1968 marked a significant change in the governance of Hong Kong under British colonial rule. It was also the beginning of social activism among students and intellectuals who called for decolonization. This new chapter in the history of Hong Kong was ushered in by devastating riots in 1967. The brutal practices of a factory owner in the industrial district precipitated a workers’ strike on May 6, 1967. The owner had oppressed his workers by cutting their wages, extending their work hours, and discharging their union leaders. This strike, in turn, triggered a series of riots and bomb attacks that crippled the city for months. While many interpreted the riots as anti-British acts orchestrated by Communist China, which was in the midst of the zealous Cultural Revolution, others regarded them as an anti-colonial movement challenging social injustice and the exploitation of workers.

Rioting against social injustice

After the 1967 riots in Hong Kong had been suppressed, the British colonial government immediately opened an in-depth internal investigation, which indicated that the unrest had not been motivated by anti-British, Communist sensibilities. Rather, it was prompted primarily by social injustice, having provided an outlet for the accumulated frustration of the youth of Hong Kong.

This new generation, which came of age in the mid-1960s having been born in the baby booms of the 1950s, was better educated and less tolerant of social injustice than the previous one, becoming a significant force for social change. Unlike their parents, who accepted their humble status as refugees seeking shelter under the British, the locally born youth made demands on their colonial government. Ironically, many of them found themselves in a frustrating limbo. On the one hand, they had little historical or emotional connection
to China, and, on the other, they had trouble identifying with their birthplace, where corruption, injustice, and harsh governance prevailed. Whether or not they supported the riots of 1967, they shared the desire for decolonization and social change. This generation imbibed the anti-colonial campaign with continuing momentum in 1968.

Realizing the changing composition of the population, and the increased social, political, and cultural discontent with traditional colonial rule, the British rulers recognized that the time had come to abandon the existing mode of governance and introduce softer, more citizen-oriented measures. In the spring of 1968, for the first time in the history of the colony, the Governor’s House was briefly opened to the public. The event, which lasted for only a couple of days, was intended as a symbolic gesture representing the end of the century-old segregation of the colonizers and the colonized. Even today, now that the colony has been returned to China, such open house days continue to take place at the Governor’s House and remain emblematic of the government’s approachability, even though it is not democratically elected.

Change in cultural policy

The well-being of Hong Kong’s non-European citizens had never been of great concern to the British occupiers. Correspondingly, the government had never done much to promote the arts and culture among its citizens. When the City Hall was completed in the central district in 1962, Hong Kong finally had a cultural center. Boasting a theater, concert hall, and museum, this venue, by its mere construction, indicated that the British rulers were contemplating a more modern mode of citizen-oriented governance. The official introduction of cultural activities accompanied the center’s opening. However, as in most colonies, the arts fostered at this newly built cultural center remained the exclusive pleasure of a minority
of elites and were directed mainly at Europeans and well-educated Chinese. Local culture and the idea of a distinctive Hong Kong cultural identity were not encouraged.

After the rioting of 1967, however, a significant change in cultural policy, which stressed the contemporary and regional culture, was implemented. By the end of 1967, a special office was set up to organize large-scale cultural and recreational programs for the public. In full operation in 1968, this office, for the first time, arranged cultural programs—such as rock and roll concerts, outdoor dancing parties, and the Miss Hong Kong competition—directed not at the elites but at the mass public, and especially young people.

One of the main tasks of the office was to plan the first “Hong Kong Festival” to celebrate the city’s new self-image. The festival was launched in 1969 with dance and theater performances, art exhibitions, parades, and all manner of other attractions the government could offer. After decades of indifference, not only did the colonial government begin to care about its citizens and foster the arts, culture, and recreation for its citizens, but it also actively tried to bolster a sense of Hong Kong identity. The government’s motivations, however, went beyond smoothing out social relations; they also had a political dimension.

**Modern Hong Kong versus backward China**

After the suppression of the rioting, the British continued to be wary of the revolutionary zeal still raging in China at the time of the Cultural Revolution. It was, consequently, important, for the sake of effective governance, to nurture a sense of Hong Kong identity to counter the Chinese threat. Using various measures, such as cultural and recreational activities, the government started a long-term campaign to promote Hong Kong as a modern, orderly, international city, in contrast to China, which it portrayed as chaotic, poor, and backward.

At the same time, the influx of Western consumer culture ushered Hong Kong into a colorful era of modern, popular entertainment. The introduction of television shortly after the riots certainly played a role in this as the new medium quickly became an integral part of everyday life.

On the sociopolitical level, this period also saw the first community protest against the colonial government, which demanded that
discriminatory colonial structures be eliminated. On January 20, 1968, at the Chinese University, over 100 students, teachers from various universities, professionals from different fields, and social activists attended a forum to discuss implementing Chinese as an official language of Hong Kong, with the same status as English. The forum prompted a widespread campaign to make Chinese an official language, a policy the colonial government finally enacted in 1976.

**Discontent with the colonial government**

By the end of the 1960s, the new generation of Hong Kong students and intellectuals, discontented with the repressive colonial government and influenced by student movements in the West, started to demand social and political changes at home. The campaign to make Chinese an official language was significant because it not only gave expression to the discontent with the colonial government but also set the stage for a new cultural awareness and the pronounced sociopolitical involvement that would mark the 1970s.

As both the Chinese and the British were aware that something needed to change, the 1970s brought rapid social and cultural transformations. 1968 marked the beginning of this decisive chapter of reforms.

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