. There were considerable social problems in housing, education, welfare, and corruption. The riots in 1966 and 1967 respectively revealed the prevalence of social discontent against the administration. Non-government service organizations had, since the 1960s, advocated for services in deprived communities like squatter and cottage areas, fishermen villages, and boat shelters. The colonial administration finally recognized the need to provide social services to the general populace. In the hope of pacifying the citizens, the government started to launch reforms in various social policies from the 1970s onwards. With reference to the neo-Marxist
tenets of Manuel Castells (1977, 1983), government provision of ‘collective consumption’
would politicize the social policy domain. The increasing commitment of the government to
social policy development, particularly in the domain of housing, provided the impetus for
intensified government-public antagonism. Social workers working for the respective client
groups affected by these various social policies began to mobilize and organize their clients
over issues of common concern. Thus social workers, while particularly active in social
policy issues in the 1970s, were forced to resort to informal channels of political participation
due to the relative inadequacy and unresponsiveness of formal channels. Similar patterns
were evident in South Africa in the struggle against apartheid during the 1980s (Gray &
Collett van Rooyen, 1999).

Recognizing the potential threat of social work activism at the grassroots level, the
colonial government adopted a strategy for the ‘administrative absorption of politics’ (King,
1975:424) by providing subsidies to the NGOs offering community-based services in
deprived communities (Leung a, 1990). This provided social workers the opportunity to serve
as agents for political mobilization and acculturation of people at the grassroots level.

At the beginning of the 1980s, when the critical issue of political transfer to China
in 1997 began to surface, Hong Kong haphazardly underwent its limited democratization
(Chui, 1997). In 1982 the colonial government introduced the District Administration scheme.
It was followed by the development of ‘representative government’ in 1985 and the introduction of an unprecedented election of a representative legislature, paving the way for direct election in 1991.

The Sino-British tug-of-war in settling the 1997-transfer created currents of politicization which spurred politically active social workers on as the vanguard for Hong Kong’s budding democratization. They actively organized mass rallies demanding democratic openings in the government structure. Many of them participated enthusiastically in community or public education programs to promote civic education, mobilizing the citizens to participate in protests and in elections, in voting, campaigning, and the like. With the opening up of electoral avenues, the social workers had better chances to make their way into such formal channels. Some activist social workers even stood for elections at various levels and many succeeded in entering the political machinery. Early successes in the 1970s through participation in informal non-government channels paved the way for their later entry into the formal political arena, by bestowing them a readily receptive constituency among the citizenry. Thus, the problem of increasing participation by social workers (especially community workers) in local level elections gradually emerged. In time their role as political representatives superseded their professional social work role.
This gradual mutation from community organizer or service provider to politician ignited heated debates throughout the 1980s and 90s regarding the desirability of social workers’ participation in formal politics. For instance, Wong and Yeung (1986) and Au (1986) expressed their reservations about the potential for role ambiguity or even role conflict experienced by social workers participating in formal politics by standing for elections. However, Chan (1986) shared her direct experience in participating in a local level formal consultative channel or ‘Area Committee’ and attested to the positive role played by social workers in promoting grassroots people’s concern and involvement in community issues. Likewise Chui (1992) believed that the involvement of social workers in politics promoted ‘participatory democracy’. Hui and Wong (1992) held that social workers should not only immerse themselves in professionalization and extension of service provision, but should also be actively involved in promoting grassroots participation in politics. In this vein, Kwok (1992) postulated that ‘community workers could not avoid being more political’ (p. 39).

The politicization of social workers in Hong Kong is by no means a historical accident divorced from its social context. Chui (1988, 1989), making reference to Verba, Nie and Kim’s (1971) conceptualization, identified four major factors contributing to the politicization of social workers in Hong Kong, namely, socio-economic status, personal relevance to policy, group consciousness, and partisan mobilization. First, though social
workers were sometimes referred to as paraprofessionals, they belonged mainly to ‘the middle class’ by virtue of their higher educational attainment and income. Their socio-economic status enabled them to have access to civic structures for political participation. Their professional training, political aspirations and perceived political efficacy enhanced their political involvement reflecting the general pattern of correlation between socio-economic status and political activity. Secondly, by virtue of their penetration into the grassroots through service provision, the social work profession committed itself to a close relationship with the general populace. Other professions did not rival social work’s position as champions of the people at grassroots level. Their work in the various social problem areas also gave social workers ‘policy relevance’ enabling them to tackle policy issues through highlighting the plight of their clients. Thirdly, the increasing solidarity of the professional community rendered by the development of professional organizations provided the impetus for group identification. This group identity predisposed them to strive for the altruistic values and social justice causes embodied in their professional training. Thus fourthly, social workers’ professional organizations and unions provided a viable platform for mobilizing social work practitioners to engage in collective action, either for their own professional interests, or for policy advocacy. Besides these macro-level contributory factors, there was a host of practical forces creating opportunities for social workers to participate in formal
politics not least, the political and social climate, and general social work values, skills and experience in working at the community level, especially in developing close contacts with clients and in organizing activities that were transferable to electioneering, and the like (Wong, 1992).

