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Disseminating and Containing Communist Propaganda to Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia through Hong Kong, the Cold War Pivot, 1949–1960

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Abstract

This article explores an understudied aspect in Asia's Cold War history: how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) used Hong Kong as a Cold War pivot to produce and disseminate left-wing literature for overseas Chinese living in Southeast Asia. It argues that the CCP's expanding cultural influence can be attributed to the Party's commercial acumen. Operating within a permissive colonial regulatory regime, the CCP expanded its control of local and regional markets for left-wing printed materials. The content of CCP literature was inevitably propagandistic – that is, shaped by the changing demands of the Chinese government's foreign policy and by a need to attract foreign remittances and accommodate socialist transformation at home. Hong Kong's emergence as a pivot in propaganda wars that were global in scope created tensions between the United States and Britain, and led governments in Southeast Asia to strengthen state controls on imported communist media. As such, this article makes an original contribution to Hong Kong colonial history and deepens our understanding of transnational dynamics within Southeast Asia.

When the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded in 1949, Hong Kong became a Cold War pivot where conflicts between communism and capitalism unfolded. The British colony was used as a base by both the Communists and the Nationalists to produce propaganda to gain the support of overseas Chinese communities.¹ These twin forms of diasporic nationalism created forms of 'global geo-strategic thinking' which encouraged Chinese peoples to make emotional investments and financial contributions that bound them to their

¹ Tracy Steele, 'Hong Kong in the Cold War in the 1950s', in Priscilla Roberts and John M. Carroll, eds., *Hong Kong in the Cold War* (Hong Kong, 2016), pp. 92–116, at p. 92.

motherland, and to its politics.² By 1950, overseas Chinese accounted for 6 per cent (about 9.6 million people) of the population of Southeast Asia, and controlled a 'disproportionately large segment of the local economies'.³ With ex-European colonies such as Burma and Indonesia becoming independent, and colonies such as Malaya and Singapore undergoing traumatic processes of decolonization, the loyalty of the Chinese diaspora became an important concern for governments and civil society groups in Southeast Asia.⁴

In this context, Hong Kong possessed a unique position for Chinese living inside and outside China as it allowed both information and disinformation to be disseminated in a relatively free manner through different forms of media.⁵ The government of the Republic of China, based in Taiwan and supported by the United States, treated Hong Kong as a centre for the dissemination of anti-communist and pro-Kuomintang propaganda, via newspapers, magazines, literature, and films. The United States funded anti-communist publications written by exile intellectuals through the United States Information Service (USIS).⁶ In particular, the Asia Foundation, which was connected with the Central Intelligence Agency, funded three major publishing houses in Hong Kong, namely the United, Today's World, and the Asia Press, all of which supported anti-communist scholarship.⁷ In a similar manner, the PRC utilized the colony as a conduit for pro-communist propaganda.⁸ Through Hong Kong, left-wing literature and magazines were disseminated to overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, which the Central People's Government (CPG) considered to be a 'readily exploitable fifth column' in 1949, able to facilitate communist expansion.⁹

Recent scholarship has recognized that socio-cultural development in Asia, once considered 'a sideshow', is crucial to the understanding of the Cold War.¹⁰

² Law Wing Sang, *Collaborative colonial power: the making of Hong Kong Chinese* (Hong Kong, 2009), p. 137.

³ Meredith Oyen, 'Communism, containment and the Chinese overseas', in Zheng Yangwen, Hong Liu, and Michael Szonyi, eds., *The Cold War in Asia: the battle for hearts and minds* (Leiden, 2010), pp. 59–93, at p. 59.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Wang Gungwu, 'Hong Kong's twentieth century: the global setting', in Roberts and Carroll, eds., *Hong Kong in the Cold War*, pp. 1–14, at pp. 6–7.

⁶ Law, *Collaborative colonial power*, ch. 6; Johannes R. Lombardo, 'A mission of espionage, intelligence and psychological operations: the American consulate in Hong Kong, 1949–64', in Richard J. Aldrich, Gary D. Rawnsley, and Ming-yeh T. Rawnsley, eds., *The clandestine Cold War in Asia, 1945–65: Western intelligence, propaganda and special operations* (London and Portland, OR, 2000), pp. 64–81.

⁷ Law, *Collaborative colonial power*, p. 133.

⁸ Lu Xun, 'The American Cold War in Hong Kong, 1949–1960: intelligence and propaganda', in Roberts and Carroll, eds., *Hong Kong in the Cold War*, pp. 117–39, at p. 130.

⁹ Robert S. Elegant, *The dragon's seed: Peking and the overseas Chinese* (New York, NY, 1959); Stephen Fitzgerald, 'China and the overseas Chinese: perception and policies', *China Quarterly*, 44 (1970), pp. 1–37, at p. 2.

¹⁰ Michael Szonyi and Hong Liu, 'Introduction: new approaches to the study of the Cold War in Asia', in Zheng, Liu, and Szonyi, eds., *The Cold War in Asia*, pp. 1–10, at p. 1; Odd Arne Westad, *The global Cold War: Third World interventions and the making of our times* (New York, NY, 2007), p. 13; Patrick Major and Rana Mitter, 'East is east and west is west? Towards a comparative socio-cultural

Until recently, most studies discussing Hong Kong's role in the Cold War have focused on diplomatic history and communist-inspired civil actions, notably the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)-controlled trade unions and the 1967 riots.¹¹ Since the first decade of this century, however, there has been increased research on the cultural Cold War, work that has sought to explore cultural and social trends in Hong Kong, such as the political orientation of newspapers, literature, and films, and how they were used to draw Chinese audiences away from each other.¹² This new literature has also focused on the institutions that controlled the media.¹³ How the USIS financed right-wing publications and the American network in Hong Kong have been thoroughly examined, but how the PRC used the colony as a base to disseminate printed propaganda to Chinese audiences in Southeast Asia remains underexplored.¹⁴

Using a transnational approach, this article examines the 'local dynamics of global forces' in Hong Kong, an important Cold War pivot.¹⁵ How Hong Kong's cultural domain was utilized by the CCP to solicit support from overseas Chinese deserves close examination as it has significant local, national, and international implications. First, Hong Kong's case offers valuable insights into how global Cold War politics interacted with specific local context. Since 1949, the CPG had imposed various regulatory measures to eliminate market-oriented operations in China's cultural industries and sought to ensure

history of the Cold War', in Patrick Major and Rana Mitter, eds., *Across the blocs: Cold War cultural and social history* (London and Portland, OR, 2004), pp. 1–22, at p. 1.

¹¹ Chi-kwan Mark, *Hong Kong and the Cold War: Anglo-American relations, 1949–1957* (Oxford, 2004); Chi-kwan Mark, 'Defence or decolonialization? Britain, the United States and the Hong Kong question in 1957', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 33 (2005), pp. 51–72; David A. Levin and Stephen W. K. Chiu, 'Trade union growth waves in Hong Kong', *Labour History*, 75 (1998), pp. 40–56; Benjamin K. L. Leung, 'Political process and industrial strikes and the labour movement in Hong Kong, 1946–1989', *Journal of Oriental Studies*, 29 (1991), pp. 172–206; Robert Bickers and Ray Yep, eds., *May days in Hong Kong: riot and emergency in 1967* (Hong Kong, 2009); Ray Yep, 'The 1967 riots in Hong Kong: the diplomatic and domestic fronts of the colonial governor', *China Quarterly*, 193 (2008), pp. 122–39.

