Squatters in Hong Kong: 1950s – 1980s.

Ko Tim Keung

Between the late 1940s and 1970s, Hong Kong faced immense problems arising from a surge in urban population. At the end of the war, the number stood at around 600,000. By the end of the 1970s, it had skyrocketed to five million, almost 90% of which was within the urban areas. Besides the high rate of natural increase, of greater importance was immigration from mainland China. It was estimated that by the late 1960s, the densities of population in sizeable urban areas had become perhaps the highest in the world.

The availability of work in the city led the great majority of new immigrants and refugees into the already overcrowded urban areas. Further to the rapid population growth, the physical setting of Hong Kong also brought about urban problems. Both urban Kowloon and northern shores of Hong Kong were backed by steep ridges.

By the early 1960s, the north coast of Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon Peninsula were mostly built over. Gradually rents had become well beyond the means of many city-dwellers. Roofs, cellars and lofts were let, and before strict official control was instituted, people spilled over onto the pavements. It was inevitable that urban squatting thrived, especially in northern Kowloon, where hillside space was available. These squatters were not composed solely of refugees. Many were in fact long-time local residents who were not able to pay high rents for tiny subdivided apartments or bed space and preferred to become squatters.

With the huge number of squatters built over some relatively inaccessible sites, triad elements emerged. Very often, the police were unable or not willing to police the squatters effectively. In fact, many squatter huts were erected by the triad society and then sold to the incomers. Some triad members even constructed basic access paths or roads to the squatters, as well as provided illegal electricity wherever possible. For the larger squatter sites, gambling dens and drug dens were set up in some quiet corners which generated further profits for the triad.

Apart from the land squatters, with the escalating post-war population, sheltered creeks, inlets, coastal areas and traditional fishing communities also became crammed with squatter boats and stilted huts.

Squatters were not purely residential. The larger sites were miniature towns with their own shops, schools, restaurants and small industrial units. Infiltration of small industrial units into previously residential areas and squatter areas were common as industrialization proceeded significantly since the 1950s, which gave rise to considerable sanitary and hygienic problems, in addition to fire hazards.

Many squatter huts were built on steep hillsides. During heavy rainstorms, landslides occasionally occurred in such areas, sometimes resulting In a loss of life. By the mid-1950s, the squatter problem had gradually threatened to disrupt the whole urban framework. The government was to embark upon a massive scheme for building multi-storey resettlement accommodation.

With the resurgence of illegal immigration in the late 1970s, new squatter areas of some size sprang up in many peripheral urban areas, including steep slopes along Victoria Road.　At the end of the decade, the government recorded over 330,000 squatter residents. The figure excluded those who lived on boats and stilted huts. Established squatter areas became even more crowded, thus posing a higher fire risk and exacerbating environmental and social problems.

Undesirable as it might be, it has to be recognized that all types of housing, including squatter huts, had a role to play in meeting basic needs for shelter, given constant population pressures. It was one of the most prominent features of post-war Hong Kong development and an important common experience shared by many Hong Kong people.