During the 1990s, the entire Hong Kong society became embroiled in the political battles created by contending forces in the build-up to the critical 1997-handover, and social workers’ interest in politicization has subsided. First, within the profession itself, there was mounting resentment against social workers’ mutation of roles. Thus after the decade of Hong Kong’s haphazard democratization in the 1980s, some front-line social workers were disillusioned by the change of those thought to have betrayed their professional mission by becoming opportunistic, partisan politicians instead of remaining altruistic social work practitioners (Fung, 1992). More significantly, in the gradual ascendancy of political parties and their attendant political aspirants, some social workers moved from their service roles to become the people’s political representatives. Thus in the aftermath of the 1997 political transfer, there were increasing calls for the social work profession to return to its fundamental role in welfare. Thus, in a sense, the politicization of social workers has come full circle, in its evolution from welfare to politics, and back to welfare. It is against the backdrop of these
developments that the present study attempts to investigate the possible changes in political activity within the social work profession following Hong Kong’s political transition.

**Typologies of political participation in social work**

There is a wealth of literature on the political aspects of social work, which includes typologies of political participation propounded by different scholars. Milbrath (1965) provided a ‘hierarchy of political involvement’, which includes exposure to political stimuli, voting, initiating political discussion, persuading people to vote in a certain way, displaying political symbols like party buttons and stickers, contacting public officials or political leaders, making monetary contributions to political parties and/or candidates, attending political meetings or rallies, contributing time to political campaigns, becoming active participants in political campaigns, attending strategy meetings, soliciting political funds, running for office, and holding public and/or party office. Verba, Nie and Kim (1971) grouped political participation in four major categories, namely, voting, campaign, contacts, and collective community activities. Inglehart (1983) drew a distinction between elite-directed and elite-challenging political participation. Nettl (1967) coined the terms ‘stalactite’ and ‘stalagmite’ mobilizations to figuratively denote top-down mobilization of the masses by the elites and bottom-up grassroots mobilization respectively (cited in Putnam,
It is also possible to distinguish between ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ channels of participation, or ‘electoral’ and ‘non-electoral’ modes of participation. In this paper, reference is made to Dietz Domanski’s (1998) ten prototypes of political participation to enable comparison with three similar studies conducted in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa (Gray & Collett van Rooyen, 2000; Gray, Collett van Rooyen, Gaha & Rennie, 2000). The classification used in the present study shown in Table 1, groups Domanski’s 10 prototypes of political activity into two categories, namely, formal-electoral and informal-non-electoral modes of political participation, to reflect the particular nature of social work’s political involvement in Hong Kong previously outlined.

**Table 1: Typology of Political Activities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formal-electoral</th>
<th>Informal-non-electoral</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voting</td>
<td>Social action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuading</td>
<td>Collaborating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaigning</td>
<td>Advocating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lobbying</td>
<td>Communicating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual action</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Witnessing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Methodology**

The study is based on a methodology developed in South Africa by Gray and Collett van Rooyen (2000) involving a mailed questionnaire. Based on the same format as the other studies, the content of the questionnaire was adapted to the Hong Kong context and involved exploration of the following questions:
1. Do social workers participate in policy activities?

2. What is the nature and extent of their political participation?

3. Are there differences and similarities across differing contexts?

The questionnaire was designed to gather information about the political activities in which social workers had engaged. To this end, it explored, *inter alia*, the following:

- Particular policy processes or issues that had gained their attention since 1994.
- The nature and extent of their participation, that is, whether they had read policy documents, responded to them, participated in meetings and discussions about them, or engaged in any other action in relation to policy processes.
- Their perceptions as to the nature of their contribution and whether it had any real impact (Gray et al., 2002).

