

The Vulnerability of Hong Kong: Chinese Politics and International Relations

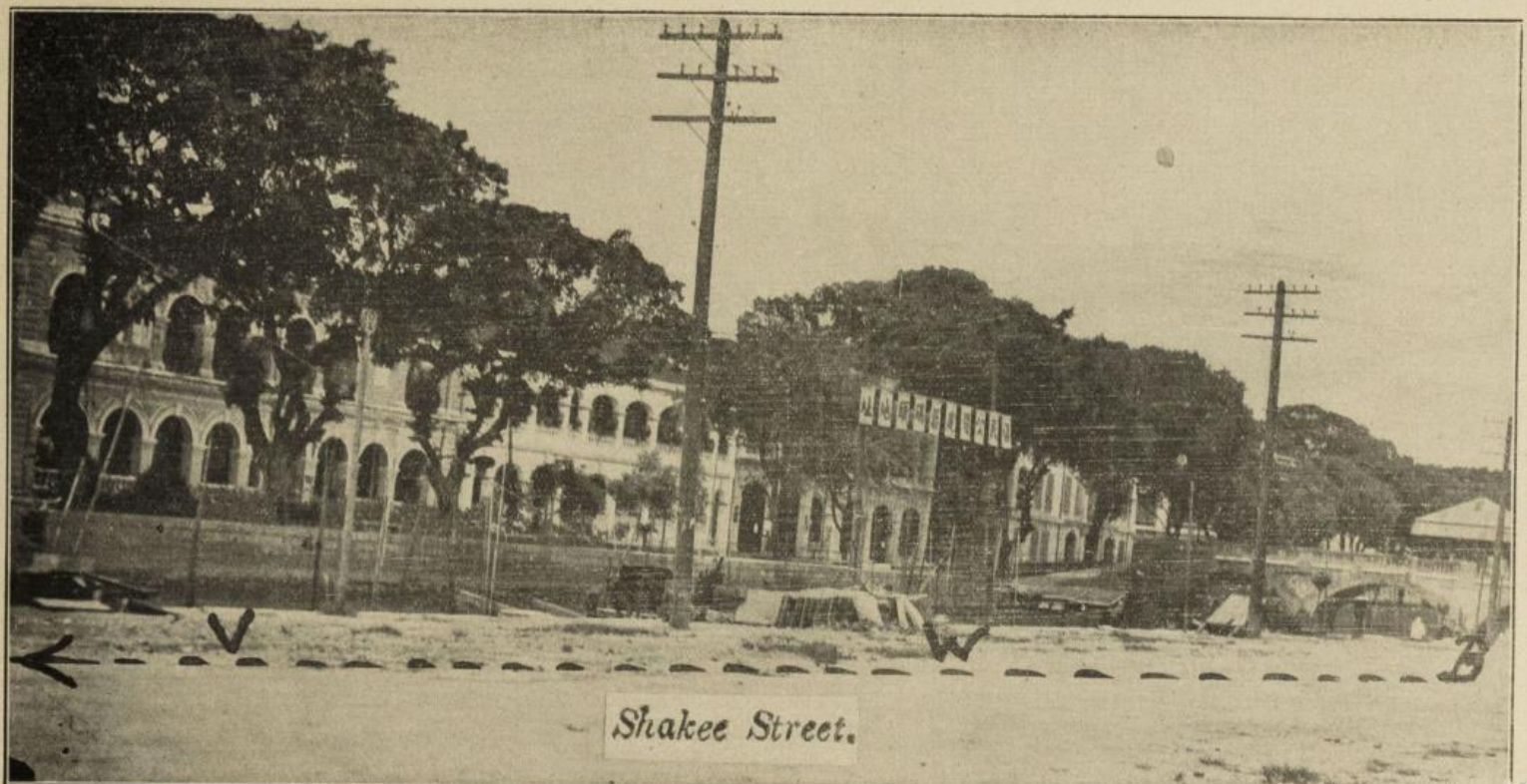
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Photograph of Shameen and Shakee Street.

1926, CO 129/497

.....→ West.



