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**Making Waves: Radio Broadcasting in 1920s Hong Kong**

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### **Abstract**

This paper traces the development of radio broadcasting in Hong Kong, focusing firstly on broadcasting activities in the early 1920s. It then examines how these early developments paved the way for the establishment of the first official radio station in Hong Kong in 1928. What the radio activities and the slow reaction of the colonial government demonstrate are that society usually adapts to new technology faster than the government did. I also argue that modernisation should not be simply regarded as a top-down state-intervention or bottom-up movement. Both state and society contributed in their ways to promote radio, which became a standard of modernity in the 1920s.

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### Introduction

Before the Internet and television were available, radio broadcasting was an integral part of everyday lives. It transformed humanity by altering the way people communicated. It “made waves” by posing a challenge to former ways of communication. The process of communication requires a medium to send a message to the receiver. The fundamental medium of communication is words. The invention of the printing press gave birth to mass communication, a process of sending messages to a considerable number of people.<sup>1</sup> Books and newspapers amplified the power of words as they sped up the dissemination of information among the literate. Sound then sustained the power of words with recorders and broadcasting. They broke the barrier of literacy so that both literate and illiterate can receive the same message. Radio changed the way people were entertained. Before this technology was ready for use, the choices of entertainment had been very limited. If they wanted to hear live music, they needed to go to a theatre. With a radio receiver, people could listen to live entertainment at home. Hence, radio became a standard of modernity in the 1920s. G. C. Moxon, the former president of the St. George’s Society in Hong Kong, declared that radio broadcasting was a development trend in the “civilised” world.<sup>2</sup>

The global history of radio begins with exceptional scientists, the United States, and Britain. Following the discovery of radio waves in 1887, wireless technology was intensively studied by an Italian scientist named Guglielmo Marconi in the late nineteenth century. In 1906, the first broadcast in history was made by a professor at the University of Pittsburgh, Reginald Fessenden, who successfully broadcast music to ships. The first commercial radio station was founded in San Jose, California, in 1909.<sup>3</sup> Radio broadcasting truly took off in the 1920s in the United States after the federal government ironed out the patent problems which had obstructed the development of radio technology. During the First World War,

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph R. Dominick, *The Dynamics of Mass Communications: Media in the Digital Age*, 9th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007), 5-10.

<sup>2</sup> “Radio Test,” *South China Morning Post*, February 25, 1928.

<sup>3</sup> John R. Bittner, *Mass Communication* (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1996), 158-60.

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American armed forces required dependable communications equipment. Thanks to the government, radio technology companies standardised some key aspects of equipment so that radio parts were interchangeable. The cost of operating a radio station thus became more affordable than before.<sup>4</sup>

Across the Atlantic Ocean, roughly around the same period, broadcasting developed in Britain, but on a different path from America. In the United States, radio stations were commercial in nature and made profits through advertising. The larger their audience, the more advertising revenues they earned. In Britain, upon receiving nearly a hundred broadcasting licence applications, the General Post Office proposed issuing a licence to a joint venture owned by radio manufacturers. The British Broadcasting Company was formed in November 1922.<sup>5</sup> The company derived its profit from the royalty of the sales of receivers. But the financial arrangement later proved to be insufficient.<sup>6</sup> In January 1927, the company was replaced by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Under a Royal Charter, the non-commercial organisation is defined even today as a public service. The BBC is obliged to regularly report its work to the Parliament. The income is derived from broadcast licence fees.<sup>7</sup>

Much has been written concerning media history in the West, including the beginnings and impacts of radio broadcasting. However, less effort has been made to understand the impacts of modern technology and the media in the non-Western world.<sup>8</sup> In the case of Hong Kong, little has been written about broadcasting. The beginning of radio can be found in institutional history. The oldest broadcaster in Hong Kong, Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK), has published several books to celebrate the anniversaries of its formation. The official account regards the founding year of the station, 1928, as the beginning of

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<sup>4</sup> Dominick, *The Dynamics of Mass Communication*, 64-5.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Crisell, *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 17-20.

<sup>6</sup> Asa Briggs, *The BBC: The First Fifty Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 146.

<sup>7</sup> Crisell, *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting*, 28.

<sup>8</sup> Chua Ai Lin, “‘The Modern Magic Carpet’: Wireless Radio in Interwar Colonial Singapore,” *Modern Asian Studies* 46 no. 1 (2012): 168.

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broadcasting. As a result, it omits the importance of radio activities in the 1920s in promoting the broadcasting development of Hong Kong.

This thesis is about the beginning of radio broadcasting in the 1920s Hong Kong — how it made waves by establishing a strong presence in the British colony. I will explore how the colonial society reacted to the new technology. It covers the activities of radio amateurs and entrepreneurs who tried to introduce the radio to the community. I will also look at how the colonial administration responded to growing demands from society for radio broadcasting, and the various reasons why it established an official radio station in 1928.

My study is significant in two aspects. First, the beginning of radio broadcasting helps us to understand the development of Hong Kong as a modern city in the twentieth century. The evolution of communication technology is pivotal to the emergence of modern societies as it not only determines how people exchange ideas, but also creates new social relationships and behaviour beyond face-to-face interactions.<sup>9</sup> In the case of radio broadcasting, individuals can speak to a multitude of physically absent people. Musicians don't just perform in front of a live audience, but in a studio for radio listeners. Some scholars suggest radio makes knowledge widely available for citizens and helps to create a "more united and egalitarian society."<sup>10</sup> When historians discuss the modernisation of Hong Kong, they primarily focus on how the administration responded to changes in population, demographic structures, economic resources, and so on. Books about the urban progress of Hong Kong are likely to concern with town planning, infrastructure, social welfare, etc.<sup>11</sup> The emphasis on state intervention unavoidably leads us to

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<sup>9</sup> John B. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 2-4.

<sup>10</sup> Seán Street, *Crossing the Ether: Pre-War Public Service Radio and Commercial Competition in the UK* (Eastleigh: John Libbey Publishing, 2006), 10; Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting, 1922-1939* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 13.

<sup>11</sup> Ho Pui-yin, *Making Hong Kong: A History of its Urban Development* (Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2018); Roger Bristow, *Land Use Planning in Hong Kong: History, Policies and Procedures* (Hong Kong: Oxford

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view modernisation from a top-down approach.<sup>12</sup> My paper uses the development of radio broadcasting in Hong Kong to demonstrate modernisation is not simply a top-down or a bottom-up movement. Both the state and society contributed in their ways to promote radio. Modernisation is the result of concerted works by both parties.

My second point about the significance of this study is it reveals society is more ready to adapt to new technologies than the state does. I argue that expatriates in Hong Kong played an important role in raising public awareness about radio broadcasting. They constituted a small portion in the population, but they moved the colony a big step closer to modernity. The Hong Kong government had been slow in responding to the quest of radio amateurs for introducing broadcasting to the colony. I shall explain how conservatism led to such laggardness. Some historians argue that the conservative attitude of colonial officials resulted in the reluctance and resistance to reform and change.<sup>13</sup> I hope this paper will offer a new understanding of colonial conservatism in the 1920s.

I have primarily used historical newspapers and official records to understand broadcasting in the 1920s. Historical newspapers are a useful primary source for studying society and culture. Editorials and correspondence reflect what people paid attention to at that time. To assess public views about broadcasting, I will scrutinise newspapers from the 1920s, mainly the *South China Morning Post*. Government records illustrate the government's attitude towards broadcasting. I aim at examining communication between the Hong Kong government and the Colonial Office because governors were obliged to consult the Colonial Office before implementing new policy initiatives even on less urgent

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University Press, 1984); Lawrence Lai Wai-chung, *Town Planning in Hong Kong: A Critical Review* (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Mark Hampton, *Hong Kong and British Culture, 1945-97* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 100-2.

<sup>13</sup> Susan Bayly, "The Evolution of Colonial Cultures: Nineteenth-Century Asia," in *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Volume III: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. Andrew Potter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 467-9.

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matters. Colonial governments submitted abundant reports to the Colonial Office on all aspects of their administration. Unfortunately, records are patchy, since only 15% of the records in the 1920s survive. They mainly concern with political and economic issues.<sup>14</sup> It poses a tremendous difficulty in researching about radio broadcasting in 1920s Hong Kong. Nevertheless, the collection of original correspondence between the Colonial Office and the Hong Kong government (CO 129) provides some clues.