Taking into consideration Hong Kong’s practice of holding elections at the district and territory-wide levels in the corresponding years, some modifications were made to the wording of the questions. With respect to the target respondents, a random sample of registered social workers was drawn. In Hong Kong statutory registration with the Social Workers’ Registration Board is required, similar to the case of South Africa. Thus the Board’s register served as a comprehensive sampling frame for the present survey since it provided access to all social workers in practice. However, in view of the immense size of the total population of eligible respondents (9,260 as at 2001), a random sample of 2,000 names was
selected, and questionnaires were mailed to the registered addresses accordingly in May 2001. As a result, a total of 264 questionnaires were returned in the following month. Once uncompleted forms had been discarded, the final response rate was 13% (n=259).

**Respondent profile**

Among the 263 respondents, 243 (92.4 percent) were practising at the time of the survey; the remaining 20 (7.6 percent) were not. The gender distribution of the respondents generally reflects the overall picture of a so-called ‘feminine’ profession: a majority (180, 69.5%) was female, while males constituted 30.5% (79 respondents). As shown in Table 2, the respondents were relatively young: 40.5% were in the 21-30 age-group, while another 39.8% were between the age of 31 to 40.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Frequency (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21 - 30</td>
<td>105 (40.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 - 40</td>
<td>103 (39.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41 - 50</td>
<td>40 (15.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 50</td>
<td>11 (04.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>259 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Given their relatively young age, their length of experience in the social work field was relatively short: 36.9% had less than 5 years experience, another 28.9% had 6 to 10 years experience (see Table 3).

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3 There are totally 263 valid cases. But there are situations where missing response appeared in some cases, which render the total number of cases in different analyses vary from 259 to 263.
A majority of nearly 60% was working in the ‘frontline’, while 22.8% were in managerial or supervisory positions. There were also 13.9% of the respondents who were social work educators. While all respondents held professional qualifications, nearly half (45.2%) had a degree (e.g. Master or Bachelor of Social Work), while nearly one-third (30.8%) had a diploma, as shown in Table 4.

As shown in Table 5, about a quarter (24.3%) was practising in family and child care services; another 24.3% were youth workers. These two fields thus constituted half of all the respondents. Rehabilitation (including mental and physical disability) workers were the third major group of respondents (17.9%).
In Table 5 only five respondents claimed that their field of practice was ‘social work education’, while in Table 6, there were 36. This discrepancy can be explained by the fact that social work educators or academics may also identify themselves as practising or teaching a particular field of practice.

As shown in Table 7, 80% of the ‘frontline’ respondents had less than 10 years practice experience, 60% of the ‘social work educators/academics’ had 6 to 15 years of experience in the field, including both frontline and teaching experience. Half of the respondents working in ‘management’ posts had 11 to 20 years working experience in the social work field.

Table 7: Respondents’ experience by position

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience (years)</th>
<th>Frontline</th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>Education/Academic</th>
<th>Non Social Work</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 5</td>
<td>69 (44.5)</td>
<td>16 (27.6)</td>
<td>6 (16.7)</td>
<td>3 (37.5)</td>
<td>94 (36.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>56 (36.1)</td>
<td>4 (6.9)</td>
<td>12 (33.3)</td>
<td>3 (37.5)</td>
<td>75 (29.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>14 (9.0)</td>
<td>15 (25.9)</td>
<td>10 (27.8)</td>
<td>1 (12.5)</td>
<td>40 (15.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>8 (5.2)</td>
<td>14 (24.1)</td>
<td>5 (13.9)</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>27 (10.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-25</td>
<td>3 (1.9)</td>
<td>6 (10.3)</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>9 (03.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;25</td>
<td>5 (3.2)</td>
<td>3 (5.2)</td>
<td>3 (8.3)</td>
<td>1 (12.5)</td>
<td>12 (04.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>155</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>257* (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Figures in brackets are percentages * 2 missing cases

Tables 8 and 9 show that of the respondents who were ‘frontline’ workers, 25.8% were male and 74.2% were female, while of those who were managers, 35.5% were males and 64.4% were female. Among the academics, there were 40% male and 60% female.