¹² Priscilla Roberts, 'Prologue: Cold War Hong Kong: the foundations', in Roberts and Carroll, eds., *Hong Kong in the Cold War*, pp. 15–25, at p. 16; Chi-kwan Mark, 'Everyday propaganda: the leftist press and Sino-British relations in Hong Kong, 1952–67', in Janick Marina Schaufelbuehl, Marco Wyss, and Valeria Zanier, eds., *Europe and China in the Cold War: exchanges beyond the bloc logic and the Sino-Soviet split* (Boston, MA, and Leiden, 2019), pp. 151–71; Law, *Collaborative colonial power*, pp. 131–48; Poshek Fu, 'More than just entertaining: cinematic containment and Asia's Cold War in Hong Kong, 1949–1959', *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, 30 (2018), pp. 1–55; Ying Du, 'Censorship, regulations and the cinematic Cold War in Hong Kong', *China Review*, 17 (2017), pp. 117–51.

¹³ For example, Ying Du, 'Censorship', pp. 118–21, pointed out that the colonial government had the power to censor both local and imported political movies which 'exacerbate[d] political rivalries' and encouraged the use of violence to 'overthrow the rule of law and order or the established government'. The colonial government also sought to control left-wing journalism through legal means, as the suspension of left-wing newspapers in 1952 and 1967 demonstrated: see Mark, 'Everyday propaganda', pp. 157 and 164.

¹⁴ See Law, *Collaborative colonial power*; Peter Hamilton, *Made in Hong Kong: transpacific networks and a new history of globalization* (New York, NY, 2021).

¹⁵ Matthew Hilton and Rana Mitter, 'Introduction', *Past & Present*, 218, suppl. 8 (2013), pp. 7–28, at p. 12.

that only 'good' and 'useful' ideas which aligned with the regime's revolutionary cause were circulated.¹⁶ However, the publishing industry in colonial Hong Kong operated in a capitalist market over which the CCP had no political control. The CCP therefore had to adapt its united-front strategies to Hong Kong's political and economic environment.

Second, the dissemination of left-wing propaganda to overseas Chinese through Hong Kong sheds light on the PRC's foreign and domestic policies. In the immediate post-war period, the CCP's vigorous appeals towards the overseas Chinese were considered suspicious by the governments in Southeast Asia.¹⁷ However, in response to the United States' strategy of containing the spread of communism and with Sino-Soviet tensions rising, the PRC saw the need to mobilize support within what was then called the Third World. After the Bandung Conference of 1955, it changed its foreign policy to peaceful co-existence, which led agencies of the CCP to seek to disseminate propaganda in Southeast Asia that was less overtly political and subversive.¹⁸ This new propaganda policy also reflected domestic concerns.¹⁹ Overseas Chinese remained important targets of Chinese communist

¹⁶ William P. Alford, *To steal a book is an elegant offense: intellectual property law in Chinese civilization* (Stanford, CA, 1995), pp. 56–7; Fei-hsien Wang, *Pirates and publishers: a social history of copyright in modern China* (Princeton, NJ, 2019), pp. 253–4, 262, 281.

¹⁷ James Jiann Hua To, *Qiaowu: extra-territorial polices for the overseas Chinese* (Leiden, 2014), p. 17; Hong Liu, 'Opportunities and anxieties for the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia', *Current History*, 115 (2016), pp. 312–18, at p. 313.

¹⁸ To, *Qiaowu*, p. 59; Fitzgerald, 'China and the overseas Chinese', pp. 15–17; Milton Easmen, 'The Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia', in Gabriel Sheffer, ed., *Modern diasporas in international politics* (New York, NY, 1986), pp. 130–63. Some scholars argued that this was a shift from the *jus sanguinis* model, which considered everyone of Chinese ancestry to be Chinese citizens, to the decolonization model, which increasingly perceived overseas Chinese as a 'foreign policy liability' that strained China's relations with other governments. Lea E. Williams, *The future of the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia* (New York, NY, 1966), p. 65; Stephen Fitzgerald, *China and the overseas Chinese: a study of Peking's changing policy, 1949–1970* (Cambridge, 1972), p. 14; Frank N. Pieke, 'Four models of China's OC policies', *China Information*, 2 (1987), pp. 8–16.

¹⁹ Historians hold different views towards the nature of the PRC's overseas Chinese policy. Some scholars believed that the policy was outward-facing as it was through the overseas Chinese that the Party managed to export revolution and mobilize them to oppose their host governments. Elegant and Lu, however, pointed out that the policy had an important domestic perspective: it took China's internal policies and development into consideration. See Victor Purcell, 'Overseas Chinese and the People's Republic', *Far Eastern Survey*, 19 (1950), pp. 194–6; Claude A. Buss, 'Overseas Chinese and Communist policy', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 277 (1951), pp. 203–12, at pp. 210–12; Elegant, *The dragon's seed*; Lu Yu-sun, *Programs of communist China for overseas Chinese* (Hong Kong, 1956), pp. 14–15. Fitzgerald acknowledged the Party's need to secure foreign remittances but believed that the overseas Chinese policy was 'ultimately concerned with external policies': see *China and the overseas Chinese*, pp. 13–15. Revisionists such as Peterson and Lim, however, have argued that China's overseas Chinese policy was domestically oriented and emphasized economic utilitarianism. In other words, overseas Chinese were assumed to have an important role in contributing to China's modernization. Lim even suggested that *qiaowu* (overseas Chinese affairs) was a 'political economy'. See Glen Peterson, *Overseas Chinese in the People's Republic of China* (New York, NY, 2012); Jin Li Lim, *The price and promise of specialness: the political economy of overseas Chinese policy in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1959* (Leiden and Boston, MA, 2019).

propaganda in the 1950s because China relied on their foreign remittances for national reconstruction and modernization.²⁰ Simultaneously, there were increased concerns that the treatment of overseas Chinese should not deviate greatly from the ideologies propagated in China during the socialist transformation.²¹ This case study can therefore help us to understand how the CCP manoeuvred between ideological and pragmatic concerns when formulating the propaganda.

Lastly, the surge of communist literature exported through Hong Kong posed security problems to the capitalist bloc and led to Anglo-American tensions. While the United States attempted to contain communism by isolating the PRC, Britain recognized the newly formed regime in 1950, owing to the need to preserve British interests in China and Asia.²² Hong Kong's reluctance to curb left-wing literature led to further Anglo-American divides and drove the Southeast Asian governments to take initiatives to control the dissemination of communist propaganda. By exploring how various governments countered the surge of communist literature, the article reveals how Hong Kong served as a transregional outpost that connected the PRC, Britain, the United States, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia.

This article builds on the existing literature, which has explored how agencies of the colonial administration sought to limit the effectiveness of pro-communist propaganda in Hong Kong. It focuses on the period from 1949 to 1960 and asks four inter-related questions: did the CCP have the capacity to exploit Hong Kong's capitalist publishing market and use it as a base for disseminating printed propaganda? What strategies did the Chinese Communists use to produce and disseminate communist propaganda which targeted people of Chinese origin living in Southeast Asia? How were left-wing literature and magazines tailored to meet the needs of overseas Chinese and align with the PRC's changing foreign and domestic policies? And how did Hong Kong's colonial government, the United States, and Southeast Asian territories react in the late 1950s?²³

With reduced resources and extensive overseas commitments, Britain began to scale down its garrison in Hong Kong in the 1950s.²⁴ The British colony was militarily indefensible. To minimize the possibility of a communist attack, the British and colonial governments sought to avoid actions which might trigger CCP activism. They also sought to draw the United States into a commitment to defend Hong Kong. Influenced by these geopolitical dynamics, Hong Kong tolerated agencies of China and the United States using the colony for 'propaganda operations'.²⁵ The colonial administration monitored communist propaganda but did not necessarily prosecute publishers and bookstores which printed and disseminated them. In this period, the PRC practised

²⁰ Lim, *Price and promise of specialness*, p. 5.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Chi-kwan Mark, *The everyday Cold War: Britain and China, 1950–1972* (London, 2017), p. 20.

²³ How overseas Chinese received this communist literature is not covered by this article, owing to its limited scope.

