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Democracy in Hong Kong: The Benefit of a Gender Mainstreaming Approach

Gina Anne Tam is an Associate Professor at Trinity University and a 2022-23 Wilson China Fellow



Abstract

In June 2019, millions of Hong Kong citizens marched in opposition of an extradition bill, spearheading a movement that evolved into a broader campaign for a more democratic government and autonomy from the PRC. Among policymakers, the movement also became representative of the global fight against authoritarianism and a key focal point of the US government's efforts to support democratic movements around the world. Historically, this movement is the most recent example of a long history of Hong Kong's democracy movement, which began in earnest during the colonial period. And while the world has long paid attention to Hong Kong's struggle for democracy, we have often paid little attention to the significance of women to its goals, tactics, and achievements. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the importance of women to the fight for democracy in greater China, with a particular focus on Hong Kong's democracy movement of the 1980s. This focus on gender will not only reveal a more complete picture of Hong Kong's fight for democracy, but also give a new understanding to how a democratic society—one in which political power, broadly imagined, is truly shared among citizens—can be built and sustained, not just in present-day Hong Kong, but in the broader Sinosphere.

Policy Implications and Key Takeaways

- Government supports for democracy organizations should conduct a gender mainstreaming analysis to consider how any organization's activities or programs affect all genders and their ability to participate as full, empowered citizens.
- Government supports for democracy organizations should consider the gender makeup of its leadership and empower women to be equal leaders in civil society organizations promoting democratic ideals. This should be done in consultation with the organizations themselves, who are often able to best gauge how foreign support would or would not serve them.
- Policymakers should not immediately presume that Chinese values or Chinese structures are inherently incompatible with democracy. Until

recently, most Hong Kong people believed it was not incompatible for Hong Kong to both belong to the PRC and be a full-fledged democratic territory with universal suffrage and protected rights. The belief is just as important, if not more important, than powerful people in Beijing who claim that democracy cannot survive in a Chinese-led space.

Introduction

On March 8, 2023, the Hong Kong Women Worker's Association planned an organized march in honor of International Women's Day. The march would have been the first approved organized civil rights event since 2020, when the People's Congress in Beijing passed a sweeping new National Security Law that designated a host of vaguely defined actions such as succession, subversion, and collusion with foreign entities punishable by imprisonment. Yet, this potentially historic event was canceled the evening before with little explanation.¹ The sudden cancellation was a potent reminder of how much Hong Kong's civil society has changed since May of 2020, especially given the sustained months-long protest movement, with approved marches nearly every weekend, in 2019. It signaled that Hong Kong's civil society and culture of protest, once robust, remains under threat.

It is notable that the first organized march to be scheduled and subsequently canceled in a post-National Security Law Hong Kong focused on women's rights. On its face, such advocacy would not be at odds with the law's spirit. The Hong Kong Women Workers' association, a grassroots organization founded in 1989 to advocate for equal labor rights, seems to have little overlap with a law that targets subversion of state power and foreign influence. Beyond this, the government People's Republic of China, the same government that crafted and enforced the National Security Law in Hong Kong, has long upheld itself as a champion of women's rights. In the early days of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) founding, they centered gender equality as a core part of their party platform, proclaiming "women hold up half the sky."² Since then, the CCP has, at least in rhetoric, stressed gender equality as both a key policy priority and a distinguishing feature of their regime compared to both previous Chinese states and Western countries.³

Yet, when we consider that the National Security Law, at its core, targets the democratic features of Hong Kong's government and the city's broader democratic culture, the suppression of a march for women's rights makes more sense. It is well documented that when non-democratic governments seek to chip away at democratic structures, it often disproportionately harms women. This is in part because the "social institution of patriarchy" and the oppression of women that it causes—including a lack of equal economic opportunities, freedom of movement, or bodily autonomy— is fundamental to the main-

tenance of non-democratic governments.⁴ This can certainly be seen in the PRC. From the marriage law in the 1950s that, while claiming to empower women, ultimately ensured the continuation of patriarchal family structures, to the One Child Policy that robbed women of bodily autonomy, to heavy-handed censorship of women's calls for better laws on sexual assault and intimate partner violence, the PRC is one of many governments that claim to support gender equality while actively thwarting progress towards it.⁵

The way the HKWWA march's cancellation highlights the gendered realities of anti-democratic measures and crackdowns is not the only reason it was notable. The fact that it was planned at all underscores how women activists have no intention of prematurely declaring the death of Hong Kong's civil society nor leaving basic rights untested. This kind of boldness is inherent to civil society organizations like the Hong Kong Women Workers Association. Hong Kong has long had a robust civil society in which NGOs and grassroots organizers were the central forces empowering Hong Kong citizens, pushing for structural change, and protecting basic rights. In the 1980s, Hong Kong's civil society became focused upon safeguarding Hong Kong's future in the face the impending handover to the PRC. The HKWWA was born in this time period, one of many organizations helping to mobilize different constituencies to participate in the democratic process and clearly articulate democratic reforms. And as a women's organization, they and others like them sought to ensure that women were treated as equal citizens in Hong Kong's democratization.

