

Research Proposal (MPhil in World History)

Name of Applicant: [REDACTED]

Preferred Supervisor: [REDACTED]

British Colonies in Chaos:

A Comparative Study on the 1956 Riots in Hong Kong and Singapore

I propose to compare and contrast the riots which erupted in British colonial Hong Kong and Singapore in October 1956. Those in Hong Kong, known as the 1956 riots, ensued from nationalist sympathisers opposing a ban on hoisting flags that represented the Republic of China. Those in Singapore, known as the Chinese middle schools riots, resulted from protests against the government deregistering pro-communist organisations.

Both riots were, in other words, part and parcel of the Cold War politics, besides Britain's struggle to maintain her imperial authority in the context of the Cold War.¹ They also proved noteworthy in terms of casualties. Hong Kong's 1956 riots recorded the largest number of deaths in the colony's history of social unrest.² And while the Chinese middle schools riots saw fewer deaths than the Maria Hertogh riots in 1950 did, they 'had the greatest significance and effect of any in the history of Singapore, and had the makings of being the bloodiest'.³

Different histories of Hong Kong and Singapore speak of the riots, but specific studies on them remain limited.⁴ Available in Chinese, most studies on Hong Kong's 1956 riots focus on recounting rather than analysing the riots.⁵ The same is for those on the Chinese middle

¹ After Hong Kong's 1956 riots, for example, Britain was anxious about how similar events would be 'ever present', making it difficult for her to maintain long-term control over the colony: Draft dispatch from Alexander Grantham, 6 Dec. 1956: National Archives, London (hereafter TNA), CO 1030/389. She was also disturbed by how China took advantage of the riots to produce a series of propaganda threatening her rule in Hong Kong: Appendix to C.O.S.(56)430: TNA, DEFE 5/72/430.

² A total of 59 civilians were killed within just three days, whereas another riots in 1967 lasted for eight months and recorded 51 deaths.

³ Richard Clutterbuck, 'The Riots of October 1956,' in Richard Clutterbuck, *Conflict and Violence in Singapore and Malaysia, 1945-1983* (New York: Routledge, 1985), 132.

⁴ For relevant histories of Hong Kong, see, for example, John Carroll, *A Concise History of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 146; Frank Welsh, *A History of Hong Kong* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993), 457-58. For relevant histories of Singapore, see, for example, Mary Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore, 1819-2005* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2009), 265-66; Mark Ravinder Frost and Yu-mei Balasingamchow, *Singapore: A Biography* (Singapore: National Museum of Singapore, 2009), 370-71.

⁵ See, for example, Yik Chow, *Xianggang Zuopai Douzhengshi* [The History of Leftist Struggles in Hong Kong] (Hong Kong: Li-Wen Publishing, 2002), 145-58. For an analysis of the riots which examines the response from China and Taiwan, see Siu-keung Cheung, 'Shuangshi Baodong: Lengzhan, Wanqi Zhimin Zhuyi yu Houzhengzhi Xingdong' ['The Double-Tenth Riots: The Cold War, Late Colonialism, and Post-Political Discourse'], in *Xianggang Shehui Wenhua Xilie* [A Collection of Society and Culture of Hong Kong], edited by Siu-keung Cheung, Chia-ming Chen, and Kai-chi Leung, retrieved from <http://jcmotion.com.cuhk.edu.hk>, 2016.

schools riots, which are concerned with the sequence of events.⁶ Although scholars have become more interested to compare Hong Kong with Singapore as former British colonies and today's international financial centres, their historical connections also remain understudied.⁷

Thus, I hope that my comparative study on both riots will provide a fuller understanding of Hong Kong's and Singapore's histories. I hope to show how the two colonies were interconnected both from Britain's perspective and in the context of the Cold War. I propose to examine the similarities and/or differences between both riots in guiding Britain's short-term and long-term policies within and beyond the empire. I also investigate whether Britain herself used comparisons between the riots and/or Hong Kong's and Singapore's histories in formulating her action. Furthermore, I look at how both riots manifested the global confrontation between the capitalist and communist blocs, besides their relevance to countries other than Britain, including China and the United States.

My current research for my undergraduate dissertation shall not conflict with my proposed study. Although I am already investigating Hong Kong's 1956 riots, I focus on how the governor, Alexander Grantham, narrated the riots in his report to the Secretary of State for the Colonies. Specifically, I explore how he tried to explain what had (not) happened, and the rationales behind his ways of presentation. My proposed study, however, will rely less on his report than on other archival sources, even though it will also compare reports on both riots.

I will draw upon archival materials from the National Archives in London and Singapore and the Public Records Office (PRO) in Hong Kong, which include government records of both riots. From the National Archives in Singapore I will be able to study photographs and interview audios about the Chinese middle schools riots. Meanwhile, from HKU's Special Collections I can also access oral history records related to the 1956 riots.

The riots were one of the reasons for Britain to ponder over the future of Hong Kong in 1957, argues Chi-kwan Mark rather at length, but they hardly make up the focus of his work: Chi-kwan Mark, 'Defence or decolonisation? Britain, the United States, and the Hong Kong question in 1957,' *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 33, 1 (2005): 51-72.

⁶ See, for example, Clutterbuck, 'The Riots of October 1956'. Since Clutterbuck's work was published in 1985, however, it could not take into account government records declassified after his publication and which I shall draw upon in my research, including, for example, 'Report on the military action in Singapore riots, 25 October-2 November 1956', 1956: TNA, WO 252/1212, closed until 1987.

⁷ Recent studies compare Hong Kong with Singapore in terms of economic and financial developments, besides political system, education, and gender issues. For the few studies on their historical connections, see, for example, Joshua-John Tian Ser Seah, 'Imperial Outposts and the War Beyond: Singapore, Hong Kong and the British Empire's Land Force Contribution to the Korean War,' *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 45, 4 (2017): 672-93; Hei-ying Kuo, *Networks Beyond Empires: Chinese Business and Nationalism in the Hong Kong-Singapore Corridor, 1914-1941* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

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