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The Writing of Competing Histories of Hong Kong,
with Special Reference to the Perspectives from
Britain, Mainland China and Hong Kong.

A Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of
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Abstract

The thesis covers the competing perspectives on Hong Kong history, with a special focus on how British colonial historiography and Mainland Chinese patriotic historiography wrote the history of Hong Kong. It is found that the two historiographical discourses had very clear political agenda behind. Post-modernism and post-colonialism are used as methodologies to critique these two discourses. British colonial historiography is shown to be an administrative adjunct to British colonialism, justifying the British claim to rule over the British colonies. Similarly, traditional Chinese historiography is found to be politically conservative, serving to aid the ideological imperatives of bureaucratic administration. Historiography under the CCP is an apparatus for political and social control.

The thesis continues to elaborate on how British colonial and Mainland Chinese patriotic historiographies wrote on colonial Hong Kong, covering the whole period from pre-1841 to 1997. The competing historiographies started their debate on whether pre-colonial Hong Kong was a “barren rock” (British discourse) or a “treasure island” (Chinese discourse). The debate ended over the rows about Hong Kong’s return to Chinese rule in 1997. Detailed and systematic analyses (of the two competing discourses) are reserved for the period 1830-1900. It is found that both sides used evidence favourable to their own discourse and wilfully ignored inconvenient data.

The local voice of Hong Kong was originally absent from these competing discourses. Before 1949, the Hong Kong Chinese did not perceive themselves to have a separate political identity or historical consciousness. Marked changes occurred from the 1960s and the Hong Kong Chinese began to see themselves distinct from both Imperial Britain and Mainland China. A generation of local Hong Kong historians emerged in the 1980s who challenged the correctness of the British and Mainland Chinese historiographies. They were no longer prepared to have their opinions stifled. Through their vigorous research, many of the British colonial and Mainland Chinese patriotic “myths” were found to be quite hollow. Gradually a Hong Kong School of historiography has emerged, a healthy sign of Hong Kong’s growing intellectual maturity and autonomy.

Preface

My thesis is a pioneer attempt to systematically scrutinize three historical perspectives on the writing of Hong Kong history: from that of Britain, Mainland China and Hong Kong. It is particularly important to analyze why these three perspectives compete with one another, thus proving the relationship between politics and historiography in real existence.

This thesis emerged from a number of sources. First, in my reading of Hong Kong (written invariably in English) over the years, I have always had a feeling that something must be biased or missing. The place of the local Hong Kong Chinese was usually not given proper or adequate consideration. I felt the reasons behind this phenomenon needed to be addressed. Second, as Hong Kong approached the 1980s, the row over the future of the Colony gained momentum. The helplessness of the people of Hong Kong and their inability to have their say (particularly in the Sino-British diplomatic talks) provided another push for me to seek answers. Third, in 1997, through a post-graduate course on “History and Theory”, I was introduced to the methodologies of post-modernism and post-colonialism as a possible historiographical critique. I found the two “isms,” within certain limits, useful in analyzing the situation facing Hong Kong’s decolonization.

The following are some of the key questions to answer in my thesis: What is the relevance of post-modernism and post-colonialism in the study of historiography in general and in the study of Hong Kong history in particular? Could we define the British colonial, Mainland Chinese patriotic, and Hong Kong historical perspectives? What is the use of history writing in the context of Hong Kong’s return to Chinese sovereignty, hence the case for competing histories? For the British case, how could we handle the different lines of argument in their colonial historiography? For Mainland China, is there only just one official voice? How could we prove the linkage between politics and historiography in China? For Hong Kong, how did a Hong Kong historical perspective emerge and how did it foster a distinctive Hong Kong identity? Serious work on preparing my thesis began in 1998, and it took me some five years (punctuated with periodic returns to Hong Kong for materials and assistance) to complete the whole thesis.

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Chapter One – Introduction: Post-Modern and Post-Colonial Historical Perspectives and their Implications on the Writing of Hong Kong History

In the introduction of G.B. Endacott's *A History of Hong Kong* (first published in 1958), long considered as the standard and authoritative history of the colony, the author claims that Hong Kong "had little part in the main current of Chinese history...[and that] [t]he history of Hong Kong really begins with the coming of the British in 1841."¹ His Anglocentrism is unmistakably clear. This kind of historical perspective does not die away with the advent of Hong Kong's decolonization. In 1997, Frank Welsh is still defending his pro-British stance as follows:

Any judgement on Hong Kong's history...has to be made not on the last five years of British rule, but on the whole period of its development from a scattered community of fisherfolk and peasants on the outermost fringe of the Chinese Empire to a distinctive near-national entity with its own recognized place in the world. Viewed in this light successive British governments may take some credit for not having made too many mistakes. For the first century of its existence the colony was safeguarded from the revolutions, wars, perils and destruction that so often made life in China a misery. The rule of law was established and accepted; and when British imperialism in any part of the world is critically examined this is likely to be, however grudgingly, applauded.²

Certainly, Mainland Chinese historians have contested such British viewpoints. In *An Outline History of Hong Kong*, China's standard history of the colony, Liu Shuyong makes clear the Chinese position: "Beginning in the 1840s, Hong Kong, a part of Chinese territory since ancient times, became a victim of Britain's persistent aggression against China...Written at the request of the Foreign Languages Press, this book looks at Hong Kong mainly from these perspectives: Hong Kong before its occupation by Britain, the origin of the Hong Kong question and its settlement, the important changes that have taken place in politics, economy, culture and education in Hong Kong, and Hong Kong's involvement in some of the major historical events that

¹ G.B. Endacott, *A history of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1973; first published 1958), pp.3-4.

² Frank Welsh, *A history of Hong Kong* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), p.563.

occurred in other parts of China.”³ To the Mainland Chinese historians, the most important task in writing Hong Kong is to condemn British colonialism in Hong Kong and to assist in the return of Hong Kong into the fold of Mother China.

It is clear that both Britain and China have been constructing and competing with their grand narratives of Hong Kong. In the eyes of the local Hong Kong historians, these two narratives are not necessarily all fabrications and falsehoods but it is clear that both the Anglo-centric and the Sino-centric historiographies are highly selective in presenting their discourses.⁴ It is exactly in this area that post-modern and post-colonial critiques are useful in exposing the hidden agenda of the British and Chinese historiographies of Hong Kong.

(A) Post-Modern Historical Perspectives

Quoting from Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *The Post-Modern Condition*, Keith Jenkins explains the two basic characterising and interlocking features of post-modernism as the “death of centres” and the “incredulity towards metanarratives”.⁵ The former means that the old and established vantage points (the centres) of looking at history have been disestablished. They are “no longer regarded as legitimate and natural frameworks” but are just a viewpoint articulating a particular interest.⁶ So the Anglo-centric or the Sino-centric history of Hong Kong is just a self-oriented and partial viewpoint of the respective countries. An exposition of their underlying premises and ideologies would therefore definitely help to explain how they have been writing Hong Kong. Jenkins reminds us that the question of “what is

³ Liu, Shuyong. *An outline history of Hong Kong* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1997), preface.

⁴ It is not easy to define the term “discourse” and the best definition is by D.E. Apter: “Discourse in general is a way of organizing human experience. It establishes frames of meaning by the recounting and interpreting of events and situations. It constructs systems of order... People make stories out of events. They do so individually and collectively. Recounting individual stories makes for sociability. Collective stories have political consequences when, as myths they purport to be history, as history they are reinterpreted as theories, and as theories they make up stories about events. Theories that become stories create fictive truths. Since in politics, truth-telling and story-telling are part of the same process, it becomes possible to interrogate the past in order to transform the future.” See the entry “political discourse” by D.E. Apter in Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (eds.) *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, v.17 (Oxford: Elsevier Science Ltd, 2001), pp.11644-11646. For other definitions, see Sara Mill, *Discourse* (London: Routledge, 1997) and David Howarth, *Discourse* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000).

⁵ Keith Jenkins. *Re-thinking history* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p.60.

⁶ Jenkins, p.60.

history” is equivalent to “who is history for”.⁷ In a similar vein, even the products of local Hong Kong historians on Hong Kong have to be critically evaluated and deconstructed. There are already lots of debates on who should write post-colonial history: the indigenous, the subaltern, the colonised, the subjugated, or the academic outsiders. It would be fair that all should be contributing and most importantly, the act of history writing is not to be dominated by any particular sector. We should be particularly alert to the argument linking knowledge (history writing as one such expression) and power, a topic which will be discussed later.

The “incredulity towards metanarratives” refers to a growing disbelief in the validity of history marching from darkness to enlightenment, of history moving towards “progress” or “modernization” or “revolutionary liberation”. All these grand narratives about human development are nothing more than a construct favouring a certain ideology or power-structure. Bill Ashcroft has put it cogently: “...contemporary Western theories of history contend that the past is essentially unknowable, that the scientific orderliness of historical accounts are the imposition of a particular story. History, indeed temporality itself, is a construction of language and of culture, and, ultimately, the site of a struggle for control...”⁸ Ashcroft continues to argue that “history is neither the opposite of fiction nor is it simply fictional. History is a method rather than a truth... an institutional formalization of the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of our lives.”⁹

Indeed, George Orwell has reminded us long ago that “who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.”¹⁰ Imperialist historians spoke in the name of their perceived universal order over and above all other classes, genders and peoples, assuming their universalism. They recorded and rationalized that the imperial powers had conducted their worldwide conquest in the name of enlightening or civilizing the world. They did not see anything wrong with their behaviour and the Chinese, in particular, often did not admit they were “imperialistic” in their past history. Traditional Chinese historians often argued that

⁷ Jenkins, p.18.

⁸ Bill Ashcroft, *Post-colonial transformation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp.82-83.

⁹ Ashcroft, p.86.

¹⁰ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1954), p.31.

the Chinese did not “conquer” the non-Han peoples. The unification of the various peoples within the Chinese embrace was based on cultural assimilation and not on coercion; indeed the peoples “willingly accepted” Chinese rule, so the argument runs.¹¹ A more critical review of Chinese history will certainly provide a different interpretation: when the Chinese said that they pacified a place, it may well mean that they had ravaged the place.¹² Indeed, the conduct of both Imperial Britain and Imperial China were very similar: they were imperialistic after all.¹³

Both Britain and China have tried to write their histories to justify their imperialist past. It is certainly important to remember: how people write depends on where people stand. Michel Foucault has adopted (from Nietzsche) the term “perspectivism” in describing this phenomenon. “The implication is that there is no single truth to ‘reality’ but endless perspectives on the truth, each theory constructing its own reality and truths, under the workings of power,” argued Jeffrey Weeks.¹⁴ Relating it to the “historical deconstructionists”, Raymond Betts explains that “to speak or write is to command, to organize a universe of sorts.” Alun Munslow gives us a succinct definition of “deconstructionist history” as follows:

In history, a model of study that questions the traditional assumptions of empiricism couched as factualism, disinterested analysis, objectivity, truth, and the continuing division between history, ideology, fiction and perspective. Instead, deconstructionist history accepts that language constitutes history’s content as well as the concepts and categories deployed to order and explain historical evidence through our linguistic power of figuration.¹⁵

Using the example of Columbus in encountering the New World, “Europeans thereafter constructed a global narrative in which all that was ‘overseas,’ ‘on the other

¹¹ Peter Perdue, “Comparing empires: Manchu colonialism,” *The International History Review*, 20.2 (June 1998), p.255.

¹² It is ironic that the Chinese can also turn the conquerors (such as the Mongols and the Manchus) of the Han Chinese into “Chinese”, so that their (Mongol or Manchu) empires become “Chinese” empires and their territories sacred and inviolable. See W.J.F. Jenner, *The tyranny of history: the roots of China’s crisis* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1994), pp.3-5.

¹³ For a critical and comparative interpretation of Chinese and European imperialisms, see Michael Adas, “Imperialism and colonialism in comparative perspective,” *The International History Review*, 20.2 (June 1998), pp.371-388.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Weeks, “Foucault for historians”, *History Workshop Journal*, 14 (1982), p.109.

¹⁵ Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing history* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp.180-181.

shore,' gained historical significance only in its newly established relationship with the intruders who had telescopes and could write, who could therefore focus on what they considered important and account for it as they wished. The Europeans then began to manage the world."¹⁶ My research will analyse how China and Britain have been trying to dominate Hong Kong's mental space and how Hong Kong, in view of the restrictions, is struggling to exert its mental autonomy.

The post-modern historical critique is also a sceptical or nihilistic reaction against the old certainties established by the traditional empiricist school of history writing. The basic premise of historical empiricism has always been the search for objectivity and historical truth based on a careful study of verifiable evidence. According to G.R. Elton, the major exponent of this historical school, the main task of historians is to "investigate a dead reality independent of the enquiry" and "just because historical matter is in the past, is gone, irrecoverable and unrepeatable, its objective reality is guaranteed: it is beyond being altered for any purpose whatsoever."¹⁷ Elton continues to argue that after selecting the main area of study or line of approach, the historian will become "the servant of his evidence of which he will, or should, ask no specific questions until he has absorbed what it says."¹⁸ After vigorous interrogation of his evidence, the historian will be able to arrive at the objective and dispassionate historical truth of the past – "the past as it actually was" – supposed to be the ultimate "noble dream."¹⁹ Elton warns particularly of the dangers of ideological and theoretical tampering of historical studies. "People have usually sought in history a justification for their convictions and prejudices" and nations could live in myths of their own constructed past.²⁰ All these preoccupations are always dangerous. He continues to warn that in the study of history, a primary preoccupation with the present is equally dangerous.²¹ The historian should "empty" himself of prejudices and he should have nothing to do with involving himself in the "invention" of history, but should believe that the historical evidence will speak for itself. As a

¹⁶ Richard F. Betts, *Decolonization* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p.93.

¹⁷ G.R. Elton, *The practice of history* (London and Glasgow: Fontana, 1969), p.73.

¹⁸ Elton, *The practice of history*, p.83.

¹⁹ A term borrowed from Peter Novick, *That noble dream: the 'objectivity question' and the American historical profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

²⁰ G.R. Elton, *Return to essentials -- some reflections on the present state of historical study* [hereafter as *Return to essentials*] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp.43-44.

²¹ Elton, *Return to essentials*, p.43.

final note, Elton insists that the most valuable aspect of the historian's work is the "rational, independent and impartial investigation" of the documents of the past.²²

The old certainties of all kinds have in fact been dethroned in the 20th century. With the atrocities and barbarism exhibited in the two world wars and the subsequent global instability, it would be difficult to maintain the arguments for certaintism. Even before the post-modernist onslaught, historians of a more self-reflexive bent argued against the conservative empiricism of Elton. E.H. Carr categorically denies that the historical facts speak for themselves. He contends that "the facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context."²³ After selecting his "facts" the historian remains pivotal in assigning the significance of those facts and their structural colligation. The historian's hand is always there to make history. According to Carr, "history is the historian's experience. It is 'made' by nobody save the historian: to write history is the only way of making it."²⁴ This mode of historiographical thought is readily shared by many modern historians. In writing about European imperialism in Africa, H.L. Wesseling reminds us that the emphasis of his book is certainly on the historical account. But "it has not, of course, been written in the naïve belief that one can present the past 'as it really was'. That is an illusion historians have long since abandoned. They realize that narrating and describing are themselves forms of interpretations, a selection from the many millions of happenings that could have been related, a choice of those deemed fit to be raised from simple fact to historical event."²⁵

As for the present-mindedness of historical enquiry, Carr would consider that as unavoidable. People can view the past, and achieve their understanding of the past, only through the eyes of the present.²⁶ All efforts in historical imagination and empathy could not bridge the gulf between the present and the past. What about the issue of objectivity? To Carr, "the facts of history cannot be purely objective, since

²² Elton, *Return to essentials*, p.6.

²³ E.H. Carr, *What is history?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964), p.11.

²⁴ Carr, p.22.

²⁵ H.L. Wesseling, *Divide and rule: the partition of Africa, 1880-1914* (translated by Arnold J. Pomerans) (Westport and London: Praeger, 1996), p.6.

²⁶ Carr, p.24.

they become facts of history only in virtue of the significance attached to them by the historian.”²⁷ All that comes back is, perhaps, an old adage: study the historian before studying his history book. I therefore attempt to establish the background of the historians whose books are included in this thesis. This is perhaps part of what the post-modern deconstructionists would call reading the text within a text.

To the post-modern historians, the first thing to do with history is to empty it of all historical certainties. In the words of Keith Jenkins, “history is a discourse about, but categorically different from, the past... [And] the past is for all that has gone on before, but history (historiography) refers to the writings of historians.”²⁸ To Jenkins, history is an inter-textual, linguistic construct, a rendering of the past.²⁹ If granted that the world is taken as a text to be read, then such readings are infinite.³⁰ If we accept this perspective of text writing and text reading, then we must be particularly alert to the influence of language or the mode of linguistic representation. Edward Said reminds us that all representations, “because they *are* [original italics] representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer.”³¹ All representations of the “other” are never true copies of the original “other” and many might even regard these representations as misrepresentations. More ominously, these representations could act as a form of intellectual dominion.³² The knower dominates the known or is “lord of all who sees.” Reflecting on American historical writing on the recent Chinese past, Paul Cohen alerts us of the Western-centeredness of those historical studies, reminding us that this “Western-centeredness ... robs China of its autonomy and makes of it, in the end, an intellectual possession of the West.”³³

²⁷ Carr, p.120.

²⁸ Jenkins, p.6.

²⁹ Jenkins, p.7.

³⁰ Jenkins, p.9.

³¹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: western conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin Books, 1995, reprinted with a new afterword; first published 1978), p.272.

³² Said calls this kind of domination “Orientalism”. With reference to the West’s domination over the Orient, Said (p.3) puts as thus: “...Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”

³³ Paul A. Cohen, *Discovering history in China: American historical writing on the recent Chinese past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p.151.

On the analysis of the language-historiography relationship, there have been no major and systematic studies relating to the case of Hong Kong. Alastair Pennycook³⁴ has focused on the relationship between English language teaching and the discourses of colonialism. In relation to Hong Kong, he emphasises that “language [English or vernacular] education policies were constantly designed to maintain the inequitable social conditions of Hong Kong.”³⁵ Apart from a short discussion on the issues of opium and the riots³⁶, he does not deal sufficiently with the manipulation of language in the writing of Hong Kong history. The Mainland Chinese side, on the other hand, often portrays Hong Kong’s history as one of being victimized by foreign colonialism.³⁷ This theory of “victimhood” tends to support China’s right to recover Hong Kong. The growth of an autonomous Hong Kong identity or personality is brushed aside as irrelevant in the Chinese grand-narrative of Hong Kong. The story of Hong Kong is often summarized as nothing more than “washing away one hundred years of shame.”³⁸ My emphasis will therefore focus on the competing discourses of Anglo-centric and Sino-centric Hong Kong histories, to see how each of them attempts to use their own language and ideology to define Hong Kong, and thus occupy or dominate the mental horizons of the Colony.

(B) Post-Colonial Historical Perspectives

In my reading on the post-colonial historical perspectives, my initial consideration is China. The Chinese were/are insistent (in their history writing efforts) that they have been victimized by various forms of colonialism starting from the 19th century. In order to redress the past injustices they intend to write or rewrite history in

³⁴ Alastair Pennycook, *English and the discourses of colonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

³⁵ Pennycook, p.126.

³⁶ Pennycook, pp.101-108.

³⁷ For an elaboration of this theory of “victimhood”, see Neil Renwick and Cao Qing, “China’s political discourse towards the 21st century: victimhood, identity, and political power,” *East Asia: An International Quarterly*, 17.4 (Winter 1999), pp.111-143.

³⁸ This feature is best reflected in the Mainland Chinese reports on Hong Kong’s return to Chinese rule. See Yu Zhang, “Covering the Hong Kong transition: a content analysis of the news stories by China’s Xinhua News Agency and the Associated Press of the United States between May 1, 1998 and August 31, 1998” (PhD thesis, University of Kentucky, 1998). Regrettably, Yu Zhang has put the year 1998 wrong: it should read 1997. In the abstract of dissertation (p.i), Yu Zhang writes that “[t]his dissertation compares the news coverage of the Hong Kong transition by China’s Xinhua News Agency and the Associated Press of the US during the summer of 1997.” For comparison, read also Alan Knight and Yoshiko Nakano (eds.) *Reporting Hong Kong: foreign media and the handover* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999).

the light of anti-colonialism. They see the restoration of Chinese sovereignty over Hong Kong as an act of immense historical importance, evidence of their ability to stand up against powerful nations of the world (many of which were colonial powers in the past). They have to answer to the “righteous” call of patriotism and such a stand is non-negotiable. But having read so much about post-modernism and deconstructionism, one might wonder if such a patriotic call is just another political myth or meta-narrative used to prop up a failing socialist order in China.³⁹ Or that their “righteousness” is a scheme to hide the reality of forcefully re-colonizing Hong Kong. Indeed it is how some Hong Kong writers have seen the case.⁴⁰ The “emptiness” of Hong Kong’s re-unification with China is the focus of Lu Dequan who has the following to say: “Hong Kong’s colonialism was originally not a good thing and Hong Kong’s return to Chinese rule was not something really bad. Hong Kong should have been democratized during the process of decolonization. But Hong Kong’s quest for a democratic re-unification was taken by the Chinese government as an act of confrontation, and the democrats were regarded as the accomplices of the Hong Kong-British government. In the face of this kind of re-unification and returning to this kind of China, British colonialism has suddenly been transformed into the basis of Hong Kong’s prosperity and the treasure of Hong Kong citizens’ liberty. All kinds of happy-go-lucky colonial life-styles, authoritarian bureaucratic and legal systems, and care-free laissez-faireism are mystified as the sacred and unalienable Hong Kong characteristics... In the face of the homogenization of China and Hong Kong, we have stopped our dreams and imaginations on the future of Hong Kong and China.”⁴¹

The reading on post-colonialism has also been helpful as a pointer of direction for my thesis. Following are some of the observations worth noting. Most colonies (though excluding Hong Kong) gained their independence after the Second World War, but colonial influence on these ex-colonies did not simply disappear. A continual study of post-colonial Hong Kong is inherently important in this aspect. The lingering effects of colonialism find their place even in the domain of history writing. In writing

³⁹ For the use of the “nationalism card” such as the “past glories of China” and “Confucianism” to prop up the Chinese regime, see Jenner, p.168.

⁴⁰ For one outstanding voice, see Kwok Nai-wang, *Zai zhihua bianyuan de Xianggang* [Hong Kong on the brink of recolonization] (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Christian Institute, 1996). All subsequent Chinese translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

⁴¹ Lu Dequan, *Polun – cipo jiaguo huiguimeng* [Bursting discourse: bursting the myth of the national unification] (Hong Kong: Xianggang Renwen Kexue Chubanshe), p.6.

about the colonial period, emphases have traditionally been placed on the activities and the importance of the colonial masters. In the case of Hong Kong, the works of G.R. Sayer and G.B. Endacott⁴² are representative. The chapters of their books are arranged chronologically with the names of the Hong Kong governors leading the way. This tendency persists up to the year 1997 with the publication of the histories on Sir Henry Pottinger and Chris Patten.⁴³ To these western historians, all important events still evolve around the personalities of the governors, as if everything should naturally gravitate towards them.

In colonial historiography, the colonized peoples were described as subjects “influenced” or “enlightened” by colonialism. They could only “react” to the colonial impact. Post-colonial history writing begins by questioning the above assumptions. It tries to expose the “experience” of colonialism, questioning the validity of the “importance” of the colonial masters and institutions. It attempts to criticize the hollowness and shallowness of colonial rule, and aims to build up historical perspectives of the colonized peoples. It attacks the continuing influence of neo-colonialism on these ex-colonial independent states. With a strong sense of nationalism, some of these post-colonial and indigenous historians have tried to “restore their own history, language, culture and ethnicity with a hope of creating their new futures.”⁴⁴ The restoration of indigenous history is most important:

For the marginalized and oppressed in particular, whose histories have been erased by power, it becomes all the more important to recapture or remake the past in their efforts to render themselves visible historically, as the very struggle to become visible presupposes a historical identity.⁴⁵

It seems to me that the efforts of some indigenous Hong Kong historians

⁴² G.R. Sayer, *Hong Kong 1841-1862: birth, adolescence and coming of age* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1980, reprint of 1937 edition); G.R. Sayer, *Hong Kong 1862-1919: years of discretion* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1975); G.B. Endacott, *A history of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1972; first published 1958).

⁴³ George Pottinger, *Sir Henry Pottinger: the first governor of Hong Kong* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); Jonathan Dimbleby, *The last governor: Chris Patten and the handover of Hong Kong* (London: Little Brown & Co., 1997).

⁴⁴ A. Dirlik, “The past as legacy and project: postcolonial criticism in the perspective of indigenous historicism”, *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, 20.2 (1996), p.9.

⁴⁵ Dirlik, p.16.

(noticeably Steve Tsang and Ming K. Chan⁴⁶) are targeted towards such a restoration. A Hong Kong historical consciousness has developed from a critical reaction both against Sayer's and Endacott's colonial (or colonialist) approach to the history of Hong Kong and against Mainland Chinese "patriotic" historiography. My research will trace how this consciousness has emerged and the implications behind it.

The writings of most post-colonial historians tend to focus on four major tasks: (1) to deconstruct colonialist discourses, (2) to reconstruct the losses of the colonized, (3) to reject the European grand narratives of modernization, and (4) to elevate the often fragmentary, local, subjugated and subaltern nature of the colonized peoples.

In terms of deconstructing colonialist discourses, the achievements of Edward Said (in his critique of "Orientalism") have been path-breaking. "Orientalism" is a body of knowledge produced by texts and institutional practices.⁴⁷ These texts were produced essentially by western scholars trained in European universities and academies. The "Orient" (under which rubric I would include both China and Hong Kong) is seen and hence defined by Western scholarship and epistemology. In the Orientalist definition of India, for instance, colonial India was represented in binary opposition terms vis-a-vis Britain (representing the West): India was emotional and spiritual whereas Britain was rational and materialist. India was unable to change and reform itself and it therefore justified British conquest and rule in the name of enlightening and uplifting India. Only the British Orientalists "knew" India and were thus in the position empowered to "guide" her: knowledge is power. Orientalist knowledge became one of Britain's technologies of rule. In dealing with the history of colonialism, Prakash argues that the post-colonial historical perspective should be one

not only to document its record of domination but also to track the failures, silences, displacements, and transformations produced by its functioning; not only to chronicle the functioning of Western dominance and resistances to it, but

⁴⁶ Steve Tsang, *Hong Kong: appointment with China* (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 1997); Ming K. Chan (ed.), *Precarious balance: Hong Kong between China and Britain, 1842-1992* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1994); Ming K. Chan (ed.), *The challenge of Hong Kong's reintegration with China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997).

⁴⁷ See also Gyan Prakash, "Writing post-orientalist histories of the Third World: perspectives from Indian historiography", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 32.2 (1990), p.384.

to mark those (subaltern⁴⁸) positions and knowledges that could not be properly recognized and named, only ‘normalized,’ by colonial discourses.⁴⁹

My intention is to make use of appropriate post-colonialist expositions of Edward Said, Gyan Prakash and others as powerful tools to dethrone and critique colonialism and colonialist histories. The first use of post-colonial discourses, argues Robert Young, is to question Western (and all other colonial) knowledge’s categories and assumptions.⁵⁰

(C) Implications of Postmodernism and Postcolonialism on the Writing of Hong Kong History

The case of Hong Kong’s decolonization is particularly interesting and relevant here. China tried her utmost to “write”, “explain” and “define” Hong Kong long before the changeover date of July 1, 1997. The five books constituting the *Series on the Return of Hong Kong* published by Xinhua Chubanshe in 1996 will be one of my research focal points.⁵¹ In the preface of all five books, it claims, with the act of restoring Hong Kong to China, to cleanse the humiliations of more than a hundred years the Chinese race has suffered. The Chinese writing of Hong Kong history (among other things) is carried out with that historical task as the guiding spirit. The political units responsible for the writing of Hong Kong history include the Hong Kong Section of the Xinhua News Agency, the Hong Kong-Macao Research Institute

⁴⁸ “Subaltern” is defined as those of inferior rank, those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes. In the Indian context, it refers to the subordination of groups in terms of class, caste, age, gender or office. Subaltern historiography hence works against colonial and traditional historiographies which focus on the elites. See Bill Ashcroft and others (eds.) *Key concepts in post-colonial studies* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998), pp.215-219. For the “subaltern” perspective in Indian historiography, see Ranajit Guha (ed.) *Selected subaltern studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), Donna Landry & Gerald Maclean (eds.) *The Spivak reader* (New York & London: Routledge, 1996), Dipesh Chakrabarty, “A small history of subaltern studies” in Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray (eds.) *A companion to postcolonial studies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), and Diana Brydon (ed.) *Postcolonialism: critical concepts, v.4* (London & New York: Routledge, 2000). The “subaltern” approach to Hong Kong historiography, though interesting in itself, should be the subject-matter of a different PhD thesis.

⁴⁹ Gyan Prakash, *After colonialism: imperial histories and postcolonial displacements* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p.6.

⁵⁰ Robert Young, *White mythologies: writing history and the West* (London and New York, Routledge, 1990), p.11.

⁵¹ The five books are: Liu Shuyong, *Xianggang de lishi* [The history of Hong Kong]; Wang Jencheng, *Xianggang de huigui* [The return of Hong Kong]; Zhou Yizhi, *Xianggang de wenhua* [The culture of Hong Kong]; and the two volumes of *Xianggang de jingji* [The economy of Hong Kong] by Chen Duo and Cai Chimeng. All the books are published in Beijing by Xinhua chubanshe, 1996.

of the Hong Kong-Macao Office of China's State Department, and the Hong Kong History Group of the Second Research Unit (History of Sino-Foreign Relations) of the Modern History Research Institute in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.⁵² It is to be expected that China will continue to "write" and "define" Hong Kong in order to delimit its autonomy and thus to rule over it. One interesting feature of this Sino-centric Hong Kong history is that it no longer uses the "class" analysis or viewpoint in describing the process (or "struggle") of incorporating Hong Kong. Probably, "class" analysis was not in vogue in China by the 1990s. The united front consideration had assumed a much greater importance. The capitalists and entrepreneurs with ethnic Chinese background (i.e. the big bourgeoisie in communist terminology) in the Colony have, therefore, been given a very warm and welcoming embrace, most probably because they are targets of pragmatic collaboration.⁵³ It might be that the Chinese Communist Party and the Hong Kong Capitalists are very much the same in terms of their political conservatism. Both would like to curtail any real opening up of political power to the people. If this is the case, the question will then be: "Is China, after all, going to be just a re-colonizing power, one who cares less about its means in achieving its 'righteous' patriotic ends?"⁵⁴

Interestingly, as a counterpoise, the British have also expended great efforts to "write" (not to "write about") Hong Kong for the sake of restoring the legitimacy of her past colonial rule. The personal efforts of Chris Patten in this respect are most noteworthy. He has completed one book, *East and West: China, Power and the Future of Asia*,⁵⁵ and plans to work on two more to make a trilogy of discourses on his Asian (or "Oriental", to borrow from Edward Said) encounter. What startles the readers is perhaps the colonialist apologetics Patten wants to convey:

⁵² Yu Shengwu & Liu Cunkuan (eds.) *Shijiu shiji de Xianggang* [Hong Kong in the 19th century] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1994), p.5; Yu Shengwu & Liu Shuyong (eds.), *Ershi shiji de Xianggang* [Hong Kong in the 20th century] (Hong Kong: Qilin Books, 1995), p.5; Liu Shuyong (ed.), *Jianming Xianggangshi* [A concise history of Hong Kong] (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., 1998), p.375; and Wang Jencheng, *Xianggang de huigui* [The return of Hong Kong] (Beijing: Xinhua chubanshe, 1996), p.230.

⁵³ For this typical case, see Feng Bangyan, *Xianggang huazi caituan 1841-1997* [The Chinese consortium of Hong Kong 1841-1997] (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., 1997).

⁵⁴ For some of the arguments condemning Mainland Chinese "interference" in Hong Kong affairs, see Kwok, pp.53-69.

⁵⁵ Christopher Patten, *East and West: China, power, and the future of Asia* (New York: Random House, 1998).

It will always be the greatest regret of my [Patten's] public life that though Britain governed these Chinese men and women [in Hong Kong] very well in many ways, leaving behind a rich and free society, it fell below the highest standards of its colonial record in the very last of its significant colonial responsibilities [i.e. granting the colony its independence]. The Empire story of the most humane and well intentioned of the colonial powers—a story that at its best encompasses scholar-administrators who knew and loved the distant lands they governed more than the country in whose name they served, the dissemination across tropical jungles and icy wastes of the impartial clemencies of the rule of law, the usually peaceful preparations of scores of new countries (sometimes successfully) as free and plural societies...⁵⁶

The Mainland Chinese certainly disagree, and instead they put forward a list of “British conspiracies” designed to disrupt the smooth transfer of power in the final years leading up to 1997.⁵⁷

One of the most interesting arguments proffered by British and Mainland Chinese historians concerns what makes Hong Kong tick. The British story starts with the assertion that Hong Kong was originally just “a barren rock” and it was only with the efforts of the British administration that Hong Kong could be transformed into one of the greatest and richest metropolitan cities in the world. Real Hong Kong history begins only when the British came, and the Hong Kong handover to China is thus “the end of history”, so the argument runs.⁵⁸ The Chinese, however, definitely dispute the contributions of the British. They say that the contributions of the *Chinese* majority in Hong Kong were vital and Hong Kong has developed so well because of the support of the *Chinese* hinterland. So in a way, historiography has entered the arena of Sino-British politics and power struggle, and it is interesting to see how the story has evolved so far and how it might go on into the future.

Both Britain and China have made their voices known but where is Hong Kong's?

⁵⁶ Patten, pp.xiii-xiv.

⁵⁷ One such example is Mo Wenzheng, *Yingguoren zai Xianggang de yinmou* [British conspiracies in Hong Kong] (Hong Kong: Yewentang Chuban Youxian Gongsi, 1998).

⁵⁸ Jeremy Tambling, “The history man: the last governor of Hong Kong”, *Public Culture*, 9.3 (1997), p.363.

What is Hong Kong's own historical identity? It is common parlance to say that Hong Kong is the meeting place of the East and the West and its history is one of developing from a fishing village to a thriving metropolis. Hong Kong history is only a concern for growth and Hong Kong is just an economic entity, so the story (read the "grand narrative" of Hong Kong history) says. The formula for Hong Kong's vitality (and therefore all other successes) used to be "a policy of laissez-faire" and now it is the magical "one country-two systems."⁵⁹ Both Britain (as the de-colonizing power) and China (as the re-colonizing power) all feel uncomfortable at the prospect of Hong Kong as a separate entity, having its own soul. During the Sino-British talks over Hong Kong (1982-1997), the colony was excluded from the negotiations. Regardless of what the Hong Kong residents were thinking, their ideas were to be subsumed by either the British or the Chinese. The Hongkongese began to question the validity of this approach. Their political consciousness emerged amidst many question marks and exclamation marks. Their historical consciousness emerged amidst similar circumstances: as part of the search of who they are and what will become of them. History writing is therefore for them an act of political consciousness, over and above anything else.

The motivation for studying the post-colonial history (or historiography) of Hong Kong is not just caused by the need to redress bias and past ignorance.⁶⁰ We indeed "know", or more precisely, we are "led to know" quite a lot about Hong Kong, its past, present and future. The Chinese would say that all will be wonderful if the Hongkongese faithfully follow the magic formula of "one country-two systems"; and the Motherland will safeguard the foundations of "stability and prosperity" of this returning son. The British (at least according to the Patten discourse) would say that all will be well if and only if the "rule of law" and "liberties" (i.e. the British legacy)

⁵⁹ Ackbar Abbas, "Hong Kong: other histories, other politics", *Public Culture*, 9.3 (1997), p.296.

⁶⁰ We must also be alert to the critiques on the limitation of the post-modern and post-colonial schools. See D.A. Washbrook, "Orient and Occidents: colonial discourse theory and the historiography of the British Empire" in Robin W. Winks (ed.) *The Oxford history of the British Empire V: historiography* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp.596-611. Evans' comments on post-modernist "reading of history" are useful here: "As historians, we clearly cannot recover a single, unalterably 'true' meaning of a dispatch simply by reading it, on the other hand, we cannot impose any meaning we wish to on such a text either. We are limited by the words it contains, words which are not, contrary to what the postmodernists suggest, capable of an infinity of meaning. And the limits which the language of the text imposes on the possibilities of interpretation are set to a large extent by the original author. Postmodernist theorists are simply being unrealistic here." See Richard J. Evans, *In defence of history* (London: Granta Books, 1997), p.106.

are kept intact. The people of Hong Kong are given little opportunity to have their say, but they are trying hard to speak for themselves, through the conscious act of writing their own history. Hopefully, through this effort, their once down-trodden and insignificant existence could be elevated. This is the age of post-modernism and post-colonialism, and the established centres of privilege, superiority or dominance are no longer taken for granted. The people of Hong Kong are not strangers in their own society. Whether they can be real masters depends very much on their consciousness of mastery over their own house. My research should be a definite contribution in that direction.

(D) Organization of the Thesis

Chapter One examines the existence of two grand narratives or national discourses as reflected in (a) the British colonial historiography and (b) the Mainland Chinese patriotic historiography. Post-modernism and post-colonialism provide the critical methodological tools to expose and analyse the layers of overt and hidden meanings of these two historiographies. The post-modern historical critique works against the certainty of the centres of historical authority. Historical “truth” is taken to be problematic and is open to manipulation by political institutions such as the state. The language used in history writing reflects many unspoken assumptions, and its relationship with the content (the text) must be critiqued. Post-colonialism does not only reveal the spectre of British imperial apologetics in the British history writing of Hong Kong, it also exposes Mainland China as a re-colonizing power which claims (in the name of nationalism) to right historical wrongs and injustices. Hong Kong history hence becomes the arena in the contest between Britain and China. This thesis tries to fill the gap of this much neglected field and to prove, amid the rise of local political identity and consciousness, that an autonomous Hong Kong historical school is emerging.

Chapter Two explains the main characteristics of British colonial historiography by showing particularly the moral and political functions of history teaching and learning in the British Empire. Colonial administrators were trained (especially in Oxford and Cambridge universities) and inculcated with historical lessons of the Greek and Roman Empires so that they would be infused with a sense of imperial

mission to do good to the natives in the colonies. The files and documents these administrators sent back to the Colonial Office became the most important source of their history writing of the colonies, reinforcing a “colonial” perspective or bias of the subjects. Certainly, colonial historiography, as an adjunct to British imperialism, has been subject to vigorous critique as a result of decolonization and post-colonialism.

Chapter Three first attempts to show the functions of historiography in traditional China. The Chinese bureaucrats traditionally used history to sustain the dynasty’s mandate to rule and hence Chinese historiography was politically conservative. Communist Chinese historiography reverted the top-heavy emphasis (focusing on the achievements of emperors and high officials/generals) and hoped to replace it with “history from below” (the workers, peasants and soldiers) and to include more non-Han nationalities. The result, however, remains that history writing was made to serve political demands. The search for historical objectivity and truth was severely undermined particularly during the Cultural Revolution, when historical allegories were used unashamedly as tools of political struggles. The revulsion against these excesses and the opening up of the country since the 1980s have triggered some real soul-searching among Mainland Chinese historians. A brief comparison of the British colonial historiography and the Mainland Chinese historiography is also attempted, showing many of their common attributes.

Chapter Four focuses attention on the British colonial discourse on writing Hong Kong history. Starting from the description of pre-British Hong Kong, this discourse tried to paint Hong Kong as a small and uninhabited “barren rock”, remote and unimportant to China. Regarding the opium issue, the discourse struggled to write it off, claiming that the “Opium War” is a misnomer. The discourse is certainly a reflection of the official viewpoint based primarily (if not exclusively) on colonial official documents. The importance of the local Hong Kong Chinese were deliberately blotted out. The British colonial administrators featured prominently in this discourse and they were portrayed as paternal figures bestowing benevolence and protection on the local people in Hong Kong. Muffled in the British colonial historiography, the native Chinese were essentially deprived of the right to speak their own voices.

Chapter Five focuses on the Mainland Chinese discourse on writing Hong Kong

history. The Chinese discourse challenged the basic assumptions of the British historiography. Hong Kong was portrayed as a treasured and integral part of the Chinese motherland which had been lustfully and illegally seized by the British. The Chinese discourse tried to expose the evils of the British colonial rule whereby the locals were heavily exploited and discriminated. Racism was rampant and the British justice system was shown to exhibit double standards, favouring the British and the Europeans. Ignoring the political developments in Hong Kong since the 1970s, the Chinese discourse puts the emphasis on the economic development of the colony, claiming that the prosperity of Hong Kong was essentially due to the ingenuity of the local Chinese and the economic support of the Mainland. The role of the British colonial rule was usually played down. Mainland Chinese historiography on Hong Kong treated the colony most readily in relation to events in Mainland China, culminating in the eventual re-unification of the “lost son” with the Motherland. Inconsistencies in this pattern were ignored in the Chinese grand narrative.

Chapter Six brings in Western journalistic writing on Hong Kong history with the purpose of providing some new perspectives to contrast the official histories from Britain and China. Their criticisms on issues (such as democracy, representation, honour, responsibility, and patriotism) during the Sino-British negotiations (1982-1997) exposed the hollowness of both the British and the Chinese discourses.

Chapter Seven shows that at first the Chinese in Hong Kong did not possess a separate identity and historical consciousness from that of the Mainland. But with the political separation from 1949, Hong Kong became more and more alienated from China. At the same time, Hong Kong did not feel politically obliged to Britain. The politics of difference began to work in the late 1960s, moving through the 1970s with the rise of an indigenous middle class. From the 1980s these Hong Kong Chinese began to satirize the Mainland Chinese as bumpkins and mocked the British for betraying local Hong Kong interests. Hong Kong’s historical consciousness rose in the process and against the overwhelming British colonial and Chinese patriotic discourses. Local Hong Kong historians did not want Hong Kong and its history to be marginalized. With their bilingual abilities and rigorous methodological training, they broke the confines of the old paradigms by emphasising the dynamics of Hong Kong society. They had also no obsession with either British colonialism or Chinese

nationalism.

Chapter Eight is a systematic analysis, with reference to events from about 1830 to about 1900, of the competing discourses of the British colonial historiography and the Chinese patriotic historiography. Both sides are found to have used evidence favourable to their own discourse and wilfully ignored inconvenient data. While avoiding the opium issue, Britain started to blame China for all the restrictions leading to the declaration of war in 1840. China argued categorically that Britain was a “drug-pusher,” intent on ruining China. The Chinese attack continued to question the legal basis (surrounding the Chuanbi Convention) of the British occupation of Hong Kong (in 1841) before the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842. Britain, traditionally, took the Chuanbi Convention as valid and binding. Regarding the Second Opium War, the British thought China had humiliated the British flag and this had led to the second war. China stated that it was just a continuation of British aggression. In the dispute over the “Blockade of Hong Kong”, Britain (though not speaking with one voice only) argued that Hong Kong’s economic freedom was unreasonably restricted by the action of the Chinese customs service. China reacted by saying that British Hong Kong was a centre of smuggling, ruining the tax revenues of the Chinese state.

In the issue regarding the lease of the New Territories, instances of evidence manipulation are most prominent. China, for example, translated only those parts of Peter Wesley-Smith’s book (1980 edition) that are useful for legitimating its own nationalistic discourse, while avoiding the key argument of the author. Wesley-Smith argued specifically that the “Convention respecting an extension of the Hong Kong territory”, while unequal in nature, was valid and binding. In the treatment of the various personalities involved, the Chinese discourse painted a somewhat sentimental picture, emphasizing the emotional humiliations the Chinese officials had suffered, none of which were recorded in the British discourse. In the treatment of resistance to British colonial rule, the British discourse usually played down its significance and denied Chinese patriotism as a key instigating factor. China, on the other hand, was emphatic that patriotic resistance against British colonial rule was prevalent among the Chinese population in Hong Kong.

Chapter Nine is divided into two parts. Part One deals with chronological events from 1830 to 1900 and gives contending new points on them, especially those of local Hong Kong historians who have tried to expose the inconsistencies of both the British colonial and Chinese patriotic historiographies. First the marginality of pre-British Hong Kong is taken as debatable. Hong Kong might not be a “barren rock” as painted by the British but it was also not a “treasure island” as the Chinese would have it. On the sensitive issue of collaboration, it is found that the Chinese migrating to Hong Kong were neither traitors nor patriots. To the Hong Kong historians, collaboration is simply not taken as a pejorative term. In the Bread Poisoning Incident of 1857, it is found that British justice did not really prevail (“for not hanging the wrong man”), but was “adjusted” for political reasons. Patriotism was a factor in the 1884 Strike and Riots but the local Chinese did not respond to China’s call without fearing intimidation. In the negotiations regarding the New Territories leasehold, Hong Kong historians found the British behaviour really arrogant, but it is doubtful whether the British actually and personally humiliated the Chinese officials.

In Part Two, four specific cases are used to show that Hong Kong history is full of grey areas which are quite inconsistent with both the British and Chinese discourses. The history of the Tung Wah Hospital shows clearly that the Chinese were not just pliant and submissive inhabitants in colonial Hong Kong. The colonial government had to use both carrot and stick in enlisting and controlling the rich and powerful Chinese merchant class. In the study of class formation in early Hong Kong, the reality of the social dynamics is unveiled as one of the political supremacy of the British versus the economic indispensability of the Chinese. In the study of the Hong Kong-Guangdong links, the Chinese discourse that the Hong Kong Chinese were all patriotic is overthrown. Equally, the British discourse that Hong Kong was always stable under British colonial rule is found untenable. In the study of the record of British colonial rule in Hong Kong, basically, the Hong Kong historians have adopted an open mind about the subject, hence disputing the rigidity of the grand narratives of both Britain and China. The chapter concludes with a recapturing of the key points of a Hong Kong historical perspective. The Hong Kong historians are careful in handling the sources and methodologies of historical re-construction. They have subjected all the key players of Hong Kong history to close scrutiny, with the aim of critically re-assessing their historical roles. It is a healthy sign of Hong Kong’s growing

intellectual maturity and autonomy.

Chapter Ten gives some concluding remarks to the whole thesis.

Chapter Two – The Tradition of British Colonial Historiography

(A) The Whig Interpretation of History

History has nearly always a didactic function to serve. History is meant not only just to tell an interesting story but is also designed to express or embody some kind of underlying moral. The story thus told is either implicitly or explicitly constructed to fit a particular line of narrative which the historian wants to impact on the readers. My intention in the following pages is to focus particularly on the connections between British historiography and British imperialism/colonialism (the two terms are almost interchangeable). I would like to see how British history writing, starting from the Victorian age, served the British Empire or how British imperialism/colonialism nurtured a particular strain of British historiography.

Among the various strains of British historiography one such tendency has been coined by Herbert Butterfield as the Whig interpretation of history. British colonial historians often, subconsciously perhaps, followed this approach – emphasising the progress and triumph of the British Empire. They would assume that the British had been achieving only positive things in expanding and ruling their colonies all over the world. Butterfield defines the Whig interpretation of history thus: “What is discussed is the tendency in many historians to write on the side of Protestants and Whigs, to praise revolutions provided they have been successful, to emphasise certain principles of progress in the past and to produce a story which is the ratification if not the glorification of the present.”¹

Whig historians thus study the past with reference to the present, the glorious present.² In the case of the British Empire, historians would emphasise those things which would illuminate the brightness of British rule overseas and blot out those things (such as the Indian Mutiny) which would tarnish or question its imperial glory. In laying out the imperial meta-narrative, there is bound to be a process of selection, abridgement and hence distortion of the story being told. According to Butterfield,

¹ H. Butterfield, *The Whig interpretation of history* (London: G. Bell and Sons Ltd, 1959; first published 1931), p.v.

² Butterfield, p.11.

“The total result of this method [the Whig interpretation] is to impose a certain form upon the whole historical story, and to produce a scheme of general history which is bound to converge beautifully upon the present – all demonstrating throughout the ages the workings of an obvious principle of progress, of which the Protestants and whigs have been the perennial allies while Catholics and Tories have perpetually formed obstruction.”³

The obvious and favoured line of British colonial historiography is to paint an uninterrupted picture of Empire-Colonies-Dominions-Independence-Commonwealth, as if it were a matter of course and that nothing was problematic. This line of historiography does not only influence Britain alone; a similar report on American universities in 1966 reflected an interesting picture:

As university catalogues and syllabi from courses offered in the field through the 1950's indicate, British Empire-Commonwealth history as taught in the United States has shown three marked tendencies. Imperial studies were chiefly administrative, constitutional, and geographical, with the history of exploration and of war playing slightly smaller roles. Courses were constructed along Whiggish lines, the history of each then-member of the Commonwealth being traced chronologically from settlement to independence, in succession, usually beginning with Canada and ending with India, creating the impression that the chief significance of such studies lay in the progressive, basically similar, and generally natural paths to independent status taken by each nation. There was a noticeable lack of comparison with other Imperial structures or of regard for the effect of imperialism on the indigenous peoples of the areas acquired. Narrative rather than analysis dominated. People (and their administration) rather than problems were studied or memorized.⁴

British colonial history is first and foremost written from the administrator's point of view. According to Philip Curtin, “Since Imperial action was initially legislative, constitutional, and administrative, these things attracted the first attention

³ Butterfield, p.12. See also pp.22-29 for the dangers of selection in history.

⁴ Robin W. Winks (ed.) *The historiography of the British Empire-Commonwealth: trends, interpretations, and resources* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1966), p.523.

of policy makers. They also attracted historians.”⁵ Viceroy, governors, generals, admirals and their exploits received a definite priority. They triumphed in bringing “law and order” to the conquered regions and bestowed them with British civilization and institutions, all supposedly for the benefit of the indigenous peoples. On this point of “law and order”, Max Beloff has tried to argue, though a bit apologetically: “What united imperialists was the belief that order in the sense of known laws actively enforced was a good in itself, and achieving this was far more significant for them than the hope of personal gain. There were many easier ways of making money than acting as the overseas representative of the Crown at any level from royal governor to local magistrate or district officer. Whether, in particular cases, trade followed the flag or the flag followed trade is always a proper subject for argument, but the core of empire was not profit but governance.”⁶ Beloff continues to argue that the British Empire was characterized by its deeply civilian ruling institutions.⁷ Many colonial historians, in a similar vein, want to play down the importance of the economic motives of British imperialism. D.K. Fieldhouse, in particular, argues that imperialism cannot only be explained in terms of economic theory. His conclusion is that “[t]he link between economics and empire was not...necessary and immediate but coincidental and indirect.”⁸

But little or nothing has been mentioned of the flimsiness of imperial pretexts in wars of conquest or expansion. The embarrassing origins of British rule (in India for example) are invariably de-emphasised. Or as in the case of Hong Kong, the opium issue as a cause of the war between Britain and China is portrayed as a matter of trade conflict rather than as a hideous drug. The British discourse has it that the colonies had to be put under British rule because the indigenous peoples were considered to be inferior (racially, culturally or by any other British standards) and therefore unfit to govern themselves. Dominion status is problematic because it was given only to the white colonies and the question of Indian autonomy (let alone independence) was often sidestepped. Independence granted to the non-white colonies was more a matter

⁵ P.D. Curtin, “The British Empire and Commonwealth in recent historiography” in E.C. Furber (ed.) *Changing views on British history* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), p.382.

⁶ M. Beloff, “Empire reconsidered,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 27.2:13-26 (1999), p.22.

⁷ Beloff, p.23.

⁸ See D.K. Fieldhouse, *Economics and Empire 1830-1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), p.464.

of last-minute political expediency rather than the result of conscious and careful planning. The Commonwealth was not necessarily welcomed and joined by all the members of the ex-British colonies. Inconsistencies to the pattern of “orderly decolonisation” were generally brushed aside or ignored. Both the Whig historians (and British colonial historians) tend to draw conclusions that are to their special liking. To give a final quote from Butterfield: “The [Whig] historian like every other specialist is quick to over-step the bounds of his subject and elicit from history more than history can really give; and he is for ever tempted to bring his stories to a conclusiveness and his judgments to a finality that are not warranted by either the materials or the processes of his research. Behind all the fallacies of the whig historian there lies the passionate desire to come to a judgment of values, to make history answer questions and decide issues and to give the historian the last word in a controversy.”⁹ British colonial historians usually served as sentinels to the Empire and the last word is certainly British imperial glory. Once the Empire came to an end, then the establishment of the Commonwealth was often used as a face-saver.

(B) The Didactic Use of History

The use of history in justifying British colonialism has been obvious. Of the Victorian historians, John Seeley (in his *Expansion of England*, 1883) was most prominent in pronouncing his stand:

It is a favourite maxim of mine that history, while it should be scientific in its method, should pursue a practical object. That is, it should not merely gratify the reader’s curiosity about the past, but modify his view of the present and his forecast of the future. Now if this maxim be sound, the history of England ought to end with something that might be called a moral... They [Holland and Sweden] were once great, but the conditions of their greatness have passed away, and they now hold a secondary place. Their interest in their own past is therefore either sentimental or purely scientific; the only practical lesson of their history is a lesson of resignation. But England has grown steadily greater and greater,

⁹ Butterfield, pp.64-65.

absolutely at least if not always relatively.¹⁰

Seeley worked hard to perpetuate the idea of British greatness. In his lectures at Oxford, he urged his students to take up the challenge of studying history as a patriotic duty: “It [History] deals with facts of the largest and most momentous kind, with the causes of the decay and growth of Empires, with war and peace, with the sufferings or happiness of millions. It is by this consideration that I merge history in politics. I tell you that when you study English history you study not the past of England only, but her future. It is the welfare of your country, it is your whole interest as citizens, that is in question while you study history.”¹¹ Seeley was overly nationalistic (showing in part the German influence on British historiography in general¹²), claiming that “history is not concerned with individuals except in their capacity as members of a State.”¹³ His audience were not ordinary citizens; they were the prospective administrators of the state of “Greater Britain”, the term he favoured to stand for the British Empire: “The ultimate object of all my teaching here is to establish this fundamental connection, to show that politics and history are only different aspects of the same study... Politics are vulgar when they are not liberalised by history, and history fades into mere literature when it loses sight of its relation to practical politics. In order to show this clearly, it has seemed to me a good plan to select a topic which belongs most evidently to history and to politics at once. Such a topic pre-eminently is Greater Britain.”¹⁴

The observations of Christopher Parker can be useful in summing up Seeley’s historiographical approach, emphasising the inter-connections of history, nation and God:

What did all this mean in terms of Seeley’s attitudes to historical writing and teaching? He believed that God’s purpose was revealed to and through nations and their leaders, not as individuals but as groups. He believed that history was a

¹⁰ J. Seeley, *The expansion of England* (London: Macmillan, 1904; first published 1883), p. 1.

¹¹ Seeley, pp.201-202.

¹² Many British historians in the Victorian age used the German concept of “Zeitgeist” in explaining the rise and fall of nations, see David Newsome, *The Victorian world picture: perceptions and introspections in an age of change* (London: John Murray, 1997), pp.165-166.

¹³ Seeley, pp.7-8.

¹⁴ Seeley, pp.192-193.

suitable education for such leadership groups; he believed in a 'clerisy'. He wanted 'to idealise the nation and familiarise it in its unity to the minds of its members.' Both church and nation were ideas of God; modern nationalism was the most developed expression of God's will and thus national churches were integral parts of this purpose... As a Broad Churchman, he wanted people to see that 'the true Bible of every nation is its national history' for it was through the modern nation state that man could relate to God. He saw the Empire as a Greater Britain...¹⁵

Historians like Seeley were insistent on writing history for the sake of the nation-state and empire. Apart from their patriotism, was there some other political agenda to serve? Would such an insistence serve the interests of the academic historians as a professional group? Here the observations of Passmore and others are noteworthy:

Historians are perhaps most significant in influencing the ideas of the ruling classes, or rather parts of them, for it is often forgotten that along with academics more generally, historians themselves constitute a privileged interest group. The profession is not therefore simply a transmission belt for a dominant ideology, for it also defends its own special interests: without necessarily calling into question their value as a means of making sense of historical evidence, the techniques used by historians constitute a form of professional closure. Historians will therefore invest dominant views of the past with their own intonation, and will do so in response to the intrinsic demands of their methodologies, their own professional interests, and in the context of wider social and political struggles.¹⁶

If historians could influence politicians, their own views (with their added intonation) would be respected. Better still, if they became political leaders or administrators themselves, they could exercise power to reinforce their original profession. Believing that they understood the historical trends and hence of what the future might hold, the historians-turned-administrators often had a strong sense of

¹⁵ C. Parker, *The English historical tradition since 1850* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1990), p.67.

mission. They believed that they were morally obliged to carry out their “historical mission.”

(C) Oxford and Empire

The Victorian generation of historians and history students were similar to John Seeley in their sense of mission regarding Empire and the world. They were there “not only to proclaim the Christian gospels, but also to civilize peoples of a totally different culture by the inculcation of Western standards and ethics.”¹⁷ An in-depth study of the tertiary establishment, particularly of Oxford University, is revealing. The bulk of the 19th century British ruling class came from established universities like Oxford and Cambridge. Oxford was of particular importance because there were more Oxford men in positions to decide and implement British imperial policies.¹⁸ The training then in Oxford and Cambridge focused on producing a ruling elite for the British Empire – graduates were to be posted anywhere and everywhere to govern (in Britain itself or in overseas colonies).

According to Richard Symonds, Oxford contributed variously to the British Empire. First and foremost, it forged an imperial philosophy or attitude: “In this the teaching of the Classics had an important place. The lessons of the history of the Greek city states were often applied to relations between Britain and the old Dominions, whilst in the government of dependent territories comparisons were frequently made with Rome.”¹⁹ It was argued that an accurate knowledge of the texts of Greek and Latin history, philosophy and literature (all considered as eternally and universally applicable) would prepare the Oxford graduates for their elite governing roles.²⁰ “The Platonic virtues of loyalty, courage, responsibility and truthfulness were admirably suited to Imperial administration,” remarked Symonds.²¹ Finally, with this vigorous (ideological) training, Oxford graduates would go out to various parts of the

¹⁶ K. Passmore (with Stefan Berger and Mark Donovan), “Historians and the nation-state: some conclusions” in S. Berger, M. Donovan & K. Passmore (eds.) *Writing national histories: Western Europe since 1800* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p.283.

¹⁷ Newsome, p.134.

¹⁸ R. Symonds, *Oxford and Empire: the last lost cause?* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991; first published 1986), p.2.

¹⁹ Symonds, p.1.

²⁰ Symonds, p.31.

²¹ Symonds, p.32.

British Empire, exercising their influence as “administrators, teachers and missionaries and on the institutions which they founded.”²² There was one network of Oxford graduates, the Balliol network, most worthy of fame. Benjamin Jowett as Master of Balliol (1870-1893) was reputed in “spotting young men of talent, inspiring them with a sense of duty and ambition, and giving them an education which enabled them to perform brilliantly in the new system which he had helped to devise by which written competition replaced patronage as the means of entry to Government Service.”²³ Jowett once remarked, rather humourously, that “he would like to govern the world through his pupils.”²⁴

Certainly, the Oxford men were confident in fulfilling this world-governing mission, which might turn out to be rather self-gratifying. “There has never been anything so great in the world’s history as the British Empire, so great an instrument for the good of humanity. We must devote all our energies to maintaining it,” Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India (1899-1905), was quoted as saying.²⁵ J.A. Froude, Regius Professor of Modern History (1892-94), believed that the indigenous peoples in the British colonies were mostly of an inferior race and they “needed a century or two of wise paternal British administration and were totally unfitted for British institutions.”²⁶ As a result there was no need to bestow the British system of representation on them, some form of gubernatorial dictatorship being more appropriate for them.

In order to popularize this form of colonial history, some Oxford historians produced textbooks for schools and a wider audience. The most successful among them was the *History of England* by C.R.L. Fletcher and Rudyard Kipling, published in 1911. There the condition of the colonies was described in a favourable light, from the British point of view: “In Canada we [the British] had really little difficulty in making good friends with our new French subjects, for they hated and feared the pushing Americans... In Australia we had nothing to fear but a few miserable blacks who could hardly use even bows and arrows in a fight... The hatred between British

²² Symonds, p.1.

²³ Symonds, p.27.

²⁴ Symonds, p.28.

²⁵ Symonds, p.36.

²⁶ Symonds, p.50.

and Dutch [in South Africa] is now almost a thing of the past... In other African colonies the natives everywhere welcome the mercy and justice of our rule."²⁷ Fletcher and Kipling continue to congratulate the benefits of British imperial rule: "Our rule [in India] has been infinitely to the good of all the 330 millions of the different races... and if our rule was taken away for a moment the Afghans would swoop down and slay and enslave them... Egypt and the Sudan also enjoy justice and mercy which they have not known since the fall of the Roman Empire."²⁸ In *The British Empire: A Short History* (1921) written by another Oxford don, J.W. Bulkeley, the idea was put forward that the British Empire was an "adventure attempted to educate the world in self-government."²⁹

This line of colonial historiography was crowned in *The Cambridge History of the British Empire* (eight volumes, variously published in the 1920s and 1930s). Ronald Robinson describes it as a "classic historiographical monument to Seeleyan unity of organic empire."³⁰ The standpoint of this series was unmistakably Anglo-centric with the contributors fixing "their gaze on imperial policy, constitution-making, and administration, and on the projected activities of British Government, as if the organic imperial state had already come into being to do everything of significance in these countries while their indigenous inhabitants slept... The tropical dependencies, vastly enlarged since Seeley's day, were also presumed inorganically to have no history except that given them by their [British] rulers."³¹

The great use of history in British colonialism made it almost a surrogate religion, for the British colonial administrators in particular. In the words of Reba Soffer,

Unlike the sciences, which competed with religion by revealing an essentially rational and self-explanatory world, history provided an accommodating bridge between secular and religious convictions. By the 1870s, historians had left

²⁷ C.R.L. Fletcher & R. Kipling, *History of England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), p.238.

²⁸ Fletcher & Kipling, p.242.

²⁹ J.W. Bulkeley, *The British Empire: a short history* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921), p.209.

³⁰ R. Robinson, "Oxford in imperial historiography" in F. Madden and D.K. Fieldhouse (eds.) *Oxford and the idea of Commonwealth* (London & Canberra: Croom Helm, 1982), p.33.

³¹ Robinson, p.33.

behind an arbitrary Calvinist God, punitively intervening in human life, to assume instead that God was a reasonable Englishman who encouraged individuals to make themselves and their society conform more to His benevolent and meliorist will. Encouraged by their belief that the study of English history was uniquely successful in developing character and institutions, and sustained by the conviction that God was on their side, idealistic university graduates set out to recreate the greater world in their own image.³²

This group of university graduates (and hence would-be colonial administrators if they so chose) from Oxford and Cambridge became a very tight core of elites. Their elitism and core-group identity were reinforced in the small-circle atmosphere of the universities. The observations of Soffer are useful again:

Very few university [history] teachers attempted to discover or master a special, unexplored subject. Specialized inquiry continued to play a very limited role because college teachers were too overburdened with personal supervision of students, teaching, and examining to attempt original research. Instead, their select organization of knowledge in examinations, lectures, tutorials, and textbooks became in itself a venerable tradition transmitted from one generation to another. Moreover, research, writing, and teaching depended upon the narrowest institutional acceptance within a small academic world generally indifferent to external standards of approval or disapproval.³³

It was a real ivory tower nurturing an upper class of rulers. They were often aloof to outside criticism because they had their own sense of value and judgement, but they presumed an air of aristocratic duty towards the “down-trodden” and the colonial inhabitants. They were certainly conservative but one could hardly question their sense of civic and imperial responsibility. Ronald Hyam has studied a subgroup among these elites, namely, the Colonial Office (CO). The CO officials were described as exhibiting an air of snobbery and a sense of superiority. They loathed

³² Reba N Soffer, *Discipline and power: the university, history and the making of an English elite 1870-1930* (Stanford & Cambridge: Stanford University Press, 1994), p.9.

³³ Soffer, pp.26-27.

many of the white commercial leaders in the colonies.³⁴ According to Stephen Constantine, “There was a suspicion in the [Colonial] office that trade and finance could be a disturbing factor in a colony. While colonial governments had an interest in increasing their taxable revenues, rapid economic change, it was thought, would upset established social and political order. There was also the prejudice felt by many members of the administrative middle class in government service against businessmen and sordid profit-making.”³⁵ To both Hyam and Constantine, the CO officials had a strong sense of trusteeship towards the indigenous population in the colonies.³⁶ The problem remains how these officials interpreted this key concept of trusteeship, i.e. how they defined the true interests of the indigenous peoples and how they resolved the crisis if indigenous interests clashed with imperial interests.

(D) Problem of Sources and Interpretations

Generally speaking, imperial interests and imperial viewpoints are served and sustained by the official records of the British Empire. As mentioned earlier, British colonial history is essentially an administrator’s history and the British historians tend to record events of importance by exploring and organizing the archives of the various public institutions, and certainly those of the Public Record Office. Thomas Richards has some revealing observations:

From all over the globe the British collected information about the countries they were adding to their map. They surveyed and they mapped. They took censuses, produced statistics. They made vast lists of birds. Then they shoved the data they had collected into a shifting series of classifications... The Empire was too far away, and the bureaucrats of Empire had to be content to shuffle papers. This paper shuffling, however, proved to have great influence. It required keeping track, and keeping track of keeping track. It required some kind of archive for it all. Unquestionably the British Empire was more productive of knowledge than any previous empire in history... In a very sense theirs was a paper empire: an

³⁴ R. Hyam, “The Colonial Office mind 1900-1914,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 8, 1:30-55 (1979), pp.39-41.

³⁵ S. Constantine, *The making of British colonial development policy 1914-1940* (London: Frank Cass, 1984), p. 18.

³⁶ Hyam, p.49 and Constantine, p. 18.

empire built on a series of flimsy pretexts that were always becoming texts.³⁷

The Colonial Office and the Foreign Office were most busy in shuffling these texts for the sake of administering the empire. The interpretations of the historical events are therefore shaped and constrained by the texts as historical sources, though these sources are not without their own value, provided that they are used in conjunction with other existing non-official records. Constantine has remarked that:

The official mind [as recorded in government documents] was not entirely cocooned and self-contained and might be affected by factors not immediately apparent from official records. Government departments were ultimately accountable to Parliament and might be influenced by the mood of M.P.s. Ministers were in addition not insensitive to the interests of their political parties. The lobbying of pressure groups might also be influential, while general political and economic conditions and the currents of intellectual and cultural change could also leave their mark. Such influences are often more implicit than explicit in the decisions taken and in the records left behind. Reference is therefore made to a wider range of contemporary material and to certain secondary sources in order, hopefully, to illuminate the nuances left in the official records.³⁸

I would like to use a few examples to illustrate my point, the first one being Hong Kong. In *Hong Kong under Imperial rule, 1912-1941* (published in 1987), one might expect the author (N.J. Miners, incidentally an Oxford graduate) to include a study or an overview of the society of Hong Kong in the said period, judging from the title of the book. But instead, half of the book (six out of thirteen chapters, two being The History of Hong Kong 1911-1941 and Conclusion) talks about administrative aspects. The chapters are respectively: "The Colonial Office", "The Governor and the Executive Council", "The Legislative Council and the Control of Legislation", "The Public Service", "Finance", and "The Structure of Government". The remaining five chapters focus on how the UK and Hong Kong governments impacted on the *mui tsai* (bonded girl-servants) system, the regulation of prostitution and the control of opium.

³⁷ T. Richards, *The imperial archive: knowledge and the fantasy of empire* (London and New York: Verso, 1993), pp.3-4.

³⁸ Constantine, p.6.

Specifically, Miners hopes to “examine the extent of the influence exerted on the administration of Hong Kong by the British government during the 30 years between the Chinese revolution of 1911 and the Japanese invasion of 1941.”³⁹ It is most likely that the production of this vantage point is the result of the historical sources Miners used. He admitted that his study “is based largely upon the official records of the Hong Kong government and in particular upon the correspondence between the successive Governors and the Colonial Office, which is preserved in the Public Record Office in London.”⁴⁰ Miners tries to argue that the various Hong Kong governors had been given a wide measure of discretion in governing the colony, with the best interests of the colony in mind.⁴¹ It is certainly open to debate whether that was really the case.

The competing interpretations of Indian history are also illustrative. Up to the 1960s, the bulk of published volumes of Indian history was probably written by English historians, according to Robert Crane.⁴² He continues to say that there were certain biases in these works: “Part of that bias, doubtless, resulted simply from the importation of European attitudes into work on India’s past. Other parts reflected an undue reliance on the high intellectual tradition, a tendency to put too much reliance – especially for the period of British Indian history – upon official sources and official viewpoints, and an emphasis on purely political or quasi-dynastic history. Some of the best-known volumes in the history of India reflect a narrow approach to the subject of history, stressing what the rulers were doing, who fought which battles, when such-and-such a river was crossed.”⁴³ On the specific issue of the Indian Mutiny, the British administration “preferred to draw a veil of silence” or to offer “its own official version of or justification for events.”⁴⁴ In opposition to the British, many Indian historians have tended “to glorify the alleged virtues of India’s past civilization and to deprecate all that the English did”, believing that India was a land of milk and honey,

³⁹ From the jacket of N.J. Miners’ book, *Hong Kong under Imperial rule, 1912-1941*(Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁴⁰ Miners, p.2.

⁴¹ Miners, pp.278-284.

⁴² R. Crane, “India” in R.W. Winks (ed.) *The historiography of the British Empire-Commonwealth: trends, interpretations, and resources* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1966). p.360.

⁴³ Crane, p.361.

⁴⁴ Crane, p.361.

“before the English came.”⁴⁵

The competing interpretations of Indian history are well summarised by Curtin:

Indian historians before the First World War took one line while British historians of India took another. Indian historians featured repressive aspects of British rule, the sins of administration, and Indian rebellions against it. British historians, on the other hand, seemed to write a history of, for, and sometimes by the administration. Constitutional, political, and legal developments were given special importance. The administrative actions of the rulers were emphasized at the expense of the social consequences they produced among the ruled. Although there were exceptions to all these tendencies, the British raj was too often represented as the end of the long road of Indian history, rather than merely the latest of a series of epochs – and one that would also pass away in time.⁴⁶

Curtin also comments on the search for national identity in Australasian historiography, before the challenge of post-colonialism, to be sure:

Both [Australia and New Zealand] showed an early optimism about the future, a belief that they were creating a nation in a desired image. In Australia it was the image of material welfare, fair shares, and nearly classless society. In New Zealand it was that of a newer and better England in the southern seas, leading a charmed life free from the ills of the Old World... A great deal of early Australasian history was, following this belief, something of a success story. Settlers came, defeated hardships, and made a new life for themselves. Miners came looking for gold and ended by founding a democracy. If the Maori Wars were forgotten by most or covered over by pride in a later and more successful ‘native policy,’ so were the ‘bad old days’ of convict settlement either forgotten or taken to have little influence on the new Australia that was emerging.⁴⁷

Certainly, this kind of colonizer’s history is rejected by the indigenous peoples in

⁴⁵ Crane, p.362.

⁴⁶ Curtin, p.391.

⁴⁷ Curtin, p.388.

