

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

CHGO-8

4 Kotewall Road, 4th Floor,  
Hong Kong.

Some Aspects of the  
Hong Kong Refugee Problem.

June 14, 1962.

Mr. R.H. Nolte,  
Institute of Current World Affairs,  
366 Madison Avenue,  
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte,

Last month the Chinese Communists relaxed their control along the Hong Kong border and an estimated 60,000 refugees tried to enter Hong Kong illegally. Most of them were caught and returned to China. As far as we can judge in Hong Kong the events of this month were fairly accurately reported in the Western press. I do not intend therefore, to duplicate the press coverage, nor do I intend to add to the speculations on why the Communists allowed the refugees to leave China. I would like however, to give a background against which the recent happenings can be studied and then describe how the events affected one member of our household.

Background

Shortly after the island of Hong Kong was ceded to the British in 1842 a supplementary treaty was signed which said that Chinese should always have the right of free access to the Colony. This treaty was strictly adhered to for 95 years, until in fact, the Japanese captured Canton in 1937. At that time hundreds of thousands of refugees crossed into Hong Kong and claimed asylum. It was then decided that the Colony could no longer support all those who wanted to enter, and so immigration restrictions were imposed. In December 1941 the Japanese occupied the Colony and during the next two years about one million Chinese were either expelled or left voluntarily.

The British again took over the control of Hong Kong in 1945 but did not enforce the old immigration restrictions. Shortly afterwards many thousands of Chinese began to come back, and this flow increased to a flood in the 1948-1950 period when the Communists came to power. It has been estimated that 700,000 political refugees entered during this time, and once again, in May 1950, the Hong Kong authorities found it necessary to close the doors. This time a quota system, allowing 50 immigrants a day (18,250 a year) was established. In February 1956, when it was believed that conditions were more or less back to normal the restrictions were relaxed. But after a seven month trial it was found there had been a net influx of 56,000 immigrants, and the quota system was re-introduced. It has remained until the present day.

These restrictions have not prevented considerable numbers of refugees from seeking to enter illegally, mostly by junk or

sampan from Macao. Normally about 100 a month were returned to China by the British authorities. However, if the refugees managed to reach the metropolitan areas before being caught, they were usually fined, or sent to prison for a few days, and then allowed to remain.

At the end of April 1962 the number of illegal immigrants jumped to about 100 a day and increased during May to a peak of about 5,000 a day, suddenly stopping on May 25. During this time an estimated total of about 60,000 crossed into Hong Kong. The British authorities continued their policy of returning all refugees caught before reaching the metropolitan areas, and it has been estimated that 80% of those who crossed the border were returned to China.

When the 700,000 political refugees arrived in Hong Kong in 1949-50, Hong Kong still depended upon its entrepot trade for survival. Then, in 1950 came the Korean War and America's embargo on trade with China, followed shortly after by the United Nation's embargo. This should have been a fatal blow to Hong Kong, and oddly enough it probably would have been - but for the newly arrived refugees. It was the new techniques and commercial shrewdness which they brought with them from the North, together with their capital and a surplus of labour, which played a large part in Hong Kong's survival, and its switch from entrepot to industrial center.

Although this switch to industry saved Hong Kong's economic life it only scratched the surface as regards the welfare of most of the refugees. For example, it has been estimated that in 1950, some 300,000 of them were squatters living in appalling conditions, with population densities as high as 2,000 per acre in single story shanties. For many others who had managed to get more permanent accommodation, conditions were not much better, so great was the overcrowding.