Yet, despite the fact that women leaders and women's organizations were critical to Hong Kong's democracy movement, they often faced more than one uphill battle. Male leaders relied upon women's labor while rarely ceding them leadership positions within major organizations. Women's concerns were also frequently dismissed. They were told that gendered concerns were too divisive. They were told that they were distracting from the larger goals of democratization. Or they were told to wait—that gender equality would be addressed after democracy was achieved. As a result, women's ability to fight for democratic representation and equal rights for all citizens was limited by the patriarchal structures stymieing them from integrating the experiences of all genders into decision making. This lack of what scholars call “gender mainstreaming” has reverberated from the 1980s democracy movement through the present.⁶

The purpose of this paper is to use the history of Hong Kong's 1980s democracy movement to highlight the critical importance of a gendered approach to the study of democracy movements in Greater China. It will do so by highlighting two important trends. First, it will show how women's voices and experiences were sidelined during Hong Kong's democracy movements. Second, it will show how and why a lack of attention to gender issues ensured that any movement towards democratic reforms often failed to benefit both genders equally. Ultimately, this paper contends that any analysis of democracy movements must give equal weight to the experiences and relative political power of its female citizens, because without their full participation, democratization will remain woefully incomplete.

The United States government has long established itself as the vanguard of democratic ideals abroad. In December, 2021, President Biden hosted a Global Democracy Summit. Arguing that democracy “doesn't happen by accident,” President Biden presented his summit as an “opportunity to listen, learn, and engage with a diverse range of actors whose support and commitment is critical for global democratic renewal.”⁷ Inherent in this statement is the presumption that the United States is impaired without nuanced, locally-created knowledge of how democracy is built and sustained around the world. As United States policymakers think about how to best serve democratic movements, it is critical that they consider how the organizations and states they support empower (or disempower) women. In so doing, we will have a clearer view about how a democratic society—one in which political power, broadly imagined, is truly shared among citizens—can be built and sustained.

I. Democracy and Social Movements in Hong Kong

A Wider View of Democracy

Democracy is a difficult thing to define. Since the Second World War, it has been common to equate democracy with elections, “fairly conducted and honestly counted.”⁸ This definition, supported by prominent political theorists and used often in qualitative datasets, privileges political processes and procedures over other political or societal structures.⁹

Certainly, it is difficult to imagine any definition of democracy that does not include free and fair elections. Yet, as many political scientists contend

today, to define democracy by the existence of elections alone can easily warp the core of what democracy is meant to accomplish.¹⁰ Elections frequently happen in societies that are on their face undemocratic, such as the People's Republic of China, South Korea under martial law (1960s–1980s), or even Hong Kong today. This truth has led scholars to recognize that a society can simultaneously expand its electorate and narrow the ability of citizens to exercise political power.¹¹ Some of these scholars even suggest we think of democracy not just as a political system but as a “social form,” with our governing procedures constituting one portion of it.¹² In their view, democracy is less about which procedures exist and more about how political power functions and how a society guarantees that citizens remain equal and significant participants in the political system.

This wider view of democracy is particularly fruitful when we add a gendered lens.¹³ States and systems that were, and still are, categorized as paragon democracies have for much of their histories denied women and ethnic and racial minorities the full rights of citizenship. Indeed, some scholars of democracy are still willing to actively ignore unequal suffrage in their definitions of democracy—in a book by Robert Dahl, one of the most cited political theorists, defined democratic countries as those with “male or full suffrage,” thus conflating countries that give the most basic right of voting to only half of its more privileged citizens to those who extend it to all citizens.¹⁴ On the one hand, this stark gap in our conversations about democracy show how and why elections based upon full suffrage can be a good marker of democratization. To be blunt, a state that guarantees full suffrage likely has a more democratic culture than those that guarantee only male suffrage.¹⁵

But perhaps this gap should compel us to think more widely about how women can act as political actors. Even in societies where women can vote, their ability to exercise political power and have agency as equal citizens is not always guaranteed. Indeed, many countries with full female suffrage still pass laws that target women and strip away their basic rights. Simultaneously, women who are denied the right to vote are not necessarily barred from being political actors, often finding creative ways to exercise power. In short, women's experiences bring into sharp relief that there was not always a direct corollary between being able to *vote* and having more political power.¹⁶

In this paper, I do not mean to neglect the question of elections. Indeed, the Hong Kong democracy movement I will cover here is primarily about efforts to introduce universal suffrage and direct elections into Hong Kong's governing system. Yet, I also take seriously the idea of democracy as a social form rather than just a political system. When we do, we can more clearly center the questions of how citizenship is defined and how political power is shared, rather than simply checking a box when elections exist. This, to me, is a much better way to consider how and in what ways people of all genders maintain equal citizenship during the process of democratization.

The Democracy Movement in Hong Kong

Despite contestations over definitions of democracies, it is difficult to argue that Hong Kong has ever been one. For most of its history, the Hong Kong British colonial government was overseen by the British government in London. Key government positions were appointed by the Hong Kong governor who, himself, was appointed by the British monarch, and most powerful positions were usually occupied by white British men. The first direct elections were introduced in the 1980s for a proportion of seats on the District Council, a local administrative body charged with advising the central government on the needs of local districts and overseeing a certain amount of government funds. For Hong Kong's legislative body, the Legislative Council, direct elections were not introduced until 1991 for a minority of its seats, while the remaining majority were either selected by economic interest groups called "Functional Constituencies" or appointed by the governor. Since 1997, the number of directly elected seats has waxed and waned but has never constituted a majority of the body's seats. The Chief Executive position, created in the 1980s as a replacement for the governor as the head of the Hong Kong government, was and still is decided by a several-hundred member "election committee." Taken together, a minority of positions in government today are directly elected, and even then, elected representatives must still pass the approval of the PRC national government, thus severely limiting the political positions any candidate could feasibly support lest they be disqualified by Beijing.¹⁷

Put plainly, Hong Kong's government representatives are largely not chosen by popular elections, and those elections that do exist are neither free nor fair.

