THE MYTH OF APATHY:

HONG KONG

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1966 - 1985

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ABSTRACT

It has been widely accepted for many years that the people of Hong Kong were politically apathetic. This myth of apathy was a construct manufactured by supporters of the colonial status quo; that was a benevolent autocracy which was opposed to any constitutional political reform in the colony. The time frame this thesis examines is from the Kowloon riots of 1966 to the first elections to the Legislative Council in 1985. During this period there were many indications that the people of Hong Kong were not apathetic. However the objective of the colonial authorities was to maintain political control and the myth of apathy was used to achieve this objective. The colonial government of Hong Kong reinforced its legitimacy by reiterating that they were governing by consensus through consultation channels with the public. This though was not the reality. The colonial government consciously and effectively deprived the people of Hong Kong of a voice in the administration of the colony. Any political reforms that were conceded were instituted to placate the public and in no way altered the constitutional frame work of the colony. Social and political reforms made by the colonial authorities were designed to diminish discontent and therefore potential political agitation. The people of Hong Kong were never politically apathetic.

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INTRODUCTION

Literature discussing the longevity of an antiquated colonial system of government in Hong Kong reiterates the statement that the people of Hong Kong are politically apathetic. Statements such as the following, by a well respected Hong Kong academic, Dr Lau Siu-kai, are typical of this mindset: "The Chinese society of Hong Kong is composed largely of immigrants and their offspring. Motivated primarily by economic aspirations, they are blatantly utilitarian in inclination and passionately apolitical or anti-political."[1] This apathy has been consistently used by the government as an excuse for the lack of constitutional reform and representative government in Hong Kong. Because of the absence of militant opposition to the government, this supposed political apathy has essentially become an unquestioned assumption about the people of Hong Kong. This has helped to create a current international mindset relieving Britain of responsibility for the political fate of Hong Kong's people after 1997, when Hong Kong returns to communist China.[2] Statements that the Hong Kong people are politically apathetic remain the dominate view when discussing the lack of political participation in Hong Kong, as Dr Lau's statement, written in 1986, shows.

Aline K. Wong, writing in 1970/71, offers an alternative view to the standard argument that the Chinese people have no desire to be involved in politics. But this view still asserts the existence of political apathy, though it gives other than traditional arguments for this apathy:

> The political apathy of the Hong Kong Chinese ... must be understood within the context of the present political system and with reference to the past record of constitutional reforms. The lack of political involvement on the part of many people is a consequence of their indifference toward the existing form of

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[1] Lau Siu-kai, 'The Changing Political Culture of the Hong Kong Chinese', in *Hong Kong in Transition* (ed) Joseph Y.S. Cheng (Oxford, 1986), p.26.

[2] Hong Kong Island was ceded to Britain by the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, Kowloon peninsula (situated on Mainland China) was ceded to Britain by the First Convention of Peking in 1860. The New Territories (also on the mainland) were leased to Britain for 99 years by the Second Convention of Peking in 1898. This lease is due to expire in 1997. Massive industrial expansion into the New Territories during the 1970s made this area an integral part of Hong Kong's economy and society essentially making Hong Kong unviable without this area. Under the Sino-British Joint Declaration, signed in 1984, the entire territory of Hong Kong will be returned to China in 1997.

> limited representation and of their disillusionment with the Hong Kong Government in introducing constitutional reforms.[3]

Wong says of her paper, written over 25 years ago: "The line of argument taken in this paper is in contrast to a widely held belief, especially in official circles, that the Chinese residents in Hong Kong do not desire any large-scale participation in the governmental process."[4] Though I dispute Wong's thesis of apathy I will expand upon and add to Wong's argument of limited representation and lack of constitutional reform to enforce the central purpose of my thesis which is to refute the claim that the people of Hong Kong were politically apathetic.

The time frame this thesis will examine is from 1966 when Hong Kong experienced major riots, to the first election of the Legislative Council in 1985. This time frame has been chosen as it covers the recent historical background to the 1997 British departure from Hong Kong that puts the lie to British claims of the apathy of the Hong Kong people. The social unrest in 1966/67 showed that the people of Hong Kong were not as apathetic as the authorities had claimed. This was followed, in the 1970s, by a period of relative quiet in Hong Kong, and the authorities used this quiet as evidence of the political apathy of the Hong Kong people and as a reason for lack of political reform. Then, during the 1980s, the government suddenly decided, in the light of negotiations with China, that the political complexion of Hong Kong should be reformed, despite ignoring all calls in the past for such reform.

My thesis will prove, through an analysis of official government documents and newspaper sources, that rather than being politically apathetic, the people of Hong Kong were denied opportunities for direct political expression by the colonial government; that the colonial government discouraged the growth of a Hong Kong national identity or consciousness; that the colonial government attempted to foster political apathy by various means such as legislation, by enforcing the paternalistic political set-up and eventually by making some social welfare reforms and increased social spending. In addition this thesis will argue that the colonial government exploited the myth of political apathy using all available resources within

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[3] Aline K. Wong, 'Political Apathy and the Political System in Hong Kong', *United College Journal*, 8(1970-71), p.1.

