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Hong Kong's place in South East Asia

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Citation

England, V. M. (2024, November 7). *Hong Kong's place in South East Asia*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4107972>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Chapter 8 Transitions (1950-2024)

In this chapter I will offer a broad-brush outline of the key events and developments that marked the second half of the twentieth century for Hong Kong. I will then consider how these events impacted the Eurasians of Hong Kong. These people were now so deeply embedded in Hong Kong society as to have become almost invisible. The number of Chinese born in Hong Kong (as opposed to the long-standing majority of those living there) also now completely outnumbered the many non-Chinese born in Hong Kong; however, it was the Eurasian families who could boast of multi-generational lives born and bred in this port city. Theirs was the longevity.

Voices both Eurasian and Chinese began expressing new senses of identity in print and film, finding new definitions of Chinese-ness and of being a Hong Konger (a word which entered the Oxford English Dictionary in 2014 and traced an etymology to 1870). Watershed moments would affect that sense of belonging, from the 1960s on. A particular threat to Eurasians would lie in the nationality laws of both Britain and China during and after the 1997 handover of sovereignty from Britain to China.

It will become clear that by the early twenty-first century, Hong Kong had become a different place. No longer the Eurasian port city thronged by foreigners of all kinds building a place with its own personality, Hong Kong is under new management. Now, being foreign is a risk, and ‘foreign collusion’ quite literally a serious crime.

New futures

Hong Kong’s identity as an Asian port city over a long first century (1841-1945) morphed into new forms after World War Two. Its pre-war industrial base expanded with the arrival of Shanghai’s financiers, shippers, textile and other manufacturers. Its life-long function as a refuge for people fleeing China expanded dramatically as millions fled the CCP victory of 1949. Impoverished and struggling, China would be led by Chairman Mao Tse-tung through the devastating and misguided push to industrialize that he named the Great Leap Forward, followed by mass-murdering famine and then the Cultural Revolution—that purging of intellectuals and the middle classes in the name of Communist purity.

In the 1950s, the Cold War came close in the Korean War, ranging the United States and its allies (including Britain) behind South Korea, and China with Russia behind the North. Only a stalemate was reached in 1953 along the 38th parallel (today's border between North and South Korea) after three years of vicious fighting. That war included the imposition of United Nations and United States embargoes on trade with China, suggesting that British Hong Kong would be stymied, barred from trading with its nearest neighbour. But in many ways, thanks to Hong Kong's hybrid nature and the wheeler-dealer instincts of its people, the tensions only raised risks—and profits. Goods crossed borders regardless but, more important, Hong Kong's pre-war home-grown industries now had a chance to shine. They already produced goods ranging from beer to batteries and from toys to jewelry; soon Hong Kong would be producing plastic flowers, luxury watches, and high-end jeans.

Meanwhile, Hong Kong under British rule, backed by a developing projection of American military might, including its missiles, planes, and aircraft carriers, was carving a new future. There were growing pains: the 1952 and 1953 squatter fires that rendered tens of thousands of mostly new arrivals homeless and prompted the acceleration of a public housing scheme; the 1956 riots resulting from the overflow of Nationalist-on-Communist tensions from the mainland; and the 1967 riots sparked by economic inequity. That more than a million mainlanders had fled communism put immense pressure on Hong Kong's social provision.

Amid the frenzy, Hong Kong was changing in more subtle ways. After a first century developing its own Eurasian identity, it was now forced into a newer, wider world. The historian G. B. Endacott noted: 'More important, Hong Kong became virtually autonomous, administratively and financially, in 1958, as was announced by Sir Robert Black, the Governor from 1958 to 1964, in the Legislative Council in March of that year; while Britain still exercises sovereignty, she has in practice restricted herself to control of Hong Kong's external relations.'⁶²⁶

Hong Kong's administration had to find new reserves (of money and will) to house, educate and absorb this massive new population; only by the 1960s would half of Hong Kong's Chinese be actually born in the territory. Hong Kong's role as a trading

⁶²⁶ Endacott, *A History of Hong Kong*, p310.

centre grew and by the 1960s, tourism was taking off too. By the 1970s, Hong Kong's role as a financial centre with all its associated services came to the fore. In the 1980s, talks began over Hong Kong's political future.

Through all this tumult, Hong Kong's Eurasian core faced larger threats than even those posed by World War Two. Following their sacrifice and survival in World War Two, and a post-war rebuilding of wealth, many of the established Eurasian families stayed just that, albeit less reliant on their freshly returned British overloads who, after all, had lost 'face' with their initial defeat by the Japanese. For many confident Eurasians, the role of the British government now was not so much as to confer honours but to secure the wider environment. Backed now by the US which was taking on a role as security-provider across the Pacific, British rule in Hong Kong was a handy guarantor of neutrality. Above all, it provided a bulwark from the little-understood but greatly-feared activities and possible expansion of the Chinese Communist Party. Eurasians could enjoy an evolution in how they were seen, too, from the contempt of the 1850s, the growing reliance upon Eurasian skills and personalities through the later nineteenth century to the wealth and influence of the early twentieth century. Now, Hong Kong's post-war Eurasians could see a post-British imperial context evolving and would begin juggling and calculating as to how best to hold family and funds together.

Moving On

For families such as Kotewall and the wider Parsi community, and for clans such as the Ho Tung and all its related lines of Wong, Ho, Lo, Hui and others, post-war Hong Kong offered the opportunity to further consolidate their wealth. Many leading Eurasians did just this – but at the same time, they had learned a lesson from the war years.⁶²⁷ Now, they knew, they had to diversify. No more would they place all their eggs in the British basket, relying on the perpetuation of colonial rule and earlier capacious definitions of Britishness. These families were alert to decolonizations going on around the world and wondered what this mysterious new China across a closed border would do. They already knew the British way and now set about making sure they had other sources of safety lined up too. They pursued a

⁶²⁷ This section is based on interviews and continued contact with the families in question.

series of new strategies in schooling, investment, property purchase and citizenships in order to cope with a world in which Britain was no longer all-powerful.

