



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Hearts and minds in Hong Kong's New Territories: Agriculture and vegetable marketing in a Cold War borderland, circa 1946–1967

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Abstract

Using declassified colonial and British records in Hong Kong and London, as well as memoirs of former leftists and newspapers, this article explores the strategies the Hong Kong colonial government employed in a propaganda campaign to garner political support of the rural population in the New Territories, a porous land frontier during the Cold War. It also analyses the varying political orientations of migrant farmers, who often had received economic benefits from both the colonial government and the leftist organizations. This article reveals that the colonial government established the Vegetable Marketing Organization (VMO), a state-owned enterprise, to first nationalize the vegetable wholesale market in the immediate post-war period, and subsequently used it to combat increasing political influence and anti-government activities of the communist-controlled Society of Plantations. Despite the improvement of the livelihood of immigrant farmers, the VMO Scheme failed to out-compete the Society economically, which was ultimately eliminated by draconian measures. Through studying the agrarian politics and economic contestations in Hong Kong's rural area, this article provides a lens on how the Cold War was played out at a village level in East Asia.

Keywords: Communism; Cold War; Sino-Hong Kong Relations; Agriculture; Decolonization

Introduction

During the Cold War, agriculture occupied a pivotal role in international diplomacy and agricultural societies were significant contested frontiers.¹ Believing that communism had harnessed the peasants' desire to own land and feed themselves, the US-led capitalist bloc initiated the 'green revolution' to improve peasants' livelihoods to counter the 'red guerrilla revolutions', in particular in Asia after China had fallen

¹For the special role of agriculture in Cold War geopolitics, see Nick Cullather, 'Introduction', in *The hungry world: America's Cold War battle against poverty in Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Claire Strom, 'Editor's Introduction' in the Special Issue on agriculture in Cold War diplomacy, *Agricultural History*, vol. 83 no. 1, 2009, pp. 1–4.

into Communist rule.² Financing agricultural development and transferring farming technologies to help peasants in Asia, such as the increase of food production, the improvement of irrigation and water infrastructures, and the rationalization of land use, became not only an important race in ‘developmental politics’ between the capitalist and communist blocs, but a strategic enhancement of US ‘quiet war for Asia’s hearts and minds’, which previously focused primarily on the elites and had been criticized as neglecting the livelihoods of ordinary people.³

With contextual understanding of the US-led ‘village-level’ campaign against communism in Asia,⁴ this article examines the hitherto under-explored agrarian conflicts and economic competitions between Chinese Communists and the colonial government in the rural New Territories. The region was a significantly porous land frontier in Hong Kong bordering Communist China. It reveals that the British colonial government established a state-owned enterprise called the Vegetable Marketing Organization to first nationalize the vegetable wholesale market in the immediate post-war period, and subsequently used it to combat increasing political influence and anti-government activities of the communist-controlled farmers’ organization known as the Society of Plantations.

During the Cold War, Hong Kong was regarded as a ‘central battlefield’ in Asia; the USA, Britain, and China used it as an important site to disseminate ‘everyday Cold War’ propaganda.⁵ The USA considered the colony a bulwark against the spread of communism in Asia and, accordingly, invested heavily in the production of anti-communist propaganda in Hong Kong.⁶ The People’s Republic of China (PRC) also considered the colony to be of strategic importance. Hong Kong was not only a source of foreign exchange but also a pivot for disseminating information and disinformation to the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia.⁷ The Chinese Communists also supported anti-government activities in and provided subsidies to various sectors of

²Cullather, *The hungry world*, pp. 1–8. For the impact of US’ agricultural and food aid in Western Europe, see Jacqueline McGlade, ‘More a plowshare than a sword: The legacy of US Cold War agricultural diplomacy’, *Agricultural History*, vol. 83, no. 1, 2009, pp. 79–102.

³For the idea of ‘developmental politics’, see Cullather, *The hungry world*, pp. 4–7. For criticism of the US’ strategies in Asia, see p. 152.

⁴For the US’ anxiety about the peasant village being a dangerous site of communist infiltration, see Cullather, *The hungry world*, p. 79.

⁵Poshek Fu, ‘More than just entertaining: Cinematic containment and Asia’s Cold War in Hong Kong, 1949–1959’, *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2018, pp. 1–55; Chi-kwan Mark, *The everyday Cold War: Britain and China, 1950–1972* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), pp. 5, 87–92.

⁶Lu Xun, ‘The American Cold War in Hong Kong, 1949–1960: Intelligence and propaganda’, in *HongKong in the Cold War*, (eds) Priscilla Roberts and John M. Carroll (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016), pp. 117–139; Law Wing Sang, *Collaborative colonial power: The making of Hong Kong Chinese* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), p. 133.

⁷Wang Gungwu, ‘Hong Kong’s twentieth century: The global setting’, in *Hong Kong in the Cold War*, (eds) Priscilla Roberts and John M. Carroll (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016), pp. 6–7; Florence Mok, ‘Disseminating and containing communist propaganda to overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia through Hong Kong, the Cold War Pivot, 1949–1960’, *The Historical Journal*, vol. 65, no. 5, 2022, pp. 1397–1417. For a recent study of how Hong Kong, due to its relatively ‘free’ environment, was used by CCP, as well as KMT and Western powers as a centre of intelligence and propaganda in East Asia during the Cold War, see He Bixiao, ‘Debates on CCP newspaper policy in Hong Kong circa 1949 and the elimination of private newspapers in the early 1950s in the PRC’, *Media History*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2021, pp. 58–70.

Hong Kong, including trade unions and schools, to inspire support for nationalism and communism.⁸ With the waning economic and political power of Britain, especially after the loss of important bases in India and Suez, the garrison in the colony had to be substantially scaled down in the 1950s.⁹ To combat the activities of these foreign political forces, the colonial government opted for containment rather than a repressive strategy, which created a permissive environment for ideological competition.¹⁰ Simultaneously, with increased international criticism against colonialism and widespread decolonization in Asia and Africa, the ‘unreformed colonial polity’ faced a legitimacy crisis.¹¹ The mass exodus of Chinese immigrants to Hong Kong under the loosely enforced border control, which included some communist political agents and former Kuomintang (KMT) troops, posed further security concerns, making Hong Kong strategically vulnerable and susceptible to political infiltration and social unrest.¹²

As Priscilla Roberts notes, the extant literature on the waging of the Cold War in Hong Kong focuses primarily on diplomatic history, such as Anglo-American relations, and few studies ‘ha[ve] attempted to put high-level international politics and diplomacy in the context of popular attitudes within Hong Kong’.¹³ Most work in this area also tends to focus on Cold War activities in urban areas, with particular attention paid to trade unions and the 1967 riots.¹⁴ The scholarship on the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) united-front work in Hong Kong during the Cold War remains

⁸David A. Levin and Stephen W. K. Chiu, ‘Trade unions growth waves in Hong Kong’, *Labor History*, vol. 75, 1998, pp. 40–56; B. K. P. Leung, ‘Political process and industrial strikes and the labour movement in Hong Kong, 1946–1989’, *Journal of Oriental Studies*, vol. 29, no. 2, 1991, pp. 172–206; A. E. Sweeting and P. Morris, ‘Educational reform in post-war Hong Kong: Planning and crisis intervention’, *International Journal of Education Development*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1993, pp. 201–216.

⁹Ronald Hyam, ‘The primacy of geopolitics: The dynamics of British Imperial policy, 1763–1963’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1999, p. 44; Chi-kwan Mark, ‘Lack of means or loss of will? The United Kingdom and the decolonization of Hong Kong, 1957–1967’, *International History Review*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2009, pp. 48–50.

¹⁰Chi-kwan Mark, *Hong Kong and the Cold War: Anglo-American relations 1949–1957* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹¹Hyam, ‘The primacy of geopolitics’, p. 43; George B. Endacott, *Government and people in Hong Kong 1841–1962: A Constitutional History* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1964), p. 230; Ian Scott, ‘Bridging the Gap: Hong Kong senior civil servants and the 1966 riots’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2016, pp. 131–148; Norman Miners, *The government and politics of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1975), pp. 155–163.

¹²Chi-kwan Mark, ‘The “problem of people”: British colonials, Cold War powers, and the Chinese refugees in Hong Kong, 1949–62’, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 41, no. 6, 2007, pp. 1147–1152; Florence Mok, ‘Chinese illicit immigration into colonial Hong Kong, c. 1970–1980’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2021, pp. 339–367.

¹³Chi-kwan Mark, ‘Defence or decolonialisation? Britain, the United States and the Hong Kong question in 1957’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2005, pp. 51–72; Mark, *Hong Kong and the Cold War*; Priscilla Roberts, ‘Prologue Cold War Hong Kong: The foundations’, in *Hong Kong in the Cold War*, (eds) Priscilla Roberts and John M. Carroll (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016), p. 16.

¹⁴See ‘Leung, ‘Political process and industrial strikes’; Gary Ka-wai Cheung, *Hong Kong’s watershed: The 1967 riots* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009); Ray Yep, ‘“Cultural Revolution in Hong Kong”: Emergency powers, administration of justice and the turbulent year of 1967’, *Modern Asia Studies*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2012, pp. 1007–1032.

relatively limited.¹⁵ Despite the rural origins of the CCP, our understanding of Chinese Communist activities in rural Hong Kong, which still accounted for 60.26 per cent of the total land by 1966 and was an important Cold War frontier due to its supply of food to the colony and strategic location that bordered China, remains patchy and fragmentary.¹⁶ We have only limited detailed analysis of how the Cold War unfolded in Hong Kong through economic contestation over the control of food supply and support of food growers residing in the New Territories.¹⁷ However, as sociologists have rightly pointed out, the support of rural communities, which are often regarded as a 'traditional force' that faces economic exploitation and 'resists the coming of modern values and social institutions' in modernization, are vital to effective governance and political stability.¹⁸ Even in contemporary Hong Kong, winning the hearts and minds of rural communities and forging networks with grassroots organizations are still proved to be important. Through providing services and organizing cultural and community events to grassroots residents, these 'mass societies' (including local federations, hometown associations, and service-oriented non-governmental organizations) were effectively used by the post-handover Hong Kong and Chinese governments to cultivate patriotic forces and enhance mobilizational capacity to counter challenges and activism initiated by the pro-democracy camps.¹⁹ In addition, the inadequate domestic food supply and dwindling agricultural land under cultivation in today's New Territories continue to affect local economy and society.²⁰ By 2017, the agricultural sector only accounted

¹⁵For existing literature, see for example Chan Lau Kit-ching, *From nothing to nothing: The Chinese Communist movement and Hong Kong, 1921-1936* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1999); Lu Yan, *Crossed paths: Labour activism and colonial governance in Hong Kong, 1938-1958* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019) and Fu, 'More than just entertaining'.

¹⁶See table 1.1, 'Area of Hong Kong, by census districts', Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, *Hong Kong Statistics 1947-1967* (Hong Kong: Government Printer, 1969), p. 4. Main contributions in the study of the history of the New Territories include Patrick Hase, *Custom, land and livelihood in rural South China: The traditional land law of Hong Kong's New Territories, 1750-1950* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013); James Hayes, *The great difference: Hong Kong's New Territories and its People 1989-2004* (Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2006).

¹⁷For example, see Kin Wing Chan and Byron Miller, 'Capitalist pigs: Governmentality, subjectivities, and the registration of pig farming in colonial Hong Kong, 1950-1970', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 33, no. 6, 2015, pp. 1022-1042 for subsidized pig farming programmes. See Siu-Keung Cheung, 'Reunification through water and food: The other battle for lives and bodies in China's Hong Kong Policy', *The China Quarterly*, 220, 2014, pp. 1013-1024 and David Clayton, 'The roots of regionalism: Water management in postwar Hong Kong', in *From a British to a Chinese colony? Hong Kong before and after the 1997 handover*, (ed.) Gary Chi-hung Luk (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 2017), pp. 166-185 for China's food and water strategies towards Hong Kong.

