

Research Assessment Exercise 2020
Impact Case Study

University: The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Unit of Assessment: 25 political science (incl. public policy & administration & international relations)

Title of case study: *Functional constituency elections in Hong Kong*

(1) Summary of the impact

The functional constituency (FC) process, which elects half of the Hong Kong legislature, is much under-studied and often criticized as a non-democratic form of election. MA Ngok's comprehensive work and analyses on FCs have informed political debate and been used for reference by political parties, candidates, the media and government officials. His research formed the basis of the 2010 reform which extended franchise for FCs from 240,000 electors to all the 3.5 million voters in Hong Kong. It gave all voters over 18 an extra vote for legislators in the 2012 and 2016 elections, and hence widened participation and impacted political parties and legislators' behaviors.

(2) Underpinning research

After 1997, half of the Legislative Council of Hong Kong (LegCo) was elected by FCs. By 2016, 35 of the 70 LegCo seats were elected by FCs, representing major business, professional and social groups. This electoral method was commonly dismissed as undemocratic. It created legitimacy problems for the government and the legislature. Reforming the FCs in ways that could solve the legitimacy problem and correct the business-dominated nature of the government had been a critical issue of political reform for Hong Kong for years.

Funded by two GRF grants (Project number: 448207 & 14607416), MA conducted comprehensive research on FC elections and their legislative performance from 2004 to the present, including their historical origins, theoretical underpinnings and debates, institutional features, problems of design and implementation, campaign processes, the legislative performance and behaviors of the FC legislators, its impacts on government policies, and possible reform directions.

MA's research and writings on FCs involved two perspectives. One saw it as a method of election with special system features and mobilization patterns. The analysis of system features was published in the journal *Representation* [R4]. A more comprehensive analysis of the system origins, features, problems, and campaign processes (including campaign issues and mobilization strategies), was published in the 2013 book [R1]. MA's work is to date the only comprehensive analysis of the FCs as a unique form of election.

The second approach saw the FC as a corporatist structure which coopted business and professional elites to form a ruling coalition. By bringing interest group demands into the decision-making structure, the FCs led to more sectoral intervention from the government after 1997, changing the role of state and government policies. MA's analysis of legislative performance since 1997 showed that policy demands of FC legislators' were more sector-oriented, which led to more government intervention and subsidies to various sectors. These findings were published in the journals *Economy and Society* [R3] and *Journal of Contemporary Asia* [R2], as a book chapter [R5] and appeared as several chapters in the 2013 book. The findings refuted the conventional wisdom that Hong Kong has a low-interventionist state and showed that the system led to a biased allocation of public resources in favor of represented sectors.

The ongoing research on FCs, funded by the GRF grant (Project number: 14607416) from January 2017 to December 2018, will result in a further book on the system nature, development and impact

of the FCs over 30 years. There will also be other journal articles discussing legislative performance, the nature of FC campaigns and its system nature.

(3) References to the research

- [R1] 馬嶽，《港式法團主義：功能界別25年》(香港：城市大學出版社，2013).
(Ma Ngok, *Corporatism in Hong Kong: 25 Years of Functional Constituencies* (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press, 2013).
- [R2] Ma Ngok, "The Making of a Corporatist State in Hong Kong: The Road to Sectoral Intervention," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 46, 2 (February 2016), pp.247-266.
- [R3] Ma Ngok, "Reinventing the Hong Kong State or Rediscovering it? From Low Interventionism to Eclectic Corporatism" *Economy and Society* 38, 3 (August 2009), pp.492-519.
- [R4] Ma Ngok, "Twenty Years of Functional Elections in Hong Kong: Exclusive Corporatism or Alternative Democratic Form?" *Representation* 45, 4 (November 2009): 421-433.
- [R5] Ma Ngok, "Eclectic Corporatism and State Interventions in Postcolonial Hong Kong," in Stephen Chiu Wing-kai and Wong Siu-lun eds., *Repositioning the Hong Kong Government: Social Foundations and Political Challenges* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), pp.63-89.

(4) Details of the impact

An important yardstick to measure the social impact of political science research is its ability to generate penetrating insights into important political issues, increase public awareness of different political options the civil society possesses, stimulate and sustain vibrant and thorough discussions on the different options, steer directions of public discourses, and help the civil society to reach consensus on challenging political choices. By this yardstick, MA's research has created significant impact in Hong Kong society. Yet, the social impact of his research on Hong Kong's campaigns for civic liberty and democracy is not limited to the local context, as evident in the global responses to the recent collective political movements in Hong Kong. In this section, we will describe how MA's research has directly impacted the democratization of Hong Kong's political institutions through FC election reforms, further inspired debate on universal suffrage elections, and framed and steered the direction of public discourses on the democratization of Hong Kong's political institutions in general.

