Workshop 4 - Housing in Developing Countries

Public Housing and Ethopolitics in Post-colonial Hong Kong

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Abstract

Public housing in Hong Kong is undergoing major transformation since the return of sovereignty back to China in 1997. In line with major public sector reforms in the last decade, the size of public housing has been in fast decline. Two broad strands of housing policy change could be discerned. The first strand concerns a reduction in the size of public housing stock. This is achieved both by a slowing down of the annual housing production and the selling of a major portion of the housing stock to sitting tenants. Public rental housing as a percentage of the total housing stock has declined tremendously. In addition, the government has also terminated its production of subsidized middle class home ownership flats in 2003, hence further reducing the role of the government in affordable housing. The second strand concerns a major restructuring of the social relationship between tenants, owners, housing managers/housing management agencies and the government. Using Niklas Rose’s conception of governance in advanced liberal democracy, this paper argues that modern public housing management fits nicely in the debate concerning rapid transformation of government technologies through the use of self in the role of a consumer. Such transformation in governance, as it is argued here, does not necessarily fulfill the ideals of a lesser government. It merely means more government from a distance, not less.

Keywords: housing governance, ethopolitics, governmentality, tenant management.
Public housing and ethopolitics in post-colonial Hong Kong

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Public housing in Hong Kong is undergoing major transformation since the change of sovereignty in 1997. In line with major public sector reforms in the last decade, the size of public housing has been in fast decline. Two broad strands of housing policy change could be discerned. The first strand concerns a reduction in the size of public housing stock. This is achieved both by a slowing down of the annual housing production and the selling of a major portion of the housing stock to sitting tenants. Public rental housing as a percentage of the total housing stock has declined from a high 50% in the early 1990s to 29% in 2005 (Housing Authority 2005). In addition, the government terminated its production of subsidized middle class home ownership flats in 2003, hence further reducing the role of the government in the provision of affordable housing in one of the world’s most expensive housing markets. The second strand concerns a major restructuring of the social relationship between tenants, owners, housing managers/housing management agencies and the government. This paper is more concerned with the second strand for the apparent reason that housing policy has always been a salient part of Hong Kong politics. In the memoir of the last British colonial governor – Chris Patten, he admitted candidly that housing policy remained one of his least successful areas of politics in British
colonial governance since it lacked proper state capacity to act in favor of both the working class and the middle class, even having established a huge public housing sector (Patten 1999).

In Hong Kong, the restructuring of the housing system is achieved through two new housing institutions: one involves the use of the Estate Management Advisory Committee (EMAC) - a transitional tenant self-management body in public housing estates. The other involves the transfer of estate management to private management agencies (PMAs) and the setting up of Owners’ Incorporation (OIs) in former public housing estates with a concentration of government-produced ownership flats. Concomitant with the emergence of these new housing institutions, Hong Kong also saw a plethora of new languages in the housing arena. This is characterized by the new emphasis on ‘consumers’ choice’, ‘tenants participation’ and ‘arms length management by the people’. Public housing tenants are given limited rights to participate in the hiring and firing of housing management agencies through the EMAC. The same applies to former public housing estates which have been completely privatized after the government sold off most of its rental flats, with the OIs managing their housing matters. What I am exploring in this paper is that these new housing institutions and languages are creating a new politics of public housing which I term ethopolitics (Rose 1999; Flint, 2003). It is characterized by the rationalities of marketization and consumption in housing as the government tries to construct a
new identity for tenants/owners as active consumers of public housing products and services. Tenants/owners are expected to become ‘independent’ and ‘responsible’ members in the governance of new housing communities, carrying with them new obligations and duties. It is argued in this paper that such new identities as ‘consumers’ and ‘self-governors’ are creating tensions and conflicts within local communities which not necessarily lead to improved governance of housing estates. I will concentrate on the EMAC as an example of a new form of governing technology emphasizing the use of ‘self’. This paper will be divided into two parts. The first part covers recent debates on liberal technologies of governance, essentially modeled after Foucault’s (1991) brief ideas on governmentality and Rose’s (1999) extension of Foucault’s ideas. According to Flint (2003:612), ‘it suggests that acts of social housing governance provide examples of the manifestation of ethopower inherent in the emergence of a post-welfarist regime of the social within advanced democracies. Technologies of governance involve the construction of identities for subjects as active consumers, and increasingly, responsibilized members of the community’. The second part of the paper describes Hong Kong’s recent policy developments in both public rental housing and public home ownership housings through the EMAC project. The paper concludes by suggesting that the new rhetoric of choice and self-governance through the new set of governing technologies has really come to mean not so much a reduction in government and more autonomous housing governance. What it means is still very much ‘governance in a distance’
tucked under a veil of freedom and choice.