### **A Nascent Broadcasting Community**

This section and the next indicates that the Hong Kong society adapted to wireless technology more readily than the state did. It resulted in a very mild tension between the state and society on broadcasting matters. At the beginning of the section, I will introduce the laws and regulations concerning radio broadcasting in the 1920s. Then, I will discuss the works of radio enthusiasts and local entrepreneurs in promoting radio broadcasting. The Hongkong Radio Society was an organisation of radio amateurs who made significant contributions to raising public awareness of broadcasting. I will also cover other broadcasting initiatives as well, by entrepreneurs before the government established an official radio station in 1928. Towards the end of the section, I will describe the role of expatriates in developing radio broadcasting in Hong Kong. The radio amateurs and enthusiastic entrepreneurs happened to be mainly foreigners.

Owing to legal restrictions, broadcasting before 1928 had to be on an experimental basis. In the 1920s, the application of wireless technology in Hong Kong was governed by the Wireless Telegraphy Ordinance of 1913. As the title suggests, it concerned mainly with wireless telegraphy. Broadcasting had not been popular in the early 1910s. Nonetheless, it was subject to this ordinance because telegraphy and broadcasting are different application of the same technology. The Legislative Council passed an amendment in July 1926 to refine the definitions of wireless telegraphy and to require wireless receiving

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<sup>14</sup> Norman Miners, *Hong Kong under Imperial Rule, 1912-1941* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1987), 1-3.

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sets to be licenced.<sup>15</sup> Before the amendment, although individuals needed to seek the permission of the government to install receiving apparatuses. The government was very likely to approve it. The *Hongkong Telegraph* reported in November 1923 that up to dozens of radio receivers were sold every day in the colony.<sup>16</sup> The government was rather strict when it came to wireless transmission. Section 4(1) of the Wireless Telegraphy Ordinance provided that “no person shall establish any wireless telegraph station or install or work any apparatus for wireless telegraphy ... except under and in accordance with a licence granted ... by the Governor.”<sup>17</sup> The granting of broadcasting licences was the key issue in the discussion of the wireless development in Hong Kong among expatriate radio enthusiasts. A major group of them was the Hongkong Radio Society.

The development of the Hongkong Radio Society should be viewed in three phases: from 1923 to 1924, from 1925 to the first half of 1926, and from the second half of 1926 to 1927. In May 1923, a group of radio amateurs met at the City Hall under the arrangement of Alfred Hicks, editor of the *Hongkong Telegraph*, and discussed the wireless development in Hong Kong. The meeting concluded with the formation of the Hongkong Radio Society. The objectives of the Society were to:

- further the study of the science of Radio Telegraphy and Telephony;
- acquire apparatus which will be of assistance to the above object;
- provide a reference library of technical literature dealing with the subject;
- give assistance and advice to all who are interested in the subject;
- provide lectures and demonstrations;
- safeguard as far as possible the interests of all users of radio apparatus.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> “A Radio Cabaret,” *South China Morning Post*, August 13, 1926.

<sup>16</sup> “Radio in Hongkong,” *Hongkong Telegraph*, November 6, 1923.

<sup>17</sup> *Wireless Telegraphy Ordinance, 1913* (1923 Consolidation).

<sup>18</sup> “Hongkong Radio Society,” *Hong Kong Daily Press*, June 5, 1923.

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From its formation in 1923, the Society received much media coverage. The government also took the Society seriously. It sent Colonial Secretary A. G. M. Fletcher to attend the second meeting in May 1923.<sup>19</sup> There was some correspondence from May to October 1923 between the government and the Society on the issue of provisional broadcasting licences. However, the government refused to grant the licences. It only agreed to loosen the restrictions on receiving sets. Individuals were granted greater freedom in possessing them. In the next section, I will further explore the conservatism of the colonial government.

The Radio Society failed to convince the government to further develop local broadcasting. The government's refusal to issue licences resulted in the withering of public interest. The Society's annual report for 1924 mentioned the dwindling number of people who attended its lectures. The report blamed the end of experimental broadcasting by the Hongkong Hotel and the Radio Communication Company on government inaction.<sup>20</sup> The Society entered the second phase of its development in 1925, with a massive strike-boycott from June 1925 to October 1926. It disrupted normal lives in the colony and further weakened the passion in society for radio broadcasting. Compared to the first phase, news rarely featured the Society during this period.

The third phase in the development of the Radio Society witnessed the revival of interest in broadcasting. From July 1926, the Society conducted frequent test transmissions in the *South China Morning Post* building. It gave test concerts in English and Chinese. It also arranged a test concert targeting Portuguese listeners in August 1926.<sup>21</sup> With frequent test transmissions, the Radio Society aimed to produce regular radio programmes. To reach that goal, it reformed its internal structure. The general committee was divided into the programme committee and the technical committee.<sup>22</sup> This management

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<sup>19</sup> "Colonial Secretary Outlines Government Policy," *South China Morning Post*, May 18, 1923.

<sup>20</sup> "Hongkong Radio Society: Annual Report," *South China Morning Post*, December 15, 1924.

<sup>21</sup> "A Radio Cabaret," *South China Morning Post*, August 13, 1926.

<sup>22</sup> "Radio Society. Optimistic Note Struck at Meeting.," *South China Morning Post*, September 3, 1926.

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model was later copied by the Entertainment Committee of the Y.M.C.A. (Young Men's Christian Association) and the official radio station.

In April 1927, more than a year before official broadcasting service was available in the colony, the Radio Society decided to sell its transmitter to pay off debts.<sup>23</sup> It suffered from perennial financial adversity. In September 1926, it was barely able to manage a balance of over \$100.<sup>24</sup> Later that year, it was necessary to replace the four valves in the transmitter if test transmissions were to continue. But each valve cost \$100.<sup>25</sup> Eventually, the Society was under heavy debts. The transmitter sold was then procured by the Entertainment Committee. After putting an end to test transmissions, the influence of the Radio Society once again declined. News about local broadcasting near the end of 1927 and early 1928 was occupied by the committee's concert broadcast. Apart from the Radio Society, other groups intended to introduce radio in Hong Kong before official broadcasting service took off.

The initiatives of the Hongkong Hotel and the Radio Communication Company (Orient) Ltd. reveal that broadcasting was not purely for leisure. The activities were more organised and frequent than previously known. The hotel and the company undertook transmissions with a view that broadcasting would shortly become a promising business. The Hongkong Hotel was involved in the broadcasting development earlier than the Radio Society was. In April 1923, it already sought the government's permission to operate a wireless transmission system.<sup>26</sup> Although the Hongkong Hotel was very interested in radio broadcasting, it saw broadcasting as a profit-making business. J. H. Taggart, the managing director, told the *Hongkong Telegraph* that he hoped the hotel could make a revenue from the licences of receiving sets. The government did not issue a broadcasting licence to the Hongkong Hotel, but the news

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<sup>23</sup> "Radio Society: The Position of Local Broadcasting," *South China Morning Post*, April 27, 1927.

<sup>24</sup> "Radio Society. Optimistic Note Struck at Meeting," *South China Morning Post*, September 3, 1926.

<sup>25</sup> "Excellent Results Now Achieved," *South China Morning Post*, January 19, 1927.

<sup>26</sup> "Hongkong Hotel Co. Prepared to Broadcast," *Hongkong Telegraph*, April 24, 1923.

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of October and November 1923 inform us the hotel broadcast every evening between 6:00 and 7:00.<sup>27</sup> Audiences could listen to live vocal and instrumental music performed by artists who just visited Beijing and Shanghai.<sup>28</sup> The test broadcasts by the Hongkong Hotel discontinued sometime in 1924 because eventually the government refused to issue broadcasting licences to any company.<sup>29</sup>

The Radio Communication Company was a British company selling radio receivers and wireless apparatuses to be installed on ships. The company was managed by an American named E. G. Osborn. He was the first person to bring radio broadcasting to China. In January 1923, he established a radio station in Shanghai.<sup>30</sup> For unknown reasons, he left the company he founded and came to Hong Kong to work as the manager of the Radio Communication Company.<sup>31</sup> In December 1924, he started to work for the Far Eastern Radio Company.<sup>32</sup> The experimental broadcast of the Radio Communication Company commenced in November 1923. The transmitter was installed on the roof of the Kowloon Hotel. Every night from 8:30 to 10:00 (sometimes between 7:00 and 7:30), the audience could listen to jazz, opera, Chinese music, piano performances, and other kinds of live audio entertainment.<sup>33</sup> Once, it broadcast dancing music to passenger ship S. S. Franconia in January 1924.<sup>34</sup> Apart from broadcasting from the Kowloon Hotel, the company also broadcast opera performances from the Star Theatre in Kowloon.<sup>35</sup>

In December 1923, the Radio Communication Company presented a proposal to the government and the Hong Kong General Chamber of Commerce. The General Chamber of Commerce had a direct

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<sup>27</sup> “Hongkong Radio Society,” *Hong Kong Daily Press*, October 26, 1923; “Radio in Hongkong,” *Hongkong Telegraph*, November 6, 1923.