Australia and New Zealand. Arguing from a post-colonial stand, Linda Tuhiwai Smith puts it squarely: “We have often allowed our ‘histories’ to be told and have then become outsiders as we heard them being retold” and the indigenous peoples have “to learn new names for our own lands.”⁴⁸ Smith wants nothing from “them”, the European outsiders: “We did not ask, need or want to be ‘discovered’ by Europe.”⁴⁹

(E) The Characteristics of British Colonial Historiography

From the late 19th century up to the Second World War, British imperial or colonial history was written from the metropolitan point of view. These historians tried to show how Britain established her political and economic control over the less developed parts of the world and then incorporated them into the British Empire. Once established, the empire became the dominant factor (the so-called imperial factor) in both the metropolis and the dependencies. The latter and their histories would lose their autonomy and be absorbed into the grand imperial scheme, everything being decided in London. Under this scheme, historians would continue to pursue an understanding of the following four items: the causes of British expansion, the process of British empire-building, the organization of the British empire, and finally the costs and benefits. These historians would generally (though sometimes with some reservations) agree that what the British Empire had been bestowing on the world was positive. Both Britain and Greater Britain enjoyed the benefits.⁵⁰

Decolonization after the Second World War has exposed the fallacies of this historiographical approach. Metropolitan Britain has to survive on its own without the empire and the dependencies. The dependencies have to write their own history so as to build up their post-colonial national identities. Their previous marginality has to be righted so that they can stand in their own right. The writing of competing histories has begun. Many indigenous historians have tried to show that Britain and the imperial factor was a delaying (if not a negative) factor for their national and

⁴⁸ L.T. Smith, *Decolonizing methodologies: research and indigenous peoples* (London & New York: Zed Books, 1999), p.33.

⁴⁹ Smith, p.24.

⁵⁰ The paragraph is assisted by the ideas of David Fieldhouse, “Can humpty-dumpty be put together again? Imperial history in the 1980s”, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 12.2:9-23 (1984), pp.9-11.

economic development. To them, “imperial history becomes anti-imperial history.”⁵¹ In the past, many of the colonies were described as having no history of their own before British rule. Now the indigenous and anti-colonial historians argue that there was no “good” history after the British came, because the British colonial record was one of ravaging the colonies. History has entered the realm of intense polemics.

Leaving aside these polemics, the characteristics of British colonial historiography remain obvious. The critical comments of Dane Kennedy deserve full quotation:

The historiography of British imperialism has long been coloured by the political and methodological conservatism of its practitioners. Arising as it did from the imperial metropole in the late nineteenth century, it originally served as an ideological adjunct to empire. Its purpose was to contribute historical insights into past exercises in overseas power that could be used to inform and inspire contemporaries to shoulder their obligations as rulers of a world-wide imperial system. Decolonization robbed imperial history of most of its practical incentives. Yet it continued to cling to the methodology and *mentalite* of ‘the official mind’, as Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher termed it in their enormously influential work. The persistence of this paradigm is evident even in the most recent scholarship. Peruse any issue of *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, for example, and you will find a succession of articles that still tread the path pioneered by John Seeley more than a century ago. They remain wedded to the same official documentation, persist in addressing the same political, economic, and military manifestations of power, and continue to employ the same narrative conventions. They seldom stray from an adamant empiricism.⁵²

The political and methodological conservatism of John Seeley and other Oxford historians is clear. They viewed the world and wrote about it from London. They stressed the importance of using history in serving British imperialism. They spoke the “official mind” and were necessarily constrained by the official sources in passing

⁵¹ Beloff, p.15.

⁵² D. Kennedy, “Imperial history and post-colonial theory”, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 24.3:345-363 (1996), p.345.

their verdicts. They were empiricists, believing that they were to objectively record the world and the empire “out there.”

(F) A Short Note on the Impact of Decolonization on British Historiography

I do not intend to be complete and exhaustive in this section. The literature is just too big to handle. I would like to list some of the key books and articles which I have come across on this topic so far. Decolonization and the end of the British Empire have created a group of historians (particularly those writing for the popular market) who are nostalgic about the empire. They would like to have a return to the good old days of the glorious empire and some of them express a deep resignation over many of the “lost imperial causes”. Among them are John Keay, Lawrence James, Denis Judd, James (Jan) Morris, and Robin Neillands.⁵³

The academic historians writing on British imperialism are much more discreet in passing their judgements.⁵⁴ Indeed, there is a generation of critical historians (influenced in part by post-colonialism) which has been writing to expose the hollowness of the British Empire. The “Studies in Imperialism” series published by Manchester University Press is particularly impressive. Various attempts have been made to understand the manipulation of British public opinion for the British Empire, to argue that British patriotism is obsolete, and to critique the use of education in the service of British imperialism.⁵⁵

The impact of post-modernism and post-colonialism on the writing of British imperial/colonial history is unmistakable. Borrowing concepts from literary writings

⁵³ J. Keay, *Last post: the end of empire in the Far East* (London: John Murray, 1997), L. James, *The rise and fall of the British Empire* (London: Little, Brown & Co., 1994), D. Judd, *Empire: the British imperial experience from 1765 to the present* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), R. Neillands, *A fighting retreat: the British experience 1947-1997* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996). The *Pax Britannica* trilogy (*Heaven's Command*, *Pax Britannica*, and *Farewell to Trumpets*, all published in London by Faber & Faber, 1973, 1968 and 1978 respectively) of J. Morris are unshamefully apologetic about British imperialism.

⁵⁴ See B. Porter, *The lion's share: a short history of British imperialism 1850-1995* (London and New York: Longman, third ed., 1995).

⁵⁵ J.M. MacKenzie (ed.), *Propaganda and empire: the manipulation of British public opinion, 1880-1960* (1984), W.J. Reader, *'At duty's call': a study in obsolete patriotism* (1988), and J.A. Mangan (ed.), *'Benefits bestowed'? Education and British imperialism* (1988). All published by Manchester University Press in Manchester & New York.

and criticisms, post-modernist and post-colonialist writers and historians are arguing against the claim of historical empiricism and objectivity. They believe that history writing is a form of power, a way to use knowledge to control and domesticate the past.⁵⁶ Among them, B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, and Robert Young are most prominent.⁵⁷ Alastair Pennycook has moved from literature to the study of the English language; and he has succeeded in arguing that English is not a neutral language of global communication, but is, rather, permeated with the discourse of British colonialism.⁵⁸ The study of the British Empire as a “paper” empire is pursued by Thomas Richards.⁵⁹ The use of photography in picturing the Empire has been successfully analysed by James Ryan.⁶⁰ Other aspects of the British Empire are still to be scrutinized and it seems that the historical debate⁶¹ will continue, and that there will be no stone left unturned. The relationship between British imperialism and the following topics has already been given attention: women and sexuality, geography and maps, sports, children’s books and juvenile literature, hunting and conservation.⁶² It is certainly a healthy development in understanding the complexities of the British Empire as a whole. *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the British Empire* (edited by P.J. Marshall)⁶³ is refreshing, breaking from the old confines of British colonial historiography. Volume 5 of the *Oxford history of the British Empire* on “Historiography” specifically deals with the history of the British Empire’s historical writing. It contains numerous critical essays portraying “the Zeitgeist or the spirit of

⁵⁶ A. Green & K. Troup. *The houses of history: a critical reader in twentieth-century history and theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp.300-302.

⁵⁷ B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths & H. Tiffin, *The Empire writes back: theory and practice in post-colonial literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989) and R. Young, *White mythologies: writing history and the West* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁵⁸ See the two books of Alastair Pennycook, *The cultural politics of English as an international language* (London: Longman, 1994) and *English and the discourses of colonialism* (London & New York: Routledge, 1999).

⁵⁹ T. Richards, *The Imperial archive: knowledge and the fantasy of empire* (London & New York: Verso, 1993).

⁶⁰ J.R. Ryan, *Picturing empire: photography and the visualization of the British Empire* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997).

⁶¹ See John Darwin, *The end of empire: the historical debate* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

⁶² See R. Hyam, *Empire and sexuality: the British experience* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), M. Bell, R. Butlin & M. Heffernan (eds.), *Geography and imperialism 1820-1940* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1995), J.A. Mangan (ed.), *The cultural bond: sport, empire and society* (London: Frank Cass, 1992), K. Castle, *Britannia’s children: reading colonialism through children’s books and magazines* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1996), J. Richards (ed.), *Imperialism and juvenile literature* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1989), and J. MacKenzie (ed.) *The empire of nature: hunting and conservation, and British imperialism* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1988).

⁶³ Published in Cambridge by the Cambridge University Press, 1996.

the time in which historians wrote and the influences on them.”⁶⁴ Remarkably, the volume has included one essay acknowledging the impact of colonial discourse theory on the history writing of the British Empire.⁶⁵ Overall, the achievements of the contributors are impressive.

⁶⁴ Robin W. Winks (ed.) *The Oxford history of the British Empire*, v.5: *Historiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.1.

⁶⁵ D.A. Washbrook, “Orients and occidents; colonial discourse theory and the historiography of the British Empire” in Winks (ed.) *The Oxford history of the British Empire*, v.5: *Historiography*, pp.596-611.

Chapter Three – Politics and Historiography in Communist China

(A) The Tradition of Chinese Historiography¹

History was written in traditional China for a very specific purpose: to teach a moral lesson. It was used to “praise” and to “blame” so that all individuals, particularly those in high positions, would be constantly mindful of how they would be judged in history. Everyone would like to leave a good name to history. Both the incumbent emperors and the intending usurpers were forewarned of such moral judgements and they were therefore particularly eager to control how history (official history at least) remembered them. Those officials assigned to be historiographers trod an uneasy path – they had the sanctions dictated by Confucianism to follow and the political directives from the emperor to keep. Should they record truthfully, or should they follow only the dictates of their political boss? Should they reflect (using the so-called historical “mirror”) and criticize policies/personalities, or would they be just “yes” men, toeing the emperor’s line? What would be their own “name” in history? Should they protect their own skins, rather than risk saying something, however remotely, offensive? Could they really “praise” and “blame” freely, if at all? What could they do if they really wanted to say something?

Here the observations of Jonathan Unger can be used as a starting point in discussing the relationship between politics and historiography in traditional China:

¹ China has a long and distinguished historiographical tradition. Some of its remarkable characteristics can be stated as follows. First, the Chinese had a deep historical consciousness. Starting from the *Shangshu*, through the *Shiji* and *Zuo zhuan*, traditional Chinese historians were aware of the linkages between the historical past, the present reality and the probable future. Basically, they wrote history with the object of reflecting on grave political decisions. Their emphasis was on “human matters” rather than on the gods or other theological problems. Second, the search for historical truth and objectivity was considered the basic ideal of Chinese historians. They aimed to write without any hiding of historical facts. As a result, they put a very strong emphasis on documentation and research. Third, the Chinese historians accumulated a rich deposit of theories regarding historical facts, narration, interpretation and criticism. In the Tang Dynasty, Liu Zhiji discussed, in addition, issues concerning the form and content of history, principles of historical compilation, problems of literary presentation and the functions of history. Zheng Xuecheng of the Qing Dynasty had critical comments on historians’ attributes such as talent (*cai*), knowledge (*xue*), understanding (*shi*) and integrity (*de*). For an extended discussion of these characteristics, see Cao Jiaji, *Duncuo zhong shambian: ershi shiji de Zhongguo lishixue* [Successive changes amidst obstacles: Chinese historiography in the 20th century] (Beijing: Xiyuan Chubanshe, 2000), pp.11-22. Section A in this chapter deals essentially with the relationship between politics and history writing in traditional China.

The recording and interpretation of history has, for the past two millennia, contained a special significance in China. More than in most other countries, history was and is considered a mirror through which ethical standards and moral transgressions pertinent to the present day could be viewed. This perspective on history was based in Confucian doctrine, which admonished followers to plumb the past for such lessons. It became a method of commentary about contemporary times that members of the literati class learned how to manipulate, sometimes as a means of flattering an incumbent emperor and government – but sometimes as a stratagem for chastising the imperial court. After all, in a centrally controlled empire it was always safer to place one’s criticisms in the past age than to write directly about the present court. Well aware of this potential for allegory, suspicious emperors and their entourages kept a watchful eye open for subversive intent in the historical treatises of the literati. Repeatedly, purges and persecutions in imperial China were rooted in alleged ‘historical’ aspersions, real or imagined, against the imperial majesty.²

Traditional historiographers knew their moral confines and practical limitations. When a new Chinese dynasty was established, they would be asked to “compile” the official history of the old one. More often than not the fallen dynasty was portrayed as morally bankrupt and the government “as a cauldron of corrupt sycophants, scheming empresses, the ambitious relatives of concubines, and weak and vain emperors.”³ “Good” officials, if they ever existed during the period of dynastic decline and moral decadence, were usually banned from participating in politics, or chose to “retire” to the countryside. So the fallen dynasty was portrayed as having lost its mandate to rule and was consequently replaced by a new “legitimate” regime. The argument is of course a circular one: the mandate was supposedly conferred by heaven on those fit to govern; an emperor who fell to the new challenger was by definition not fit to govern and had therefore lost his mandate. Circularity notwithstanding, the concept of the mandate and hence, legitimacy, was always essential in the consideration of the traditional historiographers. All officials and all scholars (which are basically the same, hence the term “scholar-officials”) studied history for such moral lessons.

² Jonathan Unger, “Introduction” in J. Unger (ed.) *Using the past to serve the present: historiography and politics in contemporary China* (Armonk and London: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), p.1.

³ Unger, p.1.

When the political order was “immoral”, it was incumbent upon them to admonish the emperor, using all the lessons they had learnt from history. When nothing more could be done and the emperor still refused to change his ways, ideally, the accomplished scholar-officials should choose to retire, as an act of moral rectitude and political defiance.⁴ They studied the lessons of history so that they could run the country, hopefully in a morally acceptable and harmonious manner. Thus Chinese history was written by these scholar-officials for the purpose of administration, and, for all practical purposes, for themselves.

Here W.J.F. Jenner offers a highly succinct comment: “Chinese governments have, for at least 2,000 years, taken history much too seriously to allow the future to make its own unguided judgements about them. Thus it is that we have a remarkably well-organized published record, covering systematically the last two millennia, that rarely tells an outright lie but passes on the views of earlier bureaucrats as modified by later bureaucrats and deals mainly with matters of concern to the monarchy and to officialdom.”⁵ In other words, Chinese history must be political and administrative, or it is nothing. The task of the traditional historiographers was certainly unenviable. Jenner reminds us that governments in imperial China tried to control what was said in official histories and to decide who were the “goodies” and “baddies.” But “[t]he legitimacy of governments is always worrying, particularly as almost every dynasty won power by methods that were, by strict Confucian standards, shady: hence the extreme sensitivity to anything that may show the founders of one’s own dynasty as gangsters.”⁶ The duty of the historiographers was to show, among other things, that the new dynasties (even though they were established by gangsters after all) were really “legitimate”, with the mandate of heaven rightfully bestowed on them. The twisting and bending of facts was the very skill that the historiographers had to practise, to perfection if possible. They must not leave behind anything too dangerous to be discovered by later generations.

In a similar vein, argued G. Foccardi, Chinese history and historiography were

⁴ Robert P. Weller, “Historians and consciousness: the modern politics of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom”, *Social Research*, 54.4 (1987), p.735.

⁵ W.J.F. Jenner, *The tyranny of history: the roots of China’s crisis* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1994), p.5.

⁶ Jenner, p.10.

only a means to maintain power and society.⁷ Officials responsible for history writing were exhorted to conform to certain norms. They were asked to keep a careful record of events, arranged in dynastic periods. Standard “morality” was supposed to be the only way of judgement. In using the method of “praise and blame” they were to abstain from making their own personal judgement. They should quote from ancient records for the purpose of asserting the present authority and hierarchy. They were also to maintain an appropriate silence regarding certain events.⁸ The last point is probably the best way of achieving self-preservation in the stormy ocean of Chinese politics. To be fair, however, even though traditional Chinese historiographers were asked to abstain from personal judgement, so that they could not use their “straight pen” (*zhibi*, direct narrative) to get involved, we often find them using their “curved pen” (*qubi*, indirect narrative) to get around the set boundaries and exercise a certain amount of critical comment on key issues. We have to read between the lines in order to understand how strenuously and skilfully Chinese historiographers did their job.

(B) Ideology and History in Communist China

The moral confines of traditional China did not suddenly disappear in Communist China. History is still used to “praise” and to “blame”, but it is given a new dress, a Marxian dress. The categories of “good” and “bad” are made with reference to their position vis-à-vis the Chinese Communist Revolution. In the Maoist era (in fact all the way up to 1978), the Chinese Communist Party was very eager to fit China’s modern history into a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist dress, putting China into the mainstream of a socialist developmental path. Various stages in China’s history were made to parallel one of the five stages of Marxist historical materialism: primitive communism, slave society, feudal society, capitalism and socialism. But the strait-jacket has been difficult to put on and the danger is clear: “This kind of historiography voided China’s history of its uniqueness by implying that historians should leave out all aspects of China’s history that could not conform with the dynamism of historical evolution as laid down in historical materialism.”⁹

⁷ Gabriele Foccardi, *Rambling on my mind: writings on Chinese civilization and sinology 1982-1985* (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1986), p.10.

⁸ Foccardi, pp.21-22.

⁹ Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, “On *shi* and *lun*: toward a typology of historiography in the PRC,” *History and Theory* 35.4 (1996), p.90.

According to Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, “Historians working under the ideological guidance of Marxism-Leninism know the truth about the present as well as the past and the future, the reason they consult history is limited to verifying time and again that the overall theoretical guidance of historical materialism is correct. Thus historiography in this context is a way of making Marxism-Leninism understandable and plausible by confronting it with the concreteness of history. History is but a tool within the overall task of propagating Marxism-Leninism.”¹⁰ For historians now turned into propagandists, Unger considers this extremely wasteful: “The historians, in short, were to serve as handmaidens to the Party propagandists. A huge quantity of stereotypic writing on peasant rebellions was duly produced, with the details duly filled in, but the larger answers were already known, already dictated by the guardians of Party ideology. So, too a vast amount of time and intelligence was wasted by historians upon a search for the exact timing of each of the stages of history, to fit the preconceived notions handed down to them by Party leadership.”¹¹

To the Chinese Communists, truth in history is what they want it to be. They do not necessarily falsify historical data but they have no hesitation in selecting and manipulating data that serves their purposes. The “past” is just a storehouse for the party historians to dip in for selective information, and when the political demands for a particular line are great, all principles governing the search for historical truth can be discarded without a second thought.¹² In the name of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought, the Chinese Communists have “push[ed] forward Communist social values and attitudes by controlling and reshaping both intellectual discourse and public sentiment. Given the importance of images of history in shaping both intellectual and popular thought in China, special attention was to be focused on ensuring that the proper line was followed by historians.”¹³ Political loyalty and conformity are stressed over and above objectivity and truth (even though the two terms are problematic themselves).

¹⁰ Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, p.91.

¹¹ Unger, p.3.

¹² Ying-shih Yu, “The study of Chinese history: retrospect and prospect” in George Kao (ed.) *The translation of things past: Chinese history and historiography* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1982), p.12.

¹³ Unger, p.2.

Even more importantly, the Chinese Communists have used historical allegories or “attack by innuendo” [*yingshe*] in their political struggles for power. Different factions were prone to use the method of “pointing at the mulberry to criticize the ash” [*zhisang mahuai*] and political leaders (Mao Zedong included of course) were all alert to this particular game. Once detected, they would try to mobilize their own propaganda machine to enter into the fray. The debates engendered were certainly not just a matter of academic interest and the outcome of these sometimes bloody “historical” debates would often end up in important political and personnel changes.

The best example is certainly Wu Han’s historical drama “Hai Rui Dismissed from Office”. This drama first appeared in January 1961. In it, the Ming official Hai Rui was portrayed as an honest official whose dismissal from office was caused by his opposition to the Emperor’s land policy. The historical analogies were clear. Mao Zedong had been criticized for his role in the Great Leap Forward (1958-1959), and Peng Dehuai, who had criticized Mao, was wrongfully dismissed. Deng Tuo and Liao Mosha (Wu Han’s supporters) joined in to satirize Chairman Mao in other journals and newspapers. It was suggested that a coordinated anti-Mao campaign was being hatched.¹⁴ Mao was furious and he knew of his own precarious position. The remarks of Mao himself were most clear to show his awareness of being targeted: “The crux of ‘Hai Rui Dismissed from Office’ was the question of dismissal from office. The Jiajing [Chia-ching] Emperor dismissed Hai Rui from office. In 1959 we dismissed Peng Dehuai from office. And Peng Dehuai is Hai Rui too.”¹⁵ Mao, being a voracious reader of history himself, certainly knew he was taken to be the Jiajing Emperor. To him, there was no doubt that Wu Han and his group of supporters had raised their dissent over the Great Leap Forward policies and because dissent in China was read as disloyalty, they had to be seen as planning a political conspiracy against the Chairman. Mao’s counter-attack came in November 1965 when he instructed Yao Wenyuan to criticize Wu Han’s historical drama. This was the first salvo for launching

¹⁴ An alternative view does not see Wu Han, Deng Tuo and Liao Mosha as collaborating to satirize Mao and his policies. In fact, Wu Han’s play about Hai Rui pleased rather than offended Mao when it appeared in January 1961. Most probably, the charge against Wu, Deng and Liao was only fabricated in a later year (probably in 1965). See Roderick MacFarquhar, *The origins of the Cultural Revolution, 3: the coming of the cataclysm 1961-1966* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp.249-258.

¹⁵ Quoted in Tom Fisher, “‘The play’s the thing’: Wu Han and Hai Rui revisited” in Unger (ed.) *Using the past to serve the present*, p.15.

the Cultural Revolution.

In other similar incidents, Mao might be implicitly alluded to as Qin Shihuang, Han Wudi or Ming Taizu, depending on the circumstances. Mao was often depicted as despotic, vainglorious or obsessive in the use of terror. Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, was likewise alluded to as Empress Wu or Empress Lu (which might be good or bad depending on the spin), two of the most powerful Empresses in Chinese history. Jiang Qing's supporters tried to legitimize her pretension to power. Confucius (with his association with the Duke of Zhou) became Premier Zhou Enlai. To his Gang-of-Four detractors, Zhou was alleged to have resisted Chairman's Mao revolutionary line, and had planned a "Confucian" restoration of "reactionary politics."

Observers from outside China might wonder why the Chinese were doing all this, draping their political conflicts in historical garb. According to Robert Oxnam,

One possible reason is a Chinese penchant for subtlety, particularly when dealing with explosive issues... Another reason is that historical allegory permits a game to be played on several levels, each level with its own political significance. It permits a political faction to initiate a debate as a 'trial balloon,' seeing how and whether opposing factions will respond to the initiative. It permits a period in which the top leaders can try to rally support among subordinate leaders, the 'inner court' reaching out to the 'outer court' in traditional parlance, before bringing the whole struggle out into the open. And it eventually permits the leadership to develop a public education campaign around the issues and personalities involved. The historical allegories are a contemporary use of the past that parallels a traditional use of the past in form but not in content.¹⁶

I have already talked about the problem of "straight pen" and "curved pen" in Chinese historiography and it would be unfair to the Mainland Chinese historians to say that all of them were uninterested in seeking "historical truth" in a less ideological sense. Some of these historians (especially for those trained before 1949) were certainly uneasy about the excessive ideological strait-jacket and they tried various

¹⁶ Robert Oxnam, "The past is still present" in Ross Terrill (ed.) *The China difference* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1979), p.73.

means to get around it. With the achievements and uniqueness of the Chinese past in mind they could not totally surrender Chinese history to the imported schemata of Marxist historical materialism. The debate between the so-called “historicists” and the advocates of “class viewpoint” in the late 1950s (up to just before the Cultural Revolution) reminds us of the complexities involved. As summarised by Dirlik and Schneider:

Class viewpoint as employed in the debate described the view that took class division as the most important datum in the interpretation of the past and regarded the struggle of the oppressed against their oppressors as the motive force of history. Its proponents demanded that historical events and personages be evaluated chiefly, if not exclusively, in terms of their attitudes toward and contributions to class struggle. The historicists, *without denying the centrality of class analysis* [my emphasis], objected to this view which ignored all aspects of history but the allegedly unabated conflict between the exploiters and the exploited. Historicism, in their view, helped reveal the complexity of class structures in history, and the attenuations of relations between classes, *by placing historical events in their temporal social context* [my emphasis].¹⁷

What I can gather from the debate (a political debate in itself, to be sure) between “historicism” and “class viewpoint” is that the historicists (such as Wu Han and Fan Wenlan) were trying to emphasize the importance of temporality in historical events and of not measuring the ancients by modern standards. On the surface, they still used Marxian terminology (so as to signify their political allegiance to the ruling ideology, the rule of the game) in the debate. But they were too much of a “Chinese” historian after all and they tried to de-radicalize the challenges from the proponents of the “class viewpoint”. To the “historicists”, history taken out of the time frame was not history at all; it was just politics or polemics dressed in historical garb. “Historicism” was certainly too conservative for the liking of Chairman Mao and his radical supporters. Mao regarded these “historicists” and other “dissidents” as the first step to overthrow his political power and disinherit his revolutionary spirit. Generally,

¹⁷ Arif Dirlik & Laurence Schneider, “The People’s Republic of China” in G.G. Iggers and H.T. Parker (eds.) *International handbook of historical studies: contemporary research and theory* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979), p.354.

the “dissidents” would verbally go “along with Mao’s demands for renewed class struggle, but actually they were reluctant to embark on a new campaign for fear it might lead to disruptions like those produced by the Great Leap Forward.”¹⁸ They were trying to dampen Mao’s revolutionary fervour by saying that whereas class struggle might have governed western historical development the same could not be applied to China without major modifications. They argued that contradictions between classes could be non-antagonistic and were not always irreconcilable.¹⁹ This was the background of the historical debate just before the Cultural Revolution.

The debate was important and the arguments of Wu Han, Fan Wenlan, Zhou Yang, Jian Bozan and Feng Youlan were crucial because in terms of Chinese Communist organization, they were some of the people occupying the first rank in handling party historiography. They held leading positions in the Academy of Social Sciences or the Central Party School or the Chinese People’s University. Most of them also participated in national policy making because they were not only historiographers but some were also influential members of the CCP. Because of their experience and loyalty to the CCP they were assigned two tasks: as educators writing party history and training teachers for the universities, and as advisers to the Central Committee on questions of party history. They had privileged access to confidential archives. All other junior historians of the second and third ranks were not so privileged and for all practical purposes were little more than messengers disseminating the officially approved version of history.²⁰ One final point I would like to add is that while it is correct to say that whilst the task of all party historians or historiographers was supposedly to propagate Communist orthodoxy, I do not see the Chinese Communist regime as a watertight monolith. There have been variations in the understanding of Communist ideology and hence variations in the handling of Chinese history, which is not as flat and monotonous as some commentators would lead one to believe.

To be fair, the impact of political ideology on historical studies is not confined to

¹⁸ Merle Goldman, “The role of history in party struggle, 1962-4.” *China Quarterly*, 51 (1972), p.501.

¹⁹ Goldman, p.504.

²⁰ Susanne Weigeli-Schwiedrzik, “Party historiography” in Unger (ed.) *Using the past to serve the present*, pp.158-159.

Communist regimes only. In 1950, at the height of the Cold War, the president of the American Historical Association openly admitted his own ideological orientation, and the remark is recorded here for the sake of balance:

Total war, whether hot or cold, enlists everyone and calls upon everyone to do his part. The historian is no freer from this obligation than the physicist... If historians, in their examination of the past, represent the evolution of civilization as haphazard, without direction and without progress, offering no assurance that mankind's present position is on the highway and not on some dead end, then mankind will seek for assurance in a more positive alternative, whether it be offered from Rome or from Moscow... This sounds like the advocacy of one form of social control over another. In short, it is... The important thing is that we shall accept and endorse such controls as are essential for the preservation of our way of life.²¹

(C) Key Foci of Chinese Communist Historiography (up to about 1980)

Speaking to the Chinese Historical Society in 1951, Guo Moruo argued that Chinese historians under the leadership of the CCP had entered a new era with regard to their method, style of work, purpose and subject of study. He listed six items in this consideration:

1. The old idealistic view of history was gradually being replaced by the materialistic view of history.
2. Collective research was gradually replacing individual studies.
3. Historical research, hitherto an "ivory tower" enterprise, was gradually turning to serve the people.
4. The attitude of adoration of the past and contempt for the present was gradually giving way to appreciation of the modern period.
5. Han chauvinism was gradually giving way to consideration for the national minorities.
6. Emphasis on European and American history was gradually ceding place to

²¹ Quoted in D.A.L. Martin, *The making of a Sino-Marxist world view: perceptions and interpretations in the People's Republic of China* (Armonk & London: M.E. Sharpe, 1990), p.12.

attention to Asian history.²²

(1) All of the six items are problematic and I would like to use them to start off the discussion. Some of the points are given an extended commentary. First, the so-called “old idealistic view of history” has traditionally focused on the superstructure and in the Chinese context it means putting the emphasis on emperors, kings, generals and prime ministers, as a matter of course. And again because of the authoritarian nature of Chinese society, those in power (e.g. landlords and the gentry class) were given prominence over the commoners. Traditional historiographers, writing from their official point of view, would naturally consider only the people at the top worthy of attention. So, in the eye of the Chinese Communists, there was already a great distortion in terms of historical sources. Political performance of the “feudal” leaders was considered as a reflection of their moral behaviour, a fallacy of pure “idealism” in the CCP viewpoint. The common people, irrespective of their great and numerical size, did not occupy much space and were really the “silent” majority.

Historical materialism, on the other hand, focused on the material (or socio-economic) basis and the relations of production. In particular, attention was focused on the masses and hence the peasants in the traditional context. Peasant revolts and wars (considered as the expression of the class struggles of the past) were given top priority, believed to be the real motive force of historical development in China’s feudal society. According to Mao Zedong, “...each of the major peasant risings and wars dealt a blow to the existing feudal regime and more or less furthered the development of the social productive forces.”²³ But there is an important attachment to this note: The “righteous uprisings of the peasants” did not and could not achieve much because the peasants as a class were not the historical equivalent of the proletariat and, what is more, the traditional peasants had not been led by the CCP which alone could lead China to a successful revolution. Though the peasants knew that they were oppressed they were unable to attain the correct class consciousness. This has to await the coming of the proletariat and the CCP leadership, the assumption being that only the working class and its vanguard know the real wishes of the masses.

²² Quoted in Albert Feuerwerker, “China’s history in Marxian dress” in A. Feuerwerker (ed.) *History in Communist China* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968), p.36.

²³ Quoted in Feuerwerker, p.16.

In any case, the focus on peasant wars has its own ideological significance: it was, in the description of James Harrison, “the most massive attempt at ideological re-education in human history, the effort to inculcate attitudes of struggle in place of the traditional emphasis on harmony.”²⁴ The peasants were also considered as “the only true patriots” in their struggles against imperialism.

One question: why choose peasants? The conservative character of the peasants and their longing to become small landowners have been noted by Marx himself. They might not be “revolutionary” after all. But as Harrison has argued, “In the absence of a significant bourgeois revolution or modern labor movement, the peasant revolts perforce assume a position of importance comparable to the modern labor movement in Western Marxist historiography as the direct forerunners of the communist revolution.”²⁵ Chinese history has to fit into the Marxian world history schemata. The peasants had struggled for two millennia against “feudal exploitation”. But most importantly, from the CCP’s historiographical point of view, the glorious revolutionary tradition of the Chinese peasants had laid the “foundation on which the peasants were able to accept the leadership of the proletariat.”²⁶

Viewed more dispassionately and related to the historical scene of the pre-1980 years, the emphasis on the peasants and their class struggles is a change of paradigm against traditional historiography. The Chinese Communists have certainly been writing didactic history and Harrison reminds us of their historical method: “They select those sources which ‘reveal the real facts of history’ rather than those which ‘slander the peasant revolts,’ and they are instructed to use those materials which ‘show the crimes of the governing class’ rather than those which ‘glorify the government at the expense of the people.’”²⁷ The peasants are at least given a place in history, even though in a Marxian guise.

(2) The second point about collective research over individual studies is a corollary

²⁴ James P. Harrison, “Chinese communist interpretations of the Chinese peasant wars” in A. Feuerwerker (ed.) *History in Communist China*, p.189.

²⁵ James P. Harrison, *The Communists and Chinese peasant rebellions: a study in the rewriting of Chinese history* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1970). p.6.

²⁶ Harrison, *The Communists and Chinese peasant rebellions*, p.273.

²⁷ Harrison, *The Communists and Chinese peasant rebellions*, p.15.

of socialist ideology. If the masses are to be given more prominence their “wisdom” has to be trusted. Equally, with socialism considered as a collectivist ideology, individual distinction has to be minimized and knowledge (historical or otherwise) could be and has to be “socialized”. Of course, it is questionable whether the approach is practicable or not. The authoritarian nature of the Chinese polity (with Chairman Mao at the apex) would still gravitate toward the glorification of the top leaders, negating some of the efforts of “the socialism of knowledge”, if we can put it as such.

(3) The promotion of getting out of the ivory tower and serving the people, in Guo Moruo’s third point, is again a natural corollary of the establishment of the Chinese socialist order. It was a hope of the CCP to give priority to the “workers, peasants and soldiers” in receiving higher education and if this could be done the structure of the ruling class would be transformed in favour of socialism. Equally, historical research should also be proletarianized (emphasizing the peasant revolts, among other things) and it was hoped thereby to serve the interest of the people. The problem, however, is that in writing “proletarian heroes” the narrative has tended to be rather flat and stereotypic. The life of these heroes appears to be unrealistic (the heroes are “models” rather than real people) and thus is not able to arouse the interest of the common-folk readers. The slogan of “serving the people” tends to become “serving the party” instead. Friedman has described the phenomenon very clearly: “The Party insisted on literature for ‘the people,’ but ‘the people’ were defined by a discourse that treated all toilers as socialist utopianism would have them. Such descriptions would not portray recognizable people, the diversity and difficulties of people as they were, because they were treated as they absolutely were not; that is, as masters of the state. A compelling language that could touch the shared real plight of the powerless who were victims of the new state, when they had already been imagined by Leninism as the nation’s masters, was impossible.”²⁸

This is partly the reason why, starting in the late 1970s, a newly arisen group of “mass media historians” (e.g. Liu Binyan, Dai Qing, Ye Yonglie and Yan Jiaqi) came to prominence. Their histories have been more readable (and marketable) and according to Geremie Barme, these were (and still are) the real “history for the

²⁸ Edward Friedman, *National identity and democratic prospects in socialist China* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), pp.96-97.

masses”.²⁹ The significance of this group of writers is clear: “These mass media historians created a semi-official and at times even unofficial forum for the airing of controversial questions. While some have merely added footnotes to official history, or created wildly colourful fictional accounts of certain figures, periods and incidents, others have been involved in the creation of a ‘parallel history’ to that presented by the Party.”³⁰

The point about “parallel history” is certainly most important. If the legitimacy of the CCP rests on its control of how history is written, the possibility and the existence of a “parallel history” may lead to the questioning of the legitimacy of the Party. People might wonder why Party history has been written and re-written so many times, why there is a need to write one new official history when a new political orientation is launched. The June 1981 official party history is a good example. Among other things, it gave a new interpretation of the Cultural Revolution. Bill Brugger has outlined some of the key points: “The official history points out that the Cultural Revolution was seen as an attack on ‘revisionism’. This term is now considered to be meaningless outside the official pronouncements... Secondly, it is argued in the official history that the Cultural Revolution confused right with wrong... Thirdly, the official history argues that the Cultural Revolution was not really a mass movement. This was apparently because the overwhelming majority of the population did not want to see Party organization attacked... Fourthly, the official history has decided that the Cultural Revolution was not a revolution at all; nor could it be... That the Cultural Revolution led to disaster is fairly clear.”³¹ The official history of 1981 has finally confirmed what the “mass media historians” wrote about “the God [Chairman Mao] that failed”. In the end, people might just ignore what the Party would like to write (because it might be re-written later) and rely more on the “parallel history,” and in that case, there is a real possibility for pluralism in China. History in this sense might really serve the people instead of the Party.

²⁹ Geremie Barme, “History for the masses” in Unger (ed.), *Using the past to serve the present*, pp.260-286.

³⁰ Barme, p.270.

³¹ Bill Brugger, “Once again, ‘making the past serve the present’: a critique of the Chinese Communist Party’s new official history” in N. Maxwell and B. McFarlane (eds.) *China’s changed road to development* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1984), pp.176-177.

(4) The fourth point concerns the alteration from contempt to adoration of the present. Traditionally, the past was considered as the Golden Age in which the best of everything (particularly in relation to moral standards) resided. The (historical) present was at most a corruption of the past and what the political leaders could do was to avert any further corruption or decline by going back to and imitating the past. This attitude of adoring the past and demeaning the present is certainly not to the liking of the CCP which sees their revolution as one of progress. Their present socialist order is already a vindication of their correct historical position – they have triumphed by defeating internal feudalism and external imperialism, and they are moving toward an even brighter future: communism. Their revolutionary historiography has to contradict and overthrow the Confucian concept of adoring some earlier Golden Age.

In adoring the present, the Chinese Communists have emphasized the study of the origins of capitalism in China. They have searched the Song and Ming Dynasties for the so-called “budding of Chinese proto-capitalism”³² and they believed that China’s “feudal” economy (in parallel to Western historical development) had been developing and changing (though sometimes very slowly) towards the capitalist stage. “As China’s feudal society developed its commodity economy and so carried within itself the embryo of capitalism, China would of herself have developed slowly into a capitalist society even if there had been no influence of foreign imperialism,” remarked Mao Zedong.³³

Following the study of Chinese proto-capitalism, the next and logical focus would be imperialism. Foreign capitalism in the 19th century had turned out to be imperialistic and it was imperialism that was the chief villain that had transformed China into a “semi-colonial and semi-feudal” status. As early as 1940, Mao had condemned imperialism, thus: “The history of imperialist aggression upon China, of imperialist opposition to China’s independence and to her development of capitalism, constitutes precisely the history of modern China. Revolutions in China failed one

³² Certainly, the study of the “budding of Chinese proto-capitalism” is also used to prove that the Marxist theory of historical development is correct and universal (i.e. applicable to China).

³³ Quoted in Feuerwerker. “China’s history in Marxian dress”, p.18.

after another because imperialism strangled them.”³⁴

The film *Lin Zexu* (produced in 1959 during the Great Leap Forward period)³⁵ laid bare the anti-imperialism discourse of the Chinese Communists. According to Friedman, the film “drew a contrast between patriotic Sanliyuan [sic] villagers and traitorous ruling groups in the capital city. If the brave peasants would join all patriotic Chinese and not fear to die, then under correct leadership the foreign capitalists who got rich in making Chinese poor by forcing opium into China would be thrown out. But ruling reactionaries, afraid of popular mobilization, preferred to sell out to the imperialists. As with patriots who had led exploited peasants throughout Chinese history, Mao’s Communists would save the nation by providing the correct leadership that would mobilize patriotic Chinese, push imperialists out of China, and thus permit an independent China to prosper with dignity.”³⁶ Symbolically, what China wanted was to have the Chinese stand up, as Mao had proclaimed in 1949 in Tiananmen Square.

Study of the peasant uprisings, proto-capitalism and imperialism (and anti-imperialism) shows very clearly the CCP’s conceptions on the use of history. Taking into account his occasional Cold War rhetoric, Feuerwerker has summarized it rightly as follows: “The study and writing of modern Chinese history in the PRC at the present time [up to 1968] is primarily an ideological exercise and emotional release, repeated over and over again, the function of which is to harness and channel the real political and economic frustrations encountered in China’s nineteenth- and twentieth-century experience in the interests of a new historical integration under the auspices of the CCP.”³⁷

The trouble is, after 1978, the Communist treatment of foreign capitalism and imperialism took an abrupt turn, again dictated by a change of national policy. Deng Xiaoping’s China had changed tack: foreign capitalist investments were to be

³⁴ Quoted in Feuerwerker, “China’s history in Marxian dress”, p.24.

³⁵ For a critical review of the film and a comparison with another film of the same genre *The Opium War* (1997), see Rebecca Karl, “The burden of history: *Lin Zexu* (1959) and *The Opium War* (1997)” in Xudong Zhang (ed.) *Whither China? Intellectual politics in contemporary China* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2001).

³⁶ Friedman, .87.

³⁷ Feuerwerker, “China’s history in Marxian dress”, p.26.

welcomed. Mao's anti-imperialism discourse became obsolete and his revolutionary strategy had blocked (rather than built) China's modernization. Though the Chinese people might have stood up, they remained ashamed of their poverty. In Friedman's words, "Mao-style anti-imperialism has lost its credibility. An overview of Chinese foreign policy as an attempt to respond to imperialist challenges shows that Mao's policy perspective injured the Chinese people and is being discarded."³⁸

Arif Dirlik puts it even more strongly, saying that the Chinese revolution is dead: "The central event of the last decade [1980s] is the repudiation in China of revolution in the name of modernization... At the most basic level, revolution measured in terms of criteria of development has been judged a failure... Secondly, not only did revolution not deliver its developmental promise, but it also obstructed progressive developments in Chinese society, such as its abortion of a civil society... Finally, revolution caused or contributed to the overall degeneration of Chinese society."³⁹

The repudiation of the revolution has to be reflected in the reversals in historical verdicts. Judgements about the Chinese bourgeoisie (including the Guomindang and Taiwanese capitalists), imperialism (including the treaty ports as outposts) and Confucian tradition (including many Confucian leaders) are all given a new interpretation. So in the compilation of Chinese business history, the management practices of the prewar (pre-1945) Chinese capitalists have been hailed as a fruitful source to be emulated. The Chinese bourgeois experience is considered more suitable than the Western and Japanese models precisely because it is Chinese. Of course, the writing of such histories has been affected by united front considerations, i.e., to woo the Taiwanese and overseas Chinese to invest in Mainland China. When communism is losing its appeal, it seems that nationalism is the only legitimizing force that can stand in its place.⁴⁰ But there is a problem here: if the Guomindang were not so bad and if the Taiwanese economic experience has been so wonderful, then how much is left regarding the legitimacy of the CCP and their revolution after all.

³⁸ Friedman, p.118.

³⁹ Arif Dirlik, "Reversals, ironies, hegemonies: notes on the contemporary historiography of modern China", *Modern China*, 22.3 (1996), p.249.

⁴⁰ Tim Wright, "The spiritual heritage of Chinese capitalism" in Unger (ed.) *Using the past to serve the present*, pp.215-216.

Finally, the reversal of official judgements on Confucianism is most indicative of the change of policy. Probably out of a practical and strategic need, Confucianism is now considered as part of the great Chinese heritage. And Confucius himself is certainly regarded by the leadership as a great educator, and the descriptors such as “feudal” and “reactionary” have become unimportant or meaningless. Other Confucianists have had their names revived as well. Before the 1980s, those anti-Taiping leaders such as Zeng Guofan and Li Hongzhang were vilified as “traitors, running dogs and executioners”; now they are considered great Confucianists with great skills in “personnel management” or “national investment planning”. Certainly we are aware that these are modern management terms which might sound out of place when describing these 19th century Chinese officials. But this is how Zeng and Li have been described, again signalling the presentist tendency of the Mainland historians. Zeng, in particular, has been “rediscovered” precisely because he is seen as the national hero who saved China from the political chaos and spiritual emptiness in the 19th century.⁴¹ Present-day China, the argument implies, also needs another Zeng Guofan to resurrect the country.⁴²

(5) The fifth point concerns the tendency of moving away from Han chauvinism to giving more consideration to the national minorities. Communist China proclaims to be a multi-ethnic nation-state and naturally, all the nationalities (*minzu*) should be given due attention (“due” but not necessarily “equal”, because sometimes preferential treatment is given to minorities for the sake of appeasement⁴³). In the 1950s there was a very big project of “ethnic identification” (*minzu shibie*), followed by a whole series of “ethnic work” (*minzu gongzuo*). The ultimate aim was to help raise the “civilization” level of the minorities so that in the end China was to become a truly unified, multi-ethnic state with all the nationalities working together for the

⁴¹ Yingjie Guo and Baogang He, “Reimagining the Chinese nation: the ‘Zeng Guofan phenomenon’,” *Modern China*, 25.2:142-170 (1999), p.147.

⁴² With this in mind, one might wonder what is left of the achievements that can be attributed to the Communist regime. Dirlik (p.251) argues that the Chinese Communist regime appears to be an interregnum and will be overwhelmed by modernization. Certainly, Dirlik’s ideological (anti-communist) stance must be noted.

⁴³ Appeasement is certainly needed as many minorities harbour hatred against Han Chinese domination. One way is to recruit ethnic minorities into the CCP so that they are cultivated to identify with the “national” interests. See Jonathan Spence, *The search for modern China* (New York & London: W.W. Norton, 1990), pp.556-557.

common goals of socialism and national unity.⁴⁴ Part of the “ethnic work” was to write the histories of these national minorities and it is where problems have been emerging. The key stumbling block remains Han chauvinism: it is Han culture that sets the standard in measuring the ethnic minorities. Often the minorities are stigmatized as being backward, uncivilized, dirty, stupid, lazy, erotic, and bigoted, and they all need Han culture to civilize them. Those individuals selected from different ethnic groups to participate in the history projects could not write their own history without restriction. The basic parameters are clearly defined, as described by Harrell: “Insofar as civilizing projects are wholly or partly successful, they include the participation of the peripheral peoples [the *minzu* in China]. And in fact, as long as peripheral peoples agree, at least on the surface, to the terms of definition and scaling imposed by the civilizers, the civilizees will be granted a voice to speak to themselves and the world about the success of the project. In this sense, the answer to whether the subaltern can speak is that the subaltern can speak on the sufferance of the civilizer. Voice is granted on the provision that it will speak in favor of the project, or at least in the project’s terms.”⁴⁵

Here theory and practice begin to diverge. In the first place, the participation of ethnic groups in the history project would always enhance ethnic consciousness, despite the restrictions imposed. The basic question to ask is “Who are we?” In the study of the contending conceptions of the Yao past (the Yao people are a national minority in Guangxi and Yunnan), Litzinger questions whether the official Yao history could always be expropriated and incorporated into the larger PRC historical discourse (of national unity and modernization).⁴⁶ The next problem is when the ethnic minorities could become really “mature” and “civilized” (both heavily value-laden terms), and thus really granted equality with the Han majority. Does equality mean the possibility of sharing power, including the power of speaking for themselves (without guidance or sufferance from the Han majority)? What would

⁴⁴ Stevan Harrell, “Introduction: civilizing projects and the reaction to them” in S. Harrell (ed.) *Cultural encounters on China’s ethnic frontiers* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1995), pp.23-24.

⁴⁵ Harrell, p.34.

⁴⁶ Ralph A. Litzinger, “Making histories: contending conceptions of the Yao past” in S. Harrell (ed.) *Cultural encounters on China’s ethnic frontiers*, p.136.

happen if they are always denied equal empowerment?⁴⁷ It is possible that the rise of ethnic historical consciousness would produce discontent against Han Chinese rule: the ethnic groups might not consider themselves as Chinese after all.

Jenner adds another dimension to the problem of Han chauvinism. He explains, “It is almost impossible for a Han Chinese historian to treat [dispassionately] of struggles between Han Chinese and other ethnic groups without seeing the former as ‘us’ and the others as ‘them’. Few contemporary Chinese would regard the wars between the Han and the Xiongnu or the Qiang as Chinese civil conflicts in which ‘we’ were divided.”⁴⁸ So resistance against the “invaders” was always described as “righteous and patriotic”. But then there is a strange change of mindset – the territories conquered by the Mongols and Manchus were to be rightfully called “Chinese”: “Conquerors such as the Mongols of the thirteenth century and the Manchus of the seventeenth have been turned by historical labelling into Chinese dynasties, so that their empires become Chinese empires and their territories sacred and inviolable. Thus history as a cultural invention has helped to keep today’s Han Chinese in the trap of imperialism, the imperialism of the mind that finds self-affirmation in the subjection of others.”⁴⁹

(6) The last point of Guo Moruo’s concerns the shifting emphasis from Europe/America to Asia. Again this concern is not unproblematic. There is always an ambivalence: Europe and America are always the economic model or developmental target to be caught up with, and without a good understanding of them (know thy enemy) it is quite impossible to reach the target. Asia (indeed Africa and South America as well) is the location of the Third World and for foreign policy considerations the Asian countries are to be wooed into a China-led anti-hegemony alliance. Finally, the Chinese Communists have to get rid of the “Asiatic mode of production” stigma, which they see as one of despotism and obscurantism.

(D) Some Reflections Up to about 1980

⁴⁷ Harrell, p.35.

⁴⁸ Jenner, p.3.

⁴⁹ Jenner, p.4.

The remarks of Robert Weller can be used for reflection: "Academic discourse in the PRC is strikingly political by comparison with Western standards. Chinese readily read historical accounts as political metaphors, the historiography of many fields tends to follow changes in the political line, and analyses of seemingly distant and trivial events have occasionally set intellectual heads rolling. The political weight of history in China relates in part to a willingness to take history seriously as a teacher for the present and in part to a strong recognition that intellectuals are influential actors whose statements have social and political roots and consequences."⁵⁰ This chapter has already established the linkage between politics and historiography in Communist China. The point about the intellectuals' involvement in politics can be extended further. Because of the authoritarian nature of Chinese society, contemporary intellectuals in the PRC are very similar to the scholar-officials of the past – while still numerically small, they are strategically important. They have always assumed a sense of responsibility toward the nation-state. And along with it, there come power and privileges. Traditionally (and in fact up to 1980s) most of the intellectuals (historians included) would choose the political career as the best means of social advancement. We would like them to exercise their power and privileges responsibly. But the story so far is probably a mixed record. The historians among them still do not dare to write history for history's sake and a large number of them have been writing for the state only. Intellectuals do not yet constitute a class in itself in the civil society (if the latter has ever existed in China, traditional or contemporary). We might have to await a fuller development of the Chinese economy and a greater exposure to the world before intellectuals (historians included) can become a more independent voice. They might need to scale down the importance of history in the first place, to take it less "seriously". A new historical paradigm will certainly arise if they do not need to rewrite history every time political changes occur.

(E) The Historiographical Scene in the 1980s and 1990s

Though not completely free from political interference, the historiographical scene in China has witnessed remarkable changes since 1978. First of all, many historians came to believe that some kind of soul-searching was needed. They frankly

⁵⁰ Weller, p.731.

admit the errors of dogmatism of the 1950s and 1960s, as reflected in the leading history journal, *Lishi Yanjiu*.⁵¹ Yu Pei blames this phenomenon partly on the impact of Soviet historiography, arguing that, because of the distortions in Soviet historiography, Chinese historians were not able to use scientific Marxist historical materialism. Chinese historians had narrowly limited themselves to the class viewpoint and ignored historicism, focusing only on political history and the history of class struggles, and ignoring economic history, intellectual history, cultural history, etc.⁵²

The next issue concerns the Cultural Revolution. Certainly, the revulsion against the excesses of the Cultural Revolution facilitated the launching of the policies in favour of openness and reform, and the same occurred in historiography. The field of history writing (being a *zhongzai qu* [heavily-devastated region] during the Cultural Revolution) has to know its own past mistakes so as to recover from its deep wounds and to rebuild its own integrity. Li Wenhai has been very candid about this: “allegorical historical writing” [*yingshe shixue*] was very rampant during the period of the Cultural Revolution and through the distortion and fabrication of history for the purpose of “reactionary politics”, it produced extremely ugly effects on social and academic life.⁵³ The ugly effects certainly include the wrecking of the prestige and legitimacy of history as an academic discipline. Many “political adventurers” had posed as “historians” and made use of historiographical terms in distorting historical facts, making history no more than a servile slave of politics.⁵⁴ Not only that, many real and scholarly historians suffered personal disaster: “During the Cultural Revolution, historians could not hold their line [i.e. maintain their professionalism], historiography was rendered totally as a tool of political struggles...Historians lost their integrity, and were trampled by everybody at will. Historiography did not only stagnate but it totally deviated from its normal path. Many historians perished in

⁵¹ Song Dejin, “*Lishi Yanjiu* sishi nian” [The forty years of *Lishi Yanjiu*], *Lishi Yanjiu* 1:33-38 (Dec 1994), p.35.

⁵² Yu Pei, “Waiguo shixue lilun de yinru he huixiang” [Introduction of historiographic theories from abroad and its repercussions], *Lishi Yanjiu* 3:145-160 (June 1996), p.155.

⁵³ Li Wenhai, “Qiuzhen caineng zhiyong” [Seeking reality in history study and making full use of historical wisdom (original translation)], *Shixue Yuekan* 4:5-7 (2001), p.5.

⁵⁴ Qu Lindong, “Guanyu yingxiang ershiyi shiji Zhongguo shixue fazhan de jige wenti” [Several problems on the development of Chinese historiography in the 21st century], *Shixue yuekan* 6:5-8 (2001), p.7.

atrocious, indescribable circumstances.”⁵⁵

There were two basic reactions among the Chinese historians after condemning political interference in history and admitting past mistakes. The first reaction was to avoid, as far as possible, “political” issues in historical research. According to He Xiaoming, by comparing the contents of *Lishi Yanjiu* [Historical Research] between the periods 1956-1965 and 1984-1989, the former period has some 58% focusing on “politicized historical works” and it falls to only 13% in the latter period.⁵⁶ The general understanding among most historians or at least the appeal is that historical research should not be subordinated to any kind of temporary or partial or even erroneous political needs.⁵⁷

The second reaction was the search for the reasons of their past mistakes and the causes of political interference in history in China. In the first place, many historians did not believe that their Marxist historiographical approach had been hindering their soul-searching. They still insisted on the correctness of the Marxist theoretical framework, only that they had not correctly interpreted and applied Marxist historiography.⁵⁸ Ge and Wang argue that “in terms of quantity and quality of research contributions, [historical] empiricism cannot match that of Marxism... but Marxist historiography has to renew itself, has to undergo rigorous self-reflection and develop a new and original theoretical system.”⁵⁹ So we can see some kind of veiled attack on the inadequacies in Marxist historiography but Chinese historians cannot still go far enough in their critique. This is the reason why the urge for separating history from politics remains suspect.

There might yet be another explanation. After paying lip service to Marxist ideology, these historians continue to do their own research all the same. In the study

⁵⁵ Cao Jiayi, *Duncao zhong shanbian: ershi shiji de Zhongguo lishixue* [Successive changes amidst obstacles: Chinese historiography in the 20th century] (Beijing: Xiyuan Chubanshe, 2000), p.170.

⁵⁶ He Xiaoming, “Xiangluo minjian: ershiyi shiji Zhongguo lishixue zouxiang guankui” [Descending down to the people: the perspectives on Chinese historiography in the 21st century], *Shixue Lilun Yanjiu*, 1:68-71 (January 2001), p.69.

⁵⁷ Lin Ganquan, “Xinde qidian: shiji zhijiao de Zhongguo lishixue” [A new starting point: Chinese historiography at the turn of the century], *Lishi Yanjiu*, 4:5-17 (August 1997), p.6.

⁵⁸ Lin, pp.11-14.

⁵⁹ Ge Hongyuan and Wang Depeng, “Zhanwang ershiyi shiji de Zhongguo shixue” [Perspectives on Chinese historiography in the 21st century], *Shixueshi Yanjiu*, 4:76-78 (2001), p.76.

of the history of Chinese political institutions, Bai Gang urges historians to adopt a pragmatic approach, to guard against over-simplification and “absolutization” [*jueduihua*]. He is frank enough to admit that the “feudal” political institutions in history were not just tools of class oppression: “They had the functions of managing public affairs. The rulers used all kinds of political institutions to regulate all kinds of political relationships. This kind of political body contributed to the prosperity of the society, feudal culture, national unification, resistance against foreign incursions. All these showed that they had the functions of managing public affairs.”⁶⁰ Again, with reference to Chinese cultural history, according to Zhou Jiming, it is certainly wrong to reduce the thousands of years of cultural history to the history of class struggles. To him, human history is not just the rise and fall of classes alone.⁶¹

In any case, we can see how earnestly the Chinese historians have tried to re-establish the integrity of the historical discipline. The advocacy of Chen Tiejian is genuine enough:

Historically, historiography has not been a prominent discipline [*xianxue*]. When it is glorious, it is mostly at the service of politics. If you don’t believe it, just look at the time of the Cultural Revolution when false histories were flooding all over the place. The first principle of history is truthfulness. The first quality of a historian is his unrestrictedness in exposing the facts. The work of historians should be to ‘expose the good points and to punish the evils’, to let people know of the achievements and their contributors in history and to show the world the evils and the evil-doers so that they cannot escape from being noticed. History should portray the tortuous and difficult path of the nation’s development so as to arouse people’s memory and their rational thinking. People would get rid of their ignorance and humiliation, would help in the direction towards modernization, and not be bound by party struggles only. History is part of our culture. It must be made to be believable. History should conclude and learn from mistakes and errors. The value of its existence is not for ‘the propaganda of the victors’.⁶²

⁶⁰ Bai Gang, “Ershi shiji de Zhongguo zhengzhi jidushi yanjiu” [Studies on the history of Chinese political institutions in the 20th century], *Lishi Yanjiu* 6:157-171 (Dec 1996), p.168.

⁶¹ Zhou Jiming, “Ershi shiji de Zhongguo wenhuashi yanjiu” [Studies on China’s cultural history in the 20th century], *Lishi Yanjiu* 6:122-142 (Dec 1997), p.131.

⁶² Chen Tiejian, “Zhencheng de shijia, zhenshi de lishi” [Faithful historians, truthful history] *Shixue*

These Chinese historians hope that by learning from these mistakes they can remove the society's misunderstanding and help to resurrect the rightful integrity of Chinese historiography. There is still a long way to go in achieving this target.

In the meantime, they have pledged to reform the historiographical field in the following ways by: 1. giving more emphasis to comparative studies of Chinese and foreign histories; 2. reflecting on the use of theories and methods of western historiography; 3. encouraging new interpretations of old historical problems or personages; 4. inviting a multi-dimensional and inter-disciplinary approach to historical research; 5. studying new social categories other than "class" and 6. adopting a more "from-the-bottom-up or grassroots" approach in historical research.⁶³ With all these in mind, in the end and most probably, a historiography with distinct Chinese characteristics will be built.⁶⁴

The present threat to historical writing, however, comes from a different direction: the threat of the commodification of history. According to Lin, under market socialism, the academic achievement of historical studies has to take a form of exchangeable commodity and he asks how historical studies can, under these circumstances, preserve their own scientific and independent quality.⁶⁵ It is welcoming that the Chinese historians are more aware of their shortcomings and the challenges ahead. With this in view, we may conclude that the self-enclosed academic conditions of the pre-1980s have been broken and we will foresee a more heartening development in the scene of Chinese historiography in the 21st century.

(F) Politics and Historiography: Similarities in Britain and China

Both colonial British and Chinese (traditional and communist) historiographies are similar in their claim that history serves a moral and political function. Both try to

yuekan, 5:7-8 (2001), p.8.

⁶³ Lin, pp.7-9; He, p.70 and see also Zhao Shiyu and Deng Qingping, "Ershi shiji Zhongguo shehuishi yanjiu de huigu yu sikao" [A retrospective and consideration of studies on the Chinese social history in the 20th century], *Lishi Yanjiu* 6:157-172 (September 2001), pp.165-166 and 169.

⁶⁴ Hu Sheng, "Ruhe jianshe Zhongguo xinwenhua" [How to construct a new culture for China], *Lishi Yanjiu* 1:3-4 (Feb 1995), p.4.

⁶⁵ Lin, p.16.

moralize the leaders and the people in general that history teaches some important lessons. For the British colonial historians, the preservation and expansion of the British Empire was at stake. Equally, for the traditional Chinese historians, the wellbeing of the Chinese Empire was dependent on a critical reflection of past historical events. For the Chinese communist historians, the promotion of historical materialism was done in the name of the Chinese communist revolution. Again, both historiographies are administrators' historiographies. The British discourse claims that the British system of law and order was beneficial to the natives in the colonies. The administrators, with their "Colonial Office" mind, worked to "protect the interests of the natives." The Chinese administrators, be they traditional or communist, were infused with an authoritarian ideology to serve their people. So, in these various ways, historians of colonial Britain and imperial/communist China were sentinels to their respective systems. To be sure, the historiographical scenes in Britain and China have undergone tremendous changes. Decolonization (together with the impact of post-modernism and post-colonialism) has deeply affected how British colonial history can be written. Equally, the policy favouring "openness and reform" in China has led to some profound soul-searching among Mainland Chinese historians. China can no longer write history in a monolithic voice.

Chapter Four – The British Colonial Discourse on Writing Hong Kong History

This chapter outlines the general but salient features of British colonial discourse on both pre-British (pre-1841) and British Hong Kong (1841-1997). More in-depth and specific examples are reserved for the case-study chapter (Chapter Eight) later. Attention is also given to the shifts and variations in British colonial discourse on Hong Kong history. Books published by the British historians in the 19th century certainly reflect unmistakably the imperialist ethos of the time. Examples of this include E.J. Eitel's and J.W. Norton-Kyshe's treatments published in 1895 and 1898 respectively.¹ All subsequent books on Hong Kong history (by British historians especially) are affected by their colonial historiography. Writing in the 1930s, G.R. Sayer frankly admitted that he was indebted to Eitel and Norton-Kyshe in producing his two volumes on Hong Kong history.² An extremist illustration of colonial historiography is found in the propaganda pamphlet called *Hong Kong: a Short History of the Colony and an Outline of the Present Political Situation in China*, also published in the 1930s.³ Still relying on the administrators' point of view, Winfred Wood's *A Brief History of Hong Kong* (1940)⁴ does not add anything major to Eitel's or Sayer's accounts. The section on Hong Kong in Lennox Mills' book only adds a further prop to British colonial rule there.⁵ After the Second World War, G.B. Endacott's works⁶ became the "standard" history of Hong Kong. He has relied essentially on "official" documents to support his colonial administrative approach to Hong Kong history. Apart from the release of the revised edition of Endacott's *A History of Hong Kong*, there was, perhaps a bit strangely, no publication of a general

¹ E.J. Eitel, *Europe in China, the history of Hong Kong from the beginning to the year 1882* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1983; originally published in Hong Kong by Kelly & Welsh, 1895); James William Norton-Kyshe, *The history of the laws and courts of Hong Kong from the earliest period to 1898*, v.1 & 2 (Hong Kong: Vetch and Lee, 1971; first published 1898).

² G.R. Sayer, *Hong Kong 1841-1862: birth, adolescence and coming of age* [hereafter as *Birth*] (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1980; first published in 1937) and *Hong Kong 1862-1919: years of discretion* [hereafter as *Discretion*] (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1975; originally completed in 1939).

³ The Publicity Bureau for South China, Hong Kong, *Hong Kong: a short history of the colony and an outline of the present political situation in China* [hereafter as *Publicity Bureau*] (Hong Kong, no publisher, third edition, 193?).

⁴ Winfred Wood, *A brief history of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: South China Morning Post, 1940).

⁵ Lennox A. Mills, *British rule in Eastern Asia: a study of contemporary government and economic development in British Malaya and Hong Kong* (London: Oxford University Press, 1942).

⁶ G.B. Endacott, *A history of Hong Kong* [hereafter as *History*] (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1973; first published 1958); *A biographical sketch-book of early Hong Kong* [hereafter as *Sketchbook*] (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1962) and *Government and people in Hong Kong 1841-1962: a constitutional history* [hereafter as *Government*] (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1964).

history of Hong Kong in the 1970s and 1980s. Certainly, during the same period (1970s and 1980s), British colonialism was in retreat and colonial historiography was subject to critical scrutiny and refutation. Nigel Cameron's *An Illustrated History of Hong Kong* reveals a glimpse of this critique.⁷ British colonial historiography is rekindled, though in a different fashion, in Jan Morris' and Frank Welsh's accounts of Hong Kong.⁸ In the dying moments of British rule in Hong Kong, both of them tried to resurrect some of the glories of British colonialism.

(A) Pre-British Hong Kong History: Establishing a Case

Putting it in the simplest terms, the great effort (by historians such as Eitel, Sayer and Welsh) devoted to narrating and explaining the pre-colonial history of Hong Kong up to the First Opium War is to establish a case: that the British had tried hard to build a "fair and equitable" working relationship with China. China should treat Britain on an equal and diplomatic basis, and should provide (not "grant") an open market for mutual and profitable trade. But the British efforts (exemplified by the Macartney, Amherst and Napier Missions) were all failures. During the last mission, in particular, Napier was subjected to intolerable insults and contemptuous and wrongful treatment.⁹ Frank Welsh has devoted one whole chapter to "the humiliation of Lord Napier".¹⁰ All the problems between China and Britain were due to the arrogance and obscurantism of the Chinese, it is argued.¹¹ The discourse continues by saying that the British were forced to fight a war to open up China, to bring her to her senses. War was inevitable and almost forced upon Britain. In the words of Endacott, "The old methods of solving disputes between the two countries were becoming no longer acceptable, and since the Chinese would not open diplomatic negotiations or recognize the British government as anything but normal tributary, it followed that any serious incident would easily lead to war. There was no acceptable alternative."¹² It seems that the British were trying to say that war, which

⁷ Nigel Cameron, *An illustrated history of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁸ Jan Morris, *Hong Kong: epilogue to an empire* (London: Penguin Books, 1997; first published in 1988); Frank Welsh, *A history of Hong Kong* (London: HarperCollins, 1997; first edition 1993).

⁹ Sayer, *Birth*, p.43.

¹⁰ Welsh, chapter 3, pp.62-100.

¹¹ According to Said, "The crime was that the Oriental was an Oriental." See Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p.39.

¹² Endacott, *History*, p.13.

they had tried everything to avoid, had been forced upon them. Even when war was really forced upon them, it is argued, and the British still tried to act in a restrained manner. In the words of Endacott, “The aim of the expedition... was not all-out war, but the use of sufficient force for an effective blockade, which should induce the Chinese to come to terms.”¹³ There were many instances in which Captain Charles Elliot was described as having exercised maximum restraint in the conduct of war. Examples will be given in the case-study chapter later.

Next, the British were described as having no territorial ambition vis-a-vis China. Starting from Eitel, British colonial historians have tried their best to discourse along this line. As Eitel puts it, “It is evidently unjust to say, what is commonly found stated in Continental and American histories of British intercourse with the Far East, that ‘the English wanted Hong Kong and they took it by force of arms.’”¹⁴ Again, Endacott argues that “Hong Kong was not placed under British control because of territorial acquisitiveness...”¹⁵ What Britain wanted was a useful and secure trading post. “The demand was for a secure and ordered trade, free from exorbitant charges and arbitrary arrangements; for law and order and for courts of justice in which the merchant had confidence. The British merchants argued that if the Chinese could not provide the requisite conditions in which trade could flourish, the British must. The demand for an island station [Hong Kong] was therefore a regrettable necessity, and its size was immaterial; the important thing was its function in providing those necessary conditions in which trade should flourish.”¹⁶ Several key points arise from this quotation. The cession of Hong Kong from Chinese rule is because China could not provide the favourable conditions for such a trading post. Pax Britannica was deemed the only alternative. The size of this post could also be small since Endacott describes size as “immaterial”. The implication is that the loss to China, if any, would be minimal. The argument that Hong Kong was just a “barren” and “sparsely inhabited” island¹⁷ points in the same direction: the Chinese should not protest so loudly because the loss was almost negligible.

¹³ Endacott, *History*, p. 16.

¹⁴ Eitel, pp. 125-126.

¹⁵ Endacott, *Government*, p. v.

¹⁶ Endacott, *History*, pp. 9-10.

¹⁷ Sayer, *Birth*, p. 5.

Another line of dismissing the Hong Kong issue is to say that Hong Kong had traditionally not been important to China. According to one extremist view, “The cession [of Hong Kong] was brought about by force of events. And the offer came from the Chinese authorities. The island had never really been an integral part of China or of any practical value to the Chinese social or political organism. It was unknown to the topographers and statesmen of China until men came from the Far West to give it a name in the Far East.”¹⁸ This same point is also taken up by Endacott in that he believes that Hong Kong “had little part in the main current of Chinese history.”¹⁹ These are certainly efforts to detach Hong Kong from its rightful Chinese connection. And if the argument stands, the loss of Hong Kong should not be considered a loss to China at all. Curiously, this type of argument even persists up to the 1990s. Welsh renders his argument as follows: “For his part the Chinese Emperor Tao-kuang, forced into acknowledging the loss of this minuscule piece of his territory, hitherto almost certainly unknown to him, by the guns of the Royal Navy levelled at the walls of Nanking, was baffled. He concluded that ‘these barbarians always look on trade as their chief occupation; and are wanting in any high purpose of striving for territorial acquisition... It is plain that they are not worth attending to.’”²⁰ The argument that it was Qishan (Kishen, the chief negotiator on the Chinese side, after the demise of Commissioner Lin Zexu) that “offered” Hong Kong to the British will be explained in detail in the case-study chapter. The issue involves the “legality” of the seizure or occupation (depending on one’s standpoint) of Hong Kong before the signing of the Nanjing Treaty in 1842.

(B) The Opium Issue: the Efforts to Write it Off

Regardless of arguments to the contrary, the opium issue in Sino-British interactions was discreditable, and every effort has been used by the British to minimise its importance. To start with, British colonial historians have always disputed the name “Opium War”, beginning with Eitel, who calls it simply “the First Anglo-Chinese War”, a seemingly innocuous and “neutral” term. Eitel assesses that “The China war of 1841 (wrongly styled the opium war) was the logical

¹⁸ Publicity Bureau, p.25.

¹⁹ Endacott, *History*, p.3.

²⁰ Welsh, p.1.

consequences of [the] British Act of 1833 [which abolished the monopoly of the East India Company in the China trade].”²¹ Endacott calls it the “so-called” Opium War²² and, according to the same author, “War might have come in 1834 after the Napier episode, was delayed until 1840 and became associated with the discreditable opium trade.”²³ Apart from the opium issue, Endacott has listed six other underlying causes of the “so-called” Opium War. Following Endacott, Welsh also believes that the term “Opium War” is erroneous.²⁴ Eitel adds a final note, by way of obfuscation rather than of logic, that the omission of the opium issue in the Treaty of Nanjing “proves” that the war had not been fought over it: “This Treaty is more noteworthy for the stipulations omitted than for those included in it. The prohibition or legalisation of the opium trade was not referred to. The war had not been undertaken for the sake of opium. China was therefore justly left free to settle the opium question at her own sweet will.”²⁵ The tragedy is that the weakness of China prevented her from controlling the hideous drug and it was never “her own sweet will” that mattered.²⁶

According to the British colonial historians, the war was not essentially caused by the opium issue and the blame was laid on the recklessness of the Chinese side, particularly on the person of Commissioner Lin Zexu. Eitel opens this typical argument with his accusation as follows, all in one long sentence:

His [Lin’s] utter disregard of the sacredness which Britain attributes to the life, the liberty and the property of others, his reckless assumption that civilized foreigners, temporarily residing in China, must submit themselves to the barbarous code of Chinese penal laws and to the corrupt judicial process of Chinese tribunals, his open and undisguised determination to hold one set of foreign merchants responsible with their lives for the doings of others not under their control, his absurd affirmation of the sovereignty of China over Great Britain and other foreign nations, and finally his persistent refusal to

²¹ Eitel, p.28.

²² Endacott, *History*, p. 14.

²³ Endacott, *History*, p. 14.

²⁴ Welsh, p.xi.

²⁵ Eitel, p.155.

