

16-0
20-18

A City under pressure

Elsie Elliot examines the adverse effects of Hong Kong's living conditions and social policy in the colony.

Hong Kong was, traditionally, a labour market for immigrants from the Mainland, seeking to support their families left behind in China, and who would ultimately return to China on retirement. The Second World War, followed by the Civil War in China, changed all that.

After 1949, immigrants from China generally came to Hong Kong intending to stay and, where possible, bring their families with them. Many of them were Nationalist supporters or army personnel; some were landlords, rich industrialists, triads escaping the stringent laws of the new communist regime, or just ordinary people not satisfied with their rations or style of life in China.

Hong Kong, being an international port and a place for fortune-seeking, has become very much like the legendary London of the agricultural and industrial revolutions in Britain, where the streets were believed to be 'paved with gold'. Like the London of those days, Hong Kong also knows suffering, deprivation, loneliness—and now crime, which always follows in the wake of a society where affluence and poverty live side by side.

The first influx—a do-it-yourself society

A generation ago, Hong Kong made no provision for social problems. The family provided all the social security needed. Parents were responsible for their children, and in later life the children were responsible for their parents. Relatives and friends living under the same roof or nearby, were responsible for each other. There was not even a government department for social welfare until 1953. The sufferings of those who flooded into Hong Kong during and after 'Liberation' (1949) were alleviated by handouts in the form of dry rations, mainly contributed by American and other relief organisations. Most of the hardworking Chinese soon managed to carve out a place for themselves in Hong Kong, either as hawkers, or by getting badly-paid jobs in the numerous small factories that mushroomed everywhere, first in squatter structures, and later in industrial buildings in the new towns. Those immigrants who had brought their own or their country's wealth out

of China became employers, mainly in cottage-type factories using manual skills. Their enterprise soon introduced new skills and more sophisticated machinery.

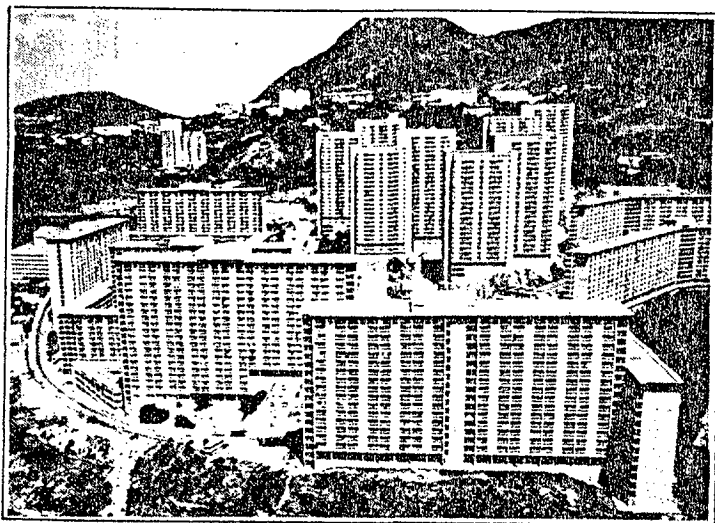
During the 30 years following this first big influx of immigrants from China, Hong Kong quickly passed through all the phases of an industrial revolution. Most of the old, four-storey colonial-type buildings were demolished one by one, and their place was taken by high-rise box-like flats. Many old residents of Hong Kong, unable to pay the rent of even a small room in one of these flats, joined the immigrant squatters on the hilltops, or wherever they could manage to erect an illegal hut. This could be achieved only by paying the triads—a phenomenon that continues even into 1984. Labour laws were practically non-existent, and a 16-hour, 7-day week not unusual. Labour unions then were more concerned with political ideology than with the interests of the workers. It is only in recent years that pressure groups have been able to obtain better pay and conditions for workers.