From a pre-war habit of sending a couple of sons to Britain for education arose now the fixed routine of sending all one's children not only to Britain but to the United States, Canada, Australia or New Zealand, for schooling, university and often a first job in a professional career. Families might once have revelled in the jumbled junior schooling in Hong Kong amid a range of race and faith-based groups, before sons would move straight into the family business. That was now no longer enough. Now, private schooling in the West for girls and boys started before puberty and was maintained throughout; many scions only came back to a family firm once experience in other companies had been gained. Earlier prejudices in some of these families against marriage to Westerners while abroad were dissolved. When earlier generations (such as in the Lee Hysan family) were threatened with disinheritance if they brought back foreign wives, now such marriages might be favoured if they brought the prospect of new passports.

The Kotewalls who had intermarried with the Zimmerns remained dominant, not in politics, but in the business world after the war. Known as 'the Bank's broker', Francis Zimmern was instrumental in many of the more lucrative arrangements made by the Hongkong & Shanghai Bank (now HSBC); his many daughters became financiers, property investors and socialites and able to enjoy the fruits of his investments (such as The Panorama apartment complex half way up the Peak). At the same time, they married Japanese, British, local and New Zealand spouses, building homes in these places as well as in London, the United States and Europe. Subsequent generations continue to live in Hong Kong but spend less time there. They are friends with families of all origins – Sindhi, Jewish, Chinese, South African and more – whose children attend similar overseas schools and meet on the ski slopes or beaches of the world.

Parsi families in post-war times more readily allowed their offspring to marry non-Parsis, and so schools and homes were found in the home countries of spouses from the Netherlands to California and back. Hong Kong was still home, and charity more likely to be done in Hong Kong instead of Bombay, but the need to weigh options and hedge was ever present.

Some families such as the Kadoories only hunkered down, nestling in ever deeper into Hong Kong-based businesses, and in forging ties with new China. The Kadoories run China's nuclear power plant just across the border at Daya Bay and remain staunchly loyal to whoever is in charge of Hong Kong. Other old clans, including many in the Ho Tung lineage, remain simply that – a vestige of old money, carrying the status acquired by their predecessors in the family line, but not doing much with it. An exception was Stanley Ho, son of one of Ho Tung's disgraced nephews, who took advantage of Macao's wartime opportunities to make a fortune and parlay it into a monopoly over Macao's casinos and transport services between Macao and Hong Kong which would not be broken until the late twentieth century.

Eurasians who had assets at stake differed from other wealthy Hong Kong people primarily in their heightened awareness of vulnerability. They were often the first to diversify their identity documents and places of domicile, in order to make it easier to stay in Hong Kong. It was still home, albeit with life-belts ready if needed. It was as if the Eurasian-ness of many of Hong Kong's older families (not all of whom were rich), was intensifying. More mixing was now more treasured, as it carried clear practical benefits. Being Eurasian implied a clever ability to straddle more dangerous worlds. By the late twentieth century, a Eurasian look was as a desirable fashion.

Such a balance of interests survived until certain key moments of rupture. The first of these was in 1967. Suddenly, members of diverse communities felt the need to rediscover their diasporic pasts and move on, out of the Hong Kong that they had helped build. This seems significant as what happened in 1967 was nothing on the scale of World War Two, from which they returned to Hong Kong. Yet now they left. From May to December 1967, Hong Kong was caught up in dangerous social unrest.⁶²⁸ A mass demonstration and bombing campaign and its repression claimed 51 lives and injured 832. Almost 5,000 people were arrested and almost 2,000 imprisoned before peace was restored by the Hong Kong Chinese police force then still under British management. China's Cultural Revolution had overflowed the border and long lines of Little Red Book-waving cadres marched into the streets of Kowloon, even reaching across the harbour into the streets of Hong Kong's central

⁶²⁸ Cheung, *Hong Kong's Watershed: The 1967 Riots*. Bickers and Yep *May Days in Hong Kong*.

business district. But while the roots of this unrest lay across the border in China, it found ready embers to enflame in the poverty, over-crowding and lack of workers' rights in rapidly industrialising Hong Kong. Labour disputes broke out led by unions such as the Beijing-linked Hong Kong and Kowloon Federation of Trade Unions, leading to mass marches and fights. Soon loudspeakers from the Bank of China, just across a cricket ground from The Hong Kong Club and next to the Hongkong & Shanghai Bank were blaring out pro-Chinese Communist Party slogans and songs. Among many significant aspects of the unrest, one was that peace was restored by an administration (and a largely Hong Kong Chinese police force) able and ready to fend off mainland pressure.

But that was not enough to reassure many Eurasian families and others about the future viability of a non-communist Hong Kong. The descendants of a Portuguese-Eurasian clan that had issued – through Portuguese consul Soares – passports to help people flee the Japanese occupation to Macao during the war, now upped sticks for Sydney, Australia. Descendants of the Macumber Churn clan stopped hedging their bets and moved completely to England in the late 1960s. Older generation figures such as Charlie Churn stayed in Hong Kong for the rest of their lives, but those with children no longer trusted the Hong Kong they had known and now chose to build new lives abroad. The grandson of Sir Robert Kotewall, that leader of Hong Kong in the 1930s and 1940s, young Ron Zimmern, was packed off to prep school in England at the age of seven, and never made a home in Hong Kong. Many of those who left in the 1960s now actively connect with fellow Portuguese, Parsis, Indians and Chinese Eurasians in new diasporas in the West. This was not only in Britain either, but in New Zealand, Australia, Europe and North America.

What 1967 spelled to those who had found in Hong Kong an Asian and Eurasian port city to call home was a lesson in temporality. What had made Hong Kong feel safe for them had been British overlordship, freedom of movement, openness to diverse faiths and races and ideas, and the city's ability to connect to a wider world. Not much was yet known about communist China, but generations of Eurasians, defined by their multiple identities, found much to fear in the authoritarianism and anti-capitalism next door. When this city's openness was at risk, these people left.

This would happen again, in the events leading up to 1997, and again after 2019. At each such moment, the overriding fear was of new state control, specifically communist state control. That fear caused many Hong Kongers who could, to flee.