Yet, Hong Kong has a long tradition of democracy *movements*, defined here as grassroots-led movements to push for democratic governance and institutions. Historians frequently point to the 1980s as the birth of Hong Kong's democracy movement.¹⁸ In 1982, with the looming end of Britain's 99-year lease on the New Territories, Margaret Thatcher traveled to Beijing to meet with Premier Zhao Ziyang and Chairman Deng Xiaoping to discuss the future of Hong Kong's sovereignty. These meetings directly informed the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984, which established the transfer of Hong Kong's sovereignty to the People's Republic of China on July 1, 1997. In tandem with the Joint Declaration, the British government released a Green Paper titled "The Further Development of Representative Government in Hong Kong," a document that signaled the British belief that the establishment and safeguarding of basic rights and democratic structures in Hong Kong was a prerequisite for a smooth transition of power.¹⁹

These events galvanized a sharp increase in activity by civil society organizations pushing popular elections.²⁰ Such activities only increased with the drafting of the Basic Law, Hong Kong's postcolonial founding document, from 1985–1988. Perhaps most importantly, Hong Kong citizens were inspired to consider their own democratic prospects by the widespread protests and subsequent crackdown in Beijing's Tiananmen Square from April through June of 1989. That summer, millions of Hong Kongers participated in activities supporting the protestors Tiananmen, protestors they saw as allies in their goals to make China a place where democracy thrived.²¹

It is clearly true that the 1980s was a turning point in Hong Kong's democracy movement. But grassroots organizations had been pushing the British government to empower Hong Kong citizens to build their own future well before 1984. The 1970s saw a flourishing of new periodicals from local Hong Kong intellectuals that proffered critiques of local, national, and international issues. Many of them, recognizing the global tides turning against colonialism, argued directly that the British should both transfer sovereignty of Hong Kong to the PRC while also safeguarding democratic institutions in the territory as part of the transfer negotiations.²² From the Hong Kong Observers, a group of young professionals who began pressuring the colonial government to consider Hong Kong's future beginning in the 1970s through a series of English-language op-eds, to student unions, literary magazines and leftist

underground groups, Hong Kong's flourishing civil society was buzzing with conversation about the territory's future years before the 1980s.

To take a bigger step back, a wider view of democracy would encourage us to turn our gaze towards the moments in which the groundwork of democracy—a fundamental shift in the city's civil society that reorganized the relationship between state and citizens—began to take shape. To understand this in Hong Kong, we must turn to Hong Kong's robust history of social movements. Since the early twentieth century, grassroots protest was the primary way citizens of Hong Kong exerted political power in a colonial system. A watershed moment happened in the 1960s with a series of overlapping protests about labor conditions, cost of living, and the inequities of imperialism.²³ These so-called "1967 riots" shifted the British approach towards the colony, motivating them to institute a series of reforms, including universal education, better labor law protections, and anti-corruption campaigns. In a word, the reforms that stemmed directly from the social movements of the 1960s—as well as the kind of nationalistic critiques of imperialism that underlay the movement—were critical in creating the kind of civil society that made later democracy movements possible.²⁴

This history reminds us that the relationship between democratization and social movements are inextricably linked. Not only are social movements critical to the construction of democratic institutions, they also are fundamental to the rearrangement of power relationships more broadly. As many scholars have noted, social movements serve as "avenues of representation and participation" that can be just as important as voting, in particular for underrepresented and marginalized groups, and in particular within a non-democratic system.²⁵ In our understanding of Hong Kong's democratization, focusing only on the push for elections in the 1980s blinds us to the kinds of forces that made Hong Kong's civil society robust and guaranteed the economic and social conditions that made it possible for people to advocate for themselves.

A focus on how social movements reinforce democratic cultures and structures also implicates the relationship between democracy and gender. The existence of elections or even universal suffrage does not necessarily lead to a society of equal citizens with equal access to political power. Women, often any society's most marginalized citizens, had to think creatively about how to assert themselves as political actors. This was commonly done

through grassroots activism. By refocusing our attention on activism and protest, we can better spotlight neglected voices in the quest for a more democratic society while also emphasizing how structural power inequities made activism an important avenue underrepresented groups, like women, to make their voices heard.