²⁴ Mark, *Hong Kong and the Cold War*, p. 2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

peaceful co-existence and intensified its domestic transformation, launching Land Reform, the Three Antis Movement, the Hundred Flowers, and the Anti-Rightist Campaign.²⁶ These developments inevitably influenced communist literature for overseas audiences.²⁷

This article uses archival records in the National Archives in London and a few surviving Chinese Communist publications that circulated among Chinese people living in Southeast Asia. British government records – namely CO 1030, CO 537, and FCO 141 – which were released between 2008 and 2014, contain substantial amounts of intelligence on communist publishing.²⁸ The CO 1030 series comprises reports and correspondences of the Far Eastern Department relating to British colonial possessions in East Asia. It covers insurgencies and social, economic, and constitutional development between 1941 and 1967. The CO 537 series contains classified secret dispatches and telegrams by the Colonial Office up to 1955, which were previously withheld from the colonies. FCO 141, formerly stored in the Foreign Office Migrated Archives, contains information on the administration of colonies which was not passed to successive governments after independence.

These sources are important and can complement the existing studies by providing more nuanced insights into how to contextualize communist activities in Hong Kong during the Cold War in a transnational framework. Although the sources can be problematic, mainly reflecting the assessments of colonial bureaucrats regarding the extent and forms of communist activities in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia, they were based on covert monitoring of communist activists which involved a large amount of manpower and resources, and they were archived in confidential government files. The situation reports also directly influenced how governments co-ordinated and responded to the spread of communism. Although this account is provisional, the likelihood of new intelligence and policy files being released into the public domain by either the British or the Chinese government in the near future is low. To extend and corroborate analysis based on the records of the British state, Chinese published records and speeches, Chinese publications printed in and exported through Hong Kong, and memoirs of leading left-wing publishers have also been used.

I

Decolonization and national independence posed difficult questions about national identities for regimes in Southeast Asia, making them more susceptible to radical ideologies. The surge of anti-colonial Chinese communist literature threatened colonial regimes in Southeast Asia because, as a British official

²⁶ Fitzgerald, 'China and the overseas Chinese', pp. 15–17; Easmen, 'Chinese diaspora'; Lim, *Price and promise of specialness*, p. 133; Frank Dikotter, *The tragedy of liberation: a history of the Chinese revolution, 1945–1957* (London, 2013).

²⁷ Lim, *Price and promise of specialness*, pp. 18, 134–5, 147, 223–3.

²⁸ Compared to the files mentioned, FCO 21, FCO 40, and CO 129 are used more widely by scholars who work on post-war Hong Kong.

acknowledged, the 'insidious effect of such propaganda' created 'one of the principal subversive threats' that were particularly acute among 'the younger generation of overseas Chinese'.²⁹ These overseas Chinese were a key target audience for the CCP.³⁰ When the PRC was first founded, it promoted 'national liberation struggles' and advocated the 'complete elimination of all Western influence' in Southeast Asia.³¹ The overseas Chinese were incorporated in the Party's New Democracy concept, which argued that the establishment of a 'united front democratic alliance based on the overwhelming majority of the people, under the leadership of the working class' was the prerequisite for setting up a socialist system.³² Under this concept, the overseas Chinese were co-opted into the political system; they formed one of the constituencies in the planned democratic coalition and subsequently participated in the Chinese People's Consultative Conference.³³ The inclusion of the overseas Chinese also aided China's reconstruction and modernization.³⁴ After years of political turmoil, China's economy was 'at the edge of total collapse'.³⁵ Overseas Chinese became an important 'economic utility' as their remittances could be utilized to save China's economy.³⁶

Understanding the importance of the Chinese diaspora, the CCP utilized Hong Kong as a Cold War pivot. It established a New China News Agency (NCNA) to co-ordinate the expansion of communist propaganda. As the Hong Kong Police Special Branch noted, the CCP's propaganda in the colony 'steadily increased'.³⁷ In particular, printed materials such as books and periodicals were generated 'in large quantities for distribution to other Southeast Asian countries'.³⁸ In October 1949, Leslie C. Smith, a Kemsley Press correspondent in China, commented that the communist propaganda machine in Hong Kong was 'extremely powerful'.³⁹ Colonial officials observed that the importation of communist literature and magazines through Hong Kong

²⁹ Juxton Barton, Minutes on ISD 105/01, 27 Feb. 1956, The National Archives, London (hereafter TNA), CO 1030/188.

³⁰ Purcell, 'Overseas Chinese'; Buss, 'Overseas Chinese', pp. 210–12; Lu, *Programs of communist China*, pp. 14–15; Elegant, *The dragon's seed*; Fitzgerald, 'China and the overseas Chinese', p. 2.

³¹ Milton Sacks, 'The strategy of communism in Southeast Asia', *Pacific Affairs*, 23 (1950), pp. 227–47, at pp. 233 and 247.

³² Mao Zedong, 'On coalition government', 24 Apr. 1945, quoted in Lim, *Price and promise of specialness*, p. 28.

³³ Mao Zedong, 'Overseas Chinese export money to help the war' (海外華僑輸財助戰), 24 Apr. 1945, and 'Some important problems of the Party's present policy' (關於目前黨的政策中的幾個重要問題), 18 Jan. 1948, quoted in Lim, *Price and promise of specialness*, pp. 28–31, 47, and To, *Qiaowu*, p. 38.

³⁴ To, *Qiaowu*, p. 62; Zhang Shu Guang, *Economic Cold War: America's embargo against China and the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1949–1963* (Stanford, CA, 2001), pp. 54–6.

³⁵ Zhang, *Economic Cold War*, p. 52.

³⁶ Lim, *Price and promise of specialness*, p. 42.

³⁷ Hong Kong Police Special Branch, 'The Chinese Communist Party in Hong Kong', 30 June 1949, p. 10, TNA, CO 537/4816.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Leslie C. Smith to C. B. B. Heathcote-Smith, 1 Oct. 1949, TNA, CO 537/4817.

soon became a 'large problem'.⁴⁰ Hong Kong became 'a base for the distribution of Chinese Communist publicity material to other colonies' where 'Chinese communities exist'.⁴¹

II

The CCP's policy towards Hong Kong discouraged its activists from promoting unrest due to the colony's special status. According to Premier Zhou Enlai, the recovery of Hong Kong should 'not be measured by the narrow principle of territorial sovereignty' but viewed as 'part of the overall strategic arrangements for the East–West struggle'.⁴² As leaving Hong Kong temporarily in the British hands was advantageous, China's Hong Kong policy discouraged direct confrontation and focused on 'long-term planning and full utilization'.⁴³ Hong Kong therefore provided the CCP with a stable environment to produce materials for the propagation of communism.

By the late 1940s, the Hong Kong government had the legal authority to suppress subversive publications using local ordinances, such as the Sedition Ordinance and the Sedition Amendment Ordinance passed in 1938, and a wide range of emergency regulations. However, understanding the vulnerability of Hong Kong and the delicacy of Sino-British relations, Britain adhered to the guiding principle of 'firmness without provocation' and was reluctant to enforce these ordinances.⁴⁴ This created a permissive environment for communist propaganda agencies. By June 1949, the CCP owned eight printers and nine publishing houses in Hong Kong. These printers and publishers, supervised by the NCNA, were orchestrated by the Propaganda Section under the Hong Kong Municipal Committee, which received 'general guidance and directives from over the border'.⁴⁵ It was managed by the regional control, the South China Bureau, under the CCP Politburo (see [Figure 1](#) for the chain of command).

Realizing that the overseas Chinese were far from a homogeneous group, but spoke a range of different dialects and held various beliefs, these communist-controlled printers and publishers produced specific materials tailored for particular Southeast Asian countries: for example, the Sinminchu Publishing Company, which was 'in touch with Moscow', disseminated Soviet literature; the China Publishing Company produced propaganda materials for Malaya and the Netherlands East Indies; and the Cultural Provider was

⁴⁰ Barton, Minutes on ISD 105/01.

