

# THE TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT OF YOUTH IN HONG KONG

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## Introduction

One of the features that Hong Kong shares with many other developing countries is the marked youthfulness of its population. In 1945, the estimated population was 600,000. The age-group 15 to 24 years then formed only a small percentage of the population. In the 1961 census, the total population had risen to 3.1 million, of which 367,841 were young people. Such an increase in the proportion of young people in the population can be an invaluable asset and yet at the same time cause tremendous socio-economic problems for the society. If these young people are given a favourable environment in which they can develop their potentialities to the full, they will be the builders of our future society. They can provide great impetus not only to the processes of industrialisation and technological advancement which all the developing countries are undergoing, but also, by virtue of their idealism and creativity, to the search for a more meaningful form of human existence, from which agonising struggle not even the developed societies are exempted. In short, in this rapidly changing world where old values are constantly being replaced, youth are our vision for the future. Yet on the other hand, if these youths are frustrated and neglected, they are capable of creating numerous disruptive problems for the society, ranging from economic dependence and unemployment to juvenile delinquency and youth activism. To say the least, this represents a tremendous wastage of human resources.

The important question that all societies must consider at this moment is: How are we to assist in the training and the development of our young people at this particular phase of the evolution of our societies, so that they will become assets rather than liabilities to our community? Note that I do not say "develop" our youths, but rather how we are to "assist in the development" of our youths. The distinction is more than a play on words. We have learnt from experience that our young people do not want to be moulded into a prescribed model. They want to develop in their own fashion, according to their own definition of themselves and the world at large. We are forced today, more than ever

before, to recognise the value of the youths themselves. What remains to be answered is: How are we going to work out a societal pattern in which adults and young people can work closely together for the development of each individual, especially each young person?

### Historical development of youth work in Hong Kong

Before we proceed to answer this question - the first step obviously being an analysis of the present youth situation in Hong Kong - it may be most helpful to review what the situation has been in the past twenty five years. The study of history should have taught us that the past is a part of the present. We shall attempt to trace as far back as the end of the Second World War, when Hong Kong could claim a population of only 600,000. On account of the sharp influx of refugees, especially since the Communists took over mainland China in 1949, and the post-war baby-boom, this figure rose sharply to 2.6 million in 1957 and to nearly four million today. This swell in population, unexpected and overwhelming in proportion, was the largest single factor guiding the social development of the Colony in the post-war period. Its impact was inevitably great and far-reaching. With such a large population on hand, most of whom were destitute, houseless and illiterate, the Government and the voluntary bodies could not but gear themselves to the most immediate relief of the urgent problems of housing, water supply, sanitation, material relief, employment and elementary education, which were paramount in the 1950's. Child and youth work was then focused chiefly on free meals, material relief, institutional care and the teaching of the 3R's. This exclusive concern with the most tangible and basic necessities of life appeared perfectly justified, partly because of the magnitude of the demands, but also because of the common belief that Hong Kong was to be no more than a temporary refuge. Thus most of the provisions were ad hoc and no co-ordinated long-term planning was thought necessary.

With the coming of the 60's, however, these hundreds of thousands of residents, as well as the Government, began to realise that they had to stay in Hong Kong for a much longer period than they had anticipated. They were unwilling to return to the Chinese mainland or Taiwan. They had to admit, not without hesitation at first, that Hong Kong was to be the place in which they were to work, live and perhaps die. More important still, this was to be the place in which their children were to grow up and be educated. They were therefore bound to examine and evaluate the quality of this environment, yet the weight of the "ad

hoc" mentality of the 50's was probably too great to be cast off over-night, particularly with reference to children and youth work, and the tendency to provide improvised services was still prevalent in the early 60's. The dearth of social research, experimentation and co-ordination was sound witness to this trend. It was not until riots broke out in 1966 and 1967 that we were forced to sit back and re-think the whole situation. For the riot was not only a political issue, as many claimed it to be, but an outburst symptomatic of a deep-seated and growing dissatisfaction and unrest among the local residents, particularly the youths. What could possibly have led them to mount this onslaught against an apparently prosperous and healthy society, an onslaught that had potential power to threaten and upheave the very roots of our social and economic life? The mounting crime-rate and increasing prevalence of physical violence were telling facts too, and one could hardly draw any comfort by attributing them to the processes of urbanisation and industrialisation and citing other advanced countries as examples of fellow sufferers.

