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SOCIAL OSMOSIS - REFUGEES IN HONG KONG

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During the past hundred years the British colony of Hong Kong, attached to the South China coast, has served as a unique safety valve for mainland China. Poverty and disaster in overpopulated South China have caused a constant flow of emigrants to Hong Kong, increasing the population of the colony a thousandfold in a hundred years and transforming it from a Chinese fishing village of 1,500 persons in 1841 into an Eurasian trade metropolis with a population of a million and a half in 1941.

Despite this phenomenal long-term growth, the stream of emigrants has not all been one way. There has been a large ebb and flow caused by the human tides set in motion by political upheavals within China. The T'ai'ping Rebellion in the 1850's, the Boxer Uprising in 1900, and Japanese aggression against China in the 1930's were major high-water marks in this process. In 1931, for example, Hong Kong had a population of roughly 850,000. During the next ten years of Japanese aggression against China, it increased to over 1,600,000. Japanese conquest of Hong Kong in 1941 reversed the flow, and by 1945 the population of the colony was reduced to slightly over 500,000. Then, in the immediate postwar period it quickly reached, and by 1947 slightly exceeded, the 1941 figure.

If V-J Day had been followed by peace in China, Hong Kong's population might have been stabilized, but this was not the case. Civil war, and the Communists' rise to power, resulted in a new flood of emigrants from China. As the civil war reached its peak, and the Communists steadily won control of China, the population of Hong Kong swelled until by the spring of 1950 it was estimated to be almost two and a half million. Even after the fighting stopped on the mainland, only a few of Hong Kong's refugees returned to their homes. The majority stayed on, and new travel restrictions on both sides of the border soon reduced the flow either way to a relatively small trickle.

At present Hong Kong has a population of considerably over two million, and at least a half-million of these are refugees who have no place to go. For the moment at least, they are stranded "White Chinese," in exile from their country.

Almost every conceivable kind of person is included among these refugees. There are big businessmen, merchants, shopkeepers, former officials, ex-Nationalist soldiers, factory workers, and dance-hall girls. There are also intellectuals and politicians; some have tried to organize a "New Force" in Hong Kong (see ADB-1952-7 and ADB-1952-8), but they have had little success to date. Many of the refugees are from North and Central China; they speak different dialects from the predominant Cantonese, and instead of blending with the local population they have mixed like oil in water,

The situation which this influx of refugees has created is briefly summarized in the flat bureaucratic prose of last year's annual report made by

the Hong Kong Police Commissioner, "The highest displaced person population per area in the world, the highest human density per area in the world in the urban area, no reduction and a natural increase in the population, some 300,000 squatters on the hillsides, some 45,000 hawkers, strict Chinese immigration regulations and a rooted aversion to the traditional return of the economically displaced to their villages in China, deterioration of the economic situation generally, to some extent' by trade controls, and creation of smuggling and corruption in attempts to evade these controls, political exploitation of incidents through labor organs and a 'cold war' of nerves from China woven into the background of opposed ideologies and the almost impossible struggle for existence produced a stage where a vast amount of preventative work had to be done as much in the background as possible, while the bread and butter work of crime prevention reached the highest intensity yet achieved."

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The situation in Hong Kong is one which if duplicated in most Western countries would constitute a major crisis, One would expect disorder and confusion, breadlines and soup kitchens, and large-scale relief carried out by government organizations and big private agencies such as the Red Cross,

But this has not been the pattern of developments in Hong Kong during the past four years, Hong Kong has absorbed the great influx of refugees through a process which might be called social osmosis, As individuals, families or small groups the refugees have permeated the Chinese community in Hong Kong and have been maintained by it, The persistence of traditional Chinese practices and institutions based upon family and regional ties has made this possible, Across the border from Hong Kong, in areas under Chinese Communist control, extended kinship responsibilities and regional loyalties are under severe attack as outmoded "feudal" vestiges of a decadent society, The colonial authorities in Hong Kong, however, have made no effort to undermine these traditions, and the local Chinese population, despite its veneer of Westernization, has responded to the refugee problem in much the same way that Chinese groups have repeatedly done in the past.

As a result, the refugee influx has caused a minimum of disorder in Hong Kong. Some credit must go to the efficiency of British law enforcement agencies, but more important is the fact that the majority of refugees have not been completely rootless, Many refugees have suffered from extreme poverty, but there has been virtually no starvation, This has not been due primarily to government action or public relief activities, for these have been on a very small scale, The basic relief and social welfare needs of the refugees have been met by traditional social institutions, the most important of which have been the family and regional associations,

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The economic obligations of family ties, and to a lesser extent of friendship, are so great in traditional China, that most Westerners would find them an intolerable burden, but they have been the salvation of the majority of refugees now in Hong Kong, The refugees have relied first and foremost upon assistance from their relatives and friends, One of the most prominent Chinese philanthropists in Hong Kong recently said to me that it would be almost inconceivable for a person on the China mainland to consider coming to Hong Kong as a refugee unless he had relatives or close friends here, and

among the refugees who have come a group of former Nationalist soldiers is probably the only sizeable group lacking such ties.

