Hong Kong's place in South East Asia

England, V.M.

Chapter 9 Conclusions

This thesis began by asking not what, but Who was Hong Kong: who were the vital, but oft-ignored, people who helped to shape Hong Kong's first century, where did they come from, what did they do, what networks did they form? The goal of this enquiry was to shine a light on an important slice of Hong Kong society which has so far been given little space in formal histories. By so doing I hoped to illuminate key aspects of what has made Hong Kong special (and different to mainland China). Re-setting the historical record also helps to show that Hong Kong is much more than just another Chinese city. Instead, it grew out of a global chain of Port Cities, with specifically Eurasian characteristics.

In order to understand Hong Kong's place in a global trading world, I first described the map of Asian exchange pre-dating its birth as a port. Hong Kong's emergence was due to pre-existing figurations, namely, patterns of commodity exchange practised by long-standing and far-flung networks of peoples from across Eurasia. These networks of inter-connected people chose to come to Hong Kong, whose founding as a British colony was enabled by the weakness of China at a time of powerful Western imperial expansion. The opium trade was its siren call, not territorial conquest or missionary fervour. A loose imperium emerged to manage that emporium, which functioned thanks to its core population of Eurasian trading diasporas with all their knowledge, experience, alliances and linked port-cities.

In this bazaar, networks that long predated Hong Kong could flourish and grow. Parsi networks brought names such as Ruttonjee, Kotewall, Shroff and Master. From elsewhere in India came the Armenian Chater, his best friend Mody, the Venetian Jew Belilios, and the Baghdadi clans of Sassoon and Kadoorie. From Southeast Asia came descendants of the Kapitan Cina, namely Chui Leep Chee, whose offspring would intermarry with Hong Kong Eurasians of the Ho, Lo, and Ho Tung clans. From Macao, Malacca, Galle, Goa and beyond came the Portuguese. So too came Malays and Manilamen, Lascars and their recruiters. A clear symbiosis underpinned this bazaar: the British relied on Asian networks in order to function, and these networks needed that casual overlordship in order to thrive. Nation-state, ethnic or faith boundaries were less relevant than the networks of trading diasporas and the multi-layered, multi-ethnic intimate connections between women and men.

London's ambivalence about, and often disinterest in, the building of a lasting settlement in Hong Kong was both because of, and encouraged by, the reality that Hong Kong's roots lay more in the Asian trades and trading networks to its south than in the metropole. Hong Kong was periphery.

With a unique trove of hitherto unpublished material, we have dived deep into the world of the Parsis who moved from Bombay to Canton and so Hong Kong. Their strong kinship networks, starters' advantage, and shared knowledge of the China trade supported their role not only as traders but manufacturers, financiers and ship-owners. Above all, close ties with the British, and the Parsi ability to mix easily with everyone, explains the persistent success of the close-knit, cosmopolitan Parsis.

We then met the women and men who first mixed with each other, birthing the first indigenes of the city of Hong Kong, whose descendants continued to mix through almost two centuries, across taboos of race, class and faith. The goal here was not only to discover John Darwin's 'agents of empire', the physical embodiments of far-flung imperialism. It was also to track what Geert Mak has described as the oligarchization of power. In a family's search for certainties, family is put before everything else. On meeting their successor Eurasians, who often held large sway in Hong Kong, we discovered the importance of the networks they formed among themselves, and across boundaries of race, class and faith. Names such as Chater, Kadoorie, Li, Mody, Macumber Churn, Anderson, Remedios, Kotewall and many more forged networks in which can be found new foci of belonging.

Whereas first-generation Eurasians such as (Sir) Robert Ho Tung still felt the need to claim status through lavish statements of marriage and wealth, second- and third-generation Eurasians gained in confidence and felt less need for display. They were able to consolidate their communities despite the early twentieth-century backdrop of rising nationalism, sharper definitions of identity, and cross-border conflict. When World War Two hit Hong Kong, its Eurasians faced a situation where definitions of identity became a matter of life and death. Ambiguity offered choices and the chance to escape; it also brought new meaning to the word 'collaboration', and showed that the line between enjoying the best of both worlds, or the worst, was indistinct. Most extraordinary, in this context, is the strength of belief in their idea of Hong Kong that spurred its diverse peoples to be ready to die for it and to return to it.