¹⁸Stephen W. K. Chiu and Ho-Fung Hung, 'The paradox of stability revisited: Colonial development and state building in rural Hong Kong', *China Information*, vol. 12, no. 1-2, 1997, pp. 66-95, in particular pp. 66-67.

¹⁹Samson Yuen, 'The institutional foundation of countermobilization: Elites and pro-regime grassroots organizations in post-handover Hong Kong', *Government and Opposition*, vol. 58, no. 2, 2023, pp. 316-337; Edmund W. Cheng, 'United front work and mechanisms of countermobilization in Hong Kong', *The China Journal*, vol. 83, no. 1, 2020, pp. 1-33; Samson Yuen and Edmund W. Cheng, 'Deepening the state: The dynamics of China's united front work in post-handover Hong Kong', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, vol. 53, no. 4, 2020, pp. 136-154.

²⁰For example, local production of vegetables reduced significantly from 42,500 tonnes (6.6 per cent) in 2000 to 14,200 tonnes (1.7 per cent) in 2016, with a substantial amount of agricultural land either being

for less than 0.1 per cent of Hong Kong's Gross Domestic Product.²¹ During the Covid-19 pandemic, the reliance on food imports from China in particular, became a problem when cross-border lorry drivers who were responsible for transporting food supplies into Hong Kong tested positive, leading to a drop in the fresh produce being delivered from the mainland and doubling the price of vegetables and fruit for sale.²²

This article fills the void in the existing scholarship and provides a longitudinal view of co-option of rural communities and food supply in Hong Kong by examining the under-explored competing campaigns over vegetable supply between the colonial government and the CCP in Hong Kong's New Territories in the aftermath of the Second World War against the backdrop of decolonization and the Cold War. To remove middlemen in vegetable wholesale, improve the lot of farmers and reduce Hong Kong's food dependency on China, the colonial government introduced in 1946 the Vegetable Marketing Scheme to centralize the vegetable wholesale business in the New Territories. With the progression of the Cold War after the formation of the PRC in 1949, the function of the scheme changed: this state-owned enterprise which nationalized and collectivized private markets in Hong Kong was soon utilized by the colonial government as an important political tool to secure farmers' loyalty and compete with the CCP-influenced Society of Plantations, which the colonial government believed attempted to expand communist influence amongst farmers through exploiting under-developed rural social welfare systems and providing material and monetary support to farming communities in the New Territories.

Using declassified colonial and British archival records, this article explores how the Hong Kong government closely monitored communist programmes and responded to agrarian tensions in the New Territories. As the state records of mainland China for this period are not easily accessible, this article analyses memoirs of former leftists and left-wing newspaper reports vis-à-vis pro-government media and archival findings. The nature of the sources allows this analysis to uncover primarily the perspectives of the colonial government towards seditious activities in the New Territories which it branded 'communist'. Analysing the intention of the leftist 'Society of Plantations', its activities and membership is difficult as it is impossible to ascertain in the absence of reliable local surveys and data. This study instead explains the strategies the colonial government employed in a propaganda campaign to garner political support of the masses in the Cold War context. It also underscores the varying political orientations of the farmers, who often had received economic benefits from both the colonial government and the leftist organizations.²³ Through offering useful insights into how

utilized for storage or industrial uses. See 'Statistical highlights: Food safety and environmental hygiene', by Research Office, Legislative Council Secretariat, 30 April 2019.

²¹Ibid.

²²See for example 'Vegetables shortage adds to Hong Kong's Covid-19 woes', *The Straits Times*, 8 February 2022. The shortage of food supply receives increased attention from the public and facilitates the emergence of new agricultural technologies, such as vertical farming which utilizes data on light intensity, water flow and air conditioning and makes growing vegetables in cities possible. See John Kang and Zinnia Lee, 'Meet the high-tech urban farmer growing vegetables inside Hong Kong's skyscrapers', *Forbes*, 23 May 2022.

²³The colonial government believed that farmers sometimes joined these organizations for 'the few benefits' that they received from these organizations and were 'not interested in the political side of

global politics interacted with specific local agrarian politics and economic concerns, engaging rural populations and driving transformations in Hong Kong's food supply system, this article makes an original contribution to the history of Hong Kong, China, British colonialism, agrarian developmental politics, and the Cold War.

Collectivizing the private market: The establishment of the Vegetable Marketing Organization

After the Second World War, going against the tide of decolonization, the British Labour government reasserted its legitimacy over its remaining colonies through a different system of colonial government that stressed pastoral-developmentalism, mirroring the establishment of a welfare state in the metropole.²⁴ Such post-war colonial mentality emphasized state intervention to improve the lot of the poor and marginalized populations that had not been given enough attention. To put this new system into practice, various Colonial Welfare and Development Acts were passed in the 1940s and 1950s. These Acts authorized allocation of loans and grants to colonies to develop new projects, many of which concerned agriculture, forestry and veterinarian services.²⁵ By March 1946, the British government had introduced 595 development and welfare schemes and 105 research projects which cost £28,841,000.²⁶ The Vegetable Marketing Scheme in Hong Kong was amongst one of the schemes initiated.

The Vegetable Marketing Scheme can be perceived as a measure to shore up the British authority over Hong Kong by strengthening the colonial rule. After the Second World War, Hong Kong's return to the British Empire was not without geopolitical controversy. Opposition was in particular raised by the Nationalist Chinese Government.²⁷ To enhance its legitimacy, the British government granted Hong Kong £1 million to support its ten-year plan for 'the development of the resources of the Colony' and 'the improvement of the standard of living of the people'.²⁸ Governor Mark Young subsequently established a high-level Colonial Development and Welfare Committee whose

things'. See Hong Kong Public Record Office (hereafter HKPRO), HKRS 934-9-98, Memo from J. T. Wakefield to S.C.A., 8 November 1957.

²⁴Christopher Airriess, 'Governmentality and power in politically contested space: Refugee farming in Hong Kong's New Territories, 1945–1970', *Journal of Historical Geography*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2005, pp. 763–783, at 767–770.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 769; E. R. Wicker, 'Colonial development and welfare, 1929–1957: The evolution of a policy', *Social and Economic Studies*, vol. 7, no. 4, 1958, pp. 170–192; HKPRO, HKRS 41-1-3321-1, letter from Governor Mark Young to Secretary of State for the Colonies Arthur Creech Jones, 16 December 1946.

²⁶Charlotte Lydia Riley, "'The winds of change are blowing economically': The Labour Party and British overseas development, 1940s–1960s", in *Britain, France and decolonization of Africa: Future imperfect?*, (eds) Andrew W. M. Smith and Chris Jeppesen (London: UCL Press, 2017), p. 47.

²⁷See Tsai Jung Fan (蔡榮芳), *香港人之香港史 (The Hong Kong People's History of Hong Kong)* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 270 and Sun Yang (孫揚), *國民政府對香港問題的處置 (Nationalist Government's policies towards the Hong Kong question)* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing 2017), pp. 82–105 for Nationalists' diplomatic efforts to reclaim Hong Kong's sovereignty which failed because of President Truman's support of Britain's repossession of Hong Kong after the Second World War.

²⁸HKPRO, HKRS 41-1-3321-1, Secretariat Circular no. 26, 'Colonial development & welfare fund', from D. M. MacDougall, Acting Colonial Secretary to Hong Kong Government, 6 June 1946.

initial recommendations included prioritizing the provision of assistance to farmers and fishermen in the New Territories because 'of all sections of the Hong Kong community they have received the least consideration in the past'.²⁹ Having taken into account the successes of cooperative movements 'in the most civilized countries – Scandinavia and Britain', the Hong Kong government began investigating the possibility of establishing a Vegetable Marketing Organization (VMO) to implement a state-monopolized collective vegetable marketing system.³⁰ The primary objective of the VMO was to strengthen the colonial rule by eliminating the wholesalers or middlemen known as *lans* who were regarded by the colonial government as 'evil' and the main cause of poverty of vegetable farmers in rural Hong Kong.³¹

Prior to 1945, the vegetable market was dominated by *lans* as Hong Kong lacked a central mechanism to regulate the supply and distribution of vegetables. The *lans* business was an oligopoly characterized by 'middleman control', gaining profit through selling vegetables purchased from farmers to retailers.³² *Lans* operators had their own distribution facilities, including lorries, food baskets, and retail outlets. As the transport network between the rural New Territories and urban Kowloon was underdeveloped in the pre-war and early post-war periods, farmers had to rely on the transport supplied by the *lans* to sell their produce to vegetable retailers in Kowloon. Such motor transport alone cost farmers more than 10 per cent of the sale proceeds of their vegetables³³, and they were liable to a number of other charges, including a fee to hire baskets and a *lan* commission of 6–10 per cent.³⁴ Control of both the supply and retail markets gave the *lans* huge bargaining power in setting vegetable prices. Short-weighting and other forms of cheating at the expense of farmers were common. Under the *lans* system, the retail price of vegetables was sometimes 300–400 per cent higher than that paid to growers.³⁵ As a result, the *lans* had long been viewed by the colonial government as a serious exploiter of Hong Kong farmers, whose profits were 'squeezed' and standard of living was kept 'exceedingly low'.³⁶

However, such exploitation by *lans* was only made possible largely due to Hong Kong's changing demographics and the colonial government's policy on land ownership in the New Territories. When the CCP seized power in 1949, vegetable farmers

²⁹HKPRO, HKRS 41-1-3321-1, Colonial Development and Welfare Committee, 'Draft terms of reference', (undated) 1946; HKRS 41-1-3321-1, Note from [Herklots], Chairman of Colonial Development and Welfare Committee to Officer Administering the Government of Hong Kong, (undated) 1947.

³⁰Airriess, 'Governmentality and power', p. 770.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 771.

³²HKPRO, HKRS 170-1-636-1, 'The supply & marketing of vegetables in HK & Kowloon', from Thos. F. Ryan S. K. to D. M. MacDougall, 12 November 1945, p. 8.

³³It could cost as high as HK\$1.5 per picul. Picul is a traditional Asian unit of weight. In colonial Hong Kong, one picul was equivalent to 133.3 avoirdupois pounds, stated in Ordinance no. 22 of 1844.

³⁴HKPRO, HKRS 170-1-636-1, 'Government scheme for vegetable wholesale monopoly, Kowloon', attached to 'Vegetable marketing system', telegram from T. R. Rowell to C. B. Burgess, 27 December 1945, p. 2; Man Kwok Kei, 'An appraisal of the marketing of vegetables in Hong Kong' (Master of Commerce Degree Thesis, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1968), p. 12.

³⁵'The supply & marketing of vegetables in HK & Kowloon', p. 8.

