

The Tung Tau Syndrome: The Genealogy of Hong Kong Public Housing

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It might seem almost sacrilegious during the 50th anniversary of the Shek Kip Mei fire to challenge the idea that the origins of modern public housing in Hong Kong can be traced to the Government's response to that disastrous fire on Christmas Day 1953. But I will attempt this with respect. Something as important in both Hong Kong's history and our understanding of the development of poor territories into wealthy ones needs to be accorded careful scholarly research rather than accepting it as a founding myth. While it may have been the immediate stimulus for permanent squatter resettlement, there had previously been other massive squatter areas fires, such as the 1951 Tung Tau fire that left as many as 30,000 shelterless¹, without producing a policy shift from squatter clearance to (permanent) resettlement.

I will suggest two things today, both of which argue for more recognition of continuities rather than sharp turning points. First, that Shek Kip Mei is better seen as a culmination of a series of squatter fires that for geopolitical and domestic reasons was threatened to destabilize the vulnerable position of the colony of Hong Kong. Second, that for officials at the time what they did was not seen as a radical change from what they had been trying before. At least initially, it was more an experimental architectural modification of a resettlement programme that had already been less successfully pursued for several years. And it wasn't until sometime after 1954 that it was realized that they were "launching public housing".

I can't give you the whole story here, but to complement the familiar story of Shek Kip Mei, I will offer insights from two other squatter fires: Tung Tau in November

¹ Numbers here are a difficult challenge. Many reports at the time gave estimates as high as 30,000 but later official numbers are as low as 10,000. Screening completed on 11th December, 1951 included a total of 11,961 fire victims (K. Barnett, Chairman of Urban Council to Colonial Secretary, 14 December 1951, HKRS 163-1-1416 'Confidential periodical reports on squatter clearance'.) The process of generating these numbers is a complex issue in its own right, and as resettlement became a common expectation, officials regularly voiced suspicions of large numbers of imposters. If David Faure (in *Colonialism and the Hong Kong Mentality*, Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, 2003, p. 28) is right and the Government was attempting to overcome Unofficial resistance to squatter resettlement, then it would have been in their interest to accept high estimates which would magnify the sense of emergency.

1951 and Tsuen Wan in March 1954. First, Tung Tau reminds us that Shek Kip Mei was not the first disastrous squatter fire that left thousands homeless. Second, I think that there is evidence that the aftermath of the Tung Tau fire conditioned colonial officials to expect problems if they didn't deal effectively and promptly with squatter fires, and influenced how they dealt with the much larger Shek Kip Mei fire. Tung Tau, I suggest, is a forgotten ancestor in the genealogy of Hong Kong public housing.

As for Tsuen Wan, it reminds us that even after Shek Kip Mei, squatter fire victims did not immediately or automatically receive resettlement. Instead, the fire generated what in subsequent fires came to be referred to by officials as the "Tsuen Wan treatment": old style resettlement in the 'tolerated' and 'approved' resettlement areas, which were respectively regulated squatting and cottage areas. From my reading of the files so far, it seems to have been 1956 or 1956 before it became standard procedure for squatter fire victims to receive resettlement in permanent multi-storey housing blocks (and this was ended in the 1980s again²).

The dominant, and official explanation for Hong Kong's massive intervention in public housing stresses the disastrous Shek Kip Mei fire. Clearly, other factors had to have been operating to produce this change, although I also suggest that the change was not as sharp as the general narrative assumes. The three main explanations for the origins of public housing in Hong Kong focus on, respectively: 1) governmental intervention in a situation where the private sector was incapable of producing affordable housing in order to improve public welfare³; 2) the need for intervention in order to free up scarce land for private sector development that was otherwise obstructed by illegal squatting⁴; and 3) state intervention in order to reproduce labour power at a cost low enough to support development through export-oriented manufacturing⁵. More recently, MacKay⁶ has

² Alan Smart *Making Room: Squatter Clearance in Hong Kong*, Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, 1992.

³ Hopkins, Keith "Housing." In K. Hopkins, ed. *Hong Kong: The industrial colony*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1971; Pryor, E. G. *Housing in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1973.