The post-war world would bring new challenges, not least the arrival of millions of new arrivals from now-communist China. These migrants shared the earlier drive for new opportunities but their presence would change Hong Kong fundamentally. Still, Hong Kong's port city people, albeit often let down by the British, saw a future in a Hong Kong that stood between empires, navigating a post-war Cold War era, jostling with China and wider Asia. How long that belief lasted would vary from family to family as voices both Eurasian and Chinese began expressing new senses of identity through the upheavals of 1967, 1989, 1997 and 2019. New lines drawn over nationality in both British and Chinese law were a direct threat to Eurasians.

Within two decades after the 1997 handover, Hong Kong had become a different place. It was no longer the Eurasian port city thronged by foreigners of all kinds building a place with its own personality. Hong Kong's new management has blamed 'foreigners' for its problems, and made 'foreign collusion' a serious crime, willfully ignoring the extent to which today's Hong Kong was made by the many non-Chinese people and ideas from around the world.

Just as Philip Mansel found his Levantine port cities were both communal and cosmopolitan, so too was Hong Kong. Just as he saw that the key was their non-state nature, so too for Hong Kong. We have seen that the mixed origins and subsequent mixing of port city peoples, beyond families into networks, was key to Hong Kong.

Peoples and Prosopography

It was possible to reach this conclusion through the use of prosopography. Rather than focusing on theories of colonialism or elite-formation, I chose a granular approach, tracing specific people, families and networks as they arrived and contributed to the development of Hong Kong. Again, this was because not enough of this work has yet been done in this way, and also because this approach helps define a group I have called Eurasian. My definition of this ambiguous term has been as wide as possible, to include peoples from all of (geographical) Eurasia, in order to include not simply the products of liaisons between Western men and Chinese women but whole networks of people originating in Armenia, Iberia, Persia, India, China, Iraq and Southeast Asia. As a result I have been able to discover the in-

between people, exploring the daily life of diverse peoples to take us beyond the binary of 'Chinese city' or 'British colony'. One learns who matters by what they do. These people found the gaps between empires and made them their own, becoming indispensable to any empire's functioning.

Such an approach was necessary as we have seen that narratives from both British and Chinese metropoles fail to account for Hong Kong's special nature. Viewing Hong Kong through the prisms normally applied to British empire – from the assumption that racism or labour exploitation were founding principles, for example, or that liberation from the (British) imperial yoke would bring liberation – also don't readily apply to Hong Kong. Of course there was racism in Hong Kong, but we have also seen how poor people of all races mixed cheerfully while wealthy Parsis mixed socially with Europeans, and the sports and business communities were racially mixed; only the top of colonial government was strictly British. More concern was expressed at the time about 'classes' than 'races'.

It is also hard to argue that Hong Kong was founded on racism as most of the 'colonized' people chose to come to Hong Kong precisely because it was a port run by foreigners. In addition, neither racism nor labour exploitation have been the monopoly of the British. Chinese nationality law is explicitly race-based and attitudes to those of different hue can be deeply discriminatory. The first traders in their own people, as 'coolies' from east to west, were Chinese; class collusion between wealthy Chinese and British produced the most effective exploitation of the migrating poor out of China. The difficulty of applying grand theories about empire here is also seen when the Chinese Communist People derides what it calls the failure of a younger generation of pro-democracy Hong Kongers to 'decolonize'. In this CCP frame, British imperialism becomes a pernicious source of evils such as liberalism and individual rights. No one word or theory fits all. The fundamental trouble with castigating British imperialism in a Hong Kong context is that without the former, the latter would not exist. Just as imperial history frames have their limits, so does Area Studies, as it is impossible to place Hong Kong solely within either the China or Southeast Asia Studies basket. Only when the *longue durée* and the conceptual framework of Global History is used, alongside the work of a new generation of Hong Kong historians, do we find Eurasian Hong Kong.