²⁶ For a critical refutation of Eitel’s “her own sweet will” argument, see Gregory Blue, “Opium for China: the British connection” in Timothy Brook and Bob T. Wakabayashi (eds.) *Opium regimes: China, Britain and Japan, 1839-1952* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp.31-54.

give to Her Majesty's Representative in China a dignified official status, all these measures of Lin, as the typical representative of Chinese mandarindom, served only to force upon the English people, aroused at last from their apathy by the startling news of the imprisonment of the whole foreign community, the conviction that some serious alterations in British relations with the Chinese Empire were necessary and that British commerce could never be safely carried on, and certainly could never flourish in a country where British property are alike at the mercy of a capricious, corrupt and inordinately conceited Government.²⁷

All subsequent colonial historians have based their arguments on essentially a variation of Eitel's. The colonial logic is simple: if China was so deplorable it was better for the British to establish dominance over it. Hong Kong was going to be made a crown colony and China as a whole would be controlled within the category of the "informal empire" of Great Britain.

After the Opium War, the focus of the British government was to legalize the opium trade. The British certainly knew what they were doing, even though they tried hard to avoid the moral issues associated with the opium issue. The first Governor of Hong Kong, Henry Pottinger, knew of the difficulties involved and tried his best to get through this thorny issue. According to Sayer²⁸, Pottinger told the Chinese officials that Britain did not have the power to prevent the importation of opium and that given the venality of the Chinese officials and the Chinese people's insistent demand, opium was bound to find its way into China. Legalization of the drug would also help stop the outflow of silver from China. Endacott also observes the predicament of the British government and Pottinger: "The British government's policy was set out in a dispatch to Pottinger of January 1843. The British opium smuggler must receive no protection or support, and all officials must hold aloof 'from so discreditable a traffic.' 'H.M. Government... have not the power to put a stop to this trade... The import of opium into the colony could not be prevented, but when the island was declared a British colony, Pottinger would then have power to prohibit the import of opium intended for export, or its deposit on board receiving

²⁷ Eitel, pp.97-98.

²⁸ Sayer, *Birth*, pp.155-156.

vessels in the harbour. It was agreed that this action would do little to mitigate the evil, and Pottinger was to consider measures which would have the effect of *putting the trade on a less discreditable footing. He was to urge legalization...* [italics added]²⁹

The unease of the British government can be seen in the final episode of the legalization process. Opium was not something to be proud of and legalization of it should be done in a quiet manner so as to clear everyone's conscience, so to speak. This is how Sayer describes the episode: "[in 1858] ...opium (together with a number of other articles much less controversial) was *quietly removed* [italics added] from the contraband to the tariff list.... The Treaty [of Tianjin] thus provided a new set of rules for the conduct of foreign trade, thereby incidentally allowing the Colony to enter upon years of discretion with a clean sheet if not a clear conscience."³⁰

(C) Official Viewpoint: the Problem of Perspective and Sources

The most distinctive feature of many of the British colonial historians (especially the earlier ones) is that they had been government officials. Eitel, apart from his missionary connections, served variously as Director of Chinese Studies, Inspector of Schools, Chinese Secretary, Head of the Interpretation Department and Private Secretary to Governor Hennessy. He was always close enough to the colonial administration to understand what was happening there in Hong Kong, according to Lethbridge.³¹ Because of his "official" connections, he was privileged to have access to many official source materials, some of which are no longer extant. Equally, because of his official connections (some of which turned sour on him), his perspective on various issues and personalities was inevitably affected or biased. In the words of Evans, "the bias with which he interpreted events and the colours chosen by him for the broad sweeps of his brush are almost everywhere evident."³² Lethbridge explains that Eitel, probably because of his "German conception", was

²⁹ Endacott, *History*, p.43.

³⁰ Sayer, *Discretion*, p.6.

³¹ H.J. Lethbridge, "Introduction" to E.J. Eitel's book *Europe in China*, p.v.

³² D.M. Emrys Evans, "Introduction" to G.R Sayer's book, *Hong Kong 1841-1862:birth, adolescence and coming of age*, p.xiv.

widely distrusted by the small European community in Hong Kong.³³ We must be on our guard using Eitel's account as final and definitive.

Similar to Eitel, Sayer also had a long civil service career starting from 1910 as a Cadet Officer and ending in 1938 as the Director of Education. He relied on official documents and other secondary sources in the construction of his history of Hong Kong. The problem here is that the sources are just one of the determinants of Sayer's historical accounts. He himself then adds a good deal of his own subjective opinion. On the issue of the interventions of historians, Sayer "classed himself modestly as a chronicler, a gleaner and assembler of facts" but he had "an active mind at work," interspersing the historical accounts with his own views and judgements.³⁴ Certainly, a historian need to reconstruct a historical narrative of his subject matter and here "Sayer was the next [the first being E.J. Eitel] to make a serious attempt to give a real historical impress to the forces which shaped and guided the Colony, and to put in some order the principal happenings of moment..."³⁵

To Evans, "the work [Sayer's book] itself may have become a piece of history." Quoting directly from Evans, Sayer opines that "...history is little without the judicious intrusion of the historian's own psyche into his professionally objective assessments and judgments." "The business of the historian is not simply to record a sequence of events... but to select and to draw inferences"³⁶ The frankness of Sayer is admirable. He admits that he has put his historian's hand in the narrative. On writing the history of Hong Kong, Sayer gives a detailed account of his own style:

It is the duty of the historian to record this growth [of the city of Victoria], a task of considerable difficulty, for he is entirely dependent for his facts on unconsidered trifles, odds and ends of maps and plans, old pictures and prints, old buildings, scraps from the contemporary press, occasional extracts from memoirs dealing with the China wars, and so forth; and he has (with a strict curb upon his imagination) to piece the bits together into a coherent whole.

Nor is his task ended there; for the fourth dimension, the dimension of time, is

³³ Lethbridge, Introduction to E.J. Eitel's book *Europe in China*, p.xi.

³⁴ Evans, p.x.

³⁵ Evans, p.xv.

³⁶ Evans, p.xvi. See also Sayer's own preface, *Birth*, p.v.

of the essence of the figure which he has to produce. Is he, then, to watch constantly at the bedside and issue daily bulletins, in other words to attempt to keep pace with the growth? Or is he to stand aside, and at intervals make an exploratory examination – and, if so, at what intervals?³⁷

During the age in which Sayer lived, many of the British historians believed that they were writing ‘objectively’. In the case of Sayer he believes that he has taken “a bland, if not a neutral, and certainly forthrightly simple view of the history of relations between China and Britain.”³⁸ This is certainly a debatable point. The ‘neutral’ stance is seldom neutral. Sayer’s treatment of the opium issue nearly always betrays his own partisan stance. What he hoped to do was to desensitize the issue. In defence, he tries to make use of international law in his argument:

The opium situation, in fact, stood exactly where it had stood before the war and the Treaty [of Nanjing]; except for this one important difference, that England now had in Hong Kong (or was shortly to get) a place in the immediate proximity of China over which she was to exercise full sovereignty, and upon which she could accordingly store opium, or any other article she pleased, to her heart’s content, by virtue of a right at least as incontestable as the right of China to prohibit its introduction to the mainland. I speak here in terms of what may be described as legality, though in actual fact international law is at best a shadowy region and, as touching the relations between Europe and China at this time, was non-existent.³⁹

But the admission that international law was unclear or “shadowy” betrays a clear message of Sayer’s apologetic discomfort.

Let us now consider Endacott. Though he does not claim that his book *A History of Hong Kong* is the “definitive” work on the colony⁴⁰, it is treated by many as the standard textbook for the historical account of Hong Kong. The “authoritativeness” of Endacott’s book is based on his access to or control of the

³⁷ Sayer, *Birth*, p.102.

³⁸ Evans, p.xvii.

³⁹ Sayer, *Birth*, p.129.

⁴⁰ Endacott, *History*, p.vii.

official (therefore “sacred”) documents. Like Endacott, the colonial historians might argue that they have the hegemon’s knowledge over Hong Kong and are therefore able to “define” Hong Kong history. Endacott states right from the beginning that:

[His book] is based on a study of the Colonial Office records consisting of the dispatches of the governors and the replies from the Colonial Office, reports of local commissions and committees of enquiry, sessional papers and other information sent home by the governors, correspondence between the Colonial Office and other departments, annual Blue Books of statistics relating to the colony, minutes of the Executive and Legislative Councils, Hong Kong Government Gazettes, and Hong Kong Ordinances. The records of the foreign Office, Admiralty, War Office and Board of Trade were also consulted. In addition various sources, such as the local newspapers which date to a period twelve years preceding the birth of the colony, gazetteers and memoirs, and such Chinese material as has been available in translation have been used. But the story of Hong Kong has been told mainly as seen through the eyes of the governors and the Colonial Office.⁴¹

The lack of direct Chinese sources (because Endacott did not know the language) creates a major problem: the blotting out of the real role of the Chinese in colonial Hong Kong. Endacott tries to rationalize the absence of Chinese personalities in his *A Biographical Sketch-book of Early Hong Kong*, with reference to the absence of the relevant historical sources, and the argument is interesting:

To the possible objection that few Chinese appear in the book, it must be remembered that at first the Chinese had no occasion to come to Hong Kong except on short visits for trade, and therefore no reason to bring their families. The Chinese were sojourners only, as indeed they have been during the whole of the Colony’s history until recently, and it was not until toward the end of the period covered there [1841-1866], that Chinese families were coming to reside. It would be of great interest to trace the early history of the well-known Chinese of later years but more research from private sources would be needed

⁴¹ Endacott, *History*, p.vii.

for this, and in its absence the contribution of the Chinese to early Hong Kong cannot fairly be appraised. For these reasons, and without seeming to belittle that contribution, it has been judged preferable to confine these sketches to Europeans.⁴²

It is interesting that if the Chinese were just sojourners the same should apply to the Europeans as well. It is argued that data regarding well-known Chinese could be found in “private” (as against Endacott’s use of “public” and “official”) sources. But what about the intelligence and other reports gathered by the Registrar-General in colonial Hong Kong? The contribution of the Chinese did not come later, and did not fall outside the period covered (1841-1866). We can only guess why the Chinese were removed from the picture. But the blotting out of the locals and natives is a recurrent tactic in colonial historiography.

Let us go back to Endacott’s use of official sources. Through these sources, one can always detect the sense of “authoritativeness” in Endacott’s historical accounts. He argues that the official sources are generally accurate in terms of fact and hence, by extension, his account of Hong Kong history should be reliable. The shortcomings of Endacott’s approach, however, should also be noted and the comments of Alan Birch are useful here: Endacott has given “perhaps undue emphasis on the parts played by the Colonial Governors” and there is “sometimes a failure to explore the records as deeply as they deserve.”⁴³

Another weakness of the official approach is paternalism. Again using Birch’s comments: “... as a historian, he [Endacott] was accurately reflecting the prevailing ethos of Englishmen like himself drawn to Hong Kong in the post-war years, seeing the colony as a place to accumulate wealth at a rate not possible in Britain. Yet there was a sense of responsibility to the inhabitants of Hong Kong as they, through events on the mainland, slowly acquired the feeling of belonging to their place of refuge and prosperity.”⁴⁴ It is interesting to compare it with the concluding remarks of Sayer

⁴² Endacott, *Sketchbook*, p.viii.

⁴³ Alan Birch’s “Memoir of G.B. Endacott” in the latter’s *Hong Kong eclipse* [hereafter as *Eclipse*] (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1978), p.viii.

⁴⁴ Birch, p.ix.

(*Birth*, pp.197-198) in which he underlined the contributions of the cadet officers to the administration of Hong Kong.⁴⁵

Endacott revealed a strong measure of colonial apologetics in his writing, and it is worth quoting in some length:

... [T]he history of Hong Kong was not peculiar, but very typical of British overseas activity of the early Victorian epoch. What was sought was a commercial and not a territorial empire, and the island was taken over reluctantly, primarily for the purpose of establishing the necessary organs of law and order and administration, free from Chinese intervention or control. Its function was no different from that of the settlements in the treaty ports in which the British Consul could supervise trade and settle disputes, free from interference. A healthy trade demanded settled conditions, suppression of robbery, guarantee of contract and of impartial justice. Since the Chinese were thought to be unable to provide these conditions, the British had to provide them. This is fundamental to any understanding of the history of Hong Kong. The colony was not thought of in terms of territorial gain, but as the minimum space required for what were thought to be the necessary British institutions. Its function was to be the headquarters of British trade, administration and general influence in the Far East.⁴⁶

Endacott argues that Britain had no territorial desire in China. It seems that he has failed to carefully check the validity of his own assertion. Or perhaps he has been apologetically defending what the British government had done. Perhaps the single most important bias is his assertion that “The history of Hong Kong really begins with

⁴⁵ Sayer, as a cadet officer, made use of Sir Hercules Robinson’s self commendation to congratulate himself. The original quotation is as follows: “It would ill become me [Robinson] to enlarge here tonight upon the various changes and improvements which have been carried into effect during my term of office. Nor would any object be gained by my doing so: for such improvements as the Praya, the Public Garden, gas, water, the new subsidiary currency, the mint in course of erection, the admirable scheme of public education—and such measures also as those adopted for improving the position of the Civil Servants, and for training up by means of Cadetships a body of gentlemen acquainted with the language and character of the people over whom they have to rule... these I say and numerous other measures remain to mark the course of my administration... and will be judged not by any words which I could speak in their praise tonight, but by the practical test of their failure or success.” Sayer, *Birth*, p.198.

⁴⁶ Endacott, *History*, pp.vii-viii.

the coming of the British in 1841...”⁴⁷ The statement is certainly problematic in itself but the most important question remains: who writes the history of Hong Kong? It is too excessive to say that “It [Hong Kong] was unknown to the topographers and statesmen of China until men came from the Far West to give it a name in the Far East.”⁴⁸ It reminds us of the connection between (geographical or historical) knowledge and (political) power.⁴⁹

In fact, to be fair, Endacott himself has some reservations about the validity of the “official history”, which is best illustrated by the publication of his other work, *Hong Kong Eclipse* (concentrating on the history of Hong Kong for the period 1938-1948), in 1978. It seems that the further we get into the 1970s, the more self-critical are the historians. They tend to be less and less colonial in orientation, even though Endacott is still handicapped by his inability to read the Chinese language and his dependence on the official sources for information. There is a curious sentence mentioned in the preface: “It had been intended that this book should be sponsored by the Hong Kong Government and be, to that extent, an official history, but this was not to be.”⁵⁰ Endacott does not explain this curious insertion but one might not be surprised because he includes many points which one might assume would not be to the Hong Kong government’s liking. True to his profession, Endacott adheres to the principle that truthfulness in history is what must be most important. First of all, Endacott is never silent on the lack of preparation on the part of the Hong Kong government in the face of the Japanese invasion. “To what extent were Hong Kong people prepared for the war? That much had been done cannot be gainsaid, yet much was left undone.”⁵¹ The provision of air-raid shelters was found to be utterly inadequate. “The failure to provide air-raid shelters for the masses, on the grounds of probable lack of warning time to make use of them, was strongly criticized by the Chinese unofficial members of the Legislative Council in the 1939 Budget debate, and also condemned in the Press.”⁵²

⁴⁷ Endacott, *History*, p.4.

⁴⁸ Publicity Bureau, p.25.

⁴⁹ Linda Tuhiwai Smith reminds what Europeans did when they “discovered” a new piece of land: “They came, they saw, they named, they claimed.” in *Decolonizing methodologies: research and indigenous peoples* (London and New York: Zed Books), p.80.

⁵⁰ Endacott, *Eclipse*, p.xiii.

⁵¹ Endacott, *Eclipse*, p.25.

⁵² Endacott, *Eclipse*, p.50.

The issue of governmental corruption and systemic dysfunction was also openly admitted: “The Government made itself intensely disliked over the compulsory evacuation scheme and it lost respect over the scandals connected with the A.R.P. [Air Raid Precaution] and Immigration Departments. The suspicion grew that graft was not confined to those two cases but permeated the whole Government Service...”⁵³ In explaining this systemic problem, Endacott puts it in this way: “One factor which probably hampered the Hong Kong defence effort was the extraordinary change-over in high-ranking government personnel just before the Japanese attack.”⁵⁴

The failure of the Hong Kong government to defend the colony was also due to the success of Japanese intelligence gathering: “Security over defence matters was sadly lacking and the Japanese were able to gain all the information necessary for success in their attack. It is difficult to see how it could have been otherwise. The open frontier, at least up to the imposition of immigration restrictions in July 1940, prevented any strict check being made on immigrants, and many supporters of the Japanese-sponsored puppet regime in Nanking under Wang Ching-wei entered the Colony unhindered and collaborated with the Japanese. The latter, like everyone else, were free to come and go, and Japanese agents found little difficulty in getting jobs as a cover to their activities.”⁵⁵ And contrasting the Japanese success, British intelligence was a dismal failure: “On the other hand, by comparison, British intelligence was poor. In 1940 General Grasett felt so dissatisfied that he sent officers to Chungking to gain intelligence of Japanese troop movements.”⁵⁶

Another pertinent point is the exposition of Hong Kong as a divided community. There was a general lack of loyalty among Chinese towards the British. According to Endacott,

The Chinese remained Chinese at heart and few were absorbed into the western community. They came to Hong Kong seeking economic opportunity and most looked forward to returning to China when they could afford to do so;

⁵³ Endacott, *Eclipse*, pp.25-26.

⁵⁴ Endacott, *Eclipse*, p.55.

⁵⁵ Endacott, *Eclipse*, pp.63-64.

⁵⁶ Endacott, *Eclipse*, p.64.

in the meantime, they asked only that they should be left alone and were quite prepared to shift for themselves. Basically law-abiding, they gave little trouble to the authorities, they asked for no share in political control or for any form of State aid, and by the same token they did not expect the State to make any demands on them, beyond the normal land dues, rates and indirect taxation on luxuries. There was but slight feeling of belonging to Hong Kong, scant loyalty to the State, and little spirit of willing sacrifice for the community. To them, Hong Kong defence was a matter for the British. Hong Kong was, therefore, an artificial society and the vast majority were there temporarily, seeking economic advantage or escape from Japanese attack, and only Eurasians, Portuguese and some local Chinese, Indians and others of long standing became westernized and regarded Hong Kong as a home worth fighting for.⁵⁷

Traditionally, the colonial government had always liked to play down the race issue and it claimed that its policies (defence policy included) had never been based on racism. But when it came to the crunch (as in the most testing time of the Japanese war), racism remained the Achilles heel of the Hong Kong government.

In general the Hong Kong government remained highly suspicious of the Chinese race, something that was also evident in the process of conscription: “[The] Registration Ordinance of March 1939 required all British subjects of European birth aged 18 to 55 to register and give their qualifications, and was designed as a preliminary step to compulsory service and the efficient deployment of manpower. British subjects of Chinese extraction were allowed to register voluntarily after the Chinese members of the Legislative Council had assured the Governor of Chinese support, but it was admittedly difficult to include the Chinese, even if born here, because so few possessed birth certificates.”⁵⁸

The argument that the Chinese were excluded from conscription because they did not have birth certificates is rather tenuous. But when it came to the crunch, to the issue of arming the Chinese population against the imminent Japanese invasion, the

⁵⁷ Endacott, *Eclipse*, pp.26-27.

⁵⁸ Endacott, *Eclipse*, p.43.

British were never more hesitant. As Endacott explains, “The Chinese authorities pressed the Hong Kong Government to arm the local Chinese to fight the Japanese in conjunction with the Nationalist armies and the British naturally refused this facile suggestion, having regard to the mass of refugees whose reliability could not be taken for granted. In any case, in 1940 it was impossible because of the lack of arms; moreover Britain was adhering to the policy of giving no offence to Japan. Britain remained lukewarm towards China, and not without reason in view of the long years of anti-British demonstrations in the Treaty Ports.”⁵⁹ Endacott should have added the instance of the 1925-26 Canton-Hong Kong General Strike against the British. Given the exposition of so many government blunders in the 1930s and 1940s, we are in a much better position to understand why the Hong Kong government withheld sponsorship of Endacott’s *Hong Kong Eclipse*. Indeed, it is my contention that the limitation of “official sources” is just one thing, there is also a matter of perspective and professionalism.⁶⁰

Summarising the three colonial historians so far, the fact stands out that it is not that they have openly declared their works to be definitive (as Munn has claimed) but that they have been, on the whole, defenders of the Hong Kong government.⁶¹ Their histories have become historical documents themselves. To be sure, until recently, colonial historiography has been more or less a kind of ideological adjunct to colonialism. Then, starting from the 1980s, anti-colonial critiques powerfully cast doubt on conventional colonial wisdom. The reflections of Cameron (writing in 1991) are useful here:

It was still possible in 1958 [when Endacott published his classic *A History of Hong Kong*] to regard colonial possessions – those which had not by then been surrendered to their indigenous peoples – with a certain glow of nostalgic pride as Britain relinquished them and their (in colonial terms) insurmountable problems. The opinion is largely unacceptable now. Thirty years on, whatever our personal view may be of colonialism, it can scarcely be identical with that

⁵⁹ Endacott, *Eclipse*, p.65.

⁶⁰ A professional historian such as Endacott could not close his eyes to all those numerous blunders without compromising his professionalism. At this instance, his perspective did not sit comfortably with the government’s point of view. The government might hope to forget about all those blunders.

⁶¹ Of course, if one is critical enough one can always notice their uneasiness in defending a government which had an “opium connection” for so long.

current in the climate of political opinion of 1958. The intervening years have, among myriad other transformations, cast Hong Kong in a role of some significance in the world context, a position it did not then hold. In those three decades major shifts in political thought have taken place, and the perspective we now apply to the scene has sharply altered. Reason enough for a retelling of the story.⁶²

With the help of a historian (Cameron) to dissect another historian (Endacott), we are in a better position to understand the “meanings” that history can convey to us. It shows clearly some of the functions of critical historiography.

(D) The Administrators’ History

Let us reproduce the contents page of Endacott’s *A History of Hong Kong* and see what comes out of his historical approach:

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⁶² Cameron, p.2.

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The prominence of the governors in the Table of Contents is unmistakable. This is the pattern set by Eitel and Sayer, though Endacott is more “modern” by adding chapters on the social, economic and education developments of the colony. Eitel gives a detailed account of Hong Kong history from its beginning to 1882, not according to any other conceivable historical periodization but in terms of the administrations of successive nineteenth-century Hong Kong governors. In relation to Governor Bonham, Eitel has pinpointed the importance of the Hong Kong governors: “...whilst it never is in the power of a Governor to create prosperity, he has it in his power to hinder, mar and destroy it.”⁶³ Indeed, the colonial governors were immensely powerful in Hong Kong. There were quite a number of instances of

⁶³ Eitel, p.285.

unpopular governors being jeered when they left the colony, simply because they had been instrumental in blocking the merchants' business.

So, though not disregarding the Chinese role in Hong Kong history, Eitel's approach has laid the foundation for the administrators' history of the colony. This approach, however, certainly has its shortcomings, and according to Lethbridge, it has tended to "distort or interrupt larger economic and social trends, for these overlap particular governors."⁶⁴ Yet, the same commentator reminds us of the reasoning behind such an approach: "There is, one admits, more sense in this traditional approach when the subject is colonial history and the territory discussed is small in area or population. Colonial governors do wield vast powers and some leave their stamp indelibly and lastingly on a colony after their five years of office. This is also true when power is almost monopolized by a small governing elite as in nineteenth-century Hong Kong, with the governor symbolizing that elite. *Europe in China* is, in the above sense, old-fashioned."⁶⁵ What is more pertinent to me is: this kind of administrators' historical approach is indicative of the colonial rule itself. At the top of the ruling pyramid, the governor (technically he alone) would be responsible for all the credit or discredit resulting from the government's policies. He alone must determine what course of action is to be taken and all other people (the highest Executive Council included) must be purely advisory. If Hong Kong's colonial historiography remained unchanged, it is most probably because the colonial structure basically remained the same. The demise of this approach from the 1980s is therefore indicative of the more profound socio-political changes in Hong Kong.

It can be argued that colonial historiography has been used to prop up the authoritarian colonial structure of Hong Kong.⁶⁶ It is particularly evident in Endacott's *Government and People in Hong Kong 1841-1962: a Constitutional History*, published in 1964. Up to the 1960s, Endacott did not see the need to introduce any democratic reforms in Hong Kong and the basic reason was attributed to the Chinese character: "The Chinese were accustomed to political despotism at the

⁶⁴ Lethbridge, p.xii.

⁶⁵ Lethbridge, p.xii.

⁶⁶ But it is difficult, as far as documentary evidence is concerned, to say that these historians' accounts had any major influence on policy-making in colonial Hong Kong. The Hong Kong government would certainly like to read books supporting their authoritarian rule.

centre coupled with—in theory at least—benevolent local administration by the scholar official, and so they did not fret over the absence of the Western forms of political liberty in Hong Kong... Broadly the overwhelming Chinese character of Hong Kong and the need to protect their interests have been the main factors in the delaying the introduction of essentially Western ideas of political freedom.”⁶⁷ Endacott continues to explain that in keeping the existing political system the government governed in the interest of the whole community and especially safeguarded the rights of the local Chinese.⁶⁸ During the time of Governor Robinson (1891-98) some European merchants (vis-à-vis the government officials) had argued for giving the Europeans more power in the administration of Hong Kong. Such arguments were resisted by the Colonial Secretary, as recorded by Endacott: “I [Lord Ripon] consider that the well-being of the large majority of the inhabitants is more likely to be safeguarded by the Crown Colony system under which as far as possible no distinction is made of rank or race, than by a representation which would leave the bulk of the population wholly unrepresented.”⁶⁹ The colonial government was certainly aware of the possible racist charge if the Europeans could get the vote at the expense of the local Chinese majority. And if the colonial government had no intention of establishing a truly representative government, it was imperative to resist any attempts at electoral reform or at diluting centralized colonial rule. Even the argument for property qualifications was deemed unworkable as there were more wealthy tax-payers among the Chinese than the Europeans. In any case, any effort in the direction of representative government would mean the end of colonial rule.

The interests of the British and European communities were in fact protected by other means: through the appointment of their leaders to the Legislative and Executive Councils. The interests of the Chinese were soothed by assuring them that Chinese customs would be respected and that they could live happily under British colonial rule. “Chinese prejudices and customs are safeguarded and the Chinese do not feel themselves oppressed or slighted; all are free to pursue their lawful avocations, with reasonable security for person and property... The system serves a community in which the ends of government are accepted without cleavage, and

⁶⁷ Endacott, *Government*, p.vii.

⁶⁸ Endacott, *Government*, p.119.

⁶⁹ Endacott, *Government*, p.122.

provides an efficient administration within an accepted social and economic framework, bound up with a laissez-faire economy. It tends therefore to be based on the maintenance of the *status quo*.”⁷⁰ It is certainly a typical divide-and-rule tactic. The message is clear: the Chinese could do anything they liked, as long as they did not touch the prohibited zone of political power.

Another way to discredit the argument for democracy is to make use of the allegedly low turnout rate in the Urban Council elections. Endacott cites the example of the 1953 case: “... the number of voting was small, only 2,536 out of 10,798 voters, and [it] led to the comment [by the pro-Government South China Morning Post]: ‘The poor display of civic spirit is thus either a deplorable exhibition of apathy or a stupid refusal to take a little trouble—and in any case is a grave reflection upon the population’s desire for and title to any degree of self-government’.”⁷¹ There are, however, a few key questions which Endacott has hidden from us. What power constraints were there on the Urban Council, the only elective element in the whole colonial structure in Hong Kong? What were the restrictions (property qualifications etc.) imposed on the franchise? Why was more fundamental political reform (known as the Young Plan) shelved in 1949? Colonialism is a basically conservative system. The colonial mandarins would not ponder on political changes unless they were forced to do so, or directed to do so by the Colonial Office in London.

Finally, Endacott employs his authoritarian logic again to discredit the use of democratic reform in Hong Kong:

Even with electoral machinery, it is not always easy to find out public opinion or be certain that a government acts in accordance with the popular will. One criterion is the presence or absence of political unrest. Organized opposition to the government in Hong Kong is conspicuously absent and demands explanation. It may be due to apathy, repression or to Government and people being broadly in step. Some degree of apathy comes from the realization that decisions vitally affecting the future of Hong Kong may be taken in London, Peking, New York or elsewhere. There is also among the Chinese a tendency

⁷⁰ Endacott, *Government*, pp.240-241.

⁷¹ Endacott, *Government*, p.206.

to political acquiescence, which stems from a Confucian respect for the official and which should not be mistaken for apathy. The police do have wider powers than for example in Britain, but generally, freedom of speech, conscience and association are enjoyed by the individual under the constitution and these rights are incompatible with repression. Again, there is a mass of government publications regarding government business which creates the impression of willing accountability to the public... In fact, the Government in Hong Kong commands respect by a policy of serving the common interest.⁷²

The government's assumption of the "common interest" overrode any other considerations. The basic premise is clearly playing on circumlocution: no opposition equals good government. So long as the Hong Kong situation was described as peaceful and contented everything would remain unchanged. Colonial history is really an ideological adjunct of colonialism.

(E) The Treatment of the Chinese: the Problems of Racism, Control and Collaboration

Colonialism, by definition, is a political arrangement of inequalities. The colonial rulers must be all powerful and the colonized people must be powerless or be made powerless. There is actually no practical way for the colonial rulers to share power with the colonized. Equal political partnership in the colonial context is a contradiction in terms. Colonialism is the institutional method to foster various kinds of inequalities. Colonialism often starts with the assumption of racial inequality. Prior to the Opium War, the British were described as struggling for equal treatment, vis-à-vis the Chinese. When the Chinese refused, China as a nation and the Chinese as a people were portrayed as barbaric and uncivilized. The subtext is: that they should be replaced and controlled by a higher British civilization. The Chinese officials were described as venal and corrupt and the Chinese legal system was described as harsh and unpredictable; the implication is that the British laws should be applied to the British nationals in China (in the form of extra-territoriality). The opium-smoking Chinese population were a decaying people and decadence was explained as a racial

⁷² Endacott, *Government*, pp.229-230.

or cultural malaise, and the Chinese had to be salvaged by an external force. The issue of racial segregation was often explained by the fact that the Chinese were unclean and that they “loved” to live in over-crowded places. It was therefore “reasonable” for the British (and other foreigners) to reside in their own special zones and to have a system of self-administration. It paved the way for the foreign concessions in the treaty ports and the “reserved” areas in Hong Kong. The politics and government of China were backward, chaotic and profuse with strife. The natural conclusion, in the eyes of the imperial apologists, was to have Pax Britannica prevailing in China. The following statements are highly revealing: “Great Britain’s policy throughout her intercourse with China has rested on her first and paramount interest, trade. She has never attempted to found even the beginnings of an empire in the Far East. The Boxer Rebellion was an occasion when territorial aspirations might have been carried to material results; but Great Britain refused to acquire territory for herself or to countenance the acquisition of territory by any other Power. She desires no more than a settled administration, and is ready to accept any form of Government chosen by the Chinese provided it is a Government and is stable.”⁷³ “As matters stand, it is necessary that there should be limitations to China’s judicial and fiscal autonomy. The system of unequal treaties, which is held to be the root of the evil, was not of our choosing, and the Chinese cannot properly refuse responsibility for the existing state of affairs which, really, is due to their own governmental incapacity.”⁷⁴ There are few cases of propaganda more outrageous and dangerous than this.

The problem with this colonial racial discourse is not that it propagates falsehoods; instead, it propagates half-truths that tend to stereotype the Chinese, and show them in the worst possible light. Let us see how this discourse is applied to the writing of colonial Hong Kong history. First, the premise is that early Hong Kong was infested with pirates and robbers and it was with great difficulty that the colony could be ruled. According to Endacott, “The Chinese were despised and treated with contempt as inferior beings, though this was partly a result of the prevalence of crime among them, and their reputed unreliability except where their own interest was involved.”⁷⁵ A similar sentiment was reported in the 1850s. Then the Hong Kong

⁷³ Publicity Bureau, p.75.

⁷⁴ Publicity Bureau, p.85.

⁷⁵ Endacott, *History*, p.70.

Chinese were described as lacking in civic-mindedness. As Norton-Kyshe explains, “It had been a subject of universal complaint on the part of Europeans in the Colony, and one of the long standing which exists to this day, denoting apathy characteristic of and immutable in the Chinaman, that in cases of assault and robbery in the streets, though hundreds of Chinese might be looking on, the offenders are permitted to escape without an arm being stretched out to apprehend them...”⁷⁶ What the colonial historians have not emphasized is that many of the Europeans in early Hong Kong had dubious and low social class backgrounds.⁷⁷ Many of them had a long history of drug-smuggling, and they would do anything (moral or immoral) to survive in this marginal town on the coast of South China.⁷⁸ They were also in a minority, so they had to band together for self-protection, and this had contributed to their so-called “civic consciousness”.

For the question of racial differences and segregation, with reference to the 1880s, Eitel has the following to say:

...there appeared among them [the Chinese residents in Hong Kong] a tendency to retire into their own shell, deliberately refusing any identification with the European community. The persistent refusal to adopt European costume or English way of living, the uniform aversion to participation in local politics coupled with a deep-seated anxiety to keep on good terms with Chinese Mandarindom even when it blockaded the port to throttle their trade, the steady increase of Chinese joint-stock companies from which foreign investors were jealously excluded, the readiness of secret combination to retaliate against unpopular Government measures by a general strike,—all these symptoms of Chinese clannish exclusivism, natural enough in people whose just liberties have for centuries been invaded by despotic rulers, clearly

⁷⁶ Norton-Kyshe, v.1, p.334.

⁷⁷ For an overview of some of the Europeans from the lower classes, see H.J. Lethbridge, “Condition of the European working class in nineteenth century Hong Kong” in Lethbridge, *Hong Kong: stability and change, a collection of essays* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp.189-213.

⁷⁸ Jardines and Matheson recruited people from the Scottish lowlands who were described as “[people] descended, after all, from men and women for whom poverty, hardship, and constant internecine warfare in centuries past made raiding, robbery, and murder a way of life.” See May Holdsworth, *Foreign devils: expatriates in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.13.

indicate that on the Chinese side there is, as yet, no desire to see the chasm that still separates Chinese and European life in this Colony, bridged over.⁷⁹

To Eitel, it seems that the onus should be on the side of the Chinese to adapt and reach out to the Europeans. Actually, Eitel's account is only partially correct. The racial gulf was in fact mutual. For their own physical safety and psychological comfort, the British had similarly isolated themselves and lived in their own districts. The language barrier was also huge, with the majority of the two races being ignorant of the other's language. As a result, there was a natural suspicion between them. It is certainly wrong to say that only the Chinese were clannish and exclusive of others. The British clubs and hongks in colonial Hong Kong were equally jealous in guarding their own special interests.

If the British colonial rulers were suspicious of the Chinese majority in Hong Kong then the question of control would be an important one. Indeed there were times when the British needed to be especially careful, as occurred once in 1858 when China and Britain were at war (the Second Opium War.) Norton-Kyshe describes one such occasion:

The authorities having received information that increased watchfulness on the part of the public was necessary, the Superintendent of Police, Mr. May, by direction, on the 24th July, having regard especially to what had recently happened to Mr. Hazeland, notified that great caution was necessary in walking or riding far away from the town unarmed or alone, and that night passes heretofore issued to Chinese to be in the public streets up to nine, would for the future be valid in effect only to eight o'clock. The [foreign] inhabitants of the Colony were now thrown into a fervent state of anxiety, owing to the condition of affairs prevalent consequent upon our relations with China. No work of any kind could be got done – tailors, shoemakers, carpenters, and artisans of every kind had departed from Hong Kong, and it was calculated that no less than twenty thousand persons had taken their departure from the island. Food was, moreover, at almost famine prices, and

⁷⁹ Eitel, pp.574-575.

an entire stoppage was threatened of the usual supplies of provisions for the markets.⁸⁰

One has to understand that most Hong Kong Chinese would oppose British aggression against China, and if the British were too excessive they certainly would have to face various kinds of Chinese resistance or sanctions. One must also remember that one year earlier, in 1857, there was the famous bread poisoning incident in which the whole European community feared it had been poisoned.

Clearly, there was the perception that the Chinese had to be controlled. The 1844 appointment of the Registrar-General was most important in this connection. His duty was “to register all the Chinese in order to combat triad societies and assist in the better maintenance of law and order.” And rather ironically, amidst the heat of anti-Chinese suspicion, “[i]n 1858, this side of his duties received statutory recognition and the additional title ‘Protector of the Chinese’.”⁸¹ Other duties would certainly also include the control of prostitution and a general surveillance of the Chinese population. The racist overtone of the name “Protector of the Chinese” is undeniable; and control took place under the euphemism of “protection”. One might wonder why there was no institution like the “Protector of the British” in colonial Hong Kong. Did the British and other foreigners not need protection as well? Why were the Chinese given special treatment? In the 1880s, there was some agitation among an elite group of Chinese for the abolition of the Registrar-General: “Some Chinese, educated in the West, began to object to any difference of treatment between Chinese and foreigners, and wished to abolish the office of Registrar-General on the ground that there should be no official entrusted with the duty of dealing specifically with the Chinese, and that all people of Hong Kong regardless of race should deal with the government through the same channels.”⁸² Curiously, Endacott has not provided any elaboration of this agitation. One wonders who these Chinese actually were and what kind of political platform they might have. Endacott’s silence here is disturbing. It might indicate, once again, the importance of who writes Hong Kong history. In the “official” history of Hong Kong, when something inconvenient

⁸⁰ Norton-Kyshe, v.1, pp.485-486.

⁸¹ Endacott, *Government*, p.155.

⁸² Endacott, *Government*, p.105.

occurred for the government, the Hong Kong Chinese would not be given their rightful voice. The Chinese subjects were often treated as nameless or amorphous. There are several explanations: the colonial masters either wanted to ignore or silence them because they were inconvenient, or they did not care about them, or they did not have that in-depth knowledge about the people and the place under their governance. From the control point of view, the first reason seems most probable.

Adding to the intrigue is Sayer's treatment of the appointment of Ng Choy as the first Chinese to the Legislative Council in 1880. Sayer says that from then on the Chinese were given double representation: "Thenceforward the Chinese were doubly represented—by the Registrar-General and by an unofficial member of their own race [in the Legislative Council]."⁸³ The Chinese were humourously muffled. Traditionally, the Chinese were described as politically apathetic, lacking in civic consciousness, or only interested in making money. They did not need a public or political role. Their interests were protected by the colonial government. They came to Hong Kong because they "liked" to be ruled by the British; their choice of moving to Hong Kong was therefore reflective of the benevolence of British colonial rule. All these rationalizations might be true; but they are just not complete. Consider the counter-arguments: what would happen to colonial rule if the Chinese were described as politically active and having a strong civic mind? Would they be given their rightful share of political power, contradicting the basic premise of colonialism? Why were the educated Chinese on the Mainland so eager to participate in the civil service examination with the aim of becoming government officials and assuming a political role? What would they do if they were denied political participation? Was active economic pursuit not a way to gain political power? Was the story of the Tung Wah Hospital not indicative of the political ambitions and potentials of the Hong Kong Chinese? Did the Chinese come to Hong Kong simply because the colony was a part of China after all? Did other peoples come for the same reason: simply because there were more opportunities to manoeuvre?

Eitel's descriptions of how the colonial government controlled the Tung Wah Hospital are particularly telling:

⁸³ Sayer, *Discretion*, p.128.

The new hospital was speedily erected and opened by Sir Richard [Macdonnell] on February 14, 1872, when he announced that the Government had voted (out of the Special Fund) a further sum of \$115,000 for the purposes of the hospital. He also praised the Chinese for their liberality in guaranteeing annual subscriptions to the extent of \$7,000, but warned them that, if any abuses should creep in, the Government would take the management of the hospital out of their hands. This was a fair specimen of Sir Richard's way of dealing with the Chinese community. He invariably treated them with unwearied consideration but with rigid strictness. The result was that, by the time of Sir Richard's departure, his administration left upon the Chinese people rather a favourable impression. Though they dreaded him at first as a stern disciplinarian, they always respected him and finally he became rather a popular hero in their eyes.⁸⁴

The Tung Wah Hospital was established by a group of leading and wealthy Chinese merchants in Hong Kong. They were among those who paid the highest rates in the colony. They had good connections with government officials in Mainland China, to the annoyance of the colonial government. They were considered or assumed to be the rightful spokesmen of the Chinese community. They were using the cause of charity in fostering their bargaining position vis-à-vis the government. In the face of this potential challenge, the colonial government reacted with the typical carrot-and-stick method. Subsidies would be given to the "charitable" cause, dampening the argument that the government was uncaring of the local population. The Tung Wah group was being warned to behave well and to toe the line. As a result of such a policy, the Chinese were described as being appreciative of British rule.

In fact, in addition to exercising strong control, the British were careful and skilful enough to seek collaboration with the Chinese. A policy of political co-optation had been adopted early in colonial history. In the Treaty of Nanjing, a special clause (clause 9 which grants a general amnesty in favour of all Chinese who

⁸⁴ Eitel, pp.462-463.

had served the English during the Opium War)⁸⁵ was added to warn the Chinese government not to punish any one who might have provisioned or assisted the British during the course of the war. In fact these people were the first group of Chinese collaborators.⁸⁶ Later they were given easy terms in land purchases or in running the opium monopolies in Hong Kong. The selection and appointment of leading Chinese to the Legislative Council and the Sanitary Board were certainly efforts in the same direction. Finally in 1926 there was the appointment of Chow Shouson, the first Chinese, to the highest Executive Council. But the story described is rather intriguing. According to Endacott, “The appointment was made on personal grounds and also to disarm anti-British sentiment in China and encourage local Chinese loyalty in Hong Kong.”⁸⁷ The decision was made in the aftermath of the Canton-Hong Kong General Strike of 1925-26 when Hong Kong was desperately disrupted. The focus of the account is rather on the “ease” of handling the strike: “The Hong Kong Government rose to the emergency and was energetically supported not only by Europeans but also by leading Chinese. One of the most striking phenomena of the affair was the loyalty of the Chinese despite attacks upon them as ‘running dogs of British imperialism’ and threats of assassination. They used their influence to counteract the anti-British agitation, secure information and encourage the coolies to resist intimidators and return to work.”⁸⁸ Chow Shouson’s loyalty was particularly appreciated and duly rewarded. What the colonial history does not say is that Chow’s appointment aroused much suspicion among the Europeans: they questioned the trustworthiness of Chow in observing the confidentiality of Executive Council business. The solution might anger racist sensibilities: “Later in the year [1926], on the insistence of the Foreign Office, the Governor [Clementi] was instructed that secret telegrams should no longer be communicated to members of the Council, as had been the practice in the past.”⁸⁹ Mainland Chinese historians have made a strong point out of this episode, saying that the British were racially discriminatory, even against the highest Chinese adviser under British colonial rule.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Eitel, p.155.

⁸⁶ See John M. Carroll, “Chinese collaboration in the making of British Hong Kong” in Tak-Wing Ngo (ed.) *Hong Kong’s history: state and society under colonial rule* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp.13-29.

⁸⁷ Endacott, *Government*, p. 146.

⁸⁸ Mills, pp.463-464.

⁸⁹ Norman Miners, *Hong Kong under imperial rule, 1912-1941* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.139.

⁹⁰ Liu Shuyong, *An outline history of Hong Kong* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1997), p.120.

The issue of Chinese collaboration is a sensitive one. It is a fact that the British had to make use of a great number of Chinese collaborators. The education system in Hong Kong, based on the English language, was the training ground to produce collaborators. But from the administrators' point of view, and as reflected in the colonial historiography, these people (important though they were) should not be given a prominent place in history. Probably, these Chinese collaborators were considered merely as "running dogs" of British imperialism and if that is the case, their rightful role in history would be affected. The same applies to the treatment of the compradors in both Chinese and colonial Hong Kong histories.

(F) Conclusion: Pax Britannica Justified

Ultimately, British colonial historiography is used to justify British imperialism. Evidence can be readily found in all the books quoted on page one of this chapter. British colonial rule, it is argued, is one of benevolence and justice. All the institutions it has created are for the advancement of the common good. Starting from Eitel, the depiction is of a divine mission for Hong Kong, expressed in its Hegelian form: "The genius of British free trade and political liberty constitutes unmistakably the vital element in the historic evolution of Hongkong. Hence it is that co-operation with this divine tendency of things is the unalterable condition of success. Every measure, every event in the history of Hongkong, that is in harmony with this general innate tendency, is in part a fulfilment of Hongkong's mission in the history of the universe."⁹¹ He concludes by highlighting Hong Kong's role as model for China: "Hongkong has clearly fulfilled, up to this point, the purpose of its establishment as the guardian of the interests of Europe in China. Notwithstanding all its faults and shortcomings, this British Colony has set before the people and Mandarins of China a praiseworthy example of free trade principles and humane government."⁹² That is why he titles his history of Hong Kong: *Europe in China*.

⁹¹ Eitel, p.570.

⁹² Eitel, p.575.

The goodness of British rule was best reflected in the legal system Britain had bestowed on Hong Kong, according to Norton-Kyshe. He makes it crystal clear right from the first sentence of his preface:

Wonderful as may be said to have been the courage, tenacity, and determination with which our people and Government have successfully established themselves in this *Ultima Thule* of the Empire for the benefit of all mankind, not less remarkable may be said to have been that branch of service connected with the administration of justice in Hong Kong. Placed on the borders of an Empire so full of contradictions as China, with its uncontrolled millions, conservative and prejudiced to the backbone, a people totally ignorant and indifferent as to Western ideas or modes of Government, it seems as if Hongkong by its position had been destined to become the starting point from whence a civilizing power by its beneficent rule and humane laws was to endeavour to effect those reforms which an uncivilized power like China was ever in need of.⁹³

This is certainly a self-gratifying statement, speaking from his own position as the Registrar of the Supreme Court of Hong Kong. He says that the Chinese loved to live under British laws, whose beneficence was considered “an incontestable fact”. British laws were best suited to Hong Kong: “English law... if not absolutely fitted for natives, especially as regards the clemency and technicalities of our criminal procedure, was the only law expedient to put into practice in a Crown Colony settled essentially under British rule, like Hongkong...”⁹⁴ The best case to illustrate this, according to Norton-Kyshe, is the trial of Cheong Ahlum in the bread poisoning case of 1857. The European community, except the jury, were almost unanimous in condemning Cheong Ahlum, but because of the lack of evidence he was acquitted. According to Norton-Kyshe, the case “showed the Chinese that the English were not bloodthirsty and that an English jury will do what it believes to be its duty, even though that duty may run counter not only to outside prejudice but often even to the opinion of the Judge on the Bench... One notable fact to be recorded to the honour of the British name, in connexion with this case is that the prisoners were not only tried

⁹³ Norton-Kyshe, v.1, p.vii.

⁹⁴ Norton-Kyshe, v.1, p.ix.

at the place where their crime was committed, but tried by a judge who had himself suffered from that crime, assisted by a jury all equally victims of the atrocious attempt, and they were further prosecuted by an Attorney-General and defended by lawyers also sufferers from their crime.”⁹⁵ It was the conclusion of Norton-Kyshe that the justice of the British legal system must prevail rather than risk hanging the wrong men.

Imperialist certainty was in fact shaken in the 1930s, after the rise of anti-British movements in China (as elsewhere). But the British imperialist propagandists came to the rescue by arguing that Hong Kong was built from its barrenness to a shining city in the Far East, all through the efforts of the British or other foreigners. This was equally true of all the other treaty ports in China: “A few low, swampy plots on the Huangpu river were developed into the Shanghai of to-day. Tientsin was a mud flat on the Hai or Pei river when it was leased in 1861. Shameen in Canton was a bank of silt in the Pearl river and was built up at great cost between stone retaining walls. Now these plots were the most valuable sites in China, entirely through the energy, brains and money of foreigners.”⁹⁶ There is hardly any need to refute the falsehood of this imperialist discourse.

Towards the end of British colonial rule in Hong Kong in 1997, the simplistic arguments for British colonialism were no longer acceptable anywhere, except perhaps amongst a few diehards. But there was still a lingering feeling that Britain had overall been good to and for Hong Kong. As Welsh has put it:

Any judgement on Hong Kong’s history... has to be made not on the last five years of British rule, but on the whole period of its development from a scattered community of fisherfolk and peasants on the outermost fringe of the Chinese Empire to a distinctive near-national entity with its own recognized place in the world. Viewed in this light successive British governments may take some credit for not having made too many mistakes. For the first century of its existence the colony was safeguarded from the revolutions, wars, perils and destruction that so often made life in China a misery. The rule of law was

⁹⁵ Norton-Kyshe, v.1, p.418.

⁹⁶ Publicity Bureau, pp.53-54.

established and accepted; and when British imperialism in any part of the world is critically examined this is likely to be, however grudgingly, applauded.⁹⁷

Or as Morris renders it in a rather romantic way: “History, I prophesy, will look back at their 150 years on this distant rock with astonishment and admiration. What a story! What an adventure! What messages! And however stiff or muffled the ceremony on July 1 1997, however sad its aftermath may prove, a sufficiently stylish ending after all.”⁹⁸ The colonialist spirit still perhaps haunts us.

⁹⁷ Welsh, p.563.

⁹⁸ Morris, p.303.

Chapter Five – The Mainland Chinese Discourse on Writing Hong Kong History

This chapter will start firstly on a general understanding of the Mainland Chinese discourse on Hong Kong history from its pre-British period (before 1841) and over the entire British colonial period (1841-1997). An in-depth study of the Opium Wars and the founding of Colonial Hong Kong up to 1898 will be reserved in Chapter Eight. After an analysis of the major writings published by the Mainland Chinese historians several key features have emerged. Certainly some of these features are inherited from traditional Chinese historians irrespective of their political persuasion or affiliation. For example, in relation to the Opium Wars, there has been a general condemnation of the hideousness of the opium smuggling, and the lack of legitimacy for the British invasion of China is also severely criticised. The analysis of the colonial nature of British rule in Hong Kong, however, tends to vary according to the historians' political background. Before 1978, Communist Chinese historians were more prone to use Marxist class concepts in describing Hong Kong. After 1978, there was a reduction in using the Marxist jargons. But in general they have been influenced by the policies of the time. For example, with regard to 1982-1997, their writings have tended to justify the correctness and inevitability of the realisation of the "one country, two systems" formula. Political conformity remains prominent, though there are some rare instances in which particular historians have tried to nuance their own understandings.

Starting from the 1980s, political necessity seemed to dictate an outburst of Hong Kong writings, on history as on all other subjects. Writing in 1998, Liu Cunkuan openly admitted this fact: "For some 30 years, virtually no one in Mainland China engaged in the serious study of Hong Kong history. Only Ding You (Du Dingyou) published a small book called *Xianggang Chuzi Shiwa 1841-1907* [The early history of Hong Kong 1841-1907] (published by the Joint Publishing Co.) in 1958. It was only in the early 1980s, when the leasehold of the New Territories was nearing its end and the beginning of Sino-British talks on Hong Kong started, that academic circles in Mainland China suddenly woke up to the importance and urgency

of the study of Hong Kong and its history.”¹ In writing their Hong Kong histories Mainland Chinese historians construct a grand national narrative of their own with two inter-connected objectives: to right the wrongs of the British colonial rule including its distortion of Hong Kong history, and to assist in cultural assimilation and national unification. Liu Cunkuan has been very clear regarding the political objectives and he puts the history writing effort as part of the PRC’s cultural policy towards Hong Kong:

They [the British] deliberately rejected the teaching of Chinese culture and geography and they brushed away or wilfully misinterpreted the history of the British occupation of Hong Kong. This was all done in order to minimise the national consciousness of the Hong Kong people, to break the link between Hong Kong culture and the mother body of Chinese culture. It should be stated that this series of policies has been rather successful. As a result, a portion of the Hong Kong people do not really understand Chinese history and culture and they lack love for and a sense of emotional pull toward the mother country. We have to deal with the problem of some Hong Kong people being reluctant about or even resistant to Hong Kong’s return to China.²

Certainly, history writing is just part of this cultural policy, and a more effective means is to propagate such political agenda through the media. Though I am not focusing on media studies, a brief reference to it is useful. In the “explanation notes” for *Xianggang Bainian* [The hundred years of Hong Kong], in a special TV documentary series of the same name, the chief compiler, Ayi, explained his historical task was to “make use of Hong Kong historical discourse to establish the legitimacy and correctness of the return of Hong Kong to China, to discuss the origin of the Hong Kong problem and its solution, to discuss the blood and flesh relations between

¹ Liu Cunkuan (ed.) *Xianggangshi luncong* [A critical collection on Hong Kong history] [hereafter as *Luncong*] (Hong Kong: Qilin Books, 1998), p.241. He explained (p.248) that he only started work in 1980, visiting the archives and libraries in France, Britain and Russia. He spent four months in Britain, visiting particularly the Public Record Office at Kew Gardens. He also admitted (p.246) the lack of documents in Mainland Chinese archives regarding the New Territories of Hong Kong. In another instance, Yu Shengwu and Liu Cunkuan said that the actual compilation and writing of the key book *Shijiu shiji de Xianggang* started in 1983 and it took six years to complete. See Yu and Liu, *Shijiu shiji de Xianggang* [Hong Kong in the 19th century; hereafter as *Shijiu*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1994), p.4 in the preface (and the preface was dated November 1991). Given all these facts, it is no wonder that before the 1980s Mainland China had a scarcity of serious works on Hong Kong history.

² Liu, *Luncong*, p.217.

China and Hong Kong, to let people know about Hong Kong history, to understand contemporary Hong Kong, and to understand the Basic Law.”³ Ayi proudly and openly admitted sending his “explanation notes” to the Hong Kong and Macao Office of China’s State Department (HKMO) to have them checked in terms of their political correctness.⁴ He acknowledged his gratitude to the Social-Cultural Section (HKMO) for checking his “notes” word by word to make sure that there were no mistakes in facts, presentation and political orientation.

(A) Hong Kong: China’s Sacred Soil

Let us start from pre-British Hong Kong. Mainland Chinese historians would have no difficulties in pointing out that Hong Kong (to them the term can mean Hong Kong Island, Kowloon Peninsula and the New Territories, individually and severally, depending on the need) is (and always has been) an inseparable part of China. This official discourse can be described as the “theory of the sacred soil”. Practically all writings start from this premise.⁵ From time immemorial, the Chinese (though itself a problematic term) migrated to South China (Hong Kong included) and started to settle in this region. Using various historic relics and archaeological finds they argue that Hong Kong and its environs have been under Chinese political and cultural influence for more than two thousand years. A typical example is the use of a tomb excavation dated back to the Eastern Han period (A.D. 8-220). As Liu Shuyong has described: “... the tomb provides strong proof that the Hong Kong area shared a cultural identity with Guangdong and like the Guangdong Culture, had by then [Eastern Han period] come under the ever-increasing cultural influence of Central China.”⁶ Because of these influences, Hong Kong was never so remote as has been described (for various reasons) by the British historians. A series of waves of migration also brought many people from north and central China. There were schools and libraries in the settled

³ Ayi (compiler), *Xianggang bainian* [The hundred years of Hong Kong] (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 1997), pp.1-2.

⁴ Ayi, p.296.

⁵ It is applicable for “official” or “unofficial” histories, see Liu Shuyong, *An outline history of Hong Kong* [hereafter as *Outline history*] (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1997), Liu Xiaoqing, *Xianggang yeshi* [An unofficial history of Hong Kong] (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 1997), and Yu Shengwu & Liu Cunkuan (eds.) *Shijiu shiji de Xianggang*. The official position of China is made clear in Yu and Liu’s book: “The first chapter of this book focuses on elucidating one fact: that Hong Kong was part of China’s sacred soil from ancient time. This is the starting point of all the discourses in this book,” in *Shijiu*, p.2.

⁶ Liu, *Outline history*, p.6.

parts of the New Territories and the economy must have been viable enough to support these cultural and educational activities.⁷ Even Hong Kong Island itself had long been inhabited and by the time of the British occupation, was neither barren nor remote. The purpose of Liu in the following description is clear: to dethrone British discourse on Hong Kong history:

According to a census published in [the] *Hong Kong Gazette* on May 15, 1841, Hong Kong Island by then had a population of 7,450, and Chek Chu, in the south of the island, was a “large town” with a population of 2,000. In terms of mid-19th century demography, these figures, which do not represent a small population density, were released less than four months before British troops landed in Hong Kong, and yet H.J.T. Palmerston, British Foreign Secretary, said on April 21, 1841 that Hong Kong was “a barren island with hardly a house upon it,” which, obviously, does not tally with the reality of the time.⁸

According to Liu Shuyong, “Before the arrival of the British aggressors this part of China was fairly well developed in [terms of] culture, education and agriculture, and in such industries as fisheries, maritime navigation, salt making, pearl gathering and the production and sale of incense wood.”⁹ He also argues that during the Qing period, Hong Kong Island was garrisoned like the other places in the same region and Tuen Mun in the present day New Territories was also a town of “vital importance to the area’s defense and communications.”¹⁰ All these pointed to one single direction: Hong Kong was part of China’s sacred soil, and any alienation of it is unacceptable from a patriotic point of view. British rule in Hong Kong was an act of military aggression and therefore illegal.

The discourse that Hong Kong was so much treasured by the Chinese well before the coming of the British might not square up to the facts. First of all, there are the relics of evidently non-Chinese origins. Many of the rock carvings on coastal Hong Kong originated from as far a geographical spread as Vietnam and some of the Pacific

⁷ Liu, *Outline history*, pp.9-15

⁸ Liu, *Outline history*, pp.14-15.

⁹ Liu, *Outline history*, p.22.

¹⁰ Liu, *Outline history*, p.22.

islands.¹¹ Archaeological finds and their political significance do not speak for themselves. There might have been a deliberate (dis-)selection process to let only those things favourable to the grand national narrative “speak”. For example, according to Ou Jiafa (a Mainland Chinese archaeologist), prehistoric Hong Kong inhabitants found the place full of marine and forest products and that it was a “treasure land” (*baodi*) extremely suitable for settlement.¹² Then there is the problem of Hong Kong’s marginality. Traditionally, Hong Kong and its environs were famous for pirates and political exiles. Instead of describing its natural beauties or economic worth or cultural achievements, Hong Kong was depicted by traditional Chinese historians as a place to be avoided. The people living along the shoreline were the lowly but fearless Tanka [Danjia], despicable and probably disposable because many of them led a shady piratical life. (Many of these Tanka even “collaborated” with the British by selling food and water to them during the Opium War.)¹³

The general “remoteness” of Hong Kong might not be untrue. But it would be difficult for the Chinese to admit that Hong Kong was not that valuable and that it was the British who were responsible for developing early Hong Kong into its present prosperous state. Chinese historians have always said that because of the high value of Hong Kong, the British had, for a very long time, cast a “lustful eye” on the island and its environs.¹⁴ The facts seem that what the British actually lusted after was its harbour (later named as Victoria Harbour) for its trading and strategic value rather than the land itself. Finally, Palmerston’s original war instruction, issued on 18 October, 1839 (and repeated on 20 February 1840), was to occupy Zhoushan (at the entrance of the Yangzi River) instead of Hong Kong. The occupation of Zhoushan

¹¹ See William Meacham, *Archaeology in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Heinemann Asia, 1980) and for Hong Kong’s connections with Southeast Asia, see Ou Jiafa, “Xianggang kaogu chengguo jiji qishi” [Hong Kong archaeological findings and their significance] in Wang Gungwu (ed.) *Xianggangshi xinbian* [Hong Kong history: new perspectives] v.1 (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., 1997), pp.26-27.

¹² Ou, p.12.

¹³ Wright and Cartwright have an interesting description about the Tanka in early colonial Hong Kong: “...the largest proportion of Chinese population [in Hong Kong] were the so-called Tanka, or boat people, the pariahs of South China, whose intimate connection with the social life of the foreign merchants in the Canton factories used to call forth an annual proclamation on the part of the Cantonese authorities warning foreigners against the demoralising influences of these people.” See Arnold Wright and H.A. Cartwright (eds.) *Twentieth century impressions of Hong Kong: history, people, commerce, industries, and resources* (Singapore: Graham Brash, 1990; first published in 1908), p.58.

¹⁴ Shenzhen Museum (ed.) *Xianggang, yang lishi gaosu weilai* [Hong Kong, let history inform the future] (Shenzhen: Haitian chubanshe, 1997), p.12.

was supported by many British traders and even Elliot himself, before the taking of Hong Kong, was in favour of this plan.¹⁵

(B) Evils of British Colonial Rule

British rule in 19th century Hong Kong was described by Mainland Chinese historians as a combination of colonialism and racism. Hong Kong was taken by force with the signing of the unequal Treaty of Nanjing. Kowloon and the New Territories were respectively seized by means of military occupation, intimidation and treachery, all sealed with two additional unequal treaties. Under British rule, the Hong Kong Chinese were living in hell, in misery. They were heavily exploited and discriminated against. They had no political power, no democracy, no human rights. There was a basic antagonism between the minority British colonizers and the majority colonized Chinese people. British colonialism was evil and therefore it is right to reject and expel British colonial rule. The proper solution for Hong Kong's colonial problem is to have the "one country, two systems" formula, whereby the Hong Kong people can regain their political power and human dignity (Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong). There will be no racial injustices, no colonial exploitation, no cultural separation from the Motherland. The system guaranteeing Hong Kong's stability and prosperity was given by the People's Republic of China. The Chinese leadership have carefully and correctly considered the historicity of Hong Kong's colonial past and have provided everything beneficial to the long-term stability and prosperity of Hong Kong.

Clearly, politics has a heavy hand influencing how Hong Kong history was written. The 1950s was a time when the anti-imperialism thesis was on the rise in China. Hu Sheng has clarified the basic stand of China:

The ban imposed by the Manchu Government on the opium trade and the confiscation of the opium smuggled into China were obviously lawful and reasonable. Britain's recourse to armed force to maintain its dirty trade was a brazen act. But as it dared not openly use 'opium' as a pretext to unleash the

¹⁵ Liu Cunkuan, *Luncong*, pp.40-42, quoting Britain's Foreign Office documents.

war, it raised complaints that the Chinese Government was subjecting British traders in China to all sorts of 'unequal treatment.' Every country, however, is within its rights in formulating regulations governing foreign trade through its own ports. For Britain to resort to war on this account was entirely unwarranted. The real point was that Britain launched the war to expand its economic sway by using armed force to enslave the Chinese people.¹⁶

In 1958, Ding You followed this ideological line and gave a typical Marxist analysis of the Hong Kong situation. He described the occupation of Hong Kong as "a long term plot of the British bourgeoisie"¹⁷ and that "the testimony from the three hundred years of Sino-British relations shows that the British bourgeoisie has never let go a single chance to encroach on China."¹⁸ The British had prepared for a large scale aggressive war, and laid down the conditions and the plans of the war. "All these were the ideas of the British bourgeoisie, to be carried out by the British Government."¹⁹ The Qing government was said to have contravened the will of the Chinese people in signing the unequal Nanjing Treaty.²⁰ Even though America had very little to do with the founding of colonial Hong Kong, the anti-American politics of the 1950s brought it to Ding You's history of Hong Kong. When the Americans first came to China in 1784, they were described in terms of "their economic aggression in China."²¹ Again in 1840, "the American merchants in Canton were actively helping the crime of aggression. They prepared to enter the war intending to make an equal share in profits."²²

The building of early Hong Kong and making Hong Kong successful, according to Ding You, was totally the contributions of the Chinese living in the colony: "The construction of Hong Kong, changing it from an old village to become the 'Paris of the Orient', belonged to the Chinese sojourning in Hong Kong. They toiled endlessly under the oppression of the colonialists. All the costs of construction came from the

¹⁶ Hu Sheng, *Imperialism and Chinese politics* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1955), p. 12.

¹⁷ Ding You, *Xianggang chuzi shiwa 1841-1907* [The early history of Hong Kong 1841-1907] (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1958), p. 1.

¹⁸ Ding You, p. 16.

¹⁹ Ding You, p. 31.

²⁰ Ding You, p. 1.

²¹ Ding You, p. 19.

²² Ding You, p. 35.

colonial exploitation of the local inhabitants, of which the majority were the Chinese.”²³ Ding You continued by saying that after the forceful occupation of Hong Kong, the British colonialists relentlessly pursued their colonialism by ransacking the treasure of Hong Kong and enslaving the compatriots residing there.²⁴ There is a long record of economic aggression and political oppression listed in Ding You’s book.²⁵

Adding to this record, there was the launching of the so-called “education for enslavement” (*nuhua jiaoyu*). The British emphasised the use of English, and even if the Chinese language was taught, the emphasis was placed on old literary Chinese, and new literature (*xin wenxue*, referring to the “plain language” literature of modern China starting from the May Fourth period) was despised.²⁶ Furthermore, the school curriculum was also biased in favour of business knowledge, with the aim of cultivating comprador manpower. Ding You complained that after receiving this kind of education, many Chinese children had no knowledge of their mother country or their own ethnic origin.²⁷ They were thus “enslaved” to serve British colonial rule: “At the end of the 19th century, capitalism had developed into imperialism and was crazily grabbing colonies and expanding power. It collaborated with feudalistic landlords and the comprador class in enslaving the Chinese people.”²⁸ According to Ding You, the Chinese people were certainly unwilling to be subdued and he gave a long description on how the Chinese people had struggled to oppose the occupation of Hong Kong.²⁹ This radical interpretation of Hong Kong history was, however, very much toned down in the changed political atmosphere of the 1980s and 1990s. The originally hateful compradors were to be enlisted in the patriotic united front. Ding You’s book was originally published for “internal reading” only and though it was re-issued in 1983 it was supplanted by other books in which the anti-imperialist lines were given a much diluted form.

²³ Ding You, p.78

²⁴ Ding You, p.82.

²⁵ Ding You, pp.82-97.

²⁶ Qian Yibing and Ho Yaomin, *Xianggang: dongxi wenhua de jiaohuichu* [Hong Kong: the confluence of the eastern and western cultures] (Beijing: China People’s University Press, 1995), p.6.

²⁷ Ding You, pp.94-95.

²⁸ Ding You, p.107.

²⁹ Ding You, pp.97-108.

The publications since 1978 have tended to attack the British rule in Hong Kong not along class lines; they focus rather on the negative images of colonialism and racism. British colonialism in Hong Kong means that the governors were all appointed by and responsible to the British crown, and not the people of Hong Kong. Following this argument, the people of Hong Kong had never enjoyed any democracy and any British attempt to experiment with representative government in Hong Kong was deemed as just “playing the democratic card”, a façade of the British designed only to deceive the people of Hong Kong. Again, it is argued, there had never been any meaningful autonomy in Hong Kong. All powers were derived from London and retained in London. According to Xu Ke'en, “Being an overseas colony of Britain, there existed no equality between Hong Kong and Britain and as a result, it would be unthinkable for Hong Kong to obtain sufficient autonomous power.”³⁰ Even if the governor had his “autonomous” powers, he “could only exercise his powers within the boundaries set by the British government, to protect British colonial interests.”³¹ In fact, the British government had tried its best to ensure tight control over Hong Kong, as Liu Shuyong reasoned: “As the overwhelming majority of the people in Hong Kong were Chinese, the British government, fearing that the minority British nationals might not be able to subject the Chinese to their full control, adopted the system of a crown colony with centralized powers and rigid jurisdictional control in Hong Kong.”³² There is another interesting line of argument for not granting Hong Kong autonomy, as explained by Lei Da: “The plans for political autonomy were advocated by British or pro-British groups to complement the British decolonisation plans. But they were cut short by the birth of New China in 1949 and the Hong Kong Riots of 1967. The result was mainly caused by the British fear that in the process of getting political autonomy, Hong Kong would return to the Chinese embrace... In fact, in view of the special political status of Hong Kong, Britain would not ‘*shishe*’ (give alms as if to beggars) too much democracy to Hong Kong.”³³ What Lei Da did not talk about was the possibility of Hong Kong Chinese demanding independence and separation from Chinese rule.

³⁰ Xu Ke'en, *Xianggang dute de zhengzhi jigou* [Hong Kong's unique political structure] (Beijing: China People's University Press, 1994), p.68.

³¹ Liu Shuyong, *Jianming Xianggang shi* [Concise history of Hong Kong] [hereafter as *Jianming*] (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., 1998), p.82.

³² Liu, *Outline history*, p.116.

³³ Lei Da, et al., *Xianggang huiguiqian de sikao* [Hong Kong: some thoughts on the eve of its return to China] (Beijing: China's People's University Press, 1995), p.7.

The symbol of British rule was concentrated in the person of the governor, whose power was supreme and absolute. Mainland historians often like to quote ex-governor Alexander Grantham's description: "In a crown colony the Governor is next to the Almighty. Everyone stands up when he enters a room. He is deferred to on all occasions. It is always 'Yes, Sir', 'Certainly, Your Excellency...'"³⁴

To be fair, Chinese historians should have quoted further, in order to understand the context of the quotation. Just one line down it reads: "That is why it is good for a governor when on leave to have to take his place in a queue and to have his toes trodden on in a crowded railway carriage. It brings home to him that he is but an ordinary mortal like anyone else, and that the dignity attaches to the office and not to the individual." The next paragraph is even more interesting, detailing more the conflict of loyalty a governor has to face, and it deserves a full quotation:

The position of the governor, as between the Colonial Office and his colony, in a dependency like Hong Kong with no elected ministers, is not always an easy one. If the constitution provided for an elected prime minister, then, he, the prime minister, would speak for his territory and the governor would be the agent of the Colonial Office. But in a crown colony, where does the allegiance of the governor lie: to the Colonial Office or to the colony? Normally, no conflict arises, but occasionally it does, and the situation is not improved by a tendency on the part of the Colonial Office to treat a crown colony as though it were a sub-department of the Colonial Office. I know that the Colonial Office officials do a conscientious and honest job at which they work hard, but it is just a job. They have no attachment or loyalty to the colony with which they are at the moment concerned. They do their best, but their loyalty, naturally, is to Britain and, in the last resort if a clash of interest occurs, the colony is sacrificed. Nor do I think that people in Britain fully appreciate the fact that Britain acquired, and remains in, Hong Kong for her own purposes—principally trade. She therefore became, and is, responsible for

³⁴ Alexander Grantham, *Via ports: from Hong Kong to Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press, 1965), p.107 and quoted extensively in Mainland Chinese works, see Yu Shengwu & Liu Shuyong (eds.) *Ershi shiji de Xianggang* [Hong Kong in the 20th century] [hereafter as *Ershi*] (Hong Kong: Qilin Books, 1995), p.6.

the welfare and protection of the people. Undeniably, the residents should play their part, but there is too much of an assumption in Britain that the people of Hong Kong are fortunate to be there—which is true enough—and that therefore it is they who owe a duty to Britain, which is also true up to a point. Fundamentally, though, it is Britain that owes the duty to the Colony.³⁵

The British discourse, as reflected in the above quotation, is focused on the sense of duty and honour the British rule had bestowed on colonial Hong Kong, a theme that has been analysed in Chapter Four.

According to the Mainland Chinese discourse, British colonial rule in Hong Kong was not only colonial but also racist. The Chinese, as Chinese, were discriminated against and even the so-called upper class Chinese who had been collaborating with the British were not given their rightful share of political power. Clearly, the British felt the Chinese were not to be trusted. So despite the economic achievements of the Hong Kong Chinese and their social standing in the local community, the British Hong Kong government (*Gangying zhengfu*; instead of calling it *Xianggang zhengfu* [Hong Kong government], the term connotes the British connection and control over the Hong Kong government) did not admit the Chinese to the Legislative Council until 1880 and the Executive Council until 1926. The Chinese were described as “not having the moral qualities”³⁶ to participate in elections. Anti-Chinese distrust, according to Liu Shuyong, was most evidenced in the background leading to the appointment of the first Chinese Executive Councillor in 1926. The appointment of Sir Chouson Chow to that council (after the tumultuous Guangzhou-Hong Kong Strike of 1925-26) was to “disarm anti-British sentiments in China and encourage local Chinese loyalty in Hong Kong... [but] Colonial Secretary Leo Amery and Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain objected to this appointment, arguing that the Chinese could not be trusted to observe the confidentiality of proceedings in the Council. After repeated requests, [governor] Clementi gained his point and the appointment was sanctioned by the British government. However, the

³⁵ Grantham, pp.107-108.