³⁶HKPRO, HKRS 170-1-636-1, 'Vegetable marketing survey', from Col. C. A., Central Executive Branch to Col. Thomson, D.C.C.A.O., 24 November 1945.

were amongst those who migrated to Hong Kong. By 1961, about 44 per cent of the New Territories population were Chinese migrants and 70 per cent of vegetable farmers were migrants from counties surrounding Guangdong.³⁷ However, the state policy over lands in the New Territories favoured the landlords as their support was crucial to consolidate the colonial rule in the pre-war period. Not being considered citizens in the villages, most migrant farmers had no land ownership and had to rent from indigenous landlords.³⁸ For example, in the early 1950s, 61 per cent of the total agricultural acreage was cultivated by tenant rather than indigenous farmers and at least half of the total acreage was used to grow vegetables.³⁹ In addition, under the Crown Lands Resumption (Amendment) Ordinance in 1950, when the Governor decided that resumption of any land was required for a public purpose, he could arrange for purchases with the owners without consulting the tenant farmers. These structural problems exacerbated poverty amongst immigrant farmers. Through the VMO, the colonial government hoped to improve their living standards and integrate them, hence stabilizing the New Territories politically. By economically empowering these vegetable farmers, the colonial government could also check the influence of indigenous landowners, against whom a more controversial land tenure reform project was then in the making.⁴⁰

The scheme also aimed at increasing local vegetable produce and reducing Hong Kong's reliance on China's supply of vegetables. Before the Second World War, vegetables produced by the New Territories only accounted for 20 per cent of Hong Kong's total consumption.⁴¹ To fill the gap, the colony had to rely on China for the supply of this necessity. Any changes in geopolitics or relations with China thus risked the food supply, potentially leading to food shortages and political crises. As early as the anti-colonial Canton-Hong Kong Strike and Boycott of 1925, the Hong Kong government had looked into the problem of overreliance on China for vegetable supplies. However, early attempts to encourage more local production met with little success.⁴² This problem of insufficient local food supply persisted after the Second World War. This was not confined to vegetables. According to government statistics, in 1952–1953, China supplied approximately 90.1 per cent (46,800 tons) of the meat consumed in Hong Kong, most of which was pork. Only 4 per cent of pork were produced locally.

³⁷Airriess, 'Governmentality and power', p. 767.

³⁸Land, especially rice-land, in the New Territories was very often held by indigenous villagers under ancestral or communal trusts according to the imperial Chinese land law. Sale of such land was subject to many restraints including the consent of all members of the trust. Under such system, the land ownership in the New Territories has been very stable. Such customary land ownership system according to the imperial Chinese law was kept and recognized as legally enforceable by the colonial government after it took over the New Territories in 1898. For details of the land ownership system in the New Territories under customary Chinese law, see Hase, *Custom, land and livelihood*. For the politics of village life in the New Territories in general, see James L. Watson and Rubie S. Watson, *Village life in Hong Kong: Politics, gender, and ritual in the New Territories* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2004).

³⁹Airriess, 'Governmentality and power', p. 767.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 767 and 772–777. Such land reform project involving confiscation of lands of indigenous villagers did not materialize due to internal disagreements within the government.

⁴¹HKPRO, HKRS 170-1-636-1, Letter from C.F.A. to C.C.A.O., 30 October 1945.

⁴²Stephen Chiu and Hung Ho-fung, 'The Colonial State and rural protests in Hong Kong', Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies Occasional Paper, no. 59, 1997, p. 31.

Australia also exported some to Hong Kong, but mainly in forms of frozen meat and canned meat.⁴³ Transporting live cattle via sea was difficult as the cost was 'almost prohibitive' and the quantities were 'limited'.⁴⁴ Similarly, most poultry, about 12,000,000 heads per year, were supplied to the colony by China, with 'no alternative local source' available. Although the colonial government tried to purchase rice from Siam in the post-war period, China continued to be the main supplier due to the competitive prices it offered.⁴⁵ However, as Alexander Grantham had pointed out, the Chinese supplies 'cannot be relied on' as they could be 'suddenly cut off'.⁴⁶ Replacing the *lans* system with a government-controlled body thereby improving returns for farmers in the New Territories would increase the local production of vegetables 'very considerably', partially improving Hong Kong's food security.⁴⁷

Most importantly, the scheme could pay political dividends. The Japanese propaganda for the Asiatics during the Second World War and the victory of the Chinese Communist Revolution intensified anti-colonial sentiments. During a period when decolonization and anti-imperialist movements were gaining steam worldwide in the war's aftermath, colonial government officials warned against 'the growth of an element hostile to British rule' stirred up by 'the communist agents and sympathizers', who tried 'to make agrarian discontent as a basis of their subversive propaganda' in rural Hong Kong.⁴⁸ Echoing the idea of agrarian developmental politics advocated by the US-led capitalist bloc, colonial bureaucrats of Hong Kong believed that the most effective way of combating communist infiltration was to 'improve the lot of the farmers'⁴⁹ and make them 'more self-reliant and happy citizen[s]'⁵⁰ through state's economic intervention. Ultimately, it was planned that the state-sponsored VMO would be run as a self-supporting 'cooperative organization independent of Government except for supervision'⁵¹ to monopolize the collection, transport, and wholesale marketing of all vegetables grown in the New Territories, aligning with the 'progressive' policies of the new Labour Government in post-war Britain, which advocated a cooperative movement for the collective benefit of workers.⁵² These state-sponsored cooperatives, which provided reliefs and

⁴³The National Archives of the United Kingdom (hereafter TNA), CO 537/7668, Telegram from A. Grantham to Secretary of State, 9 April 1952; 'Hong Kong food supplies: List B: Items normally in the whole or in part from China', (undated) 1953.

⁴⁴Telegram from A. Grantham to Secretary of State, 9 April 1952.

⁴⁵The Chinese authorities used rice to earn foreign exchange, even 'their own people [went] somewhat short'. See TNA, CO 852/1120, 'Government rice purchasing 1951', for discussion 7 November, attached in telegram from A. Grantham to Secretary of State, 10 November 1950.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷Hong Kong Government, *Hong Kong annual report* (Hong Kong: Government Printer, 1947), p. 49.

⁴⁸The supply & marketing of vegetables in HK & Kowloon', p. 14.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

⁵⁰HKPRO, HKRS 41-1-3321-1, Recommendations regarding 'Rural development', (undated) 1947, paragraph 3.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, paragraph 10.

⁵²After the Second World War, economic development in the colonies became increasingly important for the British government to alleviate its balance of payments deficit with the dollar area. For cooperative marketing schemes in colonies in Africa, see Michael A. Havinden and David Meredith, *Colonialism*

loans, offered welfare services, organized cultural activities and shared improved agricultural technologies, were anticipated to improve the livelihood of immigrant farmers and forge social ties amongst them, who otherwise would be isolated and exploited because of urbanization and modernization. By tackling agrarian problems, which constituted ‘a very live issue’ in China, the colonial government’s rural development in the New Territories was hoped to ‘become the pattern on which China could evolve [and] progress on modern and democratic lines’⁵³ and gain positive publicity in the mainland, thereby enhancing the colonial regime’s image.⁵⁴

Overcoming market opposition and deepening rural networks

After receiving positive feedback on the scheme from farmers in various districts of the New Territories, the Vegetable Marketing Scheme was introduced.⁵⁵ The VMO was established to monopolize the collection, movement, and wholesaling of vegetables in Kowloon and the New Territories by a government order which empowered the Governor to regulate the transport, distribution, and sale of ‘supplies or services essential to life of the community’.⁵⁶ In other words, only specific licensed lorries could carry the vegetables. These lorries would start in the early morning, run on ‘a fixed schedule’, and stop at ‘fixed points’ along the road. Each lorry would be sent to a particular district; areas covered included Cheung Sha Wan, Sham Shui Po, and Kowloon City in New Kowloon, and Yuen Long, Kam Tin, Tai Po, Sheung Shui, Castle Peak, Sha Tau Kok, and Fanling in the New Territories.⁵⁷ After collecting the vegetables, the lorries would transport them to the authorized wholesale market in Kowloon for sale. These orders were subsequently incorporated into a new law in 1952 to delineate the VMO’s powers and operation: the Agricultural Products (Marketing) Ordinance and corresponding Agricultural Products (Marketing) Regulations.⁵⁸ The regulations stipulated that no person other than the VMO’s appointed salesmen shall sell vegetables wholesale in Kowloon or the New Territories.⁵⁹ It was also illegal for any person without a government permit to transport vegetables in the New Territories and Kowloon.⁶⁰ The VMO charged local farmers 8 per cent (raised to 10 per cent in 1948) of the value of vegetables

and development: Britain and its tropical colonies, 1850–1960 (London: Taylor and Francis, 1993). For VMO and cooperatives in Hong Kong, see ‘The supply & marketing of vegetables in HK & Kowloon’, p. 14.

⁵³ ‘Rural development’, paragraph 1.

⁵⁴ ‘The supply & marketing of vegetables in HK & Kowloon’, p. 14.

⁵⁵ For feedback of farmers see HKPRO, HKRS 170-1-636-1, ‘Vegetable marketing scheme’, by Thomas Fr. Ryan, S. J., 6 December 1945, pp. 1–2.

⁵⁶ Regulation 50, Defence Regulations, 1940 and Wholesale (Kowloon) Marketing (Vegetables) Order, 1946, dated 3 September 1946.

⁵⁷ Closed frontier areas however were not included. HKPRO, HKRS 170-1-636(1), ‘Government scheme for vegetable wholesale monopoly, Kowloon’, attached in telegram ‘Vegetable marketing system’, T. R. Rowell to Burgess, 27 December 1945.

⁵⁸ Cap. 277 and Cap 277A of Laws of Hong Kong.

⁵⁹ Regulations 8 and 13, Cap. 277A.

⁶⁰ Regulation 7, Cap. 277A.

sold in the authorized wholesale market.⁶¹ The *lan* system was only allowed to operate on Hong Kong Island.⁶²

Despite the *lans'* initial opposition, the government achieved its aim of increasing local vegetable production through the scheme.⁶³ During the 1947–1948 period, 300,000 tonnes of vegetables were sold at the wholesale market in Kowloon, 75 per cent of them grown in the New Territories.⁶⁴ The amount of local vegetables sold and the average price received by farmers both increased from 1946–1949 (see Table 1). By 1950, local vegetable production was sufficient to meet 50 per cent of Hong Kong's annual requirement of 125,000 tonnes, reducing Hong Kong's dependence on China's vegetable supply.⁶⁵ Although there were still illegal and small vegetable markets in Kowloon and the New Territories which operated in the early morning, commonly known as morning assembly market or *tianguang xu* (天光墟), VMO played a dominant official role in local vegetable wholesale.⁶⁶ The small number of illegal markets that existed outside the scheme could be explained by the generally lower cost that farmers had to pay due to the provision of transport and baskets, and the absence of brokerage and *lan* commission under the scheme.⁶⁷ The enactment of legislation regulating vegetable supply also potentially had a deterrent effect: the heavy fines of up to HK\$2,000 and punishments, such as cancellation of the licence if drivers were found carrying vegetables illegally after the first or second offence and maximum imprisonment for one year, discouraged most farmers and drivers to violate the ordinances.⁶⁸ In addition, there was 'a reluctance on the parts of the New Territories farmer' to 'take his produce directly to Hong Kong mainly because of the additional time taken and by virtue of the fact that higher prices which prevailed prior to the opening of the market

⁶¹HKPRO, HKRS 170-1-636-1, 'Agricultural department', by Secretary for Development, 15 May 1946; Li Guoren (黎國仁), '蔬菜統營處歷年大事回顧, 一九四六年至一九九六年' ('Major events of vegetable marketing organization, 1946–1996'), in *Fish/Vegetable Marketing Organizations Golden Jubilee* (Hong Kong: Fish/Vegetable Marketing Organizations, 1996), pp. 68–70.

⁶²'Government scheme for vegetable wholesale monopoly, Kowloon', p. 2; 'Appendix C: Precis of rejected scheme', 24 December 1945, attached to 'Government scheme for vegetable wholesale monopoly, Kowloon'.

⁶³For *lans'* opposition and government's responses, see HKPRO, HKRS 170-1-637, Petition from the Vegetable Lans of Kowloon to the Governor in Council, attached to 'The vegetable lans of Kowloon', from C. Y. Kwan & Co. to Colonial Secretary, 9 August 1946; HKRS 170-1-637, Memo by J. N. C., 17 August 1946.

