

Rallies and Riots

Hong Kong, July 1971:

It was well past six in the evening but a fierce July sun continued to beat upon several hundred demonstrators gathered at a corner of Victoria Park. They were mostly of college students, with a sprinkling of teachers, writers, clerks and factory workers, and they did not seem to mind the humidity. They had gathered for a patriotic purpose, risking comfortable futures in the civil service or glittering jobs in the private sector for what they regarded as a just cause.

Most of them carried small plastic bags containing soft drinks and fruits. Many fluttered palm-leaf fans. The most committed wore white headbands with black characters urging protection of Chinese territorial integrity and the defence to the death of the Diu Yu Toi Islands.

Girls committed to the cause were more restrained. Ruined complexions apparently counted for more than death. Wide-brimmed straw hats and cheap umbrellas, augmented by sunglasses, were much in evidence. The atmosphere, in spite of spasmodic outbreaks of shouted slogans and patriotic songs, was generally festive, like a noisy college outing.

“Protect Diu Yu Toi!”

“Defend the territorial integrity of the Motherland!”

“Resist the revival of Japanese Militarism!”

“Defeat American and Japanese Neo-Imperialism!”

Elsewhere within Victoria Park’s forty acres of reclaimed land, the shouting and songs attracted scant attention. High school students absorbed in football or basketball created a din of their own. The elderly, sitting on benches or strolling by the harbour side of the park, looked upon the demonstrators with mild curiosity. A fair number accepted printed handbills, if only for something to fan themselves with. A collection of local journalists and photographers hovered around the edges jotting notes and snapping pictures.

Sebastian Baxingdale stood about twenty or thirty yards from the growing crowd, under the shade of some scrawny willow and eucalyptus trees. Memories of his own student days came back to him. So many things had seemed possible then. Now there was only cynicism and ennui. He was wondering why he had come when Tony Tao, a member of the Executive Committee of the Hong Kong Federation of Students, rushed up panting, clutching a fistful of handbills.

“Sorry didn’t find you earlier, Mr. Baxingdale. Many things to do, you know, besides press relations. English not good but can try to answer questions. Too bad other foreign journalists not at protest.”

Tao had a high-pitched Eastern voice and an awkward English accent. He was a thin, unremarkable lad, wearing steel-rimmed spectacles. As he spoke, he continued to dish out handbills to passers-by with a friendly smile.

“Have to be honest with you,” Baxingdale said. “I came because I’m a little baffled by the issue. You people have been demonstrating for months, mounting signature campaigns, handing in protest letters. Some of you have been arrested, injured and imprisoned. Still you keep

kicking up a fuss over what appears to be a quarrel between the Chinese and the Japanese over a few specks of rock in the middle of the East China Sea. This has little to do with Hong Kong. Can't the matter be settled through diplomatic channels or before an arbitration court? I don't think the British public is much interested in far away quarrels. The Daily Globe certainly does not want to be used by others for grinding political axes."

"Sorry, Mr. Baxingdale. I hope I can explain properly. I'm history student. Diu Yu Toi islands part of China. But because Western oil companies want to drill there, Americans try to hand them to Japan next year, when they return Ryukyu Islands to Japan. Diu Yu Toi not part of the Ryukyus. History, geography, geology link them to China. Every Chinese knows this and is united on this. Many protests in China, Taiwan, United States, Europe.

"I speak for Hong Kong Federation of Students. We are only one of many protest groups. We don't want you to take sides, only to witness British injustice. We are taught British bring rule of law. But we get no justice. We want our feelings known."

"Why do you feel you're not getting justice? There is a process for applying for public demonstrations but I gather, according to the authorities, your people have not complied with requirements."

"Authorities are tricking us. Public Order Ordinance says Police must give permit before meetings in public places. We applied for permit to rally in Victoria Park. Police said park controlled by Urban Council. If Urban Council allows use, Police will give permit. But Urban Council ask us to use a football stadium and not disturb other park users. What good is football stadium? Who goes to football stadium except to watch football? Better stay home and shout slogans at walls.

"We want right to express opinions, like Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park. Demonstrate peacefully, like in Britain. Authorities forcing us to break law. They send police to arrest us. We will not resist. We learned about civil disobedience from Gandhi. We want the world to know what's happening here."