This photograph was taken from Shakee Street. B is the British (West) Bridge, where the Consul-General was standing. W is Watson's shop. V is the Victoria Hotel. The Creek, about 150 feet wide, separates the buildings from Shakee Street, which is about 30 yards wide. The Chinese troops extended along the front of the British Concession, as indicated by the arrow, when they began the attack on Shameen.

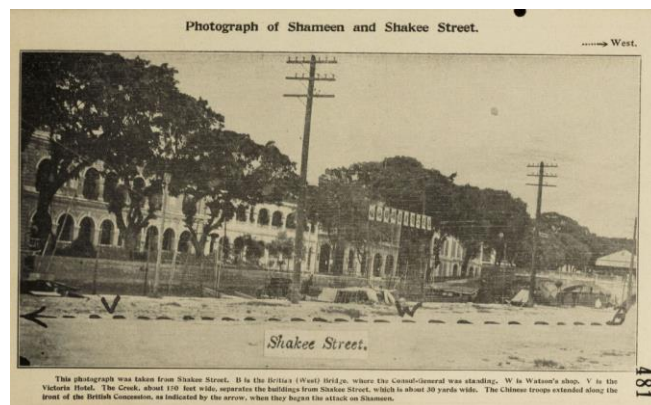
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The Vulnerability of Hong Kong: Chinese Politics and International Relations

Ever since Hong Kong became a British Crown Colony, its development trajectory was inextricably linked with Chinese politics and international relations in East Asia. Britain acquired Hong Kong Island and Kowloon in perpetuity in 1842 and 1860 respectively, and obtained a ninety-nine year lease of the New Territories in 1898. Although, at the time, no British official might have grasped its long-term implications, the lease indeed marked the beginning of the end of the whole of the colony of Hong Kong – not just the New Territories. By drawing on the CO129 files, this essay gives a snapshot of two critical periods in the twentieth century, when the status of British Hong Kong appeared to be at stake. In the 1920s, China experienced a rising tide of revolutionary nationalism, targeting Western imperialist interests in the country. The rise of Chinese nationalism also spilled over into Hong Kong, where a territory-wide strike-cum-boycott broke out and crippled the local economy. In its aftermath, the Hong Kong Governor suggested to London the permanent cession to Great Britain of the New Territories as a solution to Hong Kong's vulnerability. The second critical moment came in the 1940s as a result of the Second World War. The Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, together with the US President Roosevelt's clamour for Hong Kong's return to China after the war, propelled British ministers and officials to ponder on the future of the Crown Colony.

1921 witnessed two important events that were to shape the course of Chinese and indeed Hong Kong history – the convening of the Washington Conference, during which the question of China's sovereignty and leased territories was raised, and the founding of the Chinese

