

The history of the 1912 boycott

Before the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1912, Guangdong province had a mint that was nominally under Beijing's control, but in fact ran more or less autonomously. It minted coins that were supposed to correspond in value to the Mexican silver dollar (which was the global standard for silver coins); so did Hong Kong, and theoretically these coins should have been of equal value. The mainland coins were not legal tender in HK, but lots of shopkeepers and merchants accepted them, anyway -- both for convenience and because the HK mint never produced enough currency for the population's daily needs. The Tramways and the Star Ferry were two of the bigger firms that accepted these coins, collecting thousands every day.

But in fact the Guangdong mint cut corners, so its coins had about 5% less silver in them than HK coins. This meant that it was profitable for people to use Guangdong coins in HK whenever they could get away with it, hoard HK coins, and then take them to Guangdong to be melted down and re-minted into 5% more dollars than they had had before. This had been going on for years. It created a small loss of earnings for the Tramways and a nuisance for the HK government (because the drain of good coins from HK to Guangdong exacerbated currency shortages). The company had periodically asked the HK government to stop the influx of these coins; the government replied that the coins were already not legal tender, so the company should just not accept them. And so the status quo continued.

In 1912, with the fall of the Qing, the new government in Guangdong became more independent of the central government than before; it continued printing underweight coins, and was also running a considerable fiscal deficit, which it was trying to get HK merchants to finance. The HK government opposed this, and also seemed concerned that the new Guangdong government was too politically and socially radical; in this context, Hong Kong officials became more vocal about encouraging HK merchants to stop accepting mainland coins. (It's also possible that the new Guangdong government, given its financial problems was underweighting the coins even more than before, but this is not clear.) So on November 18, the Company suddenly instructed all its personnel to stop accepting these coins.

This infuriated many people, especially poor people – many of whom used the trams to commute to work, since it was the cheapest form of transport other than walking. Not only did they lose the chance to pay with underweight coins (which some employers provided for this purpose); because Hong Kong had a perpetual shortage of its own small coins (since the government didn't mint enough), people who couldn't use mainland coins often couldn't find small coins to pay with at all. Moreover, many people felt that the Company's unwillingness to take mainland coins that they had long accepted was an insult to the new Republican government, and to China in general – in fact, the “insult” issue played a much bigger role in public sloganeering and explanations of people's anger than whatever economic hardship the rejection of these coins

caused. Calls for a boycott of the trams emerged almost immediately. The company and some workers tried to keep the trams running, but in some cases these trams were surrounded by angry crowds; stones were thrown at passengers, workers, and the trams themselves. (There were over 1,000 people in one such crowd, on November 25).

The Company did not budge, however. It kept the trams running, though during the end of November, December, and early January, they were generally almost empty and required police protection. Meanwhile, the government stepped in by passing a Boycott Ordinance that put tremendous pressure on the protestors, in two ways. First, the Ordinance made it a crime to commit “any act calculated to persuade or induce any persons not to make use of or occupy any moveable property in any lawful manner, or not to work for any persons in a lawful manner”: wording so broad that it not only covered throwing rocks and blocking the tram tracks, but even peaceful speech in favor of the boycott. Second, it empowered the government to declare any area of the city to be a “boycott area,” and place a special tax levy on that area – essentially a collective fine upon the residents of a designated area. (Some of these funds could be used to reimburse any person or entity that had been harmed by the boycott – a measure obviously designed to encourage the Tramway Company, other firms not accepting mainland coins, to not give in to the protests). On January 4, Governor May declared most of the areas along the trams’ routes to be boycott areas, and gave them 12 days to solve the matter before the special levies would begin. Chinese merchants in these areas, who would have paid most of these costs (and many of whom were already being hurt by the boycott) began to press for an end to the boycott, while also persuading the Company to make a largely symbolic concession by selling the merchants slightly discounted tram tickets that they could use to lure back riders. By the end of January, the boycott had petered out, and in early February, the Boycott Ordinance was suspended.