⁴ Drakakis-Smith, David *High society: Housing provision in metropolitan Hong Kong, 1954 to 1979*. Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, 1979.

⁵ Castells, Manuel, Goh, Lee, and Kwok, R. Yin-Wang *The Shekkipmei Syndrome: Economic development and public housing in Hong Kong and Singapore*. London: Pion, 1990; Keung, John K. "Government intervention and housing policy in Hong Kong".

focused on the influence of public housing in Britain and the rise of housing professionals. This approach is consistent with the emphasis by Faure and, in a broader context, Harris's focus on the influence of Colonial Office policy, itself structured in part by domestic political pressures, on housing developments in British colonies⁷. Hong Kong's housing history has not yet been sufficiently examined in this broader context of international policy formation processes, and I sketch some of the main issues below.

I have previously criticized these three dominant explanations for empirical and theoretical inadequacies.⁸ The welfare explanation is contradicted by government statements at the time. The support for private developers approach is in conflict with the criticism of the program by developers and private property interests at the time and in any case fails to explain why squatters should be rehoused and not simply cleared (which would make even more land available for private development). The reduced labour cost thesis is largely without empirical evidence. I proposed an alternative approach that emphasized the way in which the eviction of squatters without permanent resettlement raised the risk of destabilization of the diplomatic situation. Violent responses from displaced squatters occasioned political responses from China.⁹

Anger and the likelihood of violence resulting from displacement achieved influence that it would not have had if not for the context where an 'indefensible' British colony was precariously perched on the edge of a country where the anti-imperialist Chinese Communist Party had recently come to power in Beijing (Tsang 1997, Mark 2001, Lui and Chiu 1999). Recent publications on Hong Kong in the aftermath of the

Third World Planning Review 7(1):23-44 (1985).

⁶ Mackay, C.J. 'Housing management and the comprehensive housing model in Hong Kong: a case study of colonial influence' *Journal of Contemporary China* 9, 449-466 (2000).

⁷ Faure, D. 'In Britain's footsteps: the colonial heritage.' In David Faure, ed. *Hong Kong: A Reader in Social History*, pp. 658-678. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2003; Harris, R. 'The silence of the experts: aided self-help housing, 1939-1954'. *Habitat International* 22, 165-189 (1998).

⁸ Smart, A. (1989) 'Forgotten Obstacles, Neglected Forces: Explaining the Origins of Hong Kong Public Housing', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 7, 179-196; Smart, A. (1992) *Making Room: Squatter Clearance in Hong Kong*, Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies.

⁹ Grantham, A. *Via Ports*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1965.

rise to power of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949 have emphasized the importance of geopolitics for Hong Kong in the postwar period, but also the concern for internal disorder. Mark (2000:838) concluded from his study of Foreign Office records the “likelihood of a direct Communist military attack on Hong Kong worried the British less ... than the internal unrest caused by the influx of refugees and Communist-inspired strikes”. The Tung Tau fire demonstrates these influences, but also allows us to understand the close relationship between what is happening at a very local level among disgruntled victims of fires and uncompensated clearance and the geopolitics of the early Cold War era.

Tung Tau

On November 21, 1952 a fire spread through Tung Tau village, bordering the Kowloon Walled City to the northeast. The estimated numbers of people left homeless varied considerably. The *South China Morning Post* on November 22 suggested that over 3000 huts housing about 15,000 were destroyed, while the *Hong Kong Standard* offered an estimate of 25,000 losing their homes “in a four hour conflagration believed to be one of the worst in the Colony’s history”. The Social Welfare Officer responsible estimated between 15,000 and 25,000 victims. Screening of fire victims by the Social Welfare Officer registered a total of 11,961 victims from 1024 huts¹⁰, but it seems likely that many had left without being registered, since registration provided little but free food on the site¹¹. The Acting Social Welfare Officer’s notes report that by November 23, “relief arrangements were being subjected to serious criticism”. A “determined attempt” was made on November 24 to “re-squat on fire area” and “Urban Council officers on spot were putting forward view that erection of ‘temporary’ shelters could not be prevented unless Government had alternative to offer”. On November 27, when the move to Ngau Tau Kok began, “some opposition to the move and some tentative demagogues emerged”.¹²

¹⁰ Chairman, Urban Council to Colonial Secretary, 14 January, 1952, 'Squatters at the village of Tung Tau, Kowloon City', HKRS 337-4-249.