It is to the credit of the Hong Kong workers that they not only survived, but actually prospered after the first few years of hardship. Whole families, including small children just able to put matches into boxes, worked to buy food and simple clothing. If there was unemployment, it was not obvious. Violent crime was almost non-existent at that time, and what crime there was could usually be traced to drug addicts stealing anything they could sell in order to buy a fix. Drugs then, as now, were the curse of Hong Kong. Import and sale of drugs had been legal until 1940, and when the trade became illegal, it continued underground and became even more lucrative to the importers, as well as an encouragement to triad activity and official corruption. Triads soon controlled all criminal activities, and as they were allowed to operate freely, Hong Kong gradually became an international centre for every kind of crime, including commercial crime.

Hong Kong, therefore, was a place of 'do it yourself' by any legal or illegal method, provided you did not become a burden on the affluent taxpayer. This mentality still exists in some quarters today, and a person who seeks public assistance is even now treated something like a beggar who has no right to ask for help.

Public housing schemes and problems

The first move towards social welfare came in the form of public housing, after the disastrous fire on Christmas Day 1953, when 50,000 squatters were left homeless. The 'rabbit warrens' which were then constructed by the government in the central area of Kowloon and the outlying areas of Hong Kong (the latter far enough away to be out of sight of the elite who live on the Peak) offered safety from fire at a cheap rent, even though they confined families to 24 square feet per person of living-space, scarcely more than coffin-space for the dead. Unfortunately, the scheme took in only those persons squatting on land required for Government development, and victims of natural disasters. Homelessness *per se* did not qualify a family for rehousing. Since then the population has increased, either naturally or by further immigration, faster than the housing programme could be implemented, with the result that the number of persons needing rehousing from squatter huts, temporary huts and substandard tenements is greater to-



Lawrent Housing Authority Flats on Hong Kong Island.
Photo: Courtesy of Hong Kong Tourist Association (HKTA)

day than it was when the scheme began 30 years ago. Public housing standards have improved through the years, but policies leave numerous loopholes, resulting in many of the most needy sleeping on the streets or in squalid conditions, while some of the best of the new public housing can, and often does, fall into the hands of landlords and better-off families. Only about 30 per cent of those who enter public housing have an income test and this leaves the scheme wide open to cheats and queue-jumpers.

While public housing has solved the problems of many families and set them on the way to improved living, strangely enough it has also created new problems which have necessitated the expansion of the public assistance scheme of the Social Welfare Department. In the older estates, a room of 120 square feet had to house a family of five persons, and there was no kitchen or bathroom, only communal toilets and wash areas. As more children were born, and as older children married and brought their spouses into the room, the new generation became cooped up with the older generation. That is why, in the older, sub-standard estates, there has been a gradual weakening of family ties. No family tradition can survive the strain of having two or three generations living in the same room. Mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law are traditional enemies in China as well as in western countries, and the resultant problems in public housing have been of epidemic proportions. In cases where the son has taken sides with his parents, there have been family break-ups. And from living at such close quarters a worse result has been incest, a crime usually kept secret because of Chinese reluctance to report crime against a family member. There has been an enormous increase in moral delinquency, suicide, psychiatric disturbances and crime, not only in older public estates, but in private tenements where the living conditions are as bad, if not worse than those in public housing. Add to all this the fact that the triads, who have controlled the building of squatter huts and have almost certainly been responsible for some of the squatter fires, have also continued their stranglehold in public housing estates, leading youngsters at risk into crime as drug carriers, and using them as stool pigeons to assist the crime detection rates of the police.