Table 8: Position and sex distribution of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frontline</td>
<td>40 (50.6)</td>
<td>115 (63.9)</td>
<td>155 (59.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>21 (26.6)</td>
<td>38 (21.1)</td>
<td>59 (22.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social work education/academic</td>
<td>18 (22.8)</td>
<td>18 (10.0)</td>
<td>36 (13.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non social work</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>9 (5.0)</td>
<td>9 (03.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>79</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>259 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figures in brackets are percentages

Table 9: Sex distribution of respondents by position

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Frontline</th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>Education/Academic</th>
<th>Non Social Work</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40 (25.8%)</td>
<td>21 (35.6%)</td>
<td>18 (50.0)</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>79 (30.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>115 (74.2%)</td>
<td>38 (64.4%)</td>
<td>18 (50.0)</td>
<td>9 (100)</td>
<td>180 (69.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>155</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>259 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figures in brackets are percentages
Summary of Findings: A spectrum of political roles

The comparison between Hong Kong and three other contexts, shown in Table 10, reveals that, on the whole, social workers in Hong Kong were less active in political participation in various respects when compared to their Western counterparts. Table 11 shows the profile of political roles taken by the respondents within the Hong Kong sample.

A. Participation in ‘formal-electoral’ channels

The role of voter and persuader

In terms of voting in elections, the Hong Kong social workers were similarly active as their Western counterparts. In fact, social workers were much more active in casting their votes in elections than the general electorate. In Hong Kong, the voter turnout rate has never exceeded 50% at various levels of elections. The present group of social worker respondents recorded a significantly high 81.1% on average, and voting ranks first in the various modes of political participation. It can be understood in the context of Hong Kong’s short history of electoral development. Hong Kong citizens only gained universal suffrage in 1982. Though election of a government is entirely out of question in Hong Kong, people still take voting as a manifestation of the citizen’s right and responsibility.
Table 10: Comparison between Hong Kong and other contexts (%/rank)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political role/ activity</th>
<th>AUCK</th>
<th>NSW</th>
<th>KZN</th>
<th>Average (of 3)</th>
<th>HK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Formal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lobbying</td>
<td>58.6(4)</td>
<td>45.5(4)</td>
<td>33.6(5)</td>
<td>44.5(4)</td>
<td>20.5(7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting</td>
<td>93.8(2)</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>76.6(2)</td>
<td>84.6(2)</td>
<td>81.1(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuading</td>
<td>42.3(7)</td>
<td>41.0(6)</td>
<td>29.1(7)</td>
<td>40.0(6)</td>
<td>34.6(4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaigner</td>
<td>5.4(10)</td>
<td>8.5(9)</td>
<td>20.4(9)</td>
<td>6.5(10)</td>
<td>4.3(10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual action</td>
<td>52.5(6)</td>
<td>46.4(3)</td>
<td>22.1(8)</td>
<td>37.6(7)</td>
<td>21.5(6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Witnessing</td>
<td>29.4(9)</td>
<td>22.9(8)</td>
<td>13.8(10)</td>
<td>21.0(9)</td>
<td>29.1(5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborating</td>
<td>55.0(5)</td>
<td>42.3(5)</td>
<td>34.5(4)</td>
<td>43.0(5)</td>
<td>13.0(9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocating</td>
<td>74.7(3)</td>
<td>68.5(2)</td>
<td>63.7(3)</td>
<td>68.2(3)</td>
<td>38.8(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating</td>
<td>95.4(1)</td>
<td>93.4(1)</td>
<td>87.5(1)</td>
<td>89.2(1)</td>
<td>64.6(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social action</td>
<td>39.9(8)</td>
<td>35.1(7)</td>
<td>32.9(6)</td>
<td>33.7(8)</td>
<td>17.4(8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As there is a gross perception that social workers are middle-class, it seems logical to say that social workers are favourably predisposed to liberal democratic precepts like civil rights and responsibilities. On the other hand, voting can be critically viewed as a ‘low-cost’ mode of political participation, and it is easy for people to cast their votes during elections. Alternatively, it can also be regarded as people (including the social workers) seeing voting as a minimum token of Hong Kong’s limited democracy. Besides casting votes on their own, the respondents also persuaded others to vote. Yet, their inclination to persuade others to vote was a bit less than the other contexts, 34.6% as compared to the 40% average.
Table 11: Profile of political roles taken by Hong Kong respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political role</th>
<th>Hong Kong (%/rank)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voting</td>
<td>81.1 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating</td>
<td>64.6 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocating</td>
<td>38.8 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuading</td>
<td>34.6 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Witnessing</td>
<td>29.1 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual action</td>
<td>21.5 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lobbying</td>
<td>20.5 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social action</td>
<td>17.4 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborating</td>
<td>13.0 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaigner</td>
<td>4.3 (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall average</td>
<td>32.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The role of campaigner