The threat of the 1967 riots drove home to many the realisation that there must be something wrong with the way we handled our youths in the past. Did we really appreciate what our youths were and what their needs and aspirations were? Did we provide for them sufficiently, in accordance with their needs? The urgent tasks seemed to be to appraise realistically the needs and aspirations of youth so that, on the basis of such an appreciation, a long-term, comprehensive and meaningful youth policy might be formulated, and to assess the role that youths can and should play in the development of our society. This problem is inevitably bound up with another question: What is our image of our youth? Do we look at them as potential contributors to the development of our society, as well as consumers of our services? And again, if our youths are to participate in the development of our society, what are the developmental goals we are aiming at, and what should we do to facilitate participation by our youth?

These are inevitably disturbing questions, and passive minds will tend to find an easy way out. The answer looks simple: "Youths are semi-civilised creatures with an abundance of energy that needs to be exhausted somehow." Thus we should on one hand provide them with leisure time recreational activities that can legitimately use up their excess energy, and on the other hand institute educational programmes and laws that will mould them into law-abiding adults like ourselves and deter them from doing evil to the society. I need not repeat here that this view of the general public overlooks the valuable assets in our youths, and it

is most unfortunate that many of our social leaders and respectable citizens still adhere to this view. Youths do have more than "nuisance value". Their energy, their creativity, their idealism and its concomitant discontent can serve more constructive purposes than merely causing headaches to the society.

This brings us directly back to the question of the role of youths in the developmental process of our society. Some general ideas must already exist at the back of our minds: our youths are energetic, better educated and more open to change, and thus will provide a valuable labour force in our commercial and industrial economy, which is as yet struggling hard to keep pace with the rapid technological advancement of other developed countries. Moreover, they are to be the social leaders and administrators of tomorrow. The education they receive is bound to affect the role they play in the future, and we must ensure that a sense of responsible citizenship is inculcated in the early years. We must be prepared, however, to do some serious and solid thinking on the questions I have outlined above, to consider them from both our point of view and that of the youths themselves, and to recognise that our youths have changed over the years.

### The present youth situation in Hong Kong

It may be helpful at this stage to review briefly the existing "youth situation" in Hong Kong, and to look at the various factors that are at play in shaping our youths' mentality.

#### (a) Breakdown in traditional family pattern

The traditional view that children are to be a "continuation" or "extension" of their parents is no longer accepted without question. Youths tend to regard themselves as separate human beings with a right to lead their own lives, which may be widely different from those of their parents. Their relative economic independence, the attraction of outside peer groups, and the vanishing of the family's traditional social and economic functions in an industrialised setting all help to weaken the old family ties, and lead our young people to assert more and more their individual rights.

#### (b) Educational opportunities

The wide spread of educational opportunities, especially with the introduction of free primary education in the coming school year, affords our young people more freedom and opportunity

in society, and at the same time raises their level of aspiration and makes them more articulate. The increasing social awareness and activism among college and secondary school students is a good indicator of this change. It also widens the generation gap as our youths receive more education of a type different from that of their parents.

(c) Employment patterns

With the increasing affluence of our society, our young people usually have little difficulty in finding employment. This enhances their economic and social independence. Yet at the same time we are suffering, as many other developing countries geared towards grammar school education do, from an excessive supply of white collar workers and a lack of technicians and skilled blue collar workers. This necessarily causes discontent in certain sectors, especially when the provision of technical education is still largely inadequate.

(d) The impact of western culture

Hong Kong is known as a meeting place of eastern and western cultures, and thus affords rich opportunities for the birth of a new culture. Before such integration is reached, however, a state of "anomie" is bound to prevail, and our youths today find themselves in this painful transitional stage. They are subjected to an influx of different values, and they have yet to sort out their own value system which might give their life a meaningful shape.

