

1967

The crisis sparked by the anticolonial riots in 1967 is arguably the most important episode of the colonial history of Hong Kong in the postwar era. Triggered by an industrial dispute in May 1967, incessant waves of violence, demonstrations and strikes hit the colony, leading to fifty-one deaths and about 4,500 arrests. The territory was also haunted by extreme forms of confrontation, such as bombings and military clashes between British and Chinese forces at the border. Many commentators regard the events as the turning point in colonial governance, as post-riot Hong Kong underwent fundamental changes in socioeconomic policies. However, despite their origin as an industrial dispute against a backdrop of destitution and frustration among the working class in the colony, the events were primarily a spillover of the political radicalism in mainland China. The confrontation lasted more than six months and had a long-lasting impact on the trajectory of labour reforms in colonial Hong Kong.

The Hong Kong Riots of 1967

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Factories in postwar Hong Kong were seen by many as poster-cases of 'blood and sweat workshops' of capitalism. Workers were paid low wages with few legal protections and limited benefits, and state regulations on industrial safety and working hours were yet to be introduced. The rapid population expansion in the postwar years further intensified the vulnerability of the underprivileged. Central to the desperation were the miserable living conditions endured by the majority. A study conducted in 1965 provides a vivid portrait of the abysmal lives of the locals, which were very much a mirror image of the desperation suffered by the English working class depicted by Charles Dickens:

These buildings are mainly three storeys high. A very steep wooden staircase serves two adjacent buildings. The treads are so worn that hollows are formed in the central parts, and sometimes one or two treads are missing altogether. As the cleaning and maintenance of the stairs are nobody's responsibility (caretakers are unheard of) dirt and dust have accumulated over the years. The stairways are dark even in broad daylight and artificial lighting is never installed so that drug addicts who take advantage of the protective darkness are encountered on the landings.²

Colonial administrators attributed their reluctance to increase social investment and welfare provision to the 'China factor'. They argued that improvement in living standards in the colony would simply encourage more population inflows from the mainland—a discourse that had considerable mileage given the accelerated influx of illegal immigrants from China since the late 1950s as a result of the famines caused by the Great Leap Forward.

The apparent increase in social tension in the early 1960s is reflected in crime statistics. In 1965–66, 8,166 cases of serious crime were recorded—the highest level of serious crime since the late 1950s and a 40 percent increase over the level of 1961–62.³ Even more worrying was the rising involvement of young people. The number of defendants under the age of sixteen witnessed an average annual growth rate of 17 percent between

1960 and 1966, and the number of young offenders between the ages of sixteen and twenty increased at an average of 13 percent during the same period.⁴ With education and employment opportunities for young people few and far between, juvenile delinquency was a genuine concern. Signs of uneasiness were also evident in the workplace. Right before the 1967 riots, industrial disputes related to pay and working conditions occurred at Greenland Cement, the Central Taxi Company and Nanfung Textiles, threatening to escalate into major disturbances.⁵ It was, however, the Kowloon disturbance of 1966 that finally forced the government to acknowledge the prevailing social tension. Triggered by a fare increase for the round-trip ferry service between Central District and Tsimshatsui, these disturbances lasted from 4 April to 10 April and ended with curfews, mass arrests and direct confrontations between the police and rioters. Although these were brief disturbances confined to districts in eastern Kowloon, they were a testament to the general restlessness among Hong Kong's young people.

The Riots as a Spinoff of China's Cultural Revolution

The 1967 riots started in an artificial-flower factory in Kowloon on 6 May, when an industrial dispute over the reduction of bonuses and allowances spiralled out of control. The employer refused to give in and eventually fired ninety-two workers. The police were soon called in and their violent handling of the situation left many workers injured. Eighteen workers were arrested. The local communists seized on this bickering to launch their anti-imperialist campaign in the colony. The communist-dominated Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions (HKFTU) immediately intervened on behalf of the workers, putting forward four demands: the immediate release of the workers arrested, the punishment of the evildoers and compensation for the victims, guarantees of the workers' personal safety and no interference henceforth by the police in labour disputes.