Meanwhile, as China convulsed from the 1950s to the 1980s, the label 'Made in Hong Kong' evolved from a derisory indicator of cheap, low quality into something said boldly by a Chinese migrant to the Netherlands—'I'm made in Hong Kong!' This was, for her, something to be proud of.⁶²⁹ That pride was maintained throughout major transitions, such as in 1979, when the first transfers took place of commercial power from British trading firms Hutchison and Wharf to Hong Kong Chinese tycoons (Li Ka-shing and Y. K. Pao respectively). Key parts in those dramas were played by the old elite of Eurasians (including Zimmern, 'the Bank's broker') even as welcome mats were laid out for international merchant banks to come for the ride.

By 1997, it would be time for Hong Kong to be handed from British sovereignty to Chinese. Any transition of a freewheeling port city, nominally governed by a power located far away on the other side of the world, into an administrative region of a powerful neighbouring state will be difficult. There was no doubt, however, that such a transition would have to take place. China has long claimed 'Hong Kong has always been a Chinese city.' If taken literally, this cannot be true; we have seen how Hong Kong became a city only after the wider world arrived. But China had rejected Hong Kong's founding treaties as 'unequal'. China had a plan⁶³⁰, made absolutely clear by China's first representative at the United Nations, Huang Hua, in 1972:

The questions of Hongkong and Macau belong in the category of questions resulting from the series of unequal treaties left over by history, treaties which the imperialists imposed on China. Hongkong and Macau are part of Chinese territory occupied by the British and Portuguese authorities. The settlement of the questions of Hongkong and Macau is entirely within China's sovereign right and does not at all fall under the ordinary category of 'Colonial Territories.' Consequently, they should not be included in the list of colonial Territories covered by the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples.

⁶²⁹ See, 'Going Dutch in Chinatown' by Vaudine England, Hongkong Standard, 11 March 2006.

⁶³⁰ Cottrell, *The End of Hong Kong*, p33.

Hong Kong residents all blithely ignored the disappearing act of Hong Kong as a colony in international law, even though it implied that Britain could not grant it independence under the decolonization procedures followed elsewhere. They chose instead to focus on the next deliberately vague bit of the statement: that 'with regard to the questions of Hongkong and Macao, the Chinese Government has consistently held that they should be settled in an appropriate way when conditions are ripe.'

Perhaps port city people need a solid streak of determined optimism or wishful thinking to survive. The result here was a few more decades of growth and enthusiasm in Hong Kong under British administration while China gained more strength on the world stage. Everyone seemed prepared then, through the heady 1970s and into the '80s, to coexist in a liminal gray zone. Sovereignty was something to be tackled some other day, but for now, to paraphrase paramount leader Deng Xiaoping: to get rich was glorious. Many in Hong Kong were happy to salute the British queen at the same time as feeling vaguely patriotic to a Chinese motherland, while those with assets, moved them. The challenge ahead was how to manage that moment 'when the fast-moving urban society now faces the claims of a power whose authority rests on the assumed rights of an ageless, primordial origin?'⁶³¹

Tsai's view is that 'most Hong Kong people resist political control from Beijing, while at the same time they embrace China as the motherland. The causes for their current predicament are deeply rooted in history.'⁶³² Back in 1898 when figures such as Ho Tung, Ho Kai and Ho Amei warmly welcomed the British Admiral Lord Charles Beresford who had arrived on a fact-finding mission, they did so in the belief that the interests of British Hong Kong and China were identical, meaning that collaboration with British Hong Kong was the way to develop China. Ho Tung even collected information to facilitate the British takeover of the New Territories, waiting for the day that China would become as enlightened and prosperous as Hong Kong. Tsai says this is collaborationist patriotism, representing a dual allegiance: 'This situation is subtle and complex.'⁶³³ Everyone was a partner, friend, rival and enemy at same time, says Tsai. Hong Kong's success was China's failure - its inability to provide a secure business environment in the late nineteenth century, its failure to

⁶³¹ Siu, 'Cultural Identity and the Politics of difference,' pp19-43, p31.

⁶³² Tsai, 'History and Identity', pp78-93, p78.

⁶³³ Tsai, 'History and Identity', p85.

control political chaos at home, and failure to give merchants the autonomy and power they had in the West. Collaboration with Britain was preferable, building what Tsai calls a primary allegiance to a Hong Kong community while 'retaining their secondary identity with the Chinese nation.'⁶³⁴

When Governor Murray Macle hose went to Beijing in 1979 to talk with Deng Xiaoping about how to extend land leases beyond their 1997 expiration, Deng said to MacLe hose: 'It has been our consistent view that the People's Republic of China has sovereignty over Hong Kong, while Hong Kong also has its own special position. A negotiated settlement of the Hong Kong question in the future should be based on the premise that the territory is part of China. However, we will treat Hong Kong as a special region. For a considerable length of time, Hong Kong may continue to practise its capitalist system while we practise our socialist system.'⁶³⁵ Deng also said Hong Kong people should 'set their hearts at ease.' Again, the coda was taken as the main message, and on went that gray zone as Hong Kongers rested 'at ease'.

Empires duck and weave

Behind the scenes, however, steps were being taken that would directly affect the people living across boundaries - the Eurasians and others with mixed roots. It is no accident that soon after Macle hose's Beijing visit, the British government chose to confirm in immigration law its exclusion of the majority of Hong Kong's population from full British citizenship. The process had begun, while few noticed, back in 1962 when the Commonwealth Immigrant Act stripped Hong Kong passport holders of their legal right to live in Britain. Hong Kong residents taking British citizenship were now designated as British Dependent Territories Citizens (BDTC), which from 1985 became British Nationals (Overseas), or BNO. Neither status conferred any right of entry to Britain.

The Harilelas, for example, had no passports beyond the British ones they had secured by being in Hong Kong before the war. Their homeland of Hyderabad Sind had been in India when their forebears had left it; now in Pakistan it was an alien world. Only when going through Hong Kong's airport immigration desks one day in

⁶³⁴ Tsai, 'History and Identity', pp91-2.

⁶³⁵ Cottrell, *The End of Hong Kong*, pp54-55.