³⁶ Yu & Liu, *Shijiu*, p.187.

Foreign Office insisted that no secret documents should in future be shown to Council members.”³⁷

If the upper class Chinese were disadvantaged in this way, the degree of discrimination against the lower classes was even more severe. The police were given extensive powers to arrest and interrogate the Chinese who had no protection under British rule. With respect to law, Liu sees only double standards in favour of the British and the whites. They were given light sentences and they could often pay fines in lieu of punishment or they were given early release from jail. On the other hand, punishments for the Chinese were harsh and there were various forms of maltreatment of the Chinese. Quoting a piece of legislation of 1845, the police were given the power to search houses and arrest “misbehaved” Chinese. Servants disobeying their masters’ orders could also be arrested and punished.³⁸ There was also racial discrimination within the police force; Chinese policemen received a lower salary than the Europeans and they were also distrusted.

Some comments should be directed against the Mainland Chinese discourse here. It is certainly true that Hong Kong as a colony could not be democratic and totally autonomous of British influence. But it is legitimate and possible for the governors to exercise their powers by representing and safeguarding the interests of Hong Kong and protecting the local Chinese there. It was imperative the British do that to maintain political stability which was vital to trade and economic development. British mercantile interests might not necessarily prevail and the Hong Kong government had been active in fending off excessive demands of the British merchants in controlling Hong Kong. And again if the anti-Chinese oppression and discrimination had been so unacceptable, there would not have been wave upon wave of Chinese migration into Hong Kong. The economic opportunities and a relatively well-functioning system of law and order must have been attractive to many Chinese. Chinese collaboration with the British Hong Kong administration took many different forms and though the racial bar was evidently present it could not stop the Chinese from gaining influence in various fields, politics included, though somewhat belatedly.

³⁷ Liu, *Outline history*, p.120.

³⁸ Liu, *Jianming*, pp.128-129. See also Peter Wesley-Smith, “Anti-Chinese legislation in Hong Kong” in Ming K. Chan (ed.) *Precarious balance, Hong Kong between China and Britain, 1842-1992* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1994), pp.91-105.

Ironically enough, any calls for resistance against the British colonial rule, though present particularly in the 19th century, were relatively rare. The call for Hong Kong's early return to Chinese rule did not occur even during the Guangzhou-Hong Kong Strike of 1925-26 or at the height of the 1967 Riots, both supposedly the high points of anti-British colonialism and imperialism.

(C) Focus on Economic Development

Because, in the eyes of Mainland China, political developments in British Hong Kong have been farcical and negligible, Mainland historians' writing on Hong Kong has focused much more on the economic achievements of the colony. The success of the ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs is given an overwhelming position and numerous books about their miraculous feats have been published.³⁹ This emphasis also complements Mainland China's "economics takes command" orientation (openness and reform) since 1978. It is also related to the effort to depoliticize Hong Kong. Any effort to make Hong Kong a political city has been condemned lest Hong Kong's stability be jeopardised if the city demands too much autonomous power (if not independence from Mainland control).

According to Mainland Chinese historians, the origins of colonial Hong Kong were related to the expansion of British capitalism. The British were seeking to expand into and dominate the China market. They even brazenly used opium to wedge open the doors of China, and later they developed greedily into all other economic avenues, still with the aim of economic dominance in mind. Chinese capital and labour were attracted to colonial Hong Kong. Even though the Chinese were allowed to participate in economic activities they were often disadvantaged. Mainland Chinese discourse argues that British economic interests always prevailed. The Chinese historians argue that the backing of British mercantile interests was pivotal in forcing open China's door and fighting the Opium Wars. With the founding of colonial Hong Kong, British capital and hongs kept and expanded their strong

³⁹ To name a few: Feng Bangyan, *Xianggang huazi caitun 1841-1997* [The Chinese consortiums of Hong Kong 1841-1997] (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., 1997), Guo Weifeng, *Xianggang huashang chuanyi* [The miraculous stories of Hong Kong Chinese merchants] (Beijing: Lungmen shudian, 1997), Leng Xia, *Huo Yingdong chuan* [The story of Huo Yingdong], v.1 and v.2 (Guangzhou: Guangdong Economic Press, 1997).

political influence. David Jardine (Jardine, Matheson & Co.) was appointed the first member in the Executive Council, and other members from the big British hongts were at the heart of Hong Kong politics, exercising huge influence. The Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, as the chief financial adviser of the Hong Kong government, participated in all major economic policies. All these British hongts were given preferential treatments and they were much advantaged.⁴⁰ British economic dominance was certainly related to the coloniality of Hong Kong. As explained by Yang Ji, “it was obvious that early Hong Kong capital had its colonial and transferred character. That is to say, Hong Kong economic development did not derive from its own capital accumulation but was transferred to Hong Kong by colonialists from the outside. This kind of capital was supported by the colonial administrators and enjoyed colonial privileges and at the same time, they directly served the interests of the colonialists and their suzerain power [Britain].”⁴¹

The most problematic part of Mainland Chinese discourse on the economic development of Hong Kong is the end product of such development: Hong Kong was transformed from a small fishing village to a world-class prosperous and metropolitan city during the British colonial period. Who contributed to it and what factors made Hong Kong tick? The Chinese discourse could certainly and easily point out the evils and exploitativeness of British capital. As mentioned earlier, British capital had been sucking the fruits of Chinese labour, and Ding You claims that the costs of building early Hong Kong derived mainly from local Chinese, not the British. Another line of argument is to say that British capital came from seizing the resources of China, through earnings from the hideous opium trade and the reparations from the Opium Wars for example.⁴² Hong Kong’s economy might have moved up but it had done “incalculable damage” to China. According to Liu, before its legalisation in November 1858, the opium trade was illegal in character. British Hong Kong had expanded opium trade to benefit itself, and failed to take any measures to help China’s efforts to stop this smuggling. The British officials in Hong Kong hindered Chinese officials from carrying out their anti-opium duties. They let smuggling ships

⁴⁰ Feng Bangyan, *Xianggang yingzi caitun 1841-1996* [The British consortiums of Hong Kong 1841-1996] (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., 1996), pp.460-463.

⁴¹ Yang Ji, *Xianggang gailun* [Introduction to Hong Kong] v.1 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1996), p.99.

⁴² Liu, *Jianming*, p.33.

register in Hong Kong, giving them passes and letting them fly the Union Jack, in order to bolster opium smuggling at China's expense.⁴³ The problem of this argument is that opium trade was later legalised and China itself produced more opium for its own consumption, effectively stopping the need for opium imports. And the British and other westerners were expanding into other economic avenues, ultimately boosting Hong Kong's economy. Colonial exploitation cannot explain away everything.

But what about Chinese capital and economic collaboration, especially when Mainland China needed to attract investments for its open-door and reform policy after 1978? This in fact supplied another line of Chinese discourse: despite all kinds of adversities and disabilities, Chinese capitalists were highly ingenious and adaptive. With reference to the 1873-75 depression, Chinese businesses, being of a smaller scale than the British hong, had successfully met the changes and challenges of the market. They had greater adaptability and they moved quickly out of the depression. As a result, by the 1870s and 1880s, Chinese capital had done well in business, transshipment, and real estate. They paid 90% of the total Hong Kong taxes, showing their immense and recognisable financial power.⁴⁴ From then on Chinese capital became the pivot of Hong Kong's economy and this argument sits well with Deng Xiaoping's thesis that it was the local inhabitants (predominantly Chinese) who contributed most to transforming Hong Kong into a prosperous city.

A problem remains however, over how to assess the contribution of the British colonial administration to Hong Kong's economic development. Though still affirming its exploitative nature, some Chinese historians have to concede its historical role: "Hong Kong's development and progress, reflected in its urban construction and management, were brought about by many factors: Britain's accumulation of wealth through its acts of aggression and plunder in China's interior on the one hand and the application of relatively liberal capitalist methods of management on the other. The development and progress, reflected, to some extent, the progressive nature of capitalism, as compared with the feudal system."⁴⁵

⁴³ Liu, *Jianming*, pp.39-41.

⁴⁴ Liu, *Jianming*, pp.56-57.

⁴⁵ Liu, *Outline history*, p.79.

Generally, the positive contributions of British rule have been played down, though some credit is grudgingly given to the British colonial administration. When talking about the post-1949 period, it is usual for Chinese historians to point out the attractiveness of Hong Kong: low tax rate, freedom of exchange and the laissez-faire policy. With regard to the legal structure, Liu has to admit: "Law in Hong Kong was based on the British system and showed to a certain degree colonial features. However, since the 1950s the law in Hong Kong began to be brought up to date by incorporating relatively complete business laws coupled with the increase of the number of legal professionals. All this helped enhance the confidence of international investors in Hong Kong."⁴⁶

The whole Chinese discourse is aimed at not giving much, if any, credit to the British rule. Chen and Lian first quoted Deng Xiaoping's definitive verdict: "Hong Kong's prosperity has been created mainly by Hong Kongers of whom ethnic Chinese constitute the overwhelming majority."⁴⁷ And then they asked a vital question: "Today, however, when Britain is about to hand over Hong Kong back to China, some people spread the view that the key to Hong Kong's success lies in a set of values established, and policies pursued, by the British in Hong Kong in the one and half centuries of their rule in Hong Kong, and in the rule of law brought to Hong Kong by the British. Is this true?" They argued that the British contributions should not be exaggerated out of proportion and that there were rapid economic developments in Southeast Asia similar to that of Hong Kong whose success was "not attributable to their following the rules of game worked out by the West [Britain included]" and that "Asians have acted in accordance with a set of their own rules and achieved success all the same."⁴⁸ I could only locate one instance of a somewhat guarded yet independent voice. Based on group research carried out by the Shanghai Social Sciences Academy, Yao Xitang could see the constructive functions of Hong Kong's British colonial past. He argued that Britain had certainly used Hong Kong to sap the resources and finances of East Asia but Britain had also let Hong Kong become the centre of the region's market network. Under certain historical conditions,

⁴⁶ Liu, *Outline history*, p.141.

⁴⁷ Chen Duo and Lian Jintian, *Who have created Hong Kong's prosperity* (Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 1997), p.11.

⁴⁸ Chen & Lian, pp.12-13.

Colonial Hong Kong had helped to transform the whole of East Asia and the Asia-Pacific region and it was not just acting as the tool of British colonialism.⁴⁹

Since 1945 international investors had definitely helped in improving Hong Kong's economy but more importantly, as Chinese discourse would have it, greater help came from Motherland China: the policy of "long-term arrangements and full utilization" (*changqiliyong chongfendasuan*) of Hong Kong. Through this policy, 'the Chinese government has helped maintained [sic] Hong Kong's political stability and supported it economically in a spirit of giving due consideration to history and maintaining the status quo.'⁵⁰ The policy has an almost "mythical" origin: it certainly was not in existence in 1949, as has been claimed⁵¹, but is "back-dated" to justify the prescience of the Chinese policy-makers. (At least Liu Shuyong has been frank in voicing some hesitation: "For some time before and after the establishment of the PRC, the CCP did not make any official declaration on the future of Hong Kong. But judging retrospectively from the development of events, from the editorials of *Wen Wei Pao* [Wenhuibao] and *Ta Kung Pao* [Dagongbao] and the reports from New China News Agency, there seemed to be a kind of indication: ... it revealed the intention of the CCP-led authorities to temporarily preserve the status quo and stability of Hong Kong.")⁵² According to Jin Yaoyu, in the summer of 1949, before the setting up of the People's Republic of China, Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai decided not to take back Hong Kong. Jin believed that they were not ignorant of the righteousness of "removing national humiliation" and "protecting national sovereignty". The decision was made because keeping Hong Kong as a British colony was considered by the two Chinese leaders to be beneficial to China's nation-building, to giving a breathing space to the Chinese people, to the dissolution of the Anti-Chinese Anglo-American coalition, to the launching of an international united front and to the safeguarding of Asian and world peace. Jin continued to argue that if not for the correctness of the policy, how could Hong Kong be made the window for China's reform policy in the 1980s?⁵³

⁴⁹ Yao Xitang. *Zoujin Xianggang* [Walking near Hong Kong] (Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, 1998), p.2.

⁵⁰ Liu, *Outline history*, p.139.

⁵¹ Liu, *Outline history*, p.139.

⁵² Liu, *Jianming*, pp.248-249.

⁵³ Jin Yaoyu, *Zhonggong Xianggang zhengce miwen shilu* [Secret records of CCP's Hong Kong policy] (Hong Kong: Tianyuan shudian, 1998), p.4.

The justifications are rather unconvincing. What is more likely is that the strategy in 1949 was focused on defeating the Guomindang and liberating Taiwan. It seems that the taking of Hong Kong was not pivotal in this grand strategic plan, at least for the time being. The CCP was still not sure what would happen if it tried to liberate Hong Kong in 1949. The liberation of Hong Kong seemed to be more difficult and complex in the 1950s with the presence of the Americans threatening Chinese waters. The policy of pursuing “long-term arrangements and full utilization” towards Hong Kong proved to be beneficial to the present day Chinese government and it was invented mainly for its retrospective utility. The policy was said to be based on certain fixed principles: the removal of imperialist privileges in China, restoration of Hong Kong and unification with the motherland. While these principles were unchangeable, the procedures and the methods used to achieve them would be flexible, with due consideration given to Hong Kong’s historical background and the practical circumstances.⁵⁴ In addition, according to the Chinese argument, China would grant preferential prices on provisions to Hong Kong. It would help reduce the inflation rate, lower production costs and enhance Hong Kong’s international competitiveness. All these were said to be far-sighted enough to create conditions favourable for the final restoration of Chinese rule in Hong Kong.⁵⁵

(D) Focus on China rather than on Hong Kong

If the British-centred writing of Hong Kong is a collection and record of the Hong Kong governors, then the history books produced by Mainland Chinese historians are mostly focused on China rather than on Hong Kong itself. The table of contents from Liu Shuyong’s *An outline history of Hong Kong* is rather interesting:

Chapter 1: The Hong Kong Area Before the Opium Wars

Chapter 2: The British Occupation of Hong Kong Island

Chapter 3: The British Seizure of Kowloon

Chapter 4: The “New Territories” Leased to Britain Under Coercion

Chapter 5: Hong Kong and the Revolution of 1911

⁵⁴ Liu, *Jianming*, p.319.

⁵⁵ Liu, *Jianming*, p.320.

Chapter 6: The Guangzhou-Hong Kong General Strike

Chapter 7: Hong Kong and the War of Resistance Against Japan

Chapter 8: The Political System of Hong Kong

Chapter 9: Hong Kong's Economic Development

Chapter 10: Culture and Education in Hong Kong

Chapter 11: A Review of the Chinese People's Past Efforts to Recover Hong Kong

The basic thrust is that events in Hong Kong were not important unless they were related to China. Briefly, apart from chapters 1, 8, 9 and 10 Hong Kong did not exist for itself. Hong Kong was just what China and Britain made it to be. The actual life of the Hong Kong people was not given its proper treatment or significance. Chapters 2 to 4 show that Hong Kong was seized from Chinese control because of British imperialism. Chapters 5 to 7 try to convey the message that the Hong Kong Chinese were patriotic. Finally, the Chinese discourse is clear enough, as reflected in chapter 11: China had always tried to recover Hong Kong, and was successful in this endeavour only because of the power of the People's Republic of China. I will come back to these points with full elaborations later.

In *Ershi Shiji de Xianggang* (Hong Kong in the 20th Century, edited by Yu and Liu) there is no mention of the real history (because it does not focus on the real life and existence of the Hong Kong people) of Hong Kong for the period 1949-1997. The last six chapters (pp.170-317, nearly half of the whole book of 14 chapters and 331 pages) revolve around Sino-British relations. Chapter 9 is on British policy towards Hong Kong before and after 1949. The last five chapters are under the section "Sino-British negotiations on the return of Hong Kong". Other Mainland Chinese publications basically follow this lop-sided emphasis, as if there is nothing important for Hong Kong after 1949 except for its return to Chinese rule. Or that Hong Kong history after 1949 is just a chapter in the diplomatic history of Sino-British relations.

As far as I know only two books from Mainland Chinese authors have dealt with real-life historical events for the 1949-1997 period. Two chapters (9 and 10) from Yuan Bangjian's *Xianggang Shilue* (A brief history of Hong Kong) deal respectively with "The new industrialization period (1950-1970s)" and "The diversified economic development period (from the 1970s)". There is a section

(chapter 9, section 3) dealing with the labour movement of Hong Kong in which special attention is given to the British Hong Kong government's "bloody suppression" of the 1967 Riots.⁵⁶ Another book worthy of attention is *Jianming Xianggangshi* (A concise history of Hong Kong, edited by Liu Shuyong). It is a good sign that, with the joint efforts of five contributors, two chapters (8 and 9) are devoted to respectively "Industrial progress and social conflicts" (chapter 8 by Liu Shuyong and Chang Li) and "High-speed economic growth and social progress" (chapter 9 by Cai Chimeng, Chen Duo and Chang Li). Within the limits of Mainland Chinese discourse, Chang Li's description and analysis of the social conditions of Hong Kong (1960s–1970s) are refreshing and honest. According to Chang Li, it was true enough that the colonial administration had become more enlightened in the wake of the riots of 1966 and 1967. The achievements of social reforms (housing, social welfare and education) in MacLehose's time as governor (1971-1982) were frankly admitted. The short-comings of these reforms were also pointed out. In terms of administrative methods and starting from the early 1970s, Chang Li points out that the colonial government had to adapt in the face of contemporary changes, and removed some of the obsolete methods coloured by colonialism. The Chinese language, previously being discriminated against, became an official language of government and law. Within limits, more Chinese were allowed to participate in government administrative decisions and management.⁵⁷ Though these points are nothing particularly new from a Hong Kong perspective, they are good signs that the Mainland scholars have finally come to understand some of the "progressive" aspects of colonial Hong Kong.

Now let us go back to the official historiography of, particularly, Liu Shuyong. For the late Qing period, Mainland Chinese discourse considers Hong Kong (Kowloon and the New Territories included) as the bone of contention between the weak Qing Dynasty and rapacious Great Britain. The Hong Kong region as a whole was illegally seized from China, with the signing of three separate unequal treaties spanning from 1842 to 1898. Because the treaties had been forced (through wars, military threats and other treachery) upon China, the People's Republic of China considered them all as null and void. The history written for this period focused on

⁵⁶ Yuan Bangjian, *Xianggang shilue* [A brief history of Hong Kong] (Hong Kong: Zhongliu chubanshe, 1995), pp.242-243.

⁵⁷ Liu, *Jianming*, pp.266-281 and pp.306-317.

how the Chinese had been humiliated and that the people in China and in Hong Kong had heroically resisted the occupation of the Hong Kong region. Regarding the 1899 resistance incidents in the New Territories, Liu relates it squarely back to the main theme: “The struggle waged by the inhabitants of the ‘New Territories’ was a milestone in the history of Hong Kong. The ennobling patriotism and fearlessness they displayed against heavy odds was so impressive that even Lockhart [Colonial Secretary of Hong Kong] had to admit [their great courage].”⁵⁸ Whether in fact many Chinese had actually stood back and remained aloof with regard to the New Territories was generally ignored. Some Chinese in Hong Kong island even bought up lands in the New Territories, speculating on a rise of land prices there as a result of the imposition of British rule.⁵⁹ Again the fact that the Chinese flocked to colonial Hong Kong, and fared better there and that there was more collaboration than resistance on the part of the Chinese in Hong Kong was never mentioned. Generally, anything inconvenient in terms of perpetuating the grand national narrative has been ignored or removed out of sight.

The topics selected for the period after 1911 are no different from any general textbook on Modern Chinese history. In the introduction to the chapter on “Hong Kong and the Revolution of 1911”, Liu puts China’s grand narrative as follows: “The occupation of Hong Kong by Britain could not sever the kinship ties between compatriots in Hong Kong and those in China’s interior. Compatriots in both parts of China rendered each other support in their common struggle against feudal oppression and foreign aggression in many major events in the course of China’s modern history, writing glorious chapters in the annals of history. The connection between Hong Kong and the Revolution of 1911 is one of the examples.”⁶⁰ Ironically, no reason was offered to explain why Hong Kong was not included in the Tongmenghui’s (the Revolutionary Alliance) “Restoration of China” program. Dr. Sun Yat-sen seemed to have forgotten that Hong Kong had been separated from China and needed national re-unification. The focus is rather on how Hong Kong Chinese had contributed to Dr. Sun’s revolutionary activities. The part played by the British in obstructing his activities (because he was a fugitive pursued by the “friendly” Qing government) in

⁵⁸ Liu, *Outline history*, pp.68-69.

⁵⁹ More details on how the Hong Kong Chinese reacted to the New Territories incidents will be discussed in Chapter Nine.

⁶⁰ Liu, *Outline history*, p.75.

Hong Kong was also deliberately highlighted.⁶¹ The anti-British theme continues by relating it to the uneasiness of the Hong Kong government over the political implications of the successful 1911 Revolution and how it had tried to stop the Hong Kong Chinese from celebrating its success: "... [The British-Hong Kong government] took various means to control the situation, and publicly intervened to prevent any adverse effect on British colonial control over Hong Kong."⁶² But according to Ayi, the patriotic fervour of the Hong Kong Chinese was unstoppable; they spent some HK\$100,000 on fire-crackers for the occasion.⁶³ The same anti-British theme occurs again in describing the May Fourth Movement (1919). During that period, Chinese newspapers in Hong Kong received warnings from the Chinese Registrar (the Hong Kong government official handling Hong Kong Chinese affairs) to be prudent and fair in their news reports and commentaries. The flames of anti-Japanese patriotism should not be fanned in case they disturbed public order, and words such as "imperialism" were not allowed to appear.⁶⁴

So Mainland Chinese discourse is not so much about telling readers about Hong Kong; it tells us what China wants readers to know. This particular tendency is most evident in the descriptions of the Guangzhou-Hong Kong Strike in 1925-26. Instead of informing us how the Hong Kong workers actually suffered before the Strike and how the Strike affected the life of the average Hong Kong worker and inhabitant, the focus is on its relation to the revolutionary struggles in China. When a halt was called to the Strike it was because it had "completed its historical mission."⁶⁵ The explanations given are rather annoying: "Because of the success of the Northern Expedition, revolution had spread to the whole country and the focus had shifted to the Northern Expeditionary Wars. The Guangzhou-Hong Kong strike in Guangdong became a secondary and regional issue only. Major revolutionary forces had concentrated in the Northern Expedition and so forces in Guangdong were weakened and it was difficult to prolong the blockade against Hong Kong."⁶⁶ And so it had to be stopped. The achievement of the Strike was described as "unprecedented in the history of the workers' movement of the world. The strike dealt a heavy blow to the

⁶¹ Yuan, p.137.

⁶² Liu, *Outline history*, p.147.

⁶³ Ayi, p.73.

⁶⁴ Liu, *Jianming*, pp.148-149.

⁶⁵ Yu & Liu, *Ershi*, p.122.

⁶⁶ Liu, *Jianming*, p.164.

imperialist forces, greatly enhanced the popularity of the Communist Party of China and significantly contributed to the success of the KMT's Northern Expedition and the development of the revolutionary situation in China at that time."⁶⁷ But where did that leave Hong Kong? We are left ignorant of how the Hong Kong workers fared following the Strike or how the Hong Kong government changed its labour policy so as to cope with the labour problems in the colony. Were Hong Kong and its workers being sacrificed for the sake of the Great Revolution in China?

The treatment of the Anti-Japanese War period follows the same discursive line. First of all, we are told that Britain was preoccupied with the war against Germany in Europe and so Hong Kong's defences were under strength. There were more severe charges, relating to factors which brought about the temporary downfall of British rule in Hong Kong: "Britain had also pursued a policy of appeasement and connivance toward Japanese aggression in China before the battle [of Hong Kong, December 1941] in a futile attempt to preserve British interests in China at the expense of China itself. The British authorities in Hong Kong even rejected China's offer to counter the Japanese invasion jointly and were afraid to mobilize Hong Kong's Chinese residents to take part in the resistance. This selfish policy on the part of Britain predetermined its utter defeat in Hong Kong."⁶⁸ But there are many problems which Liu did not attempt to answer: Was it militarily and politically feasible to mobilize the Hong Kong Chinese? Would such mobilization efforts have been enough to stop the Japanese onslaught? Was Hong Kong defensible after all? Brushing aside all these problems, Liu described instead the contributions of the Hong Kong-Kowloon Independent Brigade, a guerrilla group led by the Chinese Communists. Unlike the British-centred description of wartime Hong Kong focusing on the British prisoners-of-war in Stanley Prison and other internment camps, the Chinese historians like to concentrate on this Brigade, saying that it "launched courageous attacks on the [Japanese] enemy, and achieved one victory after another... The Hong Kong-Kowloon Independent Brigade also carried out international cooperation in many ways with Britain, the U.S. and other allied countries... The

⁶⁷ Liu, *Outline history*, p.98.

⁶⁸ Liu, *Outline history*, p.107.

intelligence work of the Independent Brigade greatly contributed to the final victory in the anti-fascist war.”⁶⁹

The final episode of the war was in the form of the Japanese surrender and the problem of the future of Hong Kong. In his treatment of the surrender ceremony, Liu particularly emphasized that the British, who had not really fought for Hong Kong, became the “liberators” whereas the Mainland Chinese, who had fought for eight bloody years against Japan, were deprived of their right to liberate Hong Kong. Liu called it a great historical irony.⁷⁰ Even more ironic was the excuse given for the British retaking Hong Kong: “redressing a past disgrace, Britain insisted on sending its fleet to Hong Kong to accept Japan’s surrender.”⁷¹ According to Liu, the rightful man to do the job should have been Chiang Kai-shek or his representative. Chiang, however, had forfeited his right because he had decided to move his troops to fight against the Chinese Communists in north China. Chiang “gave tacit consent to Britain’s retention of Hong Kong after the British agreed to provide the territory as a transit stop for [his] troops going north and hand over to [him] all the equipment and installations left behind by the Japanese troops in Hong Kong.”⁷² It seems that Chiang had been selling out the national interest [unification of Hong Kong with motherland China] for the sake of his military ambitions. Again, Hong Kong was no more than a pawn in the game of power politics.

(E) Hong Kong’s Return to Chinese Rule: Only the PRC Could Be Successful

The political mission of writing Hong Kong history is clearly to justify the legitimacy of Hong Kong’s return to Chinese rule and to facilitate that process. In the words of Liu Chukuan: “With the nearing of Hong Kong’s return to China, there has been a ‘Hong Kong fever’ ...and there have been lots of publications. To put it more correctly, the study of Hong Kong history in this period, when compared with the long-time negligence and the lack of progress since 1949, was unprecedented. It should be pointed out that, unlike what some people say that the study of Hong Kong

⁶⁹ Liu, *Outline history*, pp.112-113.

⁷⁰ Liu, *Jianming*, p.228.

⁷¹ Liu, *Outline history*, p.114.

⁷² Liu, *Outline history*, p.114.

history will 'complete its historical mission' [by 1997] and come to an end, I think it is just a good beginning and there is a lot of work to be done."⁷³

The basic thesis is: for more than 150 years, from the time Hong Kong island was occupied by the British in 1841, the Chinese people have hoped to regain the Hong Kong region. Chinese governments of the past (the Qing government, the Beijing warlord governments and the Nationalist government) all tried to recover Hong Kong but were unsuccessful. History shows that only New China (the People's Republic of China) has been able to realise the dream of the Chinese.⁷⁴ According to Liu & Liu, right from the time of the British seizure of Hong Kong, the patriotic Chinese masses and officials both in Hong Kong and on the Mainland have strongly demanded the recovery of Hong Kong, and never wanted to let go of it in the first place.⁷⁵ It was said that "both the gentry and the commoners in Hong Kong refused to submit to the foreign rule and lodged a joint petition with the office of the provincial governor."⁷⁶ And even though, in August 1841, Emperor Daoguang urged the Guangdong commanders to take back Hong Kong when the British troops had moved north to engage in other battles and their defences were rather weak, we are told that Guangdong was still reluctant to fight. Similar decrees for action were ignored. Some explanation is needed here. First, we should not blame the Guangdong Chinese for their inaction. The overwhelming military might of Britain could not realistically be challenged at that time. Second, the loss of Hong Kong might actually be marginal to Mainland China. The loss was more symbolic and psychological than real. Lastly, the cession of Hong Kong in fact gave many Chinese (from Guangdong particularly) chances of alternative economic development. Collaboration was in fact a more realistic option.

In the end, according to this line of historiography, the Qing government not only failed to recover Hong Kong island, it had signed it away, showing that the Qing government had lost its power to protect territorial integrity and independence of the

⁷³ Liu, *Luncong*, p.120. Let us hope that the mission will continue, irrespective of what discourses historians might adopt. A strong China does not only have the resources to take back Hong Kong at will, it will also have the resources to pursue worthwhile historical studies of Hong Kong.

⁷⁴ Liu, *Luncong*, p.201.

⁷⁵ In Liu, *Luncong*, p.179.

⁷⁶ Liu, *Outline history*, p.169.

country.⁷⁷ Later on, “as the Qing dynasty was politically corrupt and economically and technologically backward,”⁷⁸ it suffered further military defeats and humiliations. Apart from losing Hong Kong island, it lost Kowloon and the New Territories as well, all pointing to the bankruptcy of the Qing government. Its efforts to regain lost territories were hopeless.

The Chinese discourse continues to say that from the 1911 Revolution onward, the Chinese government and people continued their efforts to recover Hong Kong. During the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, Chinese representatives (of the Beijing government) categorically demanded the return of all leased territories (including the New Territories) in China. But because the Conference was controlled by the British and the French, China’s pleas were all ignored.⁷⁹ At the Washington Conference of 1921, Wellington Koo (Gu Weijun), China’s foreign minister, requested the cancellation of foreign leaseholds in China. The British response was that without the New Territories, Hong Kong’s defences would be impossible, and Britain thus strongly opposed the request. The Chinese appeal ultimately failed, particularly because of Britain’s hard-line stance, and partly because of China’s own internal instability and warlord-induced separatism. China lacked any real power to back its requests and it failed accordingly.⁸⁰

During the period of the Guangzhou-Hong Kong Strike of 1925-26, and when the Northern Expedition was gaining good advances in recovering the concessions in Hankou and Jiujiang, it was a bit strange that there was no demand for the return of Hong Kong, Kowloon or the New Territories. Instead Mainland Chinese discourse draws our attention to Cecil Clementi (Hong Kong governor at the time). We are told that he “spared no efforts in advocating incorporating of the ‘New Territories’ [into Hong Kong, meaning that it was no longer regarded as a leased territory with a terminal date of returning it to China].”⁸¹ His method was to offer to trade Weihaiwei for the permanent cession of the New Territories. He even suggested provoking

⁷⁷ Liu, *Luncong*, pp.204-205.

⁷⁸ Liu, *Outline history*, p.172.

⁷⁹ Liu, *Luncong*, p.205.

⁸⁰ Liu, *Luncong*, p.206.

⁸¹ Liu, *Outline history*, p.174.

incidents to seize it and to change the legal status of the New Territories.⁸² Following Clementi, governor William Peel used the excuses of trade, settlement, water provision, government construction plans and military needs for permanently keeping the New Territories. Another governor, Geoffry Northcote also wanted to exploit China's plight. In 1938 when China desperately needed to raise finances to prop up its currency, he suggested making it the occasion for annexing the New Territories or lengthening the leasehold.⁸³ Though all these proposals were rejected by the British government, the message of the Chinese discourse is clear enough: the British were eager to maintain their rule on Chinese soil, and China could do nothing about it, especially when it was so weak. The British official position was a policy of procrastination, silence or avoidance. As long as China did not raise the issue of territorial re-unification, Britain would not positively bring up the issue.⁸⁴

During the Second World War period there were two more chances to regain at least the New Territories. In 1942, in order to boost China's efforts in fighting the Japanese, the Powers agreed to negotiate the ending of extraterritoriality in China. But still Chiang Kai-shek's government failed to gain back the New Territories. According to Liu, Chiang's failure was caused by two factors: the resistance of British colonialism which argued that the issue of leasehold was not related to extraterritoriality, and the pusillanimity of the Nationalist government. Liu condemned Chiang for not holding on to a principled stand and losing a valuable chance.⁸⁵ In August 1945 with the unconditional surrender of Japan, there was another good chance to take back Hong Kong. Chiang, however, adopted a mistaken policy of pursuing the Civil War and targeting the Chinese Communists. He had forgotten the pledge to use military means to liberate the New Territories from the Japanese, and hastily declared that he had "no ambitions regarding Hong Kong". It resulted in the British reoccupying the colony. To Liu, the strangest thing was Chiang's forfeiture of his legal rights: being the highest commander of the China theatre of war (Hong Kong included), he had the sole right to accept the Japanese

⁸² Liu, *Luncong*, p.207.

⁸³ Liu, *Luncong*, p.207.

⁸⁴ Liu, *Luncong*, pp.207-208.

⁸⁵ Liu, *Luncong*, p.212.

surrender in Hong Kong. He compromised on this stand and lost another valuable chance.⁸⁶

Drawing conclusions from the past failures, the lesson is simple: weak nations have no diplomacy, according to the Mainland Chinese discourse. According to Liu, “If a country is isolationist, anti-reform, internally unstable, weak in power, corrupt and backward, then it will not be able to preserve its own independence and territorial integrity. It is impossible for it to regain its lost territories.” The message is clear: “Only with the People’s Republic of China, under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, will be able to exercise sovereign rights in Hong Kong... The only way to safeguard and improve the nation is to insist on reforms and openness, to maintain stability and unity, to strengthen oneself, to gain progress and national power.”⁸⁷ Or to put it simply: “History has proven that only a powerful Socialist China can bring about a fundamental settlement of the Hong Kong question.”⁸⁸

But there are many questions to be asked: Why was Hong Kong not recovered by the Mainland in 1949? Why were talks only started in 1982, after some 33 years? For the critical decision of 1949, the story was explained through the policy of “long-term arrangements and full utilization,” as mentioned earlier. Regarding the timing of starting the talks in 1982, Chinese discourse puts it this way: “The restoration of China’s exercise of its sovereignty over Hong Kong is naturally a matter within China’s sovereignty. As a sovereign country, China has the right to recover Hong Kong at any time and in any manner it may choose. However, in view of the friendly relations existing between China and Britain and for the purpose of maintaining Hong Kong’s stability and prosperity, the Chinese government decided to reach a solution to the question with Britain through peaceful negotiations.”⁸⁹ The story goes one step further: “The 33-year wait was built on the Chinese people’s full trust in their government. The wait also demonstrates that the Chinese government acts in good faith.”⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Liu, *Luncong*, p.213.

⁸⁷ Liu, *Luncong*, p.214.

⁸⁸ Huang Fengwu, *Origin and solution of the Hong Kong question* (Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 1997), p.19.

⁸⁹ Liu, *Outline history*, pp.178-179.

⁹⁰ Huang, p.27.

The justifications are certainly open to question. Was Hong Kong, as part of China's inalienable soil, so dispensable in 1949? What kind of uses could a "colonial and capitalist" Hong Kong have for Socialist China? When would the "utilization" of Hong Kong end? Would China have consented tacitly to continued British rule if Hong Kong's "usefulness" continued and Britain had not raised the issue in 1979? Was the policy of allowing British colonial rule in Hong Kong due to the "friendly relations" between China and Britain? (It is a very dangerous proposition that inalienable soil could be given to friendly foreign countries.) Did the Chinese people know or care about Hong Kong before 1982, given their ignorance (lack of research and books as Mainland historians have admitted) of the colony before that year?

In any case, China's writing of the history of Hong Kong is not really to talk about the past of Hong Kong as such. It is done, rather, to justify a political necessity: the re-unification of Hong Kong with the Motherland. All other questions, especially those inconsistent with the national grand narrative, have been removed.

Chapter Six – Western Journalistic Writing on Hong Kong History

My research on the writing of Hong Kong history has yielded the discovery that quite a number of western journalists have tried to tackle the issue from their own journalistic point of view.¹ Though none have attempted to write a systematic history of Hong Kong, they have touched upon many historical issues relating to the beginning and the end of this British Colony. Most of them have focused on Hong Kong of the 1980s and 1990s, because of the controversy relating to the transition of Hong Kong to Chinese rule. These journalists are, by definition, not professional historians and as such they are writing for a different readership. Their final products tend to be more focused on points of interest which are designed to attract lay readers rather than being the result of scholastic research. They tend to exaggerate some of their impressions, or they like to add hyperbole, which is uncommon in academic treatises. Many of their quotations, even if acknowledged, are seldom referenced according to the usual scholastic referencing systems. Most of them were prompted to write with the 1997 factor in mind and, because of their professional inclinations, they are never hesitant in passing their political judgements. The most important thing for my research is that their products seem to reflect a rather fixed pattern of understanding and images of Hong Kong and its history. They also have their own agendas (though some are rather more hidden than others) and the details of these will be discussed in the concluding section. It is important in the context of this research to understand their particular discourses. Finally, their influence should not be ignored because they have a much wider readership than academic treatments on Hong Kong history. To a significant extent, their work reflects how the western world understands the subject, with all the biases attached. In the following discussion, I also include one semi-journalistic piece of writing, that produced by Jan Morris,² whose work, in

¹ I have also tried, but to no avail, to find comparable writings of Hong Kong history by Mainland Chinese journalists. The following three books are the nearest I can locate: Ayi (compiler), *Xianggang bainian* [The hundred years of Hong Kong] (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 1997), Gong Gangming (ed.) *Kuayue 1997 de Xianggang* [Hong Kong straddling 1997] (Beijing: Wuzhou chuanbo chubanshe, 1996), and Li Yang & Hu Weiping (eds.) *Huashuo Xianggang* [Talking about Hong Kong] (Tianjin: Changchun chubanshe, 1997). Regrettably, they tended to closely toe the official line and, unlike the western journalists, did not offer any new or critical comments. They were also censored by government agencies such as the News Office, Foreign Office, Hong Kong-Macao Office and National Broadcasting Office (all of China's State Department). It is all indicated in either the preface or the afterword of the three books. For the reason explaining the scarcity of Mainland Chinese works on Hong Kong history, see footnote 1 (p.92) of chapter five in this thesis.

² Jan Morris, *Hong Kong: epilogue to an empire* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1997; first

comparison to all others in this chapter, is most comprehensive in covering the 156 years of Hong Kong history.

(A) Origins of Colonial Hong Kong

I would like to start with the journalists' observations on the origins of Colonial Hong Kong, with a particular emphasis on their discourses on the opium issue. Richard Hughes, the Far Eastern correspondent for the *Sunday Times* and *The Economist*, is one of the first journalists tackling the topic in the post-WWII period. He starts with his typical hyperbole: "Hong Kong did not exist, so it was necessary to invent it. Though involuntary, the process of invention was logical enough, but everyone involved [referring to Charles Elliot, Lin Zexu and Qishan], willingly or reluctantly, was denounced and punished."³ He continues to anecdote another "irony of history", juxtaposing Elliot and Lin: "The supreme irony, which was yet to emerge, was that Lin's British opponent, the distinguished naval officer and Superintendent of Trade, Captain Elliot, was as strongly opposed to opium smuggling as High Commissioner Lin was himself."⁴

Most western journalists believe that the Opium War was precipitated by the trade factor, rather than opium per se. The view of David Bonavia (Beijing correspondent of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and *The Times* of London) is typical: "The founding of the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong is often held to have been the result of the opium trade on the South China coast in the first half of the 19th century and the attempts by the Chinese imperial government to suppress it... This is not wholly true... The root cause of the clash between Europeans and Chinese in the matter of trade was their different view of the importance of that occupation."⁵ Similar arguments can be found in the works of Felix Patrikeeff⁶ (a writer for *The China Mail*, *The Times* and *The Hong Kong Monitor*) and Kevin Rafferty⁷ (a British

published in 1988). The book is classified under "Travel, History, Current Events".

³ Richard Hughes, *Borrowed place, borrowed time: Hong Kong and its many faces* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1976; first published in 1968), p.97.

⁴ Hughes, p.107.

⁵ David Bonavia, *Hong Kong 1997* (Hong Kong: South China Morning Post, 1983), p.30.

⁶ Fliex Patrikeeff, *Mouldering pearl: Hong Kong at the crossroads* (London: George Philip Limited, 1989), p.15.

⁷ Kevin Rafferty, *City on the rocks: Hong Kong's uncertain future* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books,

journalist for *The Financial Times*). For the sake of balance, Rafferty also gives the Chinese view, taken from *The Opium War* published by the Foreign Language Press, Beijing: “The British bourgeoisie felt it imperative to seek new and bigger markets for their goods in order to shake off the crisis [of over production] and gain more profit. Having consolidated their control over their Indian colony, they shifted the spearhead of their aggression to China, a country with vast territory, rich resources and a big population, so as to force open its door and extend their tentacles to rob and enslave the Chinese people.”⁸

(B) The Issue of Racism

Secondly, the theme of racism is frequently discussed in the journalists’ works. Hughes is clear in pointing out that racial animosity was mutual between the British and the Chinese, each having contempt for the other.⁹ Elaborating on this theme, Rafferty explains: “Between the British and the local Chinese population [in Hong Kong] there was a huge gulf. Perhaps the British and the Chinese were well matched. The Chinese believed in the Middle Kingdom and the superiority of their race above all things under heaven. The British similarly isolated themselves and lived in their own superior world.”¹⁰ Certainly after the consolidation of British colonial rule in Hong Kong, it was the British who were able to prevail in terms of race relations. Morris notes that it was still the case in the 1950s: “Even when I first went to Hong Kong, in the 1950s, I noticed that Britons habitually spoke to Chinese in a hectoring or domineering tone of voice.”¹¹ Morris explains that such racial prejudice was a result of ignorance: “The vast majority [of the Europeans] speak no Chinese language, and are almost completely in the dark about Chinese attitudes and intentions.”¹² (The opposite is equally true, with the Chinese being equally ignorant of the English language and Western culture in general.) British racial prejudice takes yet another form – in the realm of history teaching. Todd Crowell, a senior writer for *Asiaweek* magazine, relates an interesting point revealed by Tsang Yok-sing, the Chairman of

1989), p.118.

⁸ Rafferty, p.119.

⁹ Hughes, p.105.

¹⁰ Rafferty, p.134.

¹¹ Morris, p. 67

¹² Morris, p.62.

the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong: “In the 1960s most history [of China] stopped at the Opium War, and all of the instruction was in English.”¹³

A few points of clarification are needed. Up to the 1980s history was taught under two different categories: world history (taught in English in the secondary schools) and Chinese history (taught as a special subject in the Chinese language in the secondary schools). Teaching in the English medium was traditionally considered superior to teaching using Chinese. In terms of the world history curriculum, some coverage on the Opium Wars (labelled innocently as the First and Second Anglo-Chinese Wars) was given. But more obviously, the culpability of Britain with regard to the Opium Wars was seldom mentioned in textbooks. The focus of that historical topic then was more on the backwardness of China and the obstructionism of the Chinese foreign trade system (the so-called Eight Regulations of the Canton [Guangzhou] System). In the Chinese history curriculum, topics after the 1911 Revolution (i.e. the struggle between the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party, the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, and etc.) were generally avoided, and were not included in the school certificate examinations. Clearly, those topics were considered too politically sensitive in Hong Kong. The way history is taught or not taught is certainly a matter of political consideration and contention.¹⁴

(C) The Uniqueness of Hong Kong

In rendering the history of Hong Kong, many western journalists like to venture into the so-called “uniqueness” and “strangeness” of the Colony. Some of these renderings smack of a certain measure of Orientalism. Hughes relates Hong Kong’s uniqueness to its precarious survival upon China’s sufferance.¹⁵ Hong Kong was “founded on contraband and conquest, it is insufficient in food and water, it lacks coal, oil and all natural resources save granite, sand, fish, and *homo sapiens*. It is a rambunctious, freebooting colony, naked and unashamed, devoid of self-pity, regrets

¹³ Todd Crowell, *Farewell, my colony: last days in the life of British Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Asia 2000 Limited, 1998), p.50.

¹⁴ For a good discussion of this topic, see Flora Kan and Edward Vickers, “One Hong Kong, two histories: ‘history’ and ‘Chinese history’ in the Hong Kong school curriculum”, *Comparative Education*, 38.1:73-89 (2002).

¹⁵ Hughes, p.9.

or fear of the future.”¹⁶ To Patrikeeff, Hong Kong is strangely unique because it is a colony without a history. “History is a luxury in Hong Kong. The territory’s residents have always lived in an environment where structures are, in Henry James’s words, ‘expensively provisional’.”¹⁷ He further remarks that: “For some time the Hong Kong Public Records Office (formed only in 1972) was housed on the first floor of a car-park. While the Museum of History now [as of 1989] has its own premises in a former military building hidden in the undergrowth of Kowloon Park.”¹⁸ The avoidance of history might in fact have been deliberate or politically motivated. Apart from the excessive concentration on trade and commerce among the population (especially the local Chinese) so that they had little time to engage in matters historical, the colonial government might have liked to hide away the shame of the Colony’s origins. Or they might have wanted to establish a sense of permanence for their colonial rule. When people are ignorant of their own history, it is much easier for colonial rulers to rule according to their own liking.

On the theme of the “strangeness” of Hong Kong, Jan Morris seems to be most Orientalist. She says that Hong Kong remains Chinese despite British rule of one and a half centuries: “Hong Kong is in China, if not entirely of it, and after nearly 150 years of British rule the background to all its wonders remains its Chineseness – 98 per cent if you reckon it by population, hardly less if you are thinking metaphysically.”¹⁹ Hong Kong was wonderful because it was so rough and vibrant: “It was a seaport of the east, a garrison town, a smuggling centre, a haunt of pirates and racketeer, a drug market... Opium divans and gambling schools abounded, brothels flourished: the Chinese population of Victoria [official capital of Hong Kong], it was estimated in 1842, supported 439 prostitutes in twenty-three houses, 131 opium sellers in twenty-four shops.”²⁰

Referring to Hong Kong between the two world wars, Morris finds the Chinese “faceless” and difficult to explain: “Until now the Chinese of Hong Kong had been passive observers of its history. To visitors as to historians they figured only as an

¹⁶ Hughes, p.13.

¹⁷ Patrikeeff, p.28.

¹⁸ Patrikeeff, p.30.

¹⁹ Morris, p.38.

²⁰ Morris, p.89.

amorphous background, faceless and anonymous but for those few who, by adapting to western needs, had qualified themselves for notice. Very few Chinese names appeared in the history books, because very few Chinese had played public parts in the development of Hong Kong; and the mass of the Chinese population seemed to most observers oblivious to public events, intent only on making a living.”²¹ This is a very interesting description, significant in indicating Morris’s Orientalism. First, it shows Morris’s own ignorance of the Chinese language, and her inability to understand the local history at a much deeper level where the Chinese were no longer “faceless”. Neither did she grasp that the Chinese were “faceless” more because they were made to be politically subservient and powerless, which was normal in that colonial context. They were not recorded so much in public events because they had been displaced from the public arena by their British colonial masters. They were not allowed to have their say and their own history. Hong Kong history was traditionally written in English (to be “respectable”) and viewed from the colonial/imperial perspective. It is, therefore, often incorrect to say that the Chinese were only interested in making their living and attribute it to their political apathy.

One final remark on Hong Kong’s “strangeness” is that many of the norms in the British Empire are supposed to be non-applicable to this Colony. One example relates to the fall of the Empire itself. Morris explains the situation immediately after the Second World War: “The British Empire was now moving towards its swift disbandment, as colony after colony gained self-government or independence. None of the usual standards of aspirations, it seemed, applied to this peculiar territory, Curzon was proved right, in his prophecy that when India was lost the rest of the Empire would go too, but Hong Kong did not count.”²² The reason why this might be so will be dealt with in the section on the development and limits of Hong Kong democracy. But one point seems to be clear: immediately after the Second World War, there was no absolute compulsion for the British to abandon or leave Hong Kong. They attempted but, more conspicuously, soon aborted the trial (known as the Young Plan) of reforming and democratizing their rule of the Colony.

²¹ Morris, pp.194-195.

²² Morris, p.262.

(D) Hong Kong's Survival and Success

The next theme commonly raised by western journalists is the secret of Hong Kong's survival and success, particularly after the Second World War and despite occasional upheavals. Hong Kong's survival depended first on China's sufferance and then on its own stability. After 1949, China tolerated the existence of a British colony on the South China coast because it was an immense economic asset to Mainland China. Patrikeeff puts it rather ironically in the following manner: "Instead of becoming an anachronism in the context of a revitalized China, the colony became a vital link between a fiscally weak socialist regime and the capitalist world. This role increased when, with Guangzhou showing no signs of economic take-off, the fragile capitalist infrastructure of Shanghai faltered and then fell apart completely in less than a decade of Communist rule. Hong Kong became China's window on the world. The iron guarantee of the colony's security was the economic and, to a lesser extent, political insecurity of China itself."²³ The Mainland Chinese would like to have the resources of Hong Kong (and Macao) to be "fully utilized in the interests of long-term planning,"²⁴ remarked Robert Cottrell, a correspondent for the *Financial Times*, *The Independent* and *The Spectator*. Apart from trade, Hong Kong could be a centre for political work among the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, remarked Dick Wilson, a correspondent for the *Financial Times* and the *Far Eastern Economic Review*.²⁵

There were, to be sure, conditions to tolerating British rule in Hong Kong. "The British presence would be tolerated, provided that Britain managed Hong Kong in such a way as to avoid any embarrassment or inconvenience to China," wrote Cottrell.²⁶ "China accepted the *status quo* – as long as Britain kept order, and did not allow Hong Kong to become either self-governing (because that would rule out rejoining China) or a Guomindang base. To these 'conditions' was later added an injunction against allowing the Russians to build up a presence there," added Wilson.²⁷ The important point here is that the British had tried to avoid talking about

²³ Patrikeeff, p.37.

²⁴ Robert Cottrell, *The end of Hong Kong: the secret diplomacy of imperial retreat* (London: John Murray, 1993), p.27.

²⁵ Dick Wilson, *Hong Kong! Hong Kong!* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), p.194.

²⁶ Cottrell, p.27.

²⁷ Wilson, p.196.

these implicit conditions and therefore the local people were “blissfully ignorant” of the true condition of their own future. The Hong Kong Chinese might be led to think that the prosperity and stability of Hong Kong was due only to the “goodness” of the British colonial rule.

With China allowing the continuation of British colonial rule, the Hong Kong people had still to contribute to their own stability (i.e. they had to avoid continuing the Mainland political struggles into Hong Kong), without which the economic usefulness (its own *raison d'être*) of the Colony would disappear. Most western journalists would agree that the Chinese in Hong Kong would prefer stability above all else, especially when the alternative was unthinkable, as Bonavia puts it: “A factor militating against civil disorder [as in 1967] is that the great majority of Hong Kong’s population are immigrants or the children of immigrants, who came to the British-ruled territory in search of economic security and prosperity and to escape the unpredictable political life of socialist China. The population seem keenly aware that violent action in protest at deteriorating local conditions would benefit hardly anyone.”²⁸ Bonavia reminds us there was always a condition to Hong Kong’s stability, i.e. the China factor: “Hong Kong is uniquely susceptible to political influences from China, destabilising or otherwise. A British administration can hold the line and contain serious internal disturbances – but only if China does not give decisive help to subversive elements within the territory.”²⁹

With China’s tolerance and Hong Kong’s stability generally established then the favourable factors came to work out their own logic. Hughes puts his observations thus: “But the combination of Hong Kong’s freedom and stability and the Establishment’s enterprise and solidity would have got nowhere without Chinese industry, versatility, experiment and initiative. All the elements of Chinese commercial genius were present: hard work, technical skill, the gambler’s itch, resilience, clan and family ties.”³⁰ After 1949, despite the Communist takeover, the Mainland Chinese still retained their business acumen working in colonial Hong Kong. “Outside China [i.e. in Hong Kong], Peking assumes the posture and reality of

²⁸ Bonavia, p.45.

²⁹ Bonavia, p.58.

³⁰ Hughes, p.32.

a hard-boiled and seasoned capitalist.”³¹ With this in mind, what made Hong Kong tick is put in the following manner by Robert Cottrell, “It is a Chinese city, but like no other city that has ever existed on China’s shores. It is a British colony, but one where Britishness is more often than not a decorative veneer, a trick of the light, a polite fiction. For Hong Kong was created not by Britain and China, but by Britons liberated from the obligations of Britain and by Chinese liberated from the obligations of China. Its population has been self-selected from successive waves of migrants and refugees impelled by ambition or desperation. Here, they have been free to make of themselves what they would. It is not only the city which reinvents itself, but also its people.”³²

The ability of Hong Kong to survive and its immense usefulness to China gave rise to two contentious points. Some Hong Kong people might think that they could survive against any particular odds and it might breed a dangerous conceit, opined William McGurn, the Washington bureau chief of *National Review* and a contributor to a number of other newspapers including the *Washington Post* and the *South China Morning Post*.³³ When the Sino-British talks began in 1982 some people might be misled in thinking that the Communists needed Hong Kong so much, they would not dare to take back the British-run Colony.³⁴ The second point is how the Chinese and the British made political capital out of the “economic value” and “prosperity” of Hong Kong. The British had traditionally argued that they provided a pro-business environment (with all the freedoms, the low tax and the rule of law) for the Colony and that they were proud of it. The Chinese, however, had disputed the extent of British contributions. In the heat of the Sino-British negotiations in 1983, China kept up a furious propaganda barrage against Britain. “The pro-China papers argued that Hong Kong’s success had nothing to do with the British, that it was, due to the ‘arduous struggle by our Hong Kong compatriots and to help from the interior’ – meaning China,”³⁵ remarked Mark Roberti, a contributor to *Asiaweek*, *Asian Wall Street Journal*, *International Herald Tribune* and *The Executive*. In a similar vein, Wilson reminds us of China’s propaganda tactics, “Chinese business journals talked

³¹ Hughes, p.40.

³² Cottrell, , p.4.

³³ William McGurn, *Perfidious abliion: the abandonment of Hong Kong 1997* (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1992), p.33.

³⁴ A similar argument is offered in Cottrell, p.5.

³⁵ Roberti, *The fall of Hong Kong: China's triumph and Britain's betrayal* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1996; first published in 1994), p.59.

about Guangdong subsidising 'the highly wasteful consumer-oriented Hong Kong economy', attributing Hong Kong's success in part to the sacrifice of many mainland Chinese. But it was, of course, a voluntary policy on China's part, advertising its own perception of the value to itself of Hong Kong's stability."³⁶ Such Chinese propaganda was, in turn, countered and belittled. First, it was put that China earned some 40% of her foreign exchange earnings from trading with Hong Kong. Then it was "mainly because they [foreign exchange earnings] are so easy to generate there. The territory is a captive market for Chinese pork, vegetables, fruit, eggs, traditional medicines and even snakemeat. Water sales to complement Hong Kong's domestic storage capacity were expected to earn China HK\$192 million in 1982-83 alone. China has kept food supplies for Hong Kong at prices generally about 5% below the international price, and claims that this is its contribution to the stability of the Hong Kong economy."³⁷ Such are some of the political bickerings between China and Britain over Hong Kong, as recorded in the western journalistic writings. Clearly, it is a war for the public space in which China and Britain have each tried to exert their own voice over of the other.

(E) Debates on Democracy

Equally contentious is the debate on Hong Kong's democratic development, a theme richly covered by the western journalists. Naturally, the arguments for or against democracy in Hong Kong rest firstly on whether or not Hong Kong has developed a full-grown political consciousness/identity of its own, as distinct from or opposite to that of Communist China and Colonial Britain. Hughes regards the development of a Hong Kong identity as a way of resisting the nationalism from Mainland China, in the wake of the Cultural Revolution. He believes that the Chinese living in Hong Kong have great incentive to continue living in Hong Kong and supporting the system.³⁸ They have had enough of the "misdeeds" of the Chinese government and ironically British Hong Kong, despite its colonial character, could provide them a haven of refuge. They became "real" Hong Kong people. Indeed, the rise of the so-called "Hongkongese" was evidenced from the 1970s. According to

³⁶ Wilson, p.195.

³⁷ Bonavia, p.77.

³⁸ Hughes, p.178.

Patrikeeff, "The years 1976-82 saw the flowering of a large middle class and a new breed of local entrepreneur. Young, western-educated and well-travelled, the new class led the way in undermining the old colonial values and sensibilities."³⁹ But the Hong Kong identity is not without its ambiguity. This can be reflected in a little anecdote recorded by Crowell: "But ask them [the Hongkongese] their nationality, and they are stumped. Most people would probably mumble something like, 'I'm from Hong Kong.' Or 'I'm Chinese but from Hong Kong.' Nobody would say they are British, even if they happened to hold a British document."⁴⁰

The Hong Kong identity naturally matures in being both anti-Chinese and anti-British. Distrust of Communist China is evidenced everywhere. The observations of Bonavia are typical: "The Chinese Government's biggest problem in selling this bill of goods [the proposal of 'one country, two systems'] to Britain and Hong Kong will be credibility. On the face of it, the offer is almost unexceptionable. But hard-and-fast policies laid down by the Communist Party have frequently been changed at short notice, sometimes completely reversed. If the National People's Congress can lay down the principles of the existence of a future Hong Kong SAR, it can also change them."⁴¹

The agenda of Morris, most conspicuously, is the fear of Hong Kong losing its own identity after the Communist Chinese takeover in 1997: "It was developing into a truly established community, a community in the round. Socially it was becoming more humane and civilized, historically it was acquiring an identity of its own, even architecturally it seemed to be past the worst, and there had come into being, only in the last few years, that well-educated, young middle class which was the true pride of the Crown Colony, and which would be subsumed in the gloom of Chinese Communism, or for that matter the hopeless rigidity of Chinese tradition!"⁴² This would certainly be an affront to Communist China. But to be sure, China also did not

³⁹ Patrikeeff, p.79.

⁴⁰ Crowell, p.32. As far as I understand, the Hong Kong British passport holders do not take nationality as a water-tight legalistic issue. They happened to be born in British Hong Kong and the passport is the best and most readily available and convenient document for overseas travel. They would be certainly uneasy to call themselves British, given their Chinese parentage. And equally, given the separation from China for so long and having a great distaste of many of Communist Chinese practices, they want to distinguish themselves from the Mainland Chinese.

⁴¹ Bonavia, p.101.

⁴² Morris, pp.292-293.

really like the idea of a local Hong Kong identity with its own voice. According to Cottrell, “It was a matter of principle to China that the structure of the [Sino-British] negotiations should not imply any separate identity for Hong Kong. Having waited 140 years to retake the colony, it was highly sensitive to any hint of self-determination.”⁴³

The distrust is not just against China, an equal measure is reserved for Britain. Both China and Britain were seen as caring more for their own interests than for Hong Kong’s, as Rafferty explains: “Peking seemed determined to get its own way over key points like ‘democracy’, ‘elections’ and who was a ‘patriotic’ Chinese; the Thatcher government was more interested in performing the modern diplomatic equivalent of the ritual *kowtow* in order to stay in China’s good books. Blood in Tian’anmen Square simply reinforced the doubts.”⁴⁴

Most people in Hong Kong and China would have had doubts as to why Britain tried to democratize Hong Kong only when the colonial period was nearly over. Patrikeeff takes it as an anti-communist political game: “The introduction of full democracy would act as an important institutional bulwark against any attempt by China to interfere in Hong Kong’s affairs after 1997. More important still, such an innovation, especially if it came well before the final transition to Chinese sovereignty, would be the seedbed from which might blossom strong, independent-minded leaders who would guide Hong Kong into its new semi-autonomous era and, again, resist Chinese infractions.”⁴⁵ But given that the British must have been aware that the Chinese would almost certainly not agree to this “democracy” game, prompted Cottrell to conclude that Britain did not have any real conviction over the issue of democracy: “Even if the exercise was not a wholly cynical one on the part of Britain, it must be presumed, given the timing, that the British government was more concerned at this juncture with the political benefits which would derive from the *idea* [original italics] of democracy for Hong Kong, than it was with the implementation of democracy as such.”⁴⁶ The Mainland Chinese, according to Stephen Vines (an

⁴³ Cottrell, p.108.

⁴⁴ Rafferty, p.439.

⁴⁵ Patrikeeff, p.160.

⁴⁶ Cottrell, p.181.

Australian journalist contributing to the *Independent* and a broadcaster for the BBC), “maintained that Britain got interested in democracy as a way of preserving British influence through the election of candidates who would look after the interests for the outgoing colonial power after it had departed.”⁴⁷ I believe that this argument is more of a smoke-screen. Democratically elected Hongkongese would have no particular liking for the outgoing British. It is more likely that this group of people would not listen to the dictates of Mainland China, making the Chinese rule over Hong Kong more difficult.

The Mainland Chinese government believed that an overt emphasis on a Hong Kong identity would lead to a demand for more democratic representation in government and possible self-determination, which would have been anathema to them. Western journalists are alert to this connection. Hughes, for one, has been most emphatic in opposing the idea of democratizing Hong Kong: “Hong Kong persists – on borrowed soil and borrowed time – because it *is* [original italics] China, and because it affects no suicidal pretences of ‘democracy’ or independence.”⁴⁸ Hughes seems to be the odd man out among the western journalists in passing this judgement here; almost all of the others are in favour of democracy in Hong Kong, even though many would agree that it involved the British playing a sly game in the process. The trickery is rightly condemned by Roberti: “Even if the British had held out, it is unlikely that Beijing would have given in. The British did not try harder because they knew the Chinese leadership saw a truly democratic government in Hong Kong as a threat, because they were not prepared to offer the people of Hong Kong a safe haven in the United Kingdom, and because they felt they had something [the democratic package] that they could sell to Parliament, Hong Kong, and the world... The gap between what the Hong Kong people needed to continue living in freedom and what China was willing to give could not be bridged, so the Foreign Office and Thatcher’s government simply covered it up.”⁴⁹ The interests of Hong Kong were thus sacrificed.

⁴⁷ Stephen Vines, *Hong Kong: China's new colony* (London: Aurum Press, 1998), p.89. From 1987, Vines became a long-term resident of Hong Kong and he was also the founding editor of a short-lived English daily “Eastern Express” in Hong Kong.

⁴⁸ Hughes, p.10.

⁴⁹ Roberti, p.307.

(F) Issues in the Sino-British Negotiations and the Final Transition

A closely related theme is how Hong Kong fared during the Sino-British negotiations starting from 1982, and the bickerings in the transition period of the 1990s. It must be noted that when China and Britain were talking about how much they cared about the interests of Hong Kong, using such high-sounding terms as “honour” and “responsibility”, the reverse is in fact closer to the truth. For Beijing, the six million people of Hong Kong, in comparison to 1.3 billion people on the Mainland, could easily be discarded or overwhelmed. For London, Hong Kong was also rather remote and its problems were peripheral to mainstream politics in Britain.

To start with China, Roberti reports Deng Xiaoping as saying: “I was told a million people paraded in Hong Kong [during the June Fourth period]. Do not be scared. Compared to a billion people, a million is nothing.”⁵⁰ And Morris has compared the problem of Hong Kong as “no more than an irritating itch on the skin” of China.⁵¹ She continues to reflect that: “Reading the history of Hong Kong, I sometimes get the feeling that the colony was ceded to Britain rather as a toy might be handed over to a recalcitrant child, merely to keep him quiet. Certainly for long periods the Chinese simply let things lie, without it seems much worrying about the status of Hong Kong. Often they were physically incapable of doing anything else, but at other times they seem to have exercised indifference as a matter of policy.”⁵² Probably, Morris is reflecting a usual British discourse about Hong Kong: given the immense size of China, Hong Kong was too small to matter much and therefore, China’s loss in the 19th century should not be exaggerated.

The western journalists are also alert to Britain’s looking down upon Hong Kong. Cottrell has pointed out that “... the history of Hong Kong’s colonization claimed little if any place in the British national consciousness. Even in relatively specialized works on the history of the British Empire, it commanded only a few paragraphs. The acquisition had not, by the British reckoning, been any great matter

⁵⁰ Roberti, p.261.

⁵¹ Morris, p.267.

⁵² Morris, p.272.

for glory or for shame.”⁵³ Historically, it was British India that stood at the centre of the British colonial empire and if India could be lost through gaining its independence, the issue of Hong Kong could only be regarded as a minor irritant to Britain. “Another reason for Parliament’s lack of interest was that Hong Kong was not an important issue for winning votes,” remarked Roberti.⁵⁴ Then there was the consideration of future Sino-British relations in mind, as Rafferty puts it: “Prospects of increased trading opportunities in an expanding Chinese economy would make any deal more palatable and sweeter.”⁵⁵ The estimate of success in a far-flung conflict with China was also considered, as Bonavia argues: “Britain is cooperating in the reversion process because she is fundamentally apathetic about Hong Kong and does not want to be embroiled in a conflict with China over it.”⁵⁶ Finally, Morris reminds us that Hong Kong should be conveniently returned to China because “many of the British themselves could not contemplate the existence of Hong Kong, however dazzlingly it spoke of British enterprise and even of British benevolence, without some tremor of vicarious shame.”⁵⁷

The negotiation styles of China and Britain are also noteworthy. For China, there were a number of fixed points in her policy towards Britain and Hong Kong. First, sovereignty was non-negotiable, a stance China emphasized with great force. Just minutes before Zhao Ziyang met Mrs Thatcher for talks on 23 September 1982 the Chinese premier had put China’s non-negotiable position on public record to the waiting Hong Kong reporters, as Cottrell drives it so forcefully: “By so brazenly pre-empting Thatcher, Zhao was also showing that China did not regard Britain’s participation as a necessary factor in China’s development of future policies for Hong Kong. Finally, by choosing the Hong Kong press as his audience, he was demonstrating that China felt free to appeal directly to Hong Kong public opinion when it chose to do so.”⁵⁸

The Chinese would also not be tricked into granting a continued British

⁵³ Cottrell, p.16.

⁵⁴ Roberti, p.88.

⁵⁵ Rafferty, p.379. See also Wilson, p.204.

⁵⁶ Bonavia, p.107.

⁵⁷ Morris, p.283.

⁵⁸ Cottrell, p.86.

administration in Hong Kong after 1997, even though the latter had acknowledged Chinese sovereignty over the territory. Chinese nationalism would triumph after one and a half centuries of humiliation. Western journalists have been quick to point out China's desire for revenge: "There is a thinly disguised desire on the part of the Chinese leaders to humiliate Britain in some way in order to wipe clean the sheet of the 19th century and the bullying of China by Britain and other powers."⁵⁹ With this in mind, Bonavia continues to explain the Chinese tactics: "The Chinese tend to view diplomatic negotiations as a form of guerilla war, or as a war of attrition. They like to think of it in terms of a chessboard, and enjoy the slow massacre of the opponents' forces more than quick victory or generous compromise."⁶⁰ In the first stage of the negotiations (July to November 1983), the Chinese tried to stall any advancement unless the British bowed on the issue of giving up sovereignty over Hong Kong after 1997. The Chinese made sure that the British had no bargaining power, and Britain was left unable to speak for Hong Kong: "China's chosen weapon was propaganda, the tone of which modulated between argument, harangue and outright threat, but the general theme of which remained consistent: Britain could not speak for Hong Kong, or make any claim to Hong Kong, because Hong Kong people were Chinese, not British, and their motherland was China, not Britain. To reject British colonialism would be not merely a 'political' act on Hong Kong's part, but also a 'patriotic' one. It was not a choice, but a duty."⁶¹ Hence, Deng Xiaoping did not hesitate, as Hong Kong reporters were briefed a senior Chinese official to record, in calling Mrs. Thatcher a "stinking lady" to drive home his anger.⁶²

The British government, particularly those Old China Hands in the Foreign Office, knew very well the Chinese position. Britain had very few cards to play and it was on the defensive from the start. In order to bolster itself, according to Rafferty, "The initial British position was to take a firm, unyielding stand on sovereignty and to hope to trade it for continued British administration."⁶³ The rationale behind Britain's policy was that she had done a good job in Hong Kong for China and therefore she had no shame in asking for the continued administration of Hong Kong on condition

⁵⁹ Bonavia, pp.107-108.

⁶⁰ Bonavia, p.123.

⁶¹ Cottrell, p.94.

⁶² Cottrell, p.90.

⁶³ Rafferty, p.402.

that China agreed. Cottrell puts it clearly: “In British eyes, Hong Kong, one of the ‘miracle’ economies of Asia, was working wonderfully well *for China* [original italics] under British management, and that was the basis on which to begin talking about Hong Kong’s future; it would be only logical for China, as the substantial, even the principal beneficiary of a British-run Hong Kong, to demonstrate an appropriate complicity in maintaining the existing arrangements into the indefinite future. This was something of a self-serving perspective, but it was not a duplicitous one, for the British really did believe that they had in Hong Kong produced something both valuable and unique, one of the very rare acts of colonialism for which, even in the post-colonial era, no apology need be either sought or suffered. They were, in consequence, somewhat taken aback by the response which they received from China.”⁶⁴ The response was that China paid no heed to Britain’s “economic card” argument, which was in line with the Chinese insistence on denigrating British contributions to Hong Kong’s prosperity.

Western journalists also viewed Mrs Thatcher’s insistence on the validity of the three treaties (1842, 1860 and 1898) as a provocation to force China’s hand.⁶⁵ Patrikeeff is especially scathing in exposing British self-interest: “...the references to nineteenth-century treaties [was] a deliberate move to incite China so that Britain could then appear the reasonable party in a dispute of its own making... Moreover, by resisting China in the early fruitless talks, it had become possible to dispense with Hong Kong in an acceptable fashion through a show of defending democracy and moral principles. There was the added bonus that China was pleased with the final ‘breakthrough’ when it eventually occurred. In the process, Britain had been seen to have absolved itself of the burden of empire with its international image untarnished.”⁶⁶ Given all that, Hong Kong had every reason to feel betrayed.

(G) Criticisms Against Chinese and British Leaders

Western journalists have a long tradition of passing judgements on their leaders, and they are rarely hesitant in condemning (rather than praising) those involved in

⁶⁴ Cottrell, p.16.

⁶⁵ McGurn, p.41.

⁶⁶ Patrikeeff, p.128.

Hong Kong history, particularly those Chinese and British leaders of the 1980s and 1990s. Of the Chinese officials in Hong Kong, Xu Jiatur (Director of Xinhua News Agency, China's highest ranking representative to Hong Kong) is described as ruthless and nasty: "Xu remained a die-hard Communist who executed his orders ruthlessly and worked for the best interests of China, his party, and his masters in Beijing. One former Xinhua employee describes him as 'a nasty man' who was 'a master of public relations.'"⁶⁷ Zhou Nan (Director of China's Hong Kong-Macao Office) is described as "a suspicious man, who saw a conspiracy behind everything."⁶⁸ His task was to guard against any kind of British plot in Hong Kong (such as granting a larger measure of autonomy to Hong Kong before China's approval.) Tung Chee-hwa (the future Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, anointed by Beijing) is described more or less as a stooge of Communist China, assigned by Beijing to dismantle the liberties in Hong Kong.⁶⁹ "He shares the views of China's leaders about the need to preserve order. He is suspicious of representative government. He is instinctively authoritarian and he is intensely patriotic," as Vines depicts Tung.⁷⁰

It seems that the western journalists reserved most of their criticisms for the British side. Roberti describes Sir Percy Cradock as a career diplomat who only saw things in diplomatic terms, caring less about whether the people of Hong Kong had any right to self-determination.⁷¹ He is also scathing about Sir David Wilson: "Wilson lacked the essential qualities of a good governor: compassion for local residents and an understanding of their needs and aspirations. He was a functionary, not a leader."⁷² Other journalists too, had few good words about him. The governor was seen as "ever the consummate diplomat, always seeking to fudge rather than to stand up for a principle."⁷³ McGurn says that Wilson only knew how to kowtow to China: "Sir David Wilson has himself become a kind of *comprador* to Deng Xiaoping, charged with coming up with the right mix of rationalization to explain why Britain is doing precisely what China asks... Where once Chinese emperors trembled in their

⁶⁷ Roberti, pp.155-156.