[4] ibid., p.1.

their power to maintain the status quo of a benevolent autocracy. Because I do not read Chinese this thesis is primarily concerned with examining the colonial government's attempt to avoid reform which might question their autocratic control. I am primarily concerned to show how the colonial government created or expanded the notion of political apathy of the majority of Hong Kong's populace. Rather than attempt to analyse the overall political views of the population I have selected specific instances or events which counter-act or undermine or disprove the notion of political apathy.

Before outlining the chapters of this thesis there is a need to clarify the technical terms dealt with in this thesis, namely 'political' and 'apathy'. The dictionary definitions are as follows:

Apathy: Insensibility to suffering; indifference; mental indolence.

Political: Of the State or its government; of public affairs; of politics; (of person) engaged in civil administration.[5]

In this thesis these terms will be used according to their dictionary meanings. I will interpret acts that displayed concern for public affairs as political acts. All public issues in Hong Kong become political issues by virtue of the colonial government's paternalistic nature and its efforts to dissipate any challenge to the status quo. The Hong Kong authorities were able to perpetuate the myth of political apathy among the Hong Kong populace by confining their definition of political activity to an extreme one, that is, an attempt to overthrow the government. An absence of such extreme activity was taken as an indication of political indifference. I will show that the people of Hong Kong were not insensible to suffering, nor were they socially or politically indifferent or mentally indolent. Many had an interest in government but were unable to participate, and many were deeply concerned with public affairs and civil administration.

Chapter One will provide a background to the main argument. It will firstly examine the structure of the Hong Kong Government showing how its autocratic design was unsympathetic to representative government during the time frame of this thesis. Secondly, an examination of the failed attempt at constitutional reform by the Governor Sir Mark Young in the late 1940s and early 1950s, will show how and why the myth of political apathy arose. Finally, I will examine the construction and exploitation of the myth

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[5]*The Oxford Illustrated Dictionary* (Oxford, 2nd ed, 1976), pp.32 & 653.

of political apathy by the government and interested parties and its widespread acceptance both in Hong Kong and throughout the world.

Chapter Two will examine the 1966 Kowloon riots and the 1967 riots in support of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The 1966 riots, sparked off by an increase in ferry fare prices, pointed to the fact that there was a growing number of Hong Kong people who were dissatisfied with the paternalistic colonial government. A commission of inquiry into the 1966 riots developed a theory of a communication gap between the government and the people to explain the riots. It was not considered that government attitudes and policies may have been to blame. The 1967 riots in support of the Cultural Revolution, being ostensibly an issue of mainland politics, were not considered by the authorities as a major threat to their regime. The colonial authorities used the 1967 riots to say that the only political activity in the colony was inspired by external politics, thereby reinforcing their claim that the people of Hong Kong had no desire to be involved in the politics of the colony. But the 1966 and 1967 riots revealed the potential for political activism that existed in the colony.

Chapter Three will focus upon developments in the later years of the governorship of Sir David Trench, from 1966 to 1971, which showed a response to previous government neglect. Keeping in line with a *laissez faire* policy, social intervention by the government was virtually non-existent, apart from emergency relief and public housing. It was believed that "... Hong Kong [was] a British colony which exist[ed] primarily to serve the interests of merchants and industrialists".[6] The 1966 Kowloon riots and the 1967 riots in support of the Cultural Revolution in Hong Kong can be seen as an attempt to force the government to admit to public dissatisfaction. The government response was to blame this dissatisfaction on a communication gap between the government and the public. The government stated that the public were not well enough aware of what government was doing for them and this was why there was a gap. This chapter argues however, that the gap was caused more by government unwillingness to listen to the public, a paternalistic style of government from the top down. Despite government rhetoric in support of closing the gap, reforms were superficial, and only designed to placate the public. The government did not address the most significant issue of the gap; that the people wanted more voice in the running

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[6] C.P. Lo, *Hong Kong* (London, 1992), p.173.

of the colony. Once life returned to normal after the major riots, calls for more substantial social and political reforms continued among the populace.

Chapter Four focuses on the early years of the governorship of Murray MacLehose, 1972 to 1976. It was this period that saw a fundamental redirection of government policy towards social issues. During this period political activity took the form of public pressure on the government to act in areas of social reform. Public pressure made the political issue of social reform the aim of the new administration. But I will argue that the government only succumbed to this public pressure in order to maintain the status quo, and only when it was absolutely essential. These reforms did not stem from any moral obligation felt by the government towards the people; they were designed only to quell calls for political reform. These reforms were, in relation to Hong Kong's past, quite significant, but compared with other industrial nations they were very minor. Also, during this period, the Hong Kong administration faced a great crisis of legitimacy when the government was forced to admit that corruption was rife throughout the colony and, in particular, in the police force. Public pressure forced the government to take some action with the setting up of the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC). Corruption became a political issue for the government, and the people of Hong Kong were certainly not indifferent to it, or accepting of the problem.

