Population Growth and Redistribution in Hong Kong, 1841-1975

INTRODUCTION

Hong Kong, a British Crown Colony, has a total land area of about 400 square miles spread over some 236 islands and islets and a portion of the Chinese mainland adjoining the province of Kwangtung. The most important, though not the largest, island is Hong Kong Island which together with a few adjacent islets has an area of 29 square miles. Directly opposite on the mainland is the area of Kowloon which, including Stonecutter's Island, has an area of 3/4 square miles. North of Kowloon up to the Chinese border are the New Territories with a land area of 366 square miles, leased from China on a 99-year lease expiring in 1997. The colony is strategically located east of the Pearl River estuary, not more than 91 miles southeast of Canton, 40 miles east of the Portuguese Colony of Macau, and 90 nautical miles south of the Tropic of Cancer. It was primarily this strategic location that prevailed on the British to establish a colony here.

The greater part of the country consists of steep, rocky hillsides not fit for agriculture, industry or even human habitation. Many of the islands are waterless, barren and uninhabited. Intensive agriculture is found in the flat, low-lying area and hanging valleys and plateaux in the New Territories. The industries are situated in Kowloon and Hong Kong Island, and more recently in the newly established industrial estates such as Kwun Tong and Tsuen Wan in the New Territories. The acute shortage of land has pushed the construction of buildings right up to steep hillslopes, with houses clinging to almost perpendicular hillsides.

As in most British colonies, Hong Kong has a good system of compiling and publishing population statistics. Concise population statistics, derived from a combination of registration of certain sections of the inhabitants and estimates of others, were published almost yearly by the Registrar-General in the Government Gazettes up to the 1870s. More reliable and comprehensive statistics compiled from population censuses are contained in the series of decennial census reports from 1881 to 1971, except for 1941 and 1951 when no censuses were conducted. The rich source of population data makes it possible for us to examine the course of population trends from the very beginning of the colony's history in 1841. By and large, the story of the evolution of the population of this small colony, with little natural resources and severe physical terrain, from a few thousand in the beginning to 4.3 million today is intertwined with historical events in its colossal neighbour, China. This becomes quite apparent as we commence to analyse the trends and patterns of Hong Kong's population.

POPULATION GROWTH

The course and components of population growth in the past 130 years or so have been influenced by the ebb and flow of people in response to conditions on the mainland.
Any period of depression, political unrest or war would invariably be reflected in the enhanced tempo of immigration into Hong Kong. Only in recent years did violent fluctuations in population growth give way to a relatively stable population that expands by natural increase. However, the possibility of a major upset in the population balance in the future arising out of actions originating in China cannot be ruled out entirely.

In the days prior to the arrival of the British there were no more than a couple of thousand settlers on the island of Hong Kong; the exact number was unknown except that it fluctuated over the years. When the island was occupied on 26 January 1841 by the British on the basis of the so-called Convention of Chuenpi, the inhabitants were said to have numbered about 7,450, of whom nearly 2,000 were the boat people. The occupied territory was declared a free port and unimpeled access was accorded to all and sundry, especially the traders. Despite typhoons and virulent diseases that proved fatal to many settlers, the community was enlarged through immigration and was estimated to have doubled to some 15,000 by March 1842. At the time of the official cession of the island to the British on 29 August 1842, the population had reached 20,000, and was subsequently increased to 24,000 in 1845. The average rate of increase during these early years approached 34.2 percent per annum, the highest in its demographic history as can be observed in Table 1.

In the late 1840s Hong Kong became not only the focus of migration itself but also an important transit point from which the Chinese immigrants from the mainland passed through on their way to Southeast Asia, Australia, California and South America in search of work, commerce and gold. Life was somewhat insecure and confused among these comings and goings, and the government decided to regulate the population and check the influx of undesirable elements from China. In 1844 a bill was passed by the Legislative Council to keep a register of all inhabitants in the colony, but the Europeans and Chinese came out with one voice against the erosion of personal liberty, self-respect and national honour. The ordinance was speedily suspended and in its place appeared the amended Registration Ordinance, No. 16 of 1844, which applied the principle of registration to only inhabitants earning less than $500 and exempted all civil, military and naval employees, members of learned professions, merchants, shopkeepers, householders and tenants of Crown property. The Ordinance came into force on 1 January 1845 and was claimed to have worked so smoothly that it was amended on 31 December 1846 to make provision for a periodic census of the whole colony. The Ordinance had the effect of curbing the expansion of the settlers, with the number falling from 24,157 in 1845 to 22,453 the very next year and edging up slightly to 23,472 in 1847 and 23,998 the following year. A recovery was experienced in the next three years so that the annual growth rate came to 5.3 per cent for the whole period 1845-51. But this is still much lower than that in the preceding period.

1 The agreement by which Hong Kong was to be ceded to the British was not signed on 12 February 1841 at Chuenpi as scheduled because the meeting never took place. Earlier the British had prematurely announced the terms of the agreement on 20 January 1841 and six days later a British naval force landed on the island and raised the Union Jack. Hong Kong was officially ceded on 29 August 1842 by the Treaty of Nanking which was ratified on 26 June 1843, the date when the islands were declared a British colony with Sir Henry Pottinger as the first Governor. See G.B. Endacott, A History of Hong Kong, Oxford University Press, 1958.