8 Television in the formation of civil society

The role of a non-controversial public space in Hong Kong

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Introduction

Television first appeared in Hong Kong in 1957. It was a cable television service run by the Rediffusion Company which had operated a highly successful wired sound broadcasting service since 1949. Hong Kong was the first British colony to have television. But the Rediffusion television service was very expensive. Its monthly subscription fee was HK$55. In 1958, a technical worker’s monthly wages were HK$360 and an unskilled worker earned only HK$75 (Hong Kong Government 1959: 32). A year before the introduction of free-to-air television in 1967, Rediffusion television had only 67,000 subscribers (Hong Kong Government 1967: 206). Thus before 1967 television was an elite medium and its social impact was minimal.

After the introduction of free-to-air television in 1967, however, television penetrated rapidly and became a genuine mass medium in 1970s. From then onwards, Hong Kong witnessed great changes, among which were the formation of a distinctive Hong Kong cultural identity and the emergence of an autonomous civil society.

This chapter examines the development of television in Hong Kong accompanying the socioeconomic changes. I conclude that television provides a public space for Hong Kong people to interact among themselves, contributing to the formation of a civil society which is distinctively different from the previous ones. Before the emergence of television as a mass medium, most civil associations were state-sponsored or oppositional in nature. The civil society that emerged after the 1970s was one which has shown great autonomy from the state and has existed alongside the state peacefully without subverting state control or submitting itself to the arbitrary rule of the state.

Civil associations in Hong Kong

There has been much discussion of the concept of civil society. The concept has been criticised for lacking precision. It is not clear if it is an aspiration or a sociological condition; hope often replaces analysis. In much of the
twentieth century, according to Hall (2000), the state has been taken as a moral project, with virtue accordingly seen as a proper object of political action. However, the state’s engineering of human souls destroyed any conception of a private realm free from political interference. The end result has been massive murdering of tens of millions of people. In Europe civil society became a slogan in reaction to the brutal costs of social revolution.

The democratisation movements of Southern Europe popularised the term in the 1970s, hoping that strong, autonomous groups would balance state power. Intellectual opposition in Eastern and Central Europe took matters further. It dreamt of a societal self-organisation so complete that politics would not be necessary. The most striking characteristic of the recent discourse about civil society has been its anti-statism. At best, the state is allowed to be present just so long as it is controlled or balanced. However, Hall (2000) argues that anti-statism will not do as a general characterisation of civil society, either in the abstract or as a description of the ways in which the term has been used in the past. The removal of a large and predatory state did not and does not ensure decency in social life. Without the state, chaos is ensured.

What is needed, according to Hall, is both a curtailment of despotism and a re-creation of trust so as to allow functional tasks to be performed more effectively by the state. Hall argues that a civil society is one in which there is cooperation, rather than mere balance, with the state. What is needed is a politics of reciprocal consent.

He points out further that another analytic weakness of the recent anti-statist view of civil society has been the uncritical adulation of social groups. Powerful societal self-organisation does not necessarily make a civil society. Many groups have been no more than sealed cages: castes, tight kinship links, sects—and often these are in a constant state of war with each other. Aristotle conceives of the state as a realm free from kinship links and thus a necessary protector of civil relations. Certainly, despotic power is an enemy of civil society, but civility is not necessarily grounded in the absence of the state.

The proper definition of civil society must accordingly concentrate on the individual’s right to choose a pattern of development within a world populated with open groups in agreement on the need to respect a measure of diversity in social life (Hall 2000: 51). This chapter subscribes to this idea and treats civil society as an autonomous entity, without necessarily assuming an anti-state character. I define civil society, using Hall’s idea, as ‘a form of social organisation stressing an individual’s right to choose a pattern of development within a pluralistic world with diversity in social life’ (ibid.: 51). Since it is a form of social organisation, there could be multiple civil societies within a national or geopolitical boundary.

In Hong Kong, the notion of civil society also lacks precision. The literal translation of this term from Chinese is ‘citizen society’. In the Hong Kong context, the notion of citizenship puts more stress on social obligations rather than rights. When the term citizenship is used, it often connotes
‘fulfilling citizens’ obligations’ rather than ‘exercising citizens’ rights’. For example, in the legislature’s election campaigns, people were urged to vote in order to ‘fulfil citizens’ obligations’ rather than ‘exercise citizens’ rights’. This emphasis on citizens’ obligations in civil society has to do with the colonial history of Hong Kong.