II. Women in Hong Kong's Democracy Movement

Waiting for Gender Equality

Ms. A sat at a table listening to a man give a speech. A prominent democratic activist, he spoke to a room full of representatives of civil society organizations involved in Hong Kong's democracy movement, brought together to craft a manifesto on human rights and democratic governance at their next event. Her attention was drawn to one line: that they would seek *first* direct elections, and *then* pursue equal rights and people's livelihood. As one of the youngest participants in the room and one of few women, Ms. A sat at the edge of the table. But that line compelled her to raise her hand. "Excuse me," she said, "why does it have to be *and then*? Why does equality have to come *after* direct elections?" She then pushed, "What about gender equality—does that too have to come after?" The senior members—all men, all seated at the center of the table—responded with an uproar. Why was she being divisive? Did she not understand that equality, including gender equality, would naturally come from direct elections? Why was she attacking the main speaker? Ms. A stood her ground; she knew that treating gender equality as an afterthought, or treating gender equality as a natural byproduct of democracy that required no extra effort or attention, would likely preclude its realization. But the men at the center of the room had made their position clear: gender equality would have to wait.²⁶

Ms. A's story echoes a common refrain from women activists in Hong Kong's democracy movement. Beginning in the 1980s, dozens of groups, some already in existence and some newly formed, began pushing for democratic reforms in anticipation of the impending handover. In 1986, almost 200 civil society organizations joined together under the umbrella organization Joint Committee on the Promotion of Democratic Government (JCPDG, or the 民主政制促進聯委會 (*minzhu zhengce cujin lianweihui*))

abbreviated as 民促會 (*mincuhui*). This organization and the groups that constituted its membership formed the heart of Hong Kong's democracy movement—they were the most influential grassroots organizations able to pressure the three power brokers determining Hong Kong's future: the Hong Kong colonial government, the government of the United Kingdom, and the government of the People's Republic of China.

Nearly all of these groups, including the JCPDG itself, had exclusively or primarily male leadership. Two well-known members of the JCPDG were Martin Lee and Szeto Wah, both remembered today as the “fathers” of Hong Kong's democracy movement. Among JCPDG's core leadership, there was only one woman, Helena Wong (Wong Pik Wan).²⁷ Other organizations were hardly better. As Wong explained in a published interview, the number of women in leadership in democracy-focused civil society organizations was shockingly small.²⁸ To confirm, I asked Ho Chi Kwan, a longtime activist who served as core committee member of one prominent democracy organization, if there were many women serving in the leadership of her group or others like it. She bluntly responded, “of course not.”²⁹

For many of these women, this was nothing new. Many got their start years earlier in the social movements of the 1970s, during which time most leaders were men. Several women I spoke to said that most of the sexism they faced from their male counterparts was not overt.³⁰ But their lack of voice within leadership cast a shadow over their participation. Women reported having to be cautious in how they advocated for women's issues, if they did at all, and when they did speak up, they were frequently told that such issues were “divisive” or that they distracted from the core issues they all agreed mattered.³¹ They also had to learn to survive in cultures that tended towards hypermasculine tactics. As Helena Wong explained, male leaders rarely thought about how gender affected group dynamics, in everything from the gendered language of their rallying cries and songs to their distinct style of debate and leadership.³²

Yet, while many of these challenges existed for decades, something new happened in the 1980s: women began creating new organizations led by and advocating for women. The first women-centered organization in Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Council of Women, was founded in 1947, but its leadership and funding were largely British, and its advocacy largely focused upon middle

or upper-class women.³³ Yet by the 1980s, many women involved in Student Unions, Christian organizations, political activist movements, and labor unions—spaces where they were often minoritized—began to realize that the solution for their marginalization was to create organizations specifically dedicated to their goals. The first women’s advocacy group created entirely by local women was the Association for the Advancement of Feminism (AAF 新婦女協進會, *xin funü xiejinhui*) in 1984, though they were quickly followed by organizations such as Harmony House, the Hong Kong Federation of Women’s Centers, the Hong Kong Women’s Christian Council, and the Hong Kong Women Workers Association. And once the Sino-British Joint declaration shifted public attention towards the impending 1997 deadline, these organizations, like so many at the time, turned their gaze towards ensuring that women had a say in Hong Kong’s future.

These organizations were critical sources of empowerment. Ho Chi Kwan, one of the founding members of AAF describes it as a space for women to lead when they lacked those leadership opportunities elsewhere. Ho got her start in politics two working for a candidate for District Council elections, which first opened up for popular voting in 1982. There, she recalls, she and other female staffers became cognizant that women’s issues seemed to be of less importance to both the candidates they worked for and the other civil society organizations that were attempting to influence Hong Kong’s future.³⁴ Perhaps because of these experiences, when AAF was founded, she pushed for AAF’s elected leadership to remain closed to men. “Women needed a space where we can run our own organization,” she told me. Helena Wong also recalls the problem of leadership during her experience in civil society organizations in the 1980s. “If you look at the democracy movement,” she explains, referring to the male-dominated organizations, “they have clear leaders.” The women’s movement, on the other hand, found this “hero” model antithetical to a more equity-based organization. “[Women] did not really emphasize this image of heroism, nor did they believe the movement had to have one leader whereas everyone else followed. The relationships among them were more equal.”³⁵

Women’s organizations also allowed activists to prioritize empowering women in politics. This was something that AAF made as a core part of their platform. AAF’s first task upon being founded was to do a broad survey to understand women’s participation in Hong Kong politics.³⁶ This choice was met

with fierce criticism by male colleagues, who believed that “women’s issues” ought to be limited to policies regarding the home and children. “We didn’t want to do that,” Ms. C, one of AAF’s founders, told me. From the outset, AAF stressed that they wanted, instead, to understand how to better integrate all women into Hong Kong’s polity.³⁷