**Advanced Liberal Democracy in a Post-Colonial Anti-Welfarist Regime**

In a more traditional analysis of the role of the state, the meaning of governance is about how to minimize the size of the government and how to transfer normal state functions to non-state mechanisms, a mode of management which we now commonly call *the new public management* (Hood 1991; Kaboolian 1998). Within this context, good governance means less government and a smaller civil service, coupled with politicians exercising a much lesser role in day to day operation. Management is thus done through steering (setting policy direction) rather than rowing (delivering services). Within a context of the sociology of governance, the purpose of political studies is to identify a macro pattern of state actions and to explain their reasons behind. Extending the idea of governmentality by Foucault (1991), Rose (1999) redefines the study of the role of state in a micro manner. It is about ‘subjects being rationalized as agents of power while governmental objectives are to be achieved through realigning subjects’ identity and by implicating subject’s self-regulation within governmental aims.’ (Flint 2003:612-3) Processes of liberal government therefore involve the ‘conduct of conduct’ where practices of government are seen as deliberate attempt to shape people’s behavior in certain ways in relation to certain objectives. ‘Government refers to all endeavors to shape, guide, direct the conduct of others, whether these be the crew of a ship, the members of a household, the employees of a boss, the children
of a family and the inhabitants of a territory.’ (Rose 1999:3). Increasingly, modern
governance has come to mean the construction of new identities for subjects as
citizens and consumers, organized within the territory of the community both ‘as
spatial scale of intervention and a site of civil morality’ (Flint 2003:613).

Two strands of thoughts come out from this new debate of governance. The first
concerns the ‘death of the social’. Rose (1999) suggests that the idea of a welfare
state, or whatever ways contemporary societies have configured themselves collectively
to ameliorate social ills, is now becoming problematic. The presupposition, that the
gradual betterment of human conditions of employers, workers managers and
professionals through a collective redistributive effort, is being seriously contested.
The ‘social’ world becomes highly fragmented as welfare programs are orientated more
towards the community level. Subjects of government here are understood as
individuals with ‘identities’ which not only identify them, but do so through their
allegiance to a particular set of community values, beliefs and commitments.

The second strand of discussions concerns the transformation of citizenship in
advanced liberal democracy. The focus here is about how to transform ‘passive
citizens’ to ‘active citizens’. According to Rose (1999), active citizen is not the
republican citizen who would become so significant within the discourse of
communitarianism. It is not a question of active involvement in public affairs or in
local politics. It is about how citizens are transformed into consumers and entrepreneurs who wield the know-how in one’s own problem solving. In Rose’s term:

‘It is not simply about a re-activation of values of self-reliance, self-esteem, self-worth or self-advancement. It is rather that the individual was to conduct his or her life, and that of his or her family, as a kind of enterprise, seeking to enhance and capitalize on existence itself through calculated acts and investments. This is marked by a proliferation of new apparatuses, devices and mechanisms for the government of conduct and forms of life: new forms of consumption, a public habitat of images, the regulation of habits, dispositions, styles of existence in the name of identity and life style.’ (Rose 1999:164)

In addition, Flint (2003) suggests that governance in this new era of politics is likely to involve a discourse of authoritative ‘grammar of living’ which seeks to shape and prescribe socially sanctioned consumption, including of course the consumption of housing. The ability to consume and make appropriate choices of consumption thus becomes the central concern of the modern citizens. Success of citizenship is now gauged by the degree one is capable of commanding one’s own resource system, including the ability to generate new resources.