Growth in crime—the temptations of affluence

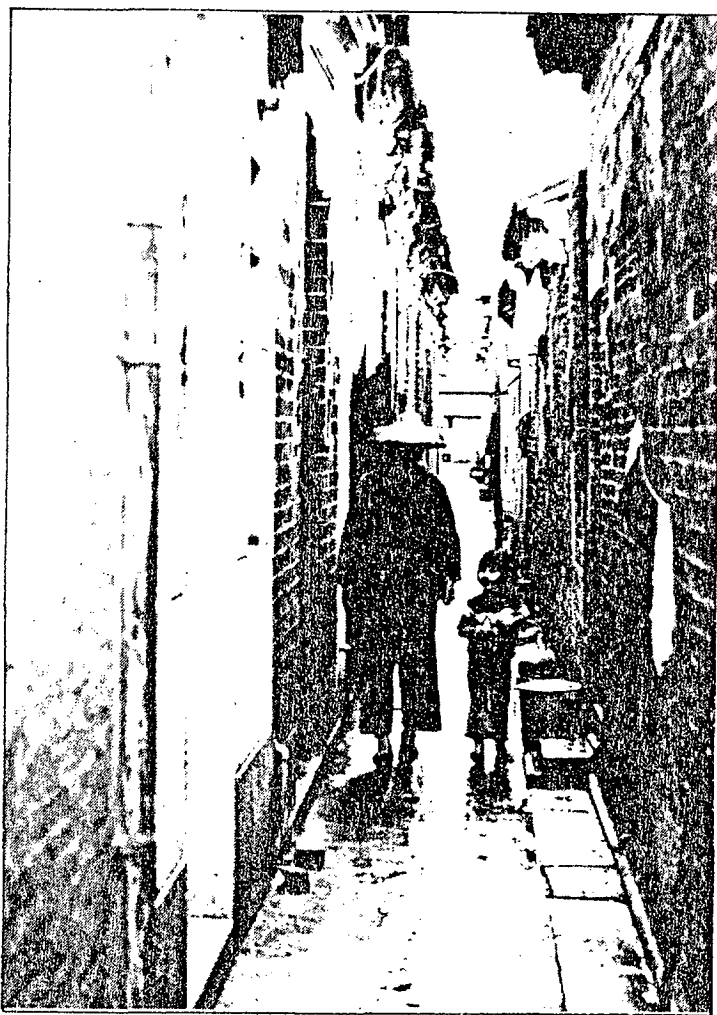
To try to combat the appalling increase in crime and drug addiction among teenage children, the Government introduced free primary school education in 1971, and free secondary school education to the age of fifteen in 1978. This has greatly assisted children from poor families, low-grade though most of the education is, but scarcely any attempt has been made to provide alternatives for those who cannot cope with an academic syllabus. With the introduction of free education in the 1970s, the activities of the triads shifted from the enticement of school dropouts left playing in the streets, to recruitment of boys and girls from the upper grades of primary schools and the lower forms of secondary schools. Some of these children show a preference for crime as being a more lucrative way of using their undoubted abilities; others join the triads because they cannot cope with an education in English, and triad activity offers more excitement and reward. Truancy from school, and running away from home are now all too common.

There are several other reasons for the increase in crime, besides boredom with school. I can summarise only the more important ones. Triads will continue to operate until the government is willing to take action against their leaders, who, unfortunately, could have connections with government officials, friends and appointees. The government, through the writings of a notoriously corrupt policeman who spent some time in prison, still consistently denies the existence of syndicated crime organised by triads and some police contacts, thus rendering the force unable to operate against triad ringleaders. From time to time an anti-crime campaign is announced, and those of us who know the Hong Kong scene wait for an influx of complaints by youngsters that they have been charged with crimes they did not commit. Sometimes they

