

From a British to a Chinese Colony? Hong Kong Before and After the 1997 Handover. Edited by Gary Luk Chi-hung. Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 2017. 292 pp. Hardcover. ISBN: 9781557291769.

Reviewed by Charles Fung Chi-keung

Two decades of being a Special Administrative Region saw Hong Kong experience a chain of sociopolitical events that brought about anti-China sentiments: the influx of mainland consumers as a result of regional economic integration; the Chinese government's attempt to promote National Education; the denial of universal suffrage in the National People's Congress decision on August 31, 2014; and most recently in 2019, the protests against the now-enacted National Security Law, which has further suppressed social movements in the city. Increasingly, a rhetoric has emerged in Hong Kong perceiving the Chinese Communist Party as a colonizer and Hong Kong people as the colonized, and a number of discourses such as localism have explored ways to defend Hong Kong's autonomy. With the ongoing Hong Kong–China tensions, it becomes an urgent question to ask to what extent it can be claimed academically that Hong Kong remains a colony after the Handover and is now being colonized by the People's Republic of China (PRC).

This question is particularly relevant in light of the enactment of the National Security Law and the recent announcement of setting up a central state-linked cultural institution in Hong Kong to facilitate the retrocession of hearts and minds of Hong Kong people (*renxin huigui* 人心回歸). All these seem to affirm the localist discourses that Hong Kong's cultural uniqueness and its autonomy had been curtailed by the central government and a process of recolonization is now taking place. The edited volume by Gary Luk Chi-hung, under review, provides much-needed reflection and clarification to what is at stake for re-evaluating Hong Kong's postcolonial situation.

Luk's introductory chapter opens by offering an informative survey of recent scholarship on Hong Kong's unique process of decolonization and its relationship with the city's postcolonial situation. A main tenet of the chapter is to discuss whether the concept of internal colonialism, first devised by Michael Hechter in the context of the Celtic peoples of the British Isles since the sixteenth century, is applicable to contemporary Hong Kong given the unequal China–Hong Kong power dynamics. Luk's position on the matter is clear: one should not overstate the extent to which Hong Kong is undergoing Chinese re-colonization (5), a nuanced stance that he concludes with the help of a range of perspectives discussed in the first two parts of the book (Chapters 1–6), where scholars delineate how various British colonial institutions were formed and inherited as historical legacies in the post-Handover era.

In Chapter 1, Abe Kaori discusses how and why the colonial government established the comprador system, which recruited local middlemen in Hong Kong and co-opted them as collaborators to assist in trading or business activities. A prominent example was Robert Ho Tung, who worked for foreign firms such as Jardine Matheson & Co. and became a key commercial elite in prewar Hong Kong. Abe's research, however, focuses not on compradors employed by foreign firms, but those who worked with colonial officials: these government compradors performed a facilitative function in the process of colonial governance by mediating "communication between senior colonial officials and the local Chinese" (62). Although these native intermediaries also created troubles such as corruption and bribery, the British could not do away with them because of their linguistic and communicative abilities. Even when these compradors disappeared from the political stage since the 1960s, Chinese business elites, such as Mok Ying Kui who served on the Hong Kong Basic Law Drafting Committee, continue to play an intermediary role serving their new master in current Hong Kong. Hence, Abe argues that "the nineteenth-

century compradors were the forebears of present-day intermediaries” (54).

In Chapter 2, Sonia Lam–Knott considers the connection between language and politics from three perspectives: how the use of language in education served the British colonial government’s political agenda; how the promotion of English constituted a preference for the language in contemporary Hong Kong society; and whether the postcolonial HKSAR government maintained the use of language polices for political purposes. Lam–Knott argues that in the era of globalization where English proficiency is still considered a key form of “linguistic capital for social mobility” (89), the young people of Hong Kong continue to embrace the practice of code-mixing Cantonese and English for “communicative and psychological needs” (96) and for upholding “a badge of identity for educated Cantonese” (101). Mandarin is thus seen as a foreign language in the eyes of Hongkongers because of the “demotic uncertainties as to where Mandarin fits into the conceptualizations and constructs of the Hong Kong identity” (102). Hence, when the HKSAR government tries to promote the use of Mandarin, Hongkongers see such promotion as part of the PRC’s influence to undermine Hong Kong’s linguistic autonomy.