As for campaigning, it seems that the Hong Kong social workers were highly reserved in having political organizational affiliation. The low incidence of social workers’ taking the role of political campaigner is to be understood within Hong Kong’s specific context of political development. There is found a general aversion to party politics or political parties in Hong Kong by the citizens, including perhaps the social workers. Such distaste against political parties can be traced back to Hong Kong’s haphazard democratization in the 80s and 90s. The prolonged antagonism between the outgoing British colonial regime and the encroaching Chinese authority drew Hong Kong into an impasse of heated conflicts among the various contending political forces. Parties and their affiliated political aspirants were regarded with scepticism as trying merely to reap political benefits rather than serving Hong
Kong’s interests. Thus, even when the social workers are only playing their role as ordinary citizens, they are also not particularly keen to engage in party politics and political campaigns. Interestingly, it is to be noticed that ‘campaigner’ consistently ranked the lowest or second lowest among the ten prototypes of political roles across the four places under study, namely, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, and Hong Kong.

**The role of lobbyist**

In terms of *lobbying*, the Hong Kong social workers fared much worse than those in the three other places (20.5% compared to the average of 44.5%). This can probably be attributed to a host of factors. In the first instance, the local people had long held a distancing stance from the Mainland Chinese regime. This was particularly apparent during the transitional period throughout the 1980s and early 90s, when Hong Kong was gradually paving its way for reunification with Communist China. The local people had not identified themselves much as subjects of the Chinese government, though they still held ethnic identification. They had a ‘floating identity’ (Leung, 1986) or ambivalence in identifying themselves as ethnic Chinese but geographically or pragmatically ‘Hong Kongers’ (Chui, 1997). As a local historian Steve Tsang remarked, ‘*The people of Hong Kong were somewhat confused regarding their dual identity of being Hong Kong residents and Chinese at the same time*’ (Tsang, 1995:259). In contrast, the local people tried to maintain an evasive stance in criticizing the central Chinese
government’s policies for fear that the latter would, in return, interfere with local Hong Kong affairs and administration. They were wary of the ‘high level of autonomy’ pledge made by the Chinese government, which happened to be a double-edged sword, in which China and Hong Kong had to avoid interfering with each other’s internal politics. Thus, it is understandable that Hong Kong’s social workers refrained from trying to approach government officials on national policies. On the other hand, the social workers were more active and vocal in making their presence known to local (district) level government officials. This can be explained by the fact that social workers working at the district level might have closer affinity to their clients who were more concerned about community issues than broader political matters.

**The individualist role**

Although the Hong Kong sample was comparatively less active in playing an individualist role (21.5%) than those in the three other places (average 37.6%), it is already comparable to Kwa Zulu-Natal, South Africa (22.1%). Nonetheless, such a low level apparently reflects that although the present group of social work respondents was inescapably citizens in Hong Kong, they seemed to be less enthusiastic about contacting government officials at various levels on personal issues. In the Hong Kong study, the respondents were also asked whether they had put forward views (e.g., writing letters or submitting petitions to government
officials) as a form of responding to government policies. About one-tenth of the respondents (11.8%) took this individualist mode of action. A few of the respondents (3%) even had the chance to participate in the policy formulation process, probably due to the fact that some social workers were either co-opted into the government’s consultative machinery, or elected as politicians thus securing pivotal positions in the government structure.

The role of witness

However, it is gratifying to note the Hong Kong social workers fared better than the average of the other three places in only one dimension, that of witnessing (29.1 as compared to 21%). In this respect, it is second to Auckland, New Zealand (29.4%) and higher than New South Wales, Australia (22.9%) and KwaZulu-Natal of South Africa (21%). The Hong Kong respondents recorded a higher rate (42.2%) than their Western counterparts (29%) in attending public hearing or commissions of enquiry. This is probably due to the fact that social workers were keen to keep abreast with government policies related to their work, which in turn were also related to their clients, that they would tend to attend such forums. They also had a higher rate of testifying at such hearing than those in the other three places under study, 16 as compared to 13%.
B. Participation in ‘informal-non-electoral’ channels

The role of activist

With respect to participation in social action, the Hong Kong sample appeared to be somewhat low on average, 17.4 as compared to the 33.7% average of the three other places. It may be attributed to the Hong Kong citizens’ general dislike of relatively militant and public actions to make their case. The significant proportion of family social workers in the Hong Kong sample, who were mostly clinical and ‘micro-practice’ oriented, may perhaps also help to explain the low rate of social action taken. However, a more incisive look into the details reveals that 46% of the respondents had taken social action against government policies, while only 5.3% took action in support of the government. Thus, the average score of ‘social action’ appears to be low.