Baxingdale listened to the fractured discourse from the young man with growing understanding and sympathy. His natural instincts for justice and fair play were engaged.

"If what you say is true, the administration seems a bit bone-headed," he said. "If it's a matter of colonial injustice, then that is a legitimate concern for the Globe. I will look into this more fully. But do you and your friends want to go so far as to risk arrest? You may end up with criminal records, unable to apply for visas to study abroad. Why not fight this through the courts? Seek a judicial review?"

"Takes too long. Whole thing dead before court hearing. Japan gets Diu Yu Toi in one year. Must act now. We know risks, Mr. Baxingdale. We're not heroes or agitators, just people wanting our say."

There was a shout from the crowd. "Old Tao! Where are the staplers? Where did you put them?"

“Sorry. Please excuse a minute,” Tao said and raced off towards students erecting a makeshift stand with pieces of plywood and empty fruit cartons. They were trying to fix a piece of cloth with a slogan to the stand.

Tao trotted back to Baxingdale after a short interval. He brushed the back of his hand across his forehead and it came away with perspiration. “Hot,” he said, apologetically, before drying his hand on his torn and faded jeans. He seemed anxious to complete what he had started to say.

“During 1967 riots, some called us running dogs of the British because we took no stand, made no gesture. That shamed us. They were partly right. We thought mainly of our careers. The older generations at least opposed the Japanese or took sides in the civil war. But we have been keeping our heads down for quiet life. We wanted to be good boys and enjoy prosperous futures. Now there’s a chance to show what we are. We must decide something. Otherwise life is false. I’m sorry I can’t explain well. You understand what I say?”

“Yes, I understand,” Baxingdale said. He felt inexpressibly touched.

The number of demonstrators had by now swelled to over a thousand. Riot police had also arrived by the truckload. They were marshalled in front of their vehicles, dressed in khaki, with black riot helmets, rattan riot shields, black wooden truncheons and hob-nailed boots. They were commanded by a tall European Divisional Superintendent who stood conferring with a handful of subordinates. Photographers scurried between the two groups searching for dramatic angles before any melee started.

Baxingdale eyed the display of force apprehensively. He knew that a Hong Kong riot company consisted of a hundred and seventy men. He figured there had to be at least five companies massed. Such a force suggested the authorities were out to teach the demonstrators a lesson. He could feel the tension gathering, like static, ready to be discharged on the slightest contact.

“What are you expecting to happen?”

Tao grinned. “Same crazy game. Police in fix. Can’t surround park like other sites. Park too big. Can’t disperse us because we’re too many. Can’t arrest us all. We just sing songs, chant slogans, try to involve public. At seven o’clock, former President of Hong Kong Federation of Students will make address. His name is Yam Tin-chee, now trade union activist. When Yam starts speaking, or maybe before, police will warn us to disperse. But we’ll stay. We’re committed. Let them beat us again before television cameras. That’ll help our cause.”

“Tempers are apt to be short in this heat. Things can get out of hand, turn bloody. I’ve seen it in Vietnam and even in London. You sure there’s no other way?”

Tony Tao shrugged his slender shoulders. “Up to police. We want peaceful protest. Many girls here. My girlfriend also. Makes no sense to put her in danger. Her name’s Mai. She’s in English Lit. That’s her over there, in the straw hat and pink pedal-pushers.”

Tao pointed to a girl and the girl waved to him.

Tao waved back. Then he pulled a document from his hip pocket and held it out diffidently to Baxingdale. "Mai made translation of history of Diu Yu Toi into English, from our pamphlets."

"Thanks," Baxingdale said. "I'm not up on this dispute, I must confess. The Japanese say the islands have been part of the Ryukyus for a long time. Claimed to have put up a marker there in 1895."

"That's true. But fact is China lost the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895. Had to cede Taiwan and Pescadores to Japan. At end of World War II, Japan agreed to return them to China. No mention of Diu Yu Toi. Chinese assumed position understood. Then, in 1969, America announced intention to return Ryukyus to Japan in 1972, including Diu Yu Toi. New plot became clear. Chinese people protested all over the world. Everything in Mai's translation."