The event was quickly politicised. The turning point was the intervention of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 15 May 1967. Chinese diplomats passed a protest statement to the British chargé d'affaires in Beijing, which was then followed by anti-British demonstrations in Beijing and Guangzhou and sympathetic editorials in the *People's Daily* (人民日報).⁶ For many local radicals in Hong Kong, these events were a clear call to arms. The formation of the All Circles Anti-Persecution Struggle Committee (香港各界同胞反英抗暴鬥爭委員會) in Hong

Kong heralded the full-scale mobilisation of local communists for an anticolonial campaign across the whole colonial territory. The labour dispute was quickly subsumed by demonstrations, strikes, marches and bombings, and the original concern for industrial relations was replaced with the highly politicised slogans of anti-imperialism. For at least six months, the normal life of the colony was paralysed by thousands of protestors performing the rhetoric and postures of the mainland's Cultural Revolution, such as holding Mao Zedong's *Little Red Book*, although attempts at full-scale and sustained strikes remained unsuccessful.

In fact, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had been present in Hong Kong since the 1920s (see Leong's and Lu's essays in the present volume). In the early days of the CCP, the colony had been a safe haven from the Nationalist regime and Japanese aggression and, in the postwar years, it served as a centre for coordination during the Civil War and remained strategically significant during the Cold War period. After 1949, the CCP's policy towards Hong Kong remained pragmatic, following the guiding principle of 'long-term planning, full utilisation' (长期打算, 充分利用). That is, despite denying the legality of the colonial status of Hong Kong, the mainland authorities regarded acceptance of the status quo as in their best interest. As a result, their efforts to consolidate the Party's presence in the colony continued under the radar.

In such a context, the rising influence of the communists was partly a self-inflicted wound on the side of the British administration in Hong Kong. With their minimalist approach to governing and noncommittal stance in service provision, the colonial authorities had unintentionally created a wide constituency for the communists, who were prepared to provide a moderate but highly cherished support network for the locals. The colonial government's foot-dragging when it came to welfare provision and reticence to address the destitution faced by the working class contributed to the expansion of the communist presence in the local labour movement.

The development of trade unions had always been the primary concern of the local communists since the 1920s. Labour's vulnerability to economic cycles and the lack of safety nets simply drove more and more hapless workers to unions that would provide them with some support for their misfortunes. Founded in 1948, the HKFTU was the local communist-controlled umbrella labour organisation. In this role, it had been particularly successful in establishing its hold among workers in public utilities companies, playing a key role in organising the strikes and

struggles of tram workers in 1949, 1950 and 1954.⁷ And it was also the force behind the success of the strikes at Dairy Farm in 1949 and the Hong Kong Naval Dockyard in 1957. The HKFTU was, however, not simply a labour organisation; it had also attempted to fill the void in welfare provision left by the colonial government, serving as a support network for its members and sympathisers. While the government was still pondering its involvement in education, the union had its own network of schools for workers' children. It also provided affordable health services, cheap meals, cultural entertainment and even relief support during crisis at a time when the notion of the welfare state remained very much a taboo for the colonial administrators.

The communist cause was further strengthened by the communist involvement in the media, education and cultural sectors. By the beginning of 1967, there were a number of broadsheets directly controlled by the communists in Hong Kong—*Wen Wei Po* (文匯報), *Tai Kung Po* (大公報), *New Evening News* (新晚報), *Ching Po Daily* (晶報), *Hong Kong Commercial Daily* (香港商報), *Ching Wu Po* (正午報) and *Tin Fung Daily* (田豐日報). These papers commanded a respectable audience: by early 1967, in total, they published 240,000 copies per day—about 16 percent of the daily newspaper circulation in the colony.⁸ By the early 1950s, the communists had also established their own filmmaking machinery in the territory. The three companies—Great Wall, Phoenix and New United—were highly successful in producing commercial films for local entertainment and occupied a key role in the colony's film industry, producing 262 films between 1950 and 1966.⁹

The communist camp was equally successful in consolidating its foothold in education. Hong Kong society had a demographic structure strongly tilted towards the young. According to the 1961 census, 41 percent of the 3.1 million people living in the territory were aged fifteen or under, with one-third of this group aged below five years.¹⁰ Although this distinctive pattern created a huge demand for education, the colonial administration was slow to react. By the early 1960s, government intervention in this area remained circumscribed and the private sector continued to play a leading role in providing schooling opportunities for the local population. The shortage of government-funded places was particularly acute in secondary education, as 70 percent of students were enrolled in private schools. Yet many of these private schools operated in unsafe premises, with limited resources and unqualified teachers. The infamous 'rooftop' schools—that is schooling offered by 'teachers' with no

formal qualifications in makeshift facilities on the tops of buildings—for example, contributed about 20 percent of total places at the primary level.¹⁰ Communist sympathisers ran a substantial portion of these informal education establishments.