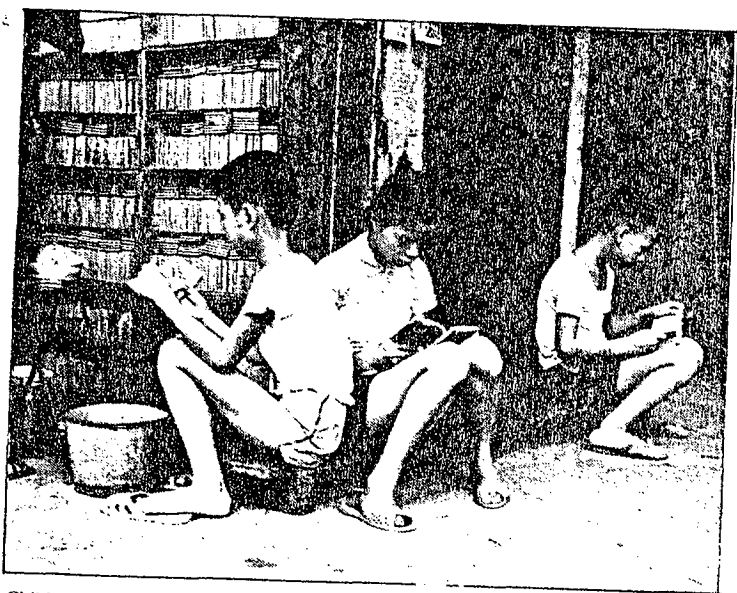
are lying, but often they are not. Once an anti-crime campaign is announced, the police pick up any youngster at random and if he happens to have a previous record, even of a minor nature, he will be charged with any crimes that have been reported in the district. Since the youngster is given no legal aid, he has little hope of proving his innocence. The fight-crime-campaign is then announced as a great success, with a large number of arrests. But crime still increases, because the real criminals, the triad leaders, are seldom caught.

Another reason for the increase in crime is the fact that to make ends meet, and to provide the little luxuries for which Hong Kong has been called an 'economic miracle', both parents must work, regardless of the ages of the children. Moreover, even with two parents earning, there is still a wide gap between the glitter of this rich shopping centre and the worst squalor to be found in any advanced society. The scene is therefore set for bank hold-ups, gold robberies, shoplifting, and gangsterism. With all its affluence, Hong Kong is a far less safe place to live in now than it was 30 years ago when most people lived in abject poverty.

Nearly every home has a television set. This should be a big step forward from the days when children would pay ten cents to watch a neighbour's television. But the programmes, widely watched by young people for many hours a day, teach gang warfare as a means of revenge. TV advertises the kind of watch, pen, cigarette lighter, brand of clothes and so on that people should wear in order to be 'well-dressed'. It glorifies smoking as the way to become a good athlete or a man-about-town. Films are even worse. Scarcely can you find a film that is not advertised 'Unsuitable for children', yet children get in without difficulty. As a teacher, my own judgment of film and TV shows in Hong Kong is that they are 'visual aids to crime'.



The Older way of life still continues in the rural New Territories, here in the cramped lanes of a traditional walled village.
Photo: HKTA



Children reading books from a roadside library.

Defects of the social welfare system

The break-up of family life, though by no means universal in Hong Kong, has necessitated the building up of a social welfare system, to support the unwanted old people, the sick, the orphan, the widow or abused wife, the handicapped, and the ever-increasing number of psychiatric patients. If ever there was a planned welfare programme, it has been slow, not only in policy-making, but in the implementation of policy. A job in the government social welfare department is a golden rice bowl for the civil servant, rather than a commitment to people. While there are undoubtedly social workers who care, there are others who have no interest in welfare but were given the job from having a degree in some other field. They treat it as a stop-gap post, not a dedicated career.

The amount of public assistance given is carefully calculated just to keep body and soul together. Rent allowances are not based upon the actual rent paid, but on the lower rents of public housing, regardless of whether or not the applicant lives in such a house. Frequently, therefore, the applicant has to use money intended for food, to pay his rent. There is such a thing as compassionate housing, but this is given only with great reluctance and usually only to long-term recipients of public assistance, such as the aged and the handicapped. Even then, they are kept waiting endlessly unless they can form a trio, because no provision is made for single persons in public housing estates. Pairing up frequently leads to disharmony, quarrelling, occasionally even murder, but the policy is maintained regardless. The fault seems to lie in lack of human concern rather than inability to provide.