⁶⁴TNA, CO 537/5518, 'Hong Kong: Essential food supplies', (undated) 1950, p. 2.

⁶⁵TNA, CO 537/5520, Colonial Office, Hong Kong Supplies Committee, minutes of the ninth meeting held in the Colonial Office, Sanctuary Buildings (Room 321), 17 July 1950.

⁶⁶Cheng Siu Kei, 'Adopting a new lifestyle: Formation of a local organic food community in Hong Kong', (MPhil Thesis, HKUST, 2009), p. 26.

⁶⁷Under the *lans* system or prior to the formation of the Vegetable Marketing Organization, farmers had to pay for the following cost to transport their produce to Kowloon: motor transport to Kowloon, \$1.5 per picul; brokerage, 5 per cent; hiring baskets, about 5 per cent of the value of the vegetables; and *lan* commission if it was through *lans*, minimum 6.14 per cent. This price probably had reduced after the Vegetable Marketing Organization was formed, but not significantly. Under the scheme, however, the government's commission was fixed at 8 per cent, covering costs of transport, operation of the market and baskets. See HKPRO, HKRS 170-1-636-1, 'Government scheme for vegetable wholesale monopoly, Kowloon', 'Vegetable marketing system', T. R. Rowell to Burgess, 27 December 1945.

⁶⁸HKPRO, HKRS 170-1-636-1, Letter from C.F.A. to C.C.A.O., 3 Jan. 1946; section 8(2), Cap. 277.

Table 1: Amount and average price of vegetables sold through the Vegetable Marketing Organization from August 1946 to August 1949

Period	Piculs of vegetables	Sales price	Average price per picul
6 months from 1.8.46 to 31.3.47	207,173	\$3,610,727	\$12.60
12 months from 1.4.47 to 31.3.48	502,921	\$7,778,855	\$12.46
12 months from 1.4.48 to 31.3.49	549,529	\$8,264,430	\$15.04
6 months from 1.4.49 to 31.8.49	269,013	\$4,549,024	\$16.90

Source: HKPRO, HKRS 163-1-455, Report from A.S.6 to Colonial Secretary, 7 September 1950, p. 2.

no longer prevail'.⁶⁹ Therefore, very few vegetables grown in the New Territories were sold on Hong Kong Island outside the scheme.

Not long after the VMO's establishment, and in line with Britain's overarching policy on the development of a cooperative movement in its colonies, the colonial government began to explore the possibility of creating rural cooperatives to reach out to small villages and coordinate the control of vegetable collection and transport. In a letter to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Hong Kong Governor Mark Young even idealized farmers' cooperatives and collective marketing as 'a model for the neighbouring provinces of South China'.⁷⁰

The influx of immigrant farmers from mainland China in and after 1949 imposed an increasing strain on the VMO's five collection stations and transport facilities, and provided further incentives for the government to expand the scheme. In 1951, the Cooperative Societies Ordinance was enacted to decentralize the Vegetable Marketing Scheme, allowing vegetable farmers to form marketing cooperatives as limited liability body corporates.⁷¹ The colonial government also set up the Cooperative and Marketing Department to educate and advise cooperatives and guide their work in collecting and transporting vegetables to the government's authorized wholesale market in Kowloon, thereby assisting the VMO's collection and delivery service.⁷² Before vegetables were sold at the market, the cooperatives paid farmers half of the expected selling price in advance in the form of a loan.⁷³ Additional vegetable collection stations were also set up by the vegetable cooperatives to collect produce from individual farmers. In 1953, the Federation of Vegetable Marketing Cooperatives Societies was founded by

⁶⁹HKPRO, HKRS 41-1-5148, 'Emergency report of the vegetable situation', memo from R. Hart to Colonial Secretary, 21 November 1949.

⁷⁰TNA, CO 129/611/5, Letter from Mark Young to Arthur Creech Jones, (undated) March 1947.

⁷¹Li, '蔬菜統營處歷年大事回顧', pp. 68–70; Weng Tiande (翁天德), '回顧及展望蔬菜產銷合作社的發展' ('Review and projection of development of vegetable marketing cooperatives'), in *Fish/Vegetable Marketing Organizations Golden Jubilee* (Hong Kong: Fish/Vegetable Marketing Organizations, 1996), pp. 35–37. Also see HKPRO, HKRS 41-1-3321-1, 'Hong Kong Colonial Development and Welfare Committee - Interim Report', (undated) 1947, p. 5; Cooperative Societies Ordinance, Cap. 33, 1951.

⁷²E. H. Nichols, 'The fish and vegetable marketing organizations of Hong Kong - A golden anniversary tribute', in *Fish/Vegetable Marketing Organizations Golden Jubilee* (Hong Kong: Fish/Vegetable Marketing Organizations, 1996), pp. 11–13. Also see 'Co-operatives in Hong Kong: Essential preparatory work by small band of workers, vegetable, fish marketing', *South China Morning Post*, 26 March 1952.

⁷³The Federation of Vegetable Marketing Co-operatives Societies', accessed 1 May 2018, <http://fedvmcs.org/intro.php>.

local village cooperatives to improve the degree of coordination amongst them.⁷⁴ As a result, the Vegetable Marketing Scheme and Cooperatives were expanded considerably. Membership of the Cooperatives increased from over 1000 vegetable farmers in 1953 to more than 9000 in 1963.⁷⁵ However, as the Cold War developed, these state-owned networks of distribution and communication permeating rural communities were soon challenged by communist-influenced organizations and sympathizers in rural Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s. In response to the changing context, the colonial government sought help from philanthropists and businessmen such as Lawrence and Horace Kadoorie, founders of Kadoorie Agricultural Aid Association, to teach and finance immigrants from China to raise pigs and poultry, which ‘help[ed] people to help themselves’ according to the ‘education in democracy’. The government admitted that helping these migrant farmers ‘who fled from a political ideology which was not acceptable to them’ would reassure them that seeking ‘sanctuary under a democratic way of life’ was a wise decision.⁷⁶ The VMO’s function also changed, becoming an important political tool for the colonial government to undermine the expanding communist influence in agrarian politics and win political support in rural Hong Kong.

Food politics and economic contestation: The Society of Plantations

In the 1950s, rather than resistance from *lans*, the greatest challenge the VMO faced was the rise of the CCP in China. Soon after the PRC’s establishment on 1 October 1949, there had been widespread fear that the Communist regime would stop exporting vegetables to the colony.⁷⁷ Such fear can be seen permeating the public discourse throughout the early 1950s. In 1951, Beijing designated Ng Fung Hong Limited, a trading firm under the control of PRC’s Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation, as the sole distributor of food products from China to Hong Kong.⁷⁸ In 1952, a news report entitled ‘Red Starving Hong Kong’ in the *Daily Express* reported that the ‘Reds’ had ‘stepped up their Cold War’ by attempting to ‘starve’ Hong Kong, with controls on the movement of food in Guangdong province being tightened to stop food from being smuggled into the colony.⁷⁹ William Clyde, the Commissioner-General for the UK in Southeast Asia, pointed out that China could easily cut off the

⁷⁴*Ibid.*

⁷⁵Hong Kong Government Printer, Hong Kong annual departmental report by the Registrar of Co-operative Societies and Director of Marketing for the financial year 1952–1953 (Hong Kong, Government Printer, 1953) and Hong Kong annual departmental report by the Commissioner for Co-operative Development and Fisheries K.W.J. Topley for the financial year 1962–1963 (Hong Kong, Government Printer, 1963).

⁷⁶The Kadoorie Agricultural Aid Association, *Agricultural and animal, agricultural and animal husbandry ventures* (Hong Kong: Kadoorie Agricultural Aid Association, 1954), pp. 3–4. The Kadoorie Agricultural Aid Association (commonly known as KAAA) was founded in 1951 to provide interest-free or low-interest loans and technical advice to farmers for raising pigs and poultry. It also offered assistance in irrigation and sourced fertilizers for rice and vegetable growers. For KAAA’s works and history, also see The Kadoorie Agricultural Aid Association, *Kadoorie experimental & extension farm and botanic gardens* (Hong Kong: Kadoorie Agricultural Aid Association, 1978) and Cai Sixing (蔡思行), *戰後新界發展史* (History of the post-war development of the New Territories) (Hong Kong: Chunghwa, 2016), pp. 36–58.

⁷⁷HKPRO, HKRS 163-1-455, ‘A policy floating sheet’, 6 December 1949.

⁷⁸Cheung, ‘Reunification through water and food’, pp. 1020–1021.

⁷⁹TNA, CO 537/7668, ‘Red starving Hong Kong’, *Daily Express*, 14 March 1952.

food supply 'without any appearance of aggression' owing to the famine in Guangdong province.⁸⁰ Contingency plans were explored, as Hong Kong's existing stocks of food were sufficient to last only seven to eight weeks without importation from China.⁸¹ At this point, locally produced vegetables had increased to 60–70 per cent of total consumption, but the figure was expected to fall to 40–45 per cent in the summer. Although 'stimulation to local production arising from the food ban from China would be small', an alternative source from Australia, Japan, and/or Canada had to be sought.⁸²

Another government concern was the potential Chinese Communist expansion in the New Territories farming communities, which might lead to increased anti-colonial sentiments. The growing influence of the Society of Plantations ('the Society' hereafter) in the New Territories from 1951 was perceived by the colonial government as a security threat. The Society was first formed in 1938, then registered under the Societies Ordinance in September 1949 as the Society of Plantations, although the name Association of Chinese Planters Sojourning in Hong Kong was often used in Chinese newspaper reports.⁸³ Little was known about the Society or its activities until 1950, when it started to exhibit 'leftist tendencies', such as hoisting the PRC flag on its premises. Nonetheless, no serious political moves were identified until May 1951, when Wong Pak Chau became the Society's Chairman.⁸⁴ There is extensive evidence which led the colonial government to believe that the organization was a communist organ from 1951. First, it was a member of the Workers' Children Education Promotion Association, which only admitted pro-CCP organizations. Second, it was affiliated with the Federation of Trade Unions, a communist-controlled trade union in Hong Kong that was continuously under the surveillance of the Hong Kong Police Special Branch. Third, its staff, as revealed by the Special Branch, maintained close contact with CCP bureaucrats in China.⁸⁵ Fourth, the Society was seen to support most of the activities directed by Chinese Communists in the colony, such as the welcome party organized to receive the Canton Comfort Mission after the Tung Tau fire and the celebration

⁸⁰TNA, CO 537/7668, Letter from William Clyde to Eugene Melville, 29 April 1952.

⁸¹TNA, CO 537/7669, 'Defence of Hong Kong—civil aspect', from A. Grantham to Secretary of State, 22 March 1952.

⁸²TNA, CO 537/7668, Telegram from Governor to Secretary of State, 9 April. 1952.

⁸³The name 'Qiao Gang zhongzhi zong gonghui (僑港種植總公會)' was used in newspaper reports in the late 1940s and early 1950s, thereafter the word 'Qiao Gang' that delineates 'sojourning in Hong Kong' was often dropped and 'Zhongzhi zong gonghui' (種植總公會) was used in the Society's press release and newspaper reports. The colonial government referred to the Society as the Society of Plantations rather than the Society of Growers in English because '種植' in Chinese means Plantation rather than Growers ('種植者'). The translation also indicates that the Hong Kong government viewed the association through the Cold War lens. Although the word 'plantation' may render a false impression that vegetable plots in the New Territories were managed by small households, the choice of word shows that the government regarded the situation in Hong Kong's New Territories similar to that of Malaya, in which the strategies of 'hearts and minds' were also used to stop the colony from 'going Red' in the communist insurgency. HKPRO, HKRS 935-1-10, Police Report on Society of Plantations, attached to memo from C. Willcox, Director of Special Branch to District Commissioner, New Territories, 18 June 1954.