Perhaps the role of the traditional Chinese family in periods of disaster or economic crisis can best be illustrated by a specific case. Recently, I asked a close personal friend of mine, whom I shall call Liu, to tell me how the refugee problem in Hong Kong affects him and his relatives. What he told me is very revealing. Liu, who is a refugee from Shanghai, is a Westernized, middle class, professional man. He is more fortunate than most refugees, since he has a full-time job with a salary that is good by local standards. Liu's immediate family and household consist of his wife, two children, sister-in-law and mother, but the demands upon his income are not confined to this inner circle (which is already more inclusive than an average American would like). One of Liu's brothers, who has a wife and two children, is also a refugee in Hong Kong and has been unable to find even part-time employment. This brother lives separately from Liu, but once a month he visits Liu's office and picks up a financial handout which is enough to keep his family going. Liu also has two widowed sisters living under the Communists in Shanghai, and he remits a small monthly allowance to them. These are regular demands and they are constantly supplemented by special ones. Last week, for example, a Shanghai friend of Liu's came into Hong Kong illegally by junk from Macao; he didn't have enough money to pay off his smugglers, and Liu had to help him out. "Did you feel obligated to do this?" I asked him. "Of course," he said, "because once he helped me out when I was in trouble." In addition to close friends, there have been other relatives, some fairly remote, who have asked him for help. "Do you always give them money if they ask?" I inquired. "Well," Liu answered, "if any relative approaches you, you must give him something the first time. It would look very bad if you didn't. After the first time, however, the obligation isn't so strong."

In addition to the aid already mentioned, Liu is currently giving a small monthly stipend to another relative -- the husband of one of his wife's sisters -- and this relative's case is one which involves a whole web of family relationships, and reveals an intricate system of private relief. The relative involved is chief accountant in a large company which is run by a man I shall call Wang, who is a first cousin of Liu's on his mother's side; the reason that the accountant is forced to ask Liu for help is that Wang's company is almost bankrupt, partly as a result of the demands of his many relatives for support, and has been forced to reduce most salaries to a token payment, insufficient to provide full support to the families involved,

Liu's cousin Wang is a good example of the position of a relatively rich man in a calamitous situation where relatives and friends converge to request relief handouts. In effect, Wang's company in Hong Kong became a family relief agency soon after the Communists took Shanghai. A horde of relatives descended on Wang, and he tried to take care of them by giving them jobs instead of cash handouts. Finally almost his entire staff, consisting of about 80 people, was made up of relatives. Needless to say, the efficiency of the company did not improve as a result of hiring based on family ties instead of professional qualifications. This effect, combined with a steady decline of business due to shrinking markets and growing trade restrictions, drove Wang's company to near bankruptcy. Since his employees were mostly relatives, however, he could not simply fire them; instead he reduced their salaries to the point where they are now really no more than token relief payments. The company's business had been almost at a standstill for a year, but the relatives are still on the payroll, even though their pay is so low that they must find supplementary income elsewhere, Liu's wife's brother-in-law

does this by getting a monthly donation from him as well as from Wang,

Wang's company payroll is not the only drain which relatives make upon his resources. As a rich man (despite the steady decline of his fortune), he not only supports a large household of close relatives (one concubine is included) and loyal servants, but he also has a steady stream of single requests for aid from remote relatives, fellow provincials, friends, and miscellaneous followers and hangers-on. In Shanghai, Wang was an influential man with a large number of personal followers or "disciples" (t'u ti). These "disciples" were an economic asset in Shanghai, but many are now indigent refugees in Hong Kong and constitute an additional drain upon his resources. Liu estimates that Wang may have contributed in one way or another to the support of as many as 150 such refugee followers,

The network of family ties and private relief to which Liu belongs includes numerous persons other than those already mentioned. Liu, for example, has another close relative who owns a factory in Hong Kong and contributes to the support of many refugee relatives in a way comparable to Wang's. This man has an even larger list of immediate family members dependent upon him; he supports eight or nine unemployed brothers and first cousins,, together with their families. Another of Liu's relatives -- his first wife's cousin -- lives in a refugee community called Diamond Hill and supports five families. One of Liu's close friends and former schoolmates (school ties are important too, although less so than family relations) heads a fairly large merchandising company in Hong Kong, and Liu says that he employs about 40 refugee relatives and friends as part-time salesmen,