Chapter Five will focus upon the later years of Murray MacLehose's governorship, 1977 to 1982. This period began with another political crisis for the Hong Kong administration. The strength of numbers in the Hong Kong police force, plus its wide ranging powers, such as arbitrary stop and search, had been an effective deterrent to any overt display of dissatisfaction with the colonial government. Exposed by the ICAC as corrupt in epidemic proportions, the rank and file of the police force in 1977 staged massive protests against the ICAC, in what amounted to a near mutiny against the authorities. The Governor, acting unilaterally, granted an amnesty for corruption exposed before 1977, though only a few weeks previously he had reaffirmed the government's commitment to eradicating corruption. The placation of this substantial political power bloc was demonstrative of the lengths to which the government would go to maintain the autocratic status quo. It also reaffirmed government reliance upon, and cooption of, various power blocs, such as the police force, to maintain their legitimacy and the

political stability of the colony. This chapter will also demonstrate that social reforms continued but the infamous gap between public and government remained and that political reforms were insubstantial.

Chapter Six concerns the period of the governorship of Sir Edward Youde, and the period of Sino-British negotiations on the future status of Hong Kong, from 1982 to the first elections to the Legislative Council in 1985. This period marked the beginnings of political change in Hong Kong. Prior to this period the colonial government had consistently stated that constitutional reforms for the colony were impossible because the government of communist China would never allow them, but under Sir Edward the colonial government began moves toward a more representative (albeit minimal) government, with the full knowledge that Hong Kong would return to China in 1997. This move had nothing to do with local calls for constitutional reform (which the colonial government had always ignored); it was a face saving measure by the British Government to demonstrate to the world that they were not merely abandoning the people of Hong Kong to an unknown future with communist China. The elections to the Legislative Council represented the first moves towards representative government in Hong Kong, but it was a situation of too little too late. This chapter will argue that such reforms were never intended to be anything other than window dressing for public consumption.

The conclusion of this thesis can be summed up as follows; the people of Hong Kong were not politically apathetic. They were denied any chance to participate directly in the administration of the colony by a colonial government determined to maintain the status quo of a benevolent autocracy. Arguments that claimed that the people of Hong Kong must be politically apathetic because they have not rebelled against the government, despite the anathema of colonial rule, were misguided. The essential way of life in Hong Kong was not a cause of major dissatisfaction for the Hong Kong people, that is, the system was not so oppressive as to create militant opposition. Denied the opportunity to participate politically, the people of Hong Kong therefore found other ways to influence the government, especially the use of pressure to gain social reforms. This tactic was successful because the colonial government was willing to use social reform as a means to quell calls for political reform.

The gap between government and the people was never successfully closed because the government stubbornly refused to see that the main cause of this gap was their ignorance of public views and their refusal to respond until issues reached crisis level. Despite the colonial government's claim to possess great communications networks, this ignorance was the reality. Government attempts to close the gap by making clearer to the people what they were doing failed because it was not a two-way process. They did not seriously consider the public's views, and when these views were sought they were often ignored. The few attempts to solicit public opinion were only a superficial attempt to show that the administration was ruling by consensus.

Eventually (a catch phrase concerning any type of reform in Hong Kong) calls for constitutional reform that had always been ignored were heeded in 1985. But again this response was not an act of moral obligation on the part of the Hong Kong Government but an attempt by the British Government to save face in the international arena. The people of Hong Kong were never politically apathetic, but were successfully prevented by the colonial government from being able to participate in the government of the colony. They consequently found other outlets for political expression such as putting pressure on the government for social reform or subtle resistance to government policies.

CHAPTER ONE

CONSTRUCTION OF THE MYTH

The belief that the people of Hong Kong are politically apathetic has become a historical truism rarely questioned by researchers of Hong Kong society. This belief dates back to the 1940s, at which time the Governor, Sir Mark Young, put forward plans for constitutional reform. These reforms would have led to eventual self-government in the colony. In the early 1950s the next Governor, Sir Alexander Grantham, with the support of the Unofficials[1] on the Legislative Council (Legco), rejected the Young Plan and all other proposals for reform; the resultant situation was maintenance of the status quo of autocratic rule. The fact that the Unofficials had supported Grantham, and the lack of public influence over the government led to the belief that the people of Hong Kong were politically apathetic and did not desire any form of representative government. This belief remained in people's minds for the entire period covered by this thesis, and is still believed even today in the 1990s. This was due, in great part, to clever governmental exploitation of the myth of political apathy.

As Peter Slinn has observed of the Hong Kong Government:

> Until October, 1985, there was no elected element in the central government and legislature of the colony of Hong Kong. Hong Kong is a classic model of old-style colonial government; executive power is vested in the London-appointed Governor, advised by (but not obliged to take the advice of) an *executive council* made up of nominated 'official' and 'unofficial' members; legislative power is vested locally in a *legislative council*, presided over by the Governor, with a power vested in London to 'disallow' any ordinance passed. Until October, 1985, the legislative council ('Legco') consisted wholly of nominated official and unofficial members.[2]

This is an apt and simple explanation of the government of Hong Kong. It succinctly describes what was, during the time frame of this thesis, a

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1 Unofficial members of the Legislative Council were non-civil servant appointees of the Governor.