⁸⁴HKPRO, HKRS 935-1-33, 'Chapter I: Origin & history of the Society of Plantations', in 'The Society of Plantations', Hong Kong Police Special Branch Report, August 1954, p. 2.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

events for the National Day of the PRC.⁸⁶ Fifth, PRC's flags and portraits of CCP's leaders were hoisted at the Society's ceremonial events.⁸⁷ Sixth, all of its work received support from left-wing newspapers, such as *Wen Wei Po* and *Ta Kung Pao*.⁸⁸ Finally, the Society appeared to have 'ample funds' at its disposal, funds that far exceeded subscriptions.⁸⁹ Former leftist Zhou Yi acknowledged that the Society 'was controlled by leftist farmers from the 1950s' in his memoirs.⁹⁰ The Society was able to maintain a broad appeal amongst migrant farmers primarily because of the 'political vacuum' in the New Territories—the failure of the government to address the problems of uneven land ownership and the poverty of tenant vegetable growers.⁹¹

Although the Society publicized that its primary objectives were to 'foster friendship among fellow-farmers and promote cooperative enterprise', 'advance the spirit of mutual aid among fellow-farmers for the sake of their welfare', 'guide, advise and improve agriculture and animal husbandry', and 'resolve disputes amongst farmers and landlords', the colonial government believed it had ulterior political motives.⁹² To compete for the support of the rural population, the Society filled the 'political vacuum' in the New Territories and provided material support to farmers. For example, it offered a variety of benefits and assistance to new members as 'an inducement' to join, including the provision of vegetable fertilizers, funeral funds of up to HK\$500 in the event of a death, and legal advice to farmers involved in land disputes. The Society also provided monetary relief to farmers who suffered from natural disasters. Medical care, tutoring for children and recreational activities for farmers were also important parts

⁸⁶'籌祝國慶積極進行部分學校放假兩天' ('To prepare for the celebration of the National Day, schools have two days off'), *Ta Kung Pao*, 18 September 1958; also see 'Chapter I: Origin & history of the Society of Plantations', pp. 3–4. See Alan Smart, *The Shek Kip Mei fire myth: Squatters, fires and colonial rule in Hong Kong, 1950–63* (Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2006), Chapter 5 for the Tung Tau fire and the subsequent riots.

⁸⁷Photo of the anniversary celebration event of the Society's Tsuen Wan Branch in '種植公會荃灣支部七百多人昨大聚餐' ('More than 700 People from the Tsuen Wan branch of the Society of Plantations gathered for lunch yesterday'), *Ta Kung Pao*, 13 January 1959.

⁸⁸For example, '種植公會發米 救濟受害菜農' ('Society of Plantations distributes rice, relieving vegetable farmer victims'), *Ta Kung Pao*, 30 October 1951 and '種植公會支部救濟水災菜農七十多人昨天領到米' ('More than 70 vegetable farmers affected by floods received rice from the branch of the Society of Plantations as relief yesterday'), *Ta Kung Pao*, 26 September 1952.

⁸⁹Chapter I: Origin & history of the Society of Plantations', pp. 3–4.

⁹⁰See for example, Zhou Yi (周奕), *香港左派鬥爭史 (A history of the leftist struggle in Hong Kong)* (Hong Kong: Liwen, 2002), p. 158.

⁹¹The problem of government's arbitrary power over land resumption, uneven land ownership and high land rent was reported widely by both left-wing and right-wing newspapers in the early 1950s. See for example, '港九新界農民籲請當局立法保障耕權 農地價漲耕權迭起紛爭' ('Farmers in Hong Kong, Kowloon and New Territories urge the authorities to legislate laws to protect farming rights; Rising farm land prices and disputes over farming rights'), *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 24 January 1951 and '牛頭角村興築公路農地將被剝去四成該村 農民請求港府改道興建 免致影響八百多名農民生活' ('Road construction in Ngau Tau Kok will shovel 40% of the farmland away: Farmers in the village ask the Hong Kong government to build the road elsewhere to avoid affecting lives of 800 Farmers'), *Ta Kung Pao*, 19 October 1952.

⁹²For the objectives of the Society, see '種植會務有利廣大市民 事實俱在早獲社會公認' ('The Services of the Society of Plantations benefited the public, this fact has been recognized by the Society') *Ta Kung Pao*, 8 June 1959; HKPRO, HKRS 935-1-10, 'The Hong Kong Farming & Agriculture Association membership card', (translation) by the Hong Kong Farming and Agriculture Association, 1 December 1953, p. 1.

of the Society's services to its members.⁹³ For example, it organized exhibitions on Chinese agricultural production to impress the rural community with the increase in agricultural production seen in China since the PRC's establishment.⁹⁴ Films produced in mainland China were also screened for members.⁹⁵ Rather than heavy-handed ideological indoctrination that promoted communism, these activities primarily focused on propagating patriotism and the achievements of the PRC.⁹⁶

The Society became popular amongst the immigrant farmers according to *Ta Kung Pao* and oral testimonies. For example, a farmer who was a victim of a fire showed gratitude to the Society after receiving relief money and clothes from the Society:

We felt that the Society is really like our family members who care for each other of the same family. They distributed relief materials for the second time now and I heard the third relief is forthcoming. It is very cold now. The Society gave us free clothes and money and made us feel very warm.⁹⁷

A villager who had not associated themselves with the Society also admitted that he started 'supporting' (*yongdai* 擁戴) the Society after it had successfully helped him and fellow villagers to seek a better compensation from the government which took back their farmland for an urbanization project.⁹⁸ Although there was no direct evidence suggesting that these farmers became communist sympathizers, they did hold an increasingly favourable view towards the PRC. For instance, a farmer expressed his appreciation for how China had taken care of the farmers after being brought by the Society to visit rural collectives in the mainland: 'The livelihood of the people in the motherland is getting better every day. They do not need to worry about having

⁹³For activities, welfare and disaster relief offered by the Society, see '種植會務有利廣大市民事實俱在早獲社會公認'. Also see *Ta Kung Pao*'s other reports on 30 October 1951, 26 September 1952, and 29 January 1954; HKPRO, HKRS 935-1-10, 'Society of Plantations', memo from H. D. Miller, D.O.T.W. to D.C.N.T., 21 February 1959; Zhou, 香港左派鬥爭史, p. 162.

⁹⁴HKPRO, HKRS 935-1-10, 'Society of Plantations to hold an exhibition of Chinese agricultural products in Sai Kung' by Wong K. T., Hong Kong Police Special Branch, 31 December 1958.

⁹⁵HKPRO, HKRS 935-1-10, 'Society of Plantations', memo from H. D. Miller to D.C.N.T. Films screening as a way of political propaganda was not exclusive to rural society during this period. There was a significant presence of "pro-Communist" "patriotic" studios and "Free China" studios in support of Taiwan and the US' producing films for cinemas in urban Hong Kong, see Fu, 'More than just entertaining', 3.

⁹⁶A similar approach was used in CCP's propaganda during the Sino-Japanese War to mobilize peasants, see Chalmers Johnson, *Peasant nationalism and Communist power: The emergence of Revolutionary China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1963), p. 4. Lu Yan argued that many Hong Kong workers in the immediate post-war period were not revolutionaries but were motivated by pragmatism and nationalism. It is possible that the CCP did not propagate communism overtly in the New Territories because farmers demonstrated similar tendencies. See Lu, *Crossed paths*, p. 338.

⁹⁷'種植公會發錢發物 受災會員咸表感謝' ('Society of Plantations distributed money and materials, members suffering from the disaster expressed gratitude'), *Ta Kung Pao*, 29 January 1954.

⁹⁸Oral history of 吳佛全 (Ng Fat-chuen), '十三鄉委員會與僑港種植總工會的合作' ('Cooperation between the Thirteen Villages Committee and the Society of Plantations'), Hong Kong Memory, 20 February 2012, https://www.hkmemory.hk/collections/oral_history/All_Items_OH/oha_100/records/index_cht.html?fbclid=IwAR0jiPIX-Rca0nBKg-pFMydhidcoEqo2PCPFyYWGFrVYw3a6-t4JetQB_E#p65744.

nothing to eat. Not only they do not need to pay for meals, they are well taken care of in various aspects.⁹⁹

The use of a pragmatic rather than ideological approach shows that the CCP tailored its mobilization strategy based on Hong Kong's local context and responded to economic and social problems in the New Territories that were not addressed by the colonial government. The provision of such benefits and subsidies proved appealing to farmers. By 1954, the Society had expanded and was operating two branches, one in Tsuen Wan and one in Castle Peak. Its membership grew from just over 2000 in the early 1950s to more than 7000 in the late 1950s.¹⁰⁰ Most of the Society's members were poor 'immigrant cultivators' who were seriously exploited under the land and *lans* systems.¹⁰¹ Whilst more than 80 per cent of rice paddy farmers in Hong Kong were indigenous Chinese born in the New Territories, whose interests were, at least in theory, looked after by their representatives in the Rural Committees and Heung Yee Kuk,¹⁰² over 70 per cent of vegetable farmers in the New Territories were immigrants from China. Their unattended interests thus became a site of contestation between the colonial government and the Society.¹⁰³ As the Society grew in both membership and influence in the New Territories, it gradually broadened its united front and dropped 'Sojourning in Hong Kong' from its publicized name. It then claimed to represent the interests of 'all farmers whose ancestors had been living in the New Territories historically.'¹⁰⁴

According to a Special Branch report, since 1952, the colonial government believed that the Society had 'seized every opportunity to exploit[,] in typical communist fashion, any situation involving farmers and which tended to embarrass the government'.¹⁰⁵ This could be attributed to the escalating Cold War tensions. Despite recognition of the PRC in 1950, Britain's subsequent military involvement to back the USA in the Korean War and support of the United Nations' embargo against China led to increased Sino-British tensions in the 1950s.¹⁰⁶ To the colonial government, the

⁹⁹'種植公會祝會慶千餘農民集會歡宴' (Celebrating Society of Plantations' anniversary, over a thousand farmers enjoyed a banquet), *Ta Kung Pao*, 12 December 1958.

¹⁰⁰HKPRO, HKRS 935-1-33, 'Chapter VII: Membership and its distribution', in 'The Society of Plantations', Hong Kong Police Special Branch Report, August 1954, p. 1; also see Zhou, 香港左派鬥爭史, p. 163.

¹⁰¹HKPRO, HKRS 935-1-10, 'Chung Chik Kung Wui in the N.T.', memo from E. B. Teesdale to the Commissioner of Police, 2 July 1954.

¹⁰²Rural Committees and Heung Yee Kuk were both statutory bodies recognized by the colonial government to represent the interests of the indigenous Chinese population in the New Territories. See Steve Tsang, *A documentary history of Hong Kong: Government and politics* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1995), p. 42; Sit Fung-shuen (薛鳳旋) and Kwong Chi-man (鄭智文), *新界鄉議局史: 由租借地到一國兩制* (The history of Heung Yee Kuk: from the Leased Territory to One Country Two Systems) (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2011), pp. 87–99.

¹⁰³Cai, 戰後新界發展史, pp. 49–50.

¹⁰⁴'種植會務有利廣大市民事實俱在早獲社會公認'. The Society's name changed from 'Association of Chinese Planters Sojourning in Hong Kong' (Qiao Gang zhongzhi zong gonghui) in *Ta Kung Pao*, 19 October 1949, 14 April 1950, 30 October 1951, 18 February 1952, and 26 September 1952 to 'Association of Chinese Planters' (Zhongzhi zong gonghui) in *Ta Kung Pao*, 14 January 1954, 29 January 1954, 24 October 1956, and 8 June 1959.

¹⁰⁵'Chapter I: Origin & history of the Society of Plantations', p. 1.