Malleable ethnicities, the mixing of people and their movements and thus a diasporic perspective focused on mobility allows identity to become more fluid, hybrid, and fragmented. We have seen Tim Harper, John Darwin, Chris Bayly and others calling for fresh biographical work on key figures to show complex and contradictory layers of belonging around empire. This helps, too, says Darwin, for showing that British cultural imperialism was not equivalent to biological racism. Despite arrogance and prejudice, 'the potential for equality among persons of all races remained the formal position in law, in institutions and in official ideology.'[658]

Non-elite Europeans were perhaps freest to love where they chose, bound neither by religious orthodoxy, nor any money at stake. Hong Kong made new lives possible – as when Ho Chi Minh used British law to avoid a French death penalty,[659] or one Carvalho Yeo switched nationalities to conduct fraud and (almost) get away with it.[660] For Munn, despite the racism and discrimination, Yeo's subsequent trial and the people around it 'suggest a diversity and fluidity that complicate the usual colonial stereotypes.' When a (Chinese) clerk in the Treasury was threatened by Yeo's crime, his bosses defended him strongly due to an 'implicit trust built on long experience, mutual respect, and common interests that transcended cultural differences.'[661] That diversity and fluidity was, as seen in the 1940 Evacuation, badly served by blinkered bureaucrats. The point is that it existed. Bayly insists on the need to study these more complex interactions. He discards claims that a global narrative denies or ignores the powerless, the downtrodden, the brown, the female and the idea that global history is complicit with imperialism. His objection is - as we have seen in Hong Kong – that everything is more fluid, ambiguous and interesting.[662]

David Pomfret's study of colonial Vietnam and Hong Kong shows they both featured multi-ethnic populations which acquired significance out of all proportion to their numbers.[663] But, he notes, knowledge of this reality has been almost lost: 'The presence of several generations of people of mixed European and Chinese heritage went almost entirely unacknowledged in official circles. Even the small but

---

658 Darwin, *After Tamerlane*, p416.
659 Sinn and Munn, *Meeting Place*, p172.
660 Sinn and Munn, *Meeting Place*, p154
661 Sinn and Munn, *Meeting Place*, pp172–73.
662 Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World*, p9.
663 Pomfret, 'Raising Eurasia,' p314.

influential cohort of Eurasians that had risen to important positions within the developing colonial state was obscured in official discourse by the tendency to identify them as Chinese.'[664] Perceptions of a racial category often relied on things that were not 'racial' at all, but were about language, dress, behaviour, and class. British scholarship has, compared to the Dutch, largely ignored its Eurasians; in Hong Kong, too, a dearth of historical attention has been paid to a core part of early Hong Kong.[665] It is this lacunae that this thesis attempts to address. After 1841, Helen Siu notes, 'A multiracial merchant culture developed with close ties to India, London, and Guangzhou,' concluding that 'It would be naive to judge Hong Kong society as being more or less "authentically Chinese". For over a century and a half, its population was racially and culturally composite.'[666] This thesis has looked in granular detail at that composite.

As a result, this research has revealed a great many of the variations and nuances of Hong Kong society, daily life and networks of power, beyond the standard clichés of 'East' and 'West'. This thesis cannot cover everybody however, and thus shows that much more can be done, to fill in the details of women's lives, of laws, practises and taboos, and to build in-depth biographies of key people and networks.

This thesis has found the many children of inevitable liaisons that occurred between all racial and religious groups of Muslims loving Chinese, or Parsis mixing with Malay and Chinese, or half-Jewish Chinese marrying Belgians. It has found power in the margins between British and Chinese societies, in a multiracial core that, though numerically small, was nonetheless pivotal in early Hong Kong. It has found that Hong Kong was never 'just another Chinese city.' It ranked with the great port cities from Genoa to Smyrna, from Salonica to Calcutta, from Canton to Makassar to Nagasaki. It grew out of a specific chain of Asian port cities, first seeded by the Portuguese at Malacca and Macao, then with the Dutch at Batavia and Galle, and finally the British at Penang and Singapore. Only then did Hong Kong come into its own, with its visceral connection its Asian trades, and thus to its Asian traders.