<sup>28</sup> “Hongkong Hotel Co. Prepared to Broadcast,” *Hongkong Telegraph*, April 24, 1923.

<sup>29</sup> “Hongkong Radio Society: Annual Report,” *South China Morning Post*, December 15, 1924.

<sup>30</sup> Guo Zhenzhi 郭鎮之, “Zhongguo jingnei di yi zuo guangbo diantai shi mo ji” 中國境內第一座廣播電台始末記 [The first radio station in Chinese territory], *Xinwen yanjiu ziliao* 新聞研究資料 no. 1 (1986): 164.

<sup>31</sup> “New Advertisement,” *South China Morning Post*, August 31, 1923; “Radio in Hongkong: Dance on the Franconia,” *South China Morning Post*, January 15, 1924.

<sup>32</sup> “Local and General,” *South China Morning Post*, December 18, 1924.

<sup>33</sup> “Radio in Hongkong,” *Hongkong Telegraph*, November 6, 1923.

<sup>34</sup> “Passengers Enjoy Broadcast Programme,” *Hong Kong Daily Press*, January 15, 1924.

<sup>35</sup> “Radio for Hongkong,” *South China Morning Post*, March 15, 1924.

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interest in wireless technology because many companies were engaged in overseas trade. Wireless communication with ships during emergencies was essential because piracy was rampant in the 1920s owing to political turmoil in South China.<sup>36</sup> The Radio Communication Company offered to take over all radio work in the colony, including wireless communication with ocean-going ships and river shipping, gathering of complete weather reports from ships at sea and Far Eastern wireless stations in Manila, Singapore, and Saigon. The company's plan also included regular broadcasting. However, the government did not "actively reject" the company's suggestion or encourage it.<sup>37</sup> The Radio Communication Company instead established a broadcasting station in Macao in July 1924.<sup>38</sup> The experimental broadcast undertaken by the company halted sometime in 1924 as the Hongkong Hotel's did.<sup>39</sup>

The Hongkong Hotel and the Radio Communication Company saw experimental broadcasting as a promising business opportunity. However, the broadcasting by the Entertainment Committee of the Y.M.C.A. was not profit-oriented. The committee was established in February 1927 because of an expected surge of British servicemen in Hong Kong and the subsequent need for entertainment. It provided regular entertainment in various Y.M.C.A. centres and other places.<sup>40</sup> In a meeting of the Hongkong Radio Society in July 1927, the chairman of the committee, R. J. Sutherland, presented a broadcasting scheme. The committee intended to broadcast to troops in Hong Kong as well as the general public three or four times a week. The broadcasting content included news from Britain, cricket, football, and racing news, local news, lectures and essays on neighbouring countries. To cater to Chinese listeners, the committee would arrange a Chinese evening each week.<sup>41</sup> In December 1927, it secured a transmitter previously

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<sup>36</sup> John M. Carroll, *A Concise History of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 89-90.

<sup>37</sup> "Radio without Hongkong," *South China Morning Post*, July 10, 1924.

<sup>38</sup> "The New Radio Station at Macao," *Hong Kong Daily Press*, July 14, 1924.

<sup>39</sup> "Hongkong Radio Society: Annual Report," *South China Morning Post*, December 15, 1924.

<sup>40</sup> "Entertainments for Service Men," *South China Morning Post*, February 28, 1927; "Power of Radio," *South China Morning Post*, March 28, 1927.

<sup>41</sup> "Local Broadcasting Scheme," *South China Morning Post*, July 8, 1927.

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owned by the Radio Society and installed it on the roof of the Lee Theatre in Causeway Bay. After a series of tests, the first broadcast by the Entertainment Committee was carried out on 30 December 1927.<sup>42</sup>

Apart from experimental broadcasting, efforts were made by non-governmental agencies to educate the public on radio technology. The local newspaper industry was supportive too. The *Hongkong Telegraph* organised a meeting at the City Hall to discuss the formation of the Radio Society. The *South China Morning Post* provided a place to install a radio transmitter for the Radio Society to carry out test transmissions.<sup>43</sup> It also provided a place for the Society to hold regular meetings. In terms of raising public awareness about radio broadcasting, the two newspapers devoted columns to news about the development of radio around the globe. The Hongkong Electric Co. assisted the Radio Society to analyse the performance of test broadcasts from listeners' feedback.<sup>44</sup> The Education Committee of the Y.M.C.A. organised an evening course for the study of wireless technology. The course lasted for eighteen weeks and was taught in English.<sup>45</sup> The Radio Society also provided lectures occasionally on wireless telegraphy to members.

The development of Hong Kong radio broadcasting started with the establishment of the Radio Society in 1923. Experimental broadcast by the Hongkong Hotel and the Radio Communication Company fuelled the local passion for radio from 1923 to 1924. Interest in radio cooled down in 1925 and the first half of 1926, partly because of the government's inaction, and partly because of the political predicament during this period. The second half of 1926 witnessed the revival of interest in broadcasting with the test transmissions of the Radio Society. Although its work was halted owing to financial difficulties, the enthusiasm for radio was then sustained by the broadcast of the Y.M.C.A. Entertainment Committee.

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<sup>42</sup> "Concerts for Servicemen," *South China Morning Post*, December 15, 1927; "Successful Radio Broadcast," *Hongkong Telegraph*, December 31, 1927.

<sup>43</sup> "Test Transmissions Yesterday," *South China Morning Post*, July 6, 1926.

<sup>44</sup> "Test Transmissions Yesterday," *South China Morning Post*, July 6, 1926.

<sup>45</sup> "Radio Lessons," *South China Morning Post*, August 27, 1924.

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It is worth noting the role of expatriates in the development of radio broadcasting in 1920s Hong Kong in that the Radio Society was led by foreign residents. Not to mention, foreign residents took the initiatives to conduct test transmissions. Some of them worked for the government, such as C. A. D. Melbourne and G. F. H. Taylor. Melbourne was the Deputy Registrar and Appraiser of the Supreme Court.<sup>46</sup> He was the president of the Radio Society between 1923 and 1924. Taylor was a lighthouse keeper on the Green Island.<sup>47</sup> He was the Secretary of the Society in 1923. Although the expatriate community constituted only 2 to 3% of the colonial population in the 1920s, their contribution is as equally important as the Chinese in the making of modern Hong Kong. Historians generally perceive that the influence of expatriates was on the wane in the 1920s as a new generation of Chinese businessmen and professionals rose to a prominent social and economic position in the colony.<sup>48</sup> The participation of expatriates in cultivating a broadcasting culture prompts us to rethink their statement. European expatriates arrived in Hong Kong to earn a living and to seek career advancement.<sup>49</sup> They cared about the development of Hong Kong because they expected a European cultural experience in the Far Eastern colony.<sup>50</sup> Borrowing from Goodstadt's description of British expatriates, they "fashioned an existence for themselves that enabled them to spend their lives in a world as thoroughly British as they could contrive."<sup>51</sup> Hence, expatriate amateurs often refer to Europe and America when they complained about the lack of broadcasting in Hong Kong. When the Y.M.C.A. Entertainment Committee arranged a transmission test

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<sup>46</sup> *Hongkong Blue Book for the Year 1924*, 150.

<sup>47</sup> *Hongkong Blue Book for the Year 1923*, 131.

<sup>48</sup> Henry J. Lethbridge, *Hong Kong: Stability and Change* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1978), 19-25; Leo F. Goodstadt, "The Rise and Fall of Social, Economic and Political Reforms in Hong Kong, 1930-1955," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch* 44 (2004): 59.