⁶⁸ Roberti, p.82.

⁶⁹ Crowell, p.143.

⁷⁰ Vines, p.77.

⁷¹ Roberti, p.162.

⁷² Roberti, p.186.

⁷³ Rafferty, p.146.

palaces at the thought of England's wrath, Chairman Mao's heirs amuse themselves by putting Britain's governor through the full kowtow."⁷⁴ Chris Patten (the last British governor of Hong Kong), of course, does not escape condemnation: "Chris Patten is a consummate politician with clear goals; if the achievement of these goals involved media manipulation, he had no hesitation in manipulating like mad."⁷⁵ In the eyes of Crowell, Patten is just another self-calculating politician who would benefit from the end of British Hong Kong: "After a vacation in the US, he will go to his home in southern France, where he reportedly plans to write a book about Asian economies. He already has a promised book advance of US\$160,000 plus a US\$400,000 tax-free bonus for his work in Hong Kong. Beyond that is the assurance of lucrative speaking fees, and, of course, maybe a return to a larger political stage. End of Empire, perhaps, but not the last we have heard of Chris Patten."⁷⁶ The overall impression is that the western journalists have tried to act as champions for the underdogs, the people of Hong Kong, who have been deprived of their right to democratic elections and self-determination, sold out by unscrupulous politicians from both China and Britain.

(H) Forecasts on the Future of Hong Kong

Unlike most professional historians, journalists are much less restrained in forecasting events. Out of the nine journalists making predictions, only two see a brighter future for Hong Kong. After weighing the various factors and difficulties, Dick Wilson concludes that China would honour its pledge to Hong Kong: "China is more likely to honour than to dishonour the agreement over Hong Kong, because otherwise she would lose international reputation, economic advantage, progress in reunification with Taiwan and the contribution which a prosperous Hong Kong could make to future Chinese reform and development."⁷⁷ The same author is also confident of Hong Kong's ability to survive and therefore a favourable scenario would be likely to come to pass: "The most plausible scenario is for a slightly depleted Hong Kong, shorn of its British administrative elite and an appreciable element of its local

⁷⁴ McGurn, p.129.

⁷⁵ Vines, p.86.

⁷⁶ Crowell, p.169.

⁷⁷ Wilson, p.257.

Chinese business, administrative and professional elite, limbering up for a twenty-first century battle of wits with whoever is currently in power in Beijing, and largely succeeding in carving out a considerable degree of autonomy to pursue the kind of goals and life it had before – only with some concessions to Chinese national pride and ideology, and some face-saving deals with individual emissaries or representatives and companies. Hong Kong has a great capacity for survival and for choosing the tactics of self-improvement.”⁷⁸ Likewise, Crowell could see only brightness for Hong Kong: “Long after the handover has faded into history, Hong Kong will remain what it has long been; the most important place where China meets and interacts with the rest of the world. That is a legacy of the colonial years. Inevitably Hong Kong will become the catalyst for wide ranging changes in China itself. Not only will the region remain the primary source of capital for the mainland’s modernization, as it has been for many years, it will also be a conduit for ideas about management, finance and, shall one dare say, freedoms that will benefit the entire nation.”⁷⁹

The majority of the journalists, however, predict a much more negative picture for Hong Kong. Bonavia has openly queried China’s credibility on promising autonomy to Hong Kong. He argues that: “The history of the five existing ‘autonomous regions’ of China – Tibet, Xinjiang, Ningxia, Inner Mongolia and Guangxi – does not give anyone grounds for confidence that the constitution of an SAR may not be changed to suit the convenience of the national Government.”⁸⁰ And on the democratic institutions of Hong Kong, Bonavia argues that “Peking will not necessarily stamp on them, but will strongly sponsor its own loyalists, who will quickly gain control.”⁸¹ This prediction (made in 1983) seems to be correct. Vines has the same verdict: “Chinese organisations can only cope with one centre of power. The concept of autonomy is alien... That is why when China resumed sovereignty over Hong Kong it really wanted to inherit a colony. This is a central theme running through this book.”⁸² The fear of Hong Kong being re-colonized is explained by Rafferty from a different angle – the political ignorance and immaturity of the Hong

⁷⁸ Wilson, pp.260-261.

⁷⁹ Crowell, p.178.

⁸⁰ Bonavia, p.101.

⁸¹ Bonavia, p.107.

⁸² Vines, p.266.

Kong people: “An official who had seen the sun set on various parts of the British Empire was in Hong Kong and China in 1985 to watch the mutual self-congratulation over the agreement. His judgement was: ‘These people in Hong Kong are so naïve and immature. They have spent so much time making money that they have no idea of the devious way of politics. The hardened Communists will run rings round them.’ No wonder that the thoughtful commentators fear that Hong Kong will get rid of one set of colonial rulers simply by swapping them for another set – the Peking colonialists.”⁸³

Patrikeeff forecasts that the importance of Hong Kong will diminish with a change of its own status: “from a window on the world to just another Chinese city.”⁸⁴ In a similar vein, Roberti believes “that there will be major changes in the business landscape that will affect all foreign and local companies operating in Hong Kong. It also means that Hong Kong’s role as an international center is likely to diminish and that it will become primarily a commercial and financial center for South China.”⁸⁵ Roberti explains that it will be the case because virtually all the international companies have contingency plans for moving out of Hong Kong. They predict that the legal system can no longer protect their assets and that the idea of a level playing field is again evaporating.⁸⁶

In a more subtle manner, Cottrell argues that the future Hong Kong will no longer be Hong Kong: “Perhaps the only certainty about Hong Kong’s future is that, whatever course it takes, it will be a future in which Britain has no special part. The city so promiscuously conceived beside the Pearl River in 1841 having lived out its century and a half of borrowed time, the city reborn there in 1997 will be the child of China alone. When the British flag descends by the Hong Kong harbour-front on that sub-tropical summer midnight, it will be the beginning of a new and no doubt equally extraordinary adventure for all who remain. But it will be the end of what has, until that moment, been Hong Kong.”⁸⁷

⁸³ Rafferty, p.160.

⁸⁴ Patrikeeff, p.215.

⁸⁵ Roberti, p.312. See a similar assessment of Vines, p.75.

⁸⁶ Roberti, p.331.

⁸⁷ Cottrell, p.194.

McGurn, speaking from the American point of view, sees the predictable erosion of liberties in Hong Kong: “For the Chinese and British both, the twilight of empire is proving an ironic denouement. What the British achieved in Hong Kong could be said to reflect a Chinese ideal. The veteran Chinese journalist Tsang Ki-fan put it this way just before he died in 1988: ‘This is the only Chinese society that for a brief span of 100 years, lived through an ideal never realized at any time in the history of Chinese societies – a time when no man had to live in fear of the midnight knock on the door.’ How sad to see it all sacrificed at the precise moment when history has vindicated the experiment.”⁸⁸ From this predicament, “the United States cannot ‘save’ Hong Kong,”⁸⁹ concludes McGurn, rather strangely.

The loss of liberties and a fair playing field are aggravated by the rushing in of a pro-China elite who are prepared to sacrifice Hong Kong’s interests in order to further their own, predicted Roberti.⁹⁰ He continues to argue: “The growing dominance of so-called Red Capitalism in Hong Kong means foreign companies will have greater difficulty breaking into sectors dominated by enterprises or partially owned by Chinese state firms or by major pro-China figures in Hong Kong.”⁹¹ To Vines, these pro-China elites are marked by their amorality, their lack of civic-mindedness, and their meek compliance to Chinese wishes: “In order to maintain these connections [with Communist China] they believe it is necessary not only to second-guess the wishes and desires of the Communist Party but to anticipate them by taking positions which they assume will be well received in Peking.”⁹² With so many of these people selling out the interests of Hong Kong the future of the place is doomed, so the argument goes.

(I) Some Concluding Remarks – The Journalists’ Positions and Agenda

Through a careful and systematic reading of these western journalists’ books I have been able to uncover their positions and part of their agenda. A number of the journalists are quite explicit in declaring their positions, and I can write with

⁸⁸ McGurn, p.134.

⁸⁹ McGurn, p.127.

⁹⁰ Roberti, p.315.

⁹¹ Roberti, p.323.

⁹² Vines, p.129.

confidence regarding their ideological or political biases. Patrikeeff was a refugee when he first arrived in Hong Kong, and he has migrated to Britain to further pursue his career, implying a lack of confidence in the future of Hong Kong. “Distant, hazy memories of my parents’ arrival in Hong Kong as refugees from China now seemed to be a dress rehearsal for this day. I was engulfed by a profound feeling of loneliness and separation,” reflected Patrikeeff.⁹³

Roberti expresses his anger against both China and Britain in the preface of his book: “I arrived in Hong Kong in 1984, eager to study Asia. As a journalist for *The Executive*, a regional business magazine, I watched the confidence created by the Joint Declaration slowly eroded as China reneged on her promises and Britain caved in to maintain cordial relations with Beijing.”⁹⁴ It is his aim “to get behind the official statements, the disinformation, and the contradictory press reports to uncover the real story of Hong Kong’s transition to Chinese rule.”⁹⁵ Whether he has succeeded in getting to the “reality” is open to dispute but one thing is certain: he has made his voice, his public discourse, known. According to Martin Lee, Roberti’s findings had caused Chris Patten, then the governor of Hong Kong, to respond to his conclusions (that Britain had really betrayed Hong Kong’s interests).⁹⁶

Vines insists all along: Hong Kong will become China’s new colony after 1997. He states it openly in the preface to his book: “The obsession with the removal of symbols is entirely typical of all changes of sovereignty: it is hardly surprising that Hong Kong’s new order has been brisk in its work. Yet the extraordinary reality of what has become the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong (SAR) is that the new order, so keen to remove symbols of the past, has been equally keen to restore another form of colonial government in Hong Kong.”⁹⁷ Vines is unconvinced of the benignity of a Chinese takeover of Hong Kong.⁹⁸

⁹³ Patrikeeff, p.8. Patrikeeff’s mother was a Russian refugee who left China in 1959. Patrikeeff (born in Beijing) describes (p.9) her mother “who arrived in Hong Kong with no English, no Cantonese, two American dollars in her purse and a child [Felix Patrikeeff] under her arm.”

⁹⁴ Roberti, p.xii.

⁹⁵ Roberti, p.xiii.

⁹⁶ Martin Lee’s Introduction to Roberti’s book, p.xviii.

⁹⁷ Vines, p.ix.

⁹⁸ Stephen Vines (arrived in Hong Kong in early 1987) writes passionately about his position (p.xi): “I have a home here [in Hong Kong], not a rented property which I can vacate at a moment’s notice. I also run some businesses in Hong Kong. This gives me a tangible stake in the future of the SAR. And I have

Crowell, on the other hand, tries to distinguish himself from the other western journalists who are against Communist China. He states his aim of writing as follows: "This book is an attempt to tell, and, in some way, to interpret Hong Kong's last two years under British rule. It is not meant to be an insider's account; I had no special access. I am not in a position to write authoritatively on the history of the negotiations leading up to the Joint Declaration... I am more interested in looking forward and speculating on the shape of Hong Kong to come based on my own close observation of the events preceding the change of sovereignty. I will do so as the book progresses. And being American, neither Chinese nor British, I can look on the unfolding events with some dispassion."⁹⁹ Crowell wants to show that despite having no special access to secret files he can still arrive at his own "independent" conclusions. Being American is, however, no guarantee, of course, of impartial judgement.

McGurn, another American journalist, has a clear agenda of his own. He recommends that the U.S. Government provide shelter for the hard-working and talented Hong Kongers. He is very emphatic about his agenda: "By making the case for the freedoms that allow Hong Kong to prosper today, the United States can increase its chances tomorrow. Whether this takes the form of internationalizing the civil service, reversing the decline in English standards, or impressing upon Peking the commercial imperatives of preserving Hong Kong's tradition of common law, Americans ought to be ready to lead. None of these measures will preserve the Hong Kong of the past. But together they might help conserve some of its soul against the day when it may once again be permitted to live in freedom."¹⁰⁰

The most interesting or intriguing arguments are found in Jan Morris's book. This work, categorized as "Travel, History, Current Events", is not quite in the same category as the journalistic writings quoted above. She puts her intentions thus: "I have been writing about Hong Kong on and off for thirty years, and I come back to it now primarily as a student of British imperialism... In this book I set out to portray

strong feelings about the place and a strong revulsion against those who want to make this vibrant society a less free and less independently minded place."

⁹⁹ Crowell, pp.10-11.

¹⁰⁰ McGurn, pp.127-128.

the last of the great British colonies as it approaches its end, and by alternating chapters of theme or analysis with chapters of historical description, I also try to make a whole of the imperial connection, to evoke something of Hong Kong's past as well as its present, and to explore how such an imperial anomaly came to survive so long."¹⁰¹ Indeed, her understanding of imperialism is unique. She remains an imperialist after all. "...[W]estern imperialism was always an engine of development as well as exploitation, and Hong Kong constantly projected new vitality, too, into the moribund mass of China. For better or for worse, its constant pressure for access to China's business gradually opened up the country to modern realities. Even the trade in opium at least instructed Chinese financiers in modern methods of exchange, demonstrated the advantages of contemporary ships and armaments, and helped to open the eyes of the mandarins to the fact that foreigners might be barbaric, but were not invariably fools."¹⁰² Her conclusions are equally astounding, but they betray her innate severe bias (if not, an imperialist mind): "History, I prophesy, will look back at their 150 years on this distant rock with astonishment and admiration. What a story! What an adventure! What messages! And however stiff or muffled the ceremony on July 1 1997, however sad its aftermath may prove, a sufficiently stylish ending after all."¹⁰³ Morris's imperialist apologetics is a good reminder of how we are going to read other history books on Hong Kong.

¹⁰¹ Morris, p.31.

¹⁰² Morris, p.268.

¹⁰³ Morris, p.303.

Chapter Seven – The Rise and Development of a Hong Kong Identity and Historical Consciousness

The difficulty in understanding the concept of a Hong Kong identity lies primarily in its absence in the past. Traditionally, the people of Hong Kong did not have a generic term to describe themselves. As such they might describe their particular identities (in plural) with reference to their native places or tongues. Thus many of them, because they came from the city of Canton (Guangzhou) and the Pearl River Delta region and spoke the Cantonese dialect, called themselves Cantonese. Sometimes (but rarely) they might call themselves Hong Kong Chinese (notice the term is a very recent invention) in front of a foreigner. But as other studies on nationalism show, the definition of oneself in terms of nationality is a very recent phenomenon. The assertion that the people of Hong Kong (a problematic term in itself, implying those who are mostly Chinese and have decided to stay permanently or settle down in Hong Kong) were/are patriotic and nationalistic is most probably an invention, to cater for certain political needs. Eric Ma puts it in the following way: “... identity confirmation processes may easily become ideological when some versions of identity are concealing the cultural diversity in the interests of an established group... Identities are historically invented and revised, but they are often celebrated or suppressed in ahistorical, essentialist, and ideological forms.”¹

Without knowing the key questions of “who we are” and “why we are here in Hong Kong” the people of Hong Kong would have little need to know their own history, i.e. the history of Hong Kong. There would be no such thing as a Hong Kong historical consciousness. Naturally, the search for a Hong Kong identity goes hand in hand with the rise of Hong Kong historical consciousness. If the two things were absent in the past they have to be invented or re-invented. Hong Kong wants to exert its own self that is different from that of Britain and China. The people of Hong Kong have tried to think of (or imagine) themselves as a people distinct from the British and the Mainland Chinese. According to one critic, identity is not a matter of fact but a product of popular imagination.² Imagination is also needed to shake off and forget

¹ Eric Kit-wai Ma, *Culture, politics, and television in Hong Kong* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.10.

² Matthew Turner, “60’s/90’s: dissolving the people” in Matthew Turner and Irene Ngan (eds.) *Hong Kong sixties: designing identity* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Arts Centre, 1995), p.24.

the unavoidable and real connections Hong Kong had/has with Britain and China.³ Standing alone needs a lot of selective memorization and forgetting. Perhaps rather curiously, in their popular imaginations, the Mainland Chinese have also differentiated themselves from the Hong Kong people. The sense of “separateness” is in fact mutual.

Starting from the 1950s, the concept of a “Heunggongyahn”⁴ (variously translated as “people of Hong Kong”, the “Hong Kong Man”, the “Hongkonger” or the “Hongkongese” – the uneasiness and the lack of consensus in the translations are indicative of the difficulty of the concept itself) was amorphous but it was certainly evolving.⁵ It is interesting to wonder why such a concept was historically absent in the first place.

(A) Lacking a Hong Kong Identity: Historical Background

Historically, especially before WWII, Hong Kong did not have its own identity because it was a place not for itself. It might be an important port where goods and services were exchanged and trans-shipped. It might be a place where, as the cliché goes, the cultures of the East and the West meet. It might be the convergence point of Sino-British diplomacy. Peoples of all different nations and from different parts of China came and went, making their money, so to speak. But all these peoples did not regard Hong Kong as important in itself. Hong Kong served the interests of everyone, but people were (supposedly) not there to stay permanently. For a long time, the sense of belonging was thus simply not there for Hong Kong. Hong Kong for itself (meaning that it could understand its own worth and fight for it) was either repressed

³ This kind of imagination was used not to “objectively” assess Hong Kong’s history or to figure out “who the people of Hong Kong are” but to create an image the people of Hong Kong wanted it to be. They might want to forget that they were ruled under British colonialism or that the Chinese communist rule was imminent.

⁴ See Gordon Mathews, “Heunggongyahn: on the past, present, and future of Hong Kong identity”, *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 29.3:3-13 (July-Sept 1997).

⁵ Some personal recollections can be useful here. I could recall that when I was a secondary and then a university student in the 1960s and 1970s the concept of identity was rarely used. Instead the idea of “a sense of belonging” was readily applicable in compositions, textbooks and everyday conversations. Fellow students like me were mostly (but not entirely) born and bred in Hong Kong and it was natural for us to look for a commonness and a community that was Hong Kong.

or was “quickly sidestepped, dismissed as insignificant.”⁶ Hong Kong was important only in the commercial sense and it was inferior in all other aspects, especially in terms of culture. The stigma that Hong Kong was a “cultural desert” is particularly noteworthy. It purports to argue that Hong Kong did not have its own culture (and by extension, history) and indeed did not need one (nor a history). It was not just a colony of Britain but also of China. Both the British and the Chinese came to do business in Hong Kong and that was all. Anything that was culturally and historically important must come from Britain or China. Hong Kong was just a marginal place in the British Empire and the Chinese Empire. The observations of Bernard Luk are worth quoting: “From the beginning, Hong Kong was a Chinese as well as a British colony... It was not a Chinese city with its own citizens and its own civic institutions and traditions that was ceded to Britain; rather it was a city built by Chinese colonists under British sponsorship. In this sense, it was not unlike the overseas Chinese communities of Southeast Asia. But the proximity of the home districts made travel and communications relatively easy and, hence, made the population more mobile, with closer social and economic ties, greater cultural continuity with home districts, and *less sense of belonging to Hong Kong*. [italics added]”⁷ Sojourners in Hong Kong would find it curious to identify with Hong Kong under these circumstances.

During the colonial period, the British did not strive to instill a British identity in the Chinese inhabitants there (even though they, if born in Hong Kong, were technically British subjects). These Chinese in Hong Kong were never asked to serve and save the Queen. The British were no doubt pragmatic enough not to attempt to assimilate the people there, especially when there were so many of them. The racial bar and distinction between the British and the Chinese were too great to bridge. An insistence on the Hong Kong Chinese adopting a British identity would also carry some unwelcome political implications. A Hong Kong with a strong sense of community and British political identity would be difficult to rule, to say the least. It might demand political rights and representation, something the colonial government would find unpalatable. It might either demand equal rights with the British, or, in relation to a new identity being imposed externally, it might identify with China and

⁶ Rey Chow, “Things, common/places, passages of the port city: on Hong Kong and Hong Kong author Leung Ping-kwan,” [hereafter as *Things*] *Differences* 5.3:179-204 (1993), p.188.

⁷ Bernard Hung-kay Luk, “Chinese culture in the Hong Kong curriculum: heritage and colonialism,” *Comparative Education Review* 35.4:650-668 (Nov 1991), p.653.

possibly demand reunification with the Mainland. So the matter of allegiance was best left ambiguous and indeed it remained a grey area for quite some time. The British national anthem was not really considered as their national anthem by the Hong Kong Chinese. It was certainly sung during official ceremonies. But if it was sung during unofficial occasions it was more a matter of slight ridicule. A slanted Cantonese version of “God Save the Queen” mocks the British for holding the beggar’s bowl and begging in Hong Kong. The point I am making is that the local Hong Kong Chinese did not and would not take their British colonial connections and allegiance too seriously. A British passport held by a Chinese was more a visa of convenience, something that remains in vogue even up to now in Hong Kong (for those BNO, British Nationals (Overseas), holders). A distinctive Hong Kong identity, budding from the 1960s onwards, was certainly anything but British. If the Hong Kong colonial government was not a sponsor of a Hong Kong identity, then the problem is that, as Eric Ma explains, “Hong Kong had no official symbol to which the indigenous culture could anchor itself.”⁸ Indeed, before 1966-67, the Hong Kong government had in fact tried hard to dampen the issue of identity, knowing perfectly the political implications behind it. This is reflected in the comments of Endacott, the “official” historian of colonial Hong Kong: “Talk of constitutional progress is idle in the absence of a community, conscious of its own identity, demanding its own way of life, and willing to share fully in its defence. Such a community would be neither Chinese nor European but Hong Kong. Hong Kong is rapidly changing but few would claim that such a community already exists.”⁹ He was writing in 1964.

Equally, because of Hong Kong’s colonial status, the Chinese (PRC) national anthem was not taken as Hong Kong’s national anthem. From the 1960s onwards (especially after the Riots of 1967), the people who sang it were often labeled as “leftists”, which had opprobrious connotations. Communism in any form was viewed with great suspicion by the British administration, and they were particularly apprehensive about communism connected with Mainland China. The Hong Kong government tried to de-emphasize the Chineseness among the local Hong Kong Chinese. Such avoidance was especially reflected in the teaching of history in Hong

⁸ Ma, p.23.

⁹ G.B. Endacott, *Government and people in Hong Kong 1841-1962: a constitutional history* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1964), p.244.

Kong. Basically, up to the 1980s, modern Chinese history from 1911 was not included in the school syllabus. Hong Kong's origins in connection with the Opium War were also brushed aside, as far as possible. If that was not possible, the nature of the Opium War was rendered as one of trade disputes or conflicts of two opposing cultures. Thus, history was either neutralized or sanitized to suit certain particular interests. Without knowing its own history or with having a much distorted picture of it, the people of Hong Kong (especially the younger generations) had great difficulty in fostering their own distinct identity (political identity in particular). According to Eric Ma, this was a product of deliberate government policy, fearful of the consequences of the politics of identity:

The reason was that Britain sought to maintain the fiction that Hong Kong was only a commercial entrepot [reminding us of the Chinese notion of wanting to make Hong Kong an “economic city”] in order to avoid antagonizing the Chinese government, which also wanted temporarily to maintain a commercial and apolitical territory for economic and diplomatic reasons. Although a substantial proportion of the population harboured pro-China or pro-Taiwan nationalist sentiments and were hostile to the communists, the colonial government was quick to suppress and eliminate decisively these political forces whenever they surfaced into the public arena. Concerned primarily with sustaining economic and social order, the colonial administration sought to distance itself from identity politics. Schools and other government institutions did not narrate a history of national or political identification. There was no coherent historical narrative for the younger generation to make sense of their socio-historical world.¹⁰

Mainland China (communist or not) had also been a stumbling block against the formation of a Hong Kong identity. For a long time, many Chinese writers marginalized Hong Kong by denigrating its lack of virtue or anything good. The descriptions of Matthew Turner are useful here: “...Chinese reflections on Hong Kong tended to present the urban society as a degenerate, treaty port culture. Northern émigrés, exiled by war and revolution, were predisposed to see Cantonese culture as

¹⁰ Ma, pp.23-24.

backward, conservative and inferior, and despised the ‘derivative culture’ of those who had ingratiated themselves with colonialism. Many saw nothing but squalor, obscenity, and greed in the city. This picture of Hong Kong as a backward Chinese culture, perverted by westernization, and debased by commercialism, remains a potent image, from the pre-war period to the modern period.”¹¹ A lowly Hong Kong had nothing to be proud of and therefore it was better to render itself voiceless and anonymous, a place devoid or deprived of its identity.

(B) Lacking a Hong Kong Historical Consciousness: Historical Background

Hong Kong without an identity for itself is Hong Kong without a history of its own. For a long time, the people of Hong Kong were not interested in its history, or they did not know it had its own history, and thus people were lacking a Hong Kong historical consciousness in general. The reason is in fact quite obvious, and it is “economic.” Hong Kong was founded because of the commercial needs of the British Empire and anything else was unimportant. If Hong Kong had a history it was no more than a chapter or even just a paragraph in British imperial history. Before the Second World War, there were few Hong Kong historians (mostly Europeans but none of the Chinese stock) of great reputation, and Hong Kong history was never held in high esteem. N.H. France, being the sole member of the University of Hong Kong’s history teaching staff, remarked that: “Hong Kong being nothing but a port with a history less than a century, a shifting population with its roots in the mainland, is not a fruitful source of historical research.”¹²

If Hong Kong history was taken into consideration, it was not for its own sake. Hong Kong was for something else, as remarked Alan Birch: “Certainly, one should take this wider view of Hong Kong’s history, for *it goes without saying* [italics added] that British relations with China have been the most important and continuous theme of Hong Kong’s history from the year 1841.”¹³ Notice that the remark was made as late as 1973, by Birch, a historian in the history department of the University of Hong Kong. It was taken for granted that Hong Kong had to serve Britain and

¹¹ Turner, p.29.

¹² Quoted in Alan Birch, *Hong Kong historical studies* (Hong Kong: Department of History, University of Hong Kong, 1973), p.2.

¹³ Birch, p.2

China in order to find its “historical” position and it had no “historical” value of its own. The contempt for Hong Kong can be further gauged in an essay on the historiography of the British Empire-Commonwealth. Basically Hong Kong was not considered important, as Winks puts it: “Hong Kong was considered one of the smaller areas and its only history book (George B. Endacott’s *A History of Hong Kong*, published in 1958) had been omitted in the discussion.”¹⁴ Another reason for Hong Kong’s marginality comes from the fact that Hong Kong had been used essentially as a station to “watch” China or that Hong Kong had been studied only as a part of China both of which have contributed to the neglect of Hong Kong as a subject for itself.¹⁵ An understanding of Hong Kong’s history, society, culture or politics was very much lacking, as John Young lamented. A similar and highly revealing remark was made by James Hayes: “...until the 1950’s Hong Kong was almost totally neglected by all manner of social scientists. It was regarded as of no importance to scholarship, being viewed as ‘no more than the railway route into Guangdong. Thereafter, a few mainly overseas scholars, people who were mostly anthropologists engaged in researching doctoral dissertations, came now and then to Hong Kong... You will note that these researchers came mainly from outside of Hong Kong. Neither Chinese nor European staff of the University of Hong Kong were interested in the subject, and it also took some time for people at the Chinese University established in the 1960s to become aware of local history.”¹⁶

If the British colonialists had belittled Hong Kong by rendering it unimportant, the Mainland Chinese denigrated Hong Kong by treating the colony as a victim in need of salvation. One Mainland writer considered Hong Kong’s history to be like a woman who had been sexually violated and another saw Hong Kong as a child in need of a caring mother.¹⁷ Rey Chow remarks that these Mainland writers believed that Hong Kong needed to be rescued or reunited with China, Hong Kong’s “real” source of identification. The salvation, for Chow however, is to have Hong Kong

¹⁴ Robin W. Winks (ed.) *The historiography of the British Empire-Commonwealth: trends, interpretations, and resources* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1966), p.5.

¹⁵ John Young. “From China-watch to Hong Kong-watch: a case for Hong Kong studies,” *Modern Chinese History Society of Hong Kong Bulletin*, no.2 (Jan 1988), pp.44-46.

¹⁶ “The Hong Kong history project,” *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, v.27 (1987), p.254. One can always notice this kind of elitist snobbery that had looked down upon Hong Kong.

¹⁷ Chow, *Things*, p.184.

writing on its own and for its own sake. If China speaks for Hong Kong and writes all of its history then this is nothing other than another form of Chinese imperialism, according to Chow.¹⁸ If Chow is too radical in her judgment, it also remains true that many Chinese historians sojourning in Hong Kong did not consider Hong Kong too important. To them, Hong Kong remained parochial and their “refugee mentality” had it that they should ultimately go back to China. Local Hong Kong history was of marginal interest to them. Chinese history remained the centre of their attention. Hong Kong history, if written at all, had to be as an appendix of Mother China’s.

In addition to factors given above, the Hong Kong colonial government itself was not supportive of the study of Hong Kong history. According to one local historian, the colonial political environment was rather prohibitive: “Hong Kong history as an independent discipline was discouraged and the sensitive topics such as the Opium War and the leasing of the New Territories were prohibited in public discussions... In an environment without government promotion and the local population lacking in local historical consciousness, there were only a few foreigners pursuing research on Hong Kong history.”¹⁹ Local Chinese historians were marginalized firstly because writing Hong Kong history in the Chinese language was considered low in status (reminding us of the connection between power and language) and secondly because they confined themselves to less important topics such as writing anecdotes and historical stories. In any case they avoided key but politically sensitive issues, thus relegating the status of their contributions.²⁰ Indeed, there was no incentive for the Hong Kong government to inculcate a sense of history into the Hong Kong people. An open and unbiased discussion on the British occupation of Hong Kong and on the nature of its colonial rule would certainly compromise effective rule of the colonial government. The Government’s policy was rather one of deliberate avoidance or suppression. It knew perfectly well that touching on sensitive subjects would not only arouse a sense of historical consciousness in Hong Kong but also of Chinese nationalism and anti-British patriotism.²¹ The political pressure put

¹⁸ Chow, *Things*, p.184.

¹⁹ Lee Pui-tak, “Introduction” in Lee Pui-tak (compiler), *Xianggang yanjiu shumu tijie* [An annotated bibliography of Hong Kong history] (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., 2001), pp.18-19.

²⁰ Lee, p.18-19.

²¹ Wong Wang-chi, *Lishi de chenzhong* [The burden of history] (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp.14-15.

on the study of history in Hong Kong is most revealed in the 1953 Report of the Committee on Chinese Studies:

In the past, Chinese studies in China tended to aim at producing ignorant and bigoted Chinese nationalists. This is not educationally sound and should be strongly discouraged in Hong Kong. Here, after having attained proficiency in their own language, literature, and history, Chinese pupils should be guided another step further to utilize this as a basis for making comparative studies of Eastern and Western thought and language. It is only through such studies that Hong Kong children can become modern Chinese, conscious of their own culture and at the same time having a liberal, balanced and international outlook.²²

The threat of Chinese nationalism was certainly an issue the Hong Kong government could not take lightly. It was particularly sensitive after the formation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. With regard to the Chinese textbooks, the Report cautioned that "without proper guidance in this matter, pupils will easily be led astray by the books which they readily find in the local bookstores and many of which contain subversive propaganda and undesirable doctrines."²³ In relation to the subject of Chinese history in particular, the Report goes on to say that: "Objectivity in treatment, is, of course, to be strictly observed, especially in connection with such topics as the Boxer Uprising and the so-called Opium War."²⁴ The Report was certainly loaded: the Opium War being treated as the "so-called" Opium War. Indeed, for a long time, a more "neutral" term "the Anglo-Chinese War" was used instead. And the arguments in favour of "balance", "international outlook" and "objectivity" are the usual tricks a hegemonic power tries to impose on the subalterns, when, in this case, the latter were condemned as "ignorant and bigoted Chinese nationalists."²⁵

²² Quoted in Luk, pp.665-666.

²³ Quoted in Luk, p.666.

²⁴ Quoted in Luk, p.666.

²⁵ For the context of the 1953 Report, see Anthony Sweeting, *A phoenix transformed: the reconstruction of education in post-war Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp.197-206. Sweeting quotes (p.201) the 1952 Education Ordinance in which it was "considered necessary to safeguard the interests of individual pupils and of the community as a whole against the use of schools for political indoctrination. During the past four years this danger has arisen chiefly from Chinese Communist Party sympathizers." For a different interpretation over the controversy of the "history curriculum", see Flora Kan and Edward Vickers, "One Hong Kong, two histories: 'history'

The conclusion up to now is that a Hong Kong historical consciousness was hard to find. If it existed, it was often sidelined by both the British and the Mainland Chinese. The colonial government of Hong Kong had its own political agenda and reasons for avoiding exploring all facets of Hong Kong history. The end result is simple: the people of Hong Kong and their children knew little about their own history. The inability to know their own history added to the difficulty in nurturing their sense of a Hong Kong identity.

(C) The Rise and Development of a Hong Kong Identity

The people of Hong Kong came essentially from the ethnic Chinese of the Mainland and therefore it would be difficult if not impossible to shake off the various kinds of connection with China. But the rise of a particular Hong Kong identity was a reaction against China, and as a result of the effort to imagine that, despite the Chinese linkages, the Hong Kong Chinese are somehow different from the rest of the Chinese people. It involves certainly what we have called the “politics of difference”. As the Hong Kong Chinese had no restrictions of movement in and out of Hong Kong before 1949, this very mobility diluted the formation of a Hong Kong identity. This identity could only evolve after 1949. Hong Kong became first politically separated from the Mainland and then there came the social and cultural separation. Lau Siu-kai offers some of the important factors:

First and foremost was the fact that, since 1949, the socialist regime in China set up a barrier that prevented the movement of people between the mainland and Hong Kong. As a result, Hong Kong Chinese became isolated from the social and cultural changes in China. Second, the path of development of Hong Kong has been different from China throughout the territory’s history.

and ‘Chinese history’ in the Hong Kong school curriculum,” *Comparative Education*, 38.1:73-89 (2002). They argue (p.85) that “while Hong Kong’s political context has exercised a critical influence over the development of both history curricula, this influence has in fact been evident principally in the weakness of the colonial government’s power to direct policy. Far from seeking to interfere in curriculum policy to ensure the promotion of a ‘colonial’ viewpoint, the main concern of officials as well as textbook publishers has been the avoidance of political controversy—particularly in the treatment of topics related to modern Chinese and Hong Kong history.” But still, one may say that “avoidance” is also a kind of interference.

The gargantuan divergence in developmental experiences between the two societies since 1949 – with Hong Kong pursuing laissez-faire capitalism and China experimenting with Maoist socialism – had been critical to the rise of the Hongkongese identity. Third, while China became an inward-looking and closed society after 1949, Hong Kong rapidly transformed itself into an active member of the international economy and became quite westernized.²⁶

1950s Hong Kong witnessed only the beginning of the two different paths but still the umbilical cord was not severed. Border controls could be breached as refugee Chinese, provided that they “touched base” (reaching the urban areas of Hong Kong), were allowed to reside in Hong Kong up to the early 1960s.²⁷ It would be asking too much to differentiate the Chinese from the Hong Kong Chinese. Indeed, the political struggles in Hong Kong in the 1950s were still expressed in terms of the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) and the GMD (Guomindang).

The real separation became obvious in the 1960s. The Chinese population began to settle down in Hong Kong as they would not possibly go back to China. Along with it there were more and more young people actually born in Hong Kong. These Hong Kong Chinese began to feel a sense of alienation from both Mainland China and the British colonial governance in Hong Kong. They had escaped from the repressions of the Mainland but Hong Kong colonialism was not all that likeable either. They yearned for an authentic Hong Kong identity, as Thomas Wong puts it: “In many ways, it was a search by the predominantly young population for some moorings in a society which was socially and ideologically at sea. Colonialism did not provide positive integrative symbols; if anything, it had heightened – via its development, achievements, corruption and bureaucracy – the ambivalence, the love-hate syndrome.”²⁸ The 1966 Riots were in fact a definite anti-colonial phenomenon and the 1967 Riots left many people disaffected with communism. The search for a Hong Kong identity was the search for a path that was neither colonialism nor communism,

²⁶ Lau Siu-kai, “Hongkongese or Chinese: the problem of identity on the eve of resumption of Chinese sovereignty over Hong Kong,” in Lau Siu-kai (ed.) *Social development and political change in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2000), p.257.

²⁷ Steve Tsang (ed.), *A documentary history of Hong Kong: government and politics* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1995), p.284.

²⁸ Thomas W.P. Wong, *Colonial governance and the Hong Kong story* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, 1998), p.23.

a path which would lead to a real Hong Kong community, with the symbolic slogan: “Hong Kong is my home.” The observations of Matthew Turner are pertinent: “Quixotic as this rhetoric was, by the end of the sixties the idea of ‘community’ was no longer an irrelevance to the majority of the population. For alongside the official discourse, a local, and largely unarticulated sense of identity had begun to emerge in Hong Kong... It was also marked by a subjective change in Hong Kong people’s attitude towards their own city.”²⁹

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the fruition of this search. The launching of the City District Office (CDO) scheme, the struggle of the Chinese as Official Language Campaign, and the formation of the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) all exerted a tremendous societal force to reinvent Hong Kong. Starting from 1969 the CDO scheme was given the task of rebuilding the government’s tarnished public image. It tried to achieve a breakthrough in relations between the bureaucracy and the public.³⁰ Again in 1969 and 1970, Hong Kong Chinese university students began to argue against the predominance of English and saw the unwillingness of the government to promote the Chinese language as evidence of colonial arrogance.³¹ The movement received wide support among the Chinese community and the government could not ignore its impact without imperiling its own ability to rule. The formation of the ICAC in 1974 was in fact a response to the widespread doubts about the government’s sincerity and ability to combat corruption in the civil service, and particularly in the police force.³² The society was expecting a government of probity. The government had to respond to this crisis of legitimacy. Gradually, there was the recognition of the existence of a “civil society” in Hong Kong that needed to be listened to. The colonial administration had to transform itself into a more caring and responsive government, corruption (with all the anti-traditional implications attached) had to be tackled, and the Chinese language had to be accorded its rightful place in the society.³³ All these

²⁹ Turner, p.15.

³⁰ Ian Scott, *Political change and the crisis of legitimacy in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.108.

³¹ Scott, p.111.

³² Scott, pp.146-147.

³³ In the campaign promoting the Chinese language as the legal and “official” language, it did not specifically uphold the use of Cantonese as such. But the implication is clear enough: the native language must be accorded with its rightful place in Hong Kong and the campaign was definitely anti-colonial in nature.

were modernizing trends that drove the local Hong Kong people to be more confident themselves. They were no longer just subservient to the British rule. These same trends that the Hong Kong Chinese experienced also forced the Hong Kong colonial government to liberalize, paving the way for the democratization process in the next decade. In the 1980s the Hong Kong people, amidst the political squabbles during the Sino-British Talks, felt bold enough to ask for political empowerment: district board elections, urban council elections and finally the legislative council elections. The key concepts in the political discourse were, among other things, rule of law, democracy, accountability, and transparency of government. The 1990s saw the people of Hong Kong trying to contest against both an ascending Mainland China and a declining Great Britain. Thomas Wong describes this contesting episode as “the powerful trying to impose narratives, and the powerless responding with mocking cynicism.”³⁴ The cynicism is understandable, as one critic remarks: “Hong Kong in the nineties [was] suspended between a remote, evasive London and a suspicious, vengeful Beijing.”³⁵

In order to combat the powerful (i.e. China and Britain) writing the Hong Kong narrative and to convert the cynicism into a constructive force, the endeavour of creating a Hong Kong identity and consciousness (historical or literary) dictates that the Hong Kong people should undertake the task of self-writing. The first imperative, according to Rey Chow, is to accept what Hong Kong has been all about: its so-called “impurities” – the economism, materialism, colonialism, dirtiness, smelliness, “vulgar and unwritable” Cantonese – and to debunk the imperialist and centralizing myths of Britain and China.³⁶ The impurities were/are what made/makes Hong Kong tick. China need not be the centre which Hong Kong has to worship and converge with. Hong Kong can be its own centre with all its own uniqueness, as Rey Chow argues, “What is unique to Hong Kong... is precisely an in-betweenness and an awareness of impure origins, of origins as impure... Instead of priding itself on the purity of culture in the form of a continuous folk, Hong Kong’s cultural productions are thus often characterized by a particular kind of negotiation. This is a negotiation in which it must play two aggressors, Britain and China, off against each other, carving out a space

³⁴ Thomas Wong, p.31.

³⁵ Turner, p.26.

³⁶ Chow, *Things*, pp.189-190.

where it is neither simply the puppet of British colonialism nor of Chinese authoritarianism.”³⁷

In fact this kind of politics of identity is the phenomenon of a rising middle class in Hong Kong. It originated from the group of baby-boomers of post-war Hong Kong, who had benefited from western education and the growing economic opportunities since the 1970s. Ideologically and socially they had left the China orbit and turned to search for their own way. After the Riots of 1966 and 1967, they had a deep sense of alienation. And according to Helen Siu, this rising class, “... triggered by the various student movements ranging from the French student riots in 1968 to the anti-Vietnam War protests, ...turned their attention to the particular social problems of Hong Kong. They had expectations for a more responsive and accountable government.”³⁸ Beginning as social critics, many from this class formed political parties and demanded political rights and representation from the 1980s. Their strongest point was their ability to claim (reflected in electoral successes) to represent the interests of the people of Hong Kong. Such “interests” are crucial in our analysis of a Hong Kong identity. They are a reflection of the economic success of Hong Kong and the people of Hong Kong would like to preserve this hard-won fruit. The Hong Kong middle class believed that certain assumptions and institutions (such as the rule of law, the protection of basic human rights, basic liberalism of the laissez-faire type, low taxation, equality of opportunities) under the British colonial rule were beneficial to their ascendance. Many were part of neither traditional nor communist Chinese culture/institutions and so they (as people of Hong Kong) were moving away from the Chinese orbit. In a sense, they prospered because they were different from China. Their reaction against China was also reflected in their treatment and demonization of the new immigrants from China (often forgetting that many of them were immigrants themselves or had parents who had immigrated from China not too long ago). The new immigrants were all grouped under the category of “Ah Chian” (originally a character in a TV serial satirizing the stupidity of the new immigrants from Mainland China). According to Eric Ma, “Ah Chian was depicted as stupid, slow on the uptake,

³⁷ Rey Chow, “Between colonizers: Hong Kong’s postcolonial self-writing in the 1990s,” *Diaspora* 2.2:151-170 (1992), pp.157-158.

³⁸ Helen F. Siu, “Remade in Hong Kong: weaving into the Chinese cultural tapestry”, in Tao Tao Liu and David Faure (eds.) *Unity and diversity: local cultures and identities in China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1996), p.183.

backward, poor, and a shallow country hick. In contrast, the Hong Kong Man, seen in the mirror of Ah Chian, was clever, savvy, progressive, rich, and modern.”³⁹ “We”, the people of Hong Kong, felt satisfaction at the expense of the despicable “they”. If they were not Ah Chian they would be “*dai huen chai*” (the “big circle” group), the ruthless gang from Mainland China, destabilizing and terrorizing Hong Kong. All hideous crimes would be blamed on them. Such negative images were magnified in the popular media (especially on television) and regrettably, highly receptive among the so-called “people of Hong Kong.” The findings of Eric Ma are concise and powerful:

...[I]n the 1970s, when Hong Kong was politically and culturally separated from China, the need for a localized identity was strongly felt, and resentment against legal and illegal immigrants from China was widespread. Melodramatic [TV] serials at that time exerted a powerful effect of centripetal consolidation and centrifugal reinforcement, through which the established Hongkongers confirmed their in-group prestige and stigmatized the mainlanders as outsiders of lesser human worth. Television centripetally drew onto itself the public antagonisms against the outsiders, constructed a social stigma for them, and projected it centrifugally into social discourses and practices.⁴⁰

While the people of Hong Kong might be anti-Chinese in the above ways, their feelings about Chinese nationalism were rather ambivalent. Many of them reacted strongly with anger and excitement to the Diaoyu Island Incident and the Tiananmen Square Massacre. These events revealed that they could not forsake their Chinese ethnicity and they were deeply disturbed by the “timidity” of the Chinese government in the first incident and its “bloodiness” in the second. Most offensive to them was that the Chinese government happened to be a communist one, with an ideology and a political record repugnant to most of the people of Hong Kong. Reintegration with China was problematic to them, as Lee Ming-kwan argues: “The questions immediately arise of whether the Hong Kong people are prepared to pledge their loyalty and commitment, as Chinese citizens, to the government of the People’s

³⁹ Ma, p.35.

⁴⁰ Ma, p.17.

Republic, whether they take pride in this new identity, whether they are ready to accord to national political leaders, institutions, and symbols the respect expected from them, and whether they are prepared to identify with the Chinese across the border.”⁴¹ The signs before 1997 were not optimistic. According to the same author, “The humiliating defeat of all pro-China candidates in Hong Kong’s first direct elections to the Legislative Council, held in September 1991, was an unambiguous message, again, that anti-Communist sentiments were pervasive and unyielding.”⁴²

The 1980s and 1990s were tumultuous years for the people of Hong Kong. Discontented with the British “betrayal” (i.e. selling out the interests of Hong Kong to Mainland China while shutting the doors against Hong Kong people’s immigration into Britain) and frightened by the imminent Chinese Communist takeover, many of them opted for an exit: emigration. It was not a very welcoming option as it reflected, among other things, a strong sense of political helplessness. It also reflected some of the prominent features of the Hong Kong identity or consciousness: its shallowness and lack of commitment to Hong Kong. According to Lui Tai-lok, “Hong Kong consciousness itself is lacking a centre. It is not a kind of rebelliousness (e.g. against British colonial rule). It is also not the continuity of an existing culture. In the 1980s when the Hongkongese were grappling with the problem of 1997, they were unable to express a kind of collective agitation... The so-called ‘Hong Kong consciousness’ is just the experience of living in Hong Kong. Many people believe that this experience is good but not many are willing to sacrifice themselves for the preservation of this experience. It is difficult to tell the ‘Story of Hong Kong’. To a large extent, it is because we are not willing to admit the shallowness of this ‘Hong Kong consciousness’.”⁴³ Other observers are equally pessimistic. Thomas Wong is worried about the paucity of larger goals and symbols in the makeup of the Hong Kong identity and the fact that there is no central value system in the Hong Kong consciousness.⁴⁴ Evans and Tam are fearful that the Hong Kong identity can only be

⁴¹ Lee Ming-kwan, “Community and identity in transition in Hong Kong,” in Reginald Y.W. Kwok and Alvin Y. So (eds.) *The Hong Kong-Guangdong link: partnership in flux* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1995), p.121.

⁴² Lee, p.122.

⁴³ Lui Tai-lok, “Xianggang gushi: Xianggang yishi de lishi fachen,” [The Hong Kong story: the historical development of the Hong Kong consciousness] in Gao Chengzu and Chen Ziehuan (eds.) *Xianggang: wenhua de yanxu yu duanlie* [Hong Kong: continuity or fissure of civilization] (Taipei: Lianjing chubanshe, 1997), p.16.

⁴⁴ Thomas Wong, pp.6-7.

ephemeral and it is likely to become very fragile in the face of reintegration into the Chinese state.⁴⁵ Probably the best way to combat its possible demise is to write and to know Hong Kong history, one which is somehow distinct from that of China's.

(D) The Rise and Development of Hong Kong Historical Consciousness

The rise of a Hong Kong identity went almost hand in hand with developing its own historical consciousness, as the search for one's history fosters one's sense of identity. Just as they had to deal with the obstacles to forming a Hong Kong identity, so the people of Hong Kong had to search for an autonomous path in between Britain and China, in terms of understanding and writing their history. More specifically, they had to negotiate between British colonialist historiography and Chinese nationalist historiography. The British issue came first because historically it was the British who wrote the history of Hong Kong and dictated the "authoritative" historiographical paradigm. Concentrating on his specialty – the second half of the 19th century in particular – Christopher Munn has summarized British colonial historiography as follows:

In scope and methodology, the colonial narratives have several characteristics in common. They devote considerable space (a quarter of the whole work in the case of Eitel and Welsh; about half in the case of Sayer's first volume) to the pre-history of colonial Hong Kong, early Sino-British contacts, the Canton System, and the Opium War. Despite their narrow perspective, they claim to provide a 'general' or 'definitive' view of Hong Kong history. They focus on linear development, with chapters usually divided according to the terms of office of governors. They generally exclude the Chinese population as agents in history, except either as obstacles to the fulfillment of colonial aims or as willing but subordinate partners. They are also strongly identified with the official view of Hong Kong history. Despite their obvious limitations, they maintain a central importance in the historiography of the colony. In the

⁴⁵ Grant Evans and Maria Tam, "Introduction: the anthropology of contemporary Hong Kong", in Evans and Tam (eds.) *Hong Kong: the anthropology of a Chinese metropolis* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1997), p.8.

absence of any other original general histories of the colony in the English language, they remain the ‘standard’ reference works for many scholars.⁴⁶

Some critical analysis is needed here. First, the effort devoted to the pre-colonial history of Hong Kong up to the Opium War had the aim of establishing a case: the British had done their utmost to build a “fair and equitable” working relationship (so-called “free trade”) with China. Due to the obstinacy of the Chinese, it was argued, the British were forced to fight the Opium War to open up China. Second, the claim that the British colonial version of the history of Hong Kong was definitive was justified on the grounds that the British possessed the official, i.e. “sacred” documents on which any history would need to be based. They had the hegemon’s knowledge over Hong Kong and were therefore able to “define” Hong Kong. Third, the reason for adopting a historiographical framework based on a chronology of Hong Kong governors’ time in office was that colonial history must be the administrators’ history, the official guide to the rule of the colony and the glorious record to justify British rule. Fourth, that the Chinese did not feature in colonial histories of Hong Kong was because they were subjects to be ruled only, not “subjects” to be written about. If the Chinese were mentioned (especially by name) it was either those who had caused gravest concern to the British rulers or those who were the most important and most-anglicized collaborators. The rest remained nameless, faceless and amorphous – and the colonial masters either did not care about them or they did not have in-depth knowledge about the place under their governance. So lastly, it was certainly unquestionable the British discourse represented the “official” view of Hong Kong history and their “centrality” (being “authoritative” works) could be used as a prop in support of colonialism. That these histories were written in English (the master language) not only added to their “authority,” but also served to keep the general populace ignorant, a key tactic of colonial rulers.

The obstacles imposed by Mainland Chinese historiography came from a different angle: that of patriotism and anti-imperialism. Again I would like to quote Munn’s comments for analysis. Munn calls this historiography the “Peking school”:

⁴⁶ Christopher Charles Munn, *Anglo-China: Chinese people and British rule in Hong Kong, 1841-1870* (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Toronto, 1998), p.8.

Although diametrically opposed in ideological terms, and (for linguistic reasons) speaking to an entirely different audience, the Peking school has a remarkable amount in common with the colonial school. The Peking school similarly favours official sources and statistics and, though it is naturally critical of the ‘colonialist bias’ of the colonial school, is heavily dependent on the research of colonial historians. It also devotes considerable space to the wars and formal political structures with Hong Kong, and produces works that claim to be ‘standard’, or at least ‘outline’, histories of the colony. The Peking school stresses the general contribution of the Chinese population to Hong Kong’s economic success, and dwells on the heroism of those who resisted colonial rule: like the colonial school, however, it treats the Chinese population in terms of crude categories and has little to say about the complexities of Chinese life or the experience of ordinary people. Although, until very recently, Hong Kong has received little attention from mainland scholars as a subject independent of larger diplomatic or economic narratives, the main elements of its history fit neatly into a crude Marxist-Leninist view of imperialist expropriation, exploitation and national humiliation.⁴⁷

In commenting on Munn’s remarks, first, the similarity between the British and Chinese historiographies may be adduced to their nature of being master narratives on Hong Kong. The Chinese wrote Hong Kong history so as to rule over it, and from the same administrative vantage point. The comments of Chen Fulin (Gilbert Chan) are particularly relevant here: “Before the 1980s the study of Hong Kong was almost the monopoly of the British. In the early 1980s reacting to the impact of Hong Kong’s imminent return to China, Chinese scholars began to pursue Hong Kong history studies. Following this, and in order to support CCP political propaganda, Mainland Chinese scholars swarmed [*fengyong*] to publish a number of books on Hong Kong. They argued that they had to rectify the ‘falsehood’ of the British historians and give ‘the real picture of history’. Of course there is nothing wrong about it. But regrettably they were not experts on Hong Kong history. Their ‘real facts of history’ were just a repetition of communist propaganda and their works were not objective historical

⁴⁷ Munn, p.9.

verdicts.”⁴⁸ The use of the Chinese language for Mainland histories on Hong Kong is certainly natural, and as Munn has said, because the audience would be Chinese. The Chinese historians would certainly like to target the Hong Kong Chinese, even though some Hongkongese may find the “simplified characters of Chinese” and their excessive political bias somewhat repulsive. However, if the people of Hong Kong do not write their own history, the market place and social space would be swamped by these Chinese books on Hong Kong.

Second, the reliance on colonial resources was because China did not really “know” about Hong Kong. Before the Sino-British Talks (1982-1984) the Chinese (because the official policy on Hong Kong had not been confirmed) had little raw data about Hong Kong, its history included. Because of the political need to “know” Hong Kong, a number of books (written in English) were hastily translated into Chinese. Norman Miner’s *The Government and Politics of Hong Kong* was among the first to be translated for this purpose. What the British historians had written so far, together with the colonial documents deposited in the Public Records Offices (Hong Kong and London), became the most accessible sources China could use.

Third, the concentration on wars and formal political structures in the Mainland histories on Hong Kong resulted from political needs as well. From the Chinese point of view, it was due to a succession of wars that Britain had ruthlessly stolen Hong Kong away from China. To China, the nature of the Hong Kong political structure was colonialism, a structure to be condemned and replaced by a so-called “special administrative region.” The histories produced were “outlines” because the real nuances or the complexities of historical events had not been studied or could not be put in a politically correct way, acceptable to Chinese political ideology.

Fourth, the emphasis on the Chinese contributions to Hong Kong’s economic success was certainly in order to dispute the British claim that Hong Kong prospered as a result of colonial rule. The focus on diplomatic narratives was because leading “Hong Kong” historians from the Mainland (such as Yu Shengwu, Liu Cunkuan and

⁴⁸ Chen Fulin [Gilbert Chan], “Xunqiu yanjiu Xianggangshi de xinfangxiang” [Searching for new directions in studying Hong Kong history], *Jindai Zhongguo* (Modern China), v.132 (August 1999), p.181.

Liu Shuyong) were originally not experts on Hong Kong history. They were, rather, experts on Sino-foreign relations.⁴⁹ And the focus on economics in these histories was most likely because China wanted Hong Kong to be a de-politicized economic city and politics could be controlled by the Chinese alone.

Lastly, the Marxist-Leninist view was certainly useful in condemning British imperialism in general. Within the anti-imperialism line of argument, it should be added that the Chinese emphasized that Hong Kong had been China's sacred territory since time immemorial and that the Hong Kong people passionately loved the mother country and constantly launched heroic anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggles. Whether this argument is biased and exaggerated or not was not the concern of these historians. They thought that the people of Hong Kong would behave in the way the Chinese historians had so portrayed. The political considerations of Mainland China remain obvious.

Synthesizing the similarities of British and Chinese historiographies, Tsai Jung-fang has offered a very neat and forceful commentary: "First, neither used Hong Kong as the focus (*zhongxin*) to understand Hong Kong history. Second, neither considered the rights of the 'local' population when explaining Hong Kong history. Both focused on the power of the 'state' and did not tolerate the 'heresy' of the 'priority of local interests'. They used the 'state power' to suppress local interests and tried to ignore the historical fact of the 'local' people's efforts in securing their own rights. Third, both ignored in-depth studies on the complexities of the Hong Kong Chinese society. Fourth, neither analyzed in depth the complex and curious relationship between the rulers and the ruled."⁵⁰ Indeed, the rise of a Hong Kong historical consciousness came from the dissatisfaction against both the British and the Chinese approaches. The Hong Kong Chinese did not want to be marginalized and merely listen to what the British and the Chinese said. They hope that the "local" interests of Hong Kong will become the centre of study, with all the complexities of the society taken into consideration and the subjectivity of Hong Kong will be taken seriously, whether or not it might be "heretical" in the eyes of the British or the

⁴⁹ Chen, p.183.

⁵⁰ Tsai Jung-fang, *Xianggangren zi Xiangangshi* [The Hong Kong people's history of Hong Kong] (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.7.

Chinese. The people of Hong Kong were not anonymous and willing subjects under British rule but they were also not the kind of anti-imperialist patriots the Mainland Chinese want everyone to believe. The state power of Britain and China had been suffocating and oppressive, as if the two states had been “gang-raping” Hong Kong.⁵¹ What Hong Kong wanted is to scream and protest – and to write its own history for its own sake.

(E) The Development of an Autonomous Local History of Hong Kong

It has been a long and tortuous road to develop an autonomous local history of Hong Kong. Before the Second World War, apart from those written by British or European historians there was no general history of Hong Kong focusing on its local development. This was especially so for local histories written in the Chinese language. Immediately after the war, the most notable contribution in Chinese was the one edited by Li Jinwei under the name *Xianggang bainianshi* [Hong Kong’s Hundred Years’ History] published in 1948.⁵² It was a kind of encyclopedic or “year-book” collection of eight major topics: history, politics, geography, society, economics, communications, culture, and education. Apart from this topical approach there was no recognizable or chronological theme, probably due to the huge number (more than 44) of contributors, most of whom had a journalistic background, as evidenced by the story-telling and anecdotal approaches that they used.

With the exception of incomplete works published by Xu Dishan of the Chinese Department of Hong Kong University, no other academic histories of Hong Kong in Chinese emerged until a group of Chinese historians (Lo Xianglin, Jian Youwen, Yao Zongyi, and Lin Tianwei) arrived in Hong Kong from the Mainland after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. According to Elizabeth Sinn, “Their interest in Hong Kong was a new phenomenon since in the eyes of ‘mainstream’ Chinese historians, Hong Kong was simply too peripheral to ‘real’, i.e. ‘dynastic’ history, and therefore, too insignificant to warrant serious scholarly attention. However, now that they were to work in Hong Kong, they began to devolve

⁵¹ Chow, *Things*, p.185.

⁵² Li Jinwei, *Xianggang bainianshi* [Hong Kong’s Hundred Years’ History] (Hong Kong: Nanzhong bianyi chubanshe, 1948).

some of their energies on local studies. They ‘discovered’ Hong Kong, so to speak.”⁵³ Typical of the topics they researched was the history of Song Wang Tai, whereby Hong Kong was featured as the last refuge for a failing Song Dynasty cause. Hong Kong as such remained unimportant. Lo Xianglin joined the University of Hong Kong in 1951 and he (together with five of his students) was only able to publish one book on Hong Kong in 1959 (translated into English in 1963) but the treatment of Hong Kong remained, in a sense, peripheral. It was titled *Hong Kong and its External Communications before 1842* and subtitled *The History of Hong Kong prior to British Arrival*.⁵⁴ Lo never touched upon sensitive issues such as the Opium War, justifying it as a kind of “division of labour” with his European colleagues, particularly Endacott.⁵⁵ The most interesting point is why, before the 1980s, so few Chinese scholars or historians paid attention to the colonial history of Hong Kong. Why did they opt out? Was the study of colonial Hong Kong politically too sensitive an issue, or even a prohibited zone among local Chinese scholars? The answer is not easy to find.

Another group of people (such as Barbara Ward, Jack Potter, Hugh Baker) who had an interest in Hong Kong studies came from a totally different background. Most of them were anthropologists and sociologists from the West, doing field work in the New Territories in particular.⁵⁶ The reason was simple: Communist China was closed to the Western world and many Western researchers believed that the villages in rural New Territories would provide raw data of surviving remnants of traditional China. Whether the rural New Territories could really represent traditional China is debatable, but it shows again that the (political) agenda of these researchers was only marginally concerned with Hong Kong. They still had an Orientalist mindset in wanting to research Hong Kong (or China writ large). Communist China, to them, had adopted a wrong policy because it had destroyed all the Chinese traditions. Apart from Taiwan, Hong Kong’s New Territories was supposedly a repository of these traditions, and therefore to be treasured.

⁵³ Elizabeth Sinn, “The study of local history in Hong Kong: a review,” [hereafter as “*Local history*”] *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, v.34 (1994), p.148.

⁵⁴ Lo Hsiang-lin [Lo Xianglin], *Hong Kong and its external communications before 1842* (Hong Kong: Institute of Chinese Culture, 1963; based on the original Chinese version published in 1959).

⁵⁵ Lo Hsiang-lin’s preface to Lin Youlan’s *Xianggang shihua* [A history of Hong Kong] (Hong Kong: Bajiao Shufang, 1975), no page given.

⁵⁶ Sinn, *Local history*, p.149.

Closely following these researchers were a group of so-called “scholar-officials” (like Austin Coates, James Hayes and Patrick Hase), a term coined by Elizabeth Sinn: “They were District Officers of the Hong Kong government who were responsible for governing rural Hong Kong. Scholars of the sinologist tradition, they were particularly well placed to collect large amounts of oral and documentary materials while working among villagers in the New Territories.” And as Sinn further remarks, “It should be noted that to these scholar-officials, the study of ‘traditional’ Chinese society is more than a purely intellectual exercise. To govern the New Territories, the Hong Kong government needs a working knowledge of the customs and culture of the indigenous inhabitants, especially in relation to land, family, lineage relations etc., and relies heavily on District Officers who are ‘on the spot’, as it were.”⁵⁷

Knowledge is power: you have to have knowledge of the New Territories in order to rule over it. But it was more than that. Austin Coates depicts himself as a loving and caring “*fu-wu guan*” (father-mother official) in the traditional Chinese context and he believes that he has totally fulfilled his “historic” mission, as he remarks of his work: “Though I was a European, I was not employed to impose European concepts of justice and rights. I was a Chinese Magistrate, expected to deal with matters in a Chinese way, whether I agreed with this or not.”⁵⁸ James Hayes, working in the New Territories from 1957 to 1987, reminds us of the importance of his work and the Hong Kong government: “Hong Kong’s return to China in mid-1997 will mark the virtual end of Great Britain’s colonial progress. The general convention, certainly since the end of the last war, has been to decry British colonialism. But Britain’s colonial record is one of which it can be very proud; not least of that record in Hong Kong – the Administration’s enabling of steadily improving housing, medical, educational and social services, all provided by a burgeoning industrial and commercial economy. This could not have been achieved without the remarkable work and drive of Hong Kong citizens cooperating with the wise direction of its leadership.”⁵⁹ James Hayes was also the editor of the *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1967-1979), which urged contributors to study “traditional Chinese

⁵⁷ Sinn, *Local history*, p.150.

⁵⁸ See his work, *Myself a mandarin: memoirs of a special magistrate* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1968), p.83.

⁵⁹ James Hayes, *Friends and teachers: Hong Kong and its people 1953-87* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1996), p.viii.

occupations which are still carried out in Hong Kong, but are in danger of dying out elsewhere.”⁶⁰ I am not disputing the contributions these “scholar-officials” (as administrators and historians) made to Hong Kong, but it is important to note that they were all Europeans and they (rather than the local Hong Kong Chinese) seemed to care more about Hong Kong’s history. The point is that Hong Kong historical consciousness was still not well-developed by the locals up to the 1960s. Equally important to note is that the *Journal* was not interested in the post Second World War political and economic affairs of Hong Kong.⁶¹ One wonders if there was a tendency or an inclination to de-sensitize research on politically problematic issues.

The usual, and correct, criticism of the work of the Royal Asiatic Society (Hong Kong Branch) is their neglect of the urban and the hugely more populous part of Hong Kong. One group of critics (including Alan Birch, Carl Smith and Henry Lethbridge) emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Again most of them were Europeans, from the University of Hong Kong. Their strength was that they offered different perspectives on Hong Kong as they were, by training, political scientists, legal scholars, sociologists and historians. They were able to move increasingly away from the European-dominated discourse. For example, Lethbridge, a professor of sociology, questioned the traditional quiescence and passivity of the Hong Kong Chinese. He argued that “at times the ordinary Chinese displayed a remarkable bellicosity and turbulence.”⁶² He also offered a more realistic reason why the Chinese had been moving to Hong Kong:

...[I]t is all a matter of degree: it was not a case of either sincerely admiring and uncritically accepting a foreign regime or not, but rather one of weighing the advantages that accrued from living in Hong Kong as against China or some other country. No Chinese saw himself as anything but Chinese, or had any wish to pass himself off as a westerner, or to lose his cultural identity. Hong Kong was preferred because it could still be recognized as an

⁶⁰ Patrick H. Hase, “The Royal Asiatic Society (Hong Kong Branch) and its Journal”, *The Journal of Resources for Hong Kong Studies* (first issue, 1998), p.23.

⁶¹ Hase, p.26.

⁶² Henry Lethbridge, *Hong Kong: stability and change, a collection of essays* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1978), p.2.

identifiably Chinese community, despite its formal legal status, and because it provided much room in which Chinese businessmen could manoeuvre.⁶³

So the attraction of British colonialism was no longer taken for granted by these researchers. Apart from Carl Smith, their weakness, in terms of their understanding of Hong Kong, was their lack of Chinese language skills. According to Sinn, “The source materials they used were primarily government publications, archival materials and newspapers, and since most read only English, they either had no access to Chinese sources, or had to rely on research assistants.”⁶⁴ In this instance, Carl Smith really stood apart from the rest. He was able to paint the particulars of the Chinese faces in the Hong Kong community, and it was a community no longer dominated by Europeans. As he has explained in a collection of his essays dating from 1969 to 1990: “This book is intended to sharpen the historical sense of those who live in Hong Kong or have a particular interest in it. The book is full of particulars about people and places. It examines the lives of all kinds of people from high to low, the natives, the settlers, the sojourners, some of the neighborhoods in which they lived, and social problems of their community.”⁶⁵ Smith was also instrumental in organizing the Hong Kong History Workshop in the Department of History at the University of Hong Kong during 1975-78.⁶⁶ The 1970s also saw the development of more institutions to facilitate historical research on Hong Kong. The Centre of Asian Studies at the University of Hong Kong was established in 1969, and it hosted one of the first conferences on Hong Kong studies. The Public Records Office was opened in 1972. In 1974, the Hung On-To Memorial Library was set up at the University of Hong Kong with an ambitious view to collecting all materials published in Hong Kong and related to Hong Kong. The Hong Kong History Project sponsored by the Chinese University of Hong Kong also started in 1978.⁶⁷

⁶³ Lethbridge, pp.24-25.

⁶⁴ Sinn, *Local history*, p.151.

⁶⁵ Carl T. Smith, *A sense of history: studies in the social and urban history of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Educational Publishing Co., 1995), p.xiv.

⁶⁶ Lee Ka-kui and Wong Man-kong, “The Reverend Carl T. Smith: a missionary-turned-historian.” *Modern Chinese History Society of Hong Kong Bulletin*, No.6 (July 1993), p.92.

⁶⁷ Sinn, *Local history*, pp.153-157.

It was in these institutions that a new generation of local Hong Kong Chinese historians⁶⁸ (the most famous ones include Fok Kai-cheong, Ming K. Chan, Helen Siu, Elizabeth Sinn, Chan Wai Kwan, Chen Fulin, Steve Tsang, David Faure and Bernard Luk) were nurtured: “Being brought up in Hong Kong, these scholars are able to handle both English and Chinese sources while benefiting from different intellectual and historical traditions. Thus they were able to push the study of Hong Kong history to new frontiers.”⁶⁹ Together they have been able to build up a maturing and more autonomous historical outlook, loosely called by Munn the Hong Kong School. Again, I will quote Munn’s observations for full discussion:

Although its practitioners do not claim to be part of a historical ‘school’ and vary considerably in their approach, a clearly defined Hong Kong school of history has not so much taken the middle ground between the extremes of the colonial and Peking schools, but has asked entirely different questions, opened up new fields of research, and introduced a view of nineteenth-century [and equally applicable for the twentieth century] Hong Kong that goes far beyond the increasingly sterile cycle of traditional narratives. This school takes Hong Kong and its people, rather than the colonial government or the diplomatic relations between China and Britain as its central subject of study. It addresses the dynamics of society and politics within Hong Kong, introduces questions of race, class and gender and studies patterns of organization that do not fit easily into traditional colonial structures. Although critical of colonialism and skeptical of the claims of the colonial school, it is not obsessed with the question of colonial oppression, and, unlike the Peking school, tends to see colonial rule more as one component among many in the complex, often double-edged relationships that organized Hong Kong society. China figures prominently in its treatment of Hong Kong, not so much as a national entity, but as the region beyond Hong Kong from which most of Hong Kong’s population originates, as an important political and cultural influence on the colony, and as a source of tension and conflict. The school makes wide use of previously untapped sources, particularly Chinese language sources, and use

⁶⁸ On the problem of defining the local Hong Kong historians, see pp. 263-266 of this thesis (especially footnotes 1 and 3 in Chapter Nine, pp.263-264).

⁶⁹ Sinn, *Local history*, pp.155-156.

the traditional colonial sources in a new and more critical way: it also tends to be analytical and monographical, rather than narrative and comprehensive, in its approach... The Hong Kong school's main emphasis is on the Chinese population of the colony and on the importance of Chinese agency in the colony's political and social development. Again, in contrast to the colonial school, it stresses conflict and change, rather than stability and growth, and, in contrast to the Peking school, it complicates what might appear to be a simple colonial relationship with questions of class, and of antagonism and competition within the Chinese elite.⁷⁰

First, given their vigorous methodological training and western education, the Hong Kong historians do not just take for granted the British and Chinese historiographies. In his study of the nature of British colonial rule in Hong Kong, Steve Tsang puts his case in the following manner: "In an age when 'colonialism' and 'imperialism' are dirty words, it is easy for one to side with the apparent victims, the subjects of colonial rule, and chastise the imperialists. To take such a position is, as all good historians will agree, as objectionable as to side with the imperialists and blow their trumpets uncritically. Indeed, in a case like Hong Kong which, as a British imperial possession populated primarily by the Chinese, has dazzled the world with many of its well earned achievements, one needs only common sense and logical thinking to realize that the record of British rule there is not a simple black-and-white issue."⁷¹ So, indeed, a judicious approach has been adopted and the Hong Kong School is not just blowing the whistle against the outgoing colonial Britain and for the incoming communist China. These Hong Kong historians also asked new questions and sought new answers. In her study of the early history of the Tung Wah Hospital, Elizabeth Sinn was able to unravel the intricacies of an emerging Chinese business elite class struggling in the name of charity for power and how the colonial Hong Kong government had tried to negotiate for their collaboration, yet at the same time trying to rein in Tung Wah's growing influence. An apprehensive China was also present on the stage as a factor affecting the allegiance of the Chinese in colonial

⁷⁰ Munn, pp.10-11 and p.13.