Hong Kong was ruled by an authoritarian state up until the 1980s when a cultural-based civil society started to emerge and be aware of its own existence – becoming a civil society for itself (Ip 1997). Before the 1980s, Hong Kong’s civil associations were small, fragmented, often non-political and state-led. They can be divided into four types: co-opted societies formed by the wealthy Chinese class, public organisations initiated by the government, institutions inherited from traditions, and politically oppositional groups. The first two categories were state-led, while the third was tolerated and the fourth was discouraged by the state.

The co-opted civil associations formed by the Chinese elite class included the Tung Wah Hospital established in 1869 and Po Leung Kuk established in 1880. They took up charity activities such as helping the sick, poor, orphans and abducted women. The second type of state-led organisations included Kaifong Welfare Associations in the 1960s and Mutual-Aid Committees in the 1970s. They served as vehicles to help government achieve its goals such as liaison with local people and anti-crime activities.

For institutions inherited from tradition, the Man Mo Temple is a good example. It began as a body to coordinate social and religious activities, but later became an unofficial local government board to adjudicate civil disputes in the Chinese community. The Man Mo Temple Committee comprised Chinese representatives from all of the different districts in the territory (Thomas 1999: 139). Its influence declined after the Second World War.

In the fourth category of civil associations are those which present an oppositional force against the state such as the trade unions and political groups. These organisations usually have ties with political parties in mainland China. The Seamen’s Strike in 1922, for example, was organised by activists associated with the Chinese Nationalist Party in Guangdong. Many of the anti-state social groups in Hong Kong before the 1980s were offshoots of Chinese political parties, either the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) or the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). These oppositional forces were suppressed or restrained by the colonial regime. In 1950, for example, when the leftist Tram Workers Union organised a strike, the police raided and shut down the Union office, followed by deportation of twenty union staff, including the chairman, to China.

None of these civil associations, except the oppositional ones, were autonomous from the state. The Tung Wah Hospital, Man Mo Temple, or Kaifong Welfare Associations had the blessing of the government. This explains in part why the notion of civil society in Hong Kong stresses citizens’ obligations more than rights. Oppositional civil associations were discouraged and harassed by the state. These civil associations were frag-
mented, isolated and disunited. They did not coordinate among themselves or share a common platform vis-à-vis the state.

In the 1970s, however, accompanied by economic growth and political separation from China, there emerged a new kind of civil society which was neither co-opted, nor oppositional. It was autonomous yet non-confrontational; united yet no concerted demands were made of the state for action. The civil society that emerged in the 1970s was representative of various interests existing side by side with the state. It was a self-conscious entity which advocated social interests in dialogue with the state.

This civil society was formed on the basis of a distinctive cultural identity among the populace of Hong Kong. The Hongkonger’s identity is different from that of the colonial rulers’ or the traditional Chinese identity. With the assumption of a Hongkonger’s identity, civil society is no longer the same as before. It is a culturally based civil society, possessing an autonomous and separate status from the state, and with great representation of the community.

This culturally based civil society does not reside in a particular club or social grouping. It exists as a common or imagined consciousness among people. This common sharing of values, ideas and beliefs constitutes a social force not to be ignored, slighted or suppressed by the state. This cultural civil society is formed and manifests itself in the public sphere provided by mass media, especially television. In the following pages, I will discuss the formation of this culturally based civil society in relation to television and the socioeconomic changes since the 1970s.

The development of television

The emergence of television as a popular mass medium in Hong Kong had a tremendous impact that included the cultivation of a distinctive cultural identity among Hong Kong people who were British colonial subjects.

Private initiatives were the moving force behind the growth of free-to-air television in Hong Kong. Right from the beginning, television was to be provided on a commercial basis and government initiative was minimal. When the Television Bill was written in 1964, the Colonial Secretary made it clear that the bill owed something to similar legislation in Australia. A major feature of the Bill was to prevent foreign control of television services and to limit cross-media ownership. It stipulated that not less than 60 per cent of the voting shares of the franchised company should be owned by British subjects ordinarily resident in Hong Kong, and that voting shares owned by any non-British person or organisation be restricted to 15 per cent or less of the total. In addition, no competitor, supplier of broadcasting material or advertising agent was permitted a controlling interest in such a company (Hong Kong Hansard 1965).