<sup>49</sup> Lethbridge, "Caste, Class, and Race in Hong Kong before the Japanese Occupation," in *Hong Kong: Stability and Change*, 189-90.

<sup>50</sup> May Holdsworth, *Foreign Devils: Expatriates in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2002), 152.

<sup>51</sup> Goodstadt, *Uneasy Partners: The Conflict Between Public Interest and Private Profit in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University press, 2009), 20-6.

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on 24 February 1928, G. C. Moxon said wireless broadcasting in the West was as common a hobby as photography. He remarked that Hong Kong fell behind the rest of the “civilised” world.<sup>52</sup> The *South China Morning Post* also expressed the “backwardness” of Hong Kong in not having a radio station when broadcasting was an everyday pleasure in Europe and the United States.<sup>53</sup> In short, expatriates were not only sojourners in the colony, but they were also promoters of colonial development in the 1920s.

While Hong Kong broadcasting had a chequered past in the 1920s, it began to develop in other regions in Asia. The first radio station in China was opened in Shanghai in January 1923. Audiences in Hong Kong were able to listen to the broadcasts at 9 pm.<sup>54</sup> The station was a project funded by the *China Press* and the Radio Corporation of China. E. G. Osborn was the mastermind behind the project.<sup>55</sup> The second and third radio stations in China were opened in May 1923 and April 1924 respectively both by American companies.<sup>56</sup> Macao had its first radio station in July 1924, providing English, Portuguese, and Chinese programmes. The operator of the station was the Radio Communication Company, which attempted to introduce broadcasting to Hong Kong but failed.<sup>57</sup> In the Philippines, radio broadcasting was managed by the Far Eastern Radio Company, set up in Manila in October 1924.<sup>58</sup> In special occasions such as the Far Eastern Games in 1925, the company would broadcast the results to Hong Kong and Shanghai.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> “Radio Test,” *South China Morning Post*, February 25, 1928.

<sup>53</sup> “Hongkong Radio,” *South China Morning Post*, April 24, 1928.

<sup>54</sup> “The Radio for Shanghai,” *South China Morning Post*, January 22, 1923.

<sup>55</sup> Guo, “Zhongguo jingnei di yi zuo guangbo diantai shi mo ji,” *Xinwen yanjiu ziliao* no. 1 (1986): 164.

<sup>56</sup> Li Yu 李煜, *Zhongguo guangbo xiandai xing liubian: guomin zhengfu guangbo yanjiu (1928-1949 nian)* 中國廣播現代性流變：國民政府廣播研究 (1928-1949年) [The Evolution of Chinese Broadcasting Modernity: A Broadcasting Study of the Nationalist Government, 1928-1949] (Beijing: Communication University of China Press, 2017), 19-20.

<sup>57</sup> “The New Radio Station at Macao,” *Hong Kong Daily Press*, July 14, 1924.

<sup>58</sup> “Manila Radio: Stations for Commercial Works and Broadcasting,” *South China Morning Post*, October 8, 1924.

<sup>59</sup> “Far Eastern Games,” *Hongkong Telegraph*, April 14, 1925.

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As for British colonies in Asia, broadcasting began in British Malaya in 1925 by a group of expatriate radio enthusiasts in Singapore. They mainly came from companies which had an interest in wireless technology. The broadcasting station closed in January 1928 owing to financial difficulties.<sup>60</sup> British India was ready for broadcasting when the Indian Broadcasting Company Ltd. was founded in September 1926.<sup>61</sup> With a shortwave radio receiver, listeners in Hong Kong could listen to broadcasts from nearby regions including Shanghai, Manila, and Macao. Hong Kong could receive broadcasts from as far as Oakland, California, though listeners had to wake up early because of different time zones.<sup>62</sup> If you were a Hong Kong resident living in the 1920s, who knew about the radio development in Asia from the newspapers, you would wonder why the Hong Kong government was slow in introducing broadcasting to the colony. In the coming section, I will explain the government's actions regarding the subject.

### **Conservative and Cautious**

Proceeding from the last section, the slowness of the Hong Kong colonial government in responding to demands for radio broadcasting illustrates society was quicker than the state in adapting to new technologies. Such laggard is contributed by the conservative attitude of the colonial administrators. Conservatism slowed down the broadcasting development in Hong Kong, but it does not imply that the government refused to do anything. The government's attitude in the 1920s concerning radio technology will prompt us to rethink the general perception about conservatism. I will argue that the government was being cautious. However, it was not generous enough to disclose more information so the radio community in Hong Kong accused the government of inaction. Lack of transparency resulted in a very mild tension between the state and society.

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<sup>60</sup> Chua, "Wireless Radio in Interwar Colonial Singapore," 169-70.

<sup>61</sup> "India to Broadcast," *South China Morning Post*, September 8, 1926.

<sup>62</sup> "Hongkong Radio," *South China Morning Post*, March 11, 1924.

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Radio enthusiasts described the government's dealing with radio matters as inaction. Throughout the 1920s, there was criticism of the government for not introducing broadcasting service. An editorial in the *South China Morning Post* covered the upcoming opening of a radio station in Macao in July 1924. The editor criticised the authorities for their passivity towards broadcasting when Macao would soon have the first radio station in South China and later Canton too (though the first station in Canton was not founded until May 1929).<sup>63</sup> The editor of the *South China Morning Post* mentioned how the Radio Communication Company had put forward a wireless proposal in 1923 but the government had not responded.<sup>64</sup> Readers had bitter comments about how the colony lacked such entertainment and why no further steps were taken by the government.<sup>65</sup> When they looked back at the time before official broadcasting was provided, they still complained bitterly. After the government announced broadcasting service would begin near the end of 1928, the *Hongkong Telegraph* commented, "it is a sad confession the Colony has to make in the year 1928, years after broadcasting has become an essential feature in the life of millions of people in other parts of the world."<sup>66</sup>

The government indeed had not been responsive to public calls and efforts made by entrepreneurs. The Hong Kong Hotel and the Radio Communication Company ran test transmissions because the government did not issue provisional broadcasting licences. Their activities stopped partly because of a lack of government support.<sup>67</sup> As mentioned earlier, the Radio Communication Company presented a plan for local broadcasting, but it received no feedback from the authorities.<sup>68</sup> The public was keen to offer advice to the government. In 1925, the *South China Morning Post* published an editorial proposing a four-

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<sup>63</sup> Zhou Langbo 周浪波, *Guangdong guangbo dianshi shi* 廣東廣播電視史 [History of Guangdong Broadcasting and Television] (Guangdong: Guangdong sheng guangbo dianshi xuexiao 廣東省廣播電視學校, 1998), 1.

<sup>64</sup> "Radio without Hongkong," *South China Morning Post*, July 10, 1924.

<sup>65</sup> "Notes on Radio in Hong Kong," *South China Morning Post*, June 23, 1926.

<sup>66</sup> "Local Broadcast," *Hongkong Telegraph*, June 22, 1928.

<sup>67</sup> "Hongkong Radio Society: Annual Report," *South China Morning Post*, December 15, 1924.

<sup>68</sup> "Radio without Hongkong," *South China Morning Post*, July 10, 1924.

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stage programme for the local wireless development. The early stages include developing long-distance wireless communication with important cities and coastal ports as well as maritime wireless communication. The last stage was about local broadcasting.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, there were no substantial developments in the application of radio technology immediately after the editorial was published. By May 1923, the government received five applications for a provisional broadcasting licence. One was from the Hongkong Hotel. One was from a newspaper. The remaining three were from businesses.<sup>70</sup> However, in the end, the government did not issue any broadcasting licence.<sup>71</sup> It took some years for the government to make a solid move towards official broadcasting. The laws governing the application of wireless technology in Hong Kong, the Wireless Telegraphy Ordinance of 1913, had no provision for radio broadcasting. Not until 1926 did the government introduce an amendment in the Legislative Council to alter the definitions of wireless telegraphy and to require wireless receiving sets to be licenced.<sup>72</sup>

The government's slow response reflects the conservative character of British colonial governance in Asia. Officials preferred not to make any substantial changes. Some even remarked that they should maintain Hong Kong "as unaltered as possible."<sup>73</sup> For example, only four new departments were created in the Hong Kong government between 1886 and 1939, including the New Territories District Office in 1899 and the Kowloon-Canton Railway in 1906. The last one was the broadcasting station in 1928.<sup>74</sup> Colonial officials in Hong Kong were accustomed to staying static. The workload of governing Hong Kong was relatively low. Several governors in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were astonished at how little work they needed to do because their predecessors had fully settled and

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<sup>69</sup> "Wireless in Hongkong," *South China Morning Post*, March 26, 1925.