⁴¹ J. M. Martin to A. Grantham, 25 May 1956, TNA, CO 1030/188.

⁴² Jin Yaoru (金堯如), *Fifty years of memories in Hong Kong* (香江五十年憶往) (Hong Kong, 2005), pp. 26, 33–5; Mark, *Everyday Cold War*, p. 39.

⁴³ Jin, *Fifty years of memories*, pp. 30, 35; Wong Man Fong (黃文放), *China resumption of sovereignty over Hong Kong* (中國對香港恢復行使主權的決策歷程與執行) (Hong Kong, 1997), pp. 34, 96.

⁴⁴ Steve Tsang, 'Strategy for survival: the Cold War and Hong Kong's policy towards Kuomintang and Chinese Communist activities in the 1950s', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 25 (1997), pp. 294–371, at p. 298; Mark, 'Everyday propaganda', pp. 155–6.

⁴⁵ A. G. Grantham, 'Report on communist activities in Hong Kong for the six months ending 31 December 1949', Jan. 1950, TNA, FCO 141/4419.

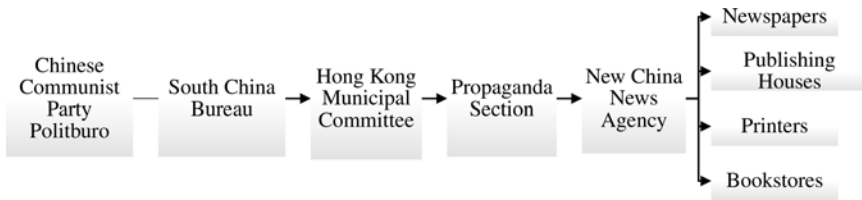


Figure 1. Chain of command of the Chinese Communist Party in Hong Kong in 1949.

Source: Hong Kong Police Special Branch, 'The Chinese Communist Party in Hong Kong', 30 June 1949, attached to A. G. Grantham to Arthur Creech Jones, 27 July 1949, TNA, FCO 141/4419.

connected to Chinese Democratic League writers and promoted political literature written by them. Books and journals on economic subjects were also produced and disseminated. For example, the Economic Information Service issued a monthly publication titled *Economic Correspondence*; and the Southern Tribune printed books on industrial subjects concerning liberated areas.⁴⁶ Many of these publishers simultaneously owned bookshops in Hong Kong, with the Life, Reader, Sinzh Joint Publishing Company comprising the Life Bookshop, the Sinzh Bookshop, and the Reader Publishing Company.⁴⁷ By mid-1949, the CCP controlled at least seventeen bookshops which were responsible for wholesaling and retailing communist literature.⁴⁸

III

In the 1950s, the CCP altered its policy towards overseas Chinese peoples. In 1951, it declared that 'overseas Chinese affairs must be strictly distinguished from the local revolution' and 'under no circumstance [should they] take part in the local civil struggle'.⁴⁹ Liao Chengzhi even asserted that 'overseas Chinese shall not make revolution' and 'they would not succeed'.⁵⁰ In 1955, the PRC announced its peaceful co-existence policy at the Bandung Conference. The following year, it declared that overseas Chinese were free to acquire the nationality of their country of residence. People who obtained a new nationality were no longer considered Chinese nationals nor subject to the PRC's jurisdiction.⁵¹ In December 1957, Beijing ordered overseas Chinese who remained Chinese citizens not to instigate revolutionary activities.⁵² Indeed, by the mid-1950s, overseas Chinese were no longer perceived

⁴⁶ 'Appendix VI. C.C.P. and pro-C.C.P. publishing houses', attached to Hong Kong Police Special Branch, 'The Chinese Communist Party in Hong Kong'.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ 'Bookshops', in appendix II, attached to Hong Kong Police Special Branch, 'The Chinese Communist Party in Hong Kong'.

⁴⁹ Fitzgerald, 'China and the overseas Chinese', pp. 10–11.

⁵⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵¹ To, *Qiaowu*, p. 60; Fitzgerald, 'China and the overseas Chinese', p. 20.

⁵² Address from the 89th session of the National People's Executive Conference, 30 Dec. 1957, quoted in To, *Qiaowu*, p. 60.

by the CCP as political assets.⁵³ Instead, they became ‘a major strain’ in China’s relations with the Southeast Asian countries, as their radicalization only exacerbated hostilities towards the Chinese, which sometimes ‘had nothing to do with communism’.⁵⁴

Despite changes in its formal outreach, the CCP continued to maintain ties with overseas Chinese because their resources were essential to China’s modernization.⁵⁵ Their foreign remittance had become even more important because the Korean War had increased national expenditure and reduced foreign investment substantially, and the United States had imposed economic sanctions on China.⁵⁶ This overseas Chinese policy had an underlying utilitarian purpose: to focus on consolidating the revolution at home.⁵⁷ To pursue this agenda, the CCP continued to utilize Hong Kong to produce left-wing literature for overseas circulation. A. M. MacDonald made the following observation in 1956: ‘I have just been out to Singapore, Hong Kong, Sarawak and North Borneo and there can be no doubt that Chinese Communist literature sent from Hong Kong is one of the main spearheads of propaganda directed at the overseas Chinese communities.’⁵⁸ This could also be attributed to Taiwan’s escalating anti-communist efforts through the Asian Peoples’ Anti-Communist League. After Bandung, the Nationalists actively forged alliances with South Korea and the Philippines and disseminated propaganda, preaching the notion that anti-communism was ‘the sole legitimate route to post-imperial emancipation’.⁵⁹ CCP propaganda therefore had to contest that of the Nationalists, competing for the support of the overseas Chinese.⁶⁰

In 1958, the CCP activists ‘intensified their activities’ in Hong Kong’s publishing domain, which they believed could ‘strengthen their position and extend their influence in Southeast Asia’.⁶¹ Contrasting strategies were adopted in Hong Kong and China. Since 1949, the CPG had attempted to establish a new state–market relationship with the publishing industries.⁶² As Hu Yuzhi, the director of the Publication Bureau and deputy minister of culture, declared, the publishing industry did not sell ordinary commodities but ‘intellectual foods’ for people and ‘cultural weapons’ that could advance

⁵³ Fitzgerald, ‘China and the overseas Chinese’, p. 11.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12; Oyen, ‘Communism’, pp. 87–8.

⁵⁵ To, *Qiaowu*, pp. 61–3.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 61; Zhang, *Economic Cold War*, p. 1; Lim, *Price and promise of specialness*, p. 69.

⁵⁷ Peterson, *Overseas Chinese*, p. 7, argues that the overseas Chinese policy was ‘centred above all on an economic calculus’. Lim, *Price and promise of specialness*, pp. 2, 4, suggests that the overseas Chinese policy was a ‘political economy’, a ‘political practice by the Chinese party-state in service of economic objectives’.

⁵⁸ A. M. MacDonald to John Martin, 25 Apr. 1956, TNA, CO 1030/188.

⁵⁹ Hao Chen, ‘Resisting Bandung? Taiwan’s struggle for “representational legitimacy” in the rise of the Asian Peoples’ Anti-Communist League, 1954–57’, *International History Review*, 43 (2020), pp. 244–63.

⁶⁰ To, *Qiaowu*, p. 58; Easmen, ‘Chinese diaspora’.

⁶¹ ‘Communist bookshops and publishers in Hong Kong’, Oct. 1958, p. 1, TNA, CO 1030/582.

⁶² Wang, *Pirates and publishers*, p. 253.