(e) The political climate

We can imagine that the Hong Kong youths, owing no allegiance to either Nationalist or Communist China and being subjected to British colonial rule, about which they have no choice, must find their national identity a constant source of irritation and discomfort. Further, the colonial administrative structure does not prepare citizens for real participation in public affairs and thus hinders the development of a "Hong Kong citizen" identity which their counterparts in Singapore have found. This must add to their frustration. But we are witnessing among our youths, especially in recent years, a growing identification with Hong Kong - the place where they were born and are being brought up - which has led to greater demands for participation in the policy-making and implementation of public affairs. The campaign to make Chinese the official language last

year testifies to this rising aspiration and the youths' desire to fight for a more responsible position in society. Fortunately, the Government is beginning to recognise this need too, and the recent proposal made by the Commissioner for Resettlement to set up Estate Councils in the larger and more remote resettlement estates is surely a step in the right direction, since through these local residents will be able to solve their common problems by joint effort.

### Our approach in working with youth

Having thus briefly analysed our youth situation, we must proceed to examine the way in which we have responded to the needs expressed in one form or another by our youths, and to consider the approach that we should adopt in the future. As I have mentioned above, our approach in the past has essentially been a passive one, responding only to crisis situations with quick, stop-gap measures. Yet to pretend that this represents the total picture is to do the Government and many voluntary bodies a grave injustice. Changes, though slow in coming, are evident in many fields of endeavour. We see, for example, in the schools growing numbers of social service groups and other extra-curricular activities. These give the students more opportunities to develop their personality, to cultivate their cultural interests and leadership potential, and to acquire the habit of serving their community. In the field of youth work, we see also a shift in emphasis from recreational clubs and interest groups to voluntary social service, leadership training and youth councils. Forums on social issues are organised to stimulate young people's interest in the society and to learn their opinion on such matters. Self-programming groups are encouraged to let young people devise and run their own programmes. Youth counselling and "out-reach" programmes are attempting to help maladjusted youths beyond the reach of traditional clubs. P.H.A.B. (Physically Handicapped and Ablebodied) programmes have been initiated to allow both groups of youths to learn from and to help each other. Voluntary service in various fields is encouraged to educate youths in service of their community. Members of youth clubs today are usually given more say in the planning and execution of their own programmes. Most of these programmes may still be new in Hong Kong and have not moved far from the experimental stage, but, all in all, there is evidence of an increasing awareness in all sectors of the society of the need for responsible participation on the part of all its citizens if this community is to be a truly healthy and integrated one. Gradually, the value of the community development approach is gaining the recognition that it deserves.

## Future trends

As for our future endeavours, I feel that the following areas must be attended to:

- (a) The enunciation of a clear overall youth policy which would take care of the total development of youth, taking into account their physical, psychological, social and cultural needs, and which would embrace all sectors of the youth population - students and workers, educated and uneducated, handicapped and able-bodied, delinquent and non-delinquent. The formulation and implementation of this policy must involve all Government departments (Social Welfare, Education, Medical and Health, Labour, Urban Services), the voluntary organisations concerned, and the youths themselves.
- (b) The identification of the developmental goals of our society and the delineation of the role of youth in this process. The constructive abilities and potential contribution of our youths must be recognised. The use of the mass media and other means must be utilised to educate the masses to these ends. In short, we ought to remember that the relationship between adults and youths should be one of responsible partnership, imbued with mutual respect and trust, and not one of leader and follower.
- (c) The present inclination to encourage the participation of youth in the affairs of society ought to be continued and strengthened. Through this process, the two parties will learn to work closely with each other for the development of a society which belongs to both of them.

## Conclusion

It will seem a little redundant to re-stress here the important role that youths can play in the development of their society. The widespread youth unrest and activism in the contemporary world should give us an idea of the possible bleak future if we continue to ignore this legitimate demand of our youth. Of course, youth cannot always be right in everything they say - they are as prone to human error as we are. We must, however, learn at least to listen to them and to respect their opinion, and work out with them a solution to our many social ills. We must

remember that young people, with their idealism and freshness of vision, are often more sensitive to breaches of promise than we are to our failures to live up to our proclaimed beliefs and values. Their criticisms, admittedly extreme and hard to bear at times, should sensitise us to our inadequacies rather than put us on the defence. It is only through working closely together, in earnestness and good faith, with our young people - who can be our children and our partners at the same time - that we can hope to build a better society for tomorrow.