[664] Pomfret, 'Raising Eurasia,' p318.
[665] Questions could include: what were marriage laws and related taboos; who benefitted/was punished by racial restrictions, or was it tougher to be a Poor White than a rich Indian; and etc.
[666] Siu, 'Cultural Identity and the Politics of difference,' pp19-43, 28-9.

What made Hong Kong special?

As a result of the investigation into the people and personality of Hong Kong in this thesis, it has become clear that Hong Kong's existence depended not on formal lines of control or fixed borders and laws. Rather it grew out of the mixing of peoples and networks. Power lay precisely where ethno-nationalist divisions were blurred — from the bedroom to the board room and beyond. Only in its essentially Eurasian character can Hong Kong be fully understood.

That character relies partly on geographical peculiarity. Due to the closed nature of China for periods of Hong Kong's existence, and how far away it was from its metropoles (both London and Beijing), Hong Kong stood alone. Other port cities were tightly tied in to their hinterlands. Canton was clearly in China, Nagasaki in Japan, Batavia in the East Indies and so on. Hong Kong was a logical outgrowth of Britain's nineteenth century colonial expansion through Penang, Singapore and so to the north. However, Penang, Singapore, Malacca and other Malay states became part of various combinations (the Federated Malay States, Straits Settlements, Malaya, and eventually the nation states of Malaysia and Singapore). Apart from its own hinterland, the New Territories running up to the border with China (and that only for 99 years), Hong Kong sat on the edge of a vast empire which it could often not reach (and from 1949-79, barely communicate with). This was orphan, not offspring.

Hong Kong was different to other port cities, even those within the British imperial network, in other ways too. Although Stamford Raffles, who first claimed Singapore for Britain, was focused on the need to attract the Buginese traders, knowing that without them his port would not work, later British administrations in Singapore and the Straits Settlements, were more hands-on, importing distinct groups of people of specific ethnic origins to perform specific tasks; in Hong Kong, people came and went as they chose. Hong Kong had the façade of British rule, and the security umbrella of Britain and (later) the US, which did indeed intrude into local lives. Behind that lay multiple other worlds. This looseness of control required individuals to improvise, to bricoleur, to forge their own networks. We have seen in Hong Kong, in contrast to more ordered Singapore and the Straits Settlements, that its waterfront and university exist thanks to Armenians, Parsis and Chinese friends.

In Dutch-ruled Batavia, as in Singapore, ethnic division was ordered and even legislated. But in Hong Kong, in contrast to the racially segregated courts of Batavia and Singapore, the legal system was based on Common Law for all. Hong Kong had no separate courts for other races or faiths; it allowed more room for difference.

Again, in contrast to other port cities of the nineteenth century, Hong Kong's mixing took place regardless of government edicts or policies. It was by no means universal within Hong Kong as discriminations and prejudices did affect who mingled with whom and how. However, we have seen that the culminative effect of the mixing underway in Hong Kong since the first arrivals of the 1840s has made for an especially tangled web. Perhaps government neglect let this community go ahead regardless. Claiming 'Britishness' (with all its evasions, elisions and euphemistic qualities) was a way to deny Hong Kong's fundamentally mixed personality. By contrast, in Singapore, where an ethnic and linguistically Chinese majority holds power the government feels the need to encourage creation of a more multi-ethnic identity which boasts of bodies specifically to 'support' Eurasians.

Port cities around the world share Hong Kong's essential characteristic in its first century of being open to all arrivals, of any faith, ethnicity or occupation, offering a home to many diasporic communities. But several other differences stand out: the scale and contribution of the Parsi community to Hong Kong significantly outstrips its presence in other Asian port cities. The scale and contribution of the Portuguese to Hong Kong was probably greater than in other non-Portuguese colonies. Importantly, once arriving in Hong Kong, these and other communities did not keep to themselves. They, their kin, and their networks interacted with each other, producing variations of culture, food, language and new kin networks of fascinating diversity. In addition, Hong Kong was the only home known to these diasporas, including Scots and other Europeans, many of whom can count more than six generations in Hong Kong. This Eurasian core foundationally shaped Hong Kong.