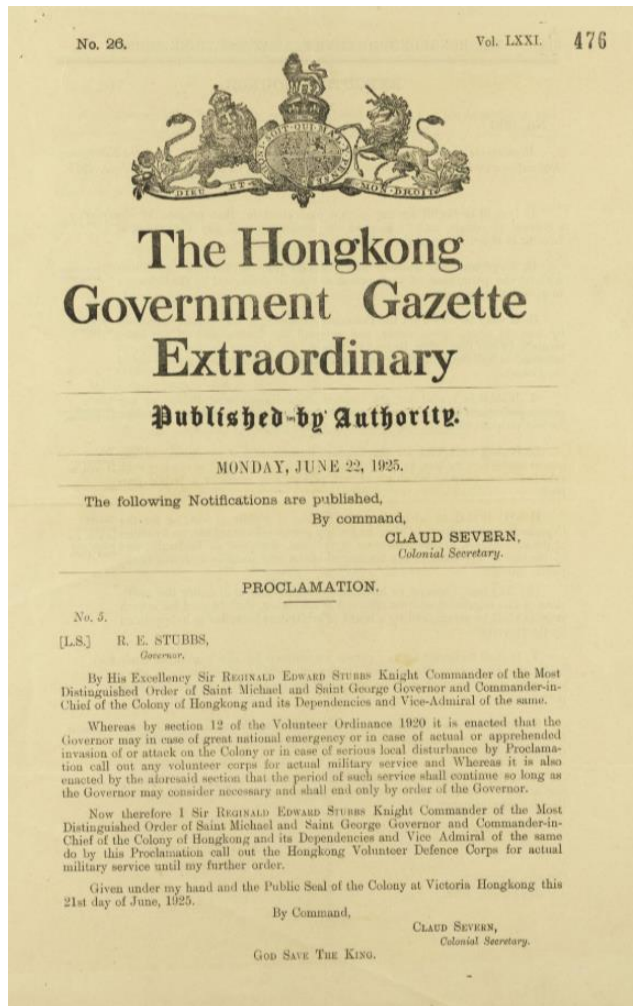
Communist Party. With the failure of the Washington Powers to return, immediately, their leased territories to China on the one hand and the encouragement of the Soviet Union on the other, in 1923 Sun Yat-sen's Kuomintang government, based in Canton, formed a united front with the Chinese Communist Party with a view to ending Western imperialism in China (Britain and other European Powers did not recognise Sun's government, but the Republican government in Peking). Chinese revolutionary nationalism exploded on 30 May 1925, when a labour dispute in a Japanese-owned mill in the International Settlement of Shanghai turned into a nationwide anti-British movement after a British police inspector had ordered his Sikh and Chinese officers to open fire on the Chinese crowd. The May Thirtieth Incident was followed by the Shakee Incident in Canton on 23 June, when fifty-two Chinese protestors were killed by British and French forces.



1: Photograph of Shameen and Shakee Street, 1926, CO 129/497

Supported by the Kuomintang government in Canton and especially the Chinese Communist Party, the Chinese in Hong Kong along with their comrades in Kwangtung launched a general strike and boycott against the British. A Strike Committee was set up to direct the struggle, and hundreds of thousands of Hong Kong

workers left the Colony for Canton. In response, Hong Kong Governor Reginald Stubbs, believing that the Canton government was under the influence of the Soviets, took a hard-line approach by, for example, invoking emergency powers to deal with the strike-boycott and even seeking London's approval to unseat the Canton government.'



2: Proclamation of emergency powers by Reginald Stubbs, June 22, 1925. CO 129/488.

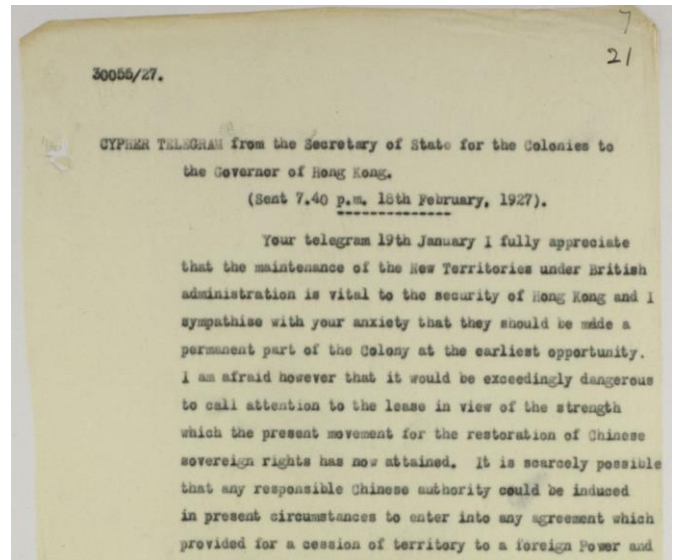
When Cecil Clementi, a Cantonese-speaking former cadet with a deep knowledge of Chinese culture and politics, succeeded Stubbs in October 1925, the Hong Kong government resorted to a mix of firm measures (an intensified propaganda campaign and a show of naval

force, for example) and negotiation with the Canton government (especially after Chiang Kai-shek had outmanoeuvred his left-wing and right-wing rivals within Kuomintang). Importantly, by mid-1926, Chiang was about to launch the Northern Expedition against the warlords, and the Hong Kong strike and, for that matter, the struggle against British imperialism, was now deemed a lesser priority. On 10 October, with the Canton government's support, the Strike Committee declared an end to the boycott against British Hong Kong.ⁱⁱ