¹¹ The Social Welfare Officer’s report noted that “After a fire such as this it is not worth the while of every victim to remain at the site awaiting relief”, 28.11.51.

¹² Extract from Social Welfare Officer emergency relief diary.

The Governor, in a report to the Secretary of State for the Colonies on December 15, 1951 stated that “Alternate sites for re-squatting have been permitted further away from the urban area and already the bulk of the fire victims have moved there”. He also noted that “this fire has given the Government an unexpected opportunity to improve the area concerned and prevent it from reverting to its former overcrowded state”. In a report from the Social Welfare Officer, D.R. Holmes (who later became the first Commissioner for Resettlement) to the Colonial Secretary Nicoll, he described Social Welfare actions after a big fire as “confined to the provision of free food, the registration of victims and the encouragement of voluntary effort, primarily by the Kaifong Association concerned”. He described the reasons for this policy as being to save money for the Government, to “encourage and train” the Kaifong Associations in community service and takes advantage of their “detailed knowledge and understanding of local conditions”, and notes that “We have welcomed a ‘time-lag’ in the initiation of large-scale direct relief measures in order that those victims who can somehow make shift for themselves may not be dissuaded from doing so”.

Again, my research on this is still in progress, but I believe that the Tung Tau fire of November and its aftermath provides some crucial clues to some of the (mostly) hidden agenda in squatter resettlement, and had a significant impact on the adoption of permanent (multi-storey) forms of resettlement. In the memo by Holmes above, he recommended a new approach with a plan for immediate relief for sudden disasters, which “should be almost on military lines”. Some of his dissatisfaction with arrangements may have incubated his future ideas on the organization of the Resettlement Department.

The connection between disgruntled fire victims and broader Governmental concerns can be seen in a telegram from the Governor responding on March 22, 1952 to a query from the Secretary of State for the Colonies about the defensibility of Hong Kong. Governor Grantham stated that:

Any evaluation of Hong Kong’s ability to survive made purely on a basis of the premise stated (namely, blockade and air attacks) would be unrealistic for two reasons. (A) In addition to blockade and air bombing, it is clear that a third and most potent weapon would be used against us. I refer to the capacity of the

C.P.G. [Communist People's Government] for fomenting internal disturbances whether by strikes, riots or extensive sabotage and terrorism. Ability to survive blockade and air bombing is of no significance if the internal security position cannot be held. (B) Freedom from attack by Chinese ground forces is postulated. This also is of little practical significance since, whether or not the attack actually developed, the threat of attack would remain, and our present resources of manpower are frankly insufficient to cover that threat and the threat to internal security simultaneously. An examination of the position on 1st March when the disturbances occurred in Kowloon leaves no room for doubt on this point. ... By withdrawal of labour, and the internal disturbances that would certainly ensue, Hong Kong ... could be made untenable quickly and without much effort on the part of the enemy. This unpalatable fact is, therefore, an essential background to our ability to resist any specialized form of attack ... and my answers to the questions asked in your second paragraph must be understood to rest on one basic assumption, namely that the internal security position can be held¹³.

What happened on March 1, 1952? According to the *Hong Kong Standard*:

Thousands of Communist-led students and workers marching along Nathan Road yesterday afternoon attacked police, servicemen and Europeans, overturned and burned vehicles, and smashed property in a roaring riot ... The crowd had gathered at the Kowloon Railway Station at Tsimshatshui around noon in order to await the expected arrival of the Canton 'comfort' mission to the Tung Tau Village fire victims. When the mission failed to arrive, having been denied entry into the Colony, the crowd started its parade, waving banners and shouting slogans. The mood of the paraders grew uglier as they marched, and disturbances broke out¹⁴.

While since left out of the standard list of civil disturbances in Hong Kong of 1956, 1966 and 1967, the riot clearly worried Governor Grantham. His concerns about the internal security situation was part of a broader set of initiatives to deal with the threat to internal

¹³ **Error! Main Document Only.** "Inward telegram to the Secretary of State for the Colonies" 22 mar 1952, COS37-17669.