⁷¹ Steve Tsang (ed.) *A documentary history of Hong Kong: government and politics* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1995), p.ix.

Hong Kong. The simple equation of ruling versus ruled was thrown overboard as a result.⁷²

Second, the focus on the dynamics of society and politics can be illustrated by Chan Wai Kwan's *The Making of the Hong Kong Society*. He queried the traditional colonial discourse that gives all the credit to the British for providing law and order in Hong Kong. In the first place, he has found out that: "The very picture of Hong Kong as a haven of criminals is questionable. It is based on an uncritical acceptance of the observations of some English officials and priests. While it might be true that most of the early immigrants were the 'lumpenproletariat' of Canton, and while it might even be true that most had criminal pasts, it does not follow that they had come to Hong Kong with intent to bring disorder. While there probably was a high incidence of robbery, deviant behaviour was surely not confined to the Chinese. In a new environment where new means of social control had yet to be established, both the British and the Chinese were equally likely to 'step out of line' and behave in ways that would otherwise have been severely sanctioned in their parent societies."⁷³ Equally, Chan goes on, the Mainland Chinese account of the class structure of early Hong Kong is objectionable. To say that "the class structure of Hong Kong simply consisted of an exploiting class of foreign merchants and government officials, and an exploited class comprising the majority of Chinese labourers" and that "Hong Kong's social history, like that of any others, is a history of the struggle between these two classes" is simply unhistorical.⁷⁴ To Chan, the real picture was much more complicated and he concludes by saying that: "In sum, from its beginning the structure of Hong Kong society was shaped by the political supremacy of the British and the economic indispensability of the Chinese. The ground was prepared for a racially mixed society to come into being. The relationship between members of the two races was to a certain extent also destined. It was to be an ambivalent relationship: politically, one of racial hostility, due to the very fact that Hong Kong was a colony; and economically, one of mutual dependence in the China trade."⁷⁵

⁷² Elizabeth Sinn, *Power and charity: the early history of the Tung Wah Hospital, Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁷³ Chan Wai Kwan, *The making of the Hong Kong society: three studies of class formation in early Hong Kong* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p.3.

⁷⁴ Chan, p.5.

⁷⁵ Chan, pp.10-11.

The analysis of Tak-wing Ngo further enlivens the socio-political dynamics of historical Hong Kong. “In the first place, the [colonial] ruling elite was at various times benevolent, manipulative and oppressive. It was capable of using varied means to reward followers, exclude rivals, neutralize the hostile, and disorganize the dangerous. While the colonial nature of the regime undoubtedly shaped its strategies and policies in certain directions, the imperative of maintaining effective rule was the same as for any other regime.” “In the second place,” Ngo continues to argue, “the people of Hong Kong did not confine themselves to hard work and entrepreneurship. There were also collaborators of the ruling regime, compradors of colonial business, anti-colonial radicals, marginalized industrialists, revenue farmers, landlords and social activists. They took an active part, not only in economic construction, trading networks and flexible manufacturing, but also in policy making, rural protests and social movements. Far from passive beneficiaries of benevolent rule, they were active agents of Hong Kong’s history.”⁷⁶ In fact, any attempt in the direction of a detailed analysis of Hong Kong history would show a very different picture, a picture much at odds with the standard British and Chinese historiographies.

Third, the historians of the Hong Kong School are not obsessed with the assertion that British colonialism must be one of exploitation and oppression, and that China must be the victim of a great humiliation.⁷⁷ If the Hong Kong Chinese had been so humiliated they should have felt it and struggled to overthrow colonial rule. As Steve Tsang has put it: “It is ironic that despite Hong Kong being the symbol of China’s humiliation at the hands of Britain, there was not one major movement initiated by the Chinese residents of this Crown Colony for its retrocession to China in a century and a half, even though there had been several upsurges of Chinese nationalism. This is as good as proof of how much the Chinese of Hong Kong feel they have benefited from British rule as one can get.”⁷⁸ The patriotism and anti-imperialism cards could hardly be used in Hong Kong, as Rey Chow has argued:

⁷⁶ Tak-wing Ngo, “Colonialism in Hong Kong revisited,” in Tak-wing Ngo (ed.) *Hong Kong’s history: state and society under colonial rule* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.2.

⁷⁷ China states this “humiliation” issue most prominently as follows: “China’s modern history was the humiliating history of the country’s progressive degeneration into the status of a semicolonial and semifeudal society and the history of the Chinese people’s unflinching and persistent struggle to change this degrading situation.” For details, see Department for Basic Education of the State Education Commission (translated by Amy Shih), “History teaching guidelines for full-time standard senior high schools (trial edition)”, *Chinese Education and Society*, 32.6:40-51.

⁷⁸ Tsang, p.1.

“The Chinese who came to Hong Kong after the colony was set up primarily aimed at gaining economic improvement or seeking refuge from political turmoil and persecution. They did not come to wage a nationalistic battle against the colonial rule, especially when the only alternative to colonial rule was the domination of the authoritarian Communist regime. Thus the ‘China factor’ ironically buttresses colonial rule by making it invulnerable to being toppled by the colonized... It renders the colonial institutions more benign and attractive to immigrants. It could be said that the colonial subjects are a self-select group who voluntarily subscribe to the colonial rule.”⁷⁹ To Helen Siu, the question of national humiliation is a very intricate matter. She remarks that many Chinese writers, intellectuals and historians “saw Hong Kong as bearing the blood and tears of the Chinese for over a hundred years. Although they were impressed with her cosmopolitan civility and orderliness, she was despised as a ‘bastard’, and pitied as ‘orphaned’... In their eyes, Hong Kong was objectified as a place that reminded China (and them) of hurt and humiliation. However, this view tells us more about the speakers themselves than the subject of their description.”⁸⁰ In other words, it is some of the Mainland Chinese who might feel aggrieved and not the Hong Kong Chinese in general. For those Chinese refugees who wanted to swim to Hong Kong (swimming being the usual method of illegally entering Hong Kong in the 1960s), the biggest humiliation was probably the inability to reach colonial Hong Kong and be “humiliated” by colonialism.

All the Hong Kong historians have to deal with the China factor in their assessment of the different topics in Hong Kong history. But they have not treated it as an idol of worship, as if everything good must come from this source. A good illustration relates to the question of China’s contribution to the economic progress of Hong Kong. According to Chen Fulin:

The Chinese leaders and scholars emphasize that the support of the mother country is the main factor for Hong Kong’s success. This is, however, a subjective and not very correct viewpoint. The economic take-off of Hong Kong occurred during the ten tumultuous years of the Cultural Revolution.

⁷⁹ Chow, *Things*, pp.198-199.

⁸⁰ Helen F. Siu, “Hong Kong: cultural kaleidoscope on a world landscape,” in Gary G. Hamilton (ed.) *Cosmopolitan capitalists: Hong Kong and Chinese diaspora at the end of the 20th century* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1999), p.107.

One wonders how Mainland China had any energy to 'support' Hong Kong at the time. Furthermore, even when Deng Xiaoping launched the economic reforms, the relationship between Hong Kong and Mainland China had not been a one-sided support given by the mother country to Hong Kong. It was more a situation of dual development of mutual benefits. In the early period of the reform, wasn't it that many Mainland Chinese enterprises were dependent on Hong Kong's investments? More importantly, apart from its free market economy, the success of Hong Kong has relied on its spirit of the rule of law, its full-fledged financial system and honest political culture.⁸¹

Indeed, Chen reminds us to be on our guard in evaluating this China factor. He adds that in the narrative of Hong Kong economic development, Mainland Chinese scholars have usually ignored the solid foundations built by the Hong Kong Chinese during the 1930s and 1940s. They have instead subjectively argued that CCP support alone was the main factor of Hong Kong's success. To Chen, this is rather excessive and unreasonable.⁸² Chen's advice to his fellow Hong Kong Chinese historians is that it is their mission to compile an objective Hong Kong history:

After Hong Kong's return to China, we must on the one hand clearly understand the meaning of being a Hong Kong Chinese. But on the other hand we do not need to totally negate the British colonial rule of the past because that period of history was ultimately an indelible part of our life. More importantly, the past history has clearly shown that in critical periods, the majority of the Hong Kong citizens have never forgotten that we were originally Chinese. Granted that, 'to love the country and to love Hong Kong' does not mean we have to follow what those Mainland Chinese scholars have said and take the political propaganda of the CCP as golden rules.⁸³

The China factor can be seen from yet another angle, by analyzing the methods of colonial rule in Hong Kong. The reason is that both Britain and China have wanted to de-politicize Hong Kong society in order to facilitate their rule. The Chinese

⁸¹ Chen, p. 187.

⁸² Chen, p. 192.

⁸³ Chen, p. 192.

government argues in the name of “prosperity and stability”; Hong Kong was stable in the past because it was governed by an unelected executive-led government⁸⁴ and Hong Kong will remain an “economic city” to keep its prosperity and stability. Hong Kong thrives economically, it is so argued, only because it is lacking in political autonomy and self-determination. Hong Kong simply does not need democracy. A study of colonial governance reveals a strikingly similar picture; it is why history is important. In the words of Ngo,

We are often told that Hong Kong was a politically apathetic society because of the ‘refugee mentality’ of its Chinese inhabitants. This apathy was manifested, it is said, in the absence of popular demands on the government as well as the absence of social/political conflicts. A familial ethos supposedly shaped the attitude of individuals, who stayed aloof from and remained indifferent to societal affairs except when events impinged on the well-being of their own families. The circularity of this argument is obvious: the lack of social unrest is taken as evidence of the political aloofness of the Hong Kong Chinese; and this aloofness is in turn used to explain the absence of social conflicts. This social acquiescence is then regarded as the basis of political stability. Notwithstanding its circularity, this argument provides policy makers and supporters of the status quo with a convenient justification for resisting pressures for political and policy change, on the grounds that the existing system worked well in preserving stability.⁸⁵

This was the argument used by the colonial government up to the end of the 1970s and Tung Chee-hwa’s HKSAR government is still attempting to do the same. To him and his like-minded advisors, political movements and struggles must be bad and should be shunned as far as possible.

(F) Conclusion

⁸⁴ Mainland China did not really want to gratify British colonial rule but it wanted to keep the unelected and authoritarian political structure after 1997.

⁸⁵ Ngo, pp.5-6.

In the postwar period, because of the divergence of developments, Hong Kong became distinct from both Britain and China. The formation of a distinctive Hong Kong identity was very much the result of the questioning of the British-Hong Kong colonial legitimacy to rule and a distancing of the Hong Kong people from Mainland China. A new generation of young people, some of whom were lucky enough to receive a Western education, began to challenge the colonial status quo. They had chosen Hong Kong as their home and their emerging civic sense pushed them to seek an identity of their own. The Mainland Chinese model was originally a target of emulation, out of some kind of patriotic imagination. The model failed in the end: firstly because communism did not provide prosperity and stability to China and secondly because of the adverse impacts of the 1967 Riots on Hong Kong. The people of Hong Kong, if they could call themselves as such, had to search for a new path, an autonomous path. Along with this search they developed their own local consciousness. They began to read their own history. But they were not satisfied with the approach adopted by the colonialist historians. By the 1980s some of these young people had become academically mature enough to write (in English first, showing the influence of their Western education) some aspects of Hong Kong's history. They did not only question the colonialist assumptions but also challenged the viewpoints of the Mainland Chinese historians who wanted to swarm the social space. Their contributions greatly enhanced our understanding of the complexities of Hong Kong history, enlivening the historical faces of the majority of the local Chinese population residing in the colony. Their works have placed Hong Kong as apart from Britain and China, and earned a place in the international society. So long as they are able to write, without fear or restrictions, their Hong Kong historical consciousness will be able to exert a kind of local identity amidst an inevitable re-sinicization of Hong Kong into China.

Chapter Eight – Case Study: From the Founding of British Hong Kong to the Leasing of the New Territories

The general orientation of the competing discourses is that the British historians first began writing the history of Hong Kong for the purpose of establishing and legitimising the British colonial presence in Hong Kong. They wrote so as to claim Hong Kong, so to speak. It is “natural” for them to leave their mark on Hong Kong, as part of the grand imperial scheme of Great Britain. The sense of imperial purpose is all too evident, as reflected in Eitel’s judgement: “A British Colony thus firmly established in Asia, on the root principles of European liberty, was and is sure to play in the drama of the future, such a part as will illustrate, in the sight of Asia, the superiority of British over Chinese forms of civilization and government and make Hongkong for all times the bulwark of the cause of Europe in the East.”¹

This British discourse runs from the 19th century all the way up to the end of the Second World War, if not up to the 1970s. With the exception of the opium issue, on the whole, the British historians were writing their Hong Kong history on their own, without caring too much about what and how the Chinese historians might have written. The former did not really need to consciously “compete” for social space with the Chinese. They were confident that with their monopoly of the “official” historical documents (nearly all of which were written in English) their history would be the official and orthodox history of the colony. Those occasional Hong Kong history books written in Chinese and/or by the Chinese were dismissed as academically unsound or were simply ignored. It is only in the 1980s with the rise of the question of Hong Kong’s return to Chinese sovereignty that British historiography was challenged by the Mainland Chinese historiographical onslaught. (British historiography was also questioned by the locally raised Hong Kong historians, and this will be dealt with in the concluding chapter.) Many British historians have had to meet this challenge by reading and using the materials published in Mainland China, and trying to counteract China’s anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist discourse.

¹ E.J. Eitel, *Europe in China, the history of Hong Kong from the beginning to the year 1882* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1983; originally published in Hong Kong by Kelly & Walsh, 1895), p.294.

As mentioned in an earlier chapter, Chinese historians seldom wrote about Hong Kong in the format of a general history. They might have written on various facets of historical or anecdotal interest about Hong Kong but in general their contributions had been sidelined or marginalized. The post-1949 situation (up to the 1980s) did not change much. In the eyes of the Mainland Chinese historians, Hong Kong was the prototype of colonial exploitation. Hong Kong history was treated in a very brief and superficial manner. Real knowledge of Hong Kong history was almost absent, and according to Liu Cunkuan, one of the leading Mainland Chinese historians, it was very regrettable that for more than 30 years after 1949 there had been not one single serious study of Hong Kong history in Mainland China.² Suddenly, these historians were awakened to this very inadequacy and the return of Hong Kong faced them with their most urgent political task: to write Hong Kong history for the sake of national unification and the eradication of past humiliations. British colonialist historiography had to be studied and discredited.³ All the British manipulations and injustices towards China and in Hong Kong had to be exposed, and the Hong Kong citizens embraced in the grand patriotic fold. Chinese historical writing about Hong Kong hence entered the realm of politics and polemics. Hong Kong history is not written for its own sake; it is written in the context of Sino-British diplomacy and confrontation. My treatment in the following pages is to concentrate on the points of conflict and to offer some critical explanations about them. The quotations in verbatim are needed to preserve the mood and flavour of the competing positions taken. The translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

(A) The Opium War

The birth of colonial Hong Kong occurred amidst serious Sino-British military confrontation. In general, the British blamed the Chinese for the occurrence of war. Ironically this position remained firm up to the present day in the British official

² Liu Cunkuan, *Xianggangshi luncong* [A Critical Collection on Hong Kong History; hereafter as *Luncong*] (Hong Kong: Qilin Books, 1998), p.241.

³ While conceding that the history books written in the West may have a high reference value, Yu and Liu (representing the official stand of China) affirm that: "It is needless to say that they contain, in various degrees, a colonial bias, obliterating the great contributions of the Chinese in the development of Hong Kong society." Yu Shengwu & Liu Cunkuan (eds.) *Shijiu shiji de Xianggang* [Hong Kong in the 19th century] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1994), p.1. This is the book which Peter Wesley-Smith used in response to the Chinese discourse.

understanding of events: “The development of trading relations was for long resisted by the officials of the Chinese court, who were not interested in commercial or cultural relations with Western civilisation, which they regarded as inferior to their own. In 1757 European traders were confined to Guangzhou (Canton), where the merchants found Chinese laws and the way they were administered troublesome and where they were subject to many personal restrictions. A conflict occurred in the period from 1839 to 1842, when a British force occupied Guangzhou and other points after a Chinese attempt to enforce the laws against the profitable opium trade which supplied the West’s principal means of payment for Chinese goods.”⁴

So the Chinese, it is argued, had been resisting trade and diplomatic contacts with the Europeans. The Chinese had a strong sense of superiority and China’s laws were troublesome and restrictive. But most poignantly, the statement quoted above, by its simplicity, brushed away the illegality of the opium trade on the Chinese coast, the most crucial point in the Chinese discourse against Britain. Some British publications attempted to make use of “Chinese” and other sources to justify their case as follows: “It is freely admitted by students of Chinese history, and corroborated by the Chinese [Qing Dynasty] historian Wei Yuan, that it was not the losses in the opium trade but the stoppage of all trade and the offensive behaviour of Commissioner Lin that brought about the war. Further valuable corroboration on this point is to be had from American sources. Dr. W.A.P. Martin, an eminent American scholar and missionary, wrote: ‘In 1839 Lin brought on the opium war by depriving the foreign community of liberty and threatening them with death... To punish this high-handed proceeding and to exact the promised indemnity were the objects of Britain’s first war with China, not at all to force the Chinese either to receive opium or to consume it.’”⁵

Traditionally, Chinese communist historians did not accept the old foreign trade system as overtly restrictive. They claimed that the Qing foreign trade system

⁴ Reference Services, Central Office of Information, *Britain and Hong Kong* (London: HMSO, 1992), p.12. This pamphlet is an expanded and updated version of a fact sheet with the same title published for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

⁵ The Publicity Bureau for South China, Hong Kong, *Hong Kong: a short history of the colony and an outline of the present political situation in China* [hereafter as Publicity Bureau] (Hong Kong, no publisher, third edition, 193?), pp.20-21.

(Canton System), “though backward, had the function of national self-defence.”⁶ More importantly, China’s basic stand of anti-opium smuggling was lawful and reasonable and the British recourse to war was totally unjustified: “The ban imposed by the Manchu Government on the opium trade and the confiscation of the opium smuggled into China were obviously lawful and reasonable. Britain’s recourse to armed force to maintain its dirty trade was a brazen act [of injustice]. But as it dared not openly use ‘opium’ as a pretext to unleash the war, it raised complaints that the Chinese Government was subjecting British traders in China to all sorts of ‘unequal treatment’. Every country, however, is within its rights in formulating regulations governing foreign trade through its own ports. For Britain to resort to war on this account was entirely unwarranted. The real point was that Britain launched the war to expand its economic sway by using armed force to enslave the Chinese people.”⁷

The British case has long been to deny the validity of this Chinese argument. To start with, they have tried to say that the name “Opium War” is wrong.⁸ A British propaganda pamphlet puts it in this way: “In 1836, Captain Charles Elliot, R.N., became Chief Superintendent of Trade, and after his arrival affairs took a definite turn, culminating in the conflict that bears the misleading name of the ‘Opium War’, a designation that is still favoured in prejudiced and ill-informed circles. But opium was only an incident in this war, which was a war between two Governments, one overwhelmingly and offensively arrogant, and the other, in no way inferior, determined to uphold its national dignity. It was not fought between the English and the Chinese people. That the ‘Opium War’ was occasioned by a dispute over the opium question is perfectly true: that it was fought by the British to force opium on an unwilling consumer is absolutely false.”⁹

It is argued that, rather than the British being the drug pushers, the demand for opium came from the Chinese side. It was this Chinese “craving” that provided the necessary balance of payments for the British trade: “The opium trade had, by its financial operations, become so intertwined with the legitimate trade, that separate

⁶ Hu Sheng, *Cong Yapianzhancheng dao Wusiyundong* [From the Opium War to the May Fourth Movement] [hereafter as *Yapian*] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1998), p.18.

⁷ Hu Sheng, *Imperialism and Chinese Politics* [hereafter as *Imperialism*] (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1955), p.12.

⁸ Eitel, p.28.

⁹ Publicity Bureau, p.12.

dealing with it was impossible. The import of opium into China, as it gradually expanded, gave an enormous impetus to the export of tea and silk from China to the European markets, and the whole opium trade had imperceptibly become a necessity both for China and Europe; for China, because the craving for opium was so widespread among the Chinese people, that the demand for it defied the severest criminal enactments; for Europe, because the sale of opium, which had by this time come to form three-fifths of the whole British imports into China, provided a very large portion of the funds required for operations in Chinese produce destined for European markets.”¹⁰ The British would say that if China had been open to normal foreign trade there would have been no need to supply opium to China in the first instance. The opening of China was supposed to be the cardinal principle in the British actions, according to Lord Palmerston, addressing the Parliament in March 1840: “...the object of this expedition [the war against China] was not to commence hostilities but to open up communications with the Emperor of China. The good people of Great Britain did not want war with China and especially not for the sake of the opium trade...”¹¹

This is exactly the opposite of what the Chinese historians would say. First of all, Hu Sheng would argue that trade was not the real issue because the British were in fact searching for opportunities for military aggression.¹² To Ding You, the British aggressors were not only drug-pushers, they were aiming at seizing colonies: “[The British] just liked to use the excuse of the opium prohibition to launch their military policy, to expand their influence and to seize colonies... The British bourgeoisie, in preparing for a large scale aggressive war, had laid down the conditions and the plans of the war. All these were the ideas of the British bourgeoisie, to be carried out by the British government.”¹³ Another Chinese propaganda pamphlet echoes this argument, calling the British shameless: “Events that led to the Opium War show that, for Britain, it was not ‘a war for free trade,’ nor was it intended ‘to open China’s closed door,’ as some people in Britain asserted. It was a shameless war of aggression

¹⁰ Eitel, p.80.

¹¹ Eitel, p.113.

¹² Hu Sheng, *Imperialism*, p.28.

¹³ Ding You, *Xianggang chuzi shiwa 1841-1907* [The early history of Hong Kong 1841-1907] (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1958), p.31.

launched by Britain to perpetuate the smuggling of opium, a deadly drug.”¹⁴ The arguments of Hu Sheng, Ding You and Huang Fengwu seem to be the official and popular understanding of the British actions. But it must be understood that Mainland Chinese historiography is not monotonal and there are other voices, emerging from, particularly, academic circles.

For example, a more refreshing and revisionist viewpoint is offered by Liu Cunkuan, reflecting some of the advances in Mainland Chinese scholarship. To Liu, “trade is the motive determining Britain’s policy towards China. The promotion of the China trade could also be divided into two categories: normal trade and illegal opium trade. The former is the long term and basic motive and the latter exercised tremendous influence in the first few decades of the 19th century.”¹⁵ Certainly, Britain had to protect the opium trade because of its huge profits but Liu reminds us of a crucial point: “It should be pointed out that some scholars, while pointing out the opium trade as the direct cause, have largely ignored or completely denigrated the importance of Britain’s efforts in opening up China for normal ‘free trade’ and occupying the China market. The result has been to create the impression that Britain started the war solely for the protection of the opium trade. This viewpoint is not comprehensive enough.”¹⁶

Liu particularly alerts us to four main points. Firstly, that historically, for some 300 years, the British had sought trade normalization with China, seen especially in the sending of several missions to China. To the British, the control of the China market was a long-term and basic objective. The opium issue only intensified in the 1820s. Secondly, the British traders knew perfectly well that the complete control of the China market served the greatest interests of Britain. The opium trade, though an important lifeline, was not likely to last for long. Thirdly, judging from British strategic planning and other war instructions, it indicated that the British did not just want to push the sale of opium. The plan was to concentrate on Zhoushan (at the entrance of Yangzi River) which was considered, in relation to long-term trade, more important than Hong Kong. And the centre of war was in Zhejiang and not in

¹⁴ Huang Fengwu, *Origin and solution of the Hong Kong question* (Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 1997), pp.10-11.

¹⁵ Liu, *Luncong*, p.1.

¹⁶ Liu, *Luncong*, p.11.

Guangdong. And fourthly, the result of the war also shows the importance of occupying the China market. The Nanjing Treaty started with the opening of 5 treaty ports, and it did not mention the opium issue.¹⁷ In sum, Liu is quite open-minded in admitting the need for a revised view on early Hong Kong history.

Liu's conclusion is clear: "The basic factor in causing Britain to wage the first Opium War was the combination of two motives: the direct and practical needs in protecting the benefits of the British opium trade in China and the strong desire to open up the China market for British manufactured goods. If we just emphasize only one motive or ignore the other, then it is not a comprehensive, complete and convincing explanation of the war."¹⁸ Of course, there is a disclaimer: Liu does not intend to defend British motives or negate the dirtiness and aggressiveness of the war.¹⁹ Liu's position is noteworthy because it indicates that Chinese scholarship has become more enlightened, given the political atmosphere in China is for openness to the outside world and reform. Mainland scholars are more confident to say what they have discovered in their critical analysis, within certain parameters. It is especially the case now that the present political leadership is striving to integrate with the world market. Some scholars have even argued that the Treaty of Nanjing, the prototype of the unequal treaties, has produced positive good for China in the long run.²⁰

Certainly, the British historians would insist that opium was not forced upon the Chinese with the purpose of wrecking the population and the national economy: "Due to a mass of Chinese literature on the subject, much of it distorted as to historical accuracy, the overwhelming proportion of the Chinese people today, both inside China and without, believe that opium was forced upon them by foreigners in order to undermine their morale, break their strength, and humble them to obedience to foreign will. The bringing of opium to China, they repeatedly insist, was carefully

¹⁷ Liu, *Luncong*, pp.11-17. Yu and Liu (p.44) also mention that Palmerston's original target was not Hong Kong but the Zhoushan archipelago.

¹⁸ Liu, *Luncong*, p.19.

¹⁹ Liu, *Luncong*, p.51.

²⁰ Mao Haijian, *Tianzhao de bengkui: Yapien Zhanzheng zai yanjiu* [The collapse of the Celestial Dynasty: a re-appraisal of the Opium War] (Beijing: Sanlian chubanshe, 1995), p.484.

plotted and planned, dastardly in its cleverness as a means of humiliating the Chinese people.”²¹

But opium remains a very sticky issue. Elliot tried to handle this knotty problem, without much success. The most problematic issue was whether Elliot could really control the British traders (opium traders included) in Chinese waters. If he could not, what was the point of appointing him to be the Chief Superintendent of Trade? If he could control them, would it harm British government revenue derived from the trade, with three-fifths of it involving opium in the 1830s? What also was the influence of the opium lobby in the British parliament? The peculiar and delicate situation is well recorded: “While Elliot was still the Second Superintendent, he had attempted to curb the activities of Jardine Matheson to which the Chinese had objected. Palmerston wrote to Elliot [July 22, 1836] – a letter which arrived just after he had become Chief: I think it necessary to recommend to you great caution in interfering in such a manner with the undertakings of British merchants. In the present state of our relations with China, it is especially incumbent upon you, while you do all that lies in your power to avoid giving just cause of offence to the Chinese authorities, to be at the same time very careful not to assume a greater degree of authority over British subjects than in fact you possess.”²² Of course, we are in a much better position to understand the difficulties of Elliot. But the Chinese historians are very adamant about the hypocrisy of the British position. Certainly, they would not appreciate what Elliot could and could not do. Their message is clear: “In May 1836 when Palmerston, the British Foreign Minister, officially announced that the control of the Superintendent of Trade would extend to the Lingding [Lintin] waters, he had authorized him the superintendence over all British ships and subjects there. In other words, the Superintendent of Trade had full powers to manage and supervise British opium trade in China. In fact, Elliot had taken to himself the task of expanding the opium trade in China.”²³ To the Chinese, Elliot was and must be the main culprit.

²¹ Austin Coates, *Macao and the British 1637-1842: Prelude to Hongkong* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), p.66.

²² Susanna Hoe and Derek Roebuck, *The taking of Hong Kong: Charles and Clara Elliot in China waters* (Richmond: Curzon, 1999), p.53. See also Eitel, p.63.

²³ Yu & Liu, p.36.

According to Endacott, Elliot was personally against the opium trade, especially in the confined waters of Canton, as it would create much ill feeling among the Chinese.²⁴ But it was this same problem which made his position untenable, as Endacott explains: “In 1838 he [Elliot] ordered all British to cease opium smuggling within the Bogue on the ground that it was provocative to flaunt the contraband trade before the eyes of the Chinese officials. The Chinese then argued that if he could suppress opium trade inside the Bogue, he could do the same outside it.”²⁵ The argument of the Chinese was just too valid to be refuted. If he were so powerless, how could he act as the highest British representative to China?

Similarly, though the opium issue was not mentioned in the Treaty of Nanjing, it does not mean that the problem was going to disappear with the signing of the treaty. The efforts of Britain after 1842 went into persuading the Chinese to accept the legalization of the opium trade, to make it a “normal” and taxable commodity. Sayer tells us of the efforts on the part of Pottinger, the first governor of Hong Kong:

True to his instructions Sir Henry Pottinger had studiously avoided reference to opium in his negotiation for the Treaty, but, also by instructions, he had, immediately after the Treaty had been signed, informally raised the subject, urging the Chinese plenipotentiaries to face the facts and legalize the trade. He had pointed out, as instructed, that Great Britain had not the power to prevent the importation of the drug; though they might control their own people they could not control those of other nations; though the great bulk of what was then imported was raised within her territory there was no assurance that that would always be the case and therefore not even suppression of the present source of supply was the complete answer.²⁶

Sayer continues to explain that as the Chinese officials were venal and the people were craving the drug, prohibition was not the optimal policy. Opium was bound to come into China. “Why not then recognize it and divert to Imperial coffers

²⁴ G.E. Endacott, *A history of Hong Kong* [hereafter as *History*] (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1973; first published 1958), p.16.

²⁵ G.E. Endacott, *A biographical sketch-book of early Hong Kong* [hereafter as *Sketchbook*] (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1962), p.6.

²⁶ G.R. Sayer, *Hong Kong 1841-1862: birth, adolescence and coming of age* [hereafter as *Birth*] (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1980; first published in 1937), p.155.

at least some part of the illicit gains which now poured into the pockets of disloyal officials? There was this added advantage that, [had] the trade become legal, the outflow of silver which China had regarded as such a deplorable feature would tend to cease.”²⁷

Regardless of how the British might try to dress up the issue, opium was incontestably a hideous drug, not a normal commodity, and every effort had to be made to put it on a “less discreditable footing”, in the words of Pottinger.²⁸ There are in fact some British historians who have been uncomfortable about the opium smuggling, as reflected in Hall’s words: “It has lately become the fashion to remind missionaries and other ‘sentimentalists’ that the war of 1840 in South China was not an Opium War; and even to the Chinese it was primarily an economic war. All this is perfectly true... And the war was more than an economic war. The fundamental question of equality and of equal treatment was an important element in the dispute... But we must not therefore suppose that our hands are clean in the matter of opium... The fact that British citizens were making use of their national position to assist in the smuggling of a prohibited article into another country made the handling of the international issue peculiarly delicate.” His admission was published as early as 1927.²⁹

Equally, it is a good sign that some Chinese historians have admitted that part of the opium smuggling problem was caused by the Chinese bureaucracy. According to Qi Pengfei, for more than a hundred years (1729-1839) the Qing government never really reached an intellectual consensus on the problem of opium prohibition or legalization. “The reason why there were increasing quantities of opium imported, even as the number of prohibition orders rose, to a large extent was because within the Qing government there existed a sizeable bureaucratic bloc which benefited from the opium trade and abetted it.”³⁰ Though not necessarily defending the opium trade, British historians like to use this argument to point out that hypocrisy was not a British monopoly, and that the Chinese were equally culpable. Publishing in 1999 and

²⁷ Sayer, *Birth*, p.156.

²⁸ Endacott, *History*, p.43.

²⁹ R.O. Hall, *China and Britain* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1927), pp.14-15.

³⁰ Qi Pengfei, *Richu rila: Xianggang wenti yibaiwushiliu nian (1841-1997)* [Sunrise and sunset: 156 years of the Hong Kong problem (1841-1997)] (Beijing: Xinhua chubanshe, 1997), p.23.

with an open partiality to Charles Elliot³¹, Hoe and Roebuck have the following to say: “The opium trade could perhaps have been contained once the Chinese government determined on a course of action against it. Unfortunately, Chinese merchants and officials at all levels had found that they too could make money both by allowing the ‘foreign mud’ into the country – for a consideration, a ‘squeeze’, a systematic clandestine levy or entrance duty – and by buying it from the foreign traders and distributing it themselves among their compatriots. One of the worst Chinese offenders in this period was the viceroy [Deng Tingzhen] who was in charge of repelling this foreign invasion in Guangdong Province.”³² It is rare, however, to find criticism of Viceroy Deng being voiced by Chinese historians. His contribution to the anti-opium smuggling efforts is generally acknowledged, and he has been regarded therefore as a patriotic fighter against British imperialism. At most, his fault was the incorrect appointment of some corrupt officials to be in charge of the anti-smuggling campaign in Guangdong.³³

Again, as expected, the judgements on Elliot are poles apart in the British and Chinese discourses. Eitel has mentioned Elliot’s hatred of the opium trade: “Captain Elliot, the Government’s representative in China, personally abhorred the opium trade, root and branch, and did not disguise his views either in his relations with the merchants in Canton or in his communications to the Government.”³⁴ Elliot was also described as lenient and caring towards the Chinese, earning the wrath of his fellow Britons: “Elliot’s policy of conciliation, leniency, and moderate war aims was unpopular all round, and aroused some resentment among the naval and military officers of the expedition. Belcher, Captain of the Sulphur, acidly noted that as Canton was about to be attacked, some Chinese appeared on the walls with white flags, shouting ‘Elliot, Elliot, as if he were their protecting joss’. The British merchants disliked him because they were convinced that force was essential in dealing with a people who were incapable of acting on principle.”³⁵ But to Elliot, his leniency and restraint was a deliberate policy to win a better understanding between Britain and China. Endacott records Elliot’s defence as follows: “Defending himself

³¹ Hoe and Roebuck, p.xiii.

³² Hoe and Roebuck, p.51.

³³ Yu Ming (ed.) *Nanjing tiaoyue yu Xianggang bainian* [Treaty of Nanjing and the hundred years of Hong Kong] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1998), p.93.

³⁴ Eitel, p.79.

³⁵ Endacott, *Sketchbook*, pp.8-9.

on his return to England, he said, 'It has been popularly objected to me, that I have cared too much for the Chinese. But I submit that it has been caring more for lasting British honour and substantial British interests to protect a helpless and friendly people.' He saw that to secure a settlement based on force was not difficult; it is to his credit that he aimed at a settlement which would respect the fundamental interests of the two countries."³⁶

According to Coates, Elliot's policy and consideration were tragically misunderstood both in China and in Britain:

His attitude towards the opium trade was of uncompromising condemnation. He called it a sin and a disgrace, indistinguishable from piracy. Placed in the morally impossible position of having to conduct a war to preserve that trade, and rightly foreseeing that aggression against the Chinese in the cause of opium could not possibly promote eventual harmonious relations between the two countries, he made the fullest use of that section of his instructions that authorized the use of force only in an extremity. At every critical juncture he deliberately took care to demonstrate to the Chinese that he resorted to arms only under provocation, and he never missed an opportunity to enter into peaceful negotiations. In so doing he steered a miraculous but misunderstood course between the conflicting orders of his conscience, his superiors and his exceptional insight into Chinese realities.³⁷

In Britain, thinking that Elliot had done too little and had demanded the minimum of what was instructed, Palmerston gave him a resounding dismissal: "You have disobeyed and neglected your instructions; you have deliberately abstained from employing, as you might have done, the force placed at your disposal;... throughout the whole course of your proceedings, you seem to have considered that my instructions were waste paper which you might treat with entire disregard."³⁸ This often-quoted statement is recorded here again to show the great difficulty in that period of Sino-British contact.

³⁶ Endacott, *Sketchbook*, p.11.

³⁷ Coates, p.216.

³⁸ Endacott, *Sketchbook*, p.8.

But the Chinese historians would have none of this. Indeed they say that Elliot was a war-monger: “Bent on provoking war with China, the British chief superintendent of trade in China, Charles Elliot, [in 1839] wrote to the British government asking for armed intervention, and at the same time moved all the British citizens in China along with British ships to the waters in the vicinity of Tsim Sha Tsui.”³⁹ Using British parliamentary papers, Yu and Liu say that the British, under the command of Elliot, were “prepared to resist all kinds of aggressive actions on the part of the Chinese Government.”⁴⁰ Their interpretation is that according to Elliot’s logic, the unscrupulous opium smuggling of the British was not an aggression, the presence of massive British opium ships in Chinese waters near Hong Kong was not an aggression, and instead the anti-opium smuggling efforts of the Chinese government against Britain was an aggression. To Yu and Liu, it is a total falsification.⁴¹ What is more important is that “on March 27, 1839, in the name of the British government, Elliot issued a notice ordering all British traders to surrender their opium, not to the Chinese government, but through him to China. Elliot was representing the British government to deliver the opium. In such a way, he turned the surrendering of opium into an issue between the two governments, laying the pretext for the aggressive war against China.”⁴² To the Chinese, it was the single most important act revealing the duplicity of Elliot. Elliot was just unpardonable, in the eyes of the Chinese.

The treatment of Lin Zexu is also polarized. Though generally respected by the British historians for his incorruptibility, especially when compared with the rest of the venal Chinese officials, Lin’s integrity did come into question. According to Waley, there were many false reports claiming victory over the British which Lin had sent to Beijing. Waley alleges Lin and his accomplices had been trying to seek rewards or credits for things they had not accomplished. In relation to the Battle of Kowloon, Waley has this to say: “Lin himself refers in his report to the Chinese having ‘obtained a victory over superior forces’... Lin was regarded by both the

³⁹ Liu Shuyong, *An outline history of Hong Kong* [hereafter as *Outline history*] (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1997), p.27.

⁴⁰ Yu and Liu, p.37.

⁴¹ Yu and Liu, p.37.

⁴² Yu and Liu, p.37.

Chinese and the English as a man of unusual integrity, and it seems at first sight surprising to find him not merely transmitting but even himself endorsing a military report so flagrantly mendacious.... The claims [for rewards] were usually based on alleged casualties inflicted on the enemy, and as the authorities at Peking had no way of checking up on enemy losses, the figures given were determined by what officers thought would entitle them to the reward they had in mind.”⁴³

The problem of Arthur Waley and other British historians like E.H. Parker⁴⁴ is that they have tended to put their own words into the mouths of the Chinese. Their respective titles “*The Opium War through Chinese Eyes*” and “*Chinese Account of the Opium War*” are rather misleading: they make use of the Chinese sources to defeat the Chinese discourse. They do not have the intention of really speaking for the Chinese. (A similar tactic on the part of the Chinese historians is their selective translation of English sources so as to advance their own arguments. This will be explained later with reference to the Chinese historians’ use of Peter Wesley-Smith’s book *Unequal Treaty*.⁴⁵) In the eyes of the Chinese historians, Lin was a national hero with an almost unimpeachable status. Lin was not only a patriotic resistance fighter but also a great reformer opening China’s eyes to the world: “Leading the resistance group and the reform group, Lin Zexu responded to the double challenge from the West: to persist in resisting the British opium and military aggression and at the same time, to search for ways to ‘control the barbarians’ and ‘to enrich and strengthen the country’, to view the world with open eyes and to understand and to learn from the West,” argued Chen Xinglun.⁴⁶ It is politically sensitive to find faults in Commissioner Lin.

The best and most critical account of some of Lin’s mistakes, however, can be found in Mao Haijian’s book.⁴⁷ While not demeaning Lin’s rightful patriotic

⁴³ Arthur Waley, *The Opium War through Chinese eyes* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1958), pp.70-71.

⁴⁴ E.H. Parker, *Chinese account of the Opium War* (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1972; first published in 1888 by Kelly & Walsh, Limited, Shanghai).

⁴⁵ Peter Wesley-Smith, *Unequal Treaty 1898-1997: China, Great Britain, and Hong Kong’s New Territories* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1980; revised edition 1998). Unless otherwise stated, the 1980 edition will be used as it is this edition that the Chinese historians have extensively consulted.

⁴⁶ Chen Xinglun, “Yapianzhazheng de lishi qishi” [The historical message of the Opium War], *Yapianzhazheng bowuguan guankan* [Journal of the Opium War Museum], v.1 (1990), p.38.

⁴⁷ Mao is a young Mainland Chinese scholar. His book was jointly published by the Harvard-Yenching Institute and the Sanlian Publishing Company (Beijing). The publishers have invited experienced professors and researchers to accredit the high quality of Mao’s book.

resistance against the British aggressors, Mao is able to point out some basic errors and human limitations of Lin. Among these, Mao records that the biggest mistake committed by Lin, as the commander in the frontline, was his inability or reluctance to report truthfully or accurately the threat of war to the capital and other provinces.⁴⁸ Many of his judgements regarding the British soldiers were also bizarre. He erroneously believed that the British troops would not climb up after falling down, because, it was said, their legs were so tightly bound.⁴⁹ Lin's naval battle plans and guerrilla warfare tactics involving the use of local people were also purely unworkable.⁵⁰ Finally, Lin mistakenly believed that he had won a major battle when the British decided not to attack Canton. He reasoned that the British were deterred because of the strong defences of the city whereas the real reason is that Palmerston's instruction was to attack the points near to the Chinese capital.⁵¹

Regrettably, these critical assessments of Commissioner Lin and the Opium War are not found in the official histories of Hong Kong written by the Mainland Chinese. They still record Chinese "victories" in many of the encounters. One such was known as the First Battle of Chuanbi:

Believing that Elliot was building 'a base for bandits' in the waters off Tsim Sha Tsui, Lin Zexu had previously posted troops on the hill ridges at Kwun Chung, north of Tsim Sha Tsui, in 'fortified positions for the purpose of wiping out [the enemy] at an opportune time.' Alarmed, Elliot ordered repeated attacks on the Chinese positions. From November 4 [1839] on, the British bombarded these positions from their ships and made repeated attempts to land. Lin's troops, led by Candidate Prefectural Governor Yu Baochun, Xin'an County Magistrate Liang Xingyuan and assistant regional commanders Chen Liansheng, Lai Enjue and Zhang Bin, dealt head-on blows to the attackers, defeating them 'in all six engagements in 10 days.' The resounding victory of the Chinese defenders forced Elliot's flotilla out of Tsim Sha Tsui.⁵²

⁴⁸ Mao, p.116.

⁴⁹ Mao, p.135.

⁵⁰ Mao, pp.136-139.

⁵¹ Mao, p.142.

⁵² Liu, *Outline history*, p.28.

During the encounter, the Chinese Admiral Guan Tianpei was described (as reported by Lin later) to be ceremoniously brave: “[Lin wrote] the Admiral stood erect before the mast, drew his sword and grasping it in his hand, directed operations, shouting in a loud and menacing voice that anyone who attempted to retreat would at once be beheaded. A fragment of enemy shell brushed the mast and ripped a splinter from it, which grazed the Admiral’s arm. The skin was broken and the wound showed red; but the Admiral, heedless of his own safety, still stood sword in hand.”⁵³ The translation is from Waley’s based upon Lin’s records. But let us see how Waley interprets it: “This account, derived perhaps from one of the Admiral’s officers, reads like a passage from a contemporary heroic ballad or play rather than a piece of sober reporting, and it was no doubt written to distract attention from the fact that the largest naval force which could be handled as a unit had been repulsed by two English frigates.”⁵⁴ The Chinese source has been turned up side down. Mao’s findings, in fact, have basically confirmed Waley’s interpretation, because in less than 45 minutes after the dramatic show, Admiral Guan had to retreat to berth with his badly wounded ships.⁵⁵

With the polarized judgements on Lin Zexu and Elliot, it would be extremely difficult to put the two men up for comparison, like the one offered by Coates: “Here in a setting of utter dishonesty, hypocrisy and double-dealing stood, at the head of their respective nations, two men similar in their transparent honesty, in their courtesy and forbearance, and in their detestation of the opium trade.”⁵⁶ It is particularly difficult for the average Chinese to accept Elliot’s integrity and his anti-opium stance.

(B) The Chuanbi Convention

In popular understanding (and this includes Mainland Chinese historians for many years), the beginning of Colonial Hong Kong took place with the signing of the Convention of Chuanbi, whereby China agreed to cede the island to Britain. The British official position naturally starts with this: “By the 1841 Convention of Chuanbi, Hong Kong Island, then little more than a barren rock, was ceded to Britain

⁵³ Waley, pp.84-85. See also Mao, p.130 for the original text.

⁵⁴ Waley, p.85.

⁵⁵ Mao, p.131.

⁵⁶ Coates, p.189.

and formally occupied in January 1841. The British and Chinese Governments, however, were dissatisfied with this agreement and refused to ratify it. Hostilities were resumed and were ended in 1842 by the Treaty of Nanjing, recognising the cession in perpetuity of the island to Britain.”⁵⁷ This view is also taken up by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government: “Under the Convention of Chuenpi (Chuanbi) signed on January 20, 1841, Hong Kong Island was ceded to Britain. A naval landing party hoisted the British flag at Possession Point on January 26, 1841, and the island was formally occupied. In June, Elliot began to sell plots of land and settlement began.”⁵⁸

Such an understanding is certainly derived from the British writing of Hong Kong history. According to Eitel, after the Chinese defeat in the Second Battle of Chuanbi, Commissioner Qishan (who had replaced the disgraced Lin Zexu) negotiated with Elliot and offered Hong Kong to Britain. Eitel insists that “it was Kishen [Qishan] and not Elliot who proposed the cession.”⁵⁹ Furthermore, according to Eitel,

By this Treaty, four preliminary propositions were agreed to by the Chinese and British Plenipotentiaries, to the effect, (1) that the island and harbour of Hongkong (not including Kowloon peninsula) should be ceded for ever to the British Crown, and the Chinese batteries on Tsimshatui [Tsimshatsui] dismantled in return for the demolished Bogue forts, (2) that an indemnity of six million dollars should be paid to the British Government in six annual instalments, the first being paid at once, (3) that direct official intercourse between the two countries should be conducted on a footing of international equality, and (4) that the trade of the port of Canton should be opened within ten days after the Chinese new year (therefore on February 1, 1841) and be carried on at Whampoa, until further arrangements should be practicable at Hong Kong.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Research Services, p.13.

⁵⁸ Hong Kong Government, *Hong Kong: a new era* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Government Press, 1998), p.389.

⁵⁹ Eitel, p.122.

⁶⁰ Eitel, p.122.

It was on this legal basis that Commodore Bremer formally and officially took possession of Hong Kong Island on 26 January, 1841. Eitel's story continues to point out that the British took the island rather reluctantly, implying that they had not actually been lustful for territorial possession:

It is obvious from the foregoing account of the acquisition of Hongkong, that the actual cession was a surprise to all concerned. Kishen had, at the last moment, reluctantly offered to cede Hongkong, and Elliot, though accepting it, because at the moment he could hardly do otherwise, took it unwillingly. To the British merchants, the leaders of whom in later years stated in a joint memorial to Lord Stanley (August 13, 1845) that 'such a settlement as Hongkong was never actually required by the British merchants,' this sudden establishment of a Colony was as unexpected as the birth of a child into a family generally is to the rest of the children. They could only wonder how it had all come about, but they could not undo the fact. They had not been consulted about it. There it was: the newborn Colony of Hongkong.⁶¹

This story-line is certainly typical imperialist apologetics. Without too much premeditation or planning, so to speak, Hong Kong was offered and taken. There was no intention or premeditation. Eitel's discourse is indeed pointing to a particular direction: "It is evidently unjust to say, what is commonly found stated in Continental and American histories of British intercourse with the Far East, that 'the English wanted Hongkong and they took it by force of arms.'"⁶²

Other British historians generally follow this interpretation, only adding a few more details. Waley, for example, reminds us of some of Qishan's manoeuvrings: "Chi-shan [Qishan] did everything in his power to gloss over the cession of Hongkong to the English; for example by maintaining that he had only ceded a corner of the island. But the news that proclamations had been put up all over the island announcing that the inhabitants of Hongkong were now British subjects, coming as it did after the Emperor had forbidden negotiations of any kind, was too much for

⁶¹ Eitel, pp.124-125.

⁶² Eitel, pp.125-126.

him.”⁶³ Waley suspects that Qishan had been playing a waiting game to trick Elliot: “Elliot, on his side, was deceived by Chi-shan’s good manners and amiability and failed to see that in signing the Chuenpi Convention Chi-shan was only playing for time – tiding over the interval that must elapse before what he thought to be an overwhelming number of troops could arrive from other provinces, just as Elliot himself had played for time before the arrival of the *Volage* and *Hyacinth*.”⁶⁴ So the main thrust here is to say that Elliot had not been tricking Qishan, and all the suggestions for ceding Hong Kong were initiated by the latter. Sayer also records similar developments and says that Elliot took the preliminary arrangements with Qishan as binding.⁶⁵

In the traditional understanding, Mainland Chinese historians did not differ much from the British position mentioned above. According to Hu Sheng, in an atmosphere of “pacification” (which is meant to mean “capitulation”), and with the sudden attacks of the British on the Bogue forts, Qishan immediately sued for peace. In accord with Elliot’s demands, Qishan had abused his power in secretly signing the Chuanbi Convention, promising to cede Hong Kong to Britain.⁶⁶ A similar story is reproduced by Zhu and others, again condemning the traitorous behaviour of Qishan in ceding territory and paying an indemnity to Britain.⁶⁷ Most probably, these historians either did not consult Endacott’s account, or did not read it judiciously enough. Indeed there are a few points worth close scrutiny.

According to Endacott, “In the negotiations at Canton, Keshen [Qishan] refused most of the demands, and there followed a period of tortuous negotiation, which early in January 1841 broke down. Elliot moved against Canton and occupied the Bogue forts; a truce was arranged three days later, and after resumed negotiations an agreement was reached, generally referred to as the Convention of Chuenpi. The two men arranged to meet at Chuenpi on 20 January 1841 to sign the agreement, but Keshen raised difficulties, and the final meeting arranged for 12 February did not take place. *The Convention in fact was never signed* [my italics]; it was disavowed by each

⁶³ Parker, p.141.

⁶⁴ Waley, p.156.

⁶⁵ Sayer, *Birth*, p.74.

⁶⁶ Hu Sheng, *Yapian*, pp.32-33.

⁶⁷ Zhu Zongyu and others, *Cong Xianggang gerang dao nuwang fanghua* [From the cession of Hong Kong to the Queen’s visit of China] (Fuzhou: Fujian remin chubanshe, 1990), p.20.

government, and both Keshen and Elliot were recalled... *Elliot had prematurely announced the terms of the settlement on 20 January 1841* [my italics]... It was in virtue of this so-called Convention that Hong Kong was occupied on 26 January 1841 by a naval force under Bremer which landed and raised the flag at Possession Point. Almost two and a half years were to elapse before the British government recognized this as the birth of a new colony.”⁶⁸ It is in fact clear that the negotiations, except for some verbal understanding, were still continuing with Qishan trying to procrastinate and Elliot pressurizing him for additional benefits and confirmation. There were still lots of complications which Qishan could not confirm or commit himself, the most serious being territorial concession. There was clearly no signature of a formal type but Elliot had to force his hand regardless, so he declared “prematurely” the conclusion of an agreement so as to acquire a piece of land for supplies, replenishments and other military purposes. Notice that the war was still going on. In any case, the legal status (based on the Chuanbi Convention) of the occupation of Hong Kong was certainly dubious, to say the least.⁶⁹

It was a golden opportunity for the Mainland Chinese historians to gain the offensive on the basis of Endacott’s account. Indeed, when nearing 1997, the orthodox interpretation adopted by the Mainland Chinese historians was to say that essentially there was no Chuanbi Convention at all because Qishan had not signed it and the agreement was still under negotiation. The British claim that they had a “treaty” basis in occupying Hong Kong is a fabrication, a fig leaf to camouflage their aggression towards China.⁷⁰ Let us take Qi Pengfei’s offensive first. He argues that the Chuanbi Convention of January 20, 1841 was just a unilateral declaration manufactured by Elliot. It was nothing other than the compilation of what Elliot had communicated to Qishan on 16 January, just 4 days before. Qishan had not inspected the contents of the so-called “agreement” and therefore it had not been approved or signed. So what Elliot had declared as the signing of the “preliminary agreement” did not exist. It was all a trick of Elliot’s.⁷¹ To Qi, the British occupation of Hong Kong was carried out while the British were still conducting their military actions in China,

⁶⁸ Endacott, *History*, p.17.

⁶⁹ See Steve Tsang (ed.) *A documentary history of Hong Kong: government and politics* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1995), p.16.

⁷⁰ Liu, *Outline history*, p.32.

⁷¹ Qi, p.65.

and while the peace negotiations in Canton were still going on. So the occupation took place without any agreement and had no legal basis.⁷² What Britain was doing was to create a fait accompli and wait for the appropriate time so as to force the Qing government to formally cede Hong Kong to Britain.⁷³

Liu Shuyong's focus is on Britain's illegal occupation of Hong Kong, saying that it had begun 19 months before the conclusion of the Treaty of Nanking [Nanjing].⁷⁴ Using Bao Peng's (the interpreter in the Qishan-Elliot talks) confessions as evidence, Liu explains that there were in fact more abortive talks even after the so-called agreement. On the meeting of January 27, 1841, Bao Peng recalled that "the Grand Secretary [Qi Shan] agreed to pay an indemnity of six million dollars for the opium destroyed as demanded by Elliot, but he would cede only one place [in Hong Kong], and not the whole island of Hong Kong. They bargained for a long time and nothing came of it."⁷⁵ And on February 10, Elliot and Qishan met again: "On arriving at Snake Head Bay, Elliot came and met with the Grand Secretary aboard his ship. Elliot insisted on the cession of the whole island, arguing that if the British were given only one place, there might be armed conflicts among the local inhabitants. Again the Grand Secretary balked."⁷⁶ On February 13, Qishan had learned of his dismissal and he could not have possibly signed any treaty. Sending a message to Elliot through Bao Peng, he pleaded illness to procrastinate. In Liu's conclusion, there was really no Chuanbi Convention at all.

The non-existence of the Chuanbi Convention is also the focal point of Liu Cunkuan's argument. According to this author, "If there were such an 'agreement' Qishan and Elliot would certainly have delivered the copies to their respective governments for approval and ratification. In both China and Britain, the document storage of this negotiation is very good and complete. All documents have been open for inspection and analysis. But there is no existence of such a document as claimed by Elliot. The Public Records Office in London does not have such an 'agreement'. It

⁷² Qi, p.66.

⁷³ Qi, p.93.

⁷⁴ Liu, *Outline history*, p.31.

⁷⁵ Liu, *Outline history*, p.33.

⁷⁶ Liu, *Outline history*, p.33.

is strong proof that Elliot had fabricated such an ‘agreement’.”⁷⁷ From all available evidence, Liu argues that the understanding on 20 January 1841 is that what Qishan was committed to, that is, to “report and ask imperial permission” to let the British lay anchor and reside in Hong Kong. There was no such thing as ceding Hong Kong at all. The “Convention” was recorded neither in China nor in Britain, and so everything was a lie, to cloud over the issue, to put a “legal” garb on the illegal occupation of Hong Kong.⁷⁸ Even Palmerston cast doubt on the existence of a properly signed agreement between Qishan and Elliot, saying that its validity was doubtful because there was no Chinese imperial approval.⁷⁹ Liu Cunkuan’s conclusion is simple and direct: “All the facts have indicated that, with the use of falsehood and violence, and with no treaty basis, Britain had launched a barbaric occupation of the Hong Kong island. This is completely colonialist behaviour, purely illegal violence.”⁸⁰

More independent research carried out in Mainland China also confirms the validity of the above conclusion. Mao Haijian definitively says that Qishan did not secretly cede Hong Kong to Elliot.⁸¹ Mao has found out that on 14 January Elliot had requested Tsim Sha Tsui and Hong Kong island but Qishan agreed to only one place for settlement and berthing, for the purpose of “temporarily staying there”, subject to the sanction of the Daoguang Emperor. On 16 January Elliot distorted Qishan’s meaning and unilaterally declared Britain’s taking control of Hong Kong island. On 18 January Qishan informed Elliot that the clause “now everything has been agreed” was related to the release of two foreign prisoners and it was not about Hong Kong. However on 20 January Elliot distorted the clause “now everything has been agreed” to mean that he had made an agreement with Qishan about the cession of Hong Kong. On 26 January, without any treaty backing, the British occupied Hong Kong. There was no “private ceding” on the part of Qishan, according to Mao.⁸² And to be fair to Qishan, regarding the alleged charge of treason against him, Mao answers that “the charge of treason was based on his policy of conciliation, he did not advocate the use of force in stopping British military aggression. He attempted to be conciliatory in order to achieve Sino-British peace.... And the policy of conciliation derived from

⁷⁷ Liu, *Luncong*, p.29.

⁷⁸ Liu, *Luncong*, p.29.

⁷⁹ Liu, *Luncong*, p.33.

⁸⁰ Liu, *Luncong*, p.65.

⁸¹ Mao, p.14.

⁸² Mao, pp.14-15.

Emperor Daoguang, not Qishan.”⁸³

Historians such as Qi Pengfei, generally think the Chinese defeat in the Opium War was caused by the existence of a group of capitulationists in the Court, saying that Qishan was culpable in terms of his accepting the various humiliations. And Qi argues that the behaviour of Qishan in the negotiations was reflective of the lack of resolution on the part of the Qing dynasty and that Qishan was just a minor capitulationist and the real culprit was the Emperor Daoguang.⁸⁴

But Mao thinks this theory of capitulationism unsound: “Some critics called Emperor Daoguang’s and Qishan’s advocacy of ‘conciliation’ as a kind of ‘capitulation.’ From this point, these critics deduced that there existed a group of ‘capitulationists’ [in the government]. I feel that this argument lacks historical understanding.”⁸⁵ He says that we have to study more carefully the policies of “*fu*” (conciliation) and “*jiao*” (extermination). Traditionally in the face of rebels or enemies, if the government was able to successfully defeat the enemies then the policy of extermination would be used, and if it was not able to gain a decisive victory then conciliation might be applied.⁸⁶ Mao warns us to consider carefully the two cardinal questions relating to the decision as to whether to go to war or not: “First, whether to resist in the face of invasion, and second, if resistance is bound to fail, should we still resist. The former is moral and the answer is positive, no question about it. The latter is political, and the conclusion should not be derived/deduced from the former. ... If righteous resistance is bound to fail, then it is acceptable to sue for peace to prevent meaningless sacrifices.”⁸⁷ Considering that during the entire Opium War, the Qing forces were unable to sink even one single British battleship, and that the Qing’s fortresses were severely bombarded and destroyed, the decision to negotiate for peace should not be equated to pure capitulationism.⁸⁸ Mao thinks that injudicious use of moral condemnation is most merciless.⁸⁹ What Mao wants to say is very clear: we should look at all the practical constraints each historical agent had to

⁸³ Mao, p. 15.

⁸⁴ Qi, p. 83.

⁸⁵ Mao, p. 182.

⁸⁶ Mao, p. 182.

⁸⁷ Mao, p. 204.

⁸⁸ Mao, p. 37.

⁸⁹ Mao, p. 205.

face and we should raise ourselves from pure moral condemnation of the persons involved.

Mao reminds us of the necessity to analyse the events realistically, based on historical evidence. He says that for all practical purposes, only Palmerston and Emperor Daoguang had the final say in the negotiations; Elliot did not have the power to lessen the British demands and Qishan had no right to concede more than instructed. The so-called Guangdong negotiations were, for all practical purposes, one example of Elliot's abuse of power and Qishan's non-compliance with instructions. Elliot's abuse was more serious than Qishan's non-compliance. To Mao, their negotiations were bound to fail.⁹⁰ It had been very brave of Qishan to cross the line by agreeing "to ask imperial sanction on behalf of Britain, one place for temporary residence in the outer region." But Elliot was just too impatient to play the game. He knew that asking for imperial sanction did not mean full acceptance at that instance, but he just forced matters all the way regardless, by claiming (on 20 January) to have obtained agreement to take Hong Kong.⁹¹ Mao concludes that in those particular circumstances and in the face of that cruel opponent (Elliot), we should believe that Qishan had in fact tried his very best to safeguard China's interests.⁹² Mao's verdict, however, might not be readily accepted in Mainland Chinese historiography.

Neither would the British historians easily admit total capitulation to the Chinese arguments. Very much like a last-ditch battle, Hoe and Roebuck have this to say: "An account of the taking of Hong Kong island, published in the lead up to the return of the British colony to Chinese sovereignty, suggests that Keshen [Qishan] never ceded Hong Kong island; the Chinese authors [referring to Yu Shengwu and Liu Cunkuan] call Elliot's claims that he did, thus justifying the occupation of the island by Britain, 'pure fabrication' and 'sheer lies'. And yet a letter from the Emperor to Keshen of 26 February 1841 complains that he 'usurped the power to cede Hong Kong.' That is not to say that the Emperor accepted the cession (neither did the British government, then). But the complaint does suggest that Keshen had agreed to

⁹⁰ Mao, p.209.

⁹¹ Mao, p.212.

⁹² Mao, p.216.

cede Hong Kong, however misguided.”⁹³ In forcing the take-over of Hong Kong, certainly Elliot had his own agenda:

On 1 February, having steamed round Hong Kong in the *Nemesis*, he [Elliot] issued a proclamation declaring the island British. Forces had already set up camp there and he had already sent orders to evacuate Chusan [Zhoushan] – in accordance with the terms of the Convention of Chuenpee [Chuanbi]. From now on, he was to argue the merits of Hong Kong and the disadvantages of Chusan. What is more, he wanted the whole fleet in Canton waters to ensure the honouring of the convention or, as he put it in a later chronology of events, ...so that, in the event of the disavowing of the High Minister [Qishan] by his Court we might be in a position to operate decisively at Canton and effectively disembarass our rear before we could proceed again to the North and impress the Court unmistakeably that our reasonable demands must be acceded to.⁹⁴

It seems that the military considerations had overwhelmed those of any legalistic niceties. Indeed, it is a fact that the British had temporarily occupied other Chinese points (e.g. Zhoushan) during the Opium War, and probably the Chinese are just making a big point out of the Chuanbi Convention issue. The Chinese have insisted that the occupation of Hong Kong before the actual signing of the Nanjing Treaty was illegal.

One final point to recall (already treated in two earlier chapters) is the importance (or the lack of it) of Hong Kong to China. British discourse highlights the remoteness and smallness of Hong Kong. The island, it is claimed, was scarcely related to the main stream of Chinese history. It was just “a barren rock,” an “uninhabited island,” and so the loss to China was negligible. Britain did not have territorial ambitions in China. When Hong Kong was handed over to become a British colony she would become a land of liberty and attract business and trade on the Chinese coast, benefiting everybody, including the Chinese.⁹⁵ Chinese discourse, on

⁹³ Hoe and Roebuck, pp.152-153.

⁹⁴ Hoe and Roebuck, p.153.

⁹⁵ For the British side, see Sayer, *Birth*, p.5; Endacott, *History*, pp. 3 and 9-10.

the other hand, emphasizes the cultural, economic and strategic importance of the place (particularly by using the term “Hong Kong region” to encompass not just Hong Kong island itself but the wider hinterland of the “New Territories” where some cultural and economic achievements were really recorded), and its close and unalienable connection with China. They try to ignore the distinction between Hong Kong island as such and the New Territories hinterland. To the Chinese, Hong Kong was certainly not uninhabited and any loss (even a single inch) of Chinese territory was humiliating and unacceptable.⁹⁶

(C) The Second Opium War and the Cession of Kowloon

The British discourse regarding the launching of war against China in 1856 (known to the Chinese as the Second Opium War) is remarkable in its similarity to what was offered as the reasons for going to war in 1839 (the First Opium War). Again, it was the Chinese side that was wrong. Before 1856, it is argued, the Chinese (central and local) authorities were not faithful in carrying out the treaty provisions (of the Treaty of Nanjing, etc.) The city of Guangzhou did not open itself to foreign traders, as stipulated by the treaty, according to the British interpretation. The various issues finally culminated in the Arrow Incident and one British story line is rendered as follows: “While anchored at Canton it [the Lorcha “Arrow”] was boarded by a party of mandarins, who deliberately hauled down the British flag and made prisoners of most of the crew. Commissioner Yeh Ming-chin [Ye Mingchen] of Canton was as haughty and antagonistic as any of his predecessors... The second war, like the first, originated in the overbearing and intolerable action of the Chinese authorities.”⁹⁷

Eitel tells a similar story in which the British flag had been deliberately insulted. It was using this pretext that the Governor of Hong Kong moved the proposal to fight, hoping to make a mark in history, while other British participants believed that they had a civilizing mission to accomplish: “Sir John Bowring saw in this move of the insolent Viceroy [Ye Mingchen] a good opportunity for settling the question of official intercourse dear to himself and for securing the promised opening of Canton city demanded by the merchants. His Chinese advisers, Consul Parkes and Secretary

⁹⁶ For the Chinese side, see Liu, *Outline history*, pp. 6, 14-15 and 22; Yu and Liu, pp.1-21.

⁹⁷ Publicity Bureau, pp.27-28.

Wade, saw deeper and recognized in the case, not merely the old foolish assumption of Chinese supremacy, but the unavoidable conflict between Europe and Asia or (as Parkes put it at the time) between Christian civilization and semi-civilized paganism. At any rate, this much is perfectly clear, that, even if the Arrow case had never occurred, hostilities would have broken out all the same.”⁹⁸

As a result of the war, the Kowloon Peninsula was taken as booty. Eitel recalls the explanations of General Sir Hope Grant, the commander of the English expedition in the occupation of Kowloon, again revealing all the usual imperialist apologetics: “Firstly, because its occupation was absolutely essential for the defence of Hongkong harbour and the town of Victoria; secondly, because it was an open healthy spot, admirably suited for a camping ground on the arrival of our troops; thirdly, because at the conclusion of the war it would be a salubrious site for the erection of barracks required for the Hongkong garrison; and lastly, because, if we did not take it, the French probably would.”⁹⁹ The feelings of the people of China were never taken into account, as it was probably considered unnecessary.

The feelings of the Chinese, however, can be reflected in Liu Cunkuan’s chapter title: “The Occupation and Cession of Kowloon – the Continuation of the British Seizure of the Hong Kong Region”.¹⁰⁰ A general description of the Kowloon incident and other related issues reflects the mood of the Chinese: “In 1856 Britain and France jointly launched a new war of aggression against China to seize more privileges. In launching the war, the British government also intended to legitimize opium trade. In March 1860 a large number of British invading troops arrived in Hong Kong. Declaring that Hong Kong Island was too small for them, the troops effected a forced landing at Tsim Sha Tsui and then occupied Kowloon. After the British side forcibly leased Kowloon Peninsula from the governor general of Guangdong and Guangxi. This was outright banditry. In October of the same year, the Anglo-French forces attacked Peking and torched the Yuan Ming Yuan Imperial Garden, a monstrous crime that shocked the world. The British government then forced the Qing government into signing the Convention of Peking, according to which the Qing

⁹⁸ Eitel, pp.307-308.

⁹⁹ Eitel, p.359.

¹⁰⁰ Liu, *Luncong*, p.74.

government ceded the southern part of Kowloon to Britain.”¹⁰¹ To the Chinese, the war was an act of aggression, again related to the selling of the drug, opium. The taking of Kowloon was outright banditry. The burning of the Summer Palace in Beijing was a shocking and monstrous crime. All the usual emotive words are used. But a detailed analysis of the events clarifies justifiable anger of the Chinese and their position has been basically confirmed by international scholarship.¹⁰²

The Arrow Incident (October 1856) was just a convenient pretext for the British to start a war against China. According to Liu Cunkuan, the lorcha *Arrow* was involved in piracy and had been rightfully detained and searched. But the British Consul in Guangzhou, H.S. Parkes, deliberately claimed that the *Arrow* was a British ship, registered in Hong Kong (but its registration had expired), and so China had no legal right to board the ship and arrest the crew. He notified Ye Mingchen, the governor-general of Liang Guang, to release the arrested crewmen. Parkes' action was strongly supported by Bowring. They perfectly knew that *Arrow* was a Chinese ship and not a British one. They deliberately made use of this incident and exaggerated it in order to blatantly attack China on 23 October, starting the Second Opium War, argued Liu.¹⁰³

In fact, according to the Chinese discourse, the British had been looking for a pretext to take Kowloon for a long time. Liu Shuyong quotes the 1847 letter of Rear Admiral M. Seymour of the British Far Eastern Fleet in support of his argument: “The possession of the Kowloon Peninsula and Stonecutters Island I consider imperatively necessary, not only to prevent its falling into the hands of any other Foreign Power to the disparagement of a British Colony, but as offering security and accommodation needful to the increasing Hong Kong community. A further reason for the possession of the Kowloon Peninsula is that, during the Typhoon season, it is the only shelter indispensable to the safety of our shipping. This highly important acquisition should never be lost sight of.”¹⁰⁴ In 1858, W.K. Hall, captain of the warship *Calcutta* gave an almost identical list of four reasons to justify the taking of

¹⁰¹ Huang Fengwu, *Origin and solution of the Hong Kong question* (Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 1997), pp.13-14.

¹⁰² The best book covering all the major issues is J.W. Wong's *Deadly dreams: opium and the Arrow War (1856-1860) in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹⁰³ Liu, *Luncong*, pp.76-77.

¹⁰⁴ Liu, *Outline history*, p.42.

Kowloon.¹⁰⁵ John Bowring certainly supported these arguments, saying that “I concur in opinion that the possession of this land, useless to the Chinese, would be of great value to us not only for military but for commercial, sanitary and police purposes.”¹⁰⁶ The belittlement of the loss to China is certainly another common ploy of British imperialism. Here, Sayer offers us a vivid description of how little Kowloon meant to China: “From the viewpoint of the ceders [i.e. the Chinese], apart from sentiment – and Chinese sentiment in the matter may be judged in the light of the declared preference of the merchants of Canton for a British settlement on the mainland so that they might be saved the risk and trouble of a sea crossing – the loss of a few hundred acres of inhospitable foreshore rapidly disintegrating in the glare of the sun’s ray and the lash of tropical rain was not a grave one.”¹⁰⁷

Finally, Liu quotes another disputable argument of Britain’s. It is from N. Elliot of the Colonial Office who wrote to the Foreign Office that “the lawless character of the Chinese located in the [Kowloon] Peninsula, and the difficulties which are presented, by the present state of affairs there, to the peaceable control of the Colony” had necessitated the taking of the place “in any future adjustment of the relations of this Empire with China”.¹⁰⁸ Pax Britannica meant that the lawlessness of other people had to be controlled by British forces. Liu summarises the British excuses as follows: “In an attempt to justify their claims, the colonialists invented a series of reasons such as ‘an increasing Hong Kong community,’ ‘the security’ of Hong Kong, preventing Kowloon from ‘falling into the hands of another foreign power’ and Kowloon’s being ‘useless’ to China.”¹⁰⁹

Liu gives a lengthy rebuttal of all these “reasons”: “Britain violated international law in the first place when it occupied the Chinese territory of Hong Kong with military forces and afterward imposed an unequal treaty on the Qing government, forcing it to recognize the occupation. Its further claims on Chinese territory in order to develop a piece of land they had taken illegally from the country were even more unjustifiable: If Kowloon was needed for the development of Hong

¹⁰⁵ Liu, *Outline history*, p.43.

¹⁰⁶ Liu, *Outline history*, p.44.

¹⁰⁷ G.R. Sayer, *Hong Kong 1862-1919: years of discretion* [hereafter as *Discretion*] (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1975; originally completed in 1939), pp.8-9.

¹⁰⁸ Liu, *Outline history*, p.45.

¹⁰⁹ Liu, *Outline history*, p.46.