China's revolutionary course.⁶³ Publishers and bookshops were therefore required to spread communism, rather than seeking profits by selling the most popular texts.⁶⁴ To eliminate the commercial orientation of the pre-existing print market, the state closely regulated publishers. For example, formal permission from the Publishing Committee was needed if publishers intended to reprint books.⁶⁵ Private reprints were banned.⁶⁶ As the case of the Chunming Bookstore in 1951 illustrated, publishers with profit-seeking mentalities were penalized; a public forum was held to criticize the bookstore's representatives, after which they were fined and pirate copies were destroyed.⁶⁷ In addition, a new remuneration system was introduced and became widely practised, with rewards being based on labour input and the works' genre, quality, print run, and word count; once a print run was exceeded, the financial returns to the author decreased progressively.⁶⁸

In Hong Kong, the CCP had to deploy alternative strategies which worked with the colony's capitalist system. Financial inducements were given to publishers to print communist texts. Matrices of books in popular science, history, and literature were provided to communist and left-inclined independent publishers at low prices, which, as a Colonial Office report noted, were also attractive to non-aligned and right-wing bookstores because the books were 'popular', often selling 1,000 copies of each title per month; if a shop obtained the right to sell three, it could cover all its monthly expenses.⁶⁹ Moreover, sellers were allowed to circulate these books without restriction in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia as long as they printed them in local communist-owned printing houses and paid royalties to the writers.⁷⁰ Furthermore, by printing texts in Hong Kong, the burden on China's already strained publishing industry was eased; since 1950, the PRC had launched a campaign to combat illiteracy, which required a 'large amount of books and stationery', and shortage of books became acute – especially after 1954, when the system of planned circulation of periodicals was adopted to restrict the amount of printing.⁷¹

The CCP also extended long-term credit to publishers and bookshops which were willing to print and disseminate left-wing literature. The credit terms generally ranged from three to six months. For new items, the credit period could be further extended until all products were sold. General books, such as Chinese and Western literature and textbooks on social and natural sciences, were offered at wholesale price, approximately 40–50 per cent lower than the average retail price. Commodities, such as toys, stationery, and music instruments made in China, were also made available to these

⁶³ Speech by Hu Yuzhi at the opening ceremony of the New China News Agency Bookstores' headquarters, 23 Feb. 1951, cited in Wang, *Pirates and publishers*, p. 260.

⁶⁴ Wang, *Pirates and publishers*, pp. 260 and 265.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 269–74.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

⁶⁹ 'Communist bookshops and publishers in Hong Kong', p. 1.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

bookshops 'cheaply'.⁷² This was an attractive package, as the average credit period offered by right-wing publishers ranged from just one to three months, and they could only provide a discount of less than 30 per cent to bookshops. When bookshops purchased literature from Taiwan, they had to pay in cash; credit was not extended.⁷³ Right-wing publishers therefore struggled to compete with left-wing publishers, and non-aligned and even right-wing bookshops started disseminating left-wing literature. This indicates that the CCP not only utilized Hong Kong's capitalist environment to its advantage but ironically did so better than the 'capitalist' Nationalists whom they opposed.

Pro-communist bookshops had a further advantage because they could republish and sell old classics, with about 90 per cent of the books published before 1949 now under the regime's control. Such books were bestsellers. Classics of Chinese literature, translations of Western literature and philosophy, and Chinese novels written in the Ming and Qing dynasties were 'popular and profitable'. They were initially withheld from circulation for fear that they would spread 'capitalist and feudal ideas' but, in the 1950s, the CCP published new, edited versions for circulation overseas. It was estimated that, on average, left-wing bookshops in Hong Kong had over 10,000 different titles, more than thirty periodicals, numerous art reproductions, and many Chinese cartoon books which contained communist propaganda. These publications were 'well printed' and at least 30 per cent cheaper than books of similar genres issued by the right-wing publishers.⁷⁴ The right-wing bookshops, by contrast, possessed no more than 1,200 titles; few of the authors of these were well known, their prices were relatively high, and the quality of printing and binding was poor.⁷⁵ Pro-communist bookshops thus held many commercial advantages, and probably increased their market share in 1950s Hong Kong.⁷⁶

In addition, the CCP set up new bookstores and publishing companies in Hong Kong. For example, in 1958, 'to comply with anti-imperialism and anti-revisionism propagated in China', the Peace Book Company Ltd, which was 'responsible for disseminating books and political propaganda overseas', was established. Utilizing Hong Kong's laxly regulated postal service, these publishers and bookshops forged ties with bookshops in Southeast Asia and exported left-wing literature through airmail.⁷⁷ For example, the New Nanyang Publishing Company in Singapore, which 'had close relationships' with the Shanghai Book Company and the Sinminchu Publishing Company in Hong Kong, would place orders on behalf of readers for politically 'progressive' literature which was then to be delivered to Singapore from Hong Kong.⁷⁸

By the late 1950s, these commercial strategies were proving highly effective. Between 1949 and 1958, the number of left-wing publishing houses and

⁷² Ibid., p. 2.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 3.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 2.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 3.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 2.

⁷⁷ Xiao Zi (蕭滋), *Publishing, art, and life* (出版藝術人生) (Hong Kong, 2017), pp. 195–6.

⁷⁸ Lu Hu (魯虎), *Exploring the perceptions of China in Singapore and Malaysia, 1949–1965* (新馬華人的中國觀之研究, 1949–1965) (Singapore, 2014), pp. 60–1.

bookshops increased more than twofold, from twenty-six to sixty-six.⁷⁹ By February 1959, at least thirty-three bookshops were known to be selling communist literature, and fourteen publishers and nine printing houses were even 'deal[ing] almost exclusively in communist materials'.⁸⁰ Many non-aligned and right-wing bookshops and publishers also disseminated left-wing work for commercial reasons. For example, the Commercial Press Limited considered 'revising textbooks along leftist lines for Southeast Asia' after receiving \$800,000 from the CCP. Likewise, after obtaining \$100,000 credit, the Academy Press Company started distributing communist books in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia.⁸¹ The owner of a Nationalist bookshop accepted credit of about \$60,000 from the communist-controlled Life, Reader, Sinzh Joint Publishing Company, because, although he opposed communism, he reported that 'I cannot help it, I have to eat.'⁸²

As Southeast Asian countries prohibited the importation of communist literature, some of these Hong Kong publishers and bookstores owned multiple companies, or published under different names. The Hsueh Wen Book Company, for example, also operated the Light Publishing Company, which helped 'facilitate entry of its books into Malaya'; the Tsu Hsueh Publishing Company published books under the name of the Sun Fung Publishing Company to evade bans in Singapore, Malaya, and Sarawak; and the Rih Sin Book Company produced books by the Youth and Children Publishing Company, which had been banned in Malaya.⁸³ In sum, commercial acumen, cheap credit, and opaque ownership structures enabled the CCP to disseminate propaganda to Southeast Asia. Chinese communist literature was therefore readily available in overseas markets.

IV

The CCP produced a wide range of literature genres in Hong Kong. Unlike the typical literature printed in China, the books and magazines produced were 'less coloured by obvious radical ideologies' but they still contained core concepts such as 'the courage to struggle and change' and 'sympathizing with the suppressed masses', which were similar to ideologies in communist literature produced in China.⁸⁴ By the late 1950s, most literature printed in and exported through Hong Kong promoted the PRC – asserting that the PRC was the sole legitimate government – and patriotism by showcasing Chinese culture.⁸⁵

⁷⁹ 'Left-wing bookshops, publishing companies and printers, October 1958', O. H. Morris to A. J. W. Hockenull, 6 Nov. 1958, TNA, CO 1030/582.

⁸⁰ Local Intelligence Committee, Review of communist activities in Hong Kong, 11(59), 3 Feb. 1959, attached to 'Communist activities in Hong Kong', governor to secretary of state, 19 Feb. 1959, TNA, CO 1030/579.

⁸¹ 'Communist bookshops and publishers in Hong Kong', pp. 2–3.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Lu, *Exploring the perceptions of China*, p. 61.

⁸⁵ A similar phenomenon was noted by the PRC's ministry of foreign affairs in 'Report by the Medan consulate on the distribution of books, magazines, movies, and newspapers for overseas Chinese', 1956, archive file no. 118-0056-05, cited in To, *Qiaowu*, p. 174.