However, the underlying principles and means for carrying out these provisions in the context of Hong Kong did not work out satisfactorily. In
the second reading of the Bill several months later in 1964, the clause restricting foreign control was struck out because ‘there might be such a risk if unduly onerous restrictions on shareholding and share transfers made investment in the undertaking unattractive ... the public would not receive the standard of television which the Bill seeks to provide’ (Hong Kong Hansard 1965: 372). The cancellation of the clause of foreign control showed that the government was prepared to trade its control for foreign investment. The colonial government was eager to have television services, but was concerned about outside influences on broadcasting. What it had relaxed related only to control by subjects of Britain’s geopolitical allies. However, it would see to it that the control would not fall into the hands of unfriendly ‘outsiders’. Broadcasting services including radio and television would not be permitted to be controlled by Chinese unfaithful to the state.

In 1965 the Television Bill was amended again to make provision for the Governor to allow Rediffusion, the existing cable television service provider, to get the franchise for free-to-air television. It is interesting to note that in the amended bill, the provision against cross-media ownership was not struck out; instead, it was made to be ‘effective’ only after the grant of the licence for free-to-air TV. This amendment was claimed to give the Governor ‘complete freedom to select the best and most suitable applicant’ (Hong Kong Hansard 1966: 401 – 3).

From these initial events, we can see that the state did not intend to place too many restrictions on the medium. The state was more concerned with the provision of service than control of the medium. Commercial imperatives prevailed over political considerations in the introduction of free-to-air television into Hong Kong in the early years.

**Principles of regulating television**

Over the years, Hong Kong has developed an elaborate system of regulations concerning television. Apart from the Television Ordinance (Cap. 52), there are the Telecommunication Ordinance (Cap. 106), the Broadcasting Authority Ordinance (Cap. 391), and Codes of Practice regulating television programmes and advertising. All these laws govern the operation of television in Hong Kong. In addition, many other laws are also relevant, such as the Smoking (Public Health) Ordinance (Cap. 371), the Undesirable Medical Advertisements Ordinance (Cap. 231), the Film Censorship Ordinance (Cap. 392), the Pharmacy and Poisons Ordinance (Cap. 138) and the Gambling Ordinance (Cap. 148).

Taking a broad view, we can say that Hong Kong television has been regulated along five principles. They are:

- Television services must be local and independent;
- Television services should maintain the status quo;
- Television news should be fair and provide proper guidance;
• Children should be protected;
• Public health should be protected.

These five principles have laid down the ground rules for television to operate. Basically, the television services in Hong Kong, as designed by the regulators, are expected to behave properly. Metaphorically, television in Hong Kong is to be a family friend possessing mainstream values, loyal to family, caring for children, concerned for public good, mild and moderate in temperament, neutral and somewhat disgusted at politics!

Under these regulations, one would not expect this family friend to be an advocate for change, to show passion for new ideas and values, to fight for the downtrodden and underprivileged, or to embrace political debates and examine deep-rooted social issues. This family friend is satisfied with leading a decent life, in following the mainstream, staying close to social peers, earning enough money to raise the family and staying away from empty idealtistic talk.

Given these expectations, Hong Kong television concentrates on entertainment, with a minimal supply of news services and current affairs programmes. As a matter of fact, both free-to-air television stations, the Television Broadcast Ltd (TVB) and Asia Television Ltd (ATV), were required by their licence conditions to broadcast a minimum of two comprehensive news bulletins, each of not less than fifteen minutes duration, each evening between 6 p.m. and 12 midnight. They are also required to broadcast a minimum of sixty minutes of documentary programmes and two half-hour current affairs programmes each week between 6 p.m. and 12 midnight, of which not less than thirty minutes are to be wholly of Hong Kong origin (Renewed Licence to Broadcast for TVB Amended Licence, 5 December 2000, Sections 14, 15, 16; Renewed Licence to Broadcast for ATV, 1999, Sections 14, 15, 16). Seldom do both stations produce news, current affairs and documentary programmes beyond the required minimum between 6 p.m. and 12 midnight. The overwhelming majority of programmes shown in this period are serial dramas and entertainment fanfares.

In the year 2001, for instance, most of the prime time programmes on both TVB and ATV were serial dramas. There were often three different dramas throughout the night starting from 7 p.m. to 11 p.m. In between, there might be a thirty-minute infotainment programme or public television programme produced by Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK). Carriage of RTHK's programmes is required by the government. The Chinese channels of TVB and ATV broadcast their last news bulletins at 11:45 p.m. and 11 p.m. respectively.

With this non-informational nature, one cannot expect television in Hong Kong to play the role of opinion leader; even less can one expect it to be a fighter for social causes. It is out of the question that it will stand up against the state. Paradoxically, it is exactly this non-controversial character that
makes television an important medium in helping to form a civil society which is independent of the state, yet not opposing it.