<sup>70</sup> "Colonial Secretary Outlines Government Policy," *South China Morning Post*, May 18, 1923.

<sup>71</sup> "Hongkong Radio Society," *Hong Kong Daily Press*, October 26, 1923.

<sup>72</sup> "Report of the Meeting on 12-Aug-1926," *Hong Kong Hansard*.

<sup>73</sup> Goodstadt, "The Rise and Fall of Social, Economic and Political Reforms in Hong Kong, 1930-1955," 57.

<sup>74</sup> Lethbridge, "Hong Kong Cadets, 1862-1941," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch* 10 (1970): 45.

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institutionalised procedures and routines.<sup>75</sup> As a result, they lacked the motivation to innovate in public administration. Nevertheless, it does not imply that the colonial administration avoided changes and reforms. Some historians associate conservatism with the reluctance and resistance to change and reform. They claim that new political and religious ideas emerging across Asia challenged British perceptions of law, faith, and morality. Colonial rulers, therefore, became more culturally conservative and insisted on governance based on “oriental norms and essences.”<sup>76</sup> But the broadcasting development of Hong Kong reveals that conservatism did not prevent the colonial administration from making changes, regardless of how slow it acted. Colonial officials were static in administering the colony because rules and procedures were established. It does not imply that they were static in terms of developing the colony. Dealing with unfamiliar technology, the Hong Kong government chose to act cautiously.

The government claimed that many obstacles would have to be solved if broadcasting were to set foot in Hong Kong. In reply to the Radio Society’s letter on provisional broadcasting licences, Colonial Secretary A. G. M. Fletcher explained the government should act very carefully to avoid interference which had troubled Britain and the United States.<sup>77</sup> There was constant reception interference by the Morse code communication from the naval vessels in Victoria Harbour and the Stonecutters Island wireless installation.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, the wet weather between April and September made wireless communication difficult. It took a great deal of time to adjust the radio transmitter.<sup>79</sup> When discussing provisional broadcasting licences, government officials expressed their worries. If they were to issue more than one licence, which company should sell receiving sets? And what models should they sell? If they were to

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 43-5; Steve Tsang, *Governing Hong Kong: Administrative Officers from the Nineteenth Century to the Handover to China, 1862-1997* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 42-3.

<sup>76</sup> Bayly, “The Evolution of Colonial Cultures: Nineteenth-Century Asia,” 467-9.

<sup>77</sup> “Colonial Secretary Outlines Government Policy,” *South China Morning Post*, May 18, 1923.

<sup>78</sup> “Local Broadcast,” *Hongkong Telegraph*, June 22, 1928.

<sup>79</sup> “Wireless in Hongkong,” *South China Morning Post*, March 26, 1925; “Concerts for Servicemen,” *South China Morning Post*, December 15, 1927.

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issue to only one company, they had to consider how to avoid a monopoly to ensure programme quality. They were also concerned about whether citizens can lawfully manufacture a receiving set by themselves as well.<sup>80</sup> Officials even confessed they worried provisional licences would fall into the hands of “objectionable people” given that the political status of China was unsettled.<sup>81</sup>

Insufficient wireless expertise was another major obstacle. As early as September 1922, when the matter was brought up, the government stated it possessed insufficient technological knowledge. The claim was reasonable because civil servants in the early twentieth century were educated to be generalists and professional administrators rather than specialists.<sup>82</sup> If they required expert advice, they had to consult the Colonial Office. The Colonial Office would then get in touch with ministries in Whitehall which dealt with similar matters in Britain or seek help from advisory committees and special advisers.<sup>83</sup> Except for wireless telegraphy which was managed by the General Post Office, wireless stations had been managed by the naval authorities until 1921 when the government took over the Cape D’Aguilar Wireless Station.<sup>84</sup> Thus, the civil administration was short of wireless experts. The Colonial Office sent engineer L. H. King to advise the Hong Kong government on all electrical matters, including radio broadcasting.<sup>85</sup> King was previously the Chief Engineer and Manager of the electric works in Tanganyika, East Africa.<sup>86</sup> After his arrival, the General Chamber of Commerce praised him for improving the local wireless operations considerably, including the Cape D’Aguilar Station.<sup>87</sup> Nevertheless, there was not enough technical staff. King was preoccupied with other businesses of wireless technology, including telegraphy and

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<sup>80</sup> “Colonial Secretary Outlines Government Policy,” *South China Morning Post*, May 18, 1923.

<sup>81</sup> “Radio Society Meeting,” *South China Morning Post*, December 20, 1924.

<sup>82</sup> John W. Cell, “Colonial Rule,” in *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Volume IV: The Twentieth Century*, ed. Judith M. Brown and Wm. Roger Louis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 223.

<sup>83</sup> Miners, *Hong Kong under Imperial Rule, 1912-1941*, 36.

<sup>84</sup> “Report of the Meeting on 23-Jun-1921,” *Hong Kong Hansard*, June 23, 1921.

<sup>85</sup> “Wireless in Hongkong,” *South China Morning Post*, March 18, 1925.

<sup>86</sup> “Mr. L. H. King: Government Official Retiring,” *South China Morning Post*, January 29, 1938.

<sup>87</sup> “Wireless Communications,” *South China Morning Post*, March 25, 1924.

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communications. When the government announced in June 1928 that it planned to provide official broadcasting, King reminded the public that testing would take a long time because he needed to train sufficient staff to run the station.<sup>88</sup>

In December 1924, after discussing the idea with the General Chamber of Commerce, the government officials announced it planned to erect a broadcasting station to transmit typhoon and police warnings, or any special items of public interest. If experimental broadcast was successful, musical and entertainment agencies could cooperate with the authorities to provide music programmes. The station was expected to begin operation in August 1925.<sup>89</sup> The government was very cautious in deciding to establish a station. It appointed two committees to look into the matter and sought advice from the Colonial Office and London's General Post Office.

Two committees were created in 1922 and 1923 to study radio matters. The composition of the committee shows how the colonial government took the matter seriously. The members were learned in wireless technology and assisted the government in understanding the subject. The committee appointed in November 1922 aimed to study whether private broadcasting stations were feasible. Commander C. W. M. Beckwith was the chairman while Lieutenant R. M. Smith and Lieutenant J. P. Money of HMS *Hawkins* were members.<sup>90</sup> Beckwith was the commander of the Hong Kong Water Police. At the apex of Beckwith's career, 1920-22, he was the Superintendent of Imports and Exports and the Deputy Superintendent of Water Police. By today's standards, he occupied the posts of the Regional Commander of Marine Police, the Aviation Director, the Immigration Director, the Marine Director, and the Commissioner for Customs and Excise all at the same time. Before he came to the colony, he was the

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<sup>88</sup> "Hongkong Radio Scheme," *Hongkong Telegraph*, June 21, 1928.

<sup>89</sup> "Estab. of Wireless Broadcasting Station, 1 April 1924," *Despatches: 1924 Jan.-July*. War and Colonial Department and Colonial Office: Hong Kong, Original Correspondence CO 129/484; "Hongkong Radio Society," *Hong Kong Daily Press*, December 20, 1924; "Radio Society Meeting," *South China Morning Post*, December 20, 1924.

<sup>90</sup> "Committee Appointed. To Discuss the Whole Subject," *South China Morning Post*, November 22, 1922.