¹⁴ "Huge Kowloon parade turns into violent riot; police attacked; tear gas used to disperse mob." march 2, 1952.

security: setting internal security as the primary role of the Hong Kong Defence Force, establishing an Essential Services Corps composed of “reliable” non-Chinese employees in facilities such as light and power¹⁵, and the amendment of the Societies Ordinance to prevent subversion by left-wing sympathizers. It was the connection between local resistance and resentments and the ways in which they prompted intervention from Beijing that was the main concern. Such ‘comfort missions’ emerged repeatedly. For example, “Canton and Kwangtung branches of Chinese People’s Relief Commission have sent sum of \$(Hong Kong) 185,000 for distribution on the occasion of Chinese New Year to victims of recent area fires at Homuntin and Kowloon Tsai. This shrewdly timed gesture is being given much publicity in left wing press. ... as a counter to this move, the Nationalist Mainland Relief Association in Formosa has sent \$(Hong Kong)300,000 to large numbers of refugees alleged to be registered at Rennie’s Mill Camp”¹⁶. China later contributed HK\$1,000,000 to the Shek Kip Mei fire victims, and a memo by the Deputy Colonial Secretary expressed concern on 23 January 1954 about a Comfort Mission coming from Canton¹⁷.

While vociferous and sometimes violent resistance to clearance without acceptable resettlement arrangements emerges again and again in the files, this alone could not have compelled the Hong Kong Government to commit substantial resources to the construction of resettlement estates. The vulnerable diplomatic situation gave it much more leverage, as did internal politics that had led to the failure of earlier resettlement endeavours, such as the Emergency (Resettlement Areas) Regulations, 1952 approved by Executive Council on January 15, 1952. While previously all squatter clearances had required gazetting of specific locations, this Ordinance gazetted for clearance “(a) the whole of the Islands of Hong Kong and Aplichau; (b) the whole of Kowloon; (c) the whole of the New Territories”.

Shek Kip Mei

¹⁵ The “managers of the two electricity companies count only on the services of their non-Chinese staff in an emergency, and one can only agree with this desire to play safe in two very essential undertakings.”, Assistant Defence Secretary to Defence Secretary, 'Civil measures for Defence Scheme - Light and Power Emergency Plans' 24 November 1956, HKRS 369-11-5.

¹⁶ Hong Kong Weekly Intelligence Telegram No. 115, 9 February 1953, CO 1023/164.

There is a lot that could be said about the Shek Kip Mei fire, but I will restrict myself to two issues. First, I will suggest that far from being an uncontrollable natural disaster, the Government was warned about the likelihood of such a holocaust much earlier but was unwilling or unable to prevent it for a variety of reasons. Second, I will question the extent to which we can see the Governmental response as ‘point zero’ for public housing in Hong Kong, suggesting that the continuities are much greater than is usually recognized in the standard accounts.

One might not expect a file entitled 'Fire Services - squatter areas - Correspondence re: fire precautions to be adopted in' to be labeled “Top Secret”. The reasons for this might be clearer when one reads a statement like the following in a memo from the Deputy Colonial Secretary to the Colonial Secretary:

It is evident, I think, that Mr. Gorman's [Chief Officer, Fire Brigade) memorandum ... will have to be considered against a background of practical politics. I do not see how we could put this area on a proper basis, from the point of view of fire risk, without tearing down a considerable number of these shacks ... in order to make the necessary fire lanes. The effect of this would almost certainly be to upset the whole of the political apple-cart at a time when we are most anxious to avoid any incidents of this kind whatever. I take it, therefore, that, if only for political reasons, we shall have to compromise on Fire Brigade requirements. Perhaps that compromise should take the form of making the necessary preparations to prevent any serious loss of life, and taking no further steps than this for the time being. It would not be unreasonable to say that that was our main concern in the whole matter. These shacks are entirely illegal structures and it is not up to Government to take measures for their protection. If a large number of them were burnt down we should probably have to take steps to assist the occupants in re-provisioning themselves, but we can hardly overlook the fact that the effect would be no bad thing politically.¹⁸

¹⁷ Deputy Colonial Secretary to Colonial Secretary “Squatter fire – Shek Kip Mei – Policy re:” HKRS 163-1-1677.