But the power of women’s organizations did not necessarily lead to representation within the broader democracy movement. Indeed, not only did women remain marginalized in democratization leadership, so too did the concerns their organizations focused on. One of the founders of AAF, Leung Laiching, recalls asking the leaders of JCPDG to include issues regarding gender equality to their platform and programming at one of the many rallies held in Victoria Park in the leadup to election reform in 1988. Begrudgingly, they offered her a speaking slot at the end of the program. While she took the opportunity, she recalls, the experience made her realize just how “marginalized,” in her words, women were in the movement. By having only one or two women speak about the relationship between gender and democracy, the movement treated women as a flattened and homogenous constituency. “I can’t represent all women, I can only represent myself,” she said.³⁸

The Importance of Gender Mainstreaming: The Case of Functional Constituencies

It is easy to look at gender inequalities in civil society leadership and focus on how it affected the women who were ignored, dismissed, or challenged. But structural patriarchy affects more than women leaders: it often ensured that blind spots and key problems went unaddressed. Perhaps the most obvious example of how and why a gendered analysis matters in understanding Hong Kong’s quest for a democratic system regards the fate of what were called “functional constituencies.”³⁹ As mentioned above, when the British colonial government began to move away from a system of appointment for legislative councilors, they introduced two methods of electing members: one set of seats chosen by popular vote within several geographic districts, and another chosen by members of several “Functional Constituencies” (FC) representing major professional and economic sectors such as Real Estate, Finance, Medicine and Health Services, Social Welfare, Labor, or Agriculture, to name a few. Laws determined who could vote within the FCs through a convoluted

set of limitations—in some cases, “umbrella organizations” such as chambers of commerce or corporations are directly given the power to vote, whereas in other cases, voting is based upon registration or professional qualifications (the Social Welfare and Medical and Health Services FCs, for instance, limit voting only to those who have a particular level of certification in their respective fields). The end result is that both the FCs themselves and those eligible to vote within each FC are those with pre-existing economic power.⁴⁰

On the one hand, FCs give political power to a broader cross-section of Hong Kong society than the appointment system that preceded it. On the other hand, by explicitly tying political power to economic power, the system ensures that only certain interests—particular professions that are disproportionately constitutive of economic elites—outweigh the needs and interests of the public. Indeed, the identities of the supporters and detractors of the FC system makes this clear. The groups generally supportive of the FC system are economic elites and business leaders; importantly, FCs are also highly favored by the Chinese Communist Party in Beijing, which believes, likely correctly, that alliances with wealthy elites would strengthen its rule in Hong Kong while direct elections would weaken it. Those opposed are organizations that generally speak for and represent grassroots interests.⁴¹

As a system that explicitly gives economic elites the right to choose a plurality of elected officials, it is clearly undemocratic. But its undemocratic nature becomes even more obvious when we consider how it starkly disenfranchises women. Both the professions represented by FCs and those empowered to vote within each FC are overwhelmingly male, because leadership roles in nearly all economic sectors remain male-dominated. In Hong Kong, women are given fewer promotions, experience more employment precarity, are more likely to work part-time and receive lower pay than their male counterparts in nearly all fields. This means they were much less likely to have the right to choose electors within their respective fields, either because they did not serve in the umbrella organizations or they did not meet certain certification requirements. Beyond that, women are much more likely to work in the home than their male counterparts. There was, and is, no FC for homemakers.

Hong Kong is not the only place where female labor is devalued. Around the world, women are almost universally paid less than male counterparts for similar work, and work gendered as “feminine” is usually valued less than

work gendered as masculine.⁴² Women's domestic labor around the world is also rarely considered economic output.⁴³ While the cooking, cleaning, and childcare work women perform in their own homes certainly contributes to a capitalist society—indeed, that work creates the labor conditions that make a capitalist economy possible—it remains unpaid and ineligible for a whole host of other material benefits attached to paid work, from insurance to government benefits to inclusion in national and regional economic data. These facts are as true in Hong Kong as they are elsewhere.

The system of FCs, however, adds a new dimension to the devaluing of female labor. In this political system, only people who are leaders in their chosen economic sector had the power to choose representatives. The fact that the work women do is so often underpaid or unpaid not only means women are not being fairly compensated. They are also being directly denied political power.

Certainly, there are other reasons FCs are deeply unequal. Nearly all of the major democracy organizations opposed the continuation of FCs due to how they empowered wealthy elites and their interests above those of Hong Kong citizens. But a gender mainstreaming approach brings into sharp relief just how much political power in Hong Kong is skewed towards men. Women involved in Hong Kong's democracy movement in the 1980s frequently stated that this inequity was one of the reasons they fought for direct elections right away.⁴⁴ To the best of my knowledge, their male colleagues, even among those who did support direct elections, nonetheless found their gendered arguments unimportant or unconvincing.

The FC system is not the only example of how existing structures disempower women in Hong Kong. From transportation to inheritance rights, rooftop heat and pay equity, societal inequalities often barred women from being able to be full participants in a democratic system. In each of these instances, it was women-led organizations that brought these inequalities into public consciousness when mainstream civil society organizations ignored, downplayed, or disregarded them. This history gives us a clear warning: without equal suffrage, equal access to transport, equal rights, equal access to work, or equal compensation of time, women can never truly be citizens. And democratization will remain incomplete.