2 Peter Slinn, 'The Hong Kong Settlement: A Preliminary Assessment', *International Relations*, 9:1(1987), p.8.

colonial anachronism. The government of Hong Kong remained, as it had since the nineteenth century, an example of classic colonial-style rule. Meetings of the Executive Council (Exco) were held behind closed doors and information from these meetings was not publicly available. It was here that policy was ultimately decided before being presented to the Legco. All members of the Legco were nominated by the Governor and were therefore by implication supporters of the status quo. The Unofficials (usually wealthy businessmen and Chinese elite) did not function as an opposition and were by no stretch of the imagination representative of the Hong Kong population. They were generally sympathetic to government policies which in turn enabled them to prosper. Business interests were entrenched in the government of Hong Kong. It must be remembered in this respect that Hong Kong was founded as a trading colony; as one Unofficial Legislative Councillor put it: "Hong Kong exists of trade, by trade and for trade".[3]

The closest one can come to the workings of the colonial government is through an examination of the official reports of the Legislative Council, but these do not make for exciting reading in comparison to, for example, debates in the British House of Commons. There were no debates as such in the Legislative Council. Governor Murray MacLehose stated at a Legislative Council meeting in 1975: "It is indeed not the tradition that Hong Kong should be governed by debate, or that there should be debate and opposition for debate and opposition's sake".[4] Meetings of this council consisted of the Governor making a policy speech at the beginning of each session, followed by an address of thanks to the Governor, first by the Unofficials, then the Officials.[5] These were prewritten speeches that generally praised the government. The same pattern emerged with the presentation of Bills. Each member made a speech giving their views and ended with the standard phrase "I support the motion". With few exceptions, it is difficult to find any motions opposed by the Unofficials at this time. The only occasion on which all the Unofficials opposed a motion in the period under discussion was in 1983 when considering a motion made to amend the wording of an Education Commission Report.[6] The Unofficials were in any case in a minority in

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[3] Mr Tien, *Hong Kong Hansard. Reports of the Sittings of the Legislative Council of Hong Kong*, 23 October 1975, Session 1975/76 (1 October 1975 - 4 August 1976), p.132.

[4] ibid., 8 October 1975, Session 1975/76, p.44.

[5] Officials of the Legco were civil servant appointees.

[6] *Hong Kong Hansard*, 13 July 1983, Session 1982/83 (6 October 1982 - 10 August 1983), pp.1121-1127.

government. The Officials had, in theory, the ability to outvote them on any matter.

No part of the government had a mandate from the people of Hong Kong. The government was in no way democratic or even representative of the majority of the Hong Kong population, which was 98 per cent Chinese. "The only concession to democracy [was] the Urban Council, a body mainly concerned with sewage and public health. Half of its members [were] elected on a restricted franchise".[7] This franchise was for the major part of the period 1966 to 1985 limited to 300,000 people (in a population of over four million) with certain complicated educational and professional qualifications. The lack of participation in voting or even registering for the Urban Council elections has time and again been used to validify the statement that the people of Hong Kong were politically apathetic, and justify the lack of constitutional reform. Yet the majority of the population were disenfranchised, therefore having no right to vote. Government, because of this fact, attempted to maintain its legitimacy through the claim of governing by consensus. This was claimed to be achieved by consultation with the people through such channels as the City District Officers Scheme (CDO) and Umelco (Unofficial Members of the Executive and Legislative Council Office). These schemes were set up to bridge the gap between the government and the people, but these schemes were arguably unsuccessful.[8] Government, while professing to be sensitive to public opinion continued to ultimately represent the business elite.

The Hong Kong Government was a bureaucratic entity, in which the majority of Hong Kong people had little chance of participating. The outdated autocratic colonial system of government was unsympathetic to any kind of constitutional reform or moves towards a more representative system of government. Theirs was a the system works, the people have all they need, there is no need for change mentality. The Hong Kong Government was an entity unto itself, answerable to no one except the British parliament, who generally took little interest in Hong Kong's affairs. Dominated by an expatriate elite and Chinese business or social elite, as Unofficial Councillor, Mr Wong observed: "Hong Kong is a paternalistic

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[7] N.J. Miners, 'Hong Kong: A Case Study in Political Stability', *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 13(1975), p.27.

[8] See Lau Siu-kai, 'The Government, Intermediate Organizations, and Grass-Roots Politics in Hong Kong', *Asian Survey*, 21:8(1981), pp.876-879.

society".[9] This was a reference to the traditional belief that Hong Kong people followed a Confucian philosophy (which will be discussed in more depth later in the chapter) and it was upon this premise that the Hong Kong Government saw the legitimacy of its antiquated colonial governing style; the people wanted a paternalistic government not a representative one. By controlling access to government the colonial authorities were able to surrounded themselves with Legislative Councillors who benefited from the status quo and were unlikely to rock the boat.

Britain, and other major colonial nations, have, since the end of World War Two, guided their colonies on the road to self-government and independence. As stated by the Secretary of State for the Colonies:

> The cardinal principle of British colonial policy is that dependent territories shall be guided to responsible self-government within the commonwealth in conditions that ensure to the people concerned both a fair standard of living and freedom from oppression from any quarter. As part of that policy it is the aim to work as rapidly as circumstances permit towards the establishment of strong central governments, democratically constituted, to which eventual responsibility can be transferred gladly and with confidence.[10]

Hong Kong was an exception to this rule. There was never any intention on the part of the British or Hong Kong Government's to apply this policy to Hong Kong. The colony was destined to remain in a state of political limbo, the trappings of democracy (for example freedom of speech, limited elections and the rule of law) without representative government, a contradiction in terms. Stability and prosperity were the catch-phrases of the Hong Kong elite; democracy or representative government, by contrast, represented to them instability and a corresponding loss of revenue. This belief led the government of Hong Kong, and those who supported the colonial regime, to reject any notion of substantial constitutional reform that would have reduced their power. In this process interested parties successfully created and perpetuated the myth of apathy about the people of Hong Kong.

