Chapter 2

Depoliticization, Citizenship and the Politics of Community in Hong Kong*

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This chapter critically examines government discourses on citizenship and community in Hong Kong from the 1960s to the present. By making special reference to the government discourses on three public events—the 1966 Star Ferry riots, the 1981 riots, and scuffles such as those that took place at the Cultural Center, Tsimshatsui, on Christmas and New Year’s Eve 2002—it reconstructs the meaning of good citizenship as promoted by the colonial and post-colonial governments. These three public events are selected as cases highly indicative of what governments expect an ideal citizen to be because all of them aroused substantial public attention that subsequently invoked considerable discourse and action. Citizenship is built upon a shared sense of community. Considered in this context, I also trace the understanding of community of the governments, as it is intertwined with the notion of citizenship, through the development of government policies on youth and citizen education in the city from the 1960s onward. It is obvious that citizenship has been constituted from both above (by the government of the day) and below (by the civil society). By reconstructing the government discourses in this regard, I will shed light on part of the process of citizenship-making in Hong Kong.

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Citizenship and Its Constitutive Stories

Although definitions of citizenship are numerous, they usually encompass three major themes. Pamela J. Conover offers an example, explaining citizenship as the fundamental relationship of a person to a political
community that consists of a collection of individuals who are “committed to dividing, exchanging, and sharing social goods.” A political community is “constituted by its members and its formal institutions, and citizenship shapes how individuals relate to both components. It is the basis, therefore, upon which people answer the fundamental questions about public life: Who am I? What can I do? What must I do?” (Conover, 1995, pp. 134–5)

Conover’s idea of citizenship reveals that it encompasses three elements. The most basic element is membership in the political community. The second element is the sense of citizenship, which consists of the concept of citizen identity: that is, the affective significance people give to their membership in a particular community. It also connotes the common beliefs that people engender about their relationship to the state and other citizens. The final element of the idea of citizenship is practice: that is, the forms of behavior in which people engage as part of their public lives. The practice of citizenship includes both political participation and civic activity. (Conover, 1995, pp. 134–5) While political participation manifests an active citizenship through which citizens assert their rights and influence their government, civic activity indicates a relatively passive citizenship by which people’s obedience and fulfillment of civic duties serve to keep the political system going.

In theory, the construction of the concepts of citizenship and political community is a process embedded with a sense of reciprocity and egalitarianism, as both the government and the citizenry have a part to play in bringing good citizenship to fruition. There should be a dual emphasis on the importance of political and civic activity. However, in politics, as Roger M. Smith (Smith, 2001, pp. 79–80) argues, the status of citizen is often utilized for creating common memories and feelings of identification, as well as to create belief in the importance of practices beneficial to governance. While citizenship indicates a political identity of a people, this identity, like other identities, is a political construction, subject to political manipulation. Also, shaping a sense of citizenship is a political process embedded with competing narratives of an economic, political and constitutive nature. Each type of story serves particular political functions. Economic stories promote accounts of interests, arguing that a particular version of citizenship advances each member’s economic well-being. Political narratives foster trust in the worth of a citizen identity by promising the people enhancement of their political power through institutions and policies, and protection