Hong Kong's Democratization Today and Recommendations for Policymakers

Since the 2020 National Security Law, Hong Kong has seen civil society organizations targeted, democracy leaders jailed, news organizations shuttered, and everyday citizens arrested for actions that were recently acceptable. Today, Hong Kongers wait with trepidation to see what future restrictions await them. This is particularly true for women civil society leaders. Many women activists are familiar with the ways the government sustains unequal gender hierarchies in China—from the lack of protections against sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and workplace discrimination, to government actions that silence feminist protests, control women's reproductive activity, and pressure women to maintain strict gender roles. In Hong Kong, where legal protections for women are only marginally better, in part because of the plethora of civil society organizations focused on women's rights, women activists fear that the National Security Law currently gutting Hong Kong civil society will ensure that any progress on gendered justice will similarly fall to the wayside.

Yet, the fact that Hong Kong is experiencing rapid democratic backsliding does not mean we should abandon the lessons of the democracy movement of the 1980s. It is worth keeping in mind that Hong Kong has never been a full-fledged democracy. As such, women in Hong Kong have always been pushing for democratic and equitable structures within an undemocratic system. Many of the women I spoke to are not shocked by the threat of state crackdowns and have come up with creative solutions to dealing with the ever-changing nature of repressive policies. For instance, organizations primarily focused on domestic violence and assault have attempted to quiet their associations with democracy-focused institutions and high-profile democracy leaders. Others have, because of the National Security Law's focus on foreign collusion, maintained distance from foreign organizations. Others have attempted to find new ways to fight for equality that are not obviously associated with the direct fight for electoral democracy, such as conservation efforts, worker rights, or online safety. Others still have stressed the importance of maintaining networks, organizations, and alliances afloat, even if their activities remain muted or dormant.

Based upon these historic and contemporary realities, there are several lessons that we, in the United States, should take. First and most importantly,

policymakers who are considering support of particular organizations dedicated to democratization should consider how and why gender mainstreaming is critical to any democratization movement. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, women's organizations highlighted roadblocks to broader democratization that were often unnoticed or ignored by male organizers since the primary victims of those roadblocks were women. As United States policymakers, global NGOs, or citizens around the world imagine how and what democracy means, it is critical that we engage in gender mainstreaming to ensure that we are considering the impacts of policies on those citizens that society frequently marginalizes.

Similarly, policymakers should also consider how a lack of women's leadership in democracy organizations reflects upon the priorities of any democratization movement. The history of the 1980s in Hong Kong shows how powerful democracy organizations thought little about the gender dynamics of not just the policies they promoted but also their day-to-day functioning. While it is impossible to prove direct causality, the women dedicated to Hong Kong's democratization clearly believed the lack of female leadership contributed to why women's concerns were often ignored. As such, government-funded programs, international NGOs, and civil society organizations might begin by prioritizing relationships with female-led NGOs, platforming women as speakers in events pertaining to democracy, or emphasizing gender mainstreaming as a focus in international events and summits. The 2021 Summit for Democracy included a panel on women's rights and democracy, but integrating this throughout more sessions would be a better way to emphasize how gender mainstreaming is inherent to all questions pertaining to democracy's success. In practice, structural gender inequality is difficult to solve solely through a focus on representation or through speeches or events, but it is a start.

With both of these recommendations, it is worth noting that today, foreign aid for civil society organizations often comes with certain risks for those organizations. This, however, should not inhibit us from offering support, financial or otherwise. In all cases, we should listen to and privilege the voices of NGO and CSO leaders on how support would be most helpful.

Finally, this history tells us that there is not something intrinsic to China or Chinese-ness that is antithetical to democracy. It is common today to claim

that democratic values are incompatible with China, its governing structure, or its core cultural values. This is a claim not only repeated by Western policy-makers, journalists, and academics, but also by powerful leaders in Asia. Yet, at the heart of democratic values is the contention that it is the people who decide if their government, society, or culture can or should be more democratic, not foreign actors who look at that society as alien or foreign, nor its most powerful players who benefit from a non-democratic system with stark power hierarchies. In the 1980s, many Hong Kongers genuinely believed that democracy and Chinese-ness were not incompatible. They believed not only could Hong Kong be both democratic and a part of the PRC nation-state, but that the eventual unification of Hong Kong and China spelled hope for democracy on the mainland as well. That memory is still fresh today, and many Hong Kongers remain steadfast that their hope was justified.

Their imagined hope has obviously not yet come to pass. Instead, Hong Kong's picture of democracy looks bleak. Even if we consider democratic structures beyond direct elections, Hong Kong looks significantly worse than it did only a few short years ago, and certainly less hopeful. But history empowers us to think creatively and analytically about how the past relates to the present and mobilize that knowledge to imagine a more malleable future. When we do, we see that activists can and do build democratic futures within oppressive presents, and they often do so guided by historical knowledge. Mass movements tend to build on one another, finding hope and purpose by studying the past and situating themselves within a collective narrative. A historical lens reveals not only where democracy-builders have been, but how they imagine what can be.