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9 *Hong Kong Hansard*, 1 November 1972, Session 1972/73 (1 October 1972 - 30 September 1973), p.59.

10 Cmnd. 7709, British Parliamentary Report, *British Dependencies in the Far East 1945-1949*, p.51.

At the end of World War Two, with a Labour Government in office in Britain which supported a decolonisation policy, there was pressure for constitutional reform in Hong Kong. Sir Mark Young, restored as Hong Kong's Governor at the end of the Japanese occupation, was in favour of such reforms. He formulated a plan, known as the Young Plan, to give Hong Kong a more representative government, which would have eventually led to self-government. It was a favourable time to consider reform in light of China's preoccupation with its civil war between the communists and the nationalists. In this congenial atmosphere plans for constitutional reform in Hong Kong were supported by the British Government.

> On 24 July 1947 ... the Hong Kong government published Creech-Jones' approval in principle of Young's reform proposals .... The Hong Kong government was also given the express authority to proceed with detailed preparations in order to give effect to the Young Plan.[11]

These plans though were quickly shelved and eventually abandoned. The Young Plan was doomed from the start. The Unofficials on the Legislative Council were, as they continued to be, against any constitutional reform that might harm the monopoly of the business community in government. "Entrenched business interests had ... little taste for power-sharing".[12]

Sir Mark Young, after a very brief period of governorship, was replaced as Governor in late 1947 by Sir Alexander Grantham. Grantham, like the Unofficials, was against reforming the government of Hong Kong and effectively prevented the implementation of the Young Plan.

> He believed that the British would have to return the whole colony to China when the lease for the New Territories expired in 1997, and that the form of government most appropriate in the existing circumstances was a 'benevolent autocracy' - that is, the particular version of the Crown colony system then existing in the territory.[13]

This was the rationale followed by future Governors of the colony when faced with the question of constitutional reform in Hong Kong. The political complexion of Hong Kong was to reflect the British Government's desire to

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11 Steve Yui-Sang Tsang, *Democracy Shelved. Great Britain, China, and Attempts at Constitutional Reform in Hong Kong, 1945-1952* (Oxford, 1988), pp.46-47.

12 Ian Scott, *Political Change and the Crisis of Legitimacy in Hong Kong* (London, 1989), p.80.

13 Tsang, p.187.

placate China. The British Foreign Office had successfully persuaded the British parliament that relations with China were far more important than constitutional reform in Hong Kong and on 26 May 1949 Cabinet concluded that:

> Policy must take account of the fact that Hong Kong was valuable to us mainly as a centre of trade .... In the long term, if a strong Communist Government established itself in control over the whole of China, it would be impossible for us to maintain Hong Kong as a trading centre unless that Government acquiesced in our continuance there. These considerations seemed to suggest that the aim of our policy should be to find a basis on which a Communist Government of China could acquiesce in our remaining in Hong Kong.[14]

Essentially this meant the preservation of the political status quo, which would benefit Britain in terms of her relationship with China and China in terms of utilising Hong Kong as a gateway to the world and for trade. The expiry date of the New Territories lease was an important consideration in the formulating of policy concerning Hong Kong. The British Government was, even at this time, fully aware that Hong Kong would be returned to China in 1997.

> The lease of the new territories expires in 1997. It does not seem likely that any Chinese Government will be prepared to renew [the] lease. Without these territories Hong Kong would be untenable and it is therefore probable that before 1997 [the] United Kingdom Government of the day will have to consider [the] status of Hong Kong.[15]

Preservation of the status quo was of the utmost importance. The British, in light of this fact, reneged on their promise of constitutional reform for Hong Kong. The Governor's and the Unofficials' lack of support, and British conciliation towards China, prompted the rejection of all plans for Hong Kong's constitutional reform by the early 1950s. A show case of reform was made in the Urban Council scheme of 1952 but as Steve Tsang states: "... the Urban Council scheme was of little real significance .... Despite the Hong

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[14] CAB 128/15, CM 38(49)3, Cabinet, conclusions on defence of Hong Kong, 26 May 1949, in *The Labour Government and the End of Empire 1945-1952. Part II, Economics and International Relations* (ed) Ronald Hyam (London, 1992), p.392.

[15] CO 537/4805, no 86B, Commonwealth Relations Office to UK high commissioners, telegram, 7 September 1949, in ibid., p.402.

Kong government's claim that the changes introduced in 1952 represented constitutional advance, they were in fact little more than administrative changes ...".[16] The colony was destined to remain politically frozen.

The British Government could control the political evolution of the colony and proceeded to do so in such a way that the colony's government remained, until 1985, as it had since the nineteenth century. In 1966 Mr Frederick Lee, Secretary of State for the Colonies said, on the question of constitutional reform for Hong Kong, "There are obvious limitations on Constitutional development",[17] and "... progress towards self-government or independence is not possible, for reasons which are generally understood in the Colony".[18] The generally understood reason reiterated by the British Government was that communist China would not tolerate any move toward representative government in Hong Kong and that any attempt at reform would almost certainly result in the communists sending troops into Hong Kong and taking the colony by force. The colonial government exploited this belief in an effort to discourage political activity by the people of Hong Kong, especially after the 1967 riots in support of the Cultural Revolution.