The 1925-26 strike was a landmark event in the history of Hong Kong. Although Hong Kong survived the year-long challenge, in its aftermath, the colonial government could not but pay more attention to the Chinese population, particularly the Chinese elites (for example, by appointing Chow Shouson to the Executive Council, as its first Chinese member). As for the British home government, the events in Hong Kong were an alarming manifestation of China's revolutionary nationalism. Shortly after the end of the Hong Kong strike, in December 1926, the Foreign Office produced a memorandum calling for a new China policy: that Britain needed to accommodate the rise of Chinese nationalism by agreeing to renegotiate the 'unequal treaties' with China. In effect, this entailed an orderly retreat from Britain's lesser concessions in China, while preserving its most important interests notably in Shanghai. Guided by the Foreign Office memorandum, Britain gave up Hankow and Kiukiang in 1927, restored China's full tariff autonomy in 1929, and returned the leased territory of Weihaiwei to China in 1929. Nevertheless, the Hong Kong Governor had strong reservations about the policy of conciliation as advocated by the Foreign Office. To Clementi, the stability of Hong Kong depended on maintaining good relations with the authorities in Canton rather than with Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist

government in Nanking, recognised by Britain in 1929. In fact, during the 1930s, Kwangtung was effectively outside the control of the Nanking government. Clementi was eager to deal with the Canton authorities over such issues as trade, transport, and extradition of criminals on a pragmatic basis.ⁱⁱⁱ

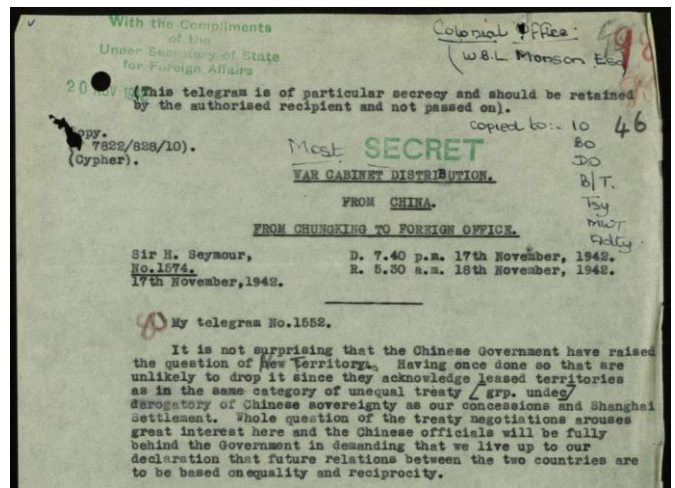
Against the backdrop of political development in China, Clementi saw the British tenure of the New Territories as 'unsatisfactory in the extreme'. In a telegram to the Colonial Office on 19 January 1927, two weeks after the Chinese seizure of the concession of Hankow, Clementi warned that in view of 'the agitation all over China for the handing back of all leased territories and concessions' and 'the fact that the handing back of the New Territories would be fatal to this Colony', it was 'of great importance' that the New Territories 'should be made a permanent part of the Colony as soon as possible'. He linked the New Territories with the leased territory of Weihaiwei (whose negotiations with the Chinese over its rendition were still underway), wondering if it was possible to come to an arrangement for the cession of the New Territories to Great Britain to be 'a quid pro quo for the unconditional rendition of Weihaiwei'.^{iv} The British Minister in China, Sir Miles Lampson, disagreed. In communicating his view to the Foreign Office on 21 January, Lampson argued that 'these proposals however desirable from the Hongkong point of view are entirely out of the present picture'. 'Whole trend of Chinese thought and national feeling is in exactly contrary direction i.e. recovery of territory ceded in the past', Lampson explained, and any suggestion of a quid pro quo 'would merely intensify charges of Imperialism against us'.^v