¹⁰⁶Mark, *Hong Kong and the Cold War*, pp. 101–110.

Society, 'actively assisted from across the border', was making use of '[e]very loophole ... to kick up a fuss via tenancy questions, evictions, water disputes etc.'¹⁰⁷ The farmland resumption policy which was part of the state's urbanization projects in the 1950s was in particular unpopular and undermined the colonial government's legitimacy in rural areas. It united the rural committees and the Society, which were formerly divided due to ideological differences. For example, in 1957, sharing common economic interest, the Thirteen Villages Committee in rural Kowloon worked closely with the Society to pressurize the colonial government to offer reasonable compensation when their lands were being resumed. A villager who was involved in the land resumption incident recalled despite 'differences in political ideas', the Village Committee 'share[d] common interests' with the Society, which was also against the government policy in farmland resumption.¹⁰⁸ Although there was no direct evidence confirming that these farmers and villagers who collaborated with the Society were 'Communists', the alliance between these organizations and their anti-colonial agenda concerned the colonial government.

The Society's active involvement in matters concerning farmland resumption and the clearance of agricultural squatters in rural Kowloon affected the VMO, which was torn between its responsibilities of taking care of the interests of the farmers concerned and helping the government to implement farmland resumption. In February 1952, for example, when the colonial government proposed resuming crown lands occupied by cultivators in Ngau Tau Kok, Ho Man Tin, Sum Wan, and Lo Fu Ngam, Society members organized protests and petitioned the Director of Public Works, the Urban Council, the Resettlement Office, and the Colonial Secretary. In March, the Society then organized an appeal delegation to the VMO, requesting its staff to stop the land resumption project on behalf of cultivators. Its members expressed 'great dissatisfaction' when the VMO told them that it could not intervene. The Society's protest against the resumption of crown land and request for resettlement of farmers living thereon were publicized in the left-wing press.¹⁰⁹ The Society also acted in the New Territories, with its members confronting the Vegetable Marketing Scheme directly. In August 1952, when the colonial government tried to resume some lands in Tsuen Wan, Society members encouraged farmers to occupy the fields. It became necessary for Cooperative Officer C. T. Large to seek police assistance to remove a number of farmers who refused to leave. According to Special Branch, the Society's officials were 'on the scene', and 'it was obvious that they had instigated the obstructive action'. The following month, farmers, with Society support, continued to resist the evictions and even planted vegetables on land that had already been fenced.¹¹⁰ Further political

¹⁰⁷HKPRO, HKRS 935-1-10, Telegram from Yuen Long District Officer to District Commissioner of the New Territories, 16 June 1964.

¹⁰⁸Cheung Sui-wai (張瑞威), 拆村:消逝的九龍村落 (*Village demolition: The disappearing village of Kowloon*) (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2013), p. 152; Oral history of 吳佛全, '十三鄉委員會與僑港種植總工會的合作'.

¹⁰⁹'種植公會反對迫遷' ('Society of Plantations opposes to forced eviction'), *Ta Kung Pao*, 18 February 1952; HKPRO, HKRS 935-1-10, 'Society of Plantations', attached to memo from C. Willcox to District Commissioner in the New Territories, 18 June 1954, p. 1.

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 3.

activism was subsequently organized by the Society's Chairman. In January, a deputation of about 40 people showed up at the VMO office to 'discuss a petition in connection with the distribution of night soil [fertilizer]' with Cooperative Officer Large. During the meeting, the deputation accused the VMO of discriminating against farmers who were not members of a cooperative society by giving them less space on the auction floor for their vegetables. Threats were also made throughout the meeting. When told to leave the VMO office, some members of the deputation shouted 'down with the vegetable market which lives on our rice' and warned Large to stay away from the New Territories unless he wanted to be killed.¹¹¹ Such instances of confrontation were not uncommon. In July 1953, ten members of the Society who were 'extremely offensive' went to one of the VMO's distribution centres and smashed down the door of the accounts' office. There were also incidents in which the employees of such centres were verbally abused and even assaulted by Society members.¹¹² These activities undermined the colonial government, which sought to implement counter-measures urgently.

Actions against the Society of Plantations: From containment to suppression

From the colonial government's standpoint, the aforementioned instances offered ample evidence of the Society's obstruction of the operation of the Vegetable Marketing Scheme and attempts to discredit the colonial government. In early 1954, their activities came to the attention of the District Commissioner of the New Territories, who was 'disquieted' about the 'increasing influence' of the left-wing organization amongst farmers and the 'general effect of its propaganda on the New Territories mentality'.¹¹³ The District Officer of Yuen Long was extremely concerned because the membership of the Society was 'increasing rapidly' and now including 'more and more of the illiterate and slower-thinking native villagers'. He suggested that a repressive rather than containment measure should be adopted—the colonial government should 'cross [the Society] off the list of approved societies'.¹¹⁴ By mid-1954, the Society had begun to influence the cooperative societies' operation.¹¹⁵ It was reported that left-wing activists that were 'well-trained in political intrigue' had joined the Ngau Tam Mei Cooperative and run successfully for its chairmanship, thereby placing the cooperative 'under the control of a Chairman who is a member of the Chung Chik Kung W[ui] [Cantonese transliteration of the Society of Plantations]', and further that 80 per cent of cooperative members who had joined recently were not even farmers. These colonial bureaucrats believed that such activities, if left unchecked, might give the Society 'virtual control of all transportation of vegetables'.¹¹⁶

¹¹¹Ibid.

¹¹²Ibid., pp. 3–4.

¹¹³HKPRO, HKRS 935-1-10, 'Chung Chik Wui or Planters' Association', memo from E. B. Teesdale to the Commissioner of Police, 6 January 1954.

¹¹⁴HKPRO, HKRS 935-1-10, Telegram from B. D. Wilson to E. B. Teesdale, 16 June 1954.

¹¹⁵HKPRO, HKRS 935-1-10, Memo from E. B. Teesdale to Colonial Secretariat, 23 July 1954.

¹¹⁶HKPRO, HKRS 935-1-10, 'Chung Chik Kung W[ui]', memo from J. T. Wakefield to D.C.N.T., 28 June 1954; HKPRO, HKRS 935-1-10, Report dated 15 June 1954 by C. T. Large, attached to memo from J. T. Wakefield, Registrar of Co-operatives to D.C.N.T., 29 June 1954.

The District Commissioner of the New Territories hence proposed that the Commissioner of Police cancel the Society's registration under the Societies Ordinance.¹¹⁷ However, to avoid driving the organization underground and jeopardizing relations with the PRC, instead of de-registering the Society, the colonial government arrested its Chairman and Secretary, Wong Pak Chau and Chan Shi Man, respectively, on 6 November 1954. They were deported to the mainland immediately afterwards for 'acting under Communist direction ... [for] ulterior political motives' under section 3 of the Deportation of Aliens Ordinance, a draconian legal 'trump card' commonly used by the colonial government against those who they perceived as politically undesirable.¹¹⁸ The Society denied such motives and its demand for the release of Wong and Chan was in vain.¹¹⁹ The deportation was reported by the right-wing press, which endorsed the colonial government's repressive measure.¹²⁰

Despite deportation of its leaders, the Society still enjoyed increasing membership. As noted, its membership totalled 7000 by 1959, an alarming level in the government's eyes.¹²¹ Although no concrete evidence had suggested that these members were 'Communists', the colonial government still feared that the Society's propaganda would 'convince persons in the rural areas that it is to the Chinese People's Government that they should look for assistance and guidance rather than to the Hong Kong Government', constituting a 'definite threat to the peace and good order'.¹²² Robert Black, who took over the governorship of Hong Kong after the 1956 riots, a

¹¹⁷HKPRO, HKRS 935-1-10, 'Chung Chik Kung Wui in the N.T.', from E. B. Teesdale to Commissioner of Police, 2 July 1954; HKPRO, HKRS 935-1-10, Telegram from J. T. Wakefield to D.C.S., 23 October 1954; HKPRO, HKRS 935-1-10, 'The Society of Plantations', from A. C. Maxwell to Colonial Secretary, 12 October 1954. Section 5 of the Societies Ordinance (Cap.151) empowered the Registrar to cancel a society's registration if it was used for illegal purposes that were incompatible with peace, welfare and good order of Hong Kong.

¹¹⁸Deportation of Aliens Ordinance, Cap. 240. Deportation was the power of the government to expel a person from Hong Kong. Contrasted with extradition, which required a judicial process to determine if there were grounds of transporting a fugitive out of the colony, deportation was an executive and often a secretive decision of the Governor who was empowered to expel a person from the colony if he considered that his or her presence in the colony was prejudicial to public safety or a deportation against him or her was conducive to the public good. Such decision-making process involved no judicial oversight. The deportation law also did not elaborate what would threaten the public good. Hence, the deportation law, originally designed as an easy means to get rid of the increasing numbers of beggars, hucksters, and criminals in nineteenth century Hong Kong, was often used to punish political dissents and the suspected communists in Hong Kong during the twentieth century. Most of the deportees were sent back to Mainland China. For a history of the use of deportation power in colonial Hong Kong, see Christopher Munn, "'Our best trump card": A brief history of deportation in Hong Kong, 1857–1955', in *Civil unrest and governance in Hong Kong: Law and order from historical and cultural perspectives*, (eds) Michael Ng and John Wong (New York: Routledge, 2017), Chapter 2.

¹¹⁹'種植公會理事長被遞解離港' ('The Chairman of the Society of Plantations was deported from Hong Kong'), *Ta Kung Pao*, 18 and 19 November 1954; HKPRO, HKRS 935-1-33, 'Chapter VI: Evidence of infiltration by the Society of Plantations', in 'The Society of Plantations', Hong Kong Police Special Branch, August 1954, p. 11. For improving Sino-British relations and the exchange of chargé d'affaires, see Mark, *The everyday Cold War*, p. 55.

¹²⁰'種植公會首腦 兩人解出境', ('Two leaders of the Society of Plantations have been deported'), *Kung Sheung Evening News*, 19 November 1954.

¹²¹'Society of Plantations', Hong Kong Police Special Branch, February 1959, p. 32.

¹²²Irwin, 'Special Branch's case against the Society', p. 2.

violent conflict between Communist and Nationalist sympathizers which occurred in October 1956, favoured a much hardened approach against communist-controlled entities. He was especially concerned with communist influence in education, hence widened government's power to close down illegal schools by amending the Education Ordinance soon after his arrival in Hong Kong.¹²³ In response to the growth of the Society, his government supported using suppressive legal measures to eliminate leftists rather than containing the Society's expansion by economic competition through the VMO. The Society's dissolution and the deportation of its leading members were considered to be 'the best method', as doing so would seriously disrupt the spread of subversion, 'deter many of the less fanatical members' and 'demonstrate that the Hong Kong government [was] not prepared to tolerate open subversion'.¹²⁴ It was predicted that the majority of people in the New Territories would 'welcome this move and understand its implications'. Nevertheless, to avoid potential repercussions, it was agreed that action should proceed 'as soon as possible subject [to] avoiding 1 May', International Labour Day.¹²⁵ To prevent the Society's revival, the Societies Ordinance was also tightened on 22 May 1959 to provide for the mandatory winding up of a dissolved society.¹²⁶ On 29 May, the Society was officially dissolved in accordance with section 16(1) of the Societies Ordinance, under which the Governor in Council could order the dissolution of a society if the Governor was satisfied that it was being used for purposes prejudicial to or incompatible with the peace, welfare, or good order of the colony. On the same day, five of the Society's leading members, Chairman Fung Yung, Vice-chairmen Yip Fu Man and Luk Kim Sing, Supervisory Committee Chairman Chan Sheung, and Cheung Tong, Clerk of the Society's Tsuen Wan Branch, were arrested. Fung, Cheung, and Chan were deported to China in the same morning in the interest of 'the public good'.¹²⁷ After the Society's dissolution, the former Society-run schools that failed to fulfil the registration requirements were closed under the

¹²³The Society, taking advantage of insufficient government school places for migrants from China, operated nine unregistered schools for over 1,500 children, for details see HKPRO, HKRS 935-1-10, P. I. M. Irwin, 'Special Branch's case against the Society', Hong Kong Police Special Branch, February 1959, p. 1; 'Society of Plantations', memo from Alexander Grantham to the Secretary of State for Colonies, 19 June 1959. The amended Education Ordinance (s.37) empowered the Governor to cancel the registration of a school, a school manager or a teacher if he considered that their continued registration was 'prejudicial to the public interest or the welfare of the pupils or of education generally'. For details of the tightened political control and surveillance over education sectors during Black's governorship, see Michael Ng, *Political censorship in British Hong Kong: Freedom of expression and the law (1842-1997)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), Chapter 4.

