

1938

After the high tide of the mid-1920s, the labour movement in Hong Kong entered a low ebb. In the wake of the Great Strike and Boycott of 1925 and 1926, the British colonial authorities increased their repression of labour activism and other expressions of social discontent. With trade unions effectively outlawed, the Illegal Strikes and Lockouts Ordinance of 1927 succeeded in eradicating collective labour action. The 1930s witnessed the rise of two interwoven movements: a citywide mobilisation for national salvation and a concurrent resurgence of labour activism. This essay looks into how the convergence of these two movements eventually rekindled Hong Kong's labour movement.

Resurgence of Labour Activism in Prewar Hong Kong

LU Yan

One day in early October 1938, a quiet meeting of three young men took place in a small apartment at Hung Hom, across Victoria Harbour from Hong Kong Island. Liao Chengzhi (1908–83), the oldest of the three, had been in Hong Kong for only ten months since his appointment to lead the semi-open Eighth Route Army Liaison Office in January. The other two, Zeng Sheng (1910–95) and Wu Youheng (1913–94), were still in their twenties but had spent years in Hong Kong, during which they had become secret members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). A Party directive had come through Liao's radio transmitter, urging them to develop guerrilla resistance against the Japanese occupation of South China. During that meeting, they reached the conclusion that Wu's responsibility for more than 600 Party members in the colony should keep him in Hong Kong, while Zeng, a native of the East River basin, was better suited for leading armed resistance there.¹

Later that month, more than 120 young workers and students left a Hong Kong that was still safe and peaceful. They travelled alone or in small groups to Pingshan, Zeng Sheng's hometown, some thirty miles (forty-eight kilometres) north of the British colony. Most would be working among villagers as 'people's motivators' (民运员), operating as a civilian front for the new guerrilla force.² About thirty took up arms and fought on the battlefield. Coming from Hong Kong's factories and schools, these initial participants would form the core of the East River Column (东江纵队), as this new guerrilla force came to be known after 1943.

This meeting occurred at a pivotal moment for the colony's resurgent labour activism. Through the 1930s, Hong Kong witnessed two interwoven movements—a citywide mobilisation for national salvation and the resurgence of labour activism—in which Zeng and Wu emerged as leaders. As the two movements converged, they rekindled a once-vibrant tradition from the previous decade, which had made Hong Kong the leader of China's labour movement. If the rendezvous of the trio was to bring labour activism in Hong Kong to a new frontier, their planning for future battles was only the logical outcome of political developments that had taken place throughout the decade.

From Trading Post to Industrial Centre

In 1931, Hong Kong entered its tenth decade under British rule. Built on the nearly absolute power of the London-appointed governor and sustained by evolving legal institutions, the colonial system appeared to be more secure than ever. Repression of labour activism and social discontent attained a new level of comprehensiveness in the wake of the Great Strike and Boycott of 1925–26 (see Leong's essay in the present volume). Labour unions were outlawed. The Illegal Strikes and Lockouts Ordinance of 1927 effectively put an end to all collective labour action. The Chinese business elite, who had traditionally collaborated with the British administration, drummed up a 'red scare' in local newspapers and generated a political climate that stigmatised social and political protest.³ Although Communists found in Hong Kong a temporary safe haven after 1927, when the White Terror swept the mainland, they were quickly caught by the police and deported over the border to Guangdong, where they were tried and executed. By the early 1930s, the Communist organisation in Hong Kong was crushed.⁴

Beneath its seeming quiescence, Hong Kong was on the brink of profound transformations. The sixth decennial census, conducted in 1931, noted for the first time that the number of people employed in manufacturing surpassed those engaged in trade, commerce, insurance, and banking.⁵ A new industrial area emerged in Shaukiwan, the northeastern part of Hong Kong Island. Across Victoria Harbour to the north, far more factories and workshops were being erected on the Kowloon Peninsula. Leading this industrial expansion were mostly Chinese-owned light industries producing for distant markets. As war ravaged the mainland through the decade, more and more factories, especially those in Shanghai, chose to move south to Hong Kong in the hope of gaining protection under the British flag. Quantitatively, Chinese-owned factories were more numerous, yet often smaller in size than the European firms that continued to dominate the economy.