Impacts of the "Super Seats"

Informed by his findings, MA has worked closely with pro-reform parties to devise reform proposals and discussed these with stakeholders including political parties, government officials, business leaders, and civil society groups. In 2009-10, as a key member of an alliance of pro-reform groups, MA devised a reform proposal for the FC, which was later revised and accepted by the government. The proposal added five new FC seats since 2012, with candidacy and nomination rights confined to District Councillors, but voted on by all voters over 18.

The new District Council (II) FC, nicknamed the "Super Seats", extended the franchise for FCs from 240,000 people to about 3.5 million in 2012, 2016 and beyond. In other words, the reform gave about 3.3 million voters an extra vote. In the 2012 LegCo elections, 1.67 million voters voted in the District Council (II) FC. About two million people voted in this FC in the 2016 elections. The Secretary for

Constitutional and Mainland Affairs reviewed in 2019 that the system “is fairer than before” and has better legitimacy [Source # 4]. Ten seats were added to the LegCo, which expands room for political participation and increases the capacity of the LegCo in deliberation of legislative and policy matters [Source #2].

Legislators elected from this method said that they will adopt a broader and more territory-wide perspective when they are deliberating policy issues in the legislature, compared to their geographically-elected colleagues [Source #1 and #2]. Party leaders observed that the new system “puts a high demand on candidates, and high demand on their organizations”, and the candidates “need to have strong organizational ability in both small districts and the whole territory” [Source #2]. The Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs believed that the system “helps enhance the status of District Council members and attract more candidates to run for District Councils.” [Source #4]

The 2013-14 Reform Debate

MA’s research on Hong Kong’s political elections motivated his further scholarly analysis into Hong Kong’s democratic development, forming a strong intellectual basis for vibrant discussions on the prospect of democracy and political reforms in Hong Kong.

In 2013-14, Hong Kong held a big debate on the electoral method for the 2017 Chief Executive and other political reforms. As convener of Proposal Panel of the Alliance for True Democracy, an alliance pushing for universal suffrage elections in 2017, MA helped to devise a reform proposal and roadmap towards full universal suffrage. The proposal, after modification, was listed as one of the options in the “Civic Referendum” on 20-29 June 2014. About 42% of the 780,000 voters (333,962 votes) who voted in the “Civic Referendum” chose this proposal. The proposal was then adopted by the opposition parties as the bargaining proposal with the government. MA also participated in seminars and discussions on political reform in the period [Source #8 and #6]. He was invited to have a dinner dialogue with the Chief Executive, Chief Secretary, and major stakeholders in the political reform (including parties, business leaders, major interest groups, and other politicians) on September 12, 2013, during which he made important suggestions about electoral reform for 2016/17 [Source #7].

Impacts on Public Knowledge and Discussion

MA had sought to extend and deepen the political impact of his research by offering research-inspired insights on political reforms in Hong Kong. Being a most authoritative expert on electoral politics in Hong Kong, MA’s research and views on FCs and political reform have been frequently cited by the media (See Source #5 as an example). He also contributed frequently to commentaries in local and international media. Source #9 provides a selected list of media interviews and commentaries related to the FCs and political reform.

MA’s analysis helped to inform the public about the nature, functioning, performance, and reform possibilities of the FCs and the LegCo, and other political issues. More importantly, his observations and views often framed and steered the directions of public debates on these issues. The Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau saw MA as “a renowned scholar in the field of Hong Kong politics and democratization” and considered that his research has “significant reference value”, “helps inform policy-making of the bureau”, and “has considerable social impact by promoting public discussion on major political and social issues” [Source #4]. Current legislator Au Nok-hin said that his choice of FC in the 2016 LegCo election and his campaign strategy was based on the information in MA’s 2013 book [Source #3].

(5) Sources to corroborate the impact

- [Source #1]** Interview record with James To, current legislator elected by the reformed FC (super-seat) method in 2012 and 2016. *[Appended]*
- [Source #2]** Interview record with Albert Ho, legislator elected from the “super-seat” in 2012-16 and former Chair of Democratic Party. *[Appended]*
- [Source #3]** Letter from Au Nok-hin, current legislator and candidate who ran in the Wholesale and Retail FC in 2016. *[Appended]*
- [Source #4]** Letter from Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs. *[Appended]*
- [Source #5]** Media reports citing MA’s research or comments on the operation of FCs, its problems, impacts and possible reform directions. *[Appended]*
- [Source #6]** A Roundtable on Political Reform, published by Ming Pao in December 2013. *[Appended]*
- [Source #7]** Press reports on the dinner meeting with the Chief Executive, Chief Secretary and other stakeholders, on political reform, on September 12, 2013. *[Appended]*
- [Source #8]** Media reports on MA’s participation/activities on the political reform debate in 2013-14, including the reports related to the reform proposal by the Alliance for True Democracy (electronic media records not included). *[Appended]*
- [Source #9]** Records on media interviews and commentaries by MA on the FC system and political reform from 2013 to 2019 (interviews in electronic media not included). *[Appended]*