References to Marxism-Leninism had largely been removed. This development could be explained by changes to Chinese foreign policy. In 1956, under Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet Union commenced de-Stalinization, a shift which in theory posed problems for Mao Zedong, who had long applied Marxism-Leninism and adopted Stalin's style of autocratic rule. As Sino-Soviet tensions rose, the 'learnings of Lenin' and 'revisionism' were removed from Chinese left-wing literature.⁸⁶ The PRC also sought to improve its relations with countries in the so-called Third World through advocating local assimilation and discouraging the instigation of revolutions.

The CCP's overseas Chinese policy had a utilitarian dimension, which was to attract foreign exchange to aid China's modernization. To incentivize overseas Chinese to send remittances back to China, from the early to mid-1950s the CCP imposed a 'favourable treatment', also known as *you dai*, on returned overseas Chinese.⁸⁷ This policy was vigorously asserted in the mid-1950s.⁸⁸ In February 1955, the State Council issued a decree to declare foreign remittances, which were often associated with the bourgeoisie, legal.⁸⁹ Giving overseas Chinese this degree of 'specialness' was problematic, as it emphasized the individual rights of those receiving remittances and thus ran contrary to Mao Zedong's vision of socialist transformation, which called for collectivization and the end of capitalist ownership.⁹⁰ After the Hundred Flowers and Anti-Rightist movements, to enforce ideological conformity, the CCP ordered that returned overseas Chinese had to participate in national reconstruction and physical labour; in 1958, *you dai* was formally repealed, laying the foundation for China's second five-year plan.⁹¹

Socialist transformation in China subtly altered propaganda intended for overseas audiences. According to Xiao Zi, who worked in the communist-controlled Peace Book Company Ltd from 1958 to 1963, to adjust to China's internal political development and the Sino-Soviet split, the company's Chinese-language books – plus those translated into English, Malay, Indonesian, Thai, and many other languages, targeting Chinese in Southeast Asia – became infused with 'propaganda of anti-imperialism and anti-revisionism', although they did not advocate the overthrow of existing governments.⁹²

Three publications provide further insights into these changes. *The revolutionary history of modern China handout: first draft* (中國現代革命史講義:初稿), written by He Ganzhi, was first printed in Beijing in 1954. The book focused

⁸⁶ Lorenz M. Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet split: Cold War in the communist world* (Princeton, NJ, 2008), ch. 2.

⁸⁷ For example, during the Land Reform, overseas Chinese who only became landlords after they had gone overseas were allowed to keep their private properties. For those overseas Chinese landlords who were involved in industrial and commercial activities, lands that were used for such purposes were also exempted from expropriation. Lim, *Price and promise of specialness*, pp. 5, 66–7.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 117, 160.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 19, 135, 147.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 188, 222–3; Michael R. Godley, 'The sojourners: returned overseas Chinese in the People's Republic of China', *Pacific Affairs*, 62 (1989), pp. 330–52, at p. 333.

⁹² Xiao, *Publishing, art, and life*, pp. 14, 195–6.

on the CCP's activities and documented its 'revolutionary history' in chronological order. Having been approved by the Higher Education Bureau, it served as teaching material in secondary education in China.⁹³ There were various versions of the text, which was translated into more than seven different languages, including English and Vietnamese. More than 2 million copies were printed in total. It was extremely influential.⁹⁴ The book's first edition discussed Maoism and Leninism extensively, and presented Mao as having had a central role in the Chinese Communist revolution. Chapters 3–8, accounting for 20 per cent of the book's content, were devoted to introducing Mao's political works, among them *Analysis of Chinese society at all levels* (中國社會各階層分析), *Hunan agricultural national movement investigation report* (湖南農民運動考察報告), and *The strategy on opposing Japanese imperialism* (論反對日本帝國主義的策略), which accounted for 20 per cent of the book's content.⁹⁵ The struggle between 'left' and 'right' within the Party was discussed, and the conclusion asserted that Mao represented the CCP's 'correct path'.⁹⁶

However, in the edition named *The revolutionary history of modern China* (中國現代革命史), printed by Life, Reader, Sinzh Joint Publishing Company in Hong Kong in 1958, He removed the content on Maoist and Leninist ideologies and made substantial revisions. Mao and Stalin were mentioned less and Mao's role in the early CCP history was given less emphasis. Seven of his major speeches and narratives were also taken out of this edition; instead, new narratives which focused on China's 'enemies, allies, and masses' were added.⁹⁷ Although the book remained propagandistic, promoting the CCP, communism, and Maoism, this version printed for overseas Chinese consumption was less doctrinal compared to the 1954 edition, which was intended for domestic consumption. This book thus demonstrates the tensions that existed in the CCP's overseas Chinese propaganda policy: to accommodate deteriorating Sino-Soviet relations and the peaceful co-existence policy, revolutionary ideologies, in particular Soviet-related ones, were increasingly removed; but to align with China's internal socialist transformation, communism was still propagated. This highlights how the CCP juggled multiple external and internal concerns when formulating propaganda for overseas Chinese in the late 1950s.

The *China Pictorial* (人民畫報), a popular colour magazine read by overseas Chinese and disseminated through Hong Kong, was first published in 1950. Rather than propagating political ideologies, it focused on reporting China's internal achievement, people's lives, arts, and natural landscapes, cultivating a sense of patriotism among overseas Chinese. Internal news in China was

⁹³ He Ganzhi (何干之), *The revolutionary history of modern China handout: first draft* (中國現代革命史講義:初稿) (Beijing, 1954), preface.

⁹⁴ Geng Huamin (耿化敏), 'A model of revolutionary history writing in the 1950s: comment on He Ganzhi's revolutionary history of modern China' (五十年代革命歷史書寫的典範-評何干之主編中國現代革命史), *Tribune of Social Sciences*, 8 (2010), pp. 205–8, at p. 207; He, *Revolutionary history*.

⁹⁵ Geng, 'Model of revolutionary history', p. 206.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 205–6; He Ganzhi (何干之), *The revolutionary history of modern China* (中國現代革命史) (Hong Kong, 1958). The revised edition was also printed in Beijing for domestic consumption.

not mentioned to any great extent. Although the magazine still propagated the legitimacy of the CCP, glorified communism, and denounced imperialism, it was often done subtly through stories and reports, without heavy-handed indoctrination.⁹⁸ For example, the issue in July 1958 included a memoir of a former Tsinghua student during the Chinese Civil War. The student described how the Nationalist 'reactionary' authorities and armies, which colluded with the United States, suppressed the 'law-abiding' Chinese students. After denouncing the 'imperialists', the student claimed that he was saved by the People's Liberation Army in December 1948. Only with the rescue of the CCP did students feel more 'settled and calm' and achieve 'materialistic security'.⁹⁹ The emphasis on the CCP's social and economic achievement was another constant feature of the magazine. For instance, in the March 1958 issue, new technologies that had been introduced to different regions in China, such as an electricity generator in Heilongjiang and productive agricultural techniques in Qinghai, were shown to demonstrate how developed the CPG was, promoting a sense of Chinese national pride.¹⁰⁰ Influenced by the peaceful co-existence policy, a relatively soft approach was used, with propaganda attacking the Nationalists and the United States rather than the colonial and post-colonial governments in Southeast Asia.

Communist propaganda was also found in other publishing genres. The leading pro-communist Sinminchu Publishing Company in Hong Kong published volumes of poems written by different poets and leaders, including *Mao Zedong's nineteen poems* (毛澤東詩詞十九首) printed in 1958. The poems in this volume evidently glorified communism and the CCP. For example, the first two lines in 'Qi Lu Chang Zheng' (七律長征) described the Red Army's struggles during the Long March from Jiangxi in 1934–5, praising their courage: 'The Red Army was not afraid of difficult expeditions, thousands of waters and mountains were just ordinary' (紅軍不怕遠征難, 萬水千山只等閒). The hardship which the Red Army had to undergo to obtain victory in the Chinese Civil War was similarly described in 'Shi Liu Zi Ling San Shou' (十六字令三首).¹⁰¹ Although these poems had literary artistic values and were far from subversive, they had pro-CCP meanings. These genres were commonly used to promote the CCP against the Nationalists and cultivate patriotism among the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia after 1955.