1962, did Hari Harilela learn that his passport was no longer the full British version guaranteeing him, he had assumed, the right to live in Britain if he wished. The immigration officer advised him to get the new British Dependent Territories Citizen passport, which he assured Harilela was just as good. Only as 1997 approached would Harilela learn that he had only a kind of British nationality which gave no rights of citizenship, specifically no right of abode outside Hong Kong. As a wealthy member of the elite he found ways to solve this, but also lobbied hard with Sindhi friends (notably Lachman Narain) in Hong Kong and London to try to extend passport rights to their less well-off brethren.⁶³⁶

Behind these legal moves was the century-long shift in the nature of the British Empire itself, from global dominance to second-tier status, with a navy that no longer ruled the seas. Back before World War One it was commonplace for anyone born in a territory over which the British flag flew to gain British nationality and citizenship. This right extended at least as far as grandchildren of the British passport holder whether or not the grandparents had themselves been born in Britain or had British forebears. Thus Baghdadi Jews in Shanghai, Sindhis in Hong Kong, Malays or Chinese in Singapore, to name but a few, all believed themselves to be British. Few, if any, had ever been to Britain or had any family there, but the imperial umbrella was understood as a genuine shelter. After World War One, as the sprawling, cosmopolitan empires of Istanbul and Vienna crumbled, it became more important for anyone of 'dubious'—meaning mixed or non-white British-born—origins to make sure they held official passports even as Britain, too, was slowly but steadily pulling up its nation-state drawbridges. Many of Hong Kong's in-between people failed to notice the diminishing value of their passports as British law cleverly separated out citizenship (including the right to live in Britain) from nationality. The latter came only if one could prove one's grandparents, and later only one's parents, were British born. The implicit racism of the shift was clear.

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher landed in Hong Kong in 1982, her nose red and streaming from a heavy cold, on her way to meet Deng in Beijing to discuss Hong Kong's future. When she emerged from those talks only to slip and stumble on the steps of the Great Hall of the People, it seemed a portent of the changing of the

⁶³⁶ England, Hari Harilela, pp242-49.

guard over Hong Kong. Many months of tortuous negotiations later, the deal guiding Hong Kong's shift towards Chinese sovereignty was set—and markedly aligned to that plan first outlined by Huang Hua back in 1972. Promised another fifty years after the handover during which nothing would change, Hong Kong was hopeful once more. Many of those who had fled to gain passports elsewhere now returned to Hong Kong, trying to determine their relationship with the 'One country', testing the limits of what might be those 'Two systems'. The next landmark for Hong Kong took place in Beijing: the killing of thousands of pro-democracy demonstrators around Tiananmen Square on 4 June 1989. Hong Kongers by the million expressed outpourings of empathy and fear for the future. Again, those with no place but Hong Kong to call home intensified their lobbying in London. Britain agreed to issue 50,000 full British passports to residents selected by the Hong Kong government. Work began on a bill of rights. Britain's last governor, Christopher Patten, arrived in July 1992, and by October had promised a broader voter base. China threatened to take Hong Kong sooner if Britain did not behave.

What mattered to Hong Kong people was the chance for one's children to get ahead. If that could be assured under Chinese rule as much as it ever was under British, all was well. But was it? China declared, 'All Hong Kong Chinese compatriots, whether they are holders of the BDTC passport or not, are Chinese nationals.' But what did this mean for Hong Kong citizens who were not 'Hong Kong Chinese.' Some had other passports, but some did not, and the governments' exchanges of memoranda ignored this. Thus, many of Hong Kong's Eurasians, and the 4,500 Indians with BDTC documents, were not covered; they were neither 'Chinese' nor 'compatriots.' Yet still, for several years after the handover, most people were relieved that daily life didn't seem to change much at all. The fruit-seller still tended his stall every day, newspapers were printed, libraries were not culled, money was still made.

Hong Kongers and Eurasians

For so long as Hong Kong was left to itself, shut off from China and often ignored by Britain, it could develop its Eurasian personality. Homegrown cultural capital was gaining traction, with Cantonese music (Canto-pop) and the films of Bruce Lee telling the world this was a stunning, distinct place. Notably, Bruce Lee's lineage

includes a concubine of the Ho Kam Tong clan, so even this icon of apparently Chinese Hong Kong has diverse roots.

Ackbar Abbas, the Hong Kong-born US-based academic and influential author, can trace his roots back to India, Malaysia and China. He calls this Hong Kong a Hyphenation. One of the first Abbas men was called a Serang, a labour supplier, just as Shaik Moosdeen and Mohammed Arab had been. Shaik Abbas (1843–1908) had owned land near the mosque on Shelley Street and worked in government service. His wife, Beebun, was described as the oldest member of Hong Kong's Indian community on her death in 1933; she left more than sixty grandchildren. Abbas men had jobs in solidly middle-class professions, at American Express, Dodwell's, the British Council, on local newspapers, as prison wardens, officers in government, navy, air force, and the Hong Kong Club. Part of the family had intermarried with the Ramjahn and Madar families; one branch was buried in Macao's Muslim cemetery while others moved to Shanghai, Texas, or New York or hailed from Sandakan. One, Abdul Rahim Abbass [sic] was among the founders of the Islamic Union, Hong Kong's organizing body for Muslims. Others married Catholic Portuguese, and into the old Eurasian clans too.

Says Abbas: '[My mother] looked slightly more Indian than I do, I don't look Indian or Malaysian at all. You know, I have this name, and I have this face, and the name don't go together with the face. So I feel like I am a living example of an allegory. And I identify with nowhere. It helps in the sense that you are inside and outside at the same time.'⁶³⁷ In his 1997 book, *Hong Kong: Culture and Politics of Disappearance*, he explored nostalgia and collective memory in Hong Kong identity, introducing the concept of hyphenation for a culture or nation without sovereignty, dependent on another place to survive. 'Hong Kong is not a nation, it's a hyphenation,' he says. Colonialism 'pioneered methods of incorporating pre-capitalist, pre-industrial, and non-European societies into the world economy and found ways of dealing with ethnically, racially and culturally different societies,' Abbas wrote, giving Hong Kong a relatively benign version that seems 'to contradict more orthodox understandings of colonialism as necessarily exploitative.'⁶³⁸

⁶³⁷ Ackbar Abbas, interviewed by Sarah Karacs, in "Born, Raised and Corrupted in Hong Kong: A Chat with Ackbar Abbas". *Zolima City Mag*, 20 September 2018. <http://zolimacitymag.com>

⁶³⁸ Abbas, *Hong Kong, Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, p3.