Linking this whole debate to Hong Kong’s post-colonial housing scene is particularly relevant. In the nine years of post-colonial governance, the new Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government has been widely criticized as ‘a government by business interest and for business interest’. Such political sentiment was widely echoed amongst the middle classes and eventually led to massive social
uproars and the mass rally of half a million on July 1st 2003, culminating at the end a change of leadership. In retrospect, throughout the Tung Administration (1997-2005), anti-welfarism and the domination by business values by the government had been the characteristics of social policies (Leung 2003). Sharp increases in social security expenditures had prompted the government to resort to numerous cost-cutting social programs, all in the name of enhancing community participation or augmenting care in the community.

Nonetheless, amongst all social policy sectors, housing remains the most peculiar setup. A number of observations merit special attention. First, Hong Kong has one of the world’s most volatile and expensive housing markets. A typical high-rise residential 2-room flat in Hong Kong for a nuclear family in the urban area could easily cost 300,000 Euro or twice that in prime urban locations. Yet Hong Kong has also Asia’s second largest public housing sector after Singapore, as half of its population live in either public rental flats or public home ownership flats. This puts the housing system into a peculiarly prominent position in both the economy and politics.

Second, economy-wise, the housing sector has always been pivotal to the rise and fall of the local economy (see Table 1). A number of observations stem from this close affinity between the housing sector and the economy. There are those who argue
that housing is an extremely important independent variable in the growth equation (Castells et al. 1990), and that housing is not simply a cause of growth, it is an essential part of the developmental strategy (Lee, Forrest & Tam 2003). This is evidenced by a large part of Hong Kong’s borrowing devoted to capital the real estate sector. Also, pervasive evidence that bank credit growth rates in Asian economies had substantially exceeded GNP growth and that the ratio of non-performing real estate loans to total loans was large, particularly during the period prior to the Asian Financial Crisis, have all indicated a particularly volatile housing economy in East Asia. (Quigley 2001) (see Table 1). Elsewhere, I have also argued that extensive financialization of the housing sector has formed an important ancillary source of income in a restructuring labor market (Smart & Lee 2003). Other than capital gain and the generation of asset-based wealth, home ownership in East Asia also carries consequences on social class formation (Lee 1999). Middle class people not only place high stakes on home ownership as a major component of personal investment, but likewise treat housing consumption as an important vehicle to enable one to play an active part in the new urban culture (Lee 1999). The identity of being a homeowner effectively guarantees the possibility of an active consumer. Home ownership not simply plays an active part in consumption but is considered the ultimate consumption goal in one’s life. Moreover, it has been argued that classes based on cultural capital have become integral parts of production, consumption and exchange within advanced democracies as products become
conceived as cultural commodities (Bourdieu 1984).

Third, politically, housing provision in Hong Kong in the last two decades was characterized by two distinct processes: 1) the recommodification of social housing and 2) the privatization of housing management. Modern public housing history in Hong Kong has been characterized by a progressive commodification of public housing. This is done through two major policy instruments: first, a public rent policy capped at 15% of the median income of tenants. The median income level is determined from time to time by the government according to the prevailing market wage level. Second, since 1987 the government has begun to promote home ownership through both the government Home Ownership Scheme as well as to sell off a major chunk of the public housing stock. From the early 90s onwards, some 10% of the public rental housing has been sold to sitting tenants at highly discounted prices. However, there are difficulties for these former rental flats to be fully commodified since many people still consider them to be stigmatized. Moreover, a mature second hand market for these flats has yet to be developed. In broad terms, the commodification of public housing by the new post-colonial regime has not been entirely successful. In contrast, the privatization of the Housing Authority has been more successful.