**Transborder television**

In the 1990s, satellite and cable (pay) television were introduced into Hong Kong. It was at a time when television viewing declined steadily. In the early 1980s, a TVB Chinese programme could still get a rating as high as 56 points. In the 1990s, however, if a programme could get more than 32 points, it was already a hit (AGB Research Services 1994). This trend continued at the turn of the new millennium; there was no sign of recovery for television viewing. In July 2001, for example, a TVB cop drama *Armed Reaction III* got 32 points. It was hailed as a great success.

Since satellite television from outside mostly aims at the China market, rather than Hong Kong, none of the satellite television services uses Cantonese in their programming. They use either Mandarin or English. Therefore, Hong Kong people seldom watch satellite television. The Hong Kong Cable Television (HKCTV) launched its service in 1993 with an exclusive right until 2000 when three licences were issued to Yes Television (Hong Kong) Limited, Pacific Digital Media (HK) Corporation Limited and Galaxy Satellite Broadcasting Limited. Without competition for a long while, the HKCTV cared less about producing more local programmes and their quality. Its penetration has been slow; after seven years the rate was still around 30 per cent.

The government has introduced different programme and advertising codes for pay and satellite television. Since pay television is a multi-channel service targeting different audience groups, the regulations are somewhat different from the terrestrial advertising-driven television. For example, pay television is not required to have Family Viewing Hours. Yet in programmes targeting children, similar provisions for terrestrial commercial television are set for pay television. Also guidelines concerning the portrayal of sex, nudity and violence in general programming are same as those for advertising-driven television. There is a special Adult Channel on pay television. This channel is allowed to show movies classified as Category III by the Film Censorship Authority. Nevertheless, violence, nudity and occasional use of offensive language still have to be justified in context (*Subscription Television Code for Practice on Programme Standards*, 31 August 1999, Part B).

The advertising standard for pay television is basically the same as that for advertising-driven television. However, it has provisions for home-shopping channels. These provisions deal mainly with honest and fair trading. Samples of goods promoted must be made available at a known address for public inspection, the product must have a delivery time of no more than thirty days, and there must be sufficient stock on hand (*Subscription Television Code of Practice on Advertising Standards*, 31 August 1999, Part B).
For satellite television targeting Hong Kong, the programme and advertising codes are the same as those for terrestrial television, including Family Viewing Hours and programme classification. For satellite television targeting audiences outside Hong Kong, the programme and advertising codes are simpler and more general, covering briefly the area of decency, hatred, sex, nudity, violence, crimes, protection of children, news programmes and advertising.

The impact of both cable and satellite television is yet to be felt in Hong Kong. Although cable television has been providing thirty-one channels with diverse programmes, most of the programmes are foreign-produced with little local appeal. Many subscribers use the cable service for news, sports, movies and children's programmes only. With more competition in sight, the appeal of cable television may be better.

The government does not treat cable and satellite television much differently from terrestrial advertising-driven television. These two new forms of television play a role similar to the terrestrial television. However, due to their limited appeal to Hong Kong people, they are not on an equal footing to terrestrial advertising-driven television. Moreover, in recent years, both TVB and ATV have steadily lost their appeal, probably because of a lack of new ideas and excitement. The competition from other leisure activities such as karaoke, computer games, VCD and ICQ has also contributed to the decline in the appeal of television.

In July 2000, the Hong Kong government consolidated various regulations into a Broadcasting Ordinance (Cap. 562) which seeks to further advance broadcasting policy objectives of:

- widening programming choice to cater for the diversified tastes and interests of the community;
- encouraging investment, innovation and technology transfer in the broadcasting industry;
- ensuring fair and effective competition in the provision of broadcasting services;
- ensuring that broadcasting services provided are up to expectations and do not offend public tastes and decency; and
- promoting Hong Kong as a regional broadcasting and communications hub.

The major substance of this bill is to impose limits on cross-media ownership. The intent is to ensure diversity in programming and free competition. The market of seven million people, however, does not seem to be able to sustain a high degree of competition among different television services. Moreover, the dominance of TVB in the market has become a deterrent for new entrants. The prospect of increasing programme quality and viewership through competition is not good since the profit margin for a successful new entrant tends to be small given the dominance of TVB in the market.
The formation of the Hongkonger’s identity

Before the 1970s, the Hong Kong people’s identity was mainly ‘Chinese’. Politically they were ‘rightist’, ‘leftist’, ‘neutral’ or ‘apolitical’. The mainstream newspapers in the 1970s – namely, the Wah Kiu Yat Po, Keung Sheung Daily News and Sing Tao Jih Pao – were largely pro-Taiwan, but relatively apolitical in news coverage and editorials. Perhaps the identity of the Hong Kong people is manifested by these newspapers’ popularity. One illustration of Hong Kong people’s sense of Chinese identity was the press response to student protests in 1971 against the American handover of the Tiao Yu Tai Islands to Japan.