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Navigator on HMS *Diadem* of the China Coast Station.<sup>91</sup> Thus, he possessed some knowledge of wireless technology. Smith was a prominent figure in the Hongkong Volunteers Defence Corps. The Volunteers Defence Corps was very supportive of the Radio Society thanks to him.<sup>92</sup> He was the first Vice-President of the Society. He also knew about radio technology and gave lectures on wireless telegraphy to the Society's members.<sup>93</sup> The committee eventually concluded that hiring a radio expert should top the government's agenda. Hence, the government requested the Secretary of State for the Colonies to send a trained electrical engineer.<sup>94</sup>

In June 1923, the government appointed a new committee to conduct a full enquiry into broadcasting upon the suggestion of the Secretary of State. The committee included government representatives R. E. Lindsell and S. B. B. McElderry, together with representatives from the Radio Society J. H. Donnithorne and R. M. Smith. Donnithorne was the president of the Society. He was a Works Manager in China Light & Power.<sup>95</sup> R. E. Lindsell was the Postmaster General. The Post Office was most concerned with wireless technology since it managed the colony's wireless telegraphy. McElderry was a cadet officer and he was a rank below Colonial Secretary A. G. M. Fletcher.<sup>96</sup> Cadet officers belonged to the upper caste of the civil establishment.<sup>97</sup> The government kept a close eye on radio matters through appointing qualified individuals to investigate the subject. It also assigned key officials to follow up with the broadcasting issues. It was serious about radio broadcasting because it was a novel technology. The

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<sup>91</sup> Iain Ward, *Sui Geng: The Hong Kong Marine Police, 1841-1950* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1991), 77-88.

<sup>92</sup> In the early years of the Radio Society, meetings, radio lectures, and demonstrations were carried out inside the Hongkong Volunteers Headquarters.

<sup>93</sup> "Lecture by Lieut. R. Melville Smith," *South China Morning Post*, May 12, 1923.

<sup>94</sup> "Colonial Secretary Outlines Government Policy," *South China Morning Post*, May 18, 1923.

<sup>95</sup> Kwok Siu-tong 郭少棠, *Guangyao bai dian — Zhongdian bai zhounian jinian tekan* 光耀百年 — 中電百週年紀念特刊 [A Century of Light – CLP Centenary Souvenir Book] (Hong Kong: CLP Power Hong Kong Limited, 2001), 34.

<sup>96</sup> *Hongkong Blue Book for the Year 1921*, 110; *Hongkong Blue Book for the Year 1924*, 112.

<sup>97</sup> Lethbridge, "Hong Kong Cadets," 36-7, 41-2.

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authorities did not have enough knowledge; therefore, they had to be cautious in every action. When the Radio Society held a meeting at the Hongkong Volunteers Headquarters on 17 May 1923, Fletcher attended to explain the government's policy on radio communication.<sup>98</sup> He was supportive of the Society's work. Fletcher even attended a demonstration arranged by the Radio Society in the *Hong Kong Telegraph* office on 5 September 1923 and permitted test transmissions to be done under the auspices of the Society.<sup>99</sup>

Apart from gathering information about wireless technology, the colonial government sought the advice of the Colonial Office. On 1 April 1924, Governor Reginald Stubbs wrote a letter to the Secretary of State, J. H. Thomas, asking for his approval to establish a wireless station in Hong Kong. In his letter, Stubbs requested London to provide copies of recent broadcasting agreements and forms of licence so that Hong Kong could enter into negotiations for the erection of the station.<sup>100</sup> Apart from the Secretary of State, Stubbs also consulted the General Post Office. In the correspondence from the Postmaster General of the British government to the Hong Kong government on 25 July 1924, he evaluated the pros and cons of different broadcasting regulations implemented in Australia and Germany. The government placed an order to purchase radio apparatus from England after seeking the approval of the British government to establish a radio station. It nearly made an agreement with Reuters for the provision of news.<sup>101</sup> However, the proposed wireless station did not come into being due to the eruption of the political and economic crisis in 1925-6. Few people raised the issue of the wireless station again after the strike.

The accusation by the local broadcasting community that the government was inactive points to a very mild tension between the state and society in the 1920s. It is the outcome of the lack of transparency. The

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<sup>98</sup> "Colonial Secretary Outlines Government Policy," *South China Morning Post*, May 18, 1923.

<sup>99</sup> "Successful Demonstration Yesterday," *South China Morning Post*, September 6, 1923; "Hongkong Radio Society," *Hong Kong Daily Press*, October 26, 1923.

<sup>100</sup> "Estab. of Wireless Broadcasting Station, 1 April 1924," CO 129/484.

<sup>101</sup> "Proposed Wireless Broadcasting Service, 25 July 1924," CO129/487.

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government had not been elaborative when talking about the obstacles it encountered and the reasons behind insufficient actions. Although the government had done numerous things to prepare Hong Kong for radio broadcasting, this was less known to the public. The government had appointed two committees to study radio broadcasting, but it did not disclose the committees' findings proactively. There was a plan to erect a radio station in 1925, but the plan was shelved owing to political instability. The government never explained to the public why the station was not present in 1925. It is very easy to judge the government for being insensitive to urges for radio broadcasting if one does not know what the government had done in moving the colony forward.

Conservatism is another cause of the state-society tension since it slowed down the pace of the government in adapting to radio technology. Instead of being reluctant to changes, caution is a more accurate feature of colonial conservatism in the 1920s. It tried to understand unfamiliar technology through seeking advice from committees, experts, and the Colonial Office. We may fall prey to believing the colonial government refused to embrace new ideas and technologies because there were insufficient official records in the 1920s about the government's considerations. The tension over broadcasting would last until 1928 when official radio service began. In the next section, I will discuss the founding of the first broadcasting station in Hong Kong.

The Founding of the Official Broadcasting Station

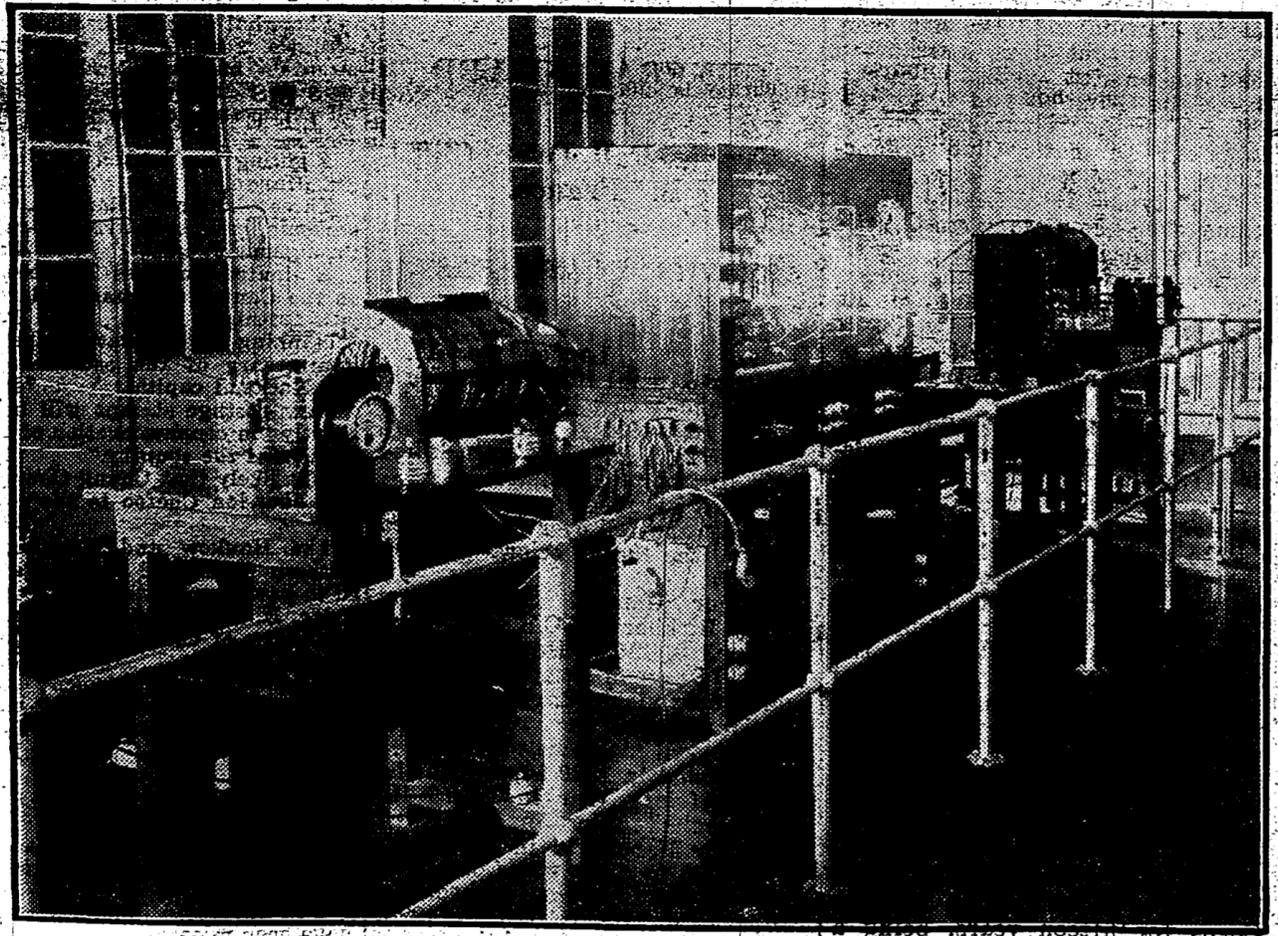


Fig. 1. *The transmitter used for broadcasting in Victoria Peak Wireless Station*<sup>102</sup>