It would be difficult to estimate how many unemployed or partially employed refugee relatives and friends are supported by the well-to-do members of this one web of relationships, but the number is obviously large. The assistance given is in the form both of cash handouts and jobs, and often it is difficult to draw a clear line differentiating the two. The result is that a large number of persons who in other types of societies would probably become public charges are absorbed into the community with a minimum of strain visible to the outsider. Another result, of course, is a gradual economic levelling process within the group as the poor feed off the wealthy, and the wealthy get poorer. It is not a process which can continue indefinitely) unless new opportunities are found for the dependent members of the group to earn a living, the resources of the group will steadily be exhausted,

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The existence of widespread family relief of the sort I have described does not mean that the refugees in Hong Kong are lazy. On the contrary, the majority show a tremendous amount of energy and ingenuity in trying to find some way of obtaining at least a meagre income. The 200,000 to 300,000 squatters living in dreary shanty-town settlements spread on the hillsides around Hong Kong are a living tribute to the Chinese ability to find means to survive. They have built their own shelter, miserable as it is, and they have found ways of keeping alive. Thousands come into the city and work as coolie laborers. More thousands try to make an irregular living by becoming street hawkers. Others have taken up handicrafts and work for shops or factories on a contract system; they are provided with raw materials, process them in their huts, and are paid on a piece-rate basis. In Hong Kong today former county magistrates and college professors sit in their dim hovels and do embroidery -- work which is usually restricted to womenfolk in rural areas

of China, But the fact is that there is not enough work to go around, and the savings which refugees were able to bring out with them have slowly been exhausted, As a result there are literally hundreds of thousands of unemployed or underemployed persons, and these people fall back upon their relatives, if they have any.

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For those refugees in Hong Kong who have exhausted their savings, are **unable** to earn a living, and cannot find relatives or friends to **help** them, there is another institution, deeply rooted in Chinese society, to which they can often turn. namely the clan or local association, In Hong Kong the two most important-types are the t'ung hsiang hui or regional **associations** (literally: "**association** of people from the same countryside") and the shih tsung ch'in hui or clan associations (**literally: "association of relatives from the clan"**). The main function of these associations is to provide relief for people from a certain area or bearing a certain name. At present there are 33 provincial or hsien associations and 12 clan associations of this sort in Hong Kong,

Returning once more to the case of Mr. Liu, if the wheel of fortune turned and he became destitute, and was unable to obtain assistance from a relative, he could turn to the clan of persons bearing his name, or to the Kiangsu-Chekiang Provincial Association of Hong Kong, and receive some aid -- even though he has never been a formal member of either of these organizations, The fact that he is a Liu and that he is from Shanghai, Kiangsu, is enough reason for these associations to **feel** some sense of responsibility toward him, (Actually, there is no "Liu" clan association in Hong Kong but there is an association for the clan of "Liu's" real name,)

The Kiangsu-Chekiang Provincial Association is one of the most important organizations of this sort at present in Hong Kong, because approximately 200,000 refugees from the Shanghai area poured into Hong Kong when the Communists took over mainland China, and these people are a long way from home,

This week I visited the office of the association and also had a long talk, between the courses of a Shanghai lunch, with its chairman, and learned something of its organization and activities,

The Kiangsu-Chekiang Association in Hong Kong was organized during the war, in 1942, when refugees from Central China first came to Hong Kong in sizeable numbers, Its primary aim was, and is, to aid refugees from the two provinces **from** which it draws its membership. This was not such a large responsibility during the early years of the **association's** existence, but in 1948-49 the task suddenly expanded, and today it is still growing,

The present membership of the association consists of **approximately** 8,000 men, almost all of whom are successful businessmen. Not everyone from Kiangsu or Chekiang can join the association, even if he wants to; prospective members must be in a sound financial position, and must be recommended by persons who are already members, Members must also be prepared to contribute toward the relief and philanthropic projects which constitute the principal activities of the association. Annual membership fees, as such, are nominal (HK\$100 for business organizations and either HK\$10 or HK\$5 for different categories of individuals; HK\$1 is roughly US\$0.15), but members

are expected to make donations according to their capacity to pay. The leading members of the association are also expected to head up teams which solicit donations during special financial drives, about once a year. These drives are competitive affairs, and the teams which bring in the most money are given silk banners and glowing tributes at the windup dinners which end the campaigns.

One of the primary incentives to join the association is undoubtedly prestige. Membership is a sign both of financial success and of virtue and is a sure road to prominence, at least among the Shanghai community. The goal of the ambitious members is to become one of the 45 officers of the association, whose photographs appear in the annual yearbook.