"I'll study the arguments. Thanks."

"Better join others now, Tony Tao said, with a slight bow. "Rally starting soon. Thanks for coming." He trotted back to the main body of students, patting Mai reassuringly on the shoulder as he passed, before taking up a position near the makeshift stand.

At the appointed hour, a tall, lean man with a loud hailer climbed onto the stand. Wrapped around the front was a two-foot wide slogan: "Protect Diu Yu Toi and the territorial integrity of the Motherland."

"Compatriots!" the tall man on the stand called and immediately a roar of approval went up. He punched the air with a clenched fist and shouted: "Defend Diu Yu Toi at all cost!" The call was echoed and met with more roars of approval.

"My name is Yam Tin-chee. I used to be a student like you but I have more recently been a guest in British gaols. It is good to be made a guest of British gaols. I'm told only the best people get that privilege! Many subsequently became presidents and prime ministers!"

Roars of laughter.

"We're here today to protest peacefully -- I stress peacefully --against another plot to steal another part of our Motherland," Yam continued. "Though we are not protesting against the British in Hong Kong, their police and lackeys have turned up to silence us. But we will not be silenced, will we?"

The demonstrators responded with a resounding "No!"

"We all know the British for what they are," Yam shouted. "They pervert our educational system. They excise from textbooks the disgraceful facts of history. But no matter. We all know they made us buy opium under the threat of gunboats and under the pretext of free trade. We know they made war again and again against our people and crippled our nation with war indemnities. It was a British commander who ordered the razing of the Summer Palace at the time of the Boxer uprising. It was British police who massacred compatriots in British concessions. Remember the shootings in the Shanghai International Settlement? The killings at Shakee? Have we forgotten the seventy-two martyrs?"

Shouted anti-British slogans greeted Yam's indictment.

“I am not just talking about history,” the speaker continued. “I’m also talking about what is happening now. It’s the British who talk of democracy, yet denying us a say over our own affairs. It’s the British who talk of the rule of law while perverting the law. They make us squander our reserves to bolster their sagging currency. They pass laws to force us to buy their products but restrict our goods in the British market. They are at this very moment trying to use their laws to turn this into an illegal gathering. We must not forget we have a right to be here.”

More roars of approval went up.

“It’s the British who have occupied our territory and who want us to remain silent while another part of our contry is being stolen by their allies. It’s time to defend our Motherland, to defend our right to free speech and free association. If blood is shed, then one day blood must be repaid with blood.”

The response of the crowd was overwhelming. Baxingdale’s command of Chinese was insufficient to catch everything but he got the drift. His country did have a great deal to answer for, he reflected, and the prosperity now enjoyed by the colony did not make British actions right.

Then another message boomed out from another loud-hailer. “Attention! Attention! This is the Police. This gathering is an illegal assembly under the provisions of the Public Order Ordinance. You are breaking the law. Disperse immediately. If you do not do so within five minutes you will be liable to arrest and imprisonment. Vacate the park at once.”

“Stand fast! We will not yield!” Yam cried, and his words were taken up by the entire assembly. A few demonstrators behind the makeshift stand unfurled four cloth banners on poles calling for the defence of the Motherland and Diu Yu Toi and demanding freedom of speech and assembly.

A police detachment immediately rushed towards the stand to arrest Yam and to tear down the banners. Students on the stage tried to protect the banners. Police and students alike got entangled in them. Others attempted to hamper the police, so as to enable their leaders to escape. Officers lashed out with their truncheons. Punches and kicks flew. The demonstrators rushed en masse to the aid of their leaders. The makeshift stand gave way with a loud crack.

Yam was apparently the prime target. A policeman already had his head in an arm lock. Students clambered over the policeman as they tried to free their speaker. Several officers struggled to disentangle themselves from the cloth banners and to confiscate them. Others applied their batons furiously and indiscriminately. The addition of more policemen and demonstrators in the confused struggle reduced the makeshift stand into a dangerous rubble of jagged wood.