Perhaps that's because there wasn't much to exploit, he wonders. 'Its very lack of resources or means of being independent was always curiously enough a factor in its favor: it meant that more could be gained all around by making the city work as a port city... This was a position that both the colonizer and the colonized could agree on, a position of cute correspondence or collusion...' This made possible, or indeed required, that 'lack and dependency were somehow advantages...dependency has been turned into a fine art... Hong Kong seems to have been built on contingency, on geographic and historical accidents, shaped by time and circumstances beyond its control and by pragmatic accommodation to events...a tendency to live its own version of the 'floating world' without the need to establish stable identities.'⁶³⁹ His 'contingency' is another word for bricolage, for improvisation, mixing to make do.

Abbas admires the Hong Kong filmmaker Wong Kar-wai's romantic comedy of 1994, *Chungking Express*, for showing that 'Hong Kong is not so much a mental or psychological state as it is a visual and spatial paradox, a skewed space that characters have to adjust to emotionally, with comic results. Far from being the habitat of one social group, many different groups feel equally (not) at home in it; notice how in the first part of the film, Cantonese, Mandarin, English, Urdu and Japanese are all spoken.'⁶⁴⁰ Dung Kaicheung and Leung Ping-kwan also reveal the distinctness of Hong Kong's past as a port city, open to all, productive of a splendid mishmash of multiple heritages. In *Atlas: The Archaeology of an Imaginary City*, Dung's lead character, Hong Kong, is a unique convergence of disparate elements.

In his 2009 *Postcolonial Affairs of Food and the Heart*, Leung writes of how he was inspired by his many Hong Kong friends 'who are not particularly British-colonial or not particularly revolutionary, but just simple people living in Hong Kong, and all kinds of problems they encounter. I don't want to just write political stories, so I concentrate on food and love, matters of the heart, and I think in these situations I think people are more natural, more expressive of themselves, and why they love someone, what sort of thing they see in the other people that they want to have a relationship with or what kind of food they want to eat.'⁶⁴¹

⁶³⁹ Abbas, *Hong Kong, Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, pp72, 73, and 76.

⁶⁴⁰ Abbas, *Hong Kong, Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, p55.

⁶⁴¹ Interview with Leung Ping-kwan, 5 June 2007, Hong Kong.

Writers and film makers such as Wong Kar-wei, Dung Kaicheung and Leung Ping-kwan are Hong Kong Chinese artists eager to stress what I call the essential Eurasian-ness of Hong Kong. In a direct example of Bricolage at work, and how it is specifically not only an elite occupation but relevant to all classes from the workers up, Leung uses food to describe how Hong Kong 'makes changes, it appropriated, adopted some Chinese cuisine but then the imperial kind of cuisine will become the food on the street for common people. You have the British tea, but then when you move to Hong Kong you have milk tea, which later developed into tea-coffee, a mixture of tea and coffee which is not British at all, it's for the coolie, for the common worker, when they want strong tea they have that. So this is not Chinese and not British as well. I'm interested in all these different kinds of food ... The early Western food when they came into Hong Kong is called soy sauce western cuisine [because] instead of using butter or cheese, which is not good for the Chinese stomach, they used soy sauce ... Like there's a soup called comprador soup, [named after] the go-betweens, the people who make profit by dealing with business ... it's shark fin soup with cream, so it's a Western-Chinese mixture in a very strange way.

'People talk a lot about East meets West. Of course, the meeting itself is worth looking into—it could be a power struggle, it could be a domination, it could be a friendly relationship, it could be a lot of opposition as well. So I always see a simplification when people give slogans like 'East meets West' and 'Hong Kong is lively urban city,' a cosmopolitan city, and so on. What actually is happening, how are people living and dealing with everyday life? I'm interested in wanting to know... Hong Kong people are very receptive of other kinds of things, of course they like Cantonese soup, but also they enjoy Malaysian curry, Indian curry. In a way Hong Kong has always been very open to all kinds of culture, and that is a good thing.'⁶⁴² Speaking just ten years after the handover, he saw himself and fellow Cantonese as another minority in Hong Kong, as Mandarin-speaking mainlanders arrived at the rate of at least one hundred a day. He lamented that the colony's new rulers could not imagine Hong Kong could have developed its own culture and so failed to take it seriously.⁶⁴³

⁶⁴² Interview with Leung Ping-kwan, 5 June 2007, Hong Kong.

⁶⁴³ Interview with Leung Ping-kwan, 5 June 2007; Leung Ping-kwan died on 5 January 2013.

The writer Han Suyin saw the writing on the wall just a few years after the war, insisting on what she called her 'foolishness' in lauding her mixed identity. She wrote that being deeply cross-cultural was the way of the future. 'We must carry ourselves with colossal assurance and say: 'Look at us, the Eurasians! Just look. How beautiful we are, more beautiful than either race alone. More clever, more hardy. The meeting of both cultures, the fusion of all that can become a world civilization. Look at us, and envy us, you poor one-world people, riveted to your limitations. We are the future of the world. Look at us'.⁶⁴⁴

Hong Kong as Home to all

What comes through in one memoir after another is that Hong Kongers, including Eurasians, saw themselves as a distinct community. They were assuredly not part of China (and as details emerged of communist rule, had no wish to be); nor were they wholly British, no matter what passports they held. As Hong Kong entered a new, almost post-imperial world marked by massive refugee influxes, local unrest, and uncertainty, that sense of Hong Kong and its people as something apart only grew even though, as usual, the metropolises in London and Beijing ignored it.