Carol Jones’s opportune research in Chapter 3 maintains a similar logic and reveals how Hong Kong’s legal system and the ideology of the rule of law were established by the colonial authority. The rule of law, for Jones, is not merely a rhetorical legality, but a part of local culture, a product of the colonial government’s introduction of the Bill of Rights in the last decade of colonial rule to defend “Hong Kong’s way of life” after the Handover (127). While the bill was only meant to boost the confidence of Hong Kong citizens, the rule of law that it promoted in the end has become “a particularly powerful counter-discourse” (135) as the Chinese government keeps attempting to undermine it.

Part Two of the book (Chapters 4–6) examines how the “triangular” relationship between Hong Kong, Britain, and China shaped the history of British colonialism in

Hong Kong, particularly during the Cold War when Hong Kong was an important strategic location of the capitalist bloc. In Chapter 4, Zardas Lee writes from a film history lens and explains how the easing of Cold War tensions in the 1970s led to the emergence of film censorship aiming to neutralize the “disturbing effect” of anti-colonial communist films (147). Institutional changes in film censorship occurred in 1973 as the colonial government began to realize the political need to maintain its legitimacy and defend its autonomy.

From the perspective of public policy, David Clayton in Chapter 5 shows how the issue of “water insecurity” in the 1960s and the subsequent period of “water diplomacy” between the Hong Kong and Guangdong authorities led to the creation of a “suboptimal water management” (182) in order to maintain the colony’s autonomy and neutralize the political risk of over-relying on imported Chinese water. The chapter demonstrates how historical research informs current policy-making by arguing why Hong Kong now needs local and regional water-supply institutions that are ecologically sustainable and socially inclusive.

In Chapter 6, Leo Goodstadt delineates the trajectory of Hong Kong’s financial development that ultimately made the city an “irreplaceable” financial center of China. In Goodstadt’s words, Hong Kong, as a node that connects China to the world, is still functionally important for “PRC’s ambitious program to become a major force in the world’s financial affairs and to make the RMB [Renminbi] a global currency” (200). Financial and monetary autonomy granted in the Basic Law to post-Handover Hong Kong therefore becomes a critical edge that promotes the PRC’s national interest. For this to continue, Goodstadt suggests, the PRC should avoid “Hong Kong’s core values [being] curtailed or the Basic Law [being] diluted” (208) so that Hong Kong would continue to be seen as the only city in the PRC that is free from arbitrary government intervention.

These first six chapters provide us with a multifaceted understanding of Hong Kong’s autonomy, suggesting that one should neither conceptualize the colonial

administration as merely an extension of the British empire, nor attribute any changes in the degree of autonomy only to decisions taken in former capital of the empire. Instead, the colonial authorities of Hong Kong had their own political agency and actually helped defend the territory's autonomy.

At the same time, while such center–periphery perspective is crucial for understanding Hong Kong–Britain–China relations, a sole focus on interactions between center and periphery risks neglecting the internal heterogeneity within each category. Part Three of the book (Chapters 7–9) therefore turns to examine Hong Kong's heterogeneity and studies the impact of decolonization, recolonization on Hong Kong society, economy, and culture. In Chapter 7, Felicia Yap narrates how communities of Portuguese, Eurasians, and Baghdadi Jews occupied prominent roles in prewar Hong Kong, with some of them integrating into Hong Kong society through intermarriage with the local ethnic Chinese population. The chapter thus offers insight into how these communities evolved and how decolonization impacted these social groups in Hong Kong.

Law Wing Sang examines in Chapter 8 the discourse of “retrocession” (*huigui* 回歸)—in the context of postcolonial Hong Kong, retrocession means more than just “returning” to China, but also “homecoming”: a “reunification” with its “homeland.” Such cautious diction, Law argues, not only legitimized the PRC's claim over Hong Kong's sovereignty, but also facilitated the preservation of British colonial institutions used to govern the territory. As an example Law studies how pro-communist university students in the 1970s (also known as *guocui pai* 國粹派) in the 1970s used Chinese magazines such as *Pan Ku* (*Pangu*) and *The Undergrad* as “a key platform” for promoting the discourse of retrocession to “[win] over the overseas Chinese in the ideological campaign” (243). The intellectual debates generated by “retrocession” among college students heavily shaped the trajectory of student activism of the 1970s.