As Hong Kong transitioned from trading post to industrial centre, it attracted more people from neighbouring Guangdong Province, as well as from Fujian, Guangxi, and other provinces further north. More Shanghai workers relocated to Hong Kong when their factories opened branches there. Wages varied and could be as high as HK\$150 per month for a skilled artisan or as low as HK\$13 for a male labourer. The average wage for skilled workers was between HK\$30 and HK\$45, but female

workers—predominant in light industry—were paid by piece rate and received only between HK\$6 and HK\$15 a month. Since a large proportion of their income had to be spent on food, nearly all workers had no choice but to live in subdivided apartments. Usually, those with family rented ‘cubicles’ whereas single workers squeezed themselves into ‘bedspaces’ or even shared a bedspace with their mother or sworn sister.⁶

Regardless of the distance from their point of origin or the length they lived there, workers in Hong Kong never thought they belonged to the colony. They were the so-called internal migrants who were merely following a time-honoured survival strategy in China.⁷ They never considered themselves as Hong Kongers, only mere sojourners. A telling indication of this mentality can be found in the way these Chinese named their native-place associations and other mutual help organisations, which often carried the phrase ‘sojourning in Hong Kong’ (侨港).⁸ The hearts and minds of Chinese workers in Hong Kong were always, in life and death, homebound.⁹

A Patriotic Resurgence

Towards the end of the 1920s, Chinese in Hong Kong reacted with alarm and anger to Japan’s first major military move against China. In 1928, the massacre of 2,000 Chinese civilians by Japanese marines in Jinan, Shandong Province, made headlines in Hong Kong. Newspapers controlled by the merchant elite, particularly the *Wah Kiu Yat Po* (华侨日报, *Overseas Chinese Daily*) and *Kung Sheung Yat Po* (工商日报, *Industrial and Commercial Daily*), gave the event extensive coverage for weeks. In defiance of colonial law, some unusually brave Chinese gave public speeches on the streets calling for mass protests against the Japanese invasion. They were quickly arrested, fined, and sentenced to hard labour. These flashes of protest became preludes to a sustained movement. In September 1931, just a few days after the outbreak of the Manchurian Incident, tens of thousands of Chinese in Hong Kong responded with huge rallies in assembly halls and on the streets. These peaceful protests turned violent during a mass rally in downtown Wanchai, when a few Japanese sneered at the crowd. Protesting Chinese clashed with the police who had been called in to stop the disorder. As protests spread throughout the colony, the government found the police inadequate to quell the disturbance and mobilised regular troops to maintain order.¹⁰ In the end, the governor’s official report cited fourteen deaths—six Japanese and eight Chinese—but

information circulated within the colonial administration indicated that British troops had killed at least 400 Chinese demonstrators. Another 200 were arrested and thrown into jail. As the Second Police Magistrate noted, anti-Japanese feeling among the Chinese was ‘very bitter indeed’.¹¹

Bitterness against the Japanese invaders alone was not enough to cause widespread and sustained protest. Authorities identified the Ko Shing Theatre, a popular stage for Cantonese opera, as a venue that facilitated anti-Japanese activities, and suspended its performances for three days in early October. The Barbers’ Guild, accused of ‘actively fomenting disaffection in connection with the anti-Japanese movement’, was outlawed.¹² Actual organisational nodes, however, were far too numerous for an alien regime to identify. In fact, each neighbourhood had its own informal network, with links that stretched well beyond its boundaries, to mobilise fellow Chinese. The indignation and sorrow had been so widely shared that a boycott at one store would always draw a large crowd of passers-by, whose cheers and shouts merged with the sound of the smashing and burning of Japanese goods. Under severe censorship, newspapers often were published with ‘empty windows’ where articles with anti-Japanese content had been deleted. But the Chinese had their ways of circumventing the censorship. For instance, in place of the usual greetings of ‘wishing you a great fortune’, that year’s New Year’s cards featured mainland heroes who had fought the invading Japanese Army. Through these unmistakable images, the Chinese in Hong Kong made a loud statement that they supported their homeland in its resistance.¹³

A New Generation of Labour Leaders

Amid spontaneous civic activism for national salvation emerged a new generation of young leaders. They were either individual Communists without Party connections or local activists who rallied around the cause of national salvation. The Hong Kong Anti-Japanese National Salvation Association (香港抗日救国会, HKNSA) was probably the earliest national salvation organisation with a working-class base led by individual Communists. One major leader, Zhou Nan (1907–80), came from a poor peasant family in Guangdong and had to cut short his education on finishing primary school. He joined the CCP in 1927 while working in a battery factory in Hong Kong, but he lost organisational connection three years later when his contact was captured.¹⁴ Surviving on odd jobs, Zhou became an avid reader of works by Marx, Lenin, and Chinese