Expressing a typically simplistic view of colonial life, sociologist Henry Lethbridge claims, 'Hong Kong's population in 1941 was split into two main groups, Europeans and Asians, poised against each other.'⁶⁴⁵ He saw prewar Hong Kong as 'rigidly stratified, Victorian-colonial... dominated by the Peak... and the 'Peak' mentality,' and pronounced the collapse of 'the British Mandarinate' in 1941. Yet in the same essay he is forced to admit that there was in fact 'very little racial bitterness or political agitation' and governance was 'widely consultative.' Perhaps what he means is that the British rulers of Hong Kong were now hedging as much as its Eurasians and other citizens felt the need to do. Pre-war certainties had imploded.

Instead of James Hayes' tale of two cities where 'Chinese' and 'Europeans' ran separate lives, we now know that most people, most of the time, lived somewhere in between. There were clear reasons for each minority group to feel badly treated, but most of them, most of the time, held on to their idea of Hong Kong as home.

⁶⁴⁴ Han Suyin, *Love Is a Many-Splendoured Thing*, p230.

⁶⁴⁵ Lethbridge, 'Hong Kong Under Japanese Occupation,' pp79ff.

Eurasians and others risked their lives for their vision of Hong Kong, and returned in 1945 ready to implement it. Not until 1967, and then 1997, did this ground shift.

For so long as Hong Kongers have been able to convince themselves that their home was special and different, they have stayed. As Jürgen Osterhammel notes, domination by foreigners was not necessarily perceived by its subjects as illegitimate; indeed, in Hong Kong a long history of local collaboration is what made it work. Osterhammel also says collaboration is not always a dirty word.⁶⁴⁶ Most Hong Kongers were collaborators in that they chose to come to Hong Kong, they were self-selected. They went on to become proud active players in the place. These people existed thanks only to the colonial system, yet turned that system on its head. The result, unsurprisingly, is a vast spectrum of experience, from racism and violence at one end to creative innovation and true love at the other, with many, many variations in between. Douglas Kerr describes it as 'one of the allegories of empire. The imperial project can come to nothing unless contact is made with the native, but contact is felt to risk disaster, loss of identity, even forfeit of the soul. And so they go on together... [there is] no profit without knowledge, no knowledge without contact, no contact without transgression.'⁶⁴⁷

Other variations came in the different Chinese-nesses, described by Leung Ping-kwan and others. Helen Siu notes that Chineseness is 'not an immutable set of beliefs and practices, but a process', stressing Hong Kong's fluid and negotiated qualities.⁶⁴⁸ The numerical majority of people in Hong Kong has always been some kind of Chinese but this includes those who came from Southeast Asia, or from wildly different parts of China, or who arrived in Hong Kong after lives in California, the South Island of New Zealand, or even from the local-born families of Hong Kong's pre-global fishing villages. Lynn Pan found that not until 1981 was more than half of Hong Kong's population actually born in Hong Kong (other sources suggest it was the 1960s). She also found Hong Kong's Chinese are different, they are *sui generis*, neither ancestral nor overseas Chinese but 'those who succeed in becoming truly bicultural, behaving in a Western mode without a debasement of their own. They are different from the Anglicized subjects of the British Empire in Southeast Asia... the

⁶⁴⁶ Osterhammel, *Colonialism*, p14.

⁶⁴⁷ Kerr, 'Three Ways of Going Wrong,' p24.

⁶⁴⁸ Siu, 'Cultural Identity and the Politics of difference,' pp19-43, p19.

treaty-port Chinese of Hong Kong are a world away from the people of China; while their Chineseness is denied by nobody, it is unlike anything you will find in China proper... The treaty-port Chinese are better able to do that difficult thing, snap the tough thread of Chinese history and achieve the happy balance which has always eluded their cousins in China: the balance between modernity and Chineseness, between moving with the times and remaining themselves.⁶⁴⁹

Whose Hong Kong Now?

All this would change after 1997. Beijing chose to embed its rule amid the tycoon class, appointing a committee that 'elected' Hong Kong's first chief executive, the shipping tycoon Tung Chee-hwa. Yet even participants in the hybrid system of Hong Kong governance admit that its failure is systemic. Tung had to resign after a million Hong Kongers marched in 2003 against the idea of a National Security Law. His successor, a former civil servant under British rule, Donald Tsang, eventually left office under a cloud of corruption allegations (he was jailed and then acquitted). His successor, C. Y. Leung's time in office was marked by the 79-day mass civil disobedience campaign of 2014 known as Occupy.

The Occupy movement surprised an older generation of democracy advocates, and terrified Beijing's appointees in Hong Kong. Here was a fresh new young generation of Hong Kongers, born after the 1997 handover, keen to save what they saw as their identity in a free, in-between place. In no mood for compromise, they rejected an electoral system imposed on them in which they could choose neither the candidates nor who voted for them. This group of school-leavers, led by the now-famous Joshua Wong, Nathan Law, and Agnes Chow, had already fought off attempts to inject more 'patriotic,' meaning pro-China, material into school curriculums.⁶⁵⁰ They joyfully camped out for more than two months with banners, seminars, study areas to keep up with schoolwork, dispensing stations for water and food and medical care, and platforms where they debated their hopes for a future in which they would have a say. Crucially, Occupy had broad public support, far beyond those upset at

⁶⁴⁹ Lynn Pan, *Sons of the Yellow Emperor*, pp373–74.

⁶⁵⁰ Their group, Scholarism, and its campaign was mediated by government adviser Anna Wu, a former member of Hong Kong Observers, founded in 1975, which had announced their hopeful goal to engage in the governance of Hong Kong. Relative to the times, this was almost as radical as Scholarism's twenty-first-century agenda.

how the traffic was messed up. Middle-class parents made sure offspring were fed and sheltered. Office staff and off-duty civil servants joined the throng after work, singing along to anthems including 'Do You Hear the People Sing,' from the French musical *Les Misérables*. Among those camping out were Nepalis, Indians, Filipinos, and more, all claiming their part in Hong Kong's fight for a future.

Clearly the old line that Hong Kong was just a financial centre whose people didn't care about politics was not true. Throughout its history, Hong Kongers have shown a marked tendency to express themselves, from protests against discriminatory anti-Chinese laws in the nineteenth century, to strikes and boycotts to support Chinese republicans in the early twentieth. Port workers and seamen, tram drivers and maids all joined mass actions for greater rights under British rule. Hong Kongers kept up the habit under Chinese rule, too.