The British Government was using two arguments to support the lack of constitutional reform in Hong Kong; that of fear of Chinese interference and that of the political apathy of the Hong Kong people. The British Government treated these two issues as mutually exclusive, being more interested in its relationship with China than with the political desires of the Hong Kong people. While it is arguable whether the Chinese would have interfered in Hong Kong in the light of constitutional reform, it was reason enough to discourage the Hong Kong people from active political agitation. Proponents of the status quo in Hong Kong did not show any recognition of the contradiction these two arguments entailed. On the one hand supporters of the status quo said that the people of Hong Kong feared the Chinese communists and had for this reason fled China, which implied that these people were not apathetic. On the other hand they were saying that the people of Hong Kong were apathetic. Commentators and analysts of the time endorsed these arguments which led to the widespread acceptance and dissemination of the myth of apathy, as shown below.

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[16] Tsang, p.186.

[17] *British Parliamentary Debates [Hansard], House of Commons*, 30 June 1966, Volume 730, 1966, p.2161.

[18] ibid., 8 November 1966, Volume 735, 1966, p.1140.

The belief in the myth of apathy can be traced back to the abandonment of the Young Plan in early 1950. As Aline Wong observes: "The failure of the Young Plan marked the beginning of the popular belief, especially among Government officials, that the Hong Kong people are politically apathetic and do not want self-rule".[19] Statements such as the following show that exploitation of this belief has affected the view of writers on Hong Kong:

> From the lack of any expression of desire for independent self-government, one must conclude that there is a general acceptance of the Government's thesis that independence would not be permitted by Peking [sic] and that steps to achieve it would bring about a communist takeover .... the desire for independence, is completely lacking in Hong Kong.[20]

As Peter Harris states: "... the British see the legitimacy of their stand in Hong Kong as deriving from the absence of controversy regarding popular demand for political change .... [The] British Government is committed to 'frozen politics' as far as Hong Kong is concerned".[21] Anything that could damage this 'legitimacy' was dangerous for the Hong Kong Government; it was therefore in their interests to play down any type of political activity. Sidney Verba et al. make a significant observation that is pertinent to the argument here: "... institutions can dominate participation negatively by controlling and limiting access to channels of activity".[22] This is what the Hong Kong Government sought to do through the exploitation of the myth of political apathy.

This myth of political apathy was able to gain a strong hold because of Westernised stereotyping of the Chinese value system. That the majority of Chinese people followed traditional Confucian values was, again, an unquestioned assumption. A construct developed by Western analysts and political commentators portrayed the Chinese as hard-working (a long used excuse for the lack of labour reforms in Hong Kong), familial (they cared only about themselves and their family, that is they were socially apathetic), and

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[19] Aline Wong, p.6.

[20] Joe England & John Rear, *Chinese Labour Under British Rule. A Critical Study of Labour Relations and Law in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong, 1975), p.4.

[21] Peter Harris, 'Policy Process and Policy Formation in Hong Kong', in *Hong Kong: Dilemmas of Growth* (eds) Leung Chi-keung, J.W. Cushman & Wang Gungwa (Canberra, 1980), p.33.

[22] Sidney Verba, Norman H. Nie & Kim Jae-on, *Participation and Political Equality: A Five Nation Comparison* (Cambridge, 1978), p.82.

politically passive, in that they saw government as a father figure who made important decisions for them and looked after them (they therefore had no desire to take any part in government). Much of the literature about Hong Kong conforms to this traditional argument; for example: "The attitude of the Hong Kong Chinese has been perhaps to let sleeping dogs lie; but it is possible that the whole set-up in fact conforms, if accidentally, to certain historical Chinese ideals";[23] "Anti-political attitudes may also stem from a Confucian view of society as a naturally harmonious whole in which all classes and groups know their place and accept without argument the decisions of their betters".[24] The government of Hong Kong was able to exploit this view of Confucianism to justify its lack of constitutional reform within the colony.

Westerners interpreted the idea of Confucianism in such a way as to construct the Chinese people as an other, so as to attribute to them traits and ideals that Westerners saw the Chinese as having. Whether this construction had elements of reality or not was immaterial as its internalisation in Western thought rendered the stereotype difficult to destroy. It was the same with the myth of political apathy, which arose from this construction of Confucianism:

> The belief that the Chinese people are by tradition politically indifferent does not stand on firm ground either when the political philosophy as embodied in the Chinese classics is carefully examined .... an analysis of the political behaviour of the Chinese in Hong Kong cannot rely on political presuppositions, nor on elitist cultural ideals, but must take into account the actual context within which political activity takes place.[25]

> The Chinese people are oftentimes characterized as politically apathetic, and their political passivity is frequently adduced to explain political stability in Hong Kong .... Apathy has been commonly treated as an inherent trait in the Chinese national character, and seldom is it considered to be a psychological and behavioural manifestation contingent upon structural conditions.[26]

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[23] H.A Turner & Patricia Fosh, *The Last Colony, But Whose? A Study of the Labour Movement, Labour Market, and Labour Relations in Hong Kong* (Cambridge, 1980), p.8.