Marxist writer Ai Siqi (1910–66). He also contributed articles to the *Public Herald* (大众日报), the newspaper sponsored by the Chinese National Revolutionary Alliance (中华民族革命同盟), a dissident organisation of political and military leaders who set up their base in Hong Kong after a failed rebellion against Nanjing in 1933. Zhou's writings for the *Public Herald* attracted other like-minded youth. Their secret study group, formed in the autumn of 1935, soon transformed into the HKNSA. Without contact or instruction from any political party, members of the HKNSA—estimated 400 to 500—were mostly workers, plus a smaller number of students, teachers, and shop clerks. In September 1936, the HKNSA suffered a fatal blow, when police raided a meeting as members held a commemoration of the Manchurian Incident. Zhou Nan happened to be in Shanghai attending the All-China Conference of National Salvation Associations and escaped arrest.¹⁵

Although the HKNSA was gone, young activists quickly rallied around another organisation, the South China Branch of the National Salvation Association (华南救国会), jointly formed by individual Communists and members of the Chinese National Revolutionary Alliance.¹⁶ Wu Youheng, whom we met at the beginning of this essay, had just arrived from Guangzhou in the spring of 1936 in hopes of boarding a ship for Manchuria to join the armed resistance in the northeast. Instead, he connected with the South China Branch and remained in Hong Kong. In September, the twenty-three-year-old Wu became a member of the Communist Party and was appointed almost immediately to lead its recently formed city branch when local Party members reconnected with the CCP centre in the north. As a representative of the South China Branch, Wu made contact with the remaining members of the disbanded HKNSA.¹⁷ Before he left for Yan'an in 1940 as Hong Kong's representative to the CCP's Seventh National Congress, Wu also became a keen observer of mass movements in Hong Kong.¹⁸

In the less repressive political climate in Hong Kong of the late 1930s, workers rapidly regrouped amid colony-wide national salvation activism. Among the newly revived labour organisations, the Hong Kong Seamen's Union (香港海员工会), which had led the first general strike in Hong Kong but was banned after the General Strike and Boycott, once more became the most prominent and active. Former union activists who had survived anti-Communist repression quietly played a key role in organising fellow Chinese seamen into recreational clubs tolerated by the colonial state. The Music Society for Leisure Entertainment (余闲乐社)

was just this kind of labour union in the guise of a recreational society. First formed in 1929 on the ocean liner *Empress of Japan*, the society organised Chinese seamen to perform Cantonese opera while at sea and aided them in times of sickness and unemployment on shore. Zeng Sheng, mentioned at the beginning of this essay, had fled arrest in Guangzhou for national salvation activism, worked as a bell boy on the *Empress of Japan*, and rose to the union's leadership. In 1937, the seamen made two attempts to register their organisation with the colonial government as a union. Their first application was flatly rejected, but the second, which included the signatures of more than 1,000 seamen, succeeded and the society was registered as the Hong Kong Seamen's Union.¹⁹

Strikes, Boycotts, and Fundraising

Regrouped Chinese labour in Hong Kong was again at the forefront of the effort to aid China's struggle against foreign invasion. Soon after total war broke out in July 1937, the 3,500 Chinese seamen working on Japanese ships left their jobs. Among those working on the four 'Empress' ocean liners owned by the Canadian Pacific Line—*Empress of Japan*, *Empress of Canada*, *Empress of Russia*, and *Empress of Asia*—845 left the ships to boycott the shipment of war material to Japan. Labour activism spread further on shore. In the second half of 1937, seventeen boycotts by seamen and dockhands marshalled support from 8,399 participants.²⁰ Between November 1937 and February 1938, four strikes with 3,000 participants broke out at Hong Kong's dockyards. A nine-day strike occurred at the Hong Kong and Kowloon Wharf and Godown Company when 2,000 dockhands refused to unload Japanese goods and prevented them coming ashore. At Standard Oil, 500 workers refused to load a shipment for Japan, forcing the company to cancel the contract. Communists played an active role in some of these mobilisations, but the workers themselves also initiated anti-Japanese boycotts. At Hongji, Hong Kong's largest Chinese grain firm, 400 dockhands refused to load grain for shipment to Japan. On their own initiative, other dockhands dumped strategically important tungsten ore into the sea rather than load it on a ship bound for Japan. Five thousand workers at the Taikoo Dockyard refused to repair Japanese ships and convinced replacement workers hired by the company to boycott as well.²¹ Under censorship and the attentive watch of the Japanese Consul-General in Hong Kong, news of Chinese workers' anti-Japanese strikes and boycotts could not appear in local newspapers.

Nevertheless, their activism appeared in internal reports by Communists who participated in or closely observed these collective actions. In hundreds of pages, their detailed descriptions recorded a rapid surge of anti-Japanese boycotts by Chinese workers in Hong Kong between 1936 and 1939.