Table 1: Potential Exposure of National Economy to Real Estate Sector of East Asia 1996
Table 2: Public expenditure on housing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Real estate as % of bank loans</th>
<th>Private bank credit (US$B)</th>
<th>1996 GNP (US$B)</th>
<th>Average exposure to real estate as % of GNP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>40-55</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>35-45</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>15-25</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>480</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>930</td>
<td>812</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: adapted from Renaud (1999:5)

Governing Public Housing Estates through the EMAC

Although I suggested earlier that public housing is in rapid decline, nonetheless Hong Kong still operates, if not in world terms, in the Asian and Pacific Region the second...
largest public housing system after Singapore. More than 600,000 households or 40% of the population live in either public rental flats or government-built-for-sale flats (see Table 3 Tenure Structure). Public expenditure on housing is a major item of public budget, averaging 8.5% of public expenditures in the last decade (Table 2). Since the 1950s, public housing management has been under the ambit of public sector management with the government directly responsible both for the production and distribution of public housing. Fully funded by government revenues, the Housing Authority managed some two hundred public housing estates, with a majority of them being rental flats. In 1976, while recognizing the need for owner-occupation and the lack of affordability by many tenants in private housing, the government began to build affordable home ownership flats through the Home Ownership Scheme (HOS). These subsidized home ownership flats were priced at roughly 50% of the prices of private market properties, and sold to either sitting tenants in public rental housing or to potential buyers on a long waiting list who met with a certain income criteria. Physically, the HOS flats were built side by side with public rental flats to provide a good mix of tenure since the early 80s. Such tenure structure went well until a major legislative change in 1993 (Building Management Ordinance) which empowered all property owners to appoint their management agents. However, since HOS flats were still under the Housing Authority’s direct management, such owners were not given the rightful opportunity to manage their own living environment. To remedy this situation the Housing Authority proposed the Estate Management
Advisory Committee (EMAC) system. For the first time in Hong Kong’s public housing history, elected tenants from Mutual Aid Committees (Resident Committee of each high-rise residential block) join hand with the Estate Housing Manager to manage the daily businesses of their own housing estates. Since its implementation on 1 April 1995, the Estate Management Advisory Committee (EMAC) Scheme has been extended to almost all public rental housing estates. To some extent modelled after UK’s model of tenant participation, the objective of the EMAC scheme is to further devolve power in estate management to local level. It also bears another motive – to promote tenants’ participation in their own matters and to strengthen their sense of belonging to their residential community.

**Transcending Tenant Participation through the Technologies of Self**

Analysing the transformation of tenant participation in UK, Cairncross, Clapham & Goodlad (1997:37) identify three major models: 1) traditional tenant participation which emphasises on information giving and effective communications between tenants, local councillors and housing managers. The emphasis is on helping tenants to understand why certain decisions are taken and also to improve the image of local authority. Accordingly, this form of tenant participation reproduces existing power relationship since little influence could be exerted by tenants to change policies affecting their own welfare; 2) consumerist tenant participation goes one step further by emphasizing not simply on giving information, but also finding the right
information from tenants, and also treating tenants more as consumers of a service/product produced by the local authority. In the consumerist model, tenants have relatively more influence, but only to the extent that they are sensitized to their rights and obligations. However, according to Cairncross, Clapham & Goodlad (1997:42), ‘there is no place in this for tenants to act collectively and this form of activity will be resisted or ignored’; 3) the citizenship tenant participation is characterized by a full range of participation structure including representation on full decision-making. The distinction of this model is based on collective representation rather than the individualistic orientation of the consumerist model.