¹⁸ DCS to CS, 14.12.49, HKRS 63-1-1231.

What was the proposal? Simply to take precautions, and spend some money (in rather short supply at the time) to lessen the serious fire risks in squatter areas. The memo that the Deputy Colonial Secretary objected to suggested that “if an outbreak of Fire occurs in the Kowloon City Squatter area¹⁹ it will turn out to be one of the biggest Fire disasters on record. Nothing could be done to save or rescue the Thousands that are residing there. ... If a large Fire does occur in this Squatter area as stated it will be nothing short of a tragedy and end up in a holocaust with a terrific loss of life. ... To my mind the onus for the Tragedy will have to be borne by some one, as an explanation will be called for to explain what precautions were taken”²⁰. It is fortunate that the Tung Tau fire, precisely in the location that worried the Chief Officer of the Fire Brigade, didn’t have the feared massive loss of life, but its extent was clearly within the range of magnitude that he envisioned.

Gorman’s subsequent memo to the Colonial Secretary of May 13, 1950 argued for the expenditure of HK\$245,990 to extend water mains, provide fire hydrants and water tanks, extend fire breaks through squatter areas, and control dangerous industrial premises and goods.²¹ The Colonial Secretary’s response was that “fire precautions are getting a little out of hand” and that “It seems a little odd, to say the least, that we should consider spending \$1/4 million on protecting from potential danger structures which are illegal, a menace to public health and security, and which our major policy aims at eliminating altogether (e.g. immigration control, expulsion of undesirables, cheap building schemes etc.)”. He goes on to assert that “We simply cannot justify the use of public funds to protect the shacks themselves. Danger to live and adjacent property is a different matter and is, to my mind, the absolute limit of our responsibility”²². The Social Welfare Officer, J.C. McDouall supported the construction of fire breaks, the larger the better, but argued that “no hydrants, extinguishers or other fire-fighting apparatus should be installed, and no official encouragement should be given to the formation of local voluntary fire-fighting units in any non-tolerated squatter area. To do otherwise would be

¹⁹ It should be pointed out that it is the Kowloon Walled City involvement that particularly raised concerns among officials. However, other statements make it clear that there was concern about the political impact of clearances, particularly partial ones for fire-lanes.

²⁰ Chief Officer, Fire Brigade to Colonial Secretary, 9 Dec 1949, HKRS 63-1-1231.

²¹ HKRS 63-1-1231.

²² Deputy Colonial Secretary, 19 May 1950, HKRS 63-1-1231.

to encourage the squatters to count on and to trade on official recognition of their ‘rights’.”²³ While various efforts were made to construct fire-breaks, local resistance often derailed them, and even when constructed, re-squatting often undermined the efforts. Politics once again seems to have been a greater factor in the course of development than any benevolent concern for those living in what all acknowledged were conditions almost certain to result in repeated conflagrations. In Gorman’s replacement COFB Cox’s words: “As I have stated so often, so long as there are squatter huts there will be squatter fires, and so long as industrial activity is permitted to remain in such areas as there are on the Kowloon Peninsula so frequently, these fires will remain frequent and must inevitably continue to cause loss of life through the abnormal spread of fire due to the presence of volatile substances”.²⁴ There is a much more complicated story about the emergence of the Shek Kip Mei fire than just uncontrolled ‘spontaneous’ settlement, and internal politics contributed greatly to the background. Again, a story that I am continuing to research and which space doesn’t permit an account of here.

It is often thought that after the Government’s decision to resettle all the Shek Kip Mei fire victims that squatter resettlement was firmly established. This was far from the case at the time. The Executive Council Minutes of December 29, 1953 make it clear that this was a decision on a special case involving “provisional housing accommodation”. Multi-storey blocks were “an experiment and ... no large-scale programme should be put in hand until the results of the experiment had been assessed”.²⁵ When the Resettlement Department was created by an order of Executive Council on April 6, 1954, what it ordered was that “a temporary department, independent of all permanent department be set up for the purpose” of “screening, clearance and resettlement of squatters”.