By the late 1950s, the dissemination of Chinese communist propaganda through Hong Kong was alarming British colonial officials and Southeast Asian governments.¹⁰² Singapore's *Annual report* of 1958 pointed out that

⁹⁸ Zhou Dong-yuan (周東元) and Qi Wen-gong (齊文公), eds., *Selected fifty-year historical materials of China's foreign languages publishing administration* (中國外文局五十年史料選編) (Beijing, 1999), pp. 48–50.

⁹⁹ *China Pictorial*, 23–5 July 1958, pp. 23–4.

¹⁰⁰ *China Pictorial*, 28–9 Mar. 1958, pp. 38–9.

¹⁰¹ Mao Zedong, *Mao Zedong's nineteen poems* (毛澤東詩詞十九首) (Hong Kong, 1958).

¹⁰² The actual figure of left-wing publications printed in and disseminated through Hong Kong is difficult to trace, as many of these books and magazines were exported from Hong Kong to Southeast Asia secretly through point-to-point posts. They were not documented in government official trade records.

there was a 'growing problem of the flow of a million and more Communist-impregnated books each month from mainland China or from Hong Kong', which was worsened by the expansion of Chinese education and increased literacy.¹⁰³ In the first nine months of 1958, more than 14 million copies of 36,291 publications were imported to Singapore, of which 794 publications were classified as 'objectionable'.¹⁰⁴ With only 2 per cent of the publication titles deemed 'objectionable', the vast majority of Chinese Communist literature was soft propaganda – that is, texts which did not advocate subversion; but the subtle propagandistic effects of left-wing publications 'tainted with communist ideology' remained a concern for administrators.¹⁰⁵ During the 1950s, Singapore experienced labour and communal riots that threatened its stability, including the National Service riots of 1954, which were triggered by clashes between the police and students from Chinese middle schools.¹⁰⁶ Chinese nationalists in Singapore also became 'increasingly radical and militant'.¹⁰⁷

In this context, the circulation of pro-Chinese communist publications from Hong Kong 'on a large scale' was highly problematic, with a published Legislative Council report stating that 'the influence of that Party [CCP] on material imported into the Federation of Malaya is of considerable significance'.¹⁰⁸ In May 1958 alone, 7,266 copies of publications that were banned under the Undesirable Publications Ordinance were imported into Malaya from Hong Kong.¹⁰⁹ The authorities had to contend with the commercial prowess of the communist press, with non-communist suppliers unable to 'compete in price with those from communist-controlled sources'.¹¹⁰ In this situation, the supply of communist literature to schools 'seemed inexhaustible'.¹¹¹ Local Special Branch officers 'caught ethnic Chinese students red-handed with Malayan Communist Party and CCP literature'.¹¹² Easy access to Chinese communist propaganda threatened the British policy of 'Malayanization' and de-Sinicization that encouraged Sinocentric identities to be replaced by 'Malaya-oriented' ones.¹¹³ How did agencies seeking to

¹⁰³ Government Printing Office, *Colony of Singapore: annual report 1958* (Singapore, 1959), p. 11.

¹⁰⁴ 'Govt. gets wide power to ban publications', *Strait Budget Serial*, 9 Oct. 1958, TNA, CO 1030/582.

¹⁰⁵ 'Communist literature in Singapore', Legislative Assembly, Singapore, Sessional paper no. 14, 9 Mar. 1959, p. 2.

¹⁰⁶ Daniel Wei Boon Chua, *US-Singapore relations, 1965-1975: strategic non-alignment in the Cold War* (Singapore, 2017), pp. 33, 43.

¹⁰⁷ C. M. Turnbull, *A history of Singapore, 1819-2005* (Singapore, 2009), p. 254.

¹⁰⁸ 'The communist threat to the Federation of Malaya', reproduction of Legislative Council Paper no. 23, 24 Feb. 1959, p. 11.

¹⁰⁹ Singapore Intelligence Committee, report for the period 11-25 June 1958, TNA, CO 1030/582.

¹¹⁰ 'Communist threat to the Federation of Malaya', p. 11.

¹¹¹ Wen-Qing Ngoei, *Arc of containment: Britain, the United States, and anticommunism in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, NY, and London, 2019), p. 69.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹¹³ The policy of 'Malayanization' was first implemented by the Secretariat of Chinese Affairs in 1948, as the colonial government was worried that the local communities would not 'buy into' the British version of 'an independent Malaya within the Commonwealth'. It was also a response to the failure of the Malayan Union project, which supposedly would have granted equal rights to

counter the spread of communist propaganda contend with Hong Kong's pivotal role in this supply chain?

V

In 1949, the United States established the USIS in Hong Kong to obtain Chinese intelligence and conduct anti-communist operations targeting overseas Chinese audiences.¹¹⁴ It maintained close contact with Hong Kong's Public Relations Office and the Hong Kong representatives in the Regional Information Office at Singapore – part of Anglo-American 'intelligence communities', with the Anglo-American working relationship 'generally close'.¹¹⁵ In 1952, the USIS launched the Chinese book-translation programme on a 'full-scale basis'. Its pamphlet programme generated 7,000 copies of pamphlets on various political topics, such as labour and the Thought Reform scheme, targeting Hong Kong and overseas Chinese communities.¹¹⁶ The Hong Kong government also tolerated the Nationalist propaganda funded by the United States as this tended to criticize the undemocratic nature of Chinese communism but rarely touched upon colonialism.¹¹⁷ In particular, Neo-Confucian scholars hosted by the New Asia College explored how Confucian philosophies could be modified to fit in with a Western way of life to harmonize with the Cold War context.¹¹⁸ This 'Cold War turn of collaborative colonialism' benefited the Hong Kong government, which seldom sought to limit such propaganda.¹¹⁹ Incidents such as the suppression of *Kwok Man Yat Po* in 1946 and the suspension of the Voice of America radio broadcasts in 1951 were rare.¹²⁰ However, the United States and the British government agencies had different approaches to communist propaganda.

The colonial government adopted an approach of 'pragmatism' and 'non-provocative firmness' towards communist propaganda.¹²¹ This stemmed from the decision of a British government to recognize the PRC in January 1950; thereafter, British governments were conscious that the suppression of the

Chinese-born residents. Jeremy E. Taylor, "'Not a particularly happy expression": "Malayanization" and the China threat in Britain's late-colonial Southeast Asian territories', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 78 (2019), pp. 789–808, at pp. 790–6; Sharon A. Carstens, *Histories, cultures, identities: studies in Malaysian Chinese worlds* (Singapore, 2005), p. 148; Ting-hong Wong, *Hegemonies compared: state formation and Chinese school politics in postwar Singapore and Hong Kong* (New York, NY, 2002), ch. 6.

¹¹⁴ Mark, *Hong Kong and the Cold War*, p. 36.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 178, 180.

¹¹⁶ Lu, 'American Cold War', pp. 129, 132.

¹¹⁷ Law, *Collaborative colonial power*, pp. 139–40.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 145–6; Ip Lam-chong, 'Where does "Hong Kongese" come from?', in Law Wing Sang, ed., *Whose city? Post-war Hong Kong civic cultures and political discourse* (Hong Kong, 1997), p. 33.

¹²⁰ Michael Ng, *Political censorship in British Hong Kong: freedom of expression and law, 1842–1997* (Cambridge, forthcoming 2022), ch. 3; Mark, *Hong Kong and the Cold War*, pp. 198, 204–7.