Tiao Yu Tai is a group of small islands long recorded as part of the Chinese territories in Chinese historical accounts. These islands became a US protectorate after the Second World War during which Japan occupied the islands. In 1970, the US announced that the islands would be ‘given back’ to Japan. This incident stirred up protests and opposition among overseas Chinese. Objections were also raised by the Chinese Nationalist government in Taiwan, and the communist government in mainland China. Mass demonstrations against Japan were launched by students in Hong Kong for the first time since the Second World War. The protests quickly enlisted the support of workers and people from other walks of life. The British colonial government acted promptly and banned the demonstrations. In confrontations with the police many students were injured and arrested.

The press almost unanimously denounced the government’s brutal actions against the students. In the Tiao Yu Tai protests the hidden nationalist sentiment of the Hong Kong Chinese surfaced for the first time since the Second World War. Although the sentiment died down soon after, and the Chinese governments on both sides of the Strait were not enthusiastic about the issue, Hong Kong people’s reactions to the Tiao Yu Tai incident demonstrated that many Hong Kong Chinese identified themselves as Chinese up to the early 1970s.

Many explanations have been given to the emergence of a Hongkonger identity among people in Hong Kong. Lau (2000) listed seven factors for its formation. Lee (2000) named six historical events which paved the way for the genesis of a Hongkonger identity among Hong Kong people. Whatever factors and historical events are taken into account, however, Hong Kong’s cultural, political and economic separation from mainland China is definitely a major factor. While Lau (2000) considered the emergence of a distinctive popular culture among Hong Kong people as an important factor for the Hongkonger identity, Lee (2000) treats this distinctive popular culture as a manifestation of the Hongkongers’ identity. Lee suggests that television serves as an anchor to landmark and stabilise the Hong Kong people’s cultural characteristics.
The role of television in the formation of civil society

Hong Kong’s television regulations open up as well as limit the space for the emergence of a civil society different from the preceding ones – autonomous and self-conscious – as compared with the state-led or oppositional societies. Television is free to produce entertainment, but restricted in covering political and socioeconomic issues. Interestingly, the apolitical and non-controversial character of television helps to bring people of different backgrounds together to interact and mingle. Political allegiances which divided the society were put aside in the public space provided by television.

Television news and current affairs programmes do not advocate any changes in values or subvert any established institutions, but they focus people’s attention on local events and problems. By being non-controversial, television performs a widely accepted agenda-setting function for people. Television news and current affairs programmes ‘do not tell people what to think, but tell people what to think about’ (Cohen 1963: 13). Moreover, news and current affairs programmes have a strong local emphasis. For the first time, Hong Kong people saw for themselves what happened in their society every day.

Due to the high rating of television news, which was consistently on the top ten list in the 1970s, a huge number of people shared the same symbolic reality in front of television every evening. The fragmenting social realities shown in newspapers of different political allegiances are ‘unified’ in television news programmes. In the 1970s, some top-rated programmes, overwhelmingly TVB’s, scored a rating of 65 points and some episodes reached as high as 80 points. Ma observes that

the literal, much-ignored notion of ‘Hong Kong society’ was knitted into visual news narratives. The abstract ‘city of Hong Kong’ was able, at least as represented in the news programmes, to incarnate itself into concrete, integrative, and localised social events.

(Ma 1999: 34)

Apart from news and current affairs programmes produced by commercial television, the public affairs programmes produced by the public broadcaster, RTHK, also had tremendous impact in the 1970s. Some are particularly worth mentioning. The Needle Point series in 1973, for example, was the first programme in Hong Kong’s television history to discuss public affairs. Although the tone was mild judging by today’s standards, the programme aroused great interest among the public, especially the educated class. In the context of a relatively repressive colonial society, the programme was mind-opening. The structure of the show meant that the studio audience could express their views as well as the invited guests. It showed to the public that they could talk about government policies although their talk had to be ‘rational’ and ‘balanced’. The programme set an example of what government policies people could discuss. Although this
programme was ‘managed’ by the state (the RTHK is still a government department at the time of writing, although it has been playing a public broadcaster’s role more), people at least got the signal that they could talk about public affairs and should pay attention to local issues.