At first the Hong Kong Government refused responsibility for these people. This was an International problem requiring International aid, it said. But no aid on any significant scale was forthcoming. For three years the Hong Kong Government "tolerated" the refugees, without itself doing anything very substantial to help them. Then on Christmas night 1953, a devastating fire wiped out one of the squatter settlements and 50,000 people lost their homes. It was this which finally stimulated the Hong Kong Government to change its policy and assume responsibility for the refugees. From that time, after waiting in vain for three years for International aid, the Government embarked upon an ambitious housing and resettlement program. By the end of 1961, 439,000 people (1/7 of the total population) had been resettled. There are plans to settle a further 500,000 people during the next five years. New blocks of apartments, each capable of accommodating 2,200 persons, are being completed at the rate of one every 9 days! In addition, schools, clinics, hospitals and community centers have been built to help serve these new communities. All this is an impressive achievement, but much remains to be done. A survey in October 1961 showed there were still 520,000 squatters

awaiting resettlement. Eventually they will be housed, but they need jobs, and Hong Kong's economy needs to prosper if their plight is to be improved.

It is ironic that this continuing refugee problem should have been given a fresh airing just at the time when America and other countries are again putting the squeeze on Hong Kong by imposing stringent import restrictions on its main export - textiles. I do not propose to debate the rights and wrongs of these restrictions; but there is little doubt that a more rational attitude towards industrial diversification on the part of the Hong Kong businessmen, coupled with less restrictive import policies on the part of the rest of the world, would greatly help to maintain Hong Kong's economic prosperity, and thus improve the lot of the unfortunate refugees. For if Hong Kong's economy slumps, its ability to cope with the refugee problem will deteriorate, and, as Hong Kong's Colonial Secretary said in a recent speech, ... Hong Kong would rapidly be "transformed into an international pauper". Those countries which are concerned about helping the refugees should look closely at their import policies, since it is here, rather than in promises to allow entry permits for a few of the skilled Chinese, that most good can be done.

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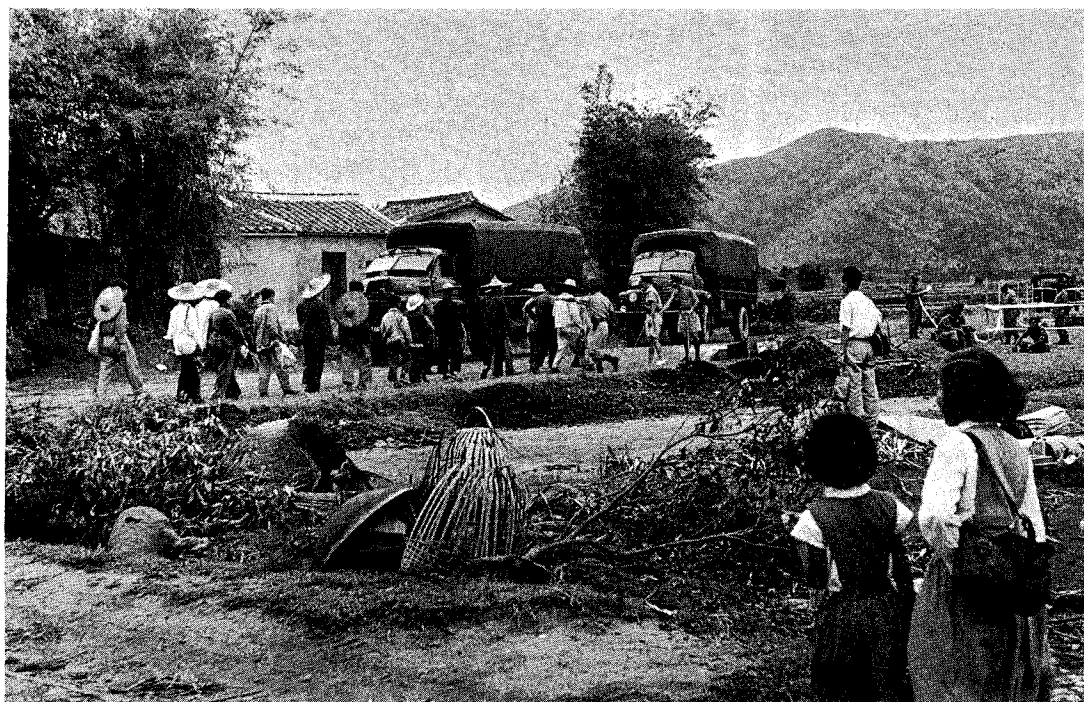
#### Ah Choy and the Refugees