¹²⁴Irwin, 'Special Branch's case against the Society', pp. 2-3; HKPRO, HKRS 935-1-10, 'Society of Plantations', telegram from R. T. D. Ledward, Colonial Secretary to D.C.N.T., S.C.A., A.G., C.P., P.R.P., P.A., D.S., 17 March 1959.

¹²⁵Ibid.

¹²⁶HKPRO, HKRS 935-1-10, 'Society of Plantations', telegram from Governor to Secretary of State, 18 April 1959; Hong Kong Government, *Hong Kong Government Gazette* (Hong Kong: Government Printer, 1959). The Societies Ordinance (Cap. 151) was amended and a new section 24A that provided for winding-up of a dissolved society was added.

¹²⁷They were deported under section 3(1)(c) of Deportation of Aliens Ordinance, Cap. 240. The Governor in Council deemed their deportation to be 'conducive to the public good'.

Education Ordinance.¹²⁸ These measures ‘paralysed’ the Society and there was ‘no hope for its functioning again in any other form’—its activities were ‘now at a standstill’.¹²⁹ The ‘fairly restrained criticism in the left-wing press’ against the Society’s dissolution suggested to the colonial government that there was ‘no indication of [the] re-establishment of any centralized control, either internally or from outside the Colony, to regain [the] initiative’, according to Governor Black.¹³⁰ These reports however provided opportunities for the right-wing press to attack the Communists, leading to rising Cold War tensions. For example, *Kung Sheung Daily News* argued that the Guangdong Communist force ‘intended to disturb the public’s mind’ and had utilized the incident of deregistration to ‘launch a malicious attack against the colonial government’ and ‘instigate anti-British sentiments’.¹³¹ Indeed, dissolving the Society and deporting its leaders did not put an end to the competing campaigns for the hearts and minds of rural population in Hong Kong, as the next section will reveal.

The food strike during the 1967 riots

The competition between the colonial government and the CCP over the support of rural population did not cease after the Society was knocked out by force. Facing government suppression, the leftists moved underground but resurfaced during the 1967 riots. After the Society’s dissolution, its former leaders and followers bonded with and influenced rural communities in covert ways. For example, they ran cooperative shops offering low-cost commodities from the mainland, some of which subsequently developed into major department stores specializing in the sale of Chinese-made goods that operated for another 50 years.¹³² At the same time, left-wing activists continued to support victims in government infrastructure projects that involved taking back of farmland and eviction of villagers. They also took an active part in negotiations with the government concerning such projects.¹³³ More significantly, a number of the Society’s former followers continued to exercise influence on the management of

¹²⁸HKPRO, HKRS 935-1-10, ‘Society of Plantations schools’, memo from J. Canning to Colonial Secretary, 24 June 1959; TNA, CO 1030/581, Memo from Robert Black to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 19 June 1959.

¹²⁹HKPRO, HKRS 935-1-10, ‘The De-registered Society of Plantations’, by Wong K. T., Hong Kong Police Special Branch, 17 June 1959.

¹³⁰For reports of the leftist press in Hong Kong and the PRC, see HKPRO, HKRS 935-1-10, ‘新華社報道：種植總公會負責人在穗 揭露港英當局迫害經過’ (‘New China News Agency reported: The organizers of the Society of Plantations in Guangzhou exposing how they were persecuted by the British Hong Kong authorities’), *Wen Wei Po*, 7 June 1959; 種植總公會五職員發表聲明 指摘港府藉口無稽 (‘Five employees of the Society of Plantations issued statements accusing the Hong Kong Government of unfounded excuses’), *Wen Wei Po*, 8 June 1959; ‘香港當局，別再放肆’ (‘Hong Kong Government should not act without restraint’), *Nan Fang Ri Bao*, 5 June 1959; ‘親切的慰問，憤怒的抗議’ (Warm consolation and indignant protest), *Nan Fang Ri Bao*, 8 June 1959. For Black’s observation, see memo from Black to the Secretary of State for the Colonies.

¹³¹‘利用種植公會事件 粵共製造反英情緒’ (‘Guangdong Communists using the Society of Plantations incident to create anti-British sentiments’), *Kung Sheung Daily News*, 10 June 1959.

¹³²The department store (中聯國貨公司) in Tsuen Wan only closed down in 2012. Also see Zhou, 香港左派鬥爭史, p. 169.

¹³³The three-year negotiation against land resumption for the construction of Plover Cover Reservoir is an example. See *ibid.*, pp. 169–170.

state-sponsored vegetable marketing cooperative societies. By the 1960s, the colonial government believed that some of these societies, such as that in Sha Tin, were under 'communist leadership'.¹³⁴ Even the Advisory Board of the VMO, on which cooperative leaders sat, showed 'a strong left-wing leaning' tendency.¹³⁵ During his investigation of rural communities in Sha Tin from 1967–1968, anthropologist Goran Aijmer saw a vegetable-carrying lorry painted with communist slogans and heard revolutionary songs broadcast into the surrounding farmland by a Guangdong radio station.¹³⁶

The Hong Kong government's efforts to counter these activities included the expansion of 'friendly' cooperative societies in the New Territories. In the early 1960s, in addition to supporting the establishment of new cooperatives in 'deep' rural areas, the VMO began offering cooperatives financial and material support. For example, it advanced loans to cooperatives to build new offices,¹³⁷ supplied durable plastic baskets produced in Japan to farmers to replace the bamboo ones they used, and arranged military boats to transport vegetables sold in the Kowloon wholesale market across Victoria Harbour to Hong Kong Island for retail sale.¹³⁸ The Agriculture and Fisheries Department also directly subsidized farmers' living costs by, for example, selling rice to them at a discount when the price rose in the market.¹³⁹ Even before these measures, the number of cooperatives had increased steadily, rising from four in the early 1950s to 21 in 1959. During the same period, their membership increased almost nine-fold, from just over 754 to more than 6540.¹⁴⁰ The pace of growth picked up in the 1960s. Towards the end of the decade, the number of registered cooperative societies stood at 31, with membership comprising more than 10,000 farmers.¹⁴¹ By 1966, the vegetable marketing cooperatives constituted a powerful rural distribution network, delivering more than 80 per cent of the locally grown vegetables sold in the Kowloon wholesale market, in contrast to just 35 per cent in 1952.¹⁴² Such a deep network into the villages that enhanced local production capacity was turned into an important counter-communist force by the colonial government during one of the major riots in Hong Kong history.

The leftist-inspired riots in 1967 posed a serious threat to the colonial government. The riots began with an industrial dispute at an artificial flower factory in Kowloon in May 1967, and turned into city-wide anti-imperialist riots led by the leftist All Circles

¹³⁴Goran Aijmer, *Atomistic society in Sha Tin: Immigrants in a Hong Kong valley* (Goteborg, Sweden: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1986), p. 145.

¹³⁵Goran Aijmer, *Economic man in Sha Tin: Vegetable gardeners in a Hong Kong valley* (London: Curzon, 1980), p. 79.

¹³⁶Aijmer, *Atomistic society*, pp. 286–270.

¹³⁷'各蔬菜合作社發展迅速' ('Various vegetable cooperatives develop rapidly'), *Kung Sheung Daily News*, 29 December 1961.

¹³⁸Li, '蔬菜統營處歷年大事回顧', pp. 71–72.

¹³⁹'大埔蔬菜合作社售平米與社員' ('Tai Po vegetable cooperative selling cheap rice to cooperative members'), *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 18 June 1967.

¹⁴⁰HKPRO, HKRS 424-3-7, 'Vegetable marketing cooperative societies', attached to 'Relief rice from China', memo from D. R. Holmes to District Officers, 14 July 1959.

¹⁴¹'The Federation of Vegetable Marketing Co-operatives Societies'.

¹⁴²'The Agriculture and Fisheries department report', quoted in Man, 'An appraisal of the marketing', p. 27.

Anti-Persecution Struggle Committee.¹⁴³ On 28 June 1967, the Committee announced that its member units from 59 industries would stage a four-day general ‘food strike’ from 29 June to 2 July 1967, during which all supplies of foodstuffs and commodities from China would be stopped. Although it was unclear whether the stoppage of food supplies from China was supported by the Chinese authorities or organized by local leftists on their own, it caused the colonial government to believe that the Chinese authorities could, ‘if they wished, enforce an embargo on all supplies of fresh food to Hong Kong from China’.¹⁴⁴

Although the Government Information Services published reports in local newspapers assuring the public that Hong Kong’s food supplies remained stable and urging citizens not to panic¹⁴⁵, it is clear that behind the scenes the colonial government did not take the food strike lightly. A cross-departmental Emergency Food Control Committee comprising senior officials from the Colonial Secretariat, Commerce and Industry Department, and Agriculture and Fisheries Department, as well as the Defence Secretary, was formed to hear daily and weekly food supply reports compiled by frontline officers. The committee also tracked the movement of supplies and the prices of vegetables, beef, pork, rice, poultry, fish, and eggs in order to formulate a corresponding food strategy.¹⁴⁶

At the time of the food strike, about 60 per cent of the 29,000 tonnes of vegetables consumed in Hong Kong monthly came from mainland China, with around 30 per cent coming from local sources and the remainder from foreign suppliers such as Japan and Taiwan.¹⁴⁷ Between 6500 and 7500 piculs of vegetables crossed the border into Hong Kong every day.¹⁴⁸ Supplies began to dry up even before the announcement of the food strike on 29 June, with ‘[n]o imports of vegetables arriv[ing] from China from 26 June to 3 July’.¹⁴⁹ On 29 June, the Director of Agriculture and Fisheries, E. H. Nichols, together with senior officials of the VMO, visited a number of vegetable marketing cooperative societies in the New Territories to discuss how to expand local vegetable production capacity.¹⁵⁰ However, such discussion could not mitigate the impact of the halt in vegetable supplies from China overnight. Vegetable prices rose quickly, from an average of HK\$18 per picul at the beginning of June to HK\$22 per picul at the end

¹⁴³Ray Yep, ‘The 1967 riots in Hong Kong: The domestic and diplomatic fronts of the Governor’, in *May days in Hong Kong: Riot and emergency in 1967*, (eds) Robert Bickers and Ray Yep (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), p. 22.

¹⁴⁴HKPRO, HKRS 1058-1-22, ‘Memorandum for Executive Council: Supplies of essential foodstuffs’, by Colonial Secretariat, 24 August 1967, p. 1; HKPRO, HKRS 270-5-87, ‘Emergency Food Control Committee—Minutes and agenda’ has confirmed that left-wing food importers were involved in obstructing food transportation from the border.

¹⁴⁵魚農處工商處強調副食供應無缺 (‘Agriculture and fisheries and commerce and industry departments emphasize that there is no shortage in non-staple food supply’) *Kung Sheung Daily News*, 29 June 1967.