[24] Norman Miners, *The Government and Politics of Hong Kong* (Oxford, 3rd ed, 1981), p.253.

[25] Aline Wong, p.2.

[26] Lau Siu-kai, *Society and Politics in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong, 1982), pp.13-14.

That these statements were written 10 years apart (the first in 1970/71 and the second in 1982) demonstrates the strength of the Westernised view of Chinese society. They are both fundamentally arguing the same point which can only lead to the conclusion that these views have largely been ignored by proponents of the Westernised view of Chinese society. But while these writers reject the notion of inherent apathy in the Chinese culture, they continue to expound a belief in the apathy of the Hong Kong people. This is possibly due to an acceptance of the argument that the Hong Kong people have shown no militant desire to overthrow the colonial regime, but more probably because they see the lack of participatory channels as *leading* to apathy.

One factor given as proof of the political apathy of the Hong Kong people was the lack of militant opposition to the colonial government.

> In the last thirty years most countries in East and South-East Asia have suffered major political upheavals. Regimes have been overthrown and constitutions rewritten following defeat in war, the withdrawal of colonial powers, communist revolutions or military *coups d'etat*. Throughout all these convulsions Hong Kong has continued to run its affairs in accordance with a constitution which is basically and formally the same as it was in the nineteenth century.[27]

The above statement implies that because the Hong Kong people had not rebelled against the regime, they were happy with the status quo. This lack of rebellion provided the colonial government with a sense of legitimacy. BUT to infer that the people of Hong Kong did not want more representative government because they had not aggressively pursued such an aim was a tenuous supposition to make. It would be more pertinent to imply that the colonial government of Hong Kong was able to maintain stability because, in general, the regime was not so oppressive as to require militant opposition as had happened in other Asian nations. This did not imply apathy but merely pointed out that the colonial government was successful in its policy of keeping the population politically acquiescent.

There were many other factors reported by the government and writers at large to explain that, and reinforce the apparent fact that, the people of

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[27] Miners, *Government and Politics*, p.xv.

Hong Kong were politically apathetic. Another of these was that the Hong Kong people were a refugee population. They had escaped communist China to pursue a better life in Hong Kong. If these refugees were apathetic, with all that this entails, surely they would never have left China. While sections of the older population of Hong Kong who fled China during the civil war and after the communist takeover might not have desired any active participation in the governing of Hong Kong, and might have been content with the stability the system gave, this did not imply apathy. Those who chose colonial rule in preference to communist rule would have been reluctant to stage militant opposition for fear of deportation. For the older generation it could have been a question of the lesser of two evils; a choice emphasised by the colonial government's exploitation of the fear of communism.

The colonial government has exploited this supposed fear of communist China among the people of Hong Kong. "They are constantly being reminded that their discontent will give the communists a cause for taking over Hong Kong or that deportation will meet their fate if they make any political move against the present regime".[28] Other writers have also observed this fear, for example Norman Miners states:

> There is little obvious enthusiasm for reabsorption into the motherland .... for the present apparently most prefer to endure the British devil that they know rather than run the risk that any attempt at political agitation might unintentionally put an end to the colony's separate existence.[29]

The colonial authorities manipulated this fear of communist China to discourage political opposition while at the same time colonial government policy was always attuned to the preferences of Beijing for a politically quiescent Hong Kong.

The supposed communist phobia of the Hong Kong people appears however to be exaggerated. As Lau Siu-kai has observed: "... the hostility of the Hong Kong Chinese towards the communist Chinese government seems to have been overstated .... the Hong Kong Chinese are not as antagonistic to

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[28] Fung Yee-wang, 'Some Contributory Factors to Student Movements in Hong Kong', *Asia Quarterly*, 4(1973), p292.

[29] Miners, *Government and Politics*, p.42.

the Communist regime as has been believed to be the case".[30] Once again the British have been able to perpetuate a myth that a fear of communism has led the Hong Kong people to prefer colonial rule. This was of course an interesting anomaly in Britain's stand on the Hong Kong issue of 1997. Having repeatedly stated that the people of Hong Kong feared communist China and preferred colonial rule, they were quite willing to see these same people returned to communist China in 1997. The British had since the end of World War Two realised that Hong Kong would eventually return to China. By playing on the fears of communism the colonial authorities were attempting to reinforce their own legitimacy rather than professing a moral commitment to their colonial subjects. They have been able to overcome the anomaly in their stand by reiterating the myth of apathy. The common belief was that the people of Hong Kong knew it was futile to resist reabsorption into China and have therefore accepted their fate. The fact that they had little choice is neatly overlooked.

The people of Hong Kong had little choice when it came to deciding their fate. "It is sometimes argued that Hong Kong is a democracy in the sense that government seeks the good of the people and attempts to maximize popular consent for its policies".[31] If we understand democracy as the right to participate in government by voting, this was simply not true. As Verba et al. observe:

> A policy that limited the amount of political knowledge a citizen could acquire or that restricted the right of the individual to be as convincing and articulate as possible in expressing his or her preferences to a political leader would hardly be consistent with democratic rights.[32]

This was certainly the way in which Hong Kong was governed. The Hong Kong people had no say in the running of the colony, except for a few consultation networks that were of little practical value. Consultation does not equal democracy no matter how virtuous and efficient the government is. By equating consultation with democracy the Hong Kong authorities were again reinforcing the myth of apathy. The rationale behind this was that the

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30 Lau, *Society and Politics*, p.11-12.
31 Miners, *Government and Politics*, p.251.
32 Verba, p.10.

people of Hong Kong were content to be part of the consultative process; they had no desire to participate in government.