Ah Choy is our wash amah, a naive but pleasant soul whose plain face becomes surprisingly attractive and animated when she talks. She seems younger than her 36 years despite the severe straight hair and amahs 'uniform' of black and white. We were amazed to learn, some time after she had started working for us, that she has a husband and three children, aged 7, 14, and 16, living near Canton. She sees them once or twice a year for a few days only. This existence seems incredible to us but is a common experience here. Her husband owned a small holding of land before 1949, farming sugar cane and rice. This, of course, became communal property, and six years ago Ah Choy came to work in Hong Kong in order to help support the family. Her job is to wash and iron clothes and do general housework. For this she receives H.K. \$170 (U.S. \$30) a month - a large portion of which she sends back to her family in the way of food and clothes.

Between her visits home she exchanges occasional letters with her family. She can read a certain amount of Chinese, but cannot write, so she has to employ a letter writer in the market (for H.K. 50¢ a letter) or occasionally I have written for her. It was from one of these letters from her husband that we had the first hint that something was afoot. He wrote saying he was thinking of trying to come to Hong Kong. Ah Choy sent a letter back telling him to stay with the children because of the lack of jobs and housing in Hong Kong. But her letter was too late, for the day after she sent it a man arrived at our apartment to tell her that her husband and his brother were hiding in the hills near a village in the New Territories, about two miles from the border.



A group of Chinese refugees are brought down from the hills near the Chinese border by a Gurkha soldier.



Two schoolgirls watch refugees being brought into their village.

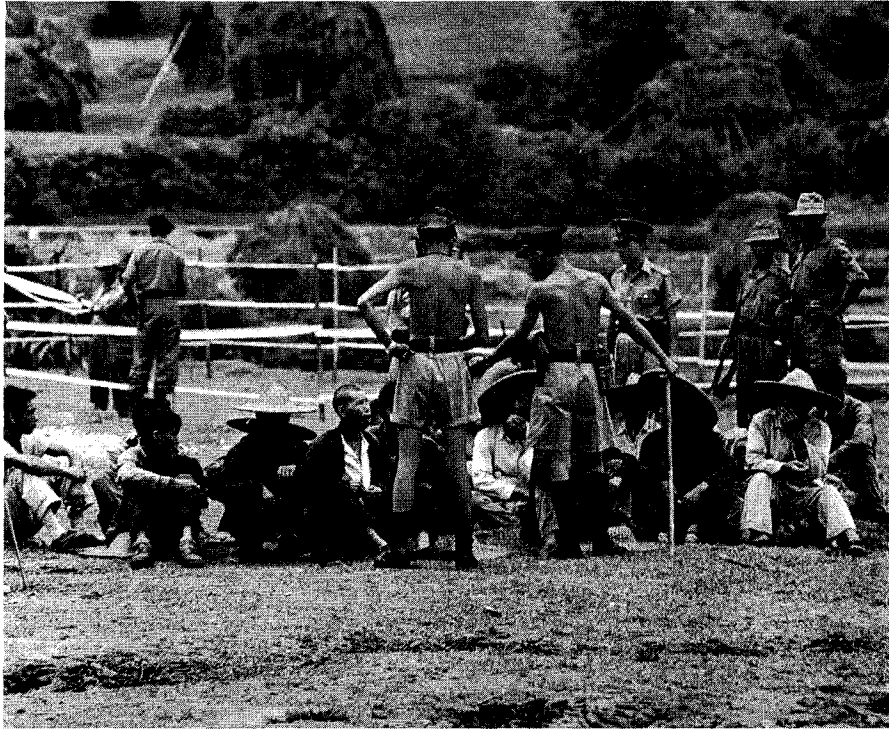
Early the next morning she packed up food and clothes and set out to look for them.