3: Peking to Foreign Office, no. 145, 21 January 1927, CO129/503/2

Obviously, the British Minister in China needed to consider the wider context of Anglo-Chinese relations, not just the parochial interests of Hong Kong. The Secretary of State for the Colonies, Leo Amery, after consultation with Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain, could not side with the Hong Kong Governor. As Amery confided to Clementi on 18 February, 'I fully appreciate that the maintenance of the New Territories under British administration is vital to the security of Hong Kong ... [But] it would be exceedingly dangerous to call attention to the lease in view of the strength which the present movement for the restoration of Chinese sovereign rights has now attained.'^{vi} The three documents cited here underscore two points about British policy towards Hong Kong: the not infrequent divergence of views between the Hong Kong Governor and the British diplomats in China, dictated by their respective bureaucratic roles; and the relative lack of influence of the Colonial Office vis-à-vis the Foreign Office within Whitehall.

If the rise of Chinese revolutionary nationalism had highlighted Hong Kong's vulnerability in the 1920s, the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937 raised more question marks about the future of the Crown Colony. On 25 December 1941, Hong Kong fell into Japanese hands, thus dealing a serious blow to the prestige of the British Empire. With the United States being dragged into the Second World War following the Pearl Harbour attack, President Franklin Roosevelt looked on China as a key ally in the defeat of Japan and as a pillar of the post-war world order. To make a goodwill gesture to Chiang Kai-shek, the United States – and Britain – agreed to the abrogation of its extra-territorial rights in China. The C0129 records show how the Anglo-Chinese negotiations over the rendition of extra-territoriality in China created an uncertainty over Hong Kong's status. In the British draft treaty submitted to the Chinese in late October 1942, there was no reference to either the Colony of Hong Kong or any part of it including the New Territories.^{vii} However, the Chinese counter-draft to the British in November included a clause providing for the termination of the 1898 Convention for the Extension of the Hong Kong Territory (or the New Territories).^{viii} The Chinese Minister for Foreign Affairs, who handed in the Chinese counter-draft, told the British that 'the Chinese Government had not raised the question of Hong Kong but that they felt that 1898 Convention ought certainly to be dealt with in the present treaty'.^{ix}



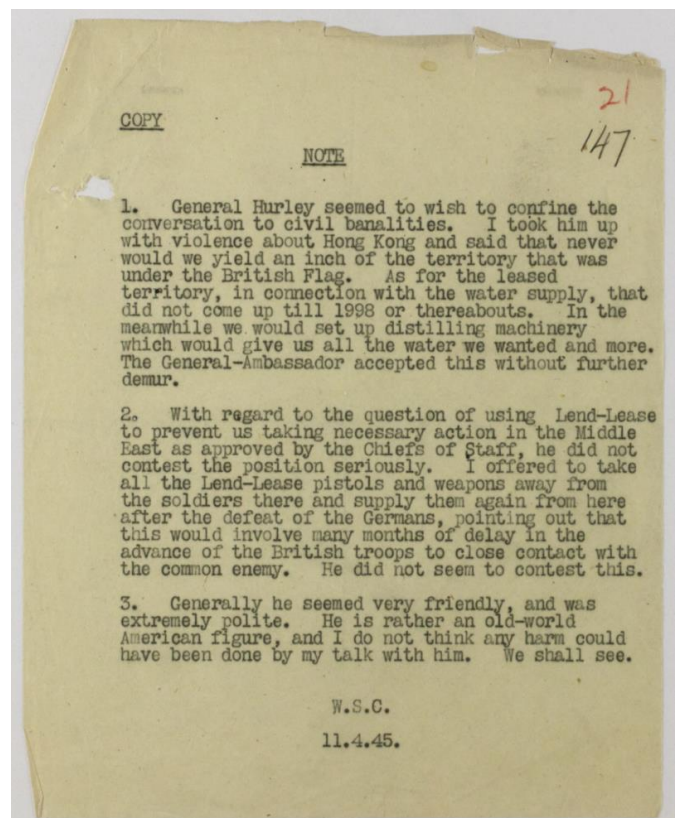
4: *Chungking to Foreign Office, no. 1552, 13 November 1942, C0129/588/23*