Another important RTHK programme in the 1970s was Below the Lion Rock. It was a single-episode drama series in the setting of an old public housing estate. The overwhelming majority of Hong Kong people then lived in public housing estates. The plots developed around bread-and-butter issues or topics of the times among family members. The characters were familiar people in one’s neighbourhood. The experiences, values and aspirations resonated with those of the working class in the 1970s.

The more important influences in the formation of the Hong Kong people’s own identity and cultural civil society came from TVB’s entertainment programmes. TVB’s Chinese channel has dominated the television industry for more than three decades. Even now, it still commands more than 70 per cent of the prime-time audience. In the 1970s it consistently had a share of more than 80 per cent. Most of the people watched TVB, hence its influence was greater than ATV or RTHK. As mentioned earlier, the serial dramas on TVB in the 1970s rated as high as 80 points. That meant that a huge number of people watched them every night. In 1976, while the serial drama Hotel was on, many people rushed home after work in order not to miss the programme. In some highlight episodes and the ending, the streets were nearly empty because people were watching television at home.

Nevertheless, a content analysis of these serial dramas showed no values significantly different from prevailing social values. The narratives were typical stories about personal struggles to succeed, strife among different classes in the business world, interpersonal conflicts in love, fame, wealth, and the like (Lee 2000). The influence these dramas had lay in providing common topics for people to discuss and share in their daily lives. The programme itself can be understood as a social event. When people paid attention to it, they shared a common experience. Meanwhile, the common experiences of Hong Kong people were articulated and manifested in the news programmes, sit-coms, variety shows and dramas. Their experiences were uniquely different from those in Taiwan, China and the West. Chinese identity receded and a Hongkonger identity emerged.

The popularity of television also contributed to the emergence of a new vernacular local culture. From the 1960s to the early 1970s, the pop charts were dominated by Western pop or Mandarin pop. The cinemas were filled with Anglo-American and Mandarin chivalry genre movies. The local vernacular Cantonese movies literally died. In the 1950s and 1960s, Cantonese movies dominated the cinema and more than a hundred were produced each year. Due to repetitive themes, outdated techniques and poor production qualities, the genre started to decline after the mid-1960s. The emergence of television dealt the final blow to the old Cantonese movies. In 1971, only one Cantonese movie was produced, and in 1972 there was no
production at all. Meanwhile, Hong Kong television started to develop its
own genres of sword-fighting, kung-fu and chivalry serial dramas.

Television, being a new popular medium, absorbed a large group of
workers and actors from the declining Cantonese movie industry and
attracted a large pool of talent from the educated class. In the 1970s when
only 2 per cent of students of relevant age could enter universities, university
graduates had great opportunities in government or the business sector. Yet
many of them joined the relatively low-paid television industry. Some were
even willing to do the job of weather women. These talents later helped to
transform local pop culture completely.

In the 1970s, the popularity of television created many intimate and
popular artists who turned to the movie industry later. Cantonese movies
came back with new artists, directors, techniques and genres in the late
1970s, although many of them were imitations of successful television series.
In the 1980s, however, Cantonese movies regained their own character.
‘Kung fu’ and ‘kung fu comedy’ were two distinctive genres of Cantonese
movies in the 1980s and 1990s.

Television also contributed to the emergence of a new type of Canto-pop.
At the beginning, it was the theme songs of television series which kept
Canto-pop alive. Later, a local pop singer and television artist, Michael Hui,
experimented with combining rock beats of the West with vernacular lyrics.
The lyrics and language were close to people’s daily life. Hui’s new style was
an instant hit in the market and set a new trend of pop songs. Many pop
groups and artists turned from Western pop to Canto-pop. In the 1980s,
many prominent pop singers emerged, making pop concerts a common
social event for Hong Kong people. Thus, in the early 1980s, Hong Kong
people started to have their own television genres, movie stars, pop singers
and pop songs. These cultural products were also well received in Taiwan,
China, South East Asia and in other overseas Chinese communities. Hong
Kong people are proud of having their own culture and identity.