Handicapped people fare worst of all. Several years ago, a government document admitted that handicapped children, especially the mentally handicapped, must be given training at the earliest possible moment. In spite of that admission, some of the worst cases may have to wait ten years or more before they can be placed in a training institution.

The same goes for old people. The life expectancy of many aged and infirm persons is shorter than the waiting time required to enter an infirmary. Consequently, many old people die without entering a care-and-attention centre and the suicide rate among them is inordinately high according to Samaritan records. Many old persons, admitted to hospital with strokes or incurable diseases, are deserted by their families after being deposited in hospital for treatment. It is not so much the callousness of the family as the fact that they cannot cope with the sick person in their tiny houses, or because every family member has to work.

In Hong Kong, there are no unemployment or sickness schemes to tide a family over a crisis, and applications for public assistance take so long to process that a needy family will pro-

bably borrow money (some social workers advise them to do so), or a family member will set up an illegal hawker business, rather than face the humiliation of the treatment they may receive from government departments. Consequently Hong Kong has a huge hawker population, blocking streets and motorways. To combat this, the government has introduced mandatory confiscation of the goods of illegal hawkers, a law applied selectively as are most laws in Hong Kong. A better solution would be to provide sites for bazaars to operate legally, but in this progress is slow.

The need for democratic progress and human rights

Provisions which are looked upon in Britain as human rights, are regarded as a 'nuisance' and a 'problem'. In 1954, when I sought permission to set up a small school to educate squatter children, a high official of the education department commented: 'We are building housing for them, do you expect us to give them education too?' to which query I gave a sharp 'Yes, I do.' But it was nearly 20 years before free primary education up to the age of 12 was provided. This typifies the attitude of the Hong Kong government, which consists of civil servants and their appointees, most of the latter being industrial employers, landlords and people connected with big commercial undertakings, who have an interest in keeping wages and taxes low, and social benefits to a minimum.

For its failure to make any progress at all in democratic representation, the Hong Kong government has always used the flimsy excuse that 'China wouldn't like a democratic system on her doorstep in Hong Kong'. British politicians of both Labour and Tory Governments have been briefed (and most of them have swallowed the briefing) that because of its geo-political position, Hong Kong needs to maintain the status quo. This attitude has been a godsend to the power-grabbers who now rank as Hong Kong's aristocracy and will tolerate no attempts to have elected representatives among them.

If the Hong Kong government is truly so subservient to China's requirements, it is hard to understand why, since 1982, the Legislative Council has been at the forefront of the struggle to maintain British administration in Hong Kong after 1997. Mrs. Thatcher administered the first slap in China's face here in September 1982, when she insisted that the hated treaties of the nineteenth century were valid and must be observed by China. Not even the Legislative Council yesmen dared to agree. At least, they would not dare to admit openly to being traitors to their own country. Since Mrs. Thatcher's visit, and her apparent change of stance later on the validity of the treaties, government-appointed members of the Legislative and Executive Councils have unremittingly endeavoured to stir up support for maintaining the status quo that keeps them in power. This led to frequent protests by Chinese representatives from Beijing. The ruse that Hong Kong could not make progress towards democracy because 'China wouldn't like it' has thus been exploded. The Hong Kong government has shown clearly that it does not care whether or not China likes it, so long as it keeps control, preserves its own privileges, and continues to store up personal wealth at the expense of social reforms. And now the Hong Kong government has a new reason for not wanting to make democratic progress: the political situation at the moment, it says, is too delicate for changes to be made. Well, that is only one in a long line of excuses made since 1843 for depriving the people of Hong Kong of their human rights. The excuses cannot hold out much longer, because a new generation of educated Chinese is growing up, and these young people will know more than their parents about democratic procedures. Democratic elections may not solve all problems, but without elections there can be no sense of accountability, as Hong Kong's history has proved.

Elsie Elliott is a member of The Urban Council, the Housing Authority and other public bodies. She is involved in many social activities, including the Samaritans.