However, participating in demonstrations against government policies stood out as the highest in this category. This might be attributable to the fact that social workers in Hong Kong quite often accompanied or even mobilized their clients to stage demonstrations to government offices to demand for policy concessions. Besides, there happened to be increasing numbers of mass rallies and demonstrations staged by various organizations appealing to a wide spectrum of citizens aggrieved by government policies. Social workers,
being part of the general citizenry, may also have been adversely affected and were therefore predisposed to go onto the streets for demonstrations, to fend for their rights.

It should be noted that there is a low rate of participation in political rallying or electioneering. Again, this may be attributable to the social workers’ non-partisan disposition, which prevented them from engaging in party politics or related activities. Besides, there actually is a rather low membership rate in Hong Kong’s embryonic political parties, which only began to develop in the early 1990s. That also partly explains the low participation rate of social workers in party rallies.

The role of collaborator

Hong Kong social workers appeared to be rather passive in terms of collaboration. Only 13% of the respondents had organized or participated in any groups to work on a government policy problem or agency related policy problem, as compared to the 43% average of the three other places. It seemed that these respondents were more prone to participate in ad hoc or ‘one-shot’ social actions or activities, rather than affiliating themselves to established political groups.

The role of advocate

On average, the Hong Kong social workers were less active than those studied in the other three places in the domain of advocating: 38.8 against 68.2%. However, within the Hong
Kong sample, ‘advocating’ comes third in the overall profile of political activities most frequently taken by the group of respondents. The overall high ratio is particularly weighted towards advocating for change in agency policies. This is probably because Hong Kong social workers are very much identified with their employee status vis-à-vis their employing social service agencies, that they are more prone to take advocacy actions within their own agency. Wong’s (1993) finding also revealed that ‘activists’ in his study were ‘consistent in their attitudes towards changes without and within their agency’ (Wong, 1993:30). On the other hand, there is also a high percentage of ‘advocating for clients’. This is particularly common among community workers whose duties are concerned with helping clients whose problems are mostly related to government policies (e.g. in housing allocation, welfare rights, and the like).

In another respect, it is interesting to note that ‘participating in lobbying for a professional interest group’ was the least attended activity: only a small 7.6%; while ‘working with others to advocate change in agency services’ and ‘advocating with government department for clients’ recorded higher participation: 54 and 44.9% respectively. It seems to reflect that social workers in Hong Kong were less concerned about their profession’s (or their professional groups’) interests than those of their clients who were affected by social service agencies and government departments.
The role of communicator

Hong Kong social workers were apparently quite active in communicating as a form of political participation: 64.6%, which is the second-most frequently taken political action; though it still fared lower than the 89.2% average of the other three places. It can be easily understood that discussing with others, including family members, friends and colleagues, about political issues, can be a casual social interaction. Another aspect of ‘communicating’ is to keep abreast with the government’s policy development. It is apparent that Hong Kong social workers were keen to keep themselves informed of government policy documents, as revealed by the finding that 72.6% of the respondents had read relevant government policy papers in the period of the study.

C. Comparison between formal and informal channels of participation

Overall the Hong Kong sample of social workers seemed to have slightly higher participation in informal-non-electoral channels than formal-electoral ones: 33.3 as compared to 31.9%. Yet, such aggregated figures should be read with caution, since the range of the various scores is quite high: in ‘formal’ channels, they can be as high as 81.1% (voting) and as low as 4.3% (campaigning); while for ‘informal’ ones, there can also be high scores (64.6% in ‘communicating’) as well as low scores (13% in ‘collaborating’).
D. Differences among respondents