¹⁴⁶‘Emergency Food Control Committee—Minutes and agenda’.

¹⁴⁷TNA, FCO 21/214, Telegram from David Trench to the Commonwealth Office, 16 June 1967.

¹⁴⁸HKPRO, HKRS 163-1-3565, ‘Imports of livestock, fruits and vegetables into Hong Kong’, memo from J. M. Riddell-Swan to Defence Secretary, attached to ‘Food supplies—Weekly reports’, 29 June 1967.

¹⁴⁹‘Imports of livestock, fruits and vegetables into Hong Kong’.

¹⁵⁰漁農處長分訪新界蔬菜合作社研討協助農民促進生產 (‘Director of the Agriculture and Fisheries Department visited vegetable cooperatives in the New Territories to research and help farmers to improve productivity’), *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 29 June 1967.

of June, representing a 22 per cent increase. Prices continued to increase to HK\$28, as reported in a memo on the food situation as of 6 July 1967, representing a month-on-month increase of over 60 per cent.

The leftist-inspired food strike tested the farmers' allegiance to the colonial government. Although it remains difficult to prove that vegetable farmers were loyal supporters of the colonial state, it was evident that most of them did not display strong anti-colonial sentiments and support the initiative advocated by the leftist urban workers. This could be partly attributed to CCP's loss of credibility due to the widespread famine that resulted from the Great Leap Forward and land collectivization.¹⁵¹ With increased agricultural production, local farmers were able and willing to absorb part of the market share left over by China imports by increasing their supplies. The Federation of Cooperatives called for a special meeting, at which they resolved to support the government to maintain a continuous supply of vegetables. Local security groups backed by the cooperatives were also formed to 'support the government in maintaining law and order' in rural Hong Kong,¹⁵² and the police force was deployed to escort cooperatives' lorries transporting vegetables from the New Territories to urban areas.¹⁵³ These People's Security Units, with members of the local cooperatives and Rural Committees being the 'backbone', 'support[ing] the government efforts in keeping local public order'.¹⁵⁴ On 30 June 1967, three cooperatives made a public announcement and sent letters to the Director of Agriculture and Fisheries promising to guarantee Hong Kong's food supply.¹⁵⁵ As T. C. Chau, the Tai Po District Extension Officer of the Agriculture and Fisheries Department, observed, 'an interesting aspect of this cooperative enterprise lies in the fact that during the four-day food strike called by local Communists earlier this year', local 'farmers boosted their production to the extent that the Ta Ku Ling [a rural village bordering mainland China] office had to arrange extra transport facilities to get the vegetables to the market'.¹⁵⁶ As *The Times* pointed out, many local retailers in market and hawker areas also 'continued to sell their goods in defiance of the strike call'.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵¹For failures of land reforms and collectivization and the resulting widespread famine in China, see Roderick MacFarquhar, *The origins of the Cultural Revolution, Volume II: The Great Leap Forward, 1958-1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) and Frank Dikotter, *Mao's great famine: The history of China's most devastating catastrophe, 1958-62* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010). For Great Leap Forward's impact on Guangdong province, see Ezra Vogel, *Canton under Communism: Programs and politics in a provincial capital, 1949-1968* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), Chapters 6 and 7. The disastrous development in China might have affected CCP's credibility amongst Hong Kong vegetable farmers, especially those who migrated from Guangdong to Hong Kong due to food shortages and the fear of being sent to the countryside to 'aid agriculture'. For Great Leap Forward and the subsequent influx of farmers from Guangdong to Hong Kong, see Vogel, *Canton under Communism*, pp. 292-296.

¹⁵²'Hong Kong hit by food strike', *The Times*, 30 June 1967.

¹⁵³Weng, '回顧及展望蔬菜產銷合作社的發展', p. 35.

¹⁵⁴Chiu and Hung, "The paradox of stability revisited," p. 83.

¹⁵⁵'三個農牧團體上書當局保證魚菜肉類大量供應民食' ('Three farming and animal husbandry groups have submitted a letter to the authorities to ensure that there is abundant supply of vegetables, fish and meat for people's consumption'), *Kung Sheung Daily News*, 30 June 1967.

¹⁵⁶HKPRO, HKRS 545-1-396, 'Streamlined service markets colony's vegetables', *South China Morning Post*, 30 October 1967.

¹⁵⁷HKPRO, HKRS 70-2-439, 'Strike cuts Hong Kong food', *The Times*, 14 June 1967.

The food strike also tested the capacity of the reformed food supply system under the VMO. In 1967, only 60 per cent of Hong Kong's vegetables were sourced from China, as opposed to 85 per cent of eggs and 90 per cent of pork. The prompt joint efforts of the government and the state-sponsored vegetable marketing cooperatives to increase local vegetable production eased the impact of the food strike in relatively short order.¹⁵⁸ It appears that the earlier efforts of the colonial government to encourage local vegetable farming, improve local farmers' standard of living and cultivate a supportive rural network alleviated the strained condition of vegetable supply during the riots. The average per-picul price of vegetables also fell fairly quickly, declining from HK\$30 at the beginning of July to HK\$22 at the end, a 30 per cent decrease.¹⁵⁹ However, the leftist efforts did impose pressure on the pork supply, triggering an internal debate amongst government officials about whether meat rationing would be necessary. This was partly due to the shortage of local production. Nevertheless, the vegetable supply during autumn 1967 was 'well above the normal position', with locally produced vegetables amounting 'to some 1000 piculs more than the [usual] October supply'. There was thus 'a definite possibility of over-supply in the near future, with gluts of certain locally produced leaf vegetables'.¹⁶⁰

Although there was no direct evidence suggesting that farmers became loyal supporters of the colonial state, during the leftist-inspired food strike of 1967, no large-scale farmer-initiated riots materialized. In fact, security units organized by farmers in the New Territories apprehended suspected leftists and handed them over to the police.¹⁶¹ As the leftist riots neared an end in December 1967, Agriculture and Fisheries Director E. H. Nichols observed that the VMO brought a price-stabilizing effect on local produce:

The local supply of fresh vegetables was the controlling factor in the price pattern for this commodity; for instance, during November, there was a slight drop in the wholesale prices of local supplies and Chinese vegetable prices had readily followed suit.¹⁶²

The cooperation of local farmers and the relatively stable supply of vegetables demonstrated that the Vegetable Marketing Scheme, along with legal measures imposed earlier in the late 1950s, as well as other state-sponsored cooperative societies in rural Hong Kong, such as pig-raising societies, farmers' irrigation societies, and housing societies, served both of their political and economic functions in the New

¹⁵⁸Government policy to prioritize local vegetable and fish farming in the 1950s made swine and egg supplies, which required larger capital and higher level of skills to localize, largely dependent on import from China, despite assistance by KAAA, see Cai, *戰後新界發展史*, pp. 36–39 and The Kadoorie Agricultural Aid Association, *Agricultural and animal*.

¹⁵⁹Imports of livestock, fruits and vegetables into Hong Kong'.

¹⁶⁰HKPRO, HKRS 163-1-3565, 'Food supplies, week-ending 11.10.1967', October 1967.

¹⁶¹Chiu and Hung, 'The colonial state and rural protests', p. 35; HKPRO, HKRS 270-5-87, Minutes of the Emergency Food Control Committee, 14 December 1967.

¹⁶²HKPRO, HKRS 270-5-87, Minute of the 19th Meeting of the Emergency Food Control Committee held at 10 a.m. on Thursday, 11th December 1967 in the Conference Room Commerce and Industry Department, 18 December 1967.

Territories.¹⁶³ Nevertheless, agrarian competition between the colonial government and the Chinese Communists in rural Hong Kong did not cease with the end of the 1967 riots.¹⁶⁴ The Chinese Communists, who were being driven underground and adopted an approach of 'peaceful expansion', continued to solicit support from the rural communities by setting up communist-influenced cooperatives and organizations to fulfil their practical needs which were not addressed by the government.¹⁶⁵ In a security committee paper prepared in 1975 for Governor Murray MacLehose, security advisors of the colonial government concluded that 'the Communists had succeeded in extending their influence [in the New Territories] till it touched even the remotest hamlet'.¹⁶⁶

Conclusion

Hong Kong was an important Cold War stage for the theatrical display of conflicts between the PRC and the British colonial government, both of which were competing for political legitimacy. It was also an 'intermediary zone' where some Chinese immigrants left mainland China for a better living and became embedded in the Cold War developmental politics of ideological, economic, and cultural contestations.¹⁶⁷ Influenced by the evolving Cold War tensions during and after the Korean War, these contestations between the CCP and the colonial government to seek supporters were tolerated by the colonial government in the 1950s as long as they did not jeopardize Hong Kong's internal security. Such Cold War dynamics unfolded through the agrarian politics and local economic concerns during the age of decolonization in Hong Kong. Particularly, the tension was visible in the porous land frontier, that is Hong Kong's New Territories, where there was intensifying competition between the US-led capitalist bloc and Chinese communist bloc at the 'village level'. Echoing the call to shift the focus of studies from high politics to culture of the Cold War, this article examines the under-explored battle for political support in rural Hong Kong amongst immigrant farmers. It also extends the study of the Cold War in Hong Kong from ideological battles and riots in urban areas to developmental politics and economic contestations in the much more sizable yet under-investigated rural areas. This article reveals that the colonial government established the VMO, a state-owned enterprise, to first nationalize the vegetable wholesale market, and subsequently used it to combat increasing political influence and anti-government activities of the Communist-controlled Society of Plantations. It also shows that to mobilize support in Hong Kong, the Chinese Communists adapted its united-front strategies to Hong Kong's political, economic, and social environment: rather than merely employing the

¹⁶³For a list of these cooperative societies, see *Hong Kong annual departmental report by the Registrar of Co-operative Societies and Director of Marketing* of various years in the 1950s.

¹⁶⁴Tables 5.2 and 5.8, 'Estimated local production of foodstuffs' and 'Import of foodstuffs' in Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, *Hong Kong annual digest of statistics, 1978 edition* (Hong Kong: Government Printer, 1978), pp. 67 and 70; Chiu and Hung, 'The paradox of stability revisited', p. 81.

¹⁶⁵It was believed that Zhou En-lai gave such directives to communist supporters in Hong Kong in 1968, see TNA, FCO 40/382, memo from E. C. Laird to Wilford and Logan, 13 July 1972.

¹⁶⁶HKPRO, HKRS 935-2-1, 'Expansion of communist influence in the New Territories', enclosed in memo from Security Branch to members of Governor's Security Committee, 29 June 1976.

¹⁶⁷Fu, 'More than just entertaining', p. 42.

ideological approach used in China, they utilized the New Territories' under-developed rural social welfare systems and offered material and monetary support to farming communities in the New Territories. This was a manifestation of their pragmatism. The popularity of the Society of Plantations amongst migrant farmers created incentives for the colonial government to further reform the VMO scheme and expand the existing cooperative societies. However, at the end, the Society was not out-competed economically by the scheme but was eliminated by the colonial government through draconian measures. Yet, suppression of the Society did not eradicate leftist political influence in rural Hong Kong, which continued through Hong Kong's reversion to China in 1997. Winning the hearts and minds of the rural community in the New Territories through similar strategies of guarding its economic interests remains a significant political strategy to cultivate loyalty towards the Hong Kong government which now operates under the auspices of the CCP, despite the fact that only very few members of the rural communities remain farmers in today's Hong Kong. This article therefore also provides a longitudinal view of how the Chinese Communists used pragmatic approaches and non-state actors to spread CCP's patriotic ideas, co-opt rural communities and expand leftist influence in the British colony. It invites comparative studies not only with present-day Hong Kong but also other territories in Asia in the Cold War.

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