¹²¹ Tsang, 'Strategy for survival', p. 305; Priscilla Roberts, 'Cold War Hong Kong: juggling opposing forces and identities', in Roberts and Carroll, eds., *Hong Kong in the Cold War*, pp. 26–59, at p. 36.

production and distribution of CCP propaganda might jeopardize colonial rule.¹²² The United States, by contrast, sought to contain communism, including assisting non-communist Southeast Asian countries in their modernization process, to 'deny the overseas Chinese to the Chinese Communists'.¹²³ This Anglo-American divide persisted into the late 1950s.

In response to the rise of a communist-aligned print industry in and distribution network through Hong Kong, in 1958 the United States requested the Hong Kong government to 'take some action to impede the production in the colony of Chinese Communist films, books, periodicals etc.'.¹²⁴ The colonial government had the legal authority to suppress political propaganda using a range of local ordinances. For example, the Sedition Ordinance and the Sedition Amendment Ordinance passed in 1938 outlawed the printing of seditious publications and could result in two years' imprisonment for the first offence and three years for repeated offences.¹²⁵ The Control of Publications (Consolidation) Ordinance enacted in 1951 provided the government with the power to prosecute printers and publishers who produced any publications which 'persuade[d] or induce[d] any person' to 'adhere to any unlawful society within the meaning of the Societies Ordinance', including the CCP.¹²⁶

In practice, the colonial administration was reluctant to enforce these laws. As P. G. F. Dalton, Hong Kong's political adviser, had suggested, the colony was 'a show window in the Far East for the free life' and that 'the rule of law' was 'one of our main [lines of] defence against complaints against colonialism'.¹²⁷ The colonial government therefore had to observe 'the same principles of freedom and justice as apply in this country' and could not 'prohibit the posting of "communist literature" in general' or set itself up 'as judges of what may or may not be considered subversive in other territories'.¹²⁸ In other words, 'they could not clamp down on communist literature simply because it was communist'.¹²⁹ British officials were also minded that suppression would 'raise a storm' in the British parliament and provoke the PRC.¹³⁰ The introduction of 'authoritarian regulations or methods for the suppression of freedom of publication' was therefore deemed 'not necessarily possible or desirable'.¹³¹ Although the Hong Kong government had tried preventing the exportation of communist propaganda from Hong Kong through 'postal routes' since the mid-1950s, left-wing materials still reached Southeast Asia in large quantities.¹³² With the colonial government taking a relatively hands-off approach,

¹²² Mark, *Hong Kong and the Cold War*, p. 197.

¹²³ Oyen, 'Communism', p. 64.

¹²⁴ P. G. F. Dalton to W. I. J. Wallace, 7 Mar. 1958, TNA, CO 1030/583.

¹²⁵ Sedition Ordinance 1938, Hong Kong, s 4(1)–(2).

¹²⁶ 'Communist propaganda', July 1958, TNA, CO 1030/583.

¹²⁷ P. G. F. Dalton to A. J. de la Mare, 7 Mar. 1958, TNA, CO 1030/583.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*; P. G. F. Dalton to M. B. Hanley, 5 May 1954, TNA, CO 1030/188.

¹²⁹ P. G. F. Dalton to W. I. J. Wallace, 5 Feb. 1958, TNA, CO 1030/582.

¹³⁰ Dalton to de la Mare, 7 Mar. 1958.

¹³¹ A. J. de la Mare to P. G. F. Dalton, 12 Feb. 1958, TNA, CO 1030/583.

¹³² Taylor, "'Not a particularly happy expression'", p. 796; 'Transmission of communist literature from Hong Kong', 26 June 1954, TNA, FCO 141/14596.

Hong Kong remained ‘a battleground of ideas’ which was ‘used as a base for the production and dissemination of CPG propaganda to other colonial territories’.¹³³

The ambivalent British control over Chinese communist literature in Hong Kong led the decolonizing Southeast Asian governments to strengthen their colonial-era laws to prohibit pro-CCP imported materials. In Singapore, additional power was granted to the government under the Undesirable Publications Ordinance to ban importation of foreign publications that were ‘subversive and undesirable’.¹³⁴ A blanket ban on publishers based in the PRC and Hong Kong was introduced.¹³⁵ Under the Control of Imported Publications Ordinance enacted in late 1958, Malaya banned the importation of books issued by twenty-nine publishing houses in Hong Kong and China.¹³⁶ Thailand prohibited the circulation of 229 Chinese-language papers and books. British North Borneo likewise made it illegal to disseminate sixty Chinese publications in its territory,¹³⁷ a blanket ban was later imposed specifically on the products of Chinese publishing houses in Hong Kong.¹³⁸ As the Local Intelligence Committee had pointed out, within a year these measures were ‘having some effect’, although pro-communist materials were still circulating in large volumes. For example, the circulation of the *Red Flag* in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia had dropped from 5,000 to 3,000, and that of *China Pictorial Fortnightly* from 8,000 to 5,000.¹³⁹ Meanwhile, the Shanghai Book Company in Hong Kong had to return a consignment of four cases of books to Beijing because it was unable to market them through its branches in Singapore and Malaya.¹⁴⁰

VI

Hong Kong was a Cold War pivot, from which the CCP disseminated printed propaganda to overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. The existing scholarship has underplayed the colony’s strategic vulnerability to such CCP activities. From 1949, the CCP gained a stronghold in the publishing and book retail industries in Hong Kong and created a distribution network reaching across Southeast Asia. In contrast to the ideological and regulatory approach used in China, the CCP utilized Hong Kong’s capitalist environment to its advantage to expand its cultural influence – and ironically did so better than the ‘capitalists’ they opposed. Intelligence gathered by British agencies shows that Chinese psychological warfare using print media was perceived as a real threat to colonial and post-colonial states in Southeast Asia; not only did the number of left-wing printers, publishers, and bookshops in Hong Kong increase, but

¹³³ MacDonald to Martin, 25 Apr. 1956.

¹³⁴ ‘Govt. gets wide power to ban publications’.

¹³⁵ Taylor, “‘Not a particularly happy expression’”, p. 798.

¹³⁶ C. B. Burgess to W. I. J. Wallace, 27 Aug. 1958, TNA, CO 1030/583.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ W. I. J. Wallace to C. B. Burgess, 25 July 1958, TNA, CO 1030/583.

¹³⁹ Local Intelligence Committee, monthly report, Jan. 1959, TNA, CO 1030/582.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Chinese communist literature imported to Southeast Asia via Hong Kong also surged in the late 1950s.

Left-wing work disseminated through Hong Kong ranged from magazines cultivating Chinese patriotism and asserting the legitimacy of the CCP to a small number of books which detailed revolutionary and communist ideologies. When a surviving sample of these texts are re-read, they reveal shifts in Chinese statecraft, and highlight tensions between different concerns at work within the CCP: between domestic and foreign policies, and between the promotion of radical ideologies versus the dictates of pragmatism. Most left-wing propaganda adopted a soft approach; it was de-ideologized and was not subversive. This reflected a peaceful co-existence policy and the practical need to attract foreign remittances. However, the CCP also had to inform overseas Chinese of the socialist transformation of China.

Lastly, this article has illuminated the tensions between agencies of the United States and the colonial administration of Hong Kong over how to contain the influx of Chinese communist literature. While the United States expected Chinese communist printed propaganda to be stringently controlled, including via censorship, the colonial government refused to comply with such demands for a hard-line stance against communist-aligned agencies and businesses. The colonial administration argued that it was upholding basic legal freedoms. The Hong Kong government was also motivated by pragmatic concerns. It feared that a hard-line approach would risk internal unrest in the colony and cause a further deterioration in Sino-British relations. Hong Kong's ambivalent hands-off approach led the decolonizing Southeast Asian countries to take initiatives to strengthen their controls on imported communist books and periodicals, showing how Hong Kong had become a pivot in a propaganda war waging across Southeast Asia in the 1950s.

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