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Notes

1. Jessie Pang, "Hong Kong Women's Rights Protest Cancelled After Police Cite Risk of Violence. *Reuters* (March 4, 2023), <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/hong-kong-womens-rights-protest-cancelled-after-police-cite-risk-violence-2023-03-04/>
2. This is an oft-cited phrase, and to the best of our knowledge, was not uttered until 1964. That said, gender equality was critical to the CCP before Mao even took the helm in the 1930s. See Gail Hershatter, *Women in China's Long Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Christina K. Gilmartin, *Engendering the Chinese Revolution: Radical Women, Communist Politics, and Mass Movements in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Kimberly Ens Manning, "China: Women's Rights Advocacy," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Women's Political Rights* (Germany: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018): 301–311; Wang Zheng, *Finding Women in the State: A Socialist, Feminist Revolution in the People's Republic of China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017).
3. For an example of this anti-Western party line today, see Shen Yi, "Top-Level Push, not Western-Style Reactionary Acts, Will Advance Women's Rights in China," *Global Times* (December 21, 2021). <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202112/1243041.shtml>
4. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, eds., *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
5. Leta Hong Fincher, *Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China* (London: Verso, 2018); Emily Honig, "Maoist Mappings of Gender: Reassessing the Red Guards," in Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, ed., *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Sarah Mellors Rodriguez, *Reproductive Realities in Modern China: Birth Control and Abortion, 1911–2021* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Margery Wolf, *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China* (Stanford, Calif., 1985); Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter, *Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980s* (Stanford, Calif., 1988); Pyllis Andors, *The Unfinished Liberation of Chinese Women, 1949–1980* (Bloomington, Ind., 1983); Yihong Jin, "Rethinking of iron girls: Gender and labor in cultural revolution in China." *Sociological Study*, 1 (2006), 169–196; Susan Greenhalgh, *Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng's China*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
6. This term was popularized in policy circles at the UN Conference on Women, held in Beijing, in 1995. For definitions and applications, see Caroline Moser and Annalise Moser, "Gender mainstreaming since Beijing: A review of success and limitations in international institutions," *Gender & Development*, 13:2 (2005), 11–22; Mary Daly, "Gender Mainstreaming in Theory and Practice," *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 12:3 (2005): 433–450
7. Joseph Biden, "Remarks by President Biden at The Summit For Democracy Opening Session," December 9, 2021. *The White House*. Accessed March 22, 2023.
8. Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl. "What Democracy Is...and Is Not." *Journal of Democracy* 2 (3) (1991): 75–88.
9. This procedural definition was privileged by Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row 1942) and is favored by Samuel Huntington in his *The*

- Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20th Century* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 6; See also Robert J. Barro, "Determinants of Democracy." *Journal of Political Economy* 107 (S6) (1999): 158–83;
10. For a good summary of these debates, see Michael Coppedge, Angel Alvarez, and Claudia Maldonado, "Two Persistent Dimensions of Democracy: Contestation and Inclusiveness," *The Journal of Politics* 70:3 (2008), 632–647; Gerardo Munck and Jay Verkuilen, "Conceptualizing and Measuring Democracy: Evaluating Alternative Indices," *Comparative Political Studies* 35 (1) (2002), 5–34.
 11. Priya Satia, "Democracy Isn't Just About Voting: Precolonial Kingdoms Challenge our Beliefs about People Power and Monarchies." *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/11/monarchy-republic-britain-democracy-us-india-colonialism/>
 12. Pierre Rosanvallon, *Democracy past and future*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).
 13. Waylen, Georgina. "Women and Democratization: Conceptualizing Gender Relations in Transition Politics." *World Politics* 46, no. 3 (1994): 327–54.
 14. Robert A. Dahl, Ian Shapiro. *On Democracy*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 8. Notably, Dahl does not even bother to mention other constraints to suffrage, such as those keeping ethnic or racial minorities, formerly imprisoned individuals, or others, from voting.
 15. Pamela Paxton, "Women's Suffrage in the Measurement of Democracy: Problems of Operationalization." *Studies in Comparative International Development*;
 16. For more on feminist political science, see S. Laurel Weldon, "Power, exclusion and empowerment: Feminist innovation in political science," *Women's Studies International Forum*, 72 (2019): 127–136; Brooke Ackerly and Jacqui True, *Doing Feminist Research in Political and Social Science* (United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019).
 17. Richard Baum, Democracy Deformed: Hong Kong's 1998 Legislative Elections – and Beyond. *The China Quarterly*, 162 (2002), 439–464; Ma Ngok, "China's Influence on Hong Kong Elections: Evidence from Legislative Council Elections," in Andrew J. Nathan, Brian C. H. Fong, Jieh-min Wu eds., *China's Influence and the Center-periphery Tug of War in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Indo-Pacific* (United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2020).
 18. Ma Ngok, *Political Development in Hong Kong: State, Political Society, and Civil Society* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 2–3; Ma Ngok, "Civil Society and Democratization in Hong Kong: Paradox and Duality" *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 4 (2s (??)) 155–175; 156, 158.
 19. "Green Paper: The Further Development of Representative Government in Hong Kong." July, 1984. Available publicly at Archive.org. <https://ia800200.us.archive.org/22/items/greenpaperfurthe00hong/greenpaperfurthe00hong.pdf>
 20. As Ma Ngok notes, the return to sovereignty made people anxious about a certain degree of democracy. *Political Development in Hong Kong*, 3; Tai-lok Lui and Wing-kai Chui, "Introduction-Changing Political Opportunities and the Shaping of Collective Action: Social Movements in Hong Kong," in Wing-kai Chiu and Tai-lok Lui, eds., *The Dynamics of Social Movement in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2000), 1–20.
 21. Pik Wan Wong. "The Pro-Chinese Democracy Movement in Hong Kong." in Stephen Wing Kai Chiu and Tai Lok Lui, eds., *The Dynamics of Social Movements in Hong Kong* (Hong

- Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2000); 55–90.
22. Edmund Cheng, “Loyalist, Dissenter and Cosmopolite: The Sociocultural Origins of a Counter-public Sphere in Colonial Hong Kong,” *The China Quarterly*, 246 (2021), 374–39; Joseph Y. S. Cheng, “The Democracy Movement in Hong Kong,” *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944–) 65, no. 3 (1989): 443–62; 445–6. This was also confirmed with interviews with members of the Observers and members of other organizations active in the 1970s such as the Revolutionary Marxist League.
 23. Gary Ka-Wai Cheung has coined the term “watershed” for this movement in his book *Hong Kong’s Watershed: The 1967 Riots* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009).
 24. Cheung, 132–138.
 25. S. Laurel Weldon, *When Protest Makes Policy: How Social Movements Represent Disadvantaged Groups*. 1–2
 26. Interview with Ms. A, 2023.
 27. Pik Wan Wong 黃碧雲, “Mincuhui nei de nujidutu 民促會內的女基督徒,” (Women Christians in the Joint Committee on the Promotion of Democratic Government” in Ma Ngok, 馬嶽, ed., *Xianggang 80 niandai minzhu yundong koushu lishi 香港80年代民主運動口述歷史* (Oral Histories of Hong Kong’s 1980s Democracy Movement) (Hong Kong: City University Press, 2012), 96–112.
 28. Pik Wan Wang, “Mincuhui,”
 29. Interview with Ho Chi Kwan.
 30. Interviews with Ms. B and Ho Chi Kwan.
 31. Leung Laiching, 梁麗清, “Funü yundong jiushi minzhu yundong 婦女運動就是民主運動,” (The Women’s Movement is the Democracy Movement,” in Ma Ngok 馬嶽, ed., *Xianggang 80 niandai minzhu yundong koushu lishi 香港80年代民主運動口述歷史* (Oral Histories of Hong Kong’s 1980s Democracy Movement) (Hong Kong: City University Press, 2012), 112–126; 121.
 32. Wong discusses how one of their most popular songs asked everyone to sing in support of “good men (好漢) rather than just good citizens Pik Wan Wong, “Mincuhui,” 104. This story was also mentioned to me in my interview with Ms. A, who recalls being frustrated by the song.
 33. For some summaries of the women’s movement in Hong Kong, see Pik Wan Wong, *Negotiating Gender: The Women’s Movement for Legal Reform in Colonial Hong Kong*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2000; Adelyn Lim, *Transnational feminism and women’s movements in post-1997 Hong Kong: Solidarity beyond the state*. (Hong Kong University Press, 2015); Wai-Man Lam and Irene LK Tong, “Political change and the women’s movement in Hong Kong and Macau.” *Asian Journal of Women’s Studies* 12 (1) (2006): 7–35 Chan Shun Hing, Leung Lai Ching, and Fong Hei, “Qingdong, Yundong: Xianggang Funü Yundong Huigu yu qianzhan yantaohui wenji. 情動, 運動: 香港婦女運動回顧與前瞻研討會文集.” (Emotion, movement: Documents from Reflections and Outlook of the Hong Kong Women’s Movement Symposium) (Hong Kong: Association for the Advancement of Feminism, 2005); Lisa Fischler, “Making Rights Claims Visible: Intersectionality, NGO Activism, and Cultural Politics in Hong Kong,” in Siu-Keung Cheung, Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, Lida V. Nedilsky, eds., *Marginalization in China* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan: 2009): 187–209

34. Interview with Ho Chi Kwan, March, 2023.
35. Wong, "Mincuhui," 107
36. 新婦女協進會調查組, Xin Funü xiejienhui diaocha zu (Survey group of the Association of the Advancement of Feminism). "香港女性參與公眾事務狀況調查報告書 Xianggang nvxing canyu gongzhong shiwu zhuangkuang diaocha baogaoshu" (Report from the Survey on Hong Kong women's participation in public affairs). *Hong Kong: Association for the Advancement of Feminism* (1984).
37. Interview with Ms. C.
38. Leung Laiching, "Funü Yundong"
39. This was bluntly given to me as an example of the overt inequalities inherent in a gender-blind examination of democracy by Ms. C.
40. Christine Loh and Civic Exchange, eds. *Functional Constituencies: A Unique Feature of the Hong Kong Legislative Council*. Civic Exchange Guides. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006.
41. Simon N. M. Young "Elected by the Elite: Functional Constituency Legislators and Elections," in Christine Loh, and Civic Exchange, eds., *Functional Constituencies: A Unique Feature of the Hong Kong Legislative Council*. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006).
42. A good example of this is in the history of computing, Mar Hicks, *Programmed inequality: How Britain discarded women technologists and lost its edge in computing*. (MIT press, 2017).
43. Susan Himmelweit and Simon Mohun, "Domestic labour and capital," *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 1(1) (March 1977), 15–31; Jeanne Boydston. *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Wally Seccombe, "The housewife and her labour under capitalism" (1974); Margaret Benston, "The political economy of women's liberation" (Toronto Women's Liberation & Hogtown Press, 1969); Angela Davis, "The Approaching Obsolescence of Housework: A Working-Class Perspective," in *Women, Race, Class* (London: The Women's Press Ltd., 1982).
44. Interview with Ms. C.