Furthermore, there was no statement of commitment to future fire victims, instead the only explicit statement about who should be resettled identified “the need to clear fire lanes in squatter areas be accepted as over-riden and about 18,000 persons were to be rehoused for this purpose before 1st October, 1954”. If space permitted, I would be able

²³ November 8, 1950, HKRS 63-1-1231.

²⁴ COFB Cox to Colonial Secretary, 'Squatter fires' 12 March, 1959, HKRS 41-1-8858.

²⁵ HKRS 156-1-4429 'squatter fire at Tai Po Road DR Holmes Comm Reset to Colonial Secretary, 26 November, 1954.

to demonstrate in detail the clear continuities with squatter policy at least since January 1952 when the Executive Council approved the Emergency (Resettlement Areas) Regulations.

Very briefly, the expansion of squatter resettlement seems to have been the result of the difficulty of the fire lane and squatter fire prevention efforts and the success of multi-storey resettlement estates in breaking the bottleneck of land development where squatters couldn't be cleared without places to put them. As the Commissioner for Resettlement said: "this is the only possible way of removing the fire risk and the constant risk to public health and public order which are presented by the remaining squatter areas, and also the only practical means of recovering for proper and permanent development the extensive areas of Crown land still sterilised by squatter colonies"²⁶.

I am still working on when the routine expectation was that squatter fire victims would be resettled. It certainly was not in place in 1954, as I demonstrate below, but seems to have developed by November 1956. In May 1957, the Social Welfare Officer expressed his concern about:

the peculiar result of the strict application of the present policy whereby only squatters are eligible for resettlement; tenement-flat fire victims are left on the streets while the persons who squatted on the roofs of the very same tenements are resettled. He emphasizes that the public simply cannot appreciate the reason for giving squatters preference in housing²⁷.

The AS1 (Assistant at the Secretariat) answered this concerned with the information that: Rooftop squatters, so Resettlement Department inform me, are treated as follows:- (a) rooftop squatter 'fire victims' (underlined) - are registered for resettlement (with the intention that they should be resettled as soon as possible) and meantime are allocated tolerated sites on public streets. ... this policy has been approved by the Resettlement Select Committee of the Urban Council, and SWO's [Social Welfare Officer] point has already been considered by that Committee (in November 1956)²⁸.

²⁶ HKRS 156-1-4429 'Squatter fire at Tai Po Road on 20 Nov 1954' DR Holmes, Commissioner for Resettlement to Colonial Secretary, 26 November, 1954.

²⁷ HKRS 163-3-20 'squatter problem in Hong Kong - Policy' AS1 to Deputy Colonial Secretary, 17.5.57.

²⁸ HKRS 163-3-20 'squatter problem in Hong Kong - Policy'- AS1 to DCS 17.5.57.

At the time of the Tsuen Wan fire of March 1954, however, no such expectation was in place, and no such provisions were accorded to the victims.

Tsuen Wan

On the face of it, the Tsuen Wan fire was a relatively minor squatter fire of no unusual features other than its timing. On 25 March, 1954, 600 people lost their homes to a fire at Tsun Wan Village, but there were no serious injuries. The “women and children are being accommodated for the time being at the Grand Theatre, Tsun Wan, whilst the men are camping out ... at the front of the Grand Theatre²⁹.” It is striking that the item dealt with by Executive Council on April 6, 1954 immediately after the establishment of the Resettlement Department was about this rather ordinary fire. Rather than providing for multi-storey resettlement of the same kind as for the Shek Kip Mei fire victims, this decision ordered that none of the funds at the disposal of the Shek Kip Mei Relief Committee “should be diverted to the Relief of the Tsun Wan fire victims” and that “sites for huts should be prepared on an area about half a mile from Tsun wan, water be laid on and minimum building materials provided at Government expense”. These were arrangements essentially identical to those for fire victims prior to the Christmas Day fire. I should also note that the final item on this order of Executive Council was that “publicity regarding the fire relief measures should be kept to a minimum unless the Communist press took the matter up”. This seems to have been very effective: so far I have been able to find very little discussion of this fire and its politics.