In assessing the inclusion of the New Territories, Sir Horace Seymour, British Ambassador in Chungking, believed that China 'acknowledge[d] leased territories as in the same category of unequal treaty', and insisted that 'no foreign power shall continue to occupy Chinese territory'. To Seymour, Britain regarded the possession of the New Territories as 'vital to Hong Kong', out of 'both civil and Military considerations'.^x Ashley Clarke of the Foreign Office commented: 'The Chinese have not raised the question of Hong Kong but perhaps calculate that our rendition of the New Territory would make a useful step towards obliging us to give up sovereignty over Hong Kong and count on our receiving no support from the United States Government in resisting their proposal.'^{xi} As it turned out, the Chinese did not press the issue of the New Territories in connection with the Extra-territoriality Treaty, but registered their desire to raise it after the war. The treaty was signed by Britain and China on 11 January 1943.^{xii}

During the Second World War, the future of British Hong Kong was questioned by the United States. At the Cairo Conference in November 1943, in the absence of British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, President Roosevelt told Chiang Kai-shek that the United States would support Hong Kong's return to China after the war, if Chiang cooperated with the Chinese Communists against Japan and agreed to make Hong Kong a 'free port'. During the Yalta Conference in February 1945, Roosevelt expressed to Joseph Stalin, in a secret meeting, his hope that Britain would relinquish its sovereignty over Hong Kong, which should then become an internationalised free port. It is important to point out that, when raising the question of Hong Kong, Roosevelt seemed to have wider strategic considerations in mind – to impress on Chiang and Stalin the importance of America as an ally in war and peace – rather than concern over Hong Kong's decolonisation per se. After all, Roosevelt was a 'gradualist' when it came to the end of European empires, regarding independence as the ultimate goal after a period of tutelage or 'trusteeship' for the colonised subjects.^{xiii}

As the CO129 files reveal, the British began to deliberate on Hong Kong's future by forming a Hong Kong Planning Unit as early as October 1943. On 8 November 1944, the Deputy Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, made a statement on Hong Kong in the House of Commons. Asked if Hong Kong or any other part of the Empire was excluded from his declaration that the government did not propose to 'liquidate the British Empire', Attlee confirmed: 'No part of the British Empire or Commonwealth of Nations is excluded from the scope of the declaration.'^{xiv} As the Pacific War reached its final stage, a Foreign Office memorandum of March 1945 wrote of the British position: 'Having lost Hongkong to

the enemy, it is a point of national honour for us to recover it ... We therefore regard it as a national duty not only to recover the Colony but to restore it to its state of order and prosperity.'^{xv} Prime Minister Churchill, meeting with General Hurley of the United States in early April, was firm about the retention of Hong Kong: 'never would we yield an inch of the territory that was under the British Flag.'^{xvi} British economic interests in China were at stake here. A meeting of the War Cabinet Far Eastern Economic Sub-Committee on 10 May noted that 'British Colonial interests in China depended on the possession of Hongkong'. The planning of the Colonial Office was based on 'the assumption that Hongkong would remain a British possession'.^{xvii}



5: Note by WSC (Churchill), 11 April 1945, CO 129/592/8

What complicated the British planning for Hong Kong in 1945 was the race for accepting the surrender of Japanese forces in Hong Kong. As the Supreme Commander of the China theatre, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek had insisted that the surrender of Hong Kong should be accepted by his representative, not by a British commander as London demanded. At last, however, Chiang settled for the Japanese surrender being accepted by a British officer on behalf of both Britain and China. By September 1945, with the defeat of Japan, Chiang's concern shifted to a possible resumption of the civil war with the Chinese Communists. Besides, the new US President, Harry Truman, was less enthusiastic about the decolonisation of Hong Kong than was the anti-colonialist Roosevelt, who passed away on 12 April. Realpolitik dictated that Chiang had to leave British Hong Kong alone for the time being. In an address to the National Defence Council and the Central Executive Committee on 24 August, President Chiang asserted that although 'Hong Kong was assigned to [the] China theatre following [the] outbreak of [the] Pacific war', China 'will not use [the] occasion of Japan's unconditional surrender as a pretext for disregarding international agreements and infringing upon rights of our allies'. 'Now that all the leased territories and settlements in China have been one after another returned to China', Chiang continued, 'the leased territory of Kowloon should not remain an exception...But China will settle this last issue through diplomatic talks' with Britain.^{xviii} On 16 September, Admiral Harcourt formally accepted Japan's surrender, marking the resumption of British colonial rule in Hong Kong. A greater challenge to Hong Kong's status would come from the Chinese Communists a few years later.