Upon closer examination, there exist some subtle differences among the respondents in accordance with their respective background characteristics. Overall male respondents were more active in almost all aspects of political participation. There are a few exceptions. Female respondents were more prone to participate in organized demonstrations in support of government policies. Moreover, they were more active in engaging in political and/or electoral discussion with their family members, friends and colleagues than the male counterparts. With respect to age, there appears to be a positive correlation between respondent’s age and their level of political activity: the older the practitioner, the more active they were. It can be attributed to the fact that older workers were more senior and would probably promote to senior positions in their service organization. It is also true for social work educators and academics with more experience, who could teach at the higher education level. Alternatively, it can also be interpreted that younger workers had grown up in a different socio-political context in which political alienation prevailed, as precipitated from the Sino-British antagonism during the 1980s. Results revealed that there was also a positive relationship between the respondents’ educational attainment and their level of political participation. Obviously, given that the social work educators should normally have higher academic and professional qualification, this finding is basically accounted for by the higher
incidence of political activity by social work educators. Once again, due to the fact that the social work educators and managerial practitioners had more years of working experience, it accounts for the positive correlation between respondents’ years of practice and their level of political activity.

With respect to the respondents’ field of practice, it is apparent that community development workers were the most active in political participation, having an overall average of 48.9%. In fact, the community workers ranked first in all the ten types of political activities among the five major groups of respondents. The community workers were particularly active in the roles of ‘lobbyist’ and ‘individualist’, and in contacting government officials at local and central (i.e., Hong Kong, not ‘national’) levels. Their levels of participation in these areas were even higher than the average of the three other places under comparison. This finding of highest political participation rate among community workers concurs with Wong’s (1993) earlier finding that community workers were the most active in promoting social change in the profession and conforms to findings elsewhere. Clark and Asquith (1985) highlighted the political nature of community work in the UK during the 1980s. Community workers practice at the macro level as their practice is directly related to government policies that affect clients at the grassroots or community level. They create opportunities to engage in political activities such as contacting government officials,
politicians, and taking social action. Ironically, the government bestowed them this favourable position in grassroots organizing and mobilizing. As Wong (1993) contended, ‘the state’s patronizing of community organization projects [in the 1980s] provides an important arena where social workers are involved directly in social change activities’ (Wong, 1993:5). Yeung (1994) also highlighted the political role of community social workers as enablers, organizers and advocates.

Youth workers were the second-most active: 30.6% in overall average. This finding can be attributed to the possibility that youth problems were highly likely to capture public attention evidenced by the many policies pertaining to youth issues (e.g. education, employment, leisure, crime, and drug addiction), which concern youth workers in their daily work. Social workers in the field of the elderly were also quite active, ranking third (29.9%) among the five groups of practitioners from different fields. The elderly in Hong Kong have persistently constituted a predominant portion in the government’s public assistance scheme, and that there were ongoing efforts by social workers serving the elderly to strive for their welfare rights.

Respondents holding managerial positions were most active politically. This is consistent with Wong’s (1993) finding relating to the political activity of social workers in supervisory (and thus managerial) positions. However, on the whole, social work educators or
academics were more active than their managerial counterparts and those in various other positions. The managerial practitioners had very high scores on a few items thus recording the highest overall average degree of political activity. This pattern may be attributed to the fact that practitioners in middle-management positions had a better chance of becoming involved in policy formulation since they were often appointed onto advisory bodies, and for contacting government officials through such channels. This must be seen against the backdrop of the elaborate proliferation of advisory bodies appointed by the government as part of Hong Kong’s limited democratization, which, in reality, amounts to ‘government-by-consultation’.

**Discussion**

While Hong Kong’s social workers appear to be less active in the political arena than their Western counterparts in New Zealand, Australia and South Africa, as the history shows, they have, in fact, been a highly active group. In the foreseeable future, it is anticipated that Hong Kong social workers will continue to play an active political role, though not necessarily as significant and visible a role as in the 70s and 80s. There are many reasons for this analysis. First, in Hong Kong, given its limited democratic structure, there will not be an election of government. This prevents the development of fully-fledged political parties, since there will
not be any ‘ruling party’ as such. Thus, party politics and their political aspirants will not have much room for manoeuvre in Hong Kong’s restrictive political arena. Given this constraint, the political parties and politicians may not be able to deliver their political goals of meeting the needs of their constituents. People have to look for additional or alternative figures to help them make their case thus providing the avenue for social workers to take up the role of educator, organizer, enabler, facilitator, and the like, as they have done in the past.