Alongside the contrasts are the similarities between Hong Kong and its Asian port city siblings, such as revenue farming. Notes Munn: 'Like its Singapore counterpart, the Hong Kong opium monopoly linked imperial processes with local trading systems and played an important role in creating Chinese capital and strengthening

Chinese elites.'[667] Hong Kong's farms were less profitable than Singapore's but Hong Kong was also servicing a massive opium trade across the Pacific, it was the central depot for opium exports to China, and ran a large local retail trade. The government 'experienced special difficulties in coming to terms with its local collaborators', as it 'found no indigenous elites or expatriated *kongsi* to help them manage a rapidly growing, largely unassimilated, and partly transient Chinese population.'[668] This could only be solved with the growth of a local – largely Eurasian – elite.

As we have seen, Hong Kong's openness came under special pressure around World War One, as it did in Singapore. But whereas in Singapore, as Harper notes, pressure came from the British emphasizing 'a more exclusive form of colonial identity…'[669], in Hong Kong, pressure also came from China's rising nationalists, demanding a more 'purely Chinese' identity. In between were the many people living beyond ethnicity in what Harper calls a limicole world, based on the latin word for mud-dwellers, the birds that inhabited the shorelines.[670] Harper's travelling revolutionaries knew they would be freer in Hong Kong than in Singapore. Regional traders also chose Hong Kong, such as Aw Boon Haw, the Rangoon-born inventor of tiger balm. British rule in Singapore revitalized old Malay habits of movement and trade and so became a centre of overlapping diasporas. So too in Hong Kong, albeit on emptier ground, without pre-existing societal habits: earlier diasporic patterns made a new place.[671]

Hong Kong was a Eurasian Port City

We have seen how port cities are the milestones marking the multiples journeys of Eurasians and their diasporas across the world. Nineteenth-century port cities might be on western or eastern shores, directly under a colonial yoke or guided by (Ottoman-era) Capitulations and later versions of extra-territoriality. They might be encouraged by local powers eager to secure the advantages of international trade without needing to change local governance structures or state borders significantly; they might be created in an otherwise unknown harbour as result of conquest

[667] Munn, 'The Hong Kong Opium Revenue', in Brook and Wakabayashi. *Opium Regimes,* p105.
[668] Munn, 'The Hong Kong Opium Revenue', in Brook and Wakabayashi. *Opium Regimes,* p106.
[669] Harper, 'Singapore 1915', pp1797-98.
[670] Harper, 'Singapore 1915', p1807.
[671] See Bayly, 'The Evolution of Colonial Cultures', in Porter, *Oxford History of the British Empire.*

and/or agreement; or, they might be a barely-tolerable excrescence on the shore, preferably ignored. Whatever their precise iteration, port cities firstly have an existence above, beyond, or in-between fixed state boundaries.

Secondly, port cities are open to all comers, offering opportunities to attract the diverse peoples, diasporas and their networks. That attraction is key to making port into marketplace. This implies at least some degree of openness to different faiths and ethnicities; it also implies an openness to other ways of thinking and behaving.

Thirdly, some form of governance over port cities is required to provide a basis of even limited trust; this is necessary, for example, for an agreed-upon set of weights and measures, and for trust in contracts, and for knowing how to resolve conflicts that might arise. This implies some basic provision of trustable information too, even if not a fully-fledged free press. Port cities need ways of operating which can be interpreted, trusted and used by diverse peoples trading diverse goods.

Fourthly, that governance is best not too concentrated: port city peoples prefer not to be interfered with too much. They are adept bricoleurs, preferring to improvise and make their own way. Grey zones – over what constitutes smuggling, for example, or what social mores might apply – allow the port to function easier than if it was shrouded in today's mazes of legal complexities. Nineteenth-century port cities generally allowed for a minimal amount of governance to make sure trade worked, at the same time as minimal interference in traders' ways of life.

Now a quarter century after that handover of sovereignty over Hong Kong from Britain to China, the fundamental contradiction between a free-wheeling port city, rooted in a cosmopolitan, mixed-race, outward-looking past, and a one-party communist state apparatus has become blindingly clear. Its high times were when it was neither wholly British, nor wholly Chinese — but between empires.