However, in another discussion of how a squatter fire (on Taipo Road, November 20, 1954) should be handled, I uncovered reference to the ‘Tsun Wan treatment’:

The argument is that a squatter who is required to move in connection with a fire lane might prefer to camp out in the streets at Shamshuipo for a few months, receiving free food, and then be resettled in a permanent building rather than to remove his hut to a remoter area. ... there is obviously a case for any course of action which may tend to make it plain that squatters have nothing to gain by burning down their huts. ... I think it is necessary to consider whether all the victims of this latest fire cannot somehow be resettled not in multi-storey blocks

²⁹ “Disastrous fire in Tsun Wan” *South China Morning Post*, 26march 54, p. 1.

but by some other method. It will take some little time to examine this possibility in detail, but it seems to me not impossible that the situation might be dealt with in the same manner as that adopted after the Tsun Wan fire in March 1954; in other words, the people would be allotted sites in 'tolerated' areas and would be supplied with basic building materials which they would have to supplement from their own resources. ... The advantages of this course, should it on detailed examination prove feasible, would be as follows : -

(a) It would not be very popular; (b) it would be cheaper than multi-storey resettlement; (c) it would be quicker than multi-storey resettlement and there would in consequence be a saving on free feeding; and (d) the planned programme of multi-storey resettlement would not be further disrupted by the additional fire victims³⁰.

Elsewhere, a very illuminating discussion of squatter policy in 1954 by the new Commissioner for Resettlement demonstrated how the 'Tsun Wan' treatment related to other elements of emerging squatter resettlement policy:

It is a matter of policy and principle. Personally I have an idea that we should do nothing for the squatter as such whether or not he is a victim of a fire, but should spend public money on resettlement, etcetera, only when the interests of the community as a whole demand that we should do so. If the matter be viewed in this light then every fire requires individual consideration. (2) Consider for instance the Shek Kip Mei fire. If we had not taken vigorous and effective action the streets of Kowloon and the fire area itself would have been in a state of chaos for an indefinite period and the fire area would eventually have been resquatted on ready for another fire. Considerations of public health, public order and public prestige made this quite acceptable and the general interest therefore demanded that we embark on the construction of semi-permanent and permanent resettlement accommodation. (3) Consider again the Tsun Wan Fire. Here the public interest justifies the expenditure of a certain amount of funds on resettlement, since by doing so we make available for development a valuable

³⁰ DR Holmes, Commissioner for Resettlement on 22 November 1954, HKRS 156-1-4429 'Squatter fire at Tai Po Road on 20 Nov 1954'.

area of building land. But this fire is on a much smaller scale and Tsun Wan has hillsides suitable for cottage-type development; therefore we do not undertake the construction of Shek Kip Mei- type resettlement accommodation since the situation can be dealt with more cheaply in another way.³¹

This suggested calculus makes it clear that resettlement was not adopted out of consideration for the victims, but as a way to overcome potential chaos and to obtain well-located land for development. As long as comfort missions and other disagreeable circumstances could be avoided, fire victims unfortunate enough to be located on land unsuitable for development could be handled by the old techniques, regardless of their general failure. Examining the ‘Tsun Wan treatment’ makes it clear that by the end of 1954 “Shek Kip Mei” did not yet mean what it has come to represent in the heroic narrative of the rise of public housing intervention in Hong Kong. I think it also suggests the need for very close examination of how ‘resettlement’ became “Resettlement” and what the actual circumstances of the shifts in agendas and transfer of responsibilities came about in the secretive grounds of a colonial bureaucracy.

Conclusions

I have offered stories of three different squatter fires to suggest the need for some very careful and thoroughgoing revision of the standard story of “out of the flames” and a new more enlightened housing policy arising from the ashes of the Shek Kip Mei conflagration. Firm conclusions about what actually went on and why are much harder to offer at this preliminary stage. But it is becoming clear to me that reconstructing this pivotal event in Hong Kong history needs to be placed in a much larger context than has tended to be done in the past. One needs to be able to move from comments about the problems of building fire breaks to colonial ideas about the unreliability of Hong Kong Chinese and the treats of a new communist government insistent on showing comfort and support for victims of “British imperialism” as well as natural disasters.

³¹ Holmes, Commissioner for Resettlement to AS1, 24.4.54, HKRS 163-3-20 'Squatter problem in Hong Kong - Policy'.