By using selected CO129 files to examine the two critical periods when Hong Kong's future was at risk, this essay highlights two themes that run through much of Hong Kong history. For one, there often existed divergent views between the Colonial Office and the Foreign Office, particularly between the Hong Kong Governor and the British diplomats in China. Whereas the former would inevitably put the survival and stability of Hong Kong first, the latter needed to consider the wider impact of Hong Kong events on Anglo-Chinese bilateral relations. This brings us to the second theme, which is that the history of Hong Kong was entwined with the revolutionary changes in mainland China and the twists and turns of international politics throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As such, Hong Kong was not just a responsibility of the Colonial Office, but also a diplomatic issue as far as the Foreign Office, other Whitehall departments, and Cabinet ministers were concerned.

Citation

Chi-Kwan Mark, 'The Vulnerability of Hong Kong: Chinese Politics and International Relations', *China and the Modern World: Hong Kong, Britain and China (1841–1951)*, Cengage Learning (EMEA) Ltd, 2019

Endnotes

¹ See Chan Lau Kit-Ching, *China, Britain and Hong Kong, 1895-1945* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1990), pp. 197-202.

² The unfolding of the strike-boycott and the Hong Kong government's responses can be traced from the files of C0129/498/2 through to C0129/498/7.

³ See Norman J. Miners, 'From Nationalistic Confrontation to Regional Collaboration: China-Hong Kong-Britain, 1926-41', in *Precarious Balance: Hong Kong between China and Britain, 1842-1992*, ed. Ming K. Chan (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1994), pp. 59-70.

⁴ Hong Kong Governor to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 19 January 1927, C0 129/503/2.

⁵ Peking to Foreign Office, no. 145, 21 January 1927, C0129/503/2

⁶ Secretary of State for the Colonies to Hong Kong Governor, 18 February 1927, C0129/503/2.

⁷ Foreign Office to Chungking, no. 1353, 18 October 1942, C0129/588/23, p. 235-40; Foreign Office to Chungking, no. 1368, 22 October 1942, C0129/588/23.

⁸ Chungking to Foreign Office, no. 1550, 13 November 1942, C0129/588/23.

⁹ Chungking to Foreign Office, no. 1552, 13 November 1942, C0129/588/23

¹⁰ Chungking to Foreign Office, no. 1574, 17 November 1942, C0129/588/23.

¹¹ Ashley Clarke (Foreign Office) to W.B.L. Monson (Colonial Office), 25 November 1942, C0129/588/23.

¹² See Chan Lau-Kit Ching, 'The Hong Kong Question during the Pacific War (1941-45)', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. II, no. 1 (October 1973); 56-78.

¹³ See Wm. Roger Louis, *Imperialism at Bay: The United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire, 1941-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

¹⁴ Parliamentary Question and Answer, 8 November 1944, C0 129/592/8.

¹⁵ Memorandum by Foreign Office, signed by H. Prideaux-Brune, 31 March 1945, C0 129/592/8.

¹⁶ Note by WSC (Churchill), 11 April 1945, C0 129/592/8.

¹⁷ Extract from the minutes of a meeting of the War Cabinet Far Eastern Economic Sub-Committee, 10 May 1945, C0 129/592/8.

¹⁸ English text of Chinese President's statement to National Defence Council and Central Executive Committee on 24 August 1945, Extract from Chungking to Foreign Office, no. 945, 26 August 1945, C0 129/592/8.