Kong, as Britain said, the next would be the whole of Xin'an County...followed by the whole of Guangdong...followed in its turn by the whole of China. This chain of absurd claims, if allowed to run riot, would soon reduce China to a British colony.”¹¹⁰

On the security issue, Liu continues: “The claim of the British officials that the security of Hong Kong and the areas in its proximity was threatened by the ‘lawless’ Chinese inhabitants of Kowloon who were emboldened by the absence of administrative control by the Chinese authorities in Tsim Sha Tsui represented still another pretext for taking Kowloon. Those whom the British colonialists called ‘lawless’ were mainly Chinese patriots. The struggle they were waging against the British invaders did pose a serious threat to their colonial rule in Hong Kong, but it was a totally justified struggle, one spawned by the lawless acts of the Anglo-French allied troops in Guangdong and waged in defense of the right to survival of the Chinese nation. There were lawless characters in the Kowloon Peninsula, to be sure, but they were British soldiers who harassed the inhabitants there, and pirates who robbed legitimate traders in the peninsula. Combating them was the business of the Chinese authorities, not the business of the British colonialists.”¹¹¹ The point on the “lawless characters” is particularly interesting and this will be dealt with in a later section concerning the tradition of resistance against foreign imperialism.

The threat of a third party is also refuted, as Liu explains: “It was equally absurd to say...that British occupation of Kowloon would prevent the peninsula from falling into the hands of another foreign country. As the peninsula was Chinese territory, its occupation by any of them, Britain included, was illegal. Besides, there were no signs at the time indicating such a possibility.”¹¹²

The argument of the “uselessness” of Kowloon is equally unsupportable: “The peninsula had the longest history of economic development in the Hong Kong area, as shown by its relatively advanced agriculture and shipping, and the Qing government was fully aware of its military value. During the First Opium War Lin Zexu made a series of efforts to strengthen the defense of the peninsula, and when Britain occupied

¹¹⁰ Liu, *Outline history*, p.46.

¹¹¹ Liu, *Outline history*, pp.46-47.

¹¹² Liu, *Outline history*, p.47.

Hong Kong, making it part of China's maritime frontier, it assumed even greater strategic importance."¹¹³

The conclusion of Liu Shuyong is to be expected: "None of the reasons Britain gave for its territorial claim on Kowloon was based on fact or sound logic. The principle of the inviolability of a country's territorial integrity and sovereignty is a fundamental principle of international law. Any act that encroaches upon the territory of a country is an act in violation of that country's right to survival, an act of aggression in total disregard of international law. No reason whatsoever can justify the infringement by one country upon the territory of another."¹¹⁴

In the taking of Kowloon, Liu Cunkuan reminds us of the three-step approach habitually used by Britain to gain territorial advantage in China: military occupation, permanent leasing, and cession.¹¹⁵ In every step, the British aggression was driven by greed. The first step occurred on 18 March 1860 with H. Grant commanding the British troops to land on Tsim Sha Tsui, "brutally occupying" its vicinity.¹¹⁶ According to Liu, this military occupation was not a temporary measure, as the British had said. It was to create a *fait accompli* to force China to agree to giving Britain a permanent leasehold of Kowloon.¹¹⁷ Harry Parkes (together with Grant) was the main planner and executor of this second step. He told Lao Chongguang, governor-general of Liang Guang (20 March 1860) that as the Chinese authorities were unable to control the "chaotic" situation in Kowloon, the peninsula would have to be ceded to Britain. As the British government had not been notified of the cession proposal, the leasing of the land would be agreed on. Parkes told Lao to accept the arrangements as stated and to mention the amount of rent. To Liu Cunkuan, "this was certainly not negotiation between two countries on an equal basis, it was purely the command from a master to his servant, whether the servant agreed or not, he [Lao] had to accept all the same."¹¹⁸ Liu Shuyong comments that the whole process of drafting, signing and exchanging copies of the lease agreement was completed very quickly: "In just a little more than one day's time, beginning on the afternoon of the

¹¹³ Liu, *Outline history*, p.47.

¹¹⁴ Liu, *Outline history*, p.47.

¹¹⁵ Liu, *Luncong*, p.75.

¹¹⁶ Liu, *Luncong*, p.79.

¹¹⁷ Liu, *Luncong*, p.79.

¹¹⁸ Liu, *Luncong*, pp.79-80.

20th, Parkes had managed to force Lao to go through all the formalities necessary for the lease [with an annual rent of 500 taels].”¹¹⁹ To Yu and Liu, indicating their outrage, “Lao should have sternly refused Parkes’ territorial demands and reported it to the central government. But he hastily replied that same day, agreeing to have the British temporarily lease and protect Kowloon...This is just too ridiculous.”¹²⁰

On 24 March 1860 the British issued a public notice¹²¹ in Kowloon claiming that they had leased the place from Lao Chongguang. But to Liu Shuyong, the whole arrangement was illegal and an act of stark aggression:

This public notice represented an attempt by the British to give a semblance of legitimacy to their occupation of Kowloon. But as Tsim Sha Tsui and its surrounding areas were Chinese territory, matters concerning the inhabitants there could only be handled by the competent Chinese authorities, something that a sovereign country is naturally expected to do. It was, therefore, absurd to try to justify the occupation of Kowloon on the grounds of ‘injury resulting to British interests’ allegedly committed by the local people. As for the order in which the occupation and the lease took place, the occupation preceded the lease and not the other way round, as the notice would have people believe. Furthermore, the conclusion of the lease was not sanctioned by the Chinese central government, as it had not been informed of it. So Britain committed an act of stark aggression when it sent its troops to occupy the southern part of the Kowloon Peninsula and took possession of it in the guise of a lease – an act which Britain could never exonerate itself from no matter how hard it tried.¹²²

The third step is the actual cession of Kowloon according to the Convention of Beijing. In describing the official ceremony, the Chinese discourse puts a strong emphasis on the issue of British haughtiness and Chinese humiliation, as Liu Cunkuan states: “Prince Gong (Yixin) had been waiting respectfully for quite some time before the sedan carriage of Lord Elgin arrived at the Ministry of Rites. Prince Gong greeted

¹¹⁹ Liu, *Outline history*, pp.50-51.

¹²⁰ Yu and Liu, p.89.

¹²¹ Liu, *Outline history*, p.51.

¹²² Liu, *Outline history*, pp.51-52.

Lord Elgin but the latter responded only with a spiteful glance and a cold smile. It was in this stifling atmosphere that the Treaty of Tianjin was ratified and the Convention of Beijing was signed.”¹²³ Not satisfied with this, in order to show Britain’s “glorious military achievements” and to overawe and humiliate the Chinese people, Lord Elgin staged a dramatic “soil transfer ceremony”. On 19 January 1861, all the important officials from British Hong Kong attended the ceremony and the British also “forced” many Chinese local officials to participate.¹²⁴

Liu Shuyong reserves one special section in his book and calls it “The Bizarre ‘Transfer of Territory’ Ceremony”¹²⁵ with the following highlight: “After Elgin had held a brief conversation with them [Chinese officials] with Parkes interpreting, Parkes handed them a handful of earth in a piece of paper which they returned to Parkes as a sign of the transfer of territory. Apparently these proceedings were intended by the swashbuckling aggressors to celebrate their victory with the humiliation of China, but the Qing officials acquiesced in this farce, an event that deeply hurt the feelings of every patriotic Chinese.”¹²⁶ Liu Cunkuan adds that during the ceremony, “The British colonialists were immersed in their harmonious music and victorious joyfulness whereas the millions of Chinese people were depressed, in a situation of ever-deepening national catastrophe and sadness.”¹²⁷ While the Chinese might consider themselves suffering, Sayer takes the transfer of sovereignty in 1861 in a light-hearted mood: “A fresh era in connexion with our interests in China appeared with the new year, and it was no less than the peaceable planting of the British ensign on a small piece of territory on the mainland of China opposite to Hong Kong and sufficient for its safeguard in the condition of affairs prevalent at that period.”¹²⁸

There is yet another rather strange paragraph from Liu Shuyong, in relation to the final cession of Kowloon: “Apparently, Article VI of the Treaty of Peking was intended by Britain to legalize the cession of the Kowloon Peninsula. However, it can never write off the fundamental fact that the cession was effected under the threat of

¹²³ Liu, *Luncong*, p.82.

¹²⁴ Liu, *Luncong*, pp.82-83.

¹²⁵ Liu, *Outline history*, pp.57-58.

¹²⁶ Liu, *Outline history*, p.58.

¹²⁷ Liu, *Luncong*, p.83.

¹²⁸ Sayer, *Discretion*, p.1.

force by Britain, that it was made against the will of the Chinese people and contrary to what the Qing government had initially hoped for.”¹²⁹ Certainly, the Convention of Beijing was another unequal treaty signed at gunpoint. But it seemed that up till then, the Chinese were still reluctant to admit defeat. According to the Chinese discourse, anything contrary to the will of the Chinese people would not be condoned. But one wonders what the Qing government “had initially hoped for” in this time of duress, given particularly that there were many “traitorous officials” in the Chinese bureaucracy who would easily give way to British imperialism. As Qi Pengfei caricatures governor-general Lao in this manner: “From March to October 1860... the Qing government did not care about the fait accompli of the British illegal military occupation of the southern part of the Kowloon peninsula... And the governor-general of Liang Guang, Lao Chongguang, was cheating everybody by privately agreeing with the British aggressors to ‘lease’ Kowloon ... Yet his guilt was not uncovered or punished. [Under these circumstances,] the feudal rule of the Qing dynasty could be carved out by anybody.”¹³⁰ The imperial edifice of China was just like a house of cards that could easily fall in the face of a superior military power like Britain.

It is ironic that the British, in justifying the two wars against China, often argued that military force was used only as a last resort, as explained by Costin: “...it would appear that the British Government was unwilling to use that Stick save as an instrument of what it considered justice in a legally ordered international society. It is not difficult for it to plead at the bar of international law that the Stick was not brandished for the sake of mere expediency. Both in the question of the exchange of ports and in the regulation of the opium trade in 1858, two matters which deeply concerned British interests, the Government and its representative were careful not to arrive at their ends by forceful means. When they used force it was to meet the duplicity, evasion, cunning, and cruelty of the Chinese officials.”¹³¹

In fact the opposite might be more accurate: the inconsiderate impulsiveness of the British officials was often the cause of launching imperialist wars on China, at least, as far as the Chinese historians understanding of the situation. John Bowring,

¹²⁹ Liu, *Outline history*, p.55.

¹³⁰ Qi, p.153.

¹³¹ W.C. Costin, *Great Britain and China 1833-1860* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937), p.344

the governor of Hong Kong during the Second Opium War was one such official, as even Sayer and Endacott have conceded. Sayer calls him a “fire-eater”: “Indeed this mild-mannered and bespectacled scholar was a regular fire-eater; and, even as a mere ‘locum tenens’, Dr. Bowring exhibited his restiveness against the conciliatory policy adopted by his principal, Sir Samuel, vis-à-vis the Canton authorities. At that time his views got little support at home and he was quietly told not to force the pace. But later, as we shall see, he authorized the bombardment of that city to secure the right of entry.”¹³² Endacott says that Bowring was contradictory: “Sir John Bowring pursued a vigorous policy with regard to China and precipitated the war over the lorcha *Arrow* dispute in 1856. His policy displayed inherent contradiction. He held on the one hand the most liberal ideas; he had been president of a Peace Society advocating conciliation in the settlement of international disputes, and to the Chinese in Hong Kong he pursued a policy that was liberal and humane. On the other hand, he treated the Chinese government in a most high-handed way and was ready to use threats to secure concessions.”¹³³ Apart from this dreadful contradiction, he might have been driven by a kind of fatal conceit, perhaps hoping to gain fame by displays of strength: “... he [Bowring] was supremely confident that he could succeed in solving the problems of Anglo-Chinese relations where Pottinger, Davis, and Bonham had failed. He owed his appointment to Palmerston, and was encouraged to adopt Palmerstonian methods in China.”¹³⁴

(D) The Blockade of Hong Kong

Some background outline of this “Blockade of Hong Kong” is needed. From 1867 up to 1886 the Chinese had been sending customs cruisers and setting up customs posts around the Hong Kong waters in order to levy customs duties on the Chinese native junks carrying taxable goods (including a great amount of opium), in accordance with the treaty stipulations. The Chinese saw it as an exercise of sovereign rights whereas the British in Hong Kong found it unacceptable, a threat to the free-port status of the colony. The Chinese discourse is ready to point out the untrustworthiness of the British and Hong Kong governments: abetting and assisting

¹³² Sayer, *Birth*, p.174.

¹³³ Endacott, *History*, p.91.

¹³⁴ Endacott, *Sketchbook*, p.39.

smuggling from Hong Kong, and ultimately hurting the tax revenues of the Chinese government. The aggressive nature of British imperialism was the driving force behind all these misdeeds. Mainland Chinese historians tend to utilise only those materials useful to their side of the argument, ignoring other dissenting voices from the British side. On the other hand, the British discourse is not uniform. Earlier historians tend to support the argument that the Chinese were wrong because they had worked against British Hong Kong's interests whereas more recent ones concede some of the mistakes made by the British and local Chinese merchants in colonial Hong Kong. They also admit that the term "blockade of Hong Kong" was a loaded one. More objectively, the issue was at a fundamental level a commercial struggle between Hong Kong and Guangzhou to control the handling of foreign trade in Guangdong waters.

Let us start with a long paragraph from Eitel, stating the details of the British position of the late 19th century:

[T]he principal tussle Sir Richard [MacDonnell, the governor of Hong Kong] had with the Chinese Authorities was connected with a much more serious attempt made by the [Chinese] Mandarins to ruin the native junk trade of Hongkong. About October 15th, 1867, the steam cruisers of the Canton Customs, aided by native gun-boats employed by the holders of Chinese monopolies at Canton (especially the salt and saltpetre farmers), commenced what was thenceforth known as the Blockade of Hongkong. The steam-cruisers and gunboats patrolled day and night every outlet of the harbour and waters of Hongkong, boarded and searched every native junk leaving or entering, arrested every junk that had no proper papers and levied double duty in the case of goods shipped at Pakhoi or Canton for other Treaty ports by junks which en route touched at Hongkong. It was a movement which pretended to aim only at suppressing smuggling but which, in reality, operated as an extra tax on the legitimate junk trade of Hongkong. It served, indeed, to induce Chinese merchants in Hongkong to conduct their shipping business in foreign bottoms (exempt from this blockade) rather than by native junks, but, as foreign vessels were excluded from all but Treaty ports, this blockade tended to nullify the right of Chinese subjects residing in Hongkong to trade,

by native junks, with the non-Treaty ports of their own country. In fact, this blockade served not only as an efficient check on smuggling, but as a simple means of compelling the junk trade of the Colony to pay double duty unless conducted via the two principal ports of South-China, Pakhoi and Canton. And this was the real purport of the measure: to effectually subordinate the native commerce of Hongkong to that of Canton for the injury of the former and the benefit of the latter port, and permanently to neutralise, so far as the junk trade of Hongkong was concerned, the freedom of the port.¹³⁵

As Eitel has admitted, according to treaty stipulations, foreign ships were not allowed to trade with non-treaty ports in China. The important point which Eitel has not mentioned is who was connected with and supplied the goods to the local Hong Kong Chinese native junk-traders in the non-treaty ports. Should they pay customs duties to the Chinese government when trading with these ports? Why was the Hong Kong government so eager to fight for the interests of these junk-traders, if they were not benefiting the British merchants in general? Had it really hurt the free port status of Hong Kong? How much smuggling (of opium, etc) was involved? Eitel has another important explanation of the “blockade” issue: “The latest portion of this volume [Eitel’s own book] exhibits that same Manchu tyranny, undeterred by repeated defeats and humiliations, because aided and abetted by H.M. Ministers and Consuls in China, surrounding the hated Free Trade Colony of Hongkong by a narrow circle of Customs stations and maintaining an effective blockade which to the present day disgraces British relations with China. All honour to Great Britain’s magnanimous forbearance in the interest of what her Crown lawyers consider to be the just demands of international law.”¹³⁶ It is curious that some British ministers and consuls in China were supporting the Chinese efforts in collecting duties and fighting against smuggling. So the British stand was definitely not one of uniformity. Colonial Hong Kong might have one voice, and British consular representatives quite another.

There were certainly some irregularities regarding the Chinese customs control over Hong Kong, causing some inconvenience to the colony, as Sayer has explained:

¹³⁵ Eitel, pp.415-416.

¹³⁶ Eitel, p.569.

[F]ree-trade Hong Kong did not take so kindly to the *fait accompli* [i.e. letting the Chinese customs to levy duties from Chinese junks in and out of Hong Kong waters]. Dramatic tales of rude arrests of junks on the high seas and of arbitrary and extortionate demands at the new stations fell upon receptive ears, and in due course strong protests were renewed... Once more the [Chinese] Customs declined to argue and replied by action. Agencies were unobtrusively established in Hong Kong at which customs dues could be paid on *terra firma* and receipts given affording safe conduct through the outer cordon. It was quietly done, so quietly that the facilities offered were already attracting a certain amount of patronage among the Chinese before the British merchants became aware of this fresh development, but when the truth leaked out a storm of protest arose against this attempt to establish an *imperium in imperio* and the agencies disappeared as quietly as they had sprung up. The customs stations, however, remained, despite Sir Richard's efforts on behalf of the local merchants. The 'blockade of Hong Kong', which was to exercise successive governors for many years, had begun.¹³⁷

The point of dispute was the existence of a customs collecting agency in Hong Kong itself (patronized even by the local Chinese traders) which the British merchants found offensive, and thus a possible solution to the customs row was sadly missed.

Indeed the home government in Britain did not unreservedly support the British merchants' stand, behaving as if they were a united front of imperialism against China, as the Chinese historians have rendered it. First of all, Endacott has freely admitted the presence of smuggling derived from Hong Kong: "Smuggling was not confined to opium and salt. British and Chinese alike had no scruple about turning the island's immunity from Chinese control to their own advantage, and Davis wrote in 1845 that lorchas used to come from Canton bringing little except tea 'not passed through the Chinese customs house'."¹³⁸ The bluntness of Macdonnell was also rebuffed by the British Foreign Office: "The 'blockade' began in November 1867, when Macdonnell reported the seizure of an opium-carrying junk by Chinese customs revenue cruisers operating off the entrances to the Hong Kong harbour; writing in the strongest terms

¹³⁷ Sayer, *Discretion*, pp.29-30

¹³⁸ Endacott, *History*, p.74.

to Robertson, the Consul at Canton, he demanded and eventually received the junk and the value of its cargo. The Duke of Buckingham passed the dispatch of the Foreign Office, but expressed his 'entire disapproval of the language used' in which the Governor had seemed to question the right of the Chinese government 'to exercise its own jurisdiction over its own subjects in its own waters in a manner which it considers conducive to its own interests.'"¹³⁹ Macdonnell's language was particularly censured: "The home government objected to Macdonnell's unrestrained language, in which he described the customs cruisers as 'a new species of corsairs', and supported the Chinese government. 'More than one of the claims advanced by you have been exaggerated and untenable... the interests of H.M. Service are injured by the tone in which they are advanced... I hold you in no slight degree responsible for the want of co-operation which at present exists,' Lord Granville told him, and the 'blockade' continued."¹⁴⁰

Endacott puts it squarely that the smuggling had hurt Chinese revenues, a fact confirmed by the British consular officials in China: "The Chinese maintained that they were losing revenue as a result of smuggling from Hong Kong; Alcock, the British Minister to Peking since 1865, supported this contention in a letter to the Foreign Office in May 1868, in which he referred to Hong Kong as 'being little more than an immense smuggling depot'. Opium had been legalized by the Treaty of Tientsin in 1858, but until 1868 it could be carried only in foreign vessels which were confined to treaty ports where opium import duty and likin transit tax were paid, but this prohibition had been disregarded by the Chinese in Hong Kong, whose junks were under no such limitation. The Chinese government therefore lost revenue on junk-carried opium."¹⁴¹ The native junks were in fact acting as local distributors of foreign goods purchased from the European and British importers and agency houses, sending them to Chinese ports (treaty or non-treaty ports alike). That is why the foreign trading community in Hong Kong had taken the matter to heart.

Other British historians have also recorded other voices. For instance, Sayer records the response in 1874 of Lord Carnarvon, the Secretary of State of Britain, thus:

¹³⁹ Endacott, *History*, pp.188-189.

¹⁴⁰ Endacott, *History*, p.191.

¹⁴¹ Endacott, *History*, p.189.

“the action of Chinese revenue cruisers in the exercise of the right of search in close proximity to Hong Kong for the purpose of defeating attempts on the part of Chinese subjects to defraud the revenue of their country did not affect the freedom of the port and afforded no valid ground for diplomatic remonstrance.”¹⁴² Indeed, during the governorship of John Pope Hennessy (1877-1882), the Hong Kong merchants were warned of their misbehaviour and that they should abide by the customs regulations: “China, it will be remembered, had agreed in principle to the appointment of a joint commission to explore ways and means of protecting her revenues without gratuitously dislocating the Colony’s trade. But there the matter stood and the Customs stations continued to stand sentinel at the exits and entrances of the harbour. When an appeal was made to rid the Colony of this irksome inquisition, Sir John bluntly replied that one thing was first necessary: the merchants must forgo the temptation to smuggle salt (a Government monopoly) into China and to evade the legal import duties on opium. Until these matters were disposed of they need not hope for the removal of the objectionable stations nor look to him for help. For his own part he had little doubt that legitimate business was suffering for the sins of the smugglers.”¹⁴³ Endacott has even recorded Hennessy’s complaint of the Hong Kong government’s bureaucratic obstruction in the smuggling issue: “The Hong Kong officials showed marked reluctance to take any action against smugglers, and Hennessy complained to Carnarvon of ‘the official countenance given to smuggling’, but the Colonial Secretary retorted that Hong Kong officials had proved worthy of the trust which had been placed in them.”¹⁴⁴

So much for the British position on the “blockade” issue. Let us see how the Chinese historians assess it. The general position of the Chinese derives from their understanding of the opium smuggling, engineered by the British. Liu Shuyong argues that before legalization, with effect from November 1858, the opium trade had been an illegal activity. The Hong Kong British authorities had expanded opium trade to benefit themselves; they failed to take any measures to help the Chinese efforts to stop this smuggling; they did not allow the Chinese ministers and officials to carry out their duties; they let the smuggling ships register in Hong Kong; they gave them

¹⁴² Sayer, *Discretion*, p.34.

¹⁴³ Sayer, *Discretion*, p.42.

¹⁴⁴ Endacott, *History*, p.193.

passes, let them fly the British Union Jack, and allowed armed shipping to safeguard them. To the Chinese historians, all these measures had bolstered the opium smuggling trade, hurting China immensely.¹⁴⁵

The Chinese position is best summarised by Liu Cunkuan: “Hong Kong had for a long time been the centre of smuggling (with opium smuggling as the most serious problem) against China. In 1858 with the ‘legalisation’ of opium imports, the opium tax and other import duties became an important income for China. At the same time, Britain disregarded treaty obligations and international morality by continuing to abet Hong Kong smugglers, reaping huge profits and hurting immensely China’s finances. All these circumstances forced China to establish customs posts around Hong Kong to levy import taxes and collect lijin [transit tax]. The British Hong Kong authorities and the Hong Kong merchant community were strongly against the setting up of this Chinese Kowloon customs. They outrageously called it the ‘Blockade of Hong Kong’. After a long period of negotiations and arguments, the two sides signed the ‘Hong Kong Opium Trade Agreement’ in 1884, stipulating certain restrictions on opium smuggling. But the British Hong Kong authorities did not want to give up the benefits from smuggling and continued to abet it. In 1889 [sic, should read 1899] when the Chinese and British governments signed the ‘Convention respecting an extension of the Hong Kong territory’, the British made a solemn promise to the Qing government to protect China’s tax revenues. But they betrayed their promise and morality by forcefully evicting all the customs posts in Kowloon’s New Territories. They did it to open their gates to smuggling.”¹⁴⁶

According to the same historian (and quoting from Peter Wesley-Smith’s book *Unequal Treaty 1898-1997*), the Hong Kong governor, Arthur Kennedy, also admitted, in 1875, the smuggling status of the colony: “It is beyond doubt that a not inconsiderable number of Chinese junk owners are in the habit of consulting their individual interests by violating Chinese customs laws, and making this Colony the basis of smuggling operations, for which its geographical position affords every

¹⁴⁵ Liu Shuyong, *Jianming Xianggang shi* [Concise history of Hong Kong] [hereafter as *Jianming*] (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., 1998), p.41.

¹⁴⁶ Liu, *Luncong*, p.104.

facility” and Liu would also like to know what role the British Hong Kong authorities played in the drama. He states that Kennedy had evaded the question.¹⁴⁷

What Liu Shuyong does not state, immediately following the above quotation, is the complaint of the Hong Kong traders, as reflected in Kennedy’s report: “...the profits [of smuggling] it is to be presumed, exceed the loss and risk, or the practice would not be continued...The Chinese Customs Officers and Revenue Collectors, with a knowledge of these facts, lose no opportunity of seizing and confiscating every Chinese junk for which they can find a pretext, and the characterless class of persons employed as subordinates in that service makes it too probable that honest and innocent traders are often grievously harassed and plundered. I entertain no doubt that such is the case.”¹⁴⁸ To Wesley-Smith, the conflict emerged as a result of two factors: profitable illegal smuggling and harassment of legitimate trade. Liu has made use of only the section favourable to his arguments and deliberately ignored the rest.

To Liu, the rightful anti-smuggling measures of the Chinese government were opposed by the British Hong Kong authorities and Hong Kong merchants. They deliberately called it the “Blockade of Hong Kong”, saying that the measures were endangering the free port status of Hong Kong and harming its trade. Again, selectively using the information from Endacott’s *A History of Hong Kong*, Liu described the Hong Kong governor Macdonnell in attacking the Chinese customs cruisers as a “new species of corsairs”, and arguing that “the [Chinese] right of searching of native vessels would lead to ‘endless dissension and bad feeling.’”¹⁴⁹

What Liu does not say is that Macdonnell had been censured by the Foreign Office, even though this piece of information is on the very next page (p.191) of Endacott’s book. In relating Hennessy’s objection to Hong Kong’s smuggling role and his critical remark about “the official countenance given to smuggling”, Liu’s twist is to say that “Hennessy understood it was impossible to resist London’s ‘official countenance given to smuggling’ and so he had to shelve his [anti-smuggling]

¹⁴⁷ Liu, *Luncong*, p.106.

¹⁴⁸ Liu (*Luncong*, p.116) has referenced his source as page 363 of the *Correspondence Relating to the Complaints of the Mercantile Community*, which is in fact quoted in Wesley-Smith, pp.19-20, and footnote 37, p.210.

¹⁴⁹ Liu, *Luncong*, p.106, quoting from Endacott, *History*, p.190.

plans.”¹⁵⁰ Liu’s emphasis is thus to put the blame on the British government without acknowledging that the British stand was not uniform, as evidenced by Hennessy’s own policy. In fact, before Hennessy, there were various British efforts to settle the difficulty, as found in Kennedy’s abortive suggestion to appoint a Chinese consul in Hong Kong and “[b]y the Chefoo Convention of 1876, a joint Anglo-Chinese Commission was to be established to find some way by which the Chinese could protect their legitimate revenue without detriment to the colony.”¹⁵¹ It did not succeed. The Chinese historians also do not mention that the Chinese customs gunboats were purchased with the help of the British consular representatives (such as Alcock and Robertson) and that they had counteracted the arguments of Macdonnell, the governor of Hong Kong.¹⁵²

What Liu wants to do is merely to define China’s position: “It was all within China’s sovereign power to establish customs posts and to launch its own tax policies. There was no need to succumb to British pressure for a joint-administration of the Chinese customs system. It was unreasonable to call the Chinese measures to safeguard their own revenue as the ‘Blockade of Hong Kong’. What the Qing government had done was for the protection of legitimate trade and the prohibition of illegitimate trade... It is sufficiently clear to say the arguments for the ‘Blockade of Hong Kong’ is just a sensational term, a lie manufactured by the British colonialists and opium smugglers to fatten their dirty pockets.”¹⁵³

The issue of the “blockade” dragged on until 1886. On September 11 of that year, the “Hong Kong Opium Trade Agreement” was signed, followed by the “Hong Kong Opium Ordinance” the following year. The agreed solution was to let F.A. Morgan of the Imperial Maritime Customs Service act as the customs inspector of Kowloon Customs Service of China, replacing the duties of the original Guangdong Customs Service and taking over the four customs posts of Kap Shui Mun, Cheung Chau, Fat Tau Chau and Kowloon City. But according to Liu, even with the agreements, smuggling could not be effectively controlled, because the Hong Kong

¹⁵⁰ Liu, *Luncong*, p.106.

¹⁵¹ Endacott, *History*, p.192.

¹⁵² Endacott, *History*, p.190.

¹⁵³ Liu, *Luncong*, pp.106-107.

government continued to see opium smuggling as a ready source of money.¹⁵⁴ In the end, with the seizure of the New Territories in 1899, Britain exerted further pressure on China and succeeded in October to expel all customs posts around Hong Kong. The consequence of all these was disastrous to China, in the words of Liu.¹⁵⁵

The Mainland Chinese historians have still to be convinced that the “blockade” arose from a genuine conflict, one not necessarily caused by the incessant push of British aggressive imperialism, as Wesley-Smith has concluded: “...the vexed question of smuggling was an even more potent source of friction. China relied on the various taxes and duties levied on traded goods generally, but especially opium for much of her imperial and local revenue, and she had a commensurate interest in the proper collection of such fees. But Hong Kong’s openness as a free port contiguous to Kwangtung favoured the development of smuggling operations so large and well-organized that Chinese revenue inevitably suffered, and all schemes designed to protect that revenue inevitably endangered the freedom of Hong Kong trade.”¹⁵⁶

(E) The Leasing of the New Territories

The next round in the writing of competing histories involves the British leasing of the New Territories. Interestingly, Anglo-Chinese cross-fires in writing the competing discourses can be found by a careful reading of the Mainland Chinese historians’ selective translation and use of Wesley-Smith’s book (*Unequal Treaty 1898-1997*, 1980 edition) and Wesley-Smith’s response found in the 1998 edition of the same book. The manipulation of evidence is most obvious in this instance.

Let us start with the British discourse. Once again the British colonialists came up with numerous justifications for taking over this extension of territories, and many of the old-type British historians tend to accept them without much reflection. Of course, a more objective and analytical understanding of the events can also be found. The Chinese position, on the other hand, follows the basic anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist trend by emphasising the “trickery” of Britain, saying that the British

¹⁵⁴ Liu, *Luncong*, p.109.

¹⁵⁵ Liu, *Luncong*, p.114.

¹⁵⁶ Wesley-Smith, p.19.

exploited China's weakness and Chinese officials' foolishness. They also detail the various humiliations suffered by the Chinese and the acts of violence perpetrated by the British. They phrase it "The 'New Territories' leased to Britain under coercion."¹⁵⁷ The unequal nature of the treaty leasing the New Territories is also a major focus.

According to Sayer, we have to understand the jingoistic background in the scramble for concessions in China and that the British action was a reaction to what other European powers had done to her: "The China-Japan war [of 1894-5] had proved the helplessness of the Chinese in defence and the increased range of modern firearms had demonstrated that Hong Kong harbour, and the city of Victoria itself, lay at the mercy of any who chose to erect batteries on the Kowloon hills... Russia and Germany had started taking places... Britain had to follow suit... Moreover this was par excellence the age of jingoism and there were not lacking English jingos who insisted that England would lose prestige in the eyes of an oriental country if she stood idly by while her rivals ran in to pick the plums."¹⁵⁸ Sayer continues to say that Britain was not excessive in her demands at all: "There was nothing for it but to present both requests together, paring down to the barest minimum. Accordingly, the British Minister, Sir Claude Macdonald, made his modest claim, under the most favoured nation clause, for a lease of Weihaiwei 'for so long as Russia occupied Port Arthur' and a ninety-nine years' lease of some two hundred square miles of territory behind Kowloon and the islands adjacent to Hong Kong."¹⁵⁹

In the description of Sayer, the Chinese easily conceded to the British demands and as a result everybody was happy: "In both cases the claim was at once met, subject to the reservation of jurisdiction for the Chinese officials already established within the two walled towns of Weihaiwei and Kowloon City, provided that such jurisdiction was not found to be incompatible with the military needs of the lessee...[And] the enlargement of her [Hong Kong's] own boundaries naturally touched the Colony closely, the news of the completion of the agreement being received with considerable relief by the local community... The military could now at

¹⁵⁷ Liu, *Outline history*, chapter 4, pp.59-74.

¹⁵⁸ Sayer, *Discretion*, p.81.

¹⁵⁹ Sayer, *Discretion*, p.82.

least feel free from the menace of hostile guns, the navy could now at least carry out minor exercises in their own waters, and civilians—and military and naval gentlemen in mufti—eagerly canvassed the possibilities of the new territory for sport and recreation.”¹⁶⁰

In the eyes of Sayer, the resistance against the British occupation was easily dismissed and the whole episode was given only a light-hearted stroke:

The seat of the tax-lords [in Kam Tin] was thus securely in British hands, the train-bands [Chinese resistance fighters] vanished as swiftly and mysteriously as they had gathered, and the campaign was over. In order, however, to mark his sense of the ill-faith of the Canton Viceroy, Sir Henry Blake a month later despatched the Hong Kong volunteers to occupy Kowloon City, claiming that a case under the Treaty for the ousting of the Chinese jurisdiction had plainly arisen. Simultaneously, he seized Sham Chun [Shenzhen] across the border as a pledge of future good behaviour. His action in relation to Kowloon City was duly endorsed by the Secretary of State, and an Order-in-Council dated 27 December 1899, formally declared that the further presence of a Chinese official in Kowloon city was found to conflict with military requirements and could not be permitted. As for Sham Chun it was occupied for five months and then, the Customs officials having meantime been removed from the Customs stations, the troops were also withdrawn. Thus with hardly any loss of life—and none of ‘face’—the territory passed into the hands of its strange new lessees.¹⁶¹

Not only that the Chinese had lost none of their ‘face’, they would positively welcome the new rulers, as Henry Blake put it to the Legislative Council on 11 October 1899: “It was assumed that the knowledge of the just treatment of the Chinese inhabitants of Hong Kong and the British Kowloon would induce the population of the leased area to accept the jurisdiction of Great Britain with equanimity if not with pleasure.”¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Sayer, *Discretion*, p.82.

¹⁶¹ Sayer, *Discretion*, p.85.

¹⁶² Endacott, *History*, p.260.

The most important source of the British discourse on the New Territories issue is found in Peter Wesley-Smith's *Unequal Treaty 1898-1997* (1980 edition), on which the Chinese historians have relied heavily. Though not following the traditional colonialist approach, the most important point which Wesley-Smith has emphasized is that the relevant treaty (the Convention of Peking respecting an extension of the Hong Kong territory – June 9, 1898) is still valid, despite its apparent unequal nature.

A careful consideration of Wesley-Smith's position is needed:

One thing seems obvious from the outset, however: the Convention of Peking 1898 was an unequal treaty. It was unequal in the sense that only one party appeared to derive any benefit from it. There was no *quid pro quo* which China received as compensation for her temporary loss of territory. In addition, as will be seen, the contracting parties were not in a position of equal bargaining power when the Convention was drawn up... Treaties which are not concluded on the basis of mutual recognition of the equality and sovereignty of the contracting states, and which do not contain the crucial element of reciprocity where rights are conferred and obligations imposed, have frequently been condemned by both the Nationalist regime and the government of the People's Republic. Such treaties offend against notions of justice and of patriotism. Just as an agreement between individuals is not a true contract if made under duress or without consideration, so, it is said, states should not be bound by treaties founded on inequality.¹⁶³

On the same page, however, Wesley-Smith puts his emphasis squarely: "But classification of a treaty as unequal does not necessarily mean it is invalid. As will be discussed towards the end of this work, international law does not yet clearly recognize even that such a classification has any legal consequences at all."¹⁶⁴ In the concluding part of the book, Wesley-Smith remains firm:

¹⁶³ Wesley-Smith, p.3.

¹⁶⁴ Wesley-Smith, p.3.

There is no doubt that the Convention of Peking 1898 was an unequal treaty and was so considered by People's China: the circumstances in which it was negotiated were inconsistent with the sovereignty and equality of both contracting parties and its burdens and advantages were non-reciprocal. This does not necessarily mean, however, that it was invalid according to modern international law. Although duress has been recognized, both in the 1969 Vienna convention on the law of treaties and by the International Court of Justice, as a factor which might vitiate a treaty, it is a concept which must be very restrictively interpreted, and it is doubtful that the Convention of Peking 1898, which arguably was not brought about by force or even the explicit threat of force, can be considered invalid on this ground.¹⁶⁵

Not only has the treaty's validity been confirmed, Wesley-Smith has argued that the treaty was "not brought about by force or even the explicit threat of force", a position which the Chinese historians would surely dispute.

To the Chinese historians, the People's Republic of China has always taken the view that all the treaties (Convention of Peking 1898 included) whereby the whole of the Hong Kong region had been ceded or leased under coercion are unequal treaties and hence must be considered null and void. Hong Kong is an unalienable part of China and China will not recognize any of the unequal treaties imposed by the imperialists on China. Liu Shuyong quotes directly from Wesley-Smith "[T]he convention of Peking of 1898 [referring to the Convention Respecting the Extension of Hong Kong Territory] is an unequal treaty. It is unequal in the sense that only one party appears to derive any benefit from it. There is no quid pro quo which China receives as compensation for her temporary loss of territory. In addition... the contracting parties were not in a position of equal bargaining power when the convention was drawn up."¹⁶⁶ But Liu does not state Wesley-Smith's affirmation of the unequal treaty, as mentioned above.

Liu Cunkuan also maintains that Britain had used coercive power in forcing China to concede. He considers the British action as "*qiangzu*" [leasing by force]:

¹⁶⁵ Wesley-Smith, pp.184-185.

¹⁶⁶ Liu, *Outline history*, p.65, quoting Wesley-Smith, p.3. The addition in parenthesis is Liu's.

It is our contention that the New Territories had been forcefully leased by Britain. We should not just consider whether Britain had actually used military force or not. Certainly, it is a common practice [for imperialists] to use military aggression to force other states to sign unequal treaties. In addition, by using one's own power to threaten other countries, exploiting other countries' difficulties in order to gain more benefits. And in the process of negotiation, forcing one's will on others, ignoring the agreed terms in order to enlarge its gains: all these should be regarded as coercive behaviours [*qiangzhi*]. All these coercive behaviours had been used by Britain in the 1898 negotiations. Not only that, in the process of leasing the New Territories, Britain had used force, as in the military suppression against New Territories residents' opposition. There were also the illegal occupation of Kowloon City, Shenzhen and Shatoujiao, and the expulsion of Chinese customs.¹⁶⁷

Liu has extensively used the materials from Wesley-Smith in order to advance his own thesis. So it is necessary for us to see what Wesley-Smith has said about the New Territories episode and how Liu (and other Chinese historians) constructs his arguments.

Wesley-Smith begins with a brief description of some of the key personalities involved in the narrative: "The evolution of British policy in regard to the acquisition of the New Territories involved three major parties: the Foreign Office, the Colonial Office, and the government and merchants of Hong Kong. At the head of the Foreign Office during 1898 and before was the Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, a man of 'imperturbability and well-known for inaction' (or, as Sir Richard Burton is allegedly to have said, 'he was, in reality, a very nice old lady')." ¹⁶⁸ The head of the British government is thus described as not very assertive and the Chinese historians do not make too much of a fuss out of it. But still Salisbury's part in "illegally" occupying the Kowloon Walled City is noted. According to Liu: "In April 1899 the British, who had long been scheming for the occupation of Kowloon Walled City and Shenzhen, took the two places when they sent their troops to break down the resistance of the

¹⁶⁷ Liu, *Luncong*, p.121.

¹⁶⁸ Wesley-Smith, p.4.

residents of the 'New Territories' The British had claimed that it seemed that Chinese government soldiers were assisting the resistance fighters because some of them were in army uniform... On May 9, 1889 [sic, should read 1899] Prime Minister Salisbury proposed to Chamberlain that the governor of Hong Kong be instructed 'to take such steps as may be necessary to secure the execution of the Convention and to occupy the City of Kowloon.' On May 14 Chamberlain ordered the occupation of Kowloon City and Shenzhen."¹⁶⁹

It is a different story for Joseph Chamberlain: "The Colonial Office was dominated by Chamberlain's forceful personality. Appointed secretary of state for the colonies in June 1895, he was an ex-Radical businessman from Birmingham who saw imperial and colonial affairs in terms of business principles. 'I regard many of our colonies as being in the condition of undeveloped estates, and estates which never can be developed without imperial assistance.' Known to the public as 'Pushful Joe' the 'Minister for Empire', he became much more interested in Chinese affairs after the Russian occupation of Port Arthur, and he was a convinced advocate of the acquisition of the New Territories."¹⁷⁰ This "Pushful Joe" plays a prominent feature in Liu's narrative: "as early as 3 January 1897, Chamberlain wrote to Salisbury that the Germans 'appear to be really resolved to take some territory in sovereignty. We have no choice but to do the same."¹⁷¹ Like Chamberlain, the foreign secretary, Arthur Balfour also advocated vigorous action. "The most recent full-length study of Balfour sees him as 'consistently practical and occasionally ruthless' when dealing with imperial problems, though he approved of territorial expansion only where clear and precise British interests were served."¹⁷² Liu has noted Balfour's advocacy for vigorous action and reminds us of his nickname "Bloody Balfour."¹⁷³ "Like Chamberlain, Balfour was an extreme colonialist. On the questions of Ireland, South Africa and China, he had advocated strong action. Because of his bloody suppression of the Irish independence movement, he was awarded with the nickname 'Bloody Balfour'."¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁹ Liu, *Outline history*, p.69.

¹⁷⁰ Wesley-Smith, p.5.

¹⁷¹ Liu, *Luncong*, p.89, directly quoting Wesley-Smith, p.25.

¹⁷² Wesley-Smith, pp.4-5.

¹⁷³ Liu, *Luncong*, p.89

¹⁷⁴ Liu Cunkuan, *Zujie Xinjie* [The leasing of the New Territories] (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., 1995), pp.7-8.

For Claude MacDonald, the British minister to Beijing, Wesley-Smith, while noting some of his deficiencies, has this to say: “Han Su-yin refers to him as ‘Gunboat’ MacDonald: a diplomat who was more at home with militaristic methods and policies.”¹⁷⁵ He was involved in the actual negotiations with Li Hongzhang and succeeded in gaining the New Territories lease. In MacDonald’s view, it was easy to get Chinese willingness to grant concessions: “...they [the Chinese] hope by offering a small concession at once to prevent Great Britain from making larger demands of territory which they know that the Central Government would be unable to resist...”¹⁷⁶ “Li c.t. [Grand Secretary Li Hung-chang] thought so too, if the extension required was not of large extent.”¹⁷⁷

The Chinese historians, on their part, are particularly angry with MacDonald because they saw him fooling, rough-handling and humiliating the Chinese representatives. According to Liu Shuyong, in the negotiations (April 1898) with MacDonald, “Li and his colleagues believed that with Kowloon Walled City remaining in the hands of China, it would mean symbolically that the extended portion of land was granted under a lease without China giving up its sovereignty over it.”¹⁷⁸ Hence the ‘face’ of China could be saved to a certain extent. But this did not last for long, as Liu explains, “On June 5 [1898], when Li Hongzhang told the British that no British fortifications would be allowed in the leased territory, MacDonald raged and, pounding the table, told Li that Britain had asked for the extension because French presence in the leased Guangzhouwan was a threat to the security of Hong Kong. He added that if China cancelled that lease, Britain would withdraw its request for the extension immediately. Abashed, Li could do nothing but swallow his pride.”¹⁷⁹ The original Chinese source (based on the recollection of Liang Qichao) actually says that “unable to do anything, Li Hongzhong became speechless and had to withhold his tears.”¹⁸⁰ The aggressiveness of MacDonald is given a great prominence here and Li Hongzhang representing China is described to have suffered

¹⁷⁵ Wesley-Smith, pp.6-7.

¹⁷⁶ Wesley-Smith, p.29.

¹⁷⁷ Wesley-Smith, p.31.

¹⁷⁸ Liu, *Outline history*, p.62. Wesley-Smith is aware of Liu’s argument. He refers to this quotation on page 60 (footnote 35) of his book *Unequal treaty 1898-1997* (1998 edition)

¹⁷⁹ Liu, *Outline history*, p.63.

¹⁸⁰ Qi, p.182.

great humiliation.

There is no similar description in Wesley-Smith's book. But he is aware of the Chinese anger and he puts it in the footnote: "See also MacDonald's outburst on 2 June, as reported from a Chinese source: 'No more talking! Britain asked for the extension because China had leased Guangzhou Bay to France which threatened the safety of Hong Kong. If you could abolish the treaty leasing Guangzhou Bay to France, I would cancel this treaty also' (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Hong Kong in the Nineteenth Century (privately translated), Chapter 4)."¹⁸¹ Wesley-Smith does not comment on this Chinese source, however.

Wesley-Smith has admitted, however, that the Chinese might have been fooled by the British negotiators: "The Tsungli Yamen [China's Foreign Office] was able to insist upon inclusion of the Walled City clause but, although the ministers were determined that the blockade should not be affected by the lease, there is no mention in the convention of customs arrangements. MacDonald had entered into a merely informal understanding with the Yamen that the leased territory would be properly policed and measures taken for the prevention of smuggling... Reliance on a British promise to take action against smuggling, and the failure to include the future of customs houses in the New Territories was a foolish mistake by the Chinese negotiators."¹⁸² With this admission, Liu Cunkuan is able to make the most of this to attack the British: "MacDonald told Li that the British government did not object to China's retention of control over the Kowloon Walled City, 'except so far as may be inconsistent with the military requirements for the defence of Hongkong.' On China's request that Britain would help China's anti-smuggling efforts and the protection of custom duties, the British agreed verbally to it, on condition that it should not be written in the agreement. Li and his officials did not realise that the former was the plot to oust the Chinese officials from the Walled City later. Li was satisfied in easily

¹⁸¹ Wesley-Smith, 1998 revised edition, p.62 (footnote 70). Wesley-Smith does not read Chinese and his information is supplied through a private translation. However, he mistook the book to be written by the "Chinese Academy of Social Sciences", which, to be correct, is edited by Yu Shengwu and Liu Cunkuan, and published by Zhonghua shuju. To be fair, Yu and Liu's book is funded by China's National Social Sciences Research Foundation, as part of the national "key-point" research topic, see Yu and Liu, p.5. Wesley-Smith's translation does not contain page numbers and he quotes only "chapter 4" as reference, which in fact is written by Liu Cunkuan, see Yu and Liu, p.4.

¹⁸² Wesley-Smith, p.38.

believing the empty words of Britain and not fixing them in black and white. He did not realise that the British would eat their words in expelling the Chinese customs stations in the New Territories. Li was just most foolish.”¹⁸³

Liu continues to say that arguments for leasing the New Territories in order to protect the security of Hong Kong was just a pretext in savagely taking away Chinese soil and thus the Convention respecting the extension of Hong Kong territory was just an unequal treaty imposed on China by Britain amidst the waves of imperialism.¹⁸⁴ Overall, the conclusion of Liu is again to be expected: “The Convention was the product of British threats and coercions. From the beginning to the end, the negotiations were based on Britain’s blueprint of aggression. The drafts were all done by the British. The negotiations were unequal. The British did not concede a single inch from their aggressive demands. Even after the Convention was signed, they could still change it at will. In conclusion, the Sino-British ‘Convention respecting an extension of the Hong Kong territory’ had been forced upon China by Britain. It did not include any element of reciprocity. It had infringed upon China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. So the whole agreement should logically be null and void.”¹⁸⁵

Let us now consider the actual implementation of the Convention of Peking in the New Territories and how Stewart Lockhart and Henry Blake had acted accordingly, as seen from both the British and the Chinese angles. According to Wesley-Smith, Stewart Lockhart, as the Special Commissioner for the New Territories, “advocated firmness when dealing with the Chinese, though he was well-liked by the Chinese community. He was undoubtedly a capable administrator.”¹⁸⁶ That might be the case in Hong Kong but when he was surveying the New Territories to gather intelligence and prepare for British administration, he was met with the villagers’ opposition. The description of Wesley-Smith is truthful enough: “The San On [Xin’an] magistrate, though apparently ordered by Peking to let Stewart Lockhart copy his land register, evaded all requests for it and eventually refused point blank. ‘Mr Lockhart’, said a local scribe, ‘then personally called on this contumacious official and after administering to him a severe rating finally procured

¹⁸³ Liu, *Luncong*, p.92.

¹⁸⁴ Liu, *Luncong*, p.95.

¹⁸⁵ Liu, *Luncong*, p.96.

¹⁸⁶ Wesley-Smith, p.8.

the books wanted, which he retained possession of for three days, copying out necessary details.’ Opposition took place at the village of Kam Tin, stronghold of the powerful Tang lineage: one thousand villagers appeared before the commission and shouted abuse. ‘Nothing is said here of the rotten eggs that emphasized these cries.’ It was only by bringing up seventy-five men from HMS Plover with two maxim guns that Stewart Lockhart was able to induce the villagers to open the Kat Hing Wai gates.”¹⁸⁷ Most probably, the local villagers’ reaction to the imminent foreign rule and Stewart Lockhart’s hardline approach were explicable (and excusable perhaps). But Wesley-Smith has no particular mention of the trickeries (in the delimitation of boundaries) which the Chinese historians have accused him of.¹⁸⁸

In describing Stewart Lockhart’s involvement of the New Territories boundary negotiations, Qi Pengfei exposes his trickery, saying that he had first demanded the “whole of the Xin’an county” and the “acquisition of Shenzhen”. It was nothing other than raising the stakes so as to negotiate for a better bargaining position. To Qi, the behaviour had an extortionist element.¹⁸⁹ Liu Shuyong has a more detailed exposition of Lockhart’s misdeeds: he had threatened to discontinue the boundary delimitation talks so as to force his issue and finally he succeeded to obtain a “Memorandum on the Delimitation of the Northern Boundary of the New Territories.” Liu adds that “The memorandum negated the northern boundary of the ‘New Territories’ that was indicated on the map attached to the convention of 1898, and was therefore a product of expansionism. As admitted by Lockhart, the memorandum gave Britain ‘complete control of that river [Shenzhen River] which on the map attached to the Convention is not included within the territory leased to Great Britain.’”¹⁹⁰ Liu Cunkuan explains that Lockhart had succeeded in luring the Chinese side so that the British could control the whole of the Shenzhen River. To Liu, Lockhart’s excessiveness in taking credit for himself had shown clearly that the British could easily tear up agreed treaties and incessantly ravage Chinese territories.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁷ Wesley-Smith, p.46.

¹⁸⁸ For Stewart Lockhart’s involvement in the delimitation talks, see Wesley-Smith, pp.52-55..

¹⁸⁹ Qi, p.189.

¹⁹⁰ Liu, *Outline history*, pp.66-67.

¹⁹¹ Liu, *Luncong*, p.128.

As for Henry Blake, the governor of Hong Kong, Wesley-Smith describes him as “clearly a competent governor and a humane man.”¹⁹² In dealing with the New Territories inhabitants, he was practical enough. Writing in March 1899, he said that: “The inhabitants on the Deep Bay side [western New Territories] do not bear a very good reputation, and it will be necessary to have a fair show of force when hoisting the flag [scheduled on 17 April 1899].” But Wesley-Smith also relates the episode of his evading the Chinese plea for setting up of customs houses in the New Territories.¹⁹³ This is a point the Chinese have been able to use to discredit the British. Yu and Liu have detailed this particular episode: “On 2 April [1899], with Hong Kong governor Blake planning to take over the New Territories and when the people were agitating for resistance, he hastily went to Guangzhou to meet Tan Zhonglin [Viceroy of Liang Guang]. In the meeting, Blake asked the Chinese side to quickly withdraw the customs posts [from the New Territories]. Tan rightfully rejected him by saying that the Convention does not include the withdrawal of customs posts and so they would not be done. Both sides continued to debate on this issue. When Blake was about to leave, he made a promise that he would not raise the issue of withdrawing the customs posts. After he had left he broke his promise again. He telegraphed Bax-Ironside [the British charge d’affaires in Beijing] to appeal to the Zhongli Yamen [for the withdrawal of the New Territories customs]. It was just done without faithfulness and justice.”¹⁹⁴ Again, Wesley-Smith records the Chinese argument in a footnote (number 54) as follows:

Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, *Hong Kong in the Nineteenth Century*, Chapter 4. In addition, the Chinese government and local authorities were angered by the removal of the customs and ‘the deprivation of Chinese right of jurisdiction over Kowloon City’ (though no decision had yet been taken on this matter by the British), and T’an Chung-lin’s attitude ‘helped to make firm the determination of the people of the New Territories to resist Britain’:
ibid.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹² Wesley-Smith, p.8.

¹⁹³ Wesley-Smith, p.59.

¹⁹⁴ Yu and Liu, p.137.

¹⁹⁵ Wesley-Smith, 1998 revised edition, p.92 (footnote 54).

It was with this kind of faithless and unjust aggression that Britain was able to seize control of the New Territories, as concluded by Yu and Liu: “The British forced lease of Kowloon, New Territories¹⁹⁶ is a vivid picture of the jungle’s law—the weak being the prey of the strong. The whole process of the negotiation shows that China was but meat on the chopping block. The beautiful land of China was wilfully invaded and occupied. Britain invaded repeatedly and deliberately, suppressing the righteous resistance of the local people bloodily, but the Qing government could not but swallow the insults and submit to the humiliations. As a result, large pieces of land south of Sham Chun river and north of Boundary Street, Kowloon, together with many islands and waters, were forcibly leased by Britain, and other Chinese rights were also deprived. Britain had realized its third and final step in the occupation of the Hong Kong area.”¹⁹⁷ This same paragraph is used by Wesley-Smith to start off the preface in the revised edition (1998) of his *Unequal Treaty 1898-1997*, showing that the author is well aware of the Chinese discourse.¹⁹⁸ It might be Wesley-Smith’s response to the Chinese historians to have made such extensive use of his 1980 edition.

What about the final occupation ceremony? It is rather strange that the British administrators had to open fire to make way and then to rush everything in a great haste: “On the 16th [April 1899] Blake sent troops to Taipo by the warship *Fame*, which opened fire to cover the landing, and the hills around Taipo were occupied. The General, Gascoigne, and Lockhart arrived, the flag was raised and the proclamation read. The take-over was thus hurriedly effected one day before the date announced.”¹⁹⁹ It was not very ceremonial after all but Sayer does not explain why it had to be like that. Certainly, the Chinese historians would make a point out of it. The occupation of Hong Kong island was done without any legal authorization. The occupation of Kowloon peninsula was associated with a “bizarre” soil transfer ceremony. And now the occupation of the New Territories was like a gang of thieves acting stealthily: “... at a surprise ceremony attended by 400 men of the Hong Kong

¹⁹⁶ Mainland historians often regard the New Territories just as the extension of Kowloon. Sometimes they might even confuse the two locations.

¹⁹⁷ Yu and Liu, p.172. The translation, though not a very smooth one, is from Wesley-Smith, 1998 revised edition, p.vii. Wesley-Smith does not read Chinese and the translation was made through a private arrangement.

¹⁹⁸ Wesley-Smith, 1998 revised edition, p.vii.

¹⁹⁹ Endacott, *History*, p.264.

Regiment that ‘took the local inhabitants unawares, the British flag was hoisted,’ and Lockhart read out an Order in Council dated October 20, 1898 and an order from the Hong Kong governor which declared that beginning 2:50 p.m. on April 16, 1899 the Chinese inhabitants of the ‘New Territories’ were under British administration.”²⁰⁰ The Chinese would like to make a mockery of everything the British had done in all the ceremonies, describing them as no more than a gang of fraudsters, robbers or thieves.

(F) The Problem of Patriotic Resistance

Traditionally, British colonialist historians do not put too much emphasis on the issue of popular resistance in the Hong Kong region. Probably they have tried to play it down so as to show that the people in general were in favour of the British rule, as evidenced by their flocking to Hong Kong. Resistance, if it was reported, was often attributed to “bad elements” or pirates. Any possible connection with patriotism has been dismissed. Cooperation and collaboration of the Chinese (particularly the merchant community) are given more prominence instead. The Mainland Chinese historians, on the other hand, tend to stress the existence of a tradition of anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist patriotic resistance among the local Chinese in Hong Kong. Often, it is argued, the people resisted British rule but they did not succeed in overthrowing colonialism, mostly because of the lack of support from the weak-kneed Qing government.

Certainly, the prototype of all this popular resistance was attributed to the Sanyuanli Incident of May 1841 on the outskirts of Guangzhou. But, to the British historians, it was just a vastly exaggerated incident. Eitel claims (largely confirmed) that only one British soldier was killed and 15 others wounded in the episode and he has put it as such: “This rencontre, between that one company of Madras Native Infantry and a few thousand volunteers near the village of Samyuenli [Sanyuanli], was vastly exaggerated by the Chinese officials and reported to the Emperor in glowing colours as ‘the Battle of Samyuen Village,’ whereupon the Emperor sarcastically remarked that the Canton yokels appeared to have accomplished more

²⁰⁰ Liu, *Outline history*, p.68.

than the whole of the regular armies of China.”²⁰¹

To the Chinese historians, generally, the Incident was an example of glorious anti-British resistance. It is variously reported that the villagers killed and wounded several tens to several hundreds of the British troops and hence had scored a major victory. But sadly these kinds of popular resistance had been restrained and smothered by the Qing government, as Hu Sheng explains: “There were two spontaneous anti-British popular movements in Canton in 1841 [Sanyuanli Incident] and 1842, both of which were suppressed by the Manchu authorities. This showed the marked difference in the attitudes of the Manchu Government and the Chinese people towards foreign aggression. The patriotic struggle of the Chinese people against the foreign capitalist aggressors began the very day the Manchu Government signed the first treaty which sold out China to a foreign power.”²⁰²

With it the myth of Sanyuanli began: if not for the interference of the Qing officials (particularly Yu Boshun), the people should have been able to defeat the British soldiers and so Yu was considered a “traitor” in the eyes of the patriots. It is believed that a similar type of patriotic resistance was present among the local Hong Kong residents in face of the British aggression. Ba Tu has this to say: “The local inhabitants hated the British colonialists, they all wanted to return to the embrace of the mother country. When the British army landed on Hong Kong island, they were resisted by the inhabitants. The islanders cut off the supply of fresh water to the British and it was a way to express their anger against the occupiers. When the British arranged a general meeting of the local inhabitants, none of them attended. The occupying army had done a lot of evils on the island and the inhabitants had been very angry and they looked forward to punishing them.”²⁰³ This report is, however, largely unconfirmed and it is not found in other more orthodox treatments from Mainland Chinese historians.

But the question remains: did the local Chinese in Hong Kong want to leave Chinese rule and live under British rule or did they really care? We might not be able

²⁰¹ Eitel, p.145.

²⁰² Hu Sheng, *Imperialism*, pp.13-14.

²⁰³ Ba Tu, *Biele, gangdu* [Goodbye, governors] (Beijing: Xinhua chubanshe, 1996), pp.12-13.

to answer these questions. But according to Liu and Liu, right from the time of the British seizure of Hong Kong, the patriotic Chinese masses and officials had strongly demanded the recovery of Hong Kong.²⁰⁴ They had never wanted to let go of Hong Kong. It was said that “both the gentry and the commoners in Hong Kong refused to submit to the foreign rule and lodged a joint petition with the office of the provincial governor.”²⁰⁵ That might be true but it could not affect any changes. And even though, in August 1841, Emperor Daoguang had urged the Guangdong commanders to take back Hong Kong when the British troops had moved north to engage in other battles and their defences were rather weak, we are told that Guangdong was still reluctant to fight. Similar decrees for action were ignored. In the end the Qing government had not only failed to recover Hong Kong island, it had signed the Treaty of Nanjing to give it away to Britain. Mao Haijian has been even more critical. He finds out that first of all, the Sanyuanli Incident was a local struggle for protecting one’s homeland (*baojia*) and not a patriotic (*waiguo*) war.²⁰⁶ And more importantly, in the Opium War and other subsequent wars, the majority of the people in China (and by implication the residents in Hong Kong) were basically standing aloof from them.²⁰⁷

If this is really the case, the general populace in Hong Kong did not care too much who actually ruled the place, as long as they were able to make a living out of it. It was particularly so for the Hakka (Kejia) and Tanka (Dengjia) boat people in the Hong Kong waters. These people were often depicted as “traitors” (*hanjian*) in Chinese history. One such example involves a Hakka called Lu Aking [Lao Ajing] and his “traitorous” behaviour is recorded as follows: “[Lu Aking] was originally a Hong Kong boatman, by nature cruel and devious, unscrupulous and unprincipled. He worked as a comprador for the British Navy, an honest running dog of foreigners. In front of villagers and local inhabitants, he was a local rascal, oppressing the locality. During the Opium War, when Lin Zexu led the locals to cut the supply line of the British Navy, Lu Aking, a traitor, collaborated with the pirates, provisioned the British Navy with stolen goods... He should have been severely punished. But the corrupt Qing government, in fear of the British aggressors, did not dare to catch the

²⁰⁴ In Liu, *Luncong*, p.179.

²⁰⁵ Liu, *Outline history*, p.169.

²⁰⁶ Mao, p.311.

²⁰⁷ Mao, p.313.

pirates in Hong Kong waters. Instead, they tried to buy up Lu Aking by offering him an official title, giving him the official title of the sixth degree.”²⁰⁸

On the British side, they are more sympathetic to these “*hanjian*” because ultimately these people had helped in various ways the British cause. “It [the term ‘*hanjian*’] was applied, long before the [Opium] War, to Chinese who entered the service of foreigners, learnt foreign languages, corresponded with foreigners or made friends with them in any way. There were, of course, licensed compradors and interpreters who theoretically were not *Han-chien* [*hanjian*]; but they were under constant suspicion, as were also the licensed guild-merchants, through whom the foreigners conducted their trade. After the war started, whole new classes of *Han-chien* arose: those who obtained maps and sea-charts for the enemy, who passed on political and military information to them, acted as pilots, worked as craftsmen on board foreign warships and so on. Later the expression became a term of abuse for anyone who favoured appeasement rather than war to the death, it often being assumed that, if he did so, it must be because he was in the foreigners’ pay.”²⁰⁹ For a more impartial assessment of these people, we need to see how the Hong Kong historians have treated them in academic research findings.²¹⁰

If Hong Kong was largely calm during the First Opium War, real disturbance and resistance did occur during the Second Opium War. After the British attacked China, it produced a natural response of resistance from the Chinese side. Hong Kong was also affected, causing a general sense of insecurity there. As Eitel has admitted:

Now it was Yeh’s [Ye Mingchen, governor-general of Liang Guang] turn to commence hostilities in his own way. He had previously (October 28, 1856) put a price of \$30 on English heads. He now raised the reward to taels 100 per head, called upon the Chinese population of Hongkong to leave the Colony immediately, and placarded the streets of Hongkong and Canton with appeals to the people to avenge his wrongs by any means whatever. In response to this

²⁰⁸ Liu Xiaojing and Liu Xiaodian, *Xianggang yeshi* [An unofficial history of Hong Kong] (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 1997), pp.32-33.

²⁰⁹ Waley, p.222.

²¹⁰ See Carl T. Smith, *A sense of history: studies in the social and urban history of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Educational Publishing Co., 1995), pp.38-63.

appeal, which had at first no effect in Hong Kong, the Canton mob set fire to the European factories at Canton (December 14, 1856) and later on (January, 1857) to the British docks and stores at Whampoa... In Hongkong, where Taiping rebels and professional pirates and brigands had been making common cause under the aegis of the local Triad societies, the European community was, ever since the Arrow incident, pervaded by a growing sense of insecurity.²¹¹

Ye Mingchen had in fact asked the people in Hong Kong to do whatever they could to disrupt the British colonial rule there. It had resulted in various forms of piracy and arson and calls for exodus from Hong Kong. “Meanwhile viceroy Yeh continued his irregular warfare. The S.S. Queen suffered (February 23, 1857) the same fate as the Thistle and her captain and European crew were assassinated. Incendiarism flourished in a petty way in Hongkong, and Duddell’s bakery, inaccessible to poisoners, was fired (February 28, 1857). Mandarin proclamations once more (March, 1857) peremptorily ordered all Chinese to leave Hongkong on pain of expatriation, but as yet with little result. A last conspiracy was discovered (April 15, 1857) to have been organized in Canton to make war in Hongkong against British lives and property.”²¹² Eitel condemns these acts as barbaric: “The barbarous mode of warfare against the Colony was steadily continued by the Mandarins of the neighbouring districts who, in spite of the occupation of Canton by the Allies and even after the conclusion of the Tientsin Treaty, continued to worry Chinese residents of Hongkong into hostile attitude against Europeans.”²¹³ Eitel has, however, ignored the fact that the British had committed similar, if more invidious, crimes in their attacks on China, and this is fortunately salvaged by Sayer’s reminder: “The attempt [of bread poisoning], however, drew protests from the representatives of other foreign nations who pointed out that, as their nationals were also bread-eaters, unfortunate mistakes might result from this method of warfare. To which Yeh [Ye Mingchen] replied blandly regretting that his writ did not run in Hong Kong and hinting that if it was a question of barbarity there really was not much to choose between inserting arsenic pills into the loaves in Hong Kong and lobbing explosive shells into the

²¹¹ Eitel, p.309.

²¹² Eitel, p.315.

²¹³ Eitel, p.319.

populous streets of Canton.” Ye’s comment seemed to be fair enough.

The case referred to was of course the bread-poisoning incident of January 1857. Some 400 Europeans who consumed the poisoned bread from E-sing Bakery became affected. Luckily, none of them died because the arsenic had been overdosed causing the consumers to vomit as soon as they ate the bread. The baker Cheong Ah-lum [Zhang Alin] was arrested but acquitted, as the jury could not find enough incriminating evidence against him (and his accomplices). It is important to see how the British historians describe the episode. According to Eitel:

The local papers seriously urged the Governor ‘to have the whole of the poisoning crew of E-sing’s bakery strung [sic] up in front of the shop where the scheme was concocted.’ Justices of the Peace, shrinking from the application of lynch law, entreated the Governor to proclaim forthwith martial law and to deport every Chinaman whose loyalty could not be vouched for. Though every member of his family suffered from the poison, Sir John [Bowring] remained calm and rejected all suggestions of hasty measures. But to the eyes of the terror-stricken community his firmness bore at the time the aspect of callous indifference. When, by the end of the month, the excitement had somewhat abated, the European residents still complained that nothing was done by the Governor to assure public confidence against the recurrence of a similar or worse catastrophe, and that the deportation (to Hainan) of 123 prisoners, released owing to the overcrowded state of the gaol, increased the general feeling of insecurity.²¹⁴

According to Eitel, “[t]he result of the criminal prosecution instituted against Ah-lum and his workmen was equally unsatisfactory to the public mind. There was no evidence incriminating the persons arrested, and Ah-lum, who was defended by the Acting Colonial Secretary (Dr. W.T. Bridge), was acquitted by the verdict of an impartial jury... He may have been innocent of any direct complicity, but the community, which unanimously attributed the crime to the instigations of Cantonese Mandarins, would not believe otherwise but that Ah-lum had, in some measure,

²¹⁴ Eitel, p.312.

connived at the diabolical attempt to poison the whole of the foreign residents of Hongkong.”²¹⁵ Several things can be read from Eitel’s descriptions. The insecurity in society (among the Europeans particularly) was real enough. The case’s close connection with the Guangdong authorities was widely perceived and it had to be carefully handled. The firmness and humaneness of Governor Bowring and the impartiality of the British justice system were emphasized, showing to the Chinese and the rest the world that the British colonial rule was superior.

Whether the trial and the verdict were of a political nature is anybody’s guess, however. My guess that they were political may well be attested by what Norton-Kyshe has told us: “One notable fact to be recorded to the honour of the British name, in connexion with this case is that the prisoners were not only tried at the place where their crime was committed, but tried by a judge who had himself suffered from that crime, assisted by a jury all equally victims of the atrocious attempt, and they were further prosecuted by an Attorney-General and defended by lawyers also sufferers from their crime.”²¹⁶ Certainly, it is the conclusion of Norton-Kyshe that the justice of the British legal system must prevail rather than to hang the wrong men. But he adds in 1858, one year after the incident, Hong Kong remained unstable: “The inhabitants of the Colony were now thrown into a fervent state of anxiety, owing to the condition of affairs prevalent consequent upon our relations with China. No work of any kind could be got done – tailors, shoemakers, carpenters, and artisans of every kind had departed from Hong Kong, and it was calculated that no less than twenty thousand persons had taken their departure from the island. Food was, moreover, at almost famine prices, and an entire stoppage was threatened of the usual supplies of provisions for the markets.”²¹⁷ It might well be surmised that if Cheong Alum’s case were not skilfully handled the consequences could be disastrous. This kind of mass exodus is reminiscent of the more serious ones in the 1920s.

The Chinese descriptions of the popular resistance during the Second Opium War are certainly different. First they accuse the British of deliberately blackening the resistant fighters in Kowloon as “lawless” characters, so that the British could use the

²¹⁵ Eitel, pp.312-313.

²¹⁶ Norton-Kyshe, v.1, p.418.

²¹⁷ Norton-Kyshe, v.1, p.486.

need to control “lawlessness” as the pretext to annex Kowloon. The “lawless” ones were in fact the British troops ravaging the peninsula.²¹⁸ According to Yu and Liu, the British aggression during the war provoked the angry resistance of the soldiers and people of Guangdong. Hong Kong and nearby regions were mobilized and they targeted the rearguard of the British forces, i.e. the Hong Kong island. On 19 December 1856 the gentry of Xin’an County met and resolved to stop supplying food to Hong Kong. They appealed to the Hong Kong merchants to return home within one month. Some 2000 militia were recruited and despatched to Kowloon to conduct their anti-British resistance.²¹⁹ In order to suppress the Chinese anti-British struggle, Hong Kong governor Bowring had to proclaim the Peace Preservation Act (6 Jan 1857) and issued night passes. A night curfew between 8pm till next dawn was imposed with heavy punishment on Chinese offenders.²²⁰ Some anti-British triad members associated with the Tiandihui and Taiping were also arrested.²²¹ The situation was one of general insecurity for the British government. With regard to the bread poisoning case, Yu and Liu (quoting Frederich Engels) says it was not a kind of fearful barbaric act but we should rather admit that the Chinese were fighting to protect their society and land, a people’s war to safeguard the Chinese nation.²²² Kowloon City was the bridge-head of the anti-British struggle and so the British were most hateful of it. On 21 April 1857 some 200 British troops attacked Kowloon City and took the Chinese commander (Zhang Yutang) to Hong Kong for interrogation, demanding that he deliver up the anti-British patriots.²²³

When Guangzhou fell to the British invaders in December 1857 the Cantonese resolved to carry on with the resistance by applying sanctions against the British Hong Kong authorities. They also asked the Hong Kong Chinese to return home. As a result, some 20,000 Chinese (out of 80,000 on the Hong Kong island) returned to the Mainland. This policy of blockading Hong Kong was very effective, causing food shortages and rising commodity prices. Food supplies were in danger of a complete cut-off.²²⁴ Overall, during the Second Opium War, the Hong Kong Chinese residents

²¹⁸ Liu, *Outline history*, p.47.

²¹⁹ Yu and Liu, p.71.