In short, on the eve of 1967, there already existed an extended web of communist supporters across different sectors of the colony. This network could serve as an effective platform for leadership, mobilisation and coordination, and it was also a steady source of foot soldiers for violence, strikes, demonstrations and propaganda. The colonial government was not unaware of the danger but its policy of minimal intervention in welfare and development tied its hands. It was not until the summer of 1967 that the real impact of this potentially subversive machinery was felt.

The Riots as a 'Spontaneous Act' by Local Communists

The presence of networks, however, does not explain why the local communists mobilised them in 1967. Sir David Trench, the colonial governor at the time, was convinced of the 'spontaneous' character of the original industrial dispute in Kowloon and that it was not a premeditated act by Beijing. 'There is every indication that this was a spontaneous incident', he argued in a telegram, and that the latest wave of militant unionism was no more than 'a reflection of the increased freedom allowed to the "masses" as a result of local propaganda based on the Cultural Revolution in China.'¹² Trench's theory was that the later escalation of events was largely a result of the Hong Kong communist leaders' survival instinct.¹³ In his opinion, they needed to win a victory for Mao Zedong Thought in Hong Kong, 'mainly to save their own neck.'¹⁴ In other words, the confrontation was primarily a plot by local communist agents to prove their loyalty to the radical leadership in China. They were under pressure to deliver some 'success', especially after their counterparts in Macau had managed to bring the Portuguese administration to its knees after a confrontation in December 1966.

The colonial government responded to the challenge with firm measures.¹⁵ For Trench, this was imperative as there was a danger that the extreme actions of radicals in Hong Kong might end up 'pushing' Beijing to support the Hong Kong communists. Under this logic, if Hong Kong managed to contain the disturbances before they spiralled out of control, Beijing could be spared this challenge. Through mass arrests of ringleaders and protestors, suspension of leftist newspapers, closure of

communist schools, activation of emergency powers and deportation, social order was gradually restored by early 1968. However, these measures would probably not have amounted to much if not for Mao's anxiety to keep radicalism in the mainland in check by mobilising military control of local administration in China.

The Riots as a Catalyst for Social Reform

Labour conditions improved in the aftermath of the riots. State regulations on working hours and women's and child labour were introduced and debates on social insurance and other labour benefits resumed with a greater sense of urgency. As the potential repercussions of the neglect of working-class conditions were used as a justification for accelerating policy changes, the riots catalysed the discourse on the imperative of labour reform. However, the events of 1967 barely changed the mentalities of the social and political elites.

As Clayton has observed:

During 1967, radicals wanted conflict between labour and capital, and sought the overthrow of a colonial state which, they argued, sided with capitalist interests. For the benevolent, 1967 was a sign, a warning that the state had to deal with market failures, and to try, once again, to foster strong, politically non-aligned, organisations of workers, able to use democratic institutions and lawful means. For pragmatists, however, the fear of social revolution soon waned. 1967 had, they must have realised, failed to change how the ordinary person in Hong Kong thought; the masses had backed the colonial state and backed away from radicalism.¹⁶

The riots, however, exerted a long-term impact on how the British establishment in London thought of the importance of social reforms. The British Government's rising concern with Hong Kong's development now attained a strategic dimension. For London, one of the major lessons of the 1967 riots was that British rule in Hong Kong beyond 1997 was simply untenable: the CCP would neither forget nor forgive the humiliation inherent to the alien rule of Hong Kong and Chinese nationalism would not disappear anytime soon. According to a Cabinet study on Hong Kong in the aftermath of the riots, 'it is inconceivable that any communist Chinese government would "negotiate" an extension of the Hong Kong

lease', and 'the Chinese intention is to take over Hong Kong by 1997 at the latest'.¹⁷ A stable and prosperous Hong Kong could at least put Britain in a good bargaining position and social reforms could contribute to this cause, the report contended.

The confrontations, however, also had a negative impact on the trajectory of labour reforms in the colony in that they tarnished the image of leftist trade unions. Left-wing unionists who had been fully engaged in the riots were now seen by many as troublemakers or communist agents. They were marginalised from both the mainstream of society and the policy process. As the most organised labour groups were forced to withdraw from the policy debate, the inferior bargaining position of the working class vis-a-vis capital in the colony was further exacerbated. It was not until the early 1980s, when the issue of the future of Hong Kong finally came to the forefront of global attention, that they resumed their role in local politics.