The official broadcasting service in Hong Kong commenced operations in 1928. A booklet celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the broadcasting station stated the first official broadcast was made on 30 June 1928.<sup>103</sup> The government began to conduct transmission tests in June 1928. The government's wireless expert, L. H. King, informed the public that official broadcasting service would begin towards the end of

<sup>102</sup> "Hongkong Broadcasting Station," *South China Morning Post*, April 19, 1929.

<sup>103</sup> *Xianggang diantai wu shinian: yi jiu er ba zhi qi ba nian de xianggang guangbo ye* 香港電台五十年：一九二八至七八年的香港廣播業 [Radio Television Hong Kong Fiftieth Anniversary: Hong Kong Broadcasting Industry from 1928 to 78] (Hong Kong: Radio Television Hong Kong, 1978), 2.

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1928. The reason for the waiting was he had to educate the staff on how to operate the transmitter. More technical staff members would arrive in Hong Kong by November 1928. Additionally, it was essential for the government to test the transmitter thoroughly because no spare parts were at its disposal for maintenance in the meantime.<sup>104</sup> The Government Gazette of 17 August 1928 announced that GOW was the call sign of the government broadcasting station.<sup>105</sup>

This section explores the *raison d'être* of the governmental radio station from three aspects. First, why was the broadcasting station set up in 1928? In the previous section, I pointed out the colonial government was cautious towards radio matters in the 1920s. Why would it set up a station in that specific year? Second, why did the government take the lead to establish the first radio station in Hong Kong? There had been several initiatives by entrepreneurs to introduce the technology to the colony, including the Radio Communication Company. Third, why did the government set up only one broadcasting station in 1928? The second radio station in Hong Kong, Commercial Radio, was not set up until 1959 by George Ho from the prominent Hotung family. Why did the government decide to maintain a monopoly at the very beginning?

Public education was an official rationale for the founding of the radio station. The government was aware radio broadcasting was an incredible teaching instrument for a multitude of listeners. As L. H. King told reporters, “from a purely government point of view,” the aim of the station was educational. Apart from broadcasting gramophone records, the station planned to produce programmes which taught the Chinese population to speak English.<sup>106</sup> Before officially announcing the government’s plan for radio broadcasting, King had already made similar remarks in December 1927 in a report to the Colonial Office. The report was primarily about the installation of automatic telephone exchanges by the Hong Kong

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<sup>104</sup> “Hongkong Radio Scheme,” *Hongkong Telegraph*, June 21, 1928.

<sup>105</sup> *Government Gazette* (GA 1928 no. 464).

<sup>106</sup> “Hongkong Radio Scheme,” *Hongkong Telegraph*, June 21, 1928; “Modern Broadcasting Service is Planned for the Colony,” *South China Morning Post*, June 22, 1928.

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Telephone Company. Siemens Brothers hoped to win the tender for automatic telephone exchanges, but it was afraid an American company would win the tender because the Company's manager was "prejudiced in favour of American work."<sup>107</sup> In the report, King noted he recognised the "immense political and educational possibilities which broadcasting provide." Radio facilitated "a better understanding between the Eastern and Western mind." He also revealed local broadcasting service would begin no later than the next winter.<sup>108</sup> This is the earliest record I have found relating to the founding of the official radio station in Hong Kong.

Although the radio community in Hong Kong had demanded broadcasting for some years, the outcome in 1928 didn't please everyone. The press was not satisfied with the government's action. It described the radio station as "an organisation ... which contradicts the suggestion made in 1923 that wireless communication could be better adapted to local needs by a commercial organisation rather than by a government department."<sup>109</sup> Some preferred commercial radio services, which was how broadcasting worked in Shanghai and the United States. Radio stations competed for audiences and commercial sponsorship. The General Chamber of Commerce was also in favour of commercial services. It considered that wireless technology could be better applied to local needs by a commercial organisation than by a government department.<sup>110</sup> The government had several considerations when it decided to set up a state-owned broadcasting station.

Since running a radio station required considerable financial support, no companies were willing to invest when the government gave the green light for radio broadcasting. Broadcasting was not financially sustainable without sufficient government support and advertising revenue. Broadcasting

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<sup>107</sup> *Hong Kong Telephone Company: Installation of Automatic Exchanges: 1927 Dec. 7-1928 Jan. 6*, CO129/506/9.

<sup>108</sup> *Broadcasting: Report: 1927 Dec. 7*, CO 129/506/10.

<sup>109</sup> "Colony's Broadcasting Service," *South China Morning Post*, April 18, 1929.

<sup>110</sup> "Radio for Hongkong," *South China Morning Post*, March 15, 1924.

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companies needed to spend a huge sum of money for maintenance and hiring technical staff.<sup>111</sup> In the United States, radio stations sold their time to companies which wanted to broadcast a message.<sup>112</sup> That the government refused to issue any broadcasting licences in the 1920s deprived entrepreneurs of the opportunity of making a fortune from advertising, because experimental broadcast was not supposed to contain any commercial elements. When the government finally decided to embark on radio broadcasting, companies which had been interested in it either lost their passion or went bankrupt. The Hongkong Hotel ceased experimental broadcast because the government refused to issue provisional broadcasting licences.<sup>113</sup> The Radio Communication Company attempted to erect a radio station, yet the government did not respond. The company instead founded a station in Macao in 1924.<sup>114</sup> The station was later bought by the Macao government and the company was dissolved in September 1927.<sup>115</sup> Eventually, the Hong Kong government had to take matters in its own hands.

The establishment of a governmental radio station resembles the vision of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). John Reith, the founder of the BBC, considered that a monopoly broadcaster was comprehensive enough to cater to a diversified range of tastes and interests. He believed broadcasting should be a public service as it carried the duty of entertaining, informing, and educating the nation.<sup>116</sup> British politicians also believed broadcasting should be directed by cultural and technical experts working for the state to improve society.<sup>117</sup> In addition, Hong Kong's geography confined the number of radio

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<sup>111</sup> "Radio Society Meeting," *South China Morning Post*, December 24, 1924.

<sup>112</sup> Dominick, *The Dynamics of Mass Communications*, 150-1.

<sup>113</sup> "Hongkong Radio Society: Annual Report," *South China Morning Post*, December 15, 1924.

<sup>114</sup> "Radio without Hongkong," *South China Morning Post*, July 10, 1924.

<sup>115</sup> "Government Acquires Wireless Installation," *South China Morning Post*, February 13, 1926; *Government Gazette* (GA 1927 no. 500).

<sup>116</sup> Street, *Crossing the Ether*, 10.

<sup>117</sup> Simon J. Potter, *Broadcasting Empire: The BBC and the British World, 1922-1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 9-10.

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stations to one only. The government suggested Hong Kong could only keep one radio station because the colony was so small.<sup>118</sup>

The development of radio broadcasting in Hong Kong had been a continuous process since 1922 when the topic was first brought up in the press.<sup>119</sup> Over the years both the government and society accumulated experience in broadcasting. Apart from the efforts made by entrepreneurs and radio enthusiasts, the government constantly gathered knowledge regarding radio broadcasting. Two investigative committees were appointed to study the radio. The authorities also sought advice from the Colonial Office and London's General Post Office. Some credits must also be attributed to the favourable environment in the second half of the 1920s. The first half of it witnessed two labour unrests all connected with the Canton government. The Hong Kong government had not been on good terms with its neighbour in the early 1920s. The relation improved after Chiang Kai-shek, the Commander-in-chief of the Northern Expedition, appointed General Li Jishen to rule Canton in 1927.<sup>120</sup> The Hong Kong economy gradually recovered from the regression caused by the strike-boycott as well. These factors contributed to a favourable environment for new policy initiatives, such as radio broadcasting.