²²⁰ Yu and Liu, p.71.

²²¹ Yu and Liu, p.72.

²²² Yu and Liu, pp.73-74.

²²³ Yu and Liu, pp.74-75.

²²⁴ Yu and Liu, p.75.

and the “patriotic compatriots” in the nearby regions were united in resisting the British, showing the unbending spirit of resistance of the Chinese race.²²⁵ To Sayer, however, this patriotic unity was in fact rather fragile, “Early the following year [1857] the Commissioner [Ye Mingchen] hit back. A blockade was imposed upon Hong Kong in the hopes of starving the English out. But while the Heung Shan district obediently refused supplies Tung Kwun and San On promptly rushed in to capture the market.”²²⁶

The evaluation of the Cheong Alum case is also rather different. According to Liu and Liu, the bread poisoning incident was a release of anti-British sentiment. Well before the incident, there were placards posted in Hong Kong to warn the Chinese provisioners not to supply food to the British. Many had complied, all except Cheong Alum. He did not heed the warnings but continued to do big business with the British. So Cheong’s shop in Guangzhou was burnt down. But he remained stubborn and continued to serve the British. On 15 January 1857 the bread poisoning incident occurred and the bakery workers were prosecuted. Cheong appealed on their behalf, claiming that he himself had been persecuted by Chinese authorities.²²⁷ The verdict of Liu and Liu is perhaps a bit strange. They argue that for the British, considering that the war was still raging, the sentencing of the pro-British Hong Kong citizens (of course this would include Cheong Alum) would be harmful to British rule. So the accused were all acquitted. To ameliorate the British, Cheong was expelled from Hong Kong.²²⁸ Balancing the British and the Chinese accounts, it is still unclear as to whether Cheong was pro-British or anti-British and hence his case remains unsolved.

In 1884 another anti-foreign incident occurred in Hong Kong and this time the focus was on resistance against the French during the Sino-French War of 1884. In the British discourse, none of this was related to the patriotism of the Chinese workers involved. Sayer did not even mention the disturbances associated with it. Norton-Kyshe, however, considers it important enough to warrant the passing of the Peace Preservation Ordinance to control the situation: “An important measure, which was passed on the 9th October, 1884, was the Peace Preservation Ordinance, but to

²²⁵ Yu and Liu, p.76.

²²⁶ Sayer, *Discretion*, p.179.

²²⁷ Liu and Liu, pp.175-176.

²²⁸ Liu and Liu, p.176.

remain in effect only until the 1st April, 1885. The enactment of this Ordinance was rendered necessary by the occurrence of a serious riot amongst a certain section of the Chinese population. In the first place the cargo-boat coolies struck work in consequence of some of them having been fined for refusing to accept employment from a French store-keeper to carry stores to a French ship. It may be remembered that hostilities were then prevalent between France and China. Threats were said to have been held out by the Canton authorities that persons working for Frenchmen would be punished through their relatives on the mainland.”²²⁹

Norton-Kyshe has tried to play down the anti-foreign nature of the incident, but he has to admit that military action was needed to quell the disturbance:

This attempt at dictation [i.e. the strike] was stoutly resisted, and from the collision thus brought about a serious riot resulted on the morning of the 3rd October, to suppress which it was necessary to call upon the military to make a display of force in the district where the disturbance was in progress. Some foreigners who were passing in chairs or jinrickshas at the time of the outbreak came in for rough usage, but that the riot was not anti-foreign in its inception was shown by the fact that no attempt was made by the rioters to attack foreign houses or property, the disturbance being confined to one portion of the Chinese quarter only. From the reports of the time, however, the affair was sufficiently alarming; stones were freely pelted at the Police and it was not without difficulty that order was restored. It was deemed prudent to keep the troops under arms for several days, and to maintain a strong guard at the Tung Wah Hospital ready for action at any moment.²³⁰

The most interesting thing was the stationing of troops at the Tung Wah Hospital, which Norton-Kyshe does not explain. The Tung Wah Hospital was organised by the wealthy Chinese merchants in Hong Kong and the Hospital Board was widely regarded as the legitimate representative of local Chinese interests. How and why did the Tung Wah men get involved? What part did they play in the strike and the subsequent ending of it? Were they, as respectable men of standing in colonial

²²⁹ Norton-Kyshe, v.2, p.376.

²³⁰ Norton-Kyshe, v.2, p.377.

Hong Kong, threatening the authority of the Hong Kong government? Would an anti-French strike become an anti-British and anti-government movement? Not even Endacott could provide answers to these questions. He only adds that during the War, while “Chinese opinion in Canton and Hong Kong was inflamed against the French”, the government tried to adopt a policy of strict neutrality.²³¹ Endacott has, however, indicated the political nature of the incident: “Marsh [the acting governor], to avoid disturbances in the colony, proceeded against the editors of four Chinese newspapers who had published the edicts of the Canton Viceroy urging all Cantonese to attack French ships and men; but the prosecutions failed and the charges were dropped.”²³² The striking workers were fined accordingly but Endacott tells us that their fines could be remitted because of the special (political) circumstances: “The cargo boatmen had been fined under an ordinance of 1858, which dealt with minimum charges, and the Secretary of State ordered these fines to be remitted on the ground that it was an abuse of the ordinance to apply it in those circumstances. By 14 October 1884, Marsh was able to report that all was normal...”²³³ Endacott does not explain why the British Secretary of State had to get involved, disputing the correctness in the application of the law. Was normality brought about other than as a result of government actions? We need to consult Elizabeth Sinn, a Hong Kong historian, to answer all these questions.²³⁴ Her arguments will be elaborated in the next chapter.

Curiously, few official Hong Kong history books by the major Mainland Chinese historians have not dealt with the 1884 anti-French strike and riot in Hong Kong. A good summary of the event, however, is provided in *Xianggang xiaobaike*, a small dictionary on Hong Kong:

In 1884, France had instigated the Sino-French War in Vietnam. The French warships disrupted Taiwan, Fujian and the Chaozhou-Shantou region, and this provoked anti-French feelings among the Hong Kong Chinese. In September, Hong Kong’s dock-workers, boatmen and coolies refused to work on the French ships. The French merchants applied to prosecute them in the Hong

²³¹ Endacott, *History*, p.208.

²³² Endacott, *History*, p.208.

²³³ Endacott, *History*, pp.208-209.

²³⁴ Elizabeth Sinn, *Power and charity: the early history of the Tung Wah Hospital, Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp.133-137.

Kong Courts. 14 workers were fined by the court, provoking further anger among the Chinese. In October the workers staged a strike. The Hong Kong government mobilized the troops and police to suppress the workers' strike, killing one man and arresting some forty-odd workers. The dock-workers of the Eastern District and the coolies of Kowloon immediately launched their protest against the government. Other members in the community rose to support them. This paralysed Hong Kong and the strike lasted for more than two months. In the end, the British Hong Kong authorities were forced to release the arrested workers, compensate the families of the victims and indicate that they would not interfere with the Chinese workers' anti-French activities. This strike revealed the immense power and patriotism of the Hong Kong workers.²³⁵

Despite its brevity, this entry remains faithful to the main line of Mainland Chinese historiography. It was also reported that this anti-French struggle was “the most serious revolt in the history of Hong Kong.”²³⁶

Finally, let us consider the Chinese resistance of 1899 in the New Territories. It was in fact the most serious resistance in 19th century Hong Kong because it actually involved an armed uprising against British colonial rule in Hong Kong and as such, it has been most thoroughly documented. Apart from Sayer's rather dismissive account of the resistance (saying that it was easily crushed with hardly any loss of life and face to the Chinese side)²³⁷, the other British historians have taken the matter very seriously. In explaining the causes and nature of the resistance, they tend to regard the element of Chinese patriotism as not that important. Rather the fear of British interference in the residents' life and a possible usurpation of their land were the more significant factors. To the Chinese historians, the resistance fighters were followers of a noble patriotic tradition. They would fight to the death rather than easily accept foreign rule, and they lost simply because of poor weaponry and organisation.

²³⁵ Ye Shiheng and others (eds.) *Xianggang xiaobaike* [A small encyclopaedia of Hong Kong] (Fuzhou: Haixia wenyi chubanshe, 1997), pp.26-27. See also Jin Yingxi (ed.), *Xianggang Shihua* [Hong Kong history] (Xiaoguan: Guangdong Renmin Chubanshe, 1988), pp.143-146.

²³⁶ Jin Yingxi, p.146.

²³⁷ Sayer, *Discretion*, pp.83-85.

According to Endacott, as soon as the delimitation of the northern boundary was settled (14 March 1899) the British began to proceed with the occupation. “Unfortunately opposition grew in the leased area. On 1 April 1899 Blake reported that British [New Territories inspection] parties were threatened with death and that placards had appeared calling on the people to arm against the British.”²³⁸ Blake actually went to Guangzhou to try and negotiate for a smooth occupation but it seemed nothing really positive was reached.

The trouble had occurred when May, Captain Superintendent of Police, had begun erecting a temporary police station at Taipo. This affected *fung shui* or Chinese prejudices regarding building sites in the place, and the workmen were stopped. May insisted on the work proceeding as a matter of principle, and then agreed to move to another site; but here work was again impeded. May returned to the island, leaving a small armed guard of two Indian and two Chinese police to guard the matsheds. The Governor decided that armed parties should not be kept in the new territory, and when May was sent with an escort of five Chinese soldiers and some unarmed police to withdraw them, he was fired on. He sent a message to say that he would hold the matsheds until dawn. Blake sent two hundred men to protect him, but on arrival they found that May and his men had retreated over the hills. May found that villagers were being mobilized.²³⁹

Originally, Blake considered the attack on the matsheds (on 3 and 4 April) to be an isolated instance of hostility which would disappear soon, but he was wrong.²⁴⁰ The British declared their intention to hoist the flag at Taipo on 17 April but instead, hurriedly completed the ceremony one day earlier, protected by gunfire from the local population who might like to interfere. So real gunshots were heard in this early skirmish.

But more and serious fighting occurred later, ending with a decisive British victory at the end of April, as outlined by Endacott: “Having assumed control of the

²³⁸ Endacott, *History*, p.263.

²³⁹ Endacott, *History*, pp.263-264.

²⁴⁰ Wesley-Smith, p.61.

leased area, Blake ordered the withdrawal of all Chinese troops, including those of the Kowloon City Garrison, and British troops were ordered to advance to secure the occupation of the whole territory. During the next three days there was desultory fighting as the troops moved to the west. A body of 2,600 men was driven from Kam Tin and six guns were captured at Uen Long. Villages began to surrender, and on 26 April Blake was able to report that all resistance was at an end.”²⁴¹ Even though Endacott tries to play down the magnitude of the resistance by giving only a broad brush stroke of the so-called “desultory fighting”, the fact that some 2,600 men were involved in resisting British rule must not be slighted.

Indeed, Wesley-Smith gives a more detailed description of this Battle of Tai Po:

The sight of the union jack at Tai Po and the presence of a few British troops were no deterrent to the rebels, and it required more emphatic measures to dissuade them from further resistance. A party of ‘sportsmen’ from Hong Kong had been fired on at Deep Bay, and on the evening of 16 April the Volunteers were called out to protect Yau Ma Tei and Kowloon against an expected attack from Castle Peak. The next day several thousand Chinese armed with heavy weapons bombarded the camp at Tai Po, and only a direct assault repelled them. They took up strong positions on hills overlooking the Lam Tsuen valley but were again repulsed, this time retreating to and regrouping at Sheung Tsuen. Their next attack, at a point two miles from Kam Tin, was their last: a resounding British victory convinced the villagers and agitators who had advocated rebellion that further fighting was useless. The British forces were too powerful, too well organized, and too determined. The rebels had suffered heavy casualties.²⁴²

In the 1998 edition, Wesley-Smith adds the picture painted by the Mainland historians: “The latter-day judgement of the New China News Agency was, nevertheless, that ‘Though their four-day-long armed struggle ended in defeat, these noble-minded heroes wrote with their blood and lives a glorious page in Hong Kong’s

²⁴¹ Endacott, *History*, p.265.

²⁴² Wesley-Smith, p.63.

history of resistance to foreign aggression’.”²⁴³ Wesley-Smith has certainly revised his book with the Mainland Chinese historians in mind.²⁴⁴

In explaining the cause of the resistance, Endacott puts it as follows: “Chinese opposition was due partly to official opposition from the Viceroy [of Liang Guang], who objected to the handing over before full agreement on the collection of the customs duties had been reached... Major Fung, the Chinese military commander, also later admitted that he had been told by the Viceroy not to interfere with the people’s plans [of resistance].”²⁴⁵ So Chinese official involvement was blamed. Wesley-Smith adds that “preparations for resistance had been common talk amongst the local Chinese for weeks past, and the Chinese authorities were accused of ‘proceeding with their old, time-honoured tactics’ and ‘secretly inciting the natives to resist the foreigners’.”²⁴⁶ In the 1998 edition and quoting a Chinese source, Wesley-Smith reminds us of a general and perhaps rather natural anti-foreign feeling among the local inhabitants: “A Chinese source states that the people of the New Territories were ‘indignant at the news that the land was leased to Britain and would not like to be under British control’.”²⁴⁷

The theory that the resistance movement was instigated by Chinese officials is, however, disputed by Wesley-Smith. He argues that the British government certainly wanted to implicate the Chinese officials: “In particular, the British had a vested interest in claiming that the April disturbances were tacitly supported, if not partly organized, by the viceroy of Canton in a last-ditch attempt to save the customs houses. Chamberlain was very anxious to prove complicity to assist him in seeking the immediate evacuation of customs houses and the Walled City, and Blake attempted to provide the evidence.”²⁴⁸ So the hidden agenda was to find an excuse to refuse the customs posts so as to end the so-called “blockade of Hong Kong” and to drive away the Chinese garrison in the Kowloon Walled City, both of these were successful

²⁴³ Wesley-Smith, 1998 revised edition, p.83, quoting Guo Chaoren et al. (eds.) *Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Xinhua News Agency, 1997), p.36.

²⁴⁴ Wesley-Smith’s book was widely but selectively quoted by Mainland Chinese historians. Probably he was annoyed by their deliberate misreading of his interpretations.

²⁴⁵ Endacott, *History*, p.264.

²⁴⁶ Wesley-Smith, p.57.

²⁴⁷ Wesley-Smith, 1998 revised edition, p.77, quoting Yu and Liu, pp.146-147.

²⁴⁸ Wesley-Smith, p.82.

subsequently. But, according to Wesley-Smith, the fact remains that “[t]he *t’uan-lien* [local militia] were not totally ignorant of military strategy, and, despite ‘sanction’ by the authorities, could nevertheless act quite independently, without official control or knowledge... [And] strong lineages [were] powerful enough to ignore the provincial representatives of a weak and declining central authority. Viceroy T’an [Tan Chonglin] is more likely to have been incapable of controlling than secretly conniving in the resistance movement. This conclusion is in line with the Foreign Office view...that T’an had neither instigated the disturbances nor been privy to them.”²⁴⁹

Endacott continues to say that “the opposition appeared to be fairly spontaneous, though the Taipo elders, in appealing for clemency on 15 April, after burning the matsheds, admitted they had been led astray by designing people.”²⁵⁰ It is regrettable that Endacott has not provided sufficient explanation of who those designing people were. If there were instigators, the resistance should not be considered spontaneous. Endacott further adds the complication of land jobbers as a possible cause in the resistance, saying that “[a] land syndicate of Chinese, among whom it was suspected Ho Kai [a prominent Chinese] was one, had bought land at a fraction of its value by spreading the rumour that the British would seize all land.”²⁵¹ This might well be true, but it is also a bit simplistic.

According to Wesley-Smith, there were certainly syndicates of land jobbers spreading the rumour that when the British came the land would be expropriated, forcing the villagers to sell the land at a cheaper price. It might well be that “[t]he economic dominance of rural gentry was confronted by an urban Hong Kong merchant class with comparatively vast wealth; the new money not only disrupted the traditional New Territories economy generally, but through the land speculators they specifically jeopardized lineage control of land.”²⁵² But Wesley-Smith reminds us: “It was not merely the tactics of the jobbers, but the genuine threat they represented to rural power relations which most alarmed New Territories elite groups. Yet this may

²⁴⁹ Wesley-Smith, p.83.

²⁵⁰ Endacott, *History*, p.265.

²⁵¹ Endacott, *History*, p.265.

²⁵² Wesley-Smith, 1998 revised edition, p.114.

not entirely account for the hostility of San On peasants to British government, and further reasons for the resistance movement may be sought.”²⁵³

The third factor, in Wesley-Smith’s understanding, was the interaction of lineage control and peasant fears of change. “It has been shown that the Tangs [the strongest clan] played a leading part in the initial organization of the resistance movement and coerced smaller villages into compliance with their plans; the Tangs’ also had most to lose by the British take-over, for they possessed ‘taxlord’ rights which might not be—and in the event were not—recognized under the new administration.”²⁵⁴ In this general atmosphere of fear resulting from the British take-over, the peasants would be agitated. “Peasant fears of more taxes and fines, of interference with traditional ways of livelihood and with *fung shui*, and, most of all, of the dreadful activities of the Sanitary Board overwhelmed the populace, contributing to inter-lineage co-operation and the relatively efficient and rapid organization of the *t’uan-lien*.”²⁵⁵

In any case, Wesley-Smith is firm in denying the validity of the patriotic theory: “Patriotic defence of the motherland against foreign aggression—the New China News Agency line—seems equally implausible.”²⁵⁶ It is exactly on this point that the Chinese historians would insist that: “The Chinese inhabitants who had lived and worked for generations in the ‘New Territories’ were indignant and refused to accept British control when they learned that the leased land would come under British jurisdiction. Led by patriotic members of the local gentry, they organized a campaign to resist the armed takeover by the British...[T]he Chinese inhabitants, determined to preserve national dignity, were not to be cowed by any display of force.”²⁵⁷

In describing the resistance movement, the Chinese historians tend to focus, wherever possible, on the ingenuity and bravery of the local fighters, as these comments relating to the 15 April skirmish show: “The resistance fighters, several thousand strong ...[were] taking advantage of elevated positions on the mountain sides where they were ‘entrenched to keep off British soldiers’ and pin down the

²⁵³ Wesley-Smith, 1998 revised edition, p.114.

²⁵⁴ Wesley-Smith, 1998 revised edition, p.115.

²⁵⁵ Wesley-Smith, 1998 revised edition, p.116.

²⁵⁶ Wesley-Smith, 1998 revised edition, p.112.

²⁵⁷ Liu, *Outline history*, p.67.

British in a ring of concentrated fire from their rifles and light weapons.”²⁵⁸ The “resistance fighters” were also persistent in working against the British, even after the British had proclaimed control over the New Territories on 16 April: “On the afternoon of April 17 the patriots bombarded the British army barracks at Tai Po with heavy guns and ambushed British soldiers in Lam Tsuen Valley. On the afternoon of the next day they descended on the British troops near Sheun [sic] Tsuen.”²⁵⁹ According to Liu, they failed not because of their lack of patriotism: “But the patriots, ill-equipped and inexperienced in combat, were not able to hold out to win the final victory. When they were dispersed the British soldiers blew up the walls of Kat Hing Wai and Tai Hong Wai villages at Kam Tin. They took away the gate of Kat Hing Wai and shipped it back to England as a war trophy.”²⁶⁰ Failure aside, the moral was clear: “The struggle waged by the inhabitants of the ‘New Territories’ was a milestone in the history of Hong Kong. The ennobling patriotism and fearlessness they displayed against heavy odds was so impressive that even Lockhart had to admit that... if their weapons had been of a modern type, [they] would have given our troops a warmer time of it. Even as it was they showed great courage by the manner in which they fired their primitive weapons.”²⁶¹ Such an explanation may well be a face-saving rationalization.

There is a rather intriguing explanation of the resistance movement recorded by Qi Pengfei. In 1925 with the return of the Kam Tin Gates from Britain, a plaque, describing the incident of 1899, was erected. The inscription says that “the resistance started because the British leasing of the New Territories was not officially declared and broadcast. So when the British army came, many foolish villagers were tricked and instigated to resist. The people of our [Kat Hing Wai] walled village, fearful of being disturbed, tried to avoid the encounter by closing the gates. The British army, fearing that there were bad elements hiding within, broke the gates by force. When they came inside the village and found that all were good men and women, they did nothing spiteful to us. They just took the gates away.”²⁶² According to Qi, the wording in the inscription was deliberately unclear about the resistance of the people

²⁵⁸ Liu, *Outline history*, p.68.

²⁵⁹ Liu, *Outline history*, p.68.

²⁶⁰ Liu, *Outline history*, p.68.

²⁶¹ Liu, *Outline history*, pp.68-69.

²⁶² Qi, p.202.

in the New Territories against foreign invaders. It blamed the Qing government's inability to "officially broadcast the policy" and that "people had been tricked and instigated to resist." It is certainly curious that the British army still took away the Kam Tin gates when no bad elements were found. "Surely, any concerned reader can read the message behind and it is impossible to brush away this historical verdict."²⁶³ Perhaps it is really not easy to decipher this cryptic inscription.

²⁶³ Qi, p.203.

Chapter Nine – The Writing of Hong Kong History: The Perspective From Hong Kong

It is not easy to give a water-tight definition of “real” Hong Kong historians. In the first place, and because of the international character of the city of Hong Kong, these historians do not speak with only one voice. They are bound to have their own distinct voices and judgements on all the important issues surrounding the history of Hong Kong, because they may have quite different backgrounds. With their vigorous methodological training, it is natural for them to debate and dispute among themselves. It is more important to have the products of their academic research put to the scrutiny of an international and academic audience, to see if their arguments and conclusions can stand up or not. Therefore, I do not intend to generalize and put them into rigid compartments.¹ Rather, as far as possible, I will point out their overall attributes and some of their limitations. Ultimately, I believe that they can be grouped as historians of the Hong Kong School (a term used by Christopher Munn²), defined particularly by their critiques on British colonialist and Chinese patriotic historiographies.

Following is a rough profile of these Hong Kong historians and those other professionals working on Hong Kong historical issues.³ They are mostly locally born

¹ It is a dangerous mine-field to attempt to give a rigid definition of the term “local Hong Kong historians.” Criteria relating to residence, birthplace, ethnicity, receiving education or doing research in Hong Kong are all open to question. For example, the international character of Hong Kong and academic studies in general will negate the importance of residence and birthplace. Hong Kong historians cannot simply be based in Hong Kong to qualify for the name “Hong Kong historian.” A Hong Kong historian being an ethnic Chinese is an advantage only if he or she is able to use the Chinese language sources. Many non-ethnic Chinese historians can acquire this linguistic skill as well. The key thing is whether the historians themselves really speak for Hong Kong people or not. See also pp.175-186 in this thesis for additional comments.

² Christopher Charles Munn, *Anglo-China: Chinese people and British rule in Hong Kong, 1841-1880* [hereafter as *Anglo-China*] (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2001), p.8. See also the same author’s PhD. Thesis *Anglo-China: Chinese people and British rule in Hong Kong, 1841-1870* (University of Toronto, 1998), p.11. Munn worked in the Hong Kong government from 1980 to 1992. After completing his PhD at the University of Toronto, he returned to Hong Kong and he is now working in the Hong Kong Monetary Authority.

³ There is an obvious need to include materials from political scientists, sociologists, legal experts etc. Firstly, they use historical materials (as evidenced in the footnotes and references) in the same way as historians do. My thesis is about the historiographical discourses and so long as these professionals and academics (historians or non-historians) contribute to this debate, their inclusion must be considered valid. The same argument applies also to using materials from politicians and journalists (see chapter 6 of this thesis). Secondly, it is a fact that these “non-historians” have worked on key historical issues (British imperial rule in interwar Hong Kong, unequal treaty regarding the New Territories, and the class system of early colonial Hong Kong). It is a fact that not only historians have opinions on key

Chinese with the ability to read and use Chinese sources and documents. The ability to speak Cantonese and other local dialects is an added advantage for them, particularly if they are asked to conduct field and case studies. Those who do not or cannot use the Chinese sources are clearly disadvantaged. The case of Norman Miners⁴ is an obvious example. Though a prestigious political scientist with a strong training in historical research, his inability to read Chinese has forced him, in writing his *Hong Kong Under Imperial Rule, 1912-1941*, to rely solely on English language sources, deposited primarily in the Public Record Office in London. His perspective has thus tended to be defensive of British rule in Hong Kong: "...some Chinese are suspicious that many of the Governor's actions are taken under instructions from London without regard to the best interests of the colony, in spite of protestations by officials that this is not the case."⁵ Miners rationalizes his focus as an effort to explain how exactly the British government had influenced the colony of Hong Kong and the local consequences of imperial policy during this period.⁶ A historian using Chinese sources would certainly have written differently. In the first place, there were many aspects of the Chinese society in Hong Kong which were not recorded in the Public Record Office in London (or even in Hong Kong). Many of these aspects (e.g. the social and cultural life of the local Hong Kong Chinese) in the Hong Kong of 1912-41 were not under the "imperial rule" of Britain or the Hong Kong colonial government. Also, the non-English speaking Chinese would definitely view issues such as opium prohibition, *mui-tsai* (bonded young female servants) and government-regulated prostitution (those key issues which Miners has attempted to tackle) differently. There is bound to be some kind of "source determinism" in the writing of history.

historical issues, and perspectives on Hong Kong should not be monopolized by "historians" only. The criterion of selection (of historians or non-historians) is purely based on their relevance to the historiographical discourses.

⁴ Norman Miners taught in the Department of Political Science (University of Hong Kong) before he retired.

⁵ Norman Miners, *Hong Kong under imperial rule, 1912-1941* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.v. The selection of Miners can also be explained with reference to the preface (p.v) of this book: "A number of books have been written about Hong Kong during the Second World War, but there is as yet no detailed history of the colony from the end of Lugard's governorship in 1912 to 1939. Endacott's *History of Hong Kong* was written before the records of this period were open to investigation. So I have begun with a short general account of the history of the colony during this period to provide a background for the following chapters which deal with particular institutions and policy areas."

⁶ Miners, p.2.

Hong Kong historians also include among their ranks those ethnic Chinese historians from outside of Hong Kong, but not from Mainland China. Their outside exposure often enhances their understanding of certain issues not obvious to the local-born Hong Kong historians. Tsai Jung-fang⁷ is one of the most important examples here and his contributions to Hong Kong history will be extensively quoted in subsequent paragraphs. Then there are those western historians with a long and intimate connection with Hong Kong. As mentioned in a previous chapter, they include the “scholar-officials” (such as James Hayes⁸) who have contributed immensely to the study of rural Hong Kong history (i.e. the New Territories). Probably because they were district officers working in the New Territories for so long they tend to have a great affection for the rural inhabitants under their care, and their research has a marked rural bias. Reverend Carl Smith⁹ has departed from this group of “scholar-official” historians by focusing his attention on urban Hong Kong history. Then, there are those western historians whose PhD topics are on Hong Kong history. Their greatest contributions lie in their uncompromising critical approach. They help particularly to debunk many of the traditional myths in the study of Hong Kong history. I will use Christopher Munn as an example. Munn is able to dethrone two old paradigms in the historical writing of Hong Kong. The first paradigm purports to argue that the relations between the colonial government and the Chinese population was minimal and that government was light, indirect or non-interventionist. The second paradigm claims that the higher courts of justice in early colonial Hong Kong were fair and impartial in their treatment of people irrespective of their race. By a critical and exhaustive study of the court documents, Munn shows that these two paradigms are untrue.¹⁰

Certainly, it is the group of local-born Hong Kong historians who have done the most in tapping new and unused sources (Chinese and colonial), in raising new

⁷ Tsai Jung-fang is professor of history at the College of Charleston, South Carolina. He was also visiting professor in the History Department (University of Hong Kong) in 2001.

⁸ James Hayes served as an administrative officer (1956-1987, particularly responsible for the New Territories) in the Hong Kong government. He received his PhD from London University and he has a close relation with the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch.

⁹ Carl Smith is a Mormon priest specializing in genealogy. He contributed immensely to the study of Hong Kong's local and social history.

¹⁰ Munn, *Anglo-China*, pp. 3-4 and 250-251. While I agree with Munn's argument that British justice was not necessarily to the Chinese on racial grounds, his contention that the colonial government was heavy, direct and interventionist is subject to question. The commercial focus and the cost consideration of the colonial government would definitely work against Munn's thesis.

questions and seeking new answers to the intricacies of Hong Kong history. British colonial rule in Hong Kong was, by their accounts, no longer a static system, firmly superimposed by the dominant British. Rather, it was one in which the colonized Chinese were neither passive subordinates nor exploited victims. These Hong Kong historians see the Hong Kong Chinese as active historical agents, capable of negotiating skilfully with their colonial masters. They see the Mainland China factor also in a new light. China's geographical proximity and indelible cultural affinity have brought with it immense influence on the Hong Kong Chinese. This "China factor" tends to cast an overhanging shadow on Hong Kong, creating the problem of divided loyalty among the local Chinese population. It was almost impossible for the British colonial government to shake off this unwelcoming influence over the "British subjects" of Chinese origin. Thus the British colonial government in Hong Kong was often living in apprehension. British colonial historiography has certainly tried to play down this fear, but this stark reality is readily exposed by the critical Hong Kong historians. These historians have made remarkable achievements by providing us with a whole range of critical appreciation of the dynamics of the polity, society and economy of Hong Kong. Again the actual words of the historians will be quoted when necessary. The following discussion is divided into two parts. Part One deals with major chronological events from about 1830 to 1900. Hong Kong historians are making their voice known regarding those key issues and they do not want to be overwhelmed by the Anglo-Chinese discourses. Part Two concentrates on four specific cases. Again local Hong Kong historians have tried to expose the inconsistencies of both the British colonial and Chinese patriotic historiographies.

Part One

(A) Hong Kong Before British Rule

Hong Kong historians are certainly aware of the limitations of the British colonialist and Chinese patriotic historiographies. They are not satisfied with these historical treatments of Hong Kong history and the political agenda behind them. They feel compelled to write their own Hong Kong history so that the voices of Hong Kong can be heard. Hong Kong historians do not consider pre-colonial Hong Kong as merely one chapter of Chinese history or a prelude to British colonial rule. Instead,

through their independent research, they have tried to query two historical myths: (a) Hong Kong as a barren rock and (b) Hong Kong as an integral part of China.

According to the first myth, “Hong Kong is said to have merely been a barren island before the British came; but thanks to the benevolent governance and good policy of the colonial state, this barren rock was transformed into a capitalist metropolis. This barren rock legend, as one critic observes, has been reiterated in one way or the other by every British official and semi-official account of Hong Kong history. Those who uphold the legend imply that, since Britain created Hong Kong out of wilderness, it has contributed more to the development of Hong Kong than anyone else.”¹¹ British colonial historians would certainly try to paint such a picture so that British colonial rule in Hong Kong could be justified.

Counteracting this myth, the Mainland Chinese historians have manufactured the second myth. According to Ngo, “In contrast to this colonial narrative, the nationalistic interpretation views the fate of Hong Kong as part of the modern history of China, characterized by invasion and humiliation at the hands of Western powers. This narrative typically begins with the opening sentence: ‘Hong Kong has been part of Chinese territory since ancient times’. It stresses the close relationship between mainland China and Hong Kong even during Hong Kong’s colonial period, highlights mainland China’s contribution to Hong Kong’s development (such as providing cheap supplies and maintaining Hong Kong’s stability), and underlines the anti-colonial struggles by the indigenous population against British rule.”¹² So, similar to the British historiography, this myth has its own agenda: China has always cared so much for Hong Kong that the colony’s reunification with the motherland is simply natural and “unobjectionable”.

The “barren rock” myth is easy to debunk. Hong Kong and its environs (known collectively as the Hong Kong region) were part of coastal China and it was no

¹¹ Tak-wing Ngo, “Colonialism in Hong Kong revisited” in Tak-wing Ngo (ed.), *Hong Kong’s history: state and society under colonial rule* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.1.

¹² Ngo, p.1. Ngo Tak-wing studied in the University of Hong Kong before he received his PhD from London University. He is lecturer in Chinese politics at Leiden University and currently a fellow of the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study at the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences.

different from the rest of rural China. According to Fok Kai-cheong¹³, the basic conditions of the Hong Kong region from the early Qing period to the mid-19th century were as follows:

In defence, the Qing Dynasty had stationed regular armies at strategic points. In administration, county rule was able to penetrate to the region and was not defunct. According to reliable sources, there existed a kind of *baojia* [mutual surveillance] system. But normal local affairs relied on local groups for settlement. They lived in villages and participated in economic activities like catching fish, farming and stone-cutting. They developed the fishing and farming villages into towns and markets. They made indelible contributions to the economic development of the region. In terms of culture and education, before the British occupied or leased the region, the famous clans among the original residents built schools to educate their descendants. They helped them to participate in civil service examinations and their achievements could be considered acceptable. At the same time, these clans built many historic relics such as temples, clan halls, walled villages etc. All this showed that the residents of the Hong Kong region, had a comparable cultural level to the coastal region along Guangdong and Fujian. Their customs and religious beliefs were no different from the rest [of South China].¹⁴

Notice that Fok's emphasis is on the "Hong Kong region". But with regard to only the Hong Kong island, it might be a different story. According to Elizabeth Sinn¹⁵, Hong Kong island was economically, socially and culturally more backward than the interior: "The new city of Hong Kong was built on the north shore of the island and it expanded westwards and eastwards, far away from the original villages. So the urban development of Hong Kong was not developed from the core of the

¹³ Fok Kai-cheong lectured in the Department of History (University of Hong Kong) before he moved to the University of East Asia (Macao). He has contributed one chapter (Chapter One: The Hong Kong Region before the British Occupation) to Yu & Liu (eds.) *Shijiu shiji de Xianggang* [Hong Kong in the 19th century], an authoritative work by Mainland Chinese historians.

¹⁴ Fok Kai-cheong [Huo Qichang], "Shijiu shiji zhongye yiqiande Xianggang" [Hong Kong before the mid-19th century] in Wang Gungwu (ed.), *Xianggangshi xinbian* [Hong Kong history: new perspectives] v.1 (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., 1997), p.58.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Sinn researched and lectured in the History Department (University of Hong Kong) over an extensive period of time and is now the Deputy Director of the Centre of Asian Studies (University of Hong Kong).

villages. In terms of demography, economic activities and urban development, Hong Kong since 1841 could be described as a migrant society imported from the outside and not derived from the original agricultural and fishing society.”¹⁶ If that is the case, the British colonial factor in the building of Hong Kong should not be minimized, even though we should not ignore the fact that the majority of the actual “builders” were those Chinese migrating to Hong Kong.

While pre-British Hong Kong might not be so barren, it was still a very remote and marginal place, especially from the perspective of the “heartland” Chinese. The critical comments of Wong Wang-chi deserve close attention.¹⁷ He queries nearly all the key points of the Mainland Chinese discourse. He argues that for the British, the term “Hong Kong” in 1841 meant only Hong Kong island. The Mainland Chinese historians, however, in order to bring Hong Kong more in line with the Mainland, have tried to supplant it with the concept “the Hong Kong region” (that is, to include Kowloon and the New Territories) as the focus of their discourse. By including these places in Hong Kong’s history, the Chinese linkage could thus be pushed back earlier. On the question of Hong Kong’s marginality, Wong says that the question is how the “Central Plain” [*zhongyuan* or heartland China] has treated this “Hong Kong region”. According to Wong, in the past, the culture of the “Hong Kong region” was the so-called “*bai yue*” culture and the “*bai yue*” people stood for those ethnic groups which were different from the Han, in other words, another term for “barbarians”. Among the “*bai yue*”, a branch was called the “*dan min*” [i.e. the Tanka, in common Hong Kong usage], one of the four groups of aborigines in Hong Kong. The Tanka had traditionally been subject to all kinds of discrimination and they were considered as “untouchables”. There were laws prohibiting them from civil service examinations and wearing silk clothes. In the Qing Dynasty, they were prohibited from residing on land, forcing them to live on boats. In the Song Dynasty, there was also a pogrom whereby the Tanka in Tai O (New Territories) were slaughtered by the Han people. In addition, Hong Kong was a place for political exiles, for those officials demoted and banished by the central government, a place far away from the centre, a place for the

¹⁶ Elizabeth Sinn [Xian Yuyi], “Shehui zuzhi yu shehui zhuanbian” [Social organizations and social changes] in Wang Gungwu (ed.) *Xianggangshi xinpian* [Hong Kong history: new perspectives] v. 1 (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., 1997), p.158.

¹⁷ Wong Wang-chi [Wang Hongzhi], *Lishi de chenzhong* [The Burden of History] (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp.133-141. Wong is an associate professor in the Department of Translations (Chinese University of Hong Kong).

“barbarians”. Finally, in terms of Hong Kong being part of China’s defence system, Wong reminds us that, during the early Qing period, the “Hong Kong region” had been subject to the “removal of sea-boundaries” order [*qian hai*], a great sacrifice on the part of Hong Kong for the sake of safeguarding the Central Government of China.¹⁸ All these, according to Wong, mean that Hong Kong was nothing to China, uncomfortable facts not in line with the grand narrative of Chinese historiography.

(B) The Opium War and the Founding of Colonial Hong Kong

In this section, the following topics will be analysed. First is a discussion on the legality of the Chuanbi Convention and thus the occupation of Hong Kong. Then it is followed by the issue of opium and the Opium War. The actual role of opium in the development of early colonial Hong Kong will be a focal point. Next and most extensively, the issue of early collaborations will be discussed. Finally, the reasons for the Chinese moving to Hong Kong will be explained.

Mainland Chinese historians have made a big point of the illegality of the Chuanbi Convention and hence the illegality of the British occupation of Hong Kong in 1841. On this point, most Hong Kong historians would agree with the Mainland Chinese. “Elliot officially requested Hong Kong for British residence. Qishan responded by agreeing to report the case to the throne and to seek imperial approval. But the British side was not content to wait. By relying on the sentence that ‘everything has been agreed’, the British side, on 20 January, unilaterally declared the signing of the Chuanbi Convention. On 26 January, based on the first clause of the said Convention, Elliot declared the cession of the Hong Kong island and harbour to Britain. He had occupied Hong Kong first, making it an accomplished fact and then forced the Chinese government to comply.”¹⁹ This is the assessment of Ting Sun Pao.

¹⁸ In order to fight against Zheng Chenggong’s (Koxinga) raids, early Qing government (1662) ordered all maritime population to move 30 to 50 li inlands, and the evacuated zone was cordoned off. Such forced “removal of sea-boundaries” caused great sufferings to local (Hong Kong included) people. Wong’s judgement, however, is an example of a bias in favour of Hong Kong. If Hong Kong suffered, then many other regions suffered as well and it would be wrong to single out Hong Kong in this case.

¹⁹ Ting Sun Pao [Ding Xinbao], “Lishi de zhuanzhe: zhimin tishi de jianli he yanjin” [Historical twists and turns: the building and evolution of the colonial system] in Wang Gungwu (ed.) *Xianggangshi xinbian* [Hong Kong history: new perspectives] v.1 (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., 1997), p.66. Ting received his PhD from the University of Hong Kong and is currently the curator of the Hong Kong Museum.

He continues to explain Elliot's action as a way of forcing the issue on the Chinese: "In conclusion, Elliot was rushing to find a place for the British merchants to anchor and reside. Relying on the so-called 'Chuanbi Convention', an empty paper without legal binding power, he occupied Hong Kong by force. Lord Palmerston did not recognize the Convention but Britain still did not withdraw from Hong Kong. The strategy of Elliot was to create a fait accompli and to find some legal justification later."²⁰

Indeed, a similar conclusion was reached much earlier (in 1976) by J.Y. Wong²¹: "Four days later, on 20 January [1841], Elliot published a notification in the *Chinese Repository* in Macao. Because the notice began with 'Her Majesty's Plenipotentiary has now to announce the conclusion of preliminary arrangements between the Imperial Commissioner and himself', historians have generally assumed that the two men were in perfect agreement about the document. However, evidence recently made available indicates that Elliot did not give Ch'i-shan [Qishan] a copy of the four-point draft convention until 27 January. Therefore, what has been often referred to as the Ch'uan-pi Convention was no more than a draft prepared and published unilaterally by H.M. Plenipotentiary. It is obvious that Elliot wanted to force the hand of a reluctant negotiator."²² The same author also rejects the theory of the Mainland Chinese historians that the primary motive of Britain in taking Hong Kong (and by extension, Kowloon and the New Territories) was territorial. Wong, like many Hong Kong historians, sees the commercial factor was more important:

In sum, British trade in China and the desire for an island depot because of the restrictions on the mainland led to the cession of the island of Hong Kong. The main consideration was indeed commercial and not territorial. Contrary to views generally accepted in academic circles that Elliot was adamant on the cession of an island, the plenipotentiary did inform Ch'i-shan that he was prepared to waive such a demand if the British were allowed to trade freely in China. However, the commissioner insisted that the old systems and regulations were perfect and should never be changed. Consequently, as

²⁰ Ting, pp.66-67.

²¹ J.Y. Wong teaches history in the University of Sydney.

²² J.Y. Wong, "The cession of Hong Kong: a chapter of imperial history", *The Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia*, 2:49-61 (1976), pp.53-54.

indicated by this essay, Elliot had to resort to using the issue of territorial concessions to force the hand of his adversary. Once the island of Hong Kong and its harbour were acquired, it became obvious that if Hong Kong were to function smoothly as a depot as well as a centre of trade, Kowloon and the New Territories had to be included in the possession. Therefore, the cession of Hong Kong must not be regarded as evidence of British territorial ambitions. Rather, it should be seen in the context of the imperialism of free trade.²³

Again, on the whole, and on the basis of overwhelming evidence, Hong Kong historians would side with their Mainland Chinese counterparts in condemning the hideousness of the British-sponsored opium trade. To them, there is no question that the British were the primary opium traders and that the Opium War, by its very nature, was objectionable. As the topic of the Opium War has been generally overworked, the Hong Kong historians do not waste too much of their time morally condemning the British and repeating the same old story. On a pragmatic level and in relation to Hong Kong, they would rather admit that British colonial rule offered a fresh start for the place. Ting takes note of this by pointing out that it was the most important historical turning point in Hong Kong: “After Hong Kong was ceded to Britain, whenever there was a rebellion in China, tens of thousands of Chinese would leave their villages to escape to Hong Kong. It was because the place was administered by the British and not under Chinese rule. The Chinese could escape from the rebellions and could freely engage in commercial activities there. If the sovereign and administrative powers of Hong Kong had remained in the hands of the Chinese government, the history of Hong Kong would have to be rewritten. The development of Hong Kong would be totally different from that of today. The British rule of the Chinese in Hong Kong has had a deep impact on the historical development of Hong Kong.”²⁴

To a more critical historian like Munn, moral condemnation could not substitute for careful historical analysis. To him, it is more fruitful to analyse the real functions of opium in early colonial Hong Kong. He finds that: “The Hong Kong government’s greatest preoccupation was with the outstanding success of the

²³ J.Y. Wong, pp.60-61.

²⁴ Ting, p.75.

Singapore monopoly.²⁵ Hong Kong officials could never understand why their own opium monopoly produced only a fraction of the revenue brought in by the Singapore monopoly when Hong Kong had a larger Chinese population, access to millions of smokers on the mainland, and a flourishing export market.”²⁶

The opium connections of Hong Kong, the focus of Munn’s analysis, are proved beyond doubt as they are clearly recorded in contemporary newspapers and Colonial Office records. According to Munn,

The British colony at Hong Kong was a by-product of the Opium War of 1839-1842. Hong Kong’s viability as a colony was also closely linked to the opium trade. Early Hong Kong served as ‘the central warehouse’ for ‘British Indian produce’ and had little other trade to sustain it. By the late 1840s, it was estimated, three-quarters of the entire Indian opium crop passed through Hong Kong. Hong Kong broadened its economic base in the 1850s, when it became a center for the coolie trade between China and the New World and began to develop the banking, shipping, and entrepot functions that have sustained it to this day. For much of the remainder of the century, however, the transshipment of opium to China continued to be a vital part of the colony’s trade. Indeed, the opium trade and Hong Kong are so obviously intertwined that it is hardly possible to consider the early history of the colony without some reference to the drug: the colony was founded because of opium; it survived its difficult early years because of opium; its principal merchants grew rich on opium; and its government subsisted on the high land rent and other revenue made possible by the opium trade. Early Chinese traders came to the colony to deal in opium; the drug became standard currency for remittances from Chinese living in Hong Kong to their native places on the

²⁵ Through either private arrangements or competitive biddings, the British colonial government granted opium “farms” to the Chinese operators in Singapore. The taxes from these “farms” were the most lucrative of all government taxes there and they became the most important source of capital accumulation in Singapore’s development. It was estimated that more than half of Chinese adults were opium addicts in 19th century Singapore. See Lee Poh Ping, *Chinese society in nineteenth century Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp.24-25 and C.M. Turnbull, *A history of Singapore 1819-1988* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.63.

²⁶ Christopher Munn, “The Hong Kong opium revenue, 1845-1885” [hereafter as *Opium revenue*] in Timothy Brook and Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi (eds.), *Opium regimes: China, Britain, and Japan, 1839-1952* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p.106.

mainland; pirated or disputed consignments of opium dominated many judicial proceedings; and opium balls cluttered the colony's numerous pawnbrokers' shops.²⁷

Because of the importance of the opium trade to Hong Kong and because legal trade with China did not develop so well as expected, Hong Kong had really nothing to offer except as an opium depot. Hong Kong was also the centre of the illicit coolie trade during the same period.²⁸

Even the usually pro-British Miners concedes on this point: "Hong Kong's role in the opium trade was as an entrepot for official imports and also as a base for the smuggling of illegal supplies. From 1842 to 1860 smugglers made use of the port to avoid the prohibition on opium imports which was still enforced against the Chinese junk trade. After 1860 they sought to evade the customs duty and *li-kin* levied by the Chinese authorities. The British administration made little or no effort to suppress this trade, maintaining that it was the responsibility of the Chinese government to enforce its own laws."²⁹ He admits that the Hong Kong government reaped tremendous profits from the opium stock: "Quite apart from the profit accruing to the colony from harbour fees and the charges for storage, freight, banking, and insurance on opium shipped to China, the Hong Kong administration also did very well out of internal consumption. Ever since the colony had been founded opium-smoking had been regulated in order to provide a source of revenue. From 1847 to 1857 fees had been charged for licences to sell raw or prepared opium and for opening smoking divans. From 1858, an opium monopoly was created and the right to boil and sell prepared opium was farmed out to the highest bidder."³⁰ It created so much profit that even the colonial government had to confess its "disquiet at the large portion of its revenue that was derived from the opium farm."³¹

²⁷ Munn, *Opium revenue*, p.107.

²⁸ Munn, *Anglo-China*, p.23 and p.48.

²⁹ Miners, p.209.

³⁰ Miners, p.210.

³¹ Miners, p.211.

Certainly, not everyone would have the privilege of getting the right to operate these opium farms. Apart from the monetary considerations, the political calculation in cultivating Chinese collaboration seems to be paramount, as Munn explains:

By auctioning off revenue collection rights to middlemen, the government was able to secure an income with minimal trouble and liability: it was relieved of much of the bother and friction of collecting tax direct from the people; it was assured of an income, since the rental was payable monthly in advance and the farmers were heavily bonded; and it could distance itself from the farms if things went wrong. The farms also had political value. By ousting pre-existing Chinese forms of revenue collection or private protection rackets, they helped to confirm British sovereignty over the new colony. They encouraged and empowered local elites over whom the government believed it could exercise some degree of control. For the farmers themselves, the farms offered them the possibility of becoming extremely rich, of building up positions of power and influence in society, and of channeling resources into indigenous forms of charity and political influence, such as the Tung Wah Hospital. Their importance to the colonial revenue offered them some limited but direct influence over the shaping of government policy: the development of the opium farm, in particular, owed much to the advice and demands put forward by monopolists and their competitors.³²

The earliest opium farmers included such names as Loo Aqoi, Kwok Acheong and Tam Achoy [Loo Agui, Guo Axiang and Tan Acai], the most important collaborators in colonial Hong Kong. Their assistance to the British rule was thus lavishly rewarded.

It must be understood that, in the eyes of the Hong Kong historians, the term “collaboration” does not necessarily carry any pejorative connotations.³³ Many of the

³² Munn, *Opium revenue*, pp.111-112.

³³ However, we have to admit that some early collaborators (such as Loo Aqoi) had a shady background and they abused their power through the loopholes of the colonial system. See Munn, *Anglo-China*, pp.99-101. While we should not be prejudicial against the Chinese collaborators, we should also know that many of their businesses (running opium or gambling dens and thus enriching themselves) were anti-social in nature. There might be a need to really study the reactions of the lower classes on these collaborators.

collaborators who came to Hong Kong were simply Chinese businessmen who had “a long tradition of cooperating and trading with foreigners, either in South China or in other European colonies in Southeast Asia.”³⁴ They were just hard-nosed businessmen who chose to make a living in colonial Hong Kong and ultimately they made their mark there: “Chinese co-operation was instrumental, both in the founding and the building of the new colony. But why were men such as Loo Aqui, Kwok Acheong and Tam Achoy willing to help the British in these processes? European historians have generally seen the Chinese in early Hong Kong at best as sojourners, and at worst as the ‘scum of Canton’. Chinese historians, on the other hand, have tended to view the Chinese in Hong Kong and elsewhere in Southeast Asia as either helpless victims duped by the foreigners or as unfilial scoundrels who abandoned their families and homeland. This rhetoric, however, masks the more important and interesting question of what the colonial situation offered to the Chinese who chose to live under alien rule.”³⁵ So to call them “traitors” (as the Chinese officials did) is missing the point. To call them “the scum of Canton” (as the European historians did) is equally unfair. They simply had the impulse to venture to this border town of Hong Kong and were able to find their niche for survival.³⁶ It was through their efforts that early colonial Hong Kong began to tick. Certainly the colonial context whereby these people could manoeuvre has to be understood: “Not only did the colonial situation help the growth of a Chinese business elite, it enabled the members of this elite to recreate aspects of the traditional order from which they had been excluded in China. As Tanka outcasts, both Loo Aqui and Kwok Acheong were barred from assuming any gentry functions in China. By working for the British in Singapore, Tam Achoy had violated Qing prohibitions against overseas emigration. In British Hong Kong, however, these prohibitions meant nothing. The colonial government, which neither understood its new Chinese constituents nor took much interest in their welfare, did not attempt to fill the vacuum left by the departure of the old gentry class after the

³⁴ John Carroll, “Chinese Collaboration in the making of British Hong Kong” in Tak-wing Ngo (ed.), *Hong Kong’s history: state and society under colonial rule* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.14. Carroll teaches history in the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia.

³⁵ Carroll, p.21.

³⁶ There were certainly many reasons for the Chinese to try Hong Kong. These might include the lure of profits or employment opportunities. Freedom from restriction of the Mainland and the escape from internal riots or rebellions in China were also likely factors. Munn reminds us that there were also many reasons why wealthy and respectable Chinese did not come to the colony. These factors included the general violence and racial discrimination in early colonial Hong Kong. See Munn, *Anglo-China*, p.90.

British takeover in 1841... Thus, in early colonial Hong Kong, outcasts could become respected leaders of the local Chinese community.”³⁷

Apart from granting monopoly rights to the Chinese opium farmers, the colonial government also rewarded these big collaborators with land grants and other material interests. Political considerations are clearly at play here and it is therefore quite obvious that the colonial system was not just a system of one-sided imposition of rule on the ruled. The ruled played an active part in helping to foster the colonial rule and benefited from it. Carroll puts it very succinctly as follows: “For the Chinese who helped found and build the colony, colonialism provided invaluable opportunities. By rewarding these men with privileges such as land grants, offering lucrative monopolies and trying to enforce separate business and residential districts for the Chinese, the colonial government helped foster the growth of a Chinese business elite in Hong Kong. Finally, the colonial nature of Hong Kong enabled the members of the elite to join the traditional order from which they had been excluded in China. Thus the making of a Chinese business elite was inseparably linked with the colonial nature of the island.”³⁸

Apart from these prominent collaborating merchants, waves of other people came, many compelled by sheer poverty: “...the British occupation of the island during the Opium War attracted many boat people, laborers, artisans and adventurers who profited by furnishing provisions and other services, and who defied the Chinese officials’ orders not to have any dealings with the *fankwei* (foreign devils)... Poverty prompted these adventurers to work for ‘foreign barbarians’ for a few cash, risking the displeasure of the mandarins.”³⁹

There were practical reasons for these people to move out of their villages or home-towns, as a consequence of the Opium War: “Even though imperialism did not substantially affect the Chinese economy as a whole, it did cause considerable socio-economic strain and dislocation in the southern provinces, especially in Kwangtung [Guangdong]... Thus, a large surplus supply of labor was created in the

³⁷ Carroll, p.23.

³⁸ Carroll, p.25.

³⁹ Jung-fang Tsai, *Hong Kong in Chinese history: community and social unrest in the British colony, 1842-1913* [hereafter as *Hong Kong*] (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp.18-19.

aftermath of the Opium War, consisting of idle weavers, handicraftsmen, iron workers, boatmen, junk crews, and dislocated peasants. Many joined secret societies and bandit gangs; others became pirates along the coast; still others formed urban bands of beggars and thieves. Piracy and social unrest mounted in Kwangtung... The ground was set for the exodus of Chinese from Kwangtung and Fukien [Fujian] in search of economic opportunities overseas. The development of Hong Kong under the British naturally attracted the Chinese from the nearby districts of Kwangtung province.”⁴⁰ To call these people “traitors” is just a heartless comment on the plight these people might have suffered. Equally, to force the issue of patriotism (or the lack of it) on them is unhistorical. These Chinese were simply going to Hong Kong to seek jobs, or to be employed by foreigners, or to conduct business. This was the side of cooperation or collaboration. Much of the prosperity of Hong Kong depended on the energy, ingenuity, and hard work of the overwhelming majority of the colony’s population, the Chinese laborers and merchants. While it is a fact that the Chinese community thrived in the British colony, it must be understood that there were also tensions and conflicts caused by foreigners’ racial discrimination or the unreasonable demands of the colonial government. In the long run, the conflicts between the Chinese and foreigners gradually helped the Hong Kong Chinese to conceive their common social consciousness, forming a sense of a Chinese community. In the process, the colonial government exhibited a rather ambiguous attitude: on the one hand, seeking collaboration from the leaders of this budding Chinese community, and on the other, feeling rather nervous about these leaders’ potential power vis-a-vis the majority of the Chinese population. This is the key theme of the next two sections.

(C) From the Cession of Kowloon to the Leasing of the New Territories and the Problem of Resistance

On the one side, British colonialist historiography would have it that the Chinese lived gratefully and obediently under the colonial government of Hong Kong. On the other, Mainland Chinese patriotic historiography argues that the Hong Kong Chinese, when called, would rise up in patriotic defence of the motherland. Unfortunately both of these two discourses have missed the mark. The reality was much more intricate

⁴⁰ Tsai, *Hong Kong*, pp.21-22.

and no simple black-and-white picture can be drawn. In this section, three incidents (Hong Kong during the Second Opium War 1856-1860, the 1884 Strike and Riot, and the 1898 leasing of the New Territories) will be discussed to illustrate my point.

In the context of the Second Opium War, it would be natural for both the local Chinese and the Westerners to get easily agitated. On the one hand, because Hong Kong was used as the launching pad of the British invasion of China, the Europeans had great apprehension and distrust regarding the Chinese living in Hong Kong. On the other hand, the placards of the Chinese government asking the Hong Kong Chinese to rise up against the British had triggered the long-hidden antagonisms (including racial discrimination and other offensive government measures) among the Hong Kong Chinese. All these exploded at the same time. According to Ting, “as a result, there occurred strikes of workers and closure of the market. Many thousands of Chinese (including some Chinese merchants and civil servants) also left Hong Kong. From the available evidence, some of these actions had been caused by blackmail (which threatened reprisals if the Hong Kong Chinese did not follow Chinese official instructions). But if the Chinese masses did not have a hidden antagonism against the Hong Kong government and the westerners, they would not be so easily fanned up and their reactions would not be so united. And it would not have triggered off the worst case of Sino-British conflict, the first ever since the establishment of colonial Hong Kong.”⁴¹ Ming K. Chan⁴² has a similar finding: “In addition to the boycott against Hong Kong, the guilds in Guangzhou declared a general strike against the colony in April 1857. Within a month, more than twenty thousand Chinese workers gave up their jobs in Hong Kong and returned to the mainland. Business came to a standstill and life in the colony became difficult as it was hard to hire help or get food supplies. The attempts of the British to recruit laborers in Guangdong’s Baoan county met with stiff resistance from the Baoan people. The same pattern of popular mobilization against the British was repeated time and again, employing economic means for political ends in the confrontations between Guangdong and Hong Kong. This reflected both the economic circumstance of Hong Kong and the peculiar nature

⁴¹ Ting, p.114.

⁴² Ming K. Chan is a senior lecturer in the History Department (University of Hong Kong). Concurrently, he is executive coordinator of the Hong Kong Documentary Archives, Hoover Institution, Stanford University. Chan is also the general editor of the series “Hong Kong Becoming China: the Transition to 1997” (published by the University of Hong Kong).

of its ties with Guangdong.”⁴³ In explaining the reaction of the Chinese, Chan believes that it “stemmed from the economic, social, and legal injustices they experienced under an alien, uncaring, and often arrogant colonial state.”⁴⁴ Many Chinese resisted colonial rule by means of mass boycotts, exoduses and other forms of evasions because many of them did not consider they had any long-term commitment to colonial Hong Kong.⁴⁵

It was in this highly charged atmosphere that the Bread Poisoning Incident of 1857 occurred. In the eyes of Tsai Jung-fang, “Whatever the real cause of the bread poisoning, it revealed a great social tension in the colony. The damage to racial relations had been done by the colonial government’s arbitrary measures and indiscriminate mass arrests and deportation. Among the Hong Kong Chinese the incident had left a legacy of bitterness and anticolonialism. It also magnified the Europeans’ fear and defensiveness, widening the divisions existing between them and the Chinese community.”⁴⁶ The Hong Kong-Guangdong link has to be studied in order to understand why the Hong Kong Chinese behaved in such a manner. Again, Tsai provides us with clues: “During the Arrow War mandarin intimidation caused some Hong Kong Chinese merchants, who had been providing provisions for the British, to close their businesses and return to the mainland... The Chinese magistrates of the neighboring districts had repeatedly called on the Chinese residents of Hong Kong to fight with any means against the foreign invaders. The magistrates now moved the rural militia ‘to compel all village elders to cut off the market supplies of the Colony and to send word to their respective clansmen in Hong Kong to leave the Colony immediately on pain of their relatives in the country being treated as rebels.’ This resulted in an exodus in July 1858 of over twenty thousand Chinese—mostly laborers—from the colony back to their homeland.”⁴⁷

⁴³ Ming K. Chan, “All in the family: the Hong Kong-Guangdong link in historical perspective” [hereafter as *HK-Guangdong*] in Reginald Kwok and Alvin So (eds.) *The Hong Kong-Guangdong link: partnership in flux* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1995), p.43.

⁴⁴ Chan, *HK-Guangdong*, p.44.

⁴⁵ Munn, *Anglo-China*, p.88. Many Chinese were particularly annoyed by the police’s abuse of power. See Munn, *Anglo-China*, pp.264-269.

⁴⁶ Tsai, *Hong Kong*, pp.53-54.

⁴⁷ Tsai, *Hong Kong*, pp.54-55.

In the face of this immense problem, Governor Bowring had to handle the case of the bread poisoning with great skill and deliberation. There were four main forms of anti-colonial resistance: “stoppages of supplies to the colony; orders to Chinese inhabitants to abandon the colony; incendiary and other attacks on European property; and attempts on European lives.”⁴⁸ These had already caused great fear and confusion in the colony and if the government did not handle matters carefully, the consequences might become uncontrollable. According to Ting,

In dealing with the Cheong Ahlum [Zhang Alin] case, Governor Bowring did not heed the foreign community’s demand for severe punishments against the Chinese. Instead, he worked calmly and carefully to weather the dangerous situation. The acquittal of Cheong Ahlum helped to increase the confidence of the Chinese, especially those rising Chinese merchants. It had undoubtedly helped stabilize the people’s mind. Bowring’s plan to reclaim land in Central [i.e. Central District of Hong Kong island] was opposed by the British merchants but was strongly supported by the Chinese merchants. When Bowring left Hong Kong he was warmly farewelled by the Chinese merchants. This was a sharp contrast to the coolness expressed by the western merchants. Consequently, the Hong Kong government recognized that the Chinese merchants were a rising power not to be despised. All subsequent governors began to seriously collaborate with the Chinese elites, utilising their influence to stabilize the society.⁴⁹

So it must be understood that the Hong Kong Chinese merchants did not harbour any prolonged antagonism against Bowring, one of the chief architects of the invasion of China during the Second Opium War. Indeed, they did not really fare very well under the Chinese officials’ intimidation. Many of them, like Cheong Ahlum, might have simply wished to do business in Hong Kong without interference from China. So, Tsai warns us not to impute too much of a patriotic element into the reactions of the Hong Kong Chinese: “Some Chinese historians are quick to claim that the 1858 exodus reflected popular nationalism against foreign imperialism, meaning that the Chinese laborers who left the colony were motivated by a sense of

⁴⁸ Munn, *Anglo-China*, p.275.

⁴⁹ Ting, p.114.

collective identity with and loyalty to China as a nation-state. But anti-British feelings did not necessarily entail Chinese national consciousness. The historians should not magnify the exodus into an incident of popular nationalism. Until solid evidence is found to support the Chinese historians' claim, perhaps it is better to regard the exodus as a response of the Hong Kong populace to the Chinese magistrates' coercion."⁵⁰ To prove his case, Tsai adds that it evoked no local Chinese resistance when the British took over the Kowloon Peninsula on January 19, 1861.⁵¹ It seems that the Chinese were more concerned with the day-to-day, mundane matters of the time, i.e. making a living in colonial Hong Kong when everything was still bearable.

For the 1884 Strike and Riot, Elizabeth Sinn provides the most authoritative Hong Kong perspective of the event. First, a brief re-cap of the event. During the Sino-French War over Annam (1884-85), the Cantonese authorities asked the Chinese inhabitants in Hong Kong to join forces in resisting the French. They did so by refusing to work for the French ships anchoring in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong government considered the strike illegal and fined the striking dock workers. The Tung Wah Hospital stepped in to mediate, and succeeded in persuading the workers to resume work. Three key questions are: (1) How much influence did China have on the local Chinese in Hong Kong?, (2) Were the strike and riot "patriotic reactions"? and (3) How powerful was the Tung Wah?

According to Sinn, on the 5th September, 1884, the Cantonese authorities issued a proclamation calling upon the people of Hong Kong and Macao to act. Most interestingly, "it pointed out that Chinese in these localities were often traitorous, because, enticed to work for foreigners for high pay, they frequently ended up in their military service. This meant that they would sometimes be actually fighting China herself. The proclamation called upon these Chinese 'to show a devoted regard for [their] fatherland' by refraining from working for the French, especially by refusing to repair their boats, and by killing French commanders and damaging their ammunitions of war. Those who followed these instructions would have their past offences forgiven, and be rewarded, while those who continued to help the enemy

⁵⁰ Tsai, *Hong Kong*, p.55.

⁵¹ Tsai, *Hong Kong*, p.57.

would imperil their family and relatives in China.”⁵² A few salient points should be noted here. The appeal was based on patriotism, supplemented with a warning to possible “traitors”. The usual tactic of carrot (rewards) and stick (intimidation against relatives in China) was used.

The dock workers responded by staging a strike against the French ships, and according to Sinn, “[t]here can be no doubt that there were anti-French feelings among local Chinese of many different classes, feelings which existed independently of any initiative from Canton, but which were likely to rally to any call for patriotism from China.”⁵³ The dock workers were subsequently fined by the Hong Kong colonial government, triggering a series of disturbances. It was rumoured that behind the strikers were the Tung Wah men, fanning their strike action. On the 3rd October, some skirmishes occurred and the government responded by sending troops to quarter in the Hall of the Tung Wah Hospital, ostensibly for stopping the riots in the vicinity. It triggered some interesting turn of events. According to Sinn, Leung On [Liang An], the leading Director of the Hospital proposed that the military picket be removed from the Hall:

He [Leung On] gave no reason for this request, but it is obvious that he wanted to avoid the impression that the Tung Wah Hospital was collaborating with the armed forces in suppressing the people. He also suggested that the Directors of the Hospital should hold a public meeting at the Hospital gates to persuade the people to resume work... Again, Stewart [the colonial secretary of Hong Kong] turned down these proposals. He did not think this was a matter which concerned the Tung Wah Hospital as such. No public meeting could be held without government permission, and in view of the disturbed circumstances it would be inadvisable to hold any gathering... The merchants also proposed that, if the Government felt it could not issue a proclamation the Hospital should issue one in *its* name [italics original]. This provoked Stewart into

⁵² Elizabeth Sinn, “The strike and riot of 1884 – a Hong Kong perspective” [hereafter as *1884 strike*], *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 22: 65-98 (1982), p.66.

⁵³ Sinn, *1884 strike*, p.78.

telling them directly that this would amount to an abdication on the part of the Government and the assumption of governmental power by the Hospital.⁵⁴

The key point is that the government was feeling besieged. It warned the Hospital not to overstep its position. The stationing of troops in Tung Wah was particularly intriguing. Sinn believes that the government wanted to intimidate the Hospital and force it to terminate its role in the disturbances.⁵⁵

Now, why and how exactly had the Tung Wah men got involved in the event? Sinn shows us one key piece of evidence that the Chinese merchants led by the Tung Wah were pivotal: “In another despatch to the Tsungli Yamen after the strike in Hong Kong ended, he [Chang]⁵⁶ wrote that he had secretly telegraphed Chinese merchants in Hong Kong to try to end the strike. The phrase he used in instructing the merchants was “*shih-k’o chi-chih*” [*shi ke ji zhi*] – to stop immediately when the time was appropriate. The implication of this phrase is that some disturbance was permissible as long as it did not get out of hand, and a further, more incriminating, implication was that the situation had been started by the Chinese merchants and was in their control so that there was no question they would be able to reverse the situation when and if they so wished.”⁵⁷ The fear of the colonial government seemed to be substantiated: there were some unspeakable linkages between Canton and the Hong Kong Chinese, and the Tung Wah men were secretly in control of the disturbances, and, by extension, in control of the Chinese populace of the colony.

Sinn argues that the 1884 events were caused by a combination of factors: “Workers were ready to strike, and social leaders were ready to encourage and abet them. It was this combination of fears, aspirations and national fervour which responded to Chang’s call for anti-French actions, and caused the initial strike. And it is very important to note that even while the general strike ended on 5th October, as

⁵⁴ Sinn, *1884 strike*, p.73.

⁵⁵ Elizabeth Sinn, *Power and charity: the early history of the Tung Wah Hospital, Hong Kong* [hereafter as *Power and charity*] (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.134.

⁵⁶ i.e. Zhang Zhidong, the Viceroy of Liang Guang.

⁵⁷ Sinn, *1884 strike*, p.76.

late as November no one would work for the French.”⁵⁸ The conclusions give us a distinct Hong Kong perspective on the colonial society of the time:

They [the events of 1884] highlight the problems of a society composed of a native population governed by a foreign power; a society whose loyalty was, at the best of times, divided. The political and emotional orientation of the Chinese in 19th Century Hong Kong was toward Mainland China. Even while more and more Chinese households were being established in Hong Kong, nonetheless, in times of emergency the entire household could be transferred to Macao or Canton. It seems almost incidental that some families did settle in Hong Kong permanently at all. Family, business, property and political ties with China continued to be strong, with the result that events in China had very strong bearings upon those in Hong Kong... This means that on the one hand, Chinese officials could bully residents in Hong Kong into carrying out orders or seduce them with rewards; sometimes this could be done simply by appealing to their patriotism. The result was a general feeling of suspicion between the Government and people of Hong Kong which explains why any local disturbance caused the Government to panic.⁵⁹

The panic of the colonial government was understandable. No matter how efficient or powerful, it was still surviving on a thin layer of colonial rule. Beneath it was the sea of the local populace, with a web of Chinese organizations not quite under British control. Despite the rhetoric of imperial omnipotence it had to seek collaboration in order to stay in power. But at that time, unfortunately, the response of the British and the Europeans in general was one of envy and hostility. They were fearful of any move that might increase the power and influence of the Chinese community. But it was exactly this kind of racial animosity that forced the Chinese populace to combine together and look for leadership in resisting colonial rule.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Sinn, *1884 strike*, p.80.

⁵⁹ Sinn, *1884 strike*, p.86.

⁶⁰ Sinn, *1884 strike*, p.91.

Finally, in relation to the acquisition of the New Territories in 1898 and 1899, the contributions of Steve Tsang⁶¹ and Liang Binghua⁶² are most prominent in presenting the voices of Hong Kong. Instead of interpreting the episode as one in which the British were banging the table to extract concessions from the Chinese (as in the Mainland Chinese narrative), Tsang has found that the negotiations were basically friendly and agreeable: “Once the negotiations opened in early April 1898, the parties quickly reached an agreement in principle. The whole process took only two months. The Chinese were in no position to resist. For them it was a matter of minimizing the losses China had to concede... Negotiators from both sides shared an important common ground. They all wanted to prevent other powers seizing on the extension of Hong Kong to demand further territorial concessions from China. Thus, while the negotiations were tough, given the circumstances, they took place in a remarkable atmosphere of cooperation. Both sides proceeded expeditiously.”⁶³ What the Chinese negotiators insisted on was the retention of symbolic sovereignty in the New Territories by keeping the fort in the Kowloon Walled City and their right of free access to the fort.

The British indeed had no objection to these rather absurd arrangements:

The 1898 Convention of Peking states that ‘the Chinese officials now stationed there shall continue to exercise jurisdiction except so far as may be inconsistent with the military requirements for the defence of Hong Kong’. It also states that ‘Chinese officials and people shall be allowed as heretofore to use the road from Kowloon to Hsinan [Xinan]’. It was absurd that Britain should extend the colony of Hong Kong to improve its defence but permit the Chinese to maintain a fort in the New Territories. The Chinese had built the fort in 1846/7 specifically to counter the British presence in Hong Kong. It was equally ridiculous for the Convention to provide ‘that the existing landing-place near Kowloon city shall be reserved for the convenience of Chinese men-of-war, merchant and passenger vessels, which may come and go and lie there at their pleasure’. It also stated that ‘Chinese vessels of war,

⁶¹ Steve Tsang is Louis Cha Fellow at St. Antony's College, Oxford.

⁶² Liang Binghua received his PhD from the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

⁶³ Steve Tsang, *Hong Kong: an appointment with China* [hereafter as *Appointment*] (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997), p.7.

whether neutral or otherwise, shall retain the right to use Deep bay and Mirs Bay, which the Chinese also leased to the British.⁶⁴

According to Tsang, the British did not regard these reservations as major problems and they were confident enough of their own preponderance in the region, believing that such things would not hurt British interests.⁶⁵ Besides, they did not believe the Chinese could reform and strengthen themselves effectively enough to recover this so-called leased territory. In fact, the British had taken the 99-year lease as permanent because constitutionally they regarded the New Territories as an integral part of the colony of Hong Kong.⁶⁶

Tsang regards the British behaviour as somewhat cavalier: “In the short term, the Convention [of Peking] was a diplomatic triumph for MacDonald [British Consul to Peking]. It gave Britain what it wanted at no cost and did not damage its relations with China or the other powers. MacDonald negotiated it with a somewhat cavalier attitude. He initiated