Beyond subversive actions against Japan, Chinese workers in Hong Kong also assisted China's resistance through fundraising. The year 1938 saw their most enthusiastic participation, epitomised by an impressive campaign started by hawkers. It began accidentally at Shamshuipo, an emerging industrial area on the Kowloon Peninsula. In the wake of a colony-wide commemoration of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident that marked the outbreak of total war, three vegetable hawkers decided to hold a three-day charity sale. Among the poorest of the poor, making only slim profits from the daily sale of perishable produce, the hawkers' heroic decision to put the nation's wellbeing before their own was contagious. Word went out to textile workers in the neighbourhood, who immediately followed with an ingenious scheme: they challenged the factory owners to match their donations. Under public pressure, employers complied, and others quickly emulated this strategy across the colony. As a result, 'every market held charity sales'.²² Factory workers devised a surprising way to move the public. They gathered in groups of several hundred to march through Hong Kong's streets, shouting in unison with a 'mountain-shaking' voice: 'Help our country [救国呀]!'²³ In just three weeks, they raised HK\$700,000. On 13 August 1938, the first anniversary of the 'Shanghai Incident' in which the National Army of China stood up to the Japanese invaders, hawkers alone raised HK\$1,180.²⁴ Their charity sale continued through the following year and raised a total of HK\$300,000.²⁵

While Chinese workers spearheaded the participatory civic movement in Hong Kong, merchant elites in the colony also joined in. Eurasian millionaire Robert Ho Tung was the principal donor when the Chinese Government announced a 'donation for airplanes campaign' in 1935. Others in the business community contributed as well, though they observed the legal boundary delineated by the colonial state and discreetly collected donations for the campaign. When the war broke out in 1937, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce became the official intermediary that transmitted donated funds to the Chinese Government. By then, national salvation had become a Hong Kong-wide movement, involving rich and poor, famous and humble alike. Actors in the film industry, singsong girls,

factory workers, street hawkers, shop clerks, teachers, and students of all ages formed their own associations for national salvation.²⁶ One observer counted 150 such organisations that suddenly appeared in the colony in the second half of 1937.²⁷

The Colonial State Steps into Labour Affairs

The upsurge of national salvation activism and labour activism in the late 1930s reflected Hong Kong's political environment, in which colonial repression moderated out of necessity. In 1936, British Asia began to feel a direct threat when Japan signed the Anti-Comintern Pact with Germany. With war imminent in Europe, Britain wished to avoid a fight on two fronts. It adopted a calculated attitude of 'benevolent neutrality', gave China 'moral support and limited material aid, but at the same time avoided confrontation with Japan'.²⁸ The British authorities allowed more than thirty official and semi-official Chinese establishments to operate in Hong Kong, channelling funds and purchasing strategic materiel from abroad.²⁹ Hong Kong's colonial state also slightly relaxed its anti-Communist stance when the Nationalist Party formed a United Front with the Communists to fight their common enemy. In 1938 the Communist-led Eighth Route Army was allowed to set up a liaison office in Hong Kong, with Liao Chengzhi as the director.

Urged by the imperial centre to reform colonial affairs and in recognition of Hong Kong's new reality of industrial development, the colonial state appointed its first labour officer in 1938. Yet its record of dealing with a major industrial dispute left much doubt as to the extent to which the colonial state would go to change its pro-business tradition. From 1937 to 1939, three waves of labour protest erupted at the Hong Kong branch of the Chung Hwa Book Company (中华书局), which was officially designated as China's currency printer. Workers took collective actions against the company's decisions to lengthen work hours in 1937, levy an unusually large fine for three banknotes ruined during printing in 1938, and enact a large-scale dismissal of workers in late 1939. Labour officer Henry Butters, a fair-minded progressive, recognised the workers' economic grievances and successfully mediated the first dispute to their satisfaction, but he was then excluded from the following disputes. On those occasions, the colonial state resorted to the police to assist the company in expelling workers from the factory. Although the protest by

1,200 dismissed workers continued for months thanks to donations from people in Hong Kong and elsewhere, eventually the workers were forced to accept the severance package and leave Hong Kong on an order by the Secretary for Chinese Affairs.

By the time the labour protest at Chung Hwa subsided, colonial Hong Kong was no longer the same as it was a decade before. It was on the rise to becoming yet another industrial centre on China's coast with a growing number of industrial workers. By establishing a labour office, the colonial state had departed from the tradition of indirect rule over the majority of local Chinese. Labour activism, once largely influenced by the Nationalist Party, witnessed the ascendance of a new leadership of activists forged in the national salvation movement, who soon chose to become Communists. This resurgent labour activism would move to a new frontier soon after Liao Chengzhi, Wu Youheng, and Zeng Sheng made their deliberation at Hung Hom. As many more activists were to recognise soon, the battlefields of guerrilla warfare against the Japanese invasion would serve as a training ground for a new wave of labour activism when peace returned to Hong Kong.