This was one of the first days that refugees came to Hong Kong in large numbers so we also went up to the border area to watch the proceedings. It seemed both dramatic and unreal. Hong Kong Chinese were there in large numbers, many well dressed, all carrying bags of food and to all appearances out for a Sunday picnic; local people lead their buffaloes through the paddy fields and carried out their work and daily lives as though oblivious to all that was happening around them. While refugees, clustered in small groups all over the hillsides, waited for the Gurkha soldiers to round them up and take them down to the nearby village. They came quietly down, some grinning sheepishly to the groups of people looking anxiously for friends or relations. The police then took over and after distributing buns given by the onlookers, ushered them into the waiting trucks. They were taken to a police camp where they were fed a cooked meal and then returned to China.

There was no trace of Ah Choy's husband, but a group of men from his village did get through to Kowloon that day, and for one of these, a cousin, Ah Choy had to pay \$100 to the man who had driven them the twenty odd miles into the city. This was the first of a series of demands which plagued Ah Choy all the following week. A number of unscrupulous Hong Kong Chinese must have made quite a profit out of giving shelter to refugees and keeping them until ransom money was paid by relatives. Ah Choy had four such demands for three different cousins and a brother in law, and these, added to nightly journeys to Kowloon, discussions and worries about housing, feeding, finding jobs and - if possible - identity cards, nearly drove her frantic.

However, the situation sorted itself out somehow toward the end of the week and Ah Choy had one crowning adventure with her brother in law:- Whereas she had learnt that her husband had returned home after being taken back to the border, his brother decided (like many other refugees) to have another try at entering Hong Kong now his knowledge of the area had been improved by his first unsuccessful attempt. And so it was, that Ah Choy received another message to go to a certain place in another village in the New Territories to meet him. This she was able to do and the two of them boarded a bus for the journey back to Kowloon. This bus was stopped by police three times. Twice, police only stood inside the doorway and looked over the passengers, but the third time a policeman wanted to see identity cards. When he came to Ah Choy, she, in an absolute frenzy of panic, flung out all the papers and contents of her bags, crying 'I have papers - lots of papers - enough for everyone'. The policeman smiled, patted her on the arm, told her to put her papers away and passed on down the bus.

The excitement over, these refugees and many others like them are now beginning a new and difficult life somewhere in this teeming overcrowded city. One relative obtained a job which paid H.K. \$50 a month and the brother in law is apprenticed to a boat-builder for three years for only H.K. \$10 a month - he sleeps and eats where he works.



Hong Kong police distribute buns, supplied by onlookers, to a group of refugees.



Police trucks take refugees back to China after they had been given a cooked meal at Fanling Police camp.

On May 21, when the flood of refugees was still in full spate, Ah Choy had another letter from her husband. He was back in his village but was thinking of trying again. This time he wanted to bring the children, his mother and father and her mother. But first he wanted to know what Ah Choy thought. "Write and tell me whether you want us to come" he said. There was no doubt in Ah Choy's mind. "No, he should not come." She reiterated... "No housey, no job, no ricey". She genuinely believed her family would be better off in their village, where they have a house and with her able to send food, than if they all came to Hong Kong. She decided that she would go back and talk things over. I asked her - why, if she was so against her husband coming, had she spent so much money and gone to so much trouble for the other relatives? Had she also told them to go home? Her answer was simply that family loyalty demanded that she do all she could to help, and that she couldn't tell cousins what to do, but she could tell husband and children!

Abruptly, on Friday May 25, the flow of refugees stopped. The Communist patrols again exerted their authority, and Ah Choy began to feel a little uneasy about her proposed trip. Would she be allowed out again? Her friends advised against going. More family consultations with relatives in Kowloon followed and it was decided that an old lady, a close friend of the family who was living with a daughter in Kowloon, but who had a son in Ah Choy's village should go instead. If she got out without difficulty then Ah Choy would try. If not the old lady could remain with her son and Ah Choy would still be free to send food parcels to her family. It is now two weeks since the old lady left Hong Kong, and although there has been no word from her there is the more startling news that Ah Choy's mother has obtained a Communist exit permit and has just arrived in Hong Kong. This perhaps adds weight to new rumours - denied by the Government - that more refugees are on their way.

Yours sincerely,

*C.H.G. Oldham*

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