When, in 2020, the latest 'mayor' backed by Beijing, Carrie Lam, planned a law providing for the extradition of Hong Kong people to the Chinese legal system, she sparked the largest mass protests ever seen in Hong Kong. First, one million people marched through the streets, then two million. Only when a tiny group attacked the legislature physically did the government agree to drop the planned bill. By then it was too late, and through a long, hot, wet summer the movement grew. Only a sweeping new National Security Law and the covid pandemic cleared the streets.

It was all a heady reminder of the spirit of a Hong Kong that refuses to bow down. Or it was the last foolishness of people who should have known better than to be so very provocative. Or both. Either way, Hong Kong now knows it is under new management. Tellingly, in early 2021, China's long-standing refusal to recognize dual nationality was extended to Hong Kong. In other words, if one was born in Hong Kong and had Hong Kong or Chinese passports, then the concept of consular protection by any other passport one might hold would no longer apply. Western governments were soon warning their passport holders in Hong Kong that this carried risks for all holders of more than one formal identity.⁶⁵¹ The risks to those of multiple or ambiguous identities only intensified.

⁶⁵¹ Primrose Riordan and Robert Wright, 'UK Says Hong Kong Authorities No Longer Recognise Dual Nationality,' *Financial Times*, 9 February 2021.

Arrests, jailings and long-drawn out trials ensued – including that of 47 democratic representatives who planned a primary to choose candidates to win a plurality in the Legislative Council. This was now subversion; subsequent restrictions of candidates and voting choices is described by government loyalists as an ‘improvement’. So, too, with the media. By arresting Jimmy Lai, then freezing his assets, the government eliminated bestselling local newspaper *Apple Daily*, the most vibrant Chinese voice for a free Hong Kong. Jimmy Lai had swum to Hong Kong as a child and worked his way up to millionaire status with clothes groups, canny investments, and media enterprise. What he loved about Hong Kong was its freedom, and, unlike many local tycoons, he joined the crowds on the streets to defend just that. His steadfast Catholic faith, his daring to call live on a BBC broadcast for people in China to stand up, his very success as a businessman—all this and more mean that Jimmy, already in his seventies and holder of a British passport, is facing the rest of his life in jail. A long string of Chinese-language news sites and enterprises has since folded. The government insists press freedom exists as strongly as ever.

Further proof that Hong Kong was under new management came with the near-total closure of its airport. Long after other countries, and particularly its competitor as Asian financial hub, Singapore, had decided to live with the coronavirus, arrivals in Hong Kong still had to run the gamut of hazmat-gear-wearing inspectors enforcing weeks-long quarantines in hotels in which one could neither open the window nor escape. Once-throbbing airport hallways for arrivals and departures were now busy only on the nights when overbooked planes carried out groups of weepy Hong Kongers, especially its younger, educated people. They were carrying their cats: they were not coming back. Hong Kong recorded a net loss of 130,000 residents in the first half of 2022 alone.⁶⁵² Numbers released by the Census and Statistics Department on 20 February 2024 show Hong Kong’s population rising to around 7,503,100, largely with the arrival of mainland Chinese. The government also admitted a clear drop in the number of people aged between 20 and 34; in 2014 there had been 1.54 million people in this age range and now there were 1.23 million. Chief Executive John Lee (a former policeman) noted a loss of 200,000 workers in recent years.⁶⁵³

⁶⁵² The British government opened a route to residence (involving a five-year wait and money to live off) under its British Nationality Overseas passports; about 140,000 have chosen this so far.

⁶⁵³ Hutton, Mercedes. ‘No. of young adults in Hong Kong continues decline, despite year-end population growth of 0.4% to 7.5 million’. *Hong Kong Free Press*, 21 February 2024.

In the harbour of Hong Kong, where it all began almost two centuries ago, the ferries still puff back and forth, carrying commuters to and from their island homes, and crisscrossing from 'Hong Kong side' to Kowloon. Since the restrictions surrounding the Covid pandemic were eased (in 2022), those ferries are again taking tourists to the bus to the cable car to the Peak, that vertiginous viewpoint over all Hong Kong, and destination for its constantly aspiring classes. In many ways, the view and the sound of the city is the same. That constant hum rises from crammed streets made into canyons by high-rise hotels, banks, and window-to-window apartment blocks. On a clear day the mountains marking out the natural border between Kowloon and the more distant New Territories, beyond which lies China, stand firm. There, too, can be found the shape of a crouching lion, which gives us Lion Rock and, inevitably, the Lion Rock Spirit. Tracing how the definition of that spirit has evolved already tells us how the view changes, depending on when you look.

Lion Rock spirit in its earliest elaboration is a Hong Kong version of pulling oneself up by the bootstraps, the sheer grit and determination to start from nothing and get ahead. Mid- to late-twentieth-century administrations loved it; a popular television soap opera, 'Beneath Lion Rock' lauded it; Hong Kong's homegrown post-war Cantonese took it as their own. Attempts by more recent governments to hijack that 'spirit' have failed. Down on the streets of the city, there are more ill-fitting suits, more bad sunglasses and obvious earphones. Hong Kongers now know they are being watched. Victoria Park, once site for annual commemorations of the Tiananmen Square massacre, is now a circumscribed place. Highway construction has cut off one side, and the large ball courts where masses used to gather are more often fenced off. Lion Rock, meanwhile, became a site for physically challenging and politically daring acts of civil disobedience: intrepid rock climbers have managed to hang huge bright yellow banners from Lion Rock with simple messages such as 'Democracy' or 'Freedom.' Each time, the huge banners, visible even from the Peak across the harbour, were torn down, but still the climbers have not been caught.