Given this theoretical context, the question I raise here is to what extent these approaches make meaning for Hong Kong and how is it connected to the whole debate about ethopolitics and public housing (Cheung & Yip 2003). To achieve this we need to probe deeper into the structure and operation of EMAC. Each EMAC is normally chaired by the estate Housing Manager whilst membership comprises the chairman and elected representatives from Mutual Aid Committees of estate blocks. Elected District Board members (the lowest wrung of Hong Kong’s local political system) whose constituency covers the housing estate are also included. In addition, government officials from the Mechanical and Civil Engineering Department and related service contractors also play a major part in the deliberation. EMAC members generally advise the estate Housing Manager on estate management matters, providing input relating to priorities of maintenance and improvement works. They are also
involved in the drawing up of estate action plan and appraising the performance of contractors who provide services in the estate and their views will be taken into account in contract extensions or renewals. This perhaps is the more important part of the EMAC system, since it involves some decision-making power in contractual renewals for service contractors in cleaning and environmental hygiene. Funds allocated to the EMACs can be used on minor improvement works, betterment of building management, environmental improvement as well as estate activities organized with a view to enhancing tenants' understanding of housing policies/services and encouraging tenants' participation in estate management matters. The whole scheme was introduced in eight phases from 1996 with the number of estates with EMACs established reached the peak in 1999 (139 estates, including 1140 members appointed) (see Table 4). New EMACs were added with new estates completed but at the same time existing EMACs were terminated owing to old estates being redeveloped or sold in the Tenant Purchase Scheme (TPS) where highly discounted flats were sold to sitting tenants. In fact, once the estate is included in the TPS scheme, EMAC in that estate would be dissolved. Thus, the number of estates having EMAC dropped to 124 in 2002. Yet both the number of blocks and EMAC members appointed have remained stable since 1998.

In principle, EMAC is an advisory body to the Housing Authority represented by the Housing Manager. The role and responsibilities of EMAC are officially defined as: a) prioritizing maintenance and improvement works within the estate; and b) making
proposals on estate security, orderliness and cleanliness, the control of over roads and carparks, noise and amenities in the estate; c) providing feedback and tenants' views on estate management matters, including maintenance and improvement works and d) participating in appraising the performance of contractors to organize community activities and e) advising on matters relating to minor local improvement works.

Judging from this brief background, EMAC seems to fall right into the citizenship model where the elements of representation and decision-making prevail. However, in an empirical study which I conducted with two other co-researchers in 2002, the findings revealed a more complex picture.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3: Hong Kong Housing Stock and Tenure 1995-2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Thousands</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Residential Housing Stock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Rental Flats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Subsidized Sale Flats (HOS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Housing (75% home ownership and 25% private renting)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporary Housing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4: Development of EMAC 1996-2002</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

17
### From Tenant to Being Active Consumer

1) *Professionalism and Consumerism*

Successful transformation of tenants to consumers requires local housing officials’ willingness and cooperation in fostering the genuine participation of tenant representatives. If housing managers are not prepared to allow tenants to play the role of a consumer, there is no way this new ethopolitics could be played out by the government. However, empirical evidence found contradictory attitudes of housing managers towards tenant participation. On the one hand, they accept the usefulness of the EMAC and regarded tenant participation as benevolent to tenants in enhancing their rights, and at the same time improving management efficiency for housing management. Yet, many were skeptical of the ability of tenants in taking over management of the estates and would make the job of housing management more difficult. Such contradiction may be understood within a framework of competing demands between professionalism and consumerism. The following views from two different housing managers illustrate well this point.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1997-1998</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>779</td>
<td>967</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998-1999</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>947</td>
<td>1,140</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999-2000</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>947</td>
<td>1,140</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-2001</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>947</td>
<td>1,140</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-2002</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>947</td>
<td>1,140</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I would like to take tenants’ view seriously. However, many of them speak in layman terms and it doesn’t really help if they are the ones who makes decision. Sometimes it is too easy for tenants to make suggestions for improvement, without aware of the fact that those suggestions are outrageously difficult to implement. Housing management is a profession and it simply can’t be run by tenants who pretend they know the job. (Mr. Chan, housing manager)