Baxingdale watched the riot police crunching towards the main body of demonstrators, ordering them to leave, striking out with boots and batons. Threats, insults, imprecations and pleas filled the air. Girls screamed. The whole vast, heaving mass of humanity altered shape, like some giant amoeba. It began fraying at the edges before splitting off into smaller entities. The new groupings quickly took on lives of their own, charging off in different directions to hurl missiles and abuse at the police. Those remaining with the main body simply curled up on the ground and covered their heads with their arms to ward off the baton blows.

Tony Tao pushed his way towards Mai. She was sitting on the ground with her arms curled around the straw hat on her head. Four policemen got to her area before Tony and set about dispersing demonstrators with varying degrees of physical encouragement. One grabbed Mai by the shoulder to pull her up. She played possum. In the test of wills that followed her straw hat fell off and then the blouse she was wearing got either torn or undone. Her white brassiere became exposed. She screamed and tried to cover herself, still refusing to stand up.

At that moment Tony Tao reached her. He tried to loosen the officer's grip on the blouse. A truncheon cracked down on Tao's head and he tumbled on top of Mai. A backhanded blow sent his spectacles flying. Blood was trickling from a wound in his head. Mai gathered him up in her arms and screamed and screamed.

The officer lost interest in Mai. He had a bigger prize -- a rioter who had attacked a policeman and obstructed him in the execution of his duty. He jerked Tao away from Mai, threw him on the ground, pressed a knee against the small of his back, and twisted his arms behind to handcuff him. Then he half-dragged his prisoner towards one of the waiting detention vans.

"Please let him go! Please let him go!" Mai cried, stumbling to her feet and retrieving her straw hat to clasp it over her chest. "He's hurt. Please let me take him to a doctor," she pleaded. Tears were streaming down her face.

"You want to be arrested too?" the officer demanded, pointing his truncheon at her.

Mai collapsed on her knees, wailing: "Tony! Tony!"

A rage surged through Baxingdale, the kind he had never managed to summon up in the boxing ring or on the rugby pitch. He rushed towards the officer who was dragging Tony Tao away. He had no idea what he might do once he got there. All he knew was that his instincts had been offended.

He fought his way through the scattering demonstrators in pursuit of the policeman. Before he got near Tao, however, he was barred by two other policemen in riot gear. A red tag on the shoulder strap of one indicated that the wearer understood English.

"Who are you? What you want?" the officer demanded, shield and baton at the ready.

"Journalist," Baxingdale replied, showing his press pass.

"Stay back. This police business."

Baxingdale looked straight into the officer's eyes. He thought he detected a malevolence there, perhaps even a secret hatred, as if the eyes were saying: "You are to blame for this. Because of your kind I'm forced to injure my own countrymen."

Baxingdale's mouth was open and he was breathing hard. He was bigger than either of them. He could bring them both down in a single tackle. But then what? The officers would never leave it at that. Reinforcements would come and far from freeing Tony Tao he would end up joining him in gaol. He was not there to make news, he told himself, only to report it. The messy state of the world was none of his business. His body relaxed and he took a small step backwards, though his heart still pounded furiously.

The officers turned and went back to chasing demonstrators. Many students, joined by local street youths, had already spilled into the shopping streets of Causeway Bay, to vent their anger on rubbish bins, cars and shop windows.

Tony Tao had disappeared into one of the police vans. The crowds began to thin. The injured were helped away by friends.

Baxingdale made for the spot where Tony Tao had been bludgeoned. It looked as if a typhoon had hit. The debris included empty soft drink containers, broken umbrellas, discarded straw hats, blood-soaked handkerchiefs and torn banners. He spotted among the mess a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles with one lens smashed and an arm twisted out of shape. He picked them up and put them into his shirt pocket. He looked for Mai but she was nowhere to be seen.

He felt drained. He wanted something, anything, to help him forget what he had witnessed. He wished Hong Kong still had opium houses like Cholon. He could do with a pipe or two. Or perhaps, like Derek Soames, he needed different kinds of succour.

Suddenly, he recalled the night he had danced with Lucille Chu at the Red Cross Ball. Her memory intoxicated him still. She would be ideal for soothing his anger and his hurt. But she was somebody else's wife!

Reluctantly he followed the trail of destruction along the crowded streets of Causeway Bay towards Szeto's Bar in Wanchai. If he encountered T. P. Choy and Derek Soames there, he would give them both a piece of his mind.