No more grey zones

This new regime was not only shutting down its thinking persons within, it was happily demolishing the *raison d'être* of Hong Kong as port city, as global waystation, as gathering place to all comers. A powerful new narrative is being

disseminated, and believed by Hong Kong's many ready quislings, that all those political troubles were nothing to do with Hong Kong being made into China at all. The official line is that all the unrest is the fault of foreign forces, specifically the U.S., funding subversion and even paying those millions to march on the street. Said senior government member Regina Ip in July 2022: 'Colluding with foreign forces is a definite no-no because of the current geopolitical situation. Some Western countries are targeting China. The U.S. is roping in allies to target China. Such action to contain China forces our country to stay vigilant.' Almost daily changes since then in everything from public language and books permitted in libraries to evolving rules on the stock market show China has asserted a level of day-to-day governance far beyond anything imagined even a few years ago. Among recent comments from the Beijing-appointed government in Hong Kong is the claim that 'foreign agents' first initiated the 2003 protest as a 'trial run' for all that followed.⁶⁵⁴ We are also regularly told Hong Kong must remain 'vigilant' as the threat of such 'terrorism' and 'soft resistance' is ever-present.

This, to put it mildly, is an entirely new way of looking at Hong Kong's traditional openness to people, ideas, and enterprises from around the world; it willfully ignores the large extent to which today's Hong Kong was made by the many non-Chinese people and ideas from around the world. Hong Kong may never have been seen as fully a place on its own ground - such notions of independent agency are anathema to all ruling nation-states. Yet Hong Kong people have lived more freely, openly, and with greater education and cosmopolitan sense than those on the Chinese mainland. Merging groups with such disparate values could never be easy. Precisely because of its different history, because of the mixing of peoples and ideas from the whole world that has helped to make Hong Kong, that fit would not be smooth. The gray zone that had allowed Hong Kong and its multiple, mixed-up peoples to thrive is becoming, step by step, more black and white.

Just as Philip Mansel saw that the key to his Levantine port cities was their non-state nature, so too for Hong Kong.

⁶⁵⁴ Hong Kong SAR Secretary for Security Chris Tang speaking in a video on his facebook page, reported by the Hong Kong Free Press, 3 August 2023.

Others never subscribed to the idea of a cosmopolitan Hong Kong and spurn it as a romantic, overidealized nostalgia for something that never was. One five-generation Hong Kong family's matriarch says, Well, so long as we are making money here, we don't care; our children will go to boarding school anyway. A gracious China coast aristocrat laughed sadly at the failure of democratic dreams in Hong Kong, knowing, from her family's flight from Shanghai in the 1940s, what little chance there had been. Meanwhile, some in-between people of perhaps Eurasian, Jewish, Indian, or Portuguese heritage in Hong Kong have awoken to the discriminations and brutalities of British rule in their family's pasts, even as they adjust to newer Chinese realities. One confided his family had been treated as second-class citizens by the British and were now third-class under the Chinese. He had no illusions that the Chinese would be as forgiving of his darker skin as the British had been. Luckily, he has a European wife and homes around the world.

The Eurasian organization, the Welfare League, now finds it hard to find people to spend the money on, says Michael Tse, one of its leaders: 'The Welfare League has lost its reason for existence because there are no Eurasians anymore. We are descendants, but not a community. We only meet in weddings and funerals; at the latter, sometimes no one turns up. Yes, Eurasians, Armenians, Jews, Parsis were the backbone of Hong Kong's first one hundred years. When it was set up, Eurasian down-and-outs were really outcasts and had no government support. But the community has disappeared.' It also struggles because two obstructive personalities block initiatives – another sign that whatever community feeling there was back in the 1930s is now no longer strong enough to prevent atrophy setting in.⁶⁵⁵

Parsis now number around just 200 in Hong Kong, even with their more liberal definition of a Parsi even if one of their parents has married 'out' (in contrast to Bombay orthodoxy which requires both parents to be Parsi to breed Parsis). For some, it remains inconceivable to ever leave their home: 'It's almost as though the city is Eurasian, just like us.'⁶⁵⁶ For many others, the time is overdue for new lives elsewhere as they grapple with whether any port city can survive without the freedoms – of expression, assembly, information and legal certainty – it once had.

⁶⁵⁵ Interview with Michael Tse, 10 April 2018.

⁶⁵⁶ Zimmern *The Eurasian Face*, p16. Another contributor says Eurasians 'move between worlds', and that's fine 'because it is something so undefined', p106, p11.

Others have chosen to toss off that in-betweenness and embrace the (new) motherland. A member of the judiciary, descendant of one of the first Portuguese to set foot in Hong Kong, Susana Maria d'Almada Remedios, is now one of the judges hand-picked by the government to act in National Security trials, and is one of the three judges for Jimmy Lai's trial. One scion of a Eurasian family that fled to Australia in 1967 chose to return to the thriving financial centre of Hong Kong, where, he believed, his children could more fully embrace what he called the 'Asian century'. Even when he took his family to Singapore to get them into school during Covid times, he insisted he would go back to Hong Kong, refusing to engage with the thought that it's tough when the only way to vote is with one's feet. Two years on, however, he admits Singapore is now home; he sees Hong Kong is stagnating. Others say the future lies in a new version of Hong Kong's past, as an offshoot of the thriving trading world of south China, of Guangzhou, Shenzhen and newer satellite cities over the Pearl River delta, which the new regime calls the Greater Bay Area. Perhaps some still dream, as in the old adage, that the mountains are high and the emperor far away – despite China's 'ethno-nationalist authoritarianism.'⁶⁵⁷

That Triestean feeling

If war was the crucible in which Eurasian Hong Kong found a fresh commitment to a Hong Kong which, though British-ruled was the only home they knew, the post-war decades would pose new questions. In this chapter I have considered what I call that Triestean feeling to evoke the rise and fall of a place due to a shift in the tectonic plates of empire which surround it. Just as Trieste had its time as a hub for empire, so did Hong Kong. Just as Trieste fell into insignificance with the rise in powerful states around it, so too with Hong Kong. The comparison cannot go much further than that but hints at the melancholy present among many who once called Hong Kong home.

We have seen Hong Kong's port city people living through 1967, 1979, 1997, 2014 and 2019, as that home transitioned from a relatively open and cosmopolitan place into something more cribbed and confined by Chinese communist state power.

⁶⁵⁷ Jamil Anderlini, 'China's 'Recolonisation' of Hong Kong Could Soon Be Complete,' Financial Times, 11 November 2020.