

Underground Front: The Chinese Communist Party in Hong Kong

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(Final version as spoken)

Let me start by saying what this book is not about. It is not a critique of the Chinese Communist Party. It has no “secrets” to reveal. There is no list of party members. If you are looking for that kind of juicy details, I am afraid you will be disappointed.

This book is a short story of the Party in Hong Kong – and what a story. It starts in 1921 when the Party was established in China, and ends in 2009.

The Party is just a little under 100 years old. This is the lifetime of three generations. My fascination with the subject is because our lives in Hong Kong are very much a part of that bigger story of modern China.

Contradiction

If I had to pick just one word to describe the overall theme of the Party’s history here, I would choose “Contradiction”.

While it was a historical shame for China to have lost Hong Kong to Britain in the 19th century, under a series of “unequal treaties”, a colonial territory at China’s doorstep turned out to have been extremely convenient.

From the time of the birth of the Party, Hong Kong served as a very useful and fairly secure haven for party members and friends to stage revolutionary and political activities.

These included using Hong Kong as a communications and propaganda nerve centre, a fundraising facility, an intelligence-gathering post, and a launch pad to the world.

Hong Kong was also a good place in terms of trade, loans, investments and gifts from compatriots. Hong Kong's enormous usefulness to the Party resulted in a high degree of tolerance for our existence.

Indeed, the “one country, two systems” principle devised in the early 1980s, sought to preserve the best of both worlds for Beijing – reunification under special arrangements that maintained Hong Kong's lifestyle and retained its prosperity as a separate administrative entity.

Status of the CCP

The contradiction affects the status of the Party in Hong Kong still. A central question that lies at the core of the book is why the mighty Chinese Communist Party is an underground organization here. After all, it is the undisputed ruling party. Why is it so coy?

The wider colonial background made a difference. After World War II, the British introduced systems of personal registration, and registration of organisations and political groups in various parts of the colonial empire. The goal was to block China's access to the Overseas Chinese communities so as to halt the spread of communist ideas among the population at large.

Obviously, the Chinese Communist Party was not about to register in Hong Kong. Moreover, why should it register under the laws of the imperialists when China claimed sovereignty over the territory in any case?

The British didn't make a fuss because there wasn't another workable approach. While they could try to keep communists out of the civil service, it was impossible to do the same with trade unions, schools and commercial organisations. There were just too many of them which publicly acknowledged their allegiance to the People's Republic for the British to suppress.

As for the community, it was important to create a kind of political tolerance. So many families had been split between the Communists and the Nationalists before they took refuge in Hong Kong. Now they were neighbours, often in squatter huts and crowded tenements, or were co-workers struggling to make a living.

Everyone could see that their well being and future depended on not reliving the past. Harmony was easier to maintain if everyone went about their affairs without drawing attention to the difficult issues.

That habit has continued even though Hong Kong is now a part of the People's Republic of China. But, nowhere else in the world is there a system where the ruling party remains an underground organization as it does here.

So, is it time for the party to “come out”? I will come back to this later.

Contest

There is another “C” word I would use to describe the Party in Hong Kong – “Contest”. The contest has been over the identity of the people here.

There was an inherent contradiction in Beijing’s policy towards sovereignty. While there was *de facto* British rule, the Party felt the need to periodically remind the people that Hong Kong was under temporary British occupation and they must not forget the historical humiliation of this situation.

At various points in time the contradiction and contest boiled over, the most violent of which was in 1967 when the Party orchestrated eight months of riots in Hong Kong challenging British rule. At the end of the campaign, Zhou Enlai and other pragmatists managed to halt the economically costly upheaval. But the Party organisation had been largely destroyed by the colonial administration, and the sympathy of Hong Kong people was lost.

When the Party made up its mind in December 1981 to take Hong Kong back in 1997, a key united front strategy was to win over the hearts and minds of the people of this city. The Cultural Revolution should be forgotten. The political and economic elites had to be persuaded their long-term interests rested with China.

The Party in Hong Kong used to reside within the *Xinhua News Agency*. Its real name was the Hong Kong and Macao Work Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. Under Xu Jiaturun, the then party head of Hong Kong, its task was to cultivate the elites to make them feel comfortable enough to transfer their loyalty from the British to Beijing.

Xu Jiaturun observed that in dealing with the capitalist economic elites – that is, Hong Kong’s business VIPs – their political inclinations usually followed their commercial interests – and could be influenced by offering the right rewards.

Not only were the local VIPs wined and dined but they were invited to Beijing and given the chance to meet top leaders, who explained the Party’s regime values. This proved highly effective. It was intoxicating for the Hong Kong elites to feel close to power. They also came away reassured that the Party would allow capitalism to flourish in Hong Kong.

June 4th in 1989 presented a set-back but it was overcome through an intensification of united front work and hard bargaining with the British over allowing a slightly faster pace of electing a small number of legislators to the Legislative Council. In time, an election machine would need to be constructed to ensure friendly forces won elections.

A New Political Order

An important part of the story is how the Party fashioned a new political order to take power in 1997, and maintain power beyond that.

The first glimpse of the individuals the Party cultivated were the 101 Hong Kong VIPs who were invited to witness the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in Beijing in 1984.

The most illustrious of them were subsequently invited to serve on the Basic Law Drafting Committee (23), and a larger group was made members of the Basic Law Consultative Committee (180). During the final years of British rule, an even larger group of people were made Hong Kong Affairs Advisers (44) and District Affairs Advisers (667).

In the final stage of taking power, Beijing created the Preliminary Working Committee (30), Preparatory Committee (94) and Selection Committee for the first chief executive (400), where the appointees were drawn from essentially the same pool of people. These various appointments became the “status markers” for the new post-1997 political order.

Who were the new power-holders? They were the same types of people as the appointees to positions of influence under the British. Quite apart from the psychological importance of retaining familiar faces within the power structure, this strategy provided convincing evidence of the Party’s sincerity. Its leaders had promised the business elite that it had everything to gain by supporting Beijing wholeheartedly.

And the process has expanded since. Not only were they appointed to various government bodies, their offspring are now populating local committees, as well as national and provincial people’s congresses and peoples’ political consultative conferences. The appendices in the book provide a record of some of these appointments.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to make two points.

The first is to urge you to buy a book. Read about the earlier years of party activities in Hong Kong. They were truly dramatic. There were extensive strikes and boycotts in the 1920s that inspired communists on the mainland. The stories of the East River guerrillas who fought the Japanese in Hong Kong and Guangdong still need to be more fully researched and told. The stories of the spill over in Hong Kong of the life-and-death fight between the Communists and Nationalists are gut-wrenching. Moreover, it is not so well-known that there was a period of time when the Party’s Guangdong HQ was in Hong Kong, and how active it was.

My final point is to answer the question: Is the Party ready to “come out”?

I think not yet. To operate in the open would entail revealing who members are and the full extent of its underground apparatus in Hong Kong. Once revealed, too many questions may be asked.

Hong Kong people may also not be ready for it. I am grateful to Michael DeGolyer of the Hong Kong Transition Project for asking a number of questions relating to the Party in a public opinion survey in 2007 for my book.

One of the questions was whether Party membership should be declared. Nearly 50% of the respondents thought “no”. They thought things should just “continue as they are”.

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