1912 年抵制運動

1912 年清朝覆滅前，廣東省有一個造幣廠，名義上由北京管轄，實際上或多或少屬於自主經營。該造幣廠鑄造的錢幣應該與墨西哥「鷹洋」等值（即全球標準銀幣）；港幣也是如此，理論上，這些硬幣應為等值貨幣。儘管大陸硬幣在香港不是法定貨幣，但很多店主和商人都會收大陸硬幣。一來是因為方便，二來是因為香港造幣廠未能生產出足夠的硬幣滿足人們日常需要。電車公司和天星小輪是兩大主要硬幣接收公司，這兩家公司每天都會收到成千上萬枚硬幣。

事實上，廣東造幣廠會偷工減料，其硬幣比香港硬幣少了約 5% 的白銀。這意味著，人們在香港使用廣東硬幣是有利可圖的。只要能夠用掉廣東硬幣、囤積港幣，然後將港幣帶回廣東重新熔鑄，就能多生產出 5% 的硬幣。這種現象持續了多年，給電車公司的收入造成了損失，也給港英政府帶來了麻煩（因為優質硬幣從香港流向廣東加劇了貨幣短缺）。電車公司曾定期要求港英政府阻止廣東硬幣的流入；政府回復，廣東硬幣早就不是法定貨幣了，所以電車公司可以直接拒收。於是，這種狀況就這樣持續下去了。

1912 年，隨著清政府倒臺，廣東成立的新政府比之前更加獨立於中央政府之外；新政府繼續鑄造重量不足的硬幣，同時還面臨巨額財政赤字。因此，新政府試圖讓香港商人融資。港英政府對此表示反對，同時也擔心廣東新政府在政治和社會政策上過於激進；在這種背景下，香港官員愈發強烈敦促香港商人停止接收大陸硬幣。（或許是因為廣東新政府因財政問題發行的硬幣重量不足的情況更甚從前，但這點尚不清楚。）因此，11 月 18 日，電車公司突然命令所有員工停止接收廣東硬幣。

此舉激怒了很多人的，尤其是基層人士，因為乘坐電車是除步行以外最便宜的出行方式，他們當中的大多數都依賴電車通勤。此舉令他們無法再用重量不足的硬幣支付車費（一些雇主甚至主動為員工提供這些硬幣以便於通勤）。另外，香港小額硬幣長期供應不足（因為政府沒有鑄造出足夠的硬幣），人們如果不能使用大陸硬幣的話，也找不到其他小額硬幣進行支付。此外，許多人認為電車公司不願接收原本長期通用的大陸硬幣是對民國臨時政府、乃至整個中國的侮辱。事實上，與拒收大陸硬幣造成的經濟困難相比，「侮辱」問題成為了更響亮的輿論口號，以及人們更大的憤怒來源。抵制電車的呼籲很快就出現。電車公司和部分工人試圖維持電車運行，但有時憤怒的人群會包圍電車，向乘客、工人和電車投擲石頭。（11 月 25 日，包圍電車的人數超過 1000 名）。

然而，電車公司沒有做出任何讓步，電車照常運行。但是在 11 月底至 1 月初，電車幾乎是空車運行，且需要警員保護。與此同時，政府通過了一項《抵制條例》，從兩方面向抗議者施加巨大壓力。首先，該條例將「任何旨在勸說和誘導任何人以非法方式使用或佔用任何動產，或不以合法方式為任何人工作的行為」定義為犯罪：該條例的影響力非常寬泛，不僅包括投擲石塊和堵塞電車軌道等行為，甚至還包括支持抵制的非暴力言論。其次，該條例授權政府宣佈城市內的所有地區均為「抵制區」，並對該地區徵收特別稅款，本質上是對抵制區的居民進行集體罰款。（其中部分罰款用於補償一切因抵制而受到損害的個人或單位。顯然，這項措施旨在鼓勵電車公司以及其他不接收大陸硬幣的公司不要屈服於抵制運動之下。）1 月 4 日，梅總督宣佈電車沿線的大部分地區為抵制區，要求這些地區在 12 天內解決問題，否則就開始徵收特別稅款。這些地區本已經承擔大部分抵制代價的華商（其中

許多人已經受到了抵制運動的傷害）開始敦促停止抵制運動，同時勸說電車公司做出象徵性的讓步，例如向華商出售略有折扣的電車票，以吸引回頭客。1 月底，抵制運動徹底結束。2 月初，《抵制條例》中止執行。