Although ordinary members are not expected to do much more than make contributions, and perhaps attend the annual dinner meeting when officers are elected (several hundred attend), the executive directors meet every two weeks to supervise disbursement of the association's funds, and the demands on their time as well as their pocketbooks can be fairly heavy. The present chairman, Mr. Hsu Chi-liang, is a wealthy Hong Kong industrialist, from the Chekiang city of Ningpo, who now devotes almost all of his time to private relief activities among Kiangsu and Chekiang refugees,

Mr. Hsu estimates that among the 200,000 or more Kiangsu-Chekiang refugees in Hong Kong, there are about 15,000 (almost all ex-soldiers) who have absolutely no relatives or friends to help them, and most of the association's requests for aid come from this group. Requests may come through members of the association, but many are made directly to the association's main office, which is located in the center of downtown Hong Kong. At present, the office gets about ten requests a day, from people who are completely destitute. There are really only two qualifications for receiving aid: a person must be a native of Kiangsu or Chekiang, and he must be destitute. If the staff at the association's office is satisfied on these grounds, it can give a small amount of cash directly to the person making a request. This is a procedure which would dishearten a modern social worker, but there is no doubt that it keeps many persons from sinking to the ultimate degradation of street begging (of which there is very little in Hong Kong) and starvation.

Most of the association's relief funds are distributed in this way, through small cash handouts, but in special cases other forms of financial assistance are given, and often the association serves as an informal employment contact office. There are approximately 150 factories in Hong Kong owned or operated by Shanghai people, and most of these give preference in hiring employees to persons from the Kiangsu-Chekiang region. One of Mr. Hsu's own factories is a good example of this practice. It is a factory which employs about 800 people. When the flood of Central China refugees first arrived in Hong Kong, almost half of the employees in the factory were persons who were given jobs because they were refugees from Kiangsu and Chekiang. It was a relief operation disguised as employment, because only 50 or so out of 400 were competent to hold their jobs. Since 1949, Mr. Hsu has helped most of the others find new jobs, locate relatives, or move to Taiwan; the remainder he fired, and only the 50 competent ones remain on the job in the factory today.

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During the past four years the almost invisible process of absorption

and support of Hong Kong's refugee population of over a half-million persons **has** contributed to the lack of **publicity** and international attention given to the problem. There **has** been no **dramatic** crisis, because the traditional institutions of **Chinese** society have been able to absorb most of the shock of the refugee **influx**.

There are reasons to believe, **however**, that Hong Kong's refugee problem may become increasingly serious in the future, **although** this is not likely to happen suddenly. One reason is the fact that the economic reserves of the Chinese population in Hong Kong are wearing down through a process of attrition. Small **savings** have slowly been exhausted, and large concentrations of wealth have shrunk. A huge unproductive group cannot be supported indefinitely by their relatives and fellow provincials.

The Chinese are fond of aphorisms, and one now current in Hong Kong sums up the refugee situation as follows, "Three types of refugees came from mainland China to Hong Kong. First came the rich, then the persons who could support themselves, and finally the destitute. The destitute fed off the self-supporting and the rich. Gradually the self-supporting have become destitute, and soon there will be no more **rich**." Although during the past year there have been some **indications** that a few of the squatters in Hong Kong have improved their situation, there are also signs that the steady **process** of **attrition** still goes on, reducing the total economic reserves of the Chinese community.

Furthermore, there is little prospect of any rapid growth in Hong Kong's economic activity in the immediate future. Restrictions on trade with Communist China, the reorientation of China's foreign trade away from the West, and the revival of Japanese competition in Asia make it unlikely that Hong Kong can hope to increase trade and industrial production sufficiently to provide **new** employment for many of the refugees.

In the past, Hong Kong's refugee problems have usually solved themselves, in time; refugees from disordered areas have returned home after the restoration of order. Now, however, the refugees in Hong Kong show no inclination to return to the Communist-ruled mainland. Some persons in the Hong Kong Government still hope the refugees will eventually leave, and they are reluctant to initiate any program of aid based upon the assumption that the refugees are a permanent addition to the colony, but the Commissioner of Police was probably more realistic when he said last year **that** "the population which regarded itself as refugee and **transient** is now putting down **roots**."

The possibilities for emigration of the Chinese refugees in Hong Kong to other areas of the Far East are extremely limited. Formosa is already overcrowded, and the Nationalist Government's tight security regulations restrict movement in that direction. Most countries in Southeast Asia which might serve as emigration outlets resent the already large Overseas Chinese communities in their midst and show no desire to accept more Chinese residents.

There is no **"solution"** in sight, therefore, for Hong Kong's refugee problem, and the need for increased government aid, both local and international, and for greater foreign relief assistance, is likely to increase. But government and relief agencies will never be called upon to do the whole job, because the traditional Chinese social institutions which survive in Hong Kong will continue to make a large contribution to meeting the problem.

These institutions give the Chinese community a resiliency in times of disaster which not only contrasts with most Western societies but which also may be slowly disappearing on the China mainland, where the Communists are doing their best to centralize responsibility for dealing with all social problems into the hands of the Party and State and are steadily undermining traditional institutions such as the extended family and regional associations,

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