In acquiring a Hongkonger identity, people in Hong Kong know that
they are one people in the same boat. They are different from their compa-
triots in Taiwan and China – they pride themselves on their economic and
cultural achievements. Meanwhile, they are aware of their independence
from expatriates and colonial rulers. Their world was separated from that of
the expatriates. This is reflected by the persistently low rating of English
channels on both the TVB and ATV. Chinese constitute over 98 per cent of
the Hong Kong population. If they seldom or never watched the English
channels, the ratings could never be high. A study in 1994 showed that only
1–2 per cent of Hong Kong people regularly watched the English language
channels on TVB and ATV. Quite clearly, Hong Kong audiences watch and
enjoy their own Cantonese programmes more than the English language
programmes.

The formation in the 1970s of a civil society distinctively different from
before can be seen most obviously in two areas: conflicts with the state and
the demand for democracy. Although the culturally based civil society is not confrontational in nature, it presses for an equal, if not superior, status vis-à-vis the state.

A study showed that during the period 1975–86, the number of social conflicts, mostly directed against the state, increased year by year. The number of social conflicts in 1975 was thirty-five while in 1986 it increased to 136 (Cheung and Louie 2000: 70). The sectors which recorded a steady increase in social conflict included housing, transport, public utilities and politics. All these sectors were closely related to the government. Most people in Hong Kong lived in public housing estates and the supply of land for private housing was controlled by the government. Public transport and utilities companies were mostly monopolies which were regulated by the government. Political reforms were not introduced until the early 1980s when the British started to negotiate with China for the maintenance of Hong Kong’s status quo beyond 1997 when the lease of the New Territories for ninety-nine years from China would expire. Various forms of conflicts in these sectors, including petitions to government, protests, mass rallies, signature campaigns and press conferences were indications of pressures put on the state by society.

Another manifestation of the power of Hong Kong’s culturally-based civil society is the agitation for democracy since the mid-1980s. Although the initiative for democratic reforms in Hong Kong came from the British, the driving force came from civil society. The demand for popular elections from the public was so great that the British were caught unprepared. China was even more startled to see the strong demand for democratisation in Hong Kong. It protested to the British who ironically needed to join hands with Beijing to suppress the Hongkongers’ demand for democracy. In late 1987 the colonial government hired a consultancy company to help manipulate a survey to obtain a ‘public opinion’ that most Hong Kong people did not favour direct election to the legislature. The result contrasted starkly against most of the polls conducted by non-governmental bodies.

The unbridled challenge cultural civil society presented to the state had been initiated a year earlier in the signature campaign against the construction of a nuclear plant in Daya Bay in China. The plant is very close to Hong Kong. A major investor was a Hong Kong Company, the China Light and Power Co., and the government was one of the guarantors for that project. The Chernobyl accident occurred in April 1986; in July, more than a million of the 5 million Hong Kong people signed a petition against the Daya Bay plant. Although this pressure did not force the government and the Hong Kong Company to drop the project, various study tours abroad and visits to the site of Daya Bay were organised by them. Nuclear experts were hired to assess the risks, and guarantees for safety were repeatedly given.

After the signing of the Sino-British Agreement in 1984 for the reversion
of Hong Kong to China on 1 July 1997, the Hong Kong people basically distrusted both the British and Chinese governments. Many social conflicts developed thereafter, including the massive demonstration against the Chinese communists in the 4 June Massacre in 1989. This demonstrated that Hong Kong civil society is autonomous of the state and powerful enough to exert pressure and influence on the state.

The formation of this cultural civil society is dependent on the crystallisation of a common identity among people vis-à-vis the state. In the context of Hong Kong, the Hongkonger identity provides a cornerstone for civil society to develop in contradistinction to the British colonial state before 1997 and the Chinese authoritarian state after the handover. The demand for democracy in Hong Kong is a representation of the wish of Hong Kong people to get away from the authoritarian state, both British and Chinese.

Should there be an erosion of the Hongkonger identity and a return to the Chinese one following the handover, the role of civil society as a buffer against the state will be weakened. The demand for democracy will also retreat. If Hong Kong people do not consider themselves to be different from their compatriots on the mainland, they will finally accept the practices of their fellowmen. Based on this analysis, I would propose that, to the extent that there is a Hongkonger identity, the demand of democracy which serves as a guard against the Chinese authoritarian state will be kept alive. On the other hand, if the Hongkonger identity diminishes, the drive for democracy in Hong Kong will be weakened. Without a Hongkonger cultural civil society, the resistance to the Chinese state's encroachment, either active or passive, will be nullified.