I think in the long run tenants should be able to manage and make good decisions for their own estates. However, in the short run I think it is risky to really run that model. EMAC is useful to the extent that we are kept abreast with the views of the tenants and thus improves our communication. Beyond that, however, I think there is a long way to go. Tenants have a great to learn and overcome before they can really manage their own affairs. (Mr. Kwok, housing manager)

The resistance of professionals towards participation mechanisms in the public service appears to be intrinsic. Analyzing professionalism from the trait theory perspective, professionals are occupation groups having identifiable traits of expert knowledge (Greenwood, 1977, Wilensky, 1964; Hugman, 1991), tenant participation would represent a threat to the monopoly of such expertise. Likewise, if professionals are seen as occupation groups seeking social closure, tenant participation would act as a blockage to such process. As a young profession, it is not surprising that housing managers would strive hard to secure their professional status. However, globalization and marketization of housing management in the public sector also creates a new demand for a consumerist culture. Delivery of public service has been changed from a need-based, citizen-directed and equity-focused rhetoric to a demand-driven, customer-oriented and efficiency-quested orientation. Government
departments have begun to implement public sector reform in the mid 90s (Cheung & Lee 2001). Within this marketized framework, public tenants become the customers of public housing service. Treating public tenants as consumers, more “market” information is then released and system of complaint and redress have been instituted more firmly on the organization level. At the local level, tenant satisfaction surveys are carried out from time to time to evaluate the performance of the local offices and the service contractors.

EMAC thus becomes a highly effectual tool in the process of consumerizing tenants. Although the housing managers are skeptical towards privatization, they also recognize the potential of EMAC in helping them to cope with the consumerized culture in the new managerial regime. EMAC per se is a medium in which tenant consumerization can be materialized. It creates a platform on which direct dialogue among stakeholders (estate management office, service contractors and tenants) is possible. This helps to improve management efficiency as well as mitigating the burden of the estate management office in mediating the performance of the service contractors.

2) Home Ownership, Social Status and the Housing Ladder

The government has always been keen on promoting home ownership. The 1987 Long Term Housing Strategy has laid firm that foundation by providing a clear signal to the private housing market that owner-occupation would be the key tenure for Hong Kong (Hong Kong Housing Authority 1987). To promote home ownership in the private
market, the government utilized two major sets of strategies. First, new land supply had been highly regulated since the 1970s. Under British colonial rule, all land is in principle owned by the crown and the government. This restrictive land production policy has always been dubbed ‘the high land price policy’ in both the media and popular discourses. Second, the government also promotes the HOS scheme as well as selling public flats to sitting tenants since the early 1990s. In Hong Kong, although some 35% of the population still lives in public rental flats, nonetheless, many people still sees it as a residual tenure. What is still widely aspired is a switch to the home ownership ladder – a stake in the country! The capability of putting a step on the ladder signifies the attainment of a new identity – a homeowner is someone who is responsible, resourceful, empowering and even successful. A tenant is seen as someone in transition while a homeowner has already found his/her destiny. In fact, under Chinese culture, whether or not one owns a flat amounts to a qualification for parents to consider whether a proposed marriage could receive their blessings. Homeowners are thus given an identity of responsible and rational consumers and moral citizens (Flint 2003). ‘A foot on the ladder’ is what the government has been trying to promote, whereas tenants are seen as someone who is usually not well to do, possibly welfare dependent and probably have no choice.

3) Active Consumer equals Active Citizenship? Rhyming Housing Consumption with Politics
According to Cairncross, Clapham and Goodlad’s (1997) study on UK housing management, there is a consensus between politicians of different political parties and housing managers that tenant participation is a ‘good thing’ and should thus be supported. ‘Nevertheless, such consensus is very shallow as there is extensive disagreement about the form of participation which should be pursued’ (Cairncross, Clapham & Goodlad 1997:46). Thus the key question here is whether or not tenant participation really empowers tenants and whether being an active consumer really makes a better citizen and hence fulfilling the requirements of an active citizenship?