There is still another inherent problem delimiting the political parties’ role in mobilizing ordinary citizens, especially those customarily served by the social work profession. In Hong Kong’s legislature, to which the political parties and their attendant politicians aspire through elections, there are seats for legislators returned from ‘functional constituencies’ and ‘geographical constituencies’ respectively. The former are basically a collection of professional groups, membership of which is primarily middle-class or even capitalist. The lower socio-economic groups are normally not their constituencies and will, therefore, be neglected by those politicians elected from among these professional groups. On the other hand, legislators elected from geographical constituencies may also not attend to the needs of deprived groups such as the elderly, physically and/or mentally disabled, the chronically ill, welfare recipients, and the like, since they are not confined to a specific
geographical area. These groups are in dire need of the assistance and service of social workers in striving for their rights.

With respect to the specific political roles possibly played by social workers in the near future, there can be divergences. In the year 2007, the Hong Kong legislature will enter into its third term of office after the 1997 transfer. The political parties by then have already undergone nearly two decades of development since the 1990s. By then, electioneering and party politics may become more intense, and thus there might be more campaigns and increased political mobilization. However, due to the aforementioned aversion by social workers to party politics, it would be unlikely that social workers would become active in campaigning roles. Yet, in their private role as Hong Kong citizens, they might still be swept into the stream of electoral mobilization at that time. In this regard, they might be more active in voting and persuading in the forthcoming direct elections.

With the executive-led nature of Hong Kong’s polity, in which the legislature is highly restrained in its political clout, there is the need to approach government officials directly, instead of appealing to the politicians to accomplish policy changes. Thus, it can be anticipated that social workers, especially community workers, who have already been quite active in contacting government officials at district and central (Hong Kong, not national-China) levels, will maintain their high profile in lobbyist and individualist roles. On
the other hand, in the Chief Executive’s second term of office (2002-2007), there would be increasing efforts by the government to appeal to more robust citizen support of the government, given that the first term of the administration (1997-2002) has been marred with multifarious problems. It follows that the government would make more effort to appear to be open to citizens’ opinions and policy suggestions. Then, more public hearings or consultative forums might be held. It therefore follows that social workers would probably take an active role in witnessing, and might even mobilize their respective clients to assert their civic rights through such channels. Besides, given the possibility (outlined above) that political parties and politicians might not adequately serve their constituents, social workers might still have to maintain their advocacy and social activist roles in striving for the plight of the deprived people in society. Finally, as communicating is essentially a less demanding action, it could be contended that social workers would basically maintain their present level of activity in discussing with their family members, friends and colleagues about policies, reading relevant government documents, and the like, in this way raising awareness of political matters.

**Conclusion**

A historical review tracing Hong Kong’s development from the post-war period to the near present helps to illustrate the socio-economic and political development of Hong Kong
society. This provided a fertile social context for the development of social workers’ participation in politics in Hong Kong. The politicization of social workers, viewed from their gradual shift from the service role to that of participating in informal and then formal channels of political participation, is essentially a manifestation of the dialectical relationship between Hong Kong’s political evolution and the social functions of the social work profession. A general observation can be made that the social workers emerged from a service-oriented profession to that with a policy advocacy role working through informal channels. They later evolved to take up a cogently political role by entering formal channels or by becoming part of the establishment or status quo as it is often referred to in the social work literature. These three different roles are neither mutually exclusive, nor need they be in conflict with one another. They can be viewed as a natural evolution of the increasing role of government intervention in social policies, and the sudden politicization of the society at large induced by the political change over in 1997.

Given Hong Kong’s evolution in political development, the social context has laid the groundwork for the proliferation of social workers’ participation in politics. Their participation in informal channels, together with their service clients, serve as the stepping stone for their eventual involvement in formal political channels. To borrow from Wolfsfeld’s (1966) conception of political efficacy, the social workers have evolved from having
‘mobilizational efficacy’ of organizing the people in informal channels, to gaining ‘institutional efficacy’ of working through the formal channels. Their accomplishment in these two respective arenas serves as reinforcement of their political orientation towards greater participation. Moreover, their professional training, and the ready receptivity of their clientele, enabled them to develop a wide repertoire of political skills. They may well be conceived of as what Wolfsfeld (1966) called the ‘pragmatists’: an elite of highly motivated individuals who are both willing and able to take on a variety of political roles. It is therefore justified to assert that the social workers can rightly perform their role of mediator between the government and the people, or from a macro-political perspective, the role of enhancing political mobilization and political integration of the Hong Kong polity.

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