Conclusion

With a decline in viewing, television today can no longer play a significant role in articulating and cultivating people's identity as in the 1970s and 1980s. The culturally-based civil society, however, already has a life of its own. Since the late 1980s, a cultural civil society has articulated itself through its responses to various social issues, such as the Daya Bay Incident in 1986, Basic Law consultation and agitation for direct election in 1987–8, protests against the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989, Sino-British rows in the handover years including the construction of the Tsing Ma Bridge, new airport, corporatisation of Radio Television Hong Kong, introduction of the Bill of Rights, direct election initiated by governor Christopher Patten, and the formation of China's own shadow legislature.

After 1997, Hong Kong's cultural civil society exists autonomously and consciously alongside the proxy government formed by Beijing in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR). Although the civil society does not challenge the Chinese authoritarian state, it passively resists its encroachment. Whenever Chinese officials attempt to intervene in Hong
Kong’s internal affairs, such as the National Peoples Congress’s reinterpretation of the Hong Kong Final Court of Appeal’s decision on the Right of Abode Issue for Hongkongers’ mainland children, or the ‘pledge’ made to the Hong Kong press not to report views advocating Taiwan independence, uproars from various sectors will be heard.

In addition, Hong Kong press opinions were particularly harsh on Beijing’s proxy government in Hong Kong in the few years after the handover. It certainly had to do with the coincidence of the Asian financial crisis which resulted in Hong Kong’s economic downturn in late 1997. The ineptitude of the new HKSAR government under the reign of the Beijing-appointed Chief Executive, Tung Chee-wah, also had a share of the blame.

In fact, after the mid-1980s, television no longer needed to play a role in fostering or strengthening Hongkonger identity. Once the identity and the civil society are formed, the catalyst is not that important any more. Hongkongers and their civil society act independently of the state. They act upon, as well as react to, social events. The formation of such a cultural civil society was certainly beyond the calculation of the British regulators when they laid down the rules for commercial wireless television in the early 1960s.

The regulations, on the one hand, opened up the space for public discussion on social and civic issues, but limited the discussion on politics and class conflicts on the other. Paradoxically, people came together to know each other exactly because of the apolitical nature of this public space. Hong Kong was an atomised society, politically and socially divided before the 1970s. Television was a low regulated space where people interact, share and get acquainted with each other. In the 1970s and 1980s, television contributed greatly to the formation of a Hongkonger identity. With this common identity, a cultural civil society and collective actions taken by people later in the political transition were made possible. Since the 1990s, however, television has lost its force as an integrating institution. Its historical mission in Hong Kong may have been fulfilled. The impact of cable and satellite television in the new era of globalisation is yet to be felt. Civil society in Hong Kong, nonetheless, will carry on if its Hongkonger identity can stand the advance of the Chinese identity.

Social discussion on the idea of civil society in Hong Kong is scanty. Not many people, including academics, talk about this conception (Scott 1989; Sing 1996; Ip 1997; Thomas 1999). The reason is probably that civil society is not an issue in Hong Kong because under British rule the state had been small even though repressive. The colonial government was aloof and indifferent to people’s demands, and people were not bothered because they were busy making a living. Before the 1960s, Hong Kong people were politically apathetic.

After the two riots in the 1960s, the government started to pay attention to social demands, such as housing, transport and education. Meanwhile, the philosophy of ‘positive non-interventionism’ was followed by and large until the reversion of Hong Kong to China in 1997. The rule of law and the
existence of a cultural civil society in the 1970s are also reasons for the meagre attention given to the issue of civil society. Although people did not have democracy under British rule, they enjoyed a considerable degree of individual liberty, freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Still another reason is that civil society issues were transformed into the demand for democracy. Democratisation is an issue given much attention by the public as well as academics.

From the development experience of Hong Kong, we can see that state-led or oppositional social groups are only partial manifestations of the process of the making of civil society. A cultural civil society articulating a distinctive identity of the people vis-à-vis the state is more essential in maintaining an autonomous yet non-confrontational social entity outside of the state. A cultural civil society helps to strengthen people's awareness of their autonomy from the state. With a common identity and consciousness, individuals will collectively resist state encroachments and apply pressure on the state. This cultural civil society is also a base for the formation of various forms of social organisation with varying interests. In the 1970s and 1980s, pressure group politics was widespread and common. It was replaced by party politics only after the 1980s.

In a nutshell, in the case of Hong Kong, television as a non-controversial public space contributed to the formation of a culturally based civil society in the 1970s. With a cultural civil society in place, the more important issue in Hong Kong is how the cultural civil society exerts and maintains its influences on the state through its demands for further democratisation. As long as Hongkongers maintain a distinctive identity and the Chinese state remains authoritarian, the demands will go on.

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