The belief that the Hong Kong people had no desire to participate in the running of the colony was ostensibly reinforced by the low voter registration and voter turnouts to the Urban Council elections. The government constantly referred to these low figures as proof of the political apathy of the Hong Kong people. They stated that if the people wanted a greater say in the running of the colony they would have made the effort to vote at these elections. "The poor voter turnouts are often alluded to as an indicator of the political apathy of the Hong Kong Chinese. But, in view of the political light-weightedness of the Council, it can also be interpreted as the result of eligible voters' shying away from a futile political exercise".[33] I agree with this statement though I would put it more forcefully that this low voter turnout was not apathy or shying away but protest against the system. It must be remembered also that the franchise was extremely limited so the majority of Hong Kong people did not have the right to vote in any case. Only 300,000 people had the right to vote out of a population of about four million, and the property and educational qualifications of these 300,000 could imply they were the least likely group to criticise the government as they were probably the group who benefited most from colonial rule. These were hardly reliable statistics to brand a whole population as politically apathetic.

Voting turnout at Urban Council elections was in fact comparable with voter turnout at similar elections in other countries: "... the [Hong Kong] voter turnout of 39% of registered persons compares favourably with average turnouts of 41% and 41.1% of registered persons for local elections in 157 towns of England and Wales (1956-58) and 45 cities of Los Angeles County (1932-52)".[34] These statistics therefore cannot be used as proof that the people of Hong Kong were politically apathetic. The low voter turnout figures were also used as a reason for the lack of reform in other areas of government. The rationale seemed to be that if the people could not be bothered voting at the Urban Council elections they did not deserve any greater say about the running of the colony. But as Verba et al. observe:

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[33] Lau, *Society and Politics*, p.116.

[34] Steve Hoadley, 'Difference of Opinion', *Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER)*, November 2, 1967, p.251.

> ... political institutions affect the political involvement of citizens. Universal suffrage and mass election campaigns open participatory opportunities. The existence of such elections - where they represent meaningful contests - leads political parties to try to mobilize citizen activity. The result is both psychological mobilization (people become more aware of and involved in political life) and behavioural mobilization (they take a more active political role).[35]

Precisely because the Urban Council elections were not a meaningful political contest in that they had no executive power, and were severely restricted in what they were able to do, the people saw no political gains from voting and therefore did not vote. The Urban Council was not a political institution. Accepting Verba's statement as a likely scenario, which when viewed logically it seems to be, then the lack of participation in the Urban Council elections can be explained in this way.

The above factors, lack of militant opposition to the colonial regime, fear of communist China, traditional Confucian values, and lack of participation in Urban Council elections, have all been used to explain the political apathy of the Hong Kong people and the lack of political reform in the colony. These reasons and explanations have been accepted without question. Yet there is a strong argument that these factors did not point to political apathy, political inactivity yes, but apathy no. It was the administrators and wealthy businessmen of the colony who created this myth of apathy to preserve their interests. The fear was that to alter the status quo was to destroy stability and therefore prosperity:

> Such is the fear of altering the *status quo* that not merely have there been no further moves towards responsible government, there has been a steadfast refusal to consider even the smallest measure of representative central government. Similarly, any step which might have suggested a more permanent identity for the people of Hong Kong, such as the creation of Hong Kong citizenship, has been rejected ...[36]

The China factor was given as a reason for this fear, but it was also in British interests to maintain the status quo, by virtue of the fact that they knew Hong Kong would return in its entirety to China in 1997. To allow any

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[35] Verba, p.21.
[36] England, p.9.

form of political participation or national identity could have potentially upset this delicate balance.

From the failure of the Young Plan in the early 1950s up to 1985, the British and Hong Kong Governments consistently rejected any form of constitutional reform for Hong Kong. The colonial regime in Hong Kong remained as it had since the nineteenth century, a benevolent autocracy. Those wishing to preserve the status quo created the myth of apathy about the Hong Kong people to excuse this lack of constitutional reform in the government of the colony. Apathy implies not caring, but the Hong Kong people did care. This was why the colonial authorities had to play on the people's fear of communist China and deter any sort of political activity within the colony. References to a traditional following of Confucian values by the people of Hong Kong were expounded to reinforce the colonial governments lack of reform. All efforts were made to preserve the political status quo, and the myth of apathy was the tool by which the colonial authorities justified their actions to the world. Indicators used to show the apathy of the Hong Kong people, such as the lack of participation at Urban Council elections, were meaningless because they concerned only a tiny percentage of the population. Despite this the myth of apathy gained widespread acceptance throughout the world. Evidence of this supposed apathy was taken at face value rather than being questioned as a tool to preserve colonial hegemony in Hong Kong. As I will show in the following chapters belief in this myth of apathy was unfounded, the people of Hong Kong were not politically apathetic.