

打風了

The Storm Cometh

Hong Kong is relatively free from natural disasters. We don't have earthquakes, blizzards or volcanic eruptions. We are spared the kind of sweeping destruction and massive death toll that plague many of our neighbors. What we do have are the half-dozen tropical storms that come our way during the summer months. The more powerful ones are called typhoons, with wind gusts reaching 120 kilometers per hour.

On average, we get six to seven tropical storms every year from May through September. The weather systems originate in the Pacific and travel westward before making landfall along the South China coast. Our city is only one of the many stops they make on their ocean traversing path. By the time the storms pass through our city, frequently they will have already wreaked havoc in the Philippines or Taiwan.

Typhoons are a way of life in Hong Kong and we have developed a tried and tested early warning system to minimize casualties and property damage. There are four typhoon signals based on wind

speed and proximity, from the lowest T1 and T3 to T8 and the highest T10. While newcomers to the city often mistake our storm signals for the *Terminator* movie franchise, locals find the system equally confounding. For instance, we don't know why there is no T2 or T5. We suspect the scale might have been designed by the same genius who invented the tennis scoring system. Also, storm signals are never just issued; they are "hoisted." It came from the old practice of hanging drums and balloons at different locations along the harbor to warn fishermen. The word is incongruous in today's world of smartphones and tablet computers. It evokes images of halberds and crossbows in a medieval battle.

What's more, it seems arbitrary that only T8 and T10 behoove a citywide shutdown and give citizens a day off. The double standard makes T1 and T3 feel like the ugly sisters that no one loves. In 1992, after torrential rains paralyzed the city, the colonial government introduced a similar warning system for rainstorms. Rain signals are color-coded according to the amount of precipitation per hour – amber, red and black – but only black rains result in work and school stoppages. So amber and red join T1 and T3 in an ugly sisterhood that elicits a collective "boohoo" from the city.

In the old days, people used to prepare for a typhoon by making giant crosses on their window panes using packing tape, as if to ward off evil spirits. The idea was not so much to reinforce the windows as to prevent shards of broken glass from flying into the apartment. People don't seem to bother much with that any more. Perhaps we now use better building materials, or perhaps we don't fear the wind as much because densely packed pencil buildings have dramatically reduced airflow. Instead, what worries many people about a big storm is the flying cockroach. Confused by changes in atmospheric pressure, the creepy crawlies suddenly turn airborne and dart from one end of the

room to another. Giant roaches are disgusting as they are, but with wings they are what Winston Churchill would have called “the sum of all fears.”

Despite our katsaridaphobia, typhoons are generally a cause for celebration in Hong Kong. They are the cultural equivalent of a snow day in America and the happiest event on the calendar after Chinese New Year. As we bemoan another never-ending work week and begrudgingly put on our work clothes on a Monday morning, we turn on the morning news and hear the magic words: “T8 is hoisted.” It is second only to winning the lottery in making a Hong Konger jump for joy. That’s why we cheer on the storms as if they were Olympic athletes: faster, higher, stronger! In case we needed any proof that we are an overworked people, look no further than the way we pray for a typhoon despite the devastation it inflicts on neighboring countries.



Praying for a T8

Indeed, a typhoon day promises something for everyone. Office workers get a day's vacation. Students have their classes canceled, exams rescheduled or the dreaded sports day postponed. Thrill seekers line up along the Tsim Sha Tsui waterfront and watch 15-foot waves crash on the sea walls. Seafood lovers take their fishing gear to Aberdeen or Tseung Kwan O to catch squid, which are known to form squads in calmer waters during big storms.

No one stands to benefit from a typhoon more than taxi drivers. They pick up stranded passengers and charge them up to HK\$200 (US\$25) on top of the meter. The "storm surcharge" is meant to compensate cab drivers for the risk of getting into an accident, as vehicular damage during a T8 storm is not covered by auto insurance. Since the law forbids anyone from driving without third party insurance, that means cab drivers are in fact risking prison to get you home safely. All things considered, \$200 is actually a bargain.

By and large, the vast majority of the population has the good sense to stay home on a typhoon day. After all, we have nowhere to go because shops and restaurants are closed; all modes of transport – buses, the MTR and ferries – are suspended. The bustling city suddenly grinds to a complete halt. If getting the flu is the way our body tells us to take a break, then typhoons would be nature's hint that we as a society should slow down once in a while. So we do exactly that. In Hong Kong, social convention dictates that there are only two appropriate activities during a typhoon: eat instant noodles and watch the news.

Instant noodles are our favorite cooked food. Every household has at least a week's supply in the kitchen cabinet, which makes them the most reliable storm companion. Once the noodles are prepared – which takes no more and no less than two minutes – we set the MSG-laced meal on the coffee table and turn on the

television. We slurp and chomp while watching newscasters clad in obligatory yellow raincoats scream into the microphone. We take pleasure in seeing fellow citizens run for cover from one side of the street to another, with their umbrellas turned inside out and reduced to wire carcasses. It's the best kind of reality TV.

Nevertheless, typhoons are not always fun and games. Every few years, we get a super storm that brings more than squally rains and gusty winds. The most devastating storm in Hong Kong's history was the Great Typhoon of 1937 that killed 11,000 people. In 1960, typhoon Mary claimed 1,600 lives and left tens of thousands homeless. Although the city has come a long way in making itself more storm proof, there are always a few unlucky denizens of the city injured by fallen awnings and collapsed scaffoldings. There is also flooding in low lying areas and mudslides along the hills. Dried seafood shops on Sheung Wan's Wing Lok Street were perennial victims of typhoons and black rains until 2012 when a massive underground water system was built in the area.

Another type of economic cost is lost income. There are roughly 250 business days in a calendar year, which means that shutting down the city for a single day reduces our GDP by about 0.4%. Each day the stock market is closed, billions are lost in commissions and other transaction-based revenues. The Hong Kong Stock Exchange, of which the government is the largest shareholder, stands to lose the most as trading volume is what drives its bottom line.

The government's vested interest in keeping the corporate machine running has spawned many conspiracy theories about the Hong Kong Observatory, the government department that decides when to issue a storm signal. Many accuse it of putting dollars ahead of public safety. The Observatory has been known to delay a T8 announcement until after the stock market has closed

or take down the signal early to avoid disrupting the morning commute. Sometimes it does it the other way around. The Observatory appears a bit trigger happy with the storm signals before a big anti-government protest in an attempt to discourage turnout. In Hong Kong, he who holds the anemometer makes the rules.

During the three-year period between 2004 and 2007, the Hong Kong Observatory did not issue a single T8 or black rain signal. The dry spell irked citizens and thus began a popular urban legend. It is said that Li Ka Shing, property tycoon and the richest man in Asia, invented a powerful shield to ward off typhoons and rainstorms. To keep employees at their desks, the so-called “Li’s Field” is activated whenever a weather system approaches. The suggestion is preposterous, but it underscores the resentment harbored by the local population against a government seen as working in cahoots with big business. After all, if you can’t laugh about it, you will just have to cry.

When the typhoon finally passes, we are left with fallen tree branches on the sidewalk and toppled flower pots on the balcony. Heavy rains will continue for a few more days before the blazing sun once again scorches the city and erases all traces of a storm. To many Hong Kongers, typhoons are welcome visitors because they give us the hope of a day off. Most importantly, they remind us of how blessed we truly are, for as much as Mother Nature enjoys unleashing her whimsical wrath on Japan, the Philippines and Indonesia, so far she has chosen to take mercy on us and pull her punches year after year.