Finally, in Chapter 9, Kevin Carrico examines how the Beijing-backed National Education Centre pursued the project of ideological homogenization to construct a patriotic Chinese identity in Hong Kong. The chapter exposes three aspects in which culture and politics intersected with each other in the Centre's ideological programs: first, viewpoints that echo a naturalized "Chinese tradition" (272) endorsed by the PRC; second, political role-playing drama that constructs "a state of voluntary servitude to an aggrandizing patriotic [Chinese] identity" (277); and finally, political rituals that serve to expulse residue colonial "pollution" and purify the Chinese self (278). Targeting Hong Kong students who may lack identification towards China, the project of ideological homogenization was designed, Carrico claims, to replace non-Chinese thought with a PRC-sponsored national culture. This constitutes a new form of colonization aiming to replace existing sociocultural characteristics of Hong Kong society that had its roots in the colonial era. The chapter concludes that the PRC's recolonization of Hong Kong is taking place, albeit subtly.

The multifarious angles of these chapters, from water politics and language politics to compradors and Eurasian communities, is certainly a main strength of this interdisciplinary volume. Together they provide a remarkable breadth of insight into Hong Kong's colonial history, and anticipate many tensions that were exacerbated in the 2019 extradition bill protests, such as the debate on the rule of law.

However, even though the book impressively highlights why and how resilient features of colonial institutions continue to function in post-Handover Hong Kong, it could benefit from a better dialogue with existing postcolonial scholarship. The chapters make little attempt to reference postcolonial theories, even though many ideas raised in the book strongly echo existing discussions in postcolonialism or decolonialism. Two examples come to mind. Writings by Franz Fanon have highlighted how rulers in the post-independence period often like to perpetuate formal and informal colonial institutions to

maintain their power and interests. Luk makes a similar point when he suggests that the PRC “recycled” pre-existing colonial institutions that sustained the unequal power relation between Hong Kong and China (10). Thus, even though Luk advocates a careful judgment on PRC re-colonization, the PRC’s deliberate prolongation of colonial institutions does ultimately serve to consolidate mainland China’s power over Hong Kong, thereby making the situation of Hong Kong a colonial, or even a neocolonial, one. The second example is Luk’s treatment of the theory of internal colonialism. In arguing that one should not overstate the usefulness of the term, Luk does not justify why Hechter’s conceptualization could be considered a meaningful baseline for assessing the coloniality of Hong Kong. More critical engagement with the abundant literature on internal colonialism is needed to unpack what it means for a place to be called an internal colony. Both examples show that the book could have developed more dialogue on how postcolonial concepts can shed light on the case of Hong Kong and vice versa. Indeed, postcolonial studies has not paid much attention to the colonial history of East Asia, and the lack of dialogue in this volume is precisely symptomatic of such mutual exclusivity.

These weaknesses notwithstanding, the chapters in this volume collectively show that decolonization is an unfinished project and a multifaceted process that involves various aspects including culture, economy, politics, law, and ecology. More importantly, decolonization for Hong Kong, as a departure from the colonial situation, means neither a rupture nor radical change, and the transition from one sovereign to another does not guarantee a remaking of socio-political order. Chapters in this edited volume reveal the crucial role that the Chinese central government plays in reproducing the colonial institutions that serve its own interests. The recent enactment of the National Security Law further complicates the work of decolonization, as dismantling colonial institutions might mean jeopardizing the central government’s stake in Hong Kong today. The result is the

formation of Hong Kong's unique postcolonial situation: although the British colonizers are now gone, some of Hong Kong's institutional setup remains colonial, but it will be increasingly difficult to practice decolonization.

In this light, this collection of essays will be useful to a wide range of scholars and students who wish to consider how Hong Kong's colonial history continues to shape the city's intriguing post-Handover situation.

The Hong Kong Modernism of Leung Ping-kwan.

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Reviewed by Sarah Lee Sze-wah

“Modernism” has been a notoriously difficult term to define. As traditionally understood, its nature can be largely ascribed to Enlightenment and rationalism, and more specifically concerning movements in the arts and literature mainly in the West taking place from *fin de siècle* to around 1950s as an academic category of study. There has been many attempts to stretch the boundaries of such definitions; a recent bold attempt would be Susan Stanford Friedman's *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time* (2015), which expands the term “modernism” to a much broader range of cultural and historical contexts, including the poetry of Du Fu (杜甫) in Tang Dynasty China alongside canonical modernists (for example Joseph Conrad and Virginia Woolf) and postcolonial writers from various nations.

Compared with such broad-sweeping approach, C. T. Au's book on the late Hong Kong writer, poet and academic Leung Ping-kwan (also known by his pen name Yasi/Ye Si 也斯) and Hong Kong modernism might seem a straightforward inquiry. However, Au points out that “Hong Kong modernism is not yet clearly defined” (4), complicated by factors such as historical context and periodization: its dates remains debated, with scholars proposing its beginnings either in the 1930s or 1950s, and