Our study in Hong Kong more or less confirms the above position. There is a general consensus among both EMAC members and tenants that resident involvement is a facilitator of good estate management. Only a very small minority of the respondents (2%-3%) disagreed that more involvement brings better management. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that while two thirds of tenants (65%) supported direct election of EMAC representatives, less than one third of EMAC members (31%) support direct election. 40% EMAC members in fact oppose to such a suggestion (Table 5). Such discrepancy is hard to explain. One possible explanation is that the general political environment of Hong Kong is highly supportive of more democracy and participation. The year when the study was conducted (2002) marked one of the worst years of the Tung administration. There was widespread anti-government feelings and general dissatisfaction with public policies. This might explain why
tenants were more supportive for directly elected EMAC members. Nonetheless, for those who were appointed as EMAC members, they began to see the limitations and challenges they were facing in the EMAC and therefore naturally became more pragmatic in their perspective.

Table 5: Attitude towards participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitude towards participation</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No resident involvement, not good for estate management</td>
<td>EMAC Member</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tenants</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMAC should participate more in estate management</td>
<td>EMAC Member</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tenants</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More residents’ participation, better estate management</td>
<td>EMAC Member</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tenants</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMAC members should be directly elected by residents</td>
<td>EMAC Member</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tenants</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


From these findings, one might take a strong position that tenant participation as a manifestation of direct democracy is irrelevant in Hong Kong given the fact that representative democracy system is still not well developed (less than half of the legislature is popularly elected). Despite the introduction of universal franchise in both the Legislative and District Council, power of democratically elected representatives is very limited. Not only that Hong Kong is still ruled by an administratively-led government headed by a Chief Executive who is elected by an obscure democratic process (by an electoral college of 800 electorates from functional constituencies), the
Legislature has no power to hold the government accountable. However, what becomes clear is that the government needs other institutional channels to maintain ruling legitimacy. It is exactly within this context that the inculcation of active consumer in the EMAC scheme becomes necessary and functional in Hong Kong ethopolitics.

**Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to explore the development of ethopolitics in Hong Kong’s public housing sector. It is argued that contemporary governance in advanced liberalism tend to use a variety of governing technologies aiming at entrepreneurizing and consumerizing the individual/household. The concept of self, entrepreneurship, active consumers, and responsible citizenship has been widely adopted as set of values and institutions configuring modern states. Using Hong Kong’s housing policy context, which includes a huge public sector, a strong policy on the promotion of owner-occupation, and a scheme aiming at the promotion tenant participation (EMAC), this paper confirms that there is a high possibility for modern governance to converge in the realm of ethopolitics, through various manifestation of governing technologies, aiming at what Flint (2003) called the ‘responsibilization of the self through community’. What differs between UK and Hong Kong is perhaps their constitution of society. UK is a mature liberal democracy while Hong Kong is still
struggling to become one. Nonetheless ethopolitics at the local level shares a great deal of similarity, at least in the housing arena.

However, what is worrying is not how advanced liberal democracies look alike. It is much more about the possible disjunction between citizens who are denied access to the ‘valued consumption’ – in this case home ownership and the demand on their responsibility to carry out, as citizens, their obligations to their communities. In Hong Kong, many public housing tenants still find home ownership unaffordable and that they are trapped forever in public rental housing. In the last few years we have already witnessed emerging ‘sites of conflict’ within public tenants. One such site concerns the public rent review mechanism and the major court cases which sow the seeds of discontent. Government was being accused of failing to lower rent level according to the law. When tenants finally lose their appeal cases in the Court of Final Appeal in 2005, they were astounded to find that procedural justice (rather than social justice) provided the government the shield against unfair rent levels. This will certainly produce a great deal of uncertainties and tensions in the development of ethopolitics in the years to come.

Reference


Hong Kong Housing Authority (2005) Housing in Figures (a pamphlet)