Behind the decision to establish a broadcasting station were also military considerations. The government regarded broadcasting a useful medium to distribute emergency information amid wars. The memorandum submitted by Governor Cecil Clementi indicated the local military forces should primarily protect Hong Kong Island and waited for reinforcements from Singapore in a possible overseas invasion. It expected the civilian population in the Kowloon Peninsula and the New Territories would fall into the hands of an enemy force before reinforcements came.<sup>121</sup> Thus, it was reasonable for the government to devise a plan to evacuate the population in the above two regions. As early as May 1923, local military

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<sup>118</sup> "Colonial Secretary Outlines Government Policy," *South China Morning Post*, May 18, 1923.

<sup>119</sup> "Radios for Hongkong," *South China Morning Post*, September 16, 1922.

<sup>120</sup> Miners, *Hong Kong under Imperial Rule, 1912-1941*, 12-20.

<sup>121</sup> *Hong Kong: Defence against oversea attack*, 17 February 1926, CO 129/498.

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commanders had similar thoughts about broadcasting. The Officer Commanding the Troops, Colonel Davy, said on a meeting of the Radio Society that broadcasting facilitated the diffusion of urgent information in the New Territories where communication was very difficult. The local military forces also considered that the government could have tighter control over the broadcasting station so that it could take over the station in urgent circumstances.<sup>122</sup> This partly explains why the government preferred to establish an official radio station.

Owing to the small size of Hong Kong, only one radio station was set up in 1928. Local entrepreneurs were reluctant to invest for fear of financial burdens. As a result, the government took matters into its own hands. Besides educating the population, especially the Chinese, the state-controlled station was useful in allowing the military to take over easily and disseminate emergent information during a war. The establishment of the official broadcasting station represents a top-down force of modernisation. But we should not overlook society had been generating momentum for broadcasting development. There was a continuous bottom-up force to modernise the colony. Apart from the initiatives of local entrepreneurs and the Hong Kong Radio Society, the works of the Y.M.C.A. Entertainment Committee were significant in inspiring the government to operate a radio station. Initially, the committee was set up to cope with the entertainment needs of British servicemen.<sup>123</sup> Sutherland expressed in January 1928 that the committee did not intend to take more steps towards establishing a broadcasting station, partly because the number of servicemen had decreased.<sup>124</sup> The management model of the official radio station in the late 1920s and the early 1930s bear some resemblance to that of the Entertainment Committee. Sutherland was appointed as a member in the broadcasting programme committee chaired by the Postmaster General.<sup>125</sup> They illustrate that the government wished to continue the work of the Entertainment Committee in

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<sup>122</sup> "Colonial Secretary Outlines Government Policy," *South China Morning Post*, May 18, 1923.

<sup>123</sup> "Entertainments for Service Men," *South China Morning Post*, February 28, 1927.

<sup>124</sup> "Hongkong Proposal Outlined," *South China Morning Post*, January 9, 1928.

<sup>125</sup> "Broadcasting Committee's First Meeting," *South China Morning Post*, September 16, 1929.

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broadcasting. Thus, it is a cursory conclusion to claim that the broadcasting development or the modernisation of Hong Kong is a top-down movement.

### **Conclusions**

This paper has probed the development of radio broadcasting in Hong Kong up to the beginning of the first official radio station in 1928. Hong Kong society adapted to radio technology quicker than the government did. A nascent broadcasting community was already present in the early 1920s. Broadcasting activities in the 1920s were more frequent and organised than previously known. I have traced the establishment of the Hongkong Radio Society, a major group of radio enthusiasts in the community. Other entrepreneurs also attempted to introduce broadcasting to Hong Kong, including the Hongkong Hotel, the Radio Communication Company, and the Y.M.C.A. Entertainment Committee. Some of them carried out test transmissions, not only out of passion but also of a belief that radio broadcasting would soon be a profitable business. The efforts made by the radio enthusiasts and the entrepreneurs involved in experimental broadcasts represent a bottom-up modernising force. It also reveals the significant role played by expatriates in the development of Hong Kong into a modern city in the 1920s.

This paper also gives a new understanding to conservatism in the 1920s. Rather than doing nothing or reluctance to change, conservatism is characterised by caution. I have discussed the accusation that the colonial government was slow to respond to public urges for a radio station. In fact, the authorities proactively gathered information and sought the advice of radio experts and the Colonial Office. The mild tension between the government and the broadcasting community was a result of the lack of transparency and the conservative attitude on the government side. Inappropriate timing was another reason for the slow development of radio broadcasting. The government had not learned enough about wireless technology when entrepreneurs were eager to introduce broadcasting to Hong Kong. When the

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government finally gave the green light, no companies were willing to invest due to fears of financial sustainability. The city witnessed a massive political crisis in the middle of the 1920s. The General Strike-Boycott between June 1925 and October 1926 disrupted the original plan to erect a radio station, although the Colonial Office had approved its construction, and equipment had been ordered from Britain.

The 1920s witnessed the British government bearing a greater responsibility in the well-being of citizens. Goodstadt suggested that such an ideological shift affected Hong Kong. The colonial administration fostered a commitment to the social well-being of the Chinese population in the 1930s.<sup>126</sup> The commitment may have surfaced in the late 1920s with the official radio station. It is a public service as well as the first governmental cultural institution in Hong Kong.

I have also explored the reasons behind the founding of the official broadcasting station in 1928. Geographical factors confined the number of radio stations in Hong Kong to only one. By the late 1920s, the government possessed sufficient knowledge to establish radio broadcasting in Hong Kong. However, it failed to look for potential investors to operate the radio station. Therefore, the government had to establish a state-controlled broadcaster, which was useful in the dissemination of emergency information during wartime.

The beginning of radio broadcasting in Hong Kong is the result of concerted efforts. The radio amateurs and passionate entrepreneurs tried hard to “make waves” — to make wireless technology noticeable to the public. They, particularly the Y.M.C.A. Entertainment Committee, inspired the government to operate a radio station. The government also proactively sought advice from experts and the Colonial Office. Apart from the experience obtained from society, the government inserted the vision of the BBC into the official radio station. It would be a public broadcaster serving the colonial population.

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<sup>126</sup> Goodstadt, “The Rise and Fall of Social, Economic and Political Reforms in Hong Kong, 1930-1955,” 57-8.

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The radio development proves that modernisation cannot be regarded simply as a top-down state intervention or a bottom-up movement. It is the outcome of state-society interaction.

Radio history has more research potential than we might expect. My study is limited to the 1920s, the embryonic stage of radio broadcasting in Hong Kong. We have witnessed how the enthusiasm for radio sprouted in a small section of the colonial community. The commencement of official broadcasting service marked the transformation of radio from a niche passion to a popular culture. Chinese broadcasting was gradually introduced in the early 1930s. The process of developing broadcasting into a popular culture continued after the Second World War. For example, the post-war period saw the emergence of popular radio announcers and the production of “Sky Fictions.” This was a form of live audio drama, where the announcer played several characters including the narrator, all improvised.<sup>127</sup> The founding of more radio stations in the post-war period provides new perspectives to understand the broadcasting development of Hong Kong. It prompts us to consider the role of the state-controlled radio station. The censorship and political functions of Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) are understudied areas as well.

It is also possible to study the development of radio broadcasting in British East Asia in the interwar years. The state-society interaction explored in this study can be compared with those in other British colonies in Asia, including the Straits Settlements. Through figuring out the role of broadcasting in colonial societies, it helps us to understand the cultural transformation of East Asia.

Radio provides a novel perspective to study the dynamics of imperialism as well. Historical works on the BBC have illustrated that it was set up partly to carry out the mission of reinforcing Britishness domestically and overseas.<sup>128</sup> A study on the broadcasting development in British East Asia between the wars and British Africa in the 1950s may enlighten us about British colonial rule.

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<sup>127</sup> Wu Hao 吳昊, *Xianggang dianying minsu xue* 香港電影民俗學 [Hong Kong Film Folklore] (Hong Kong: Subculture, 1993), 46-51.

<sup>128</sup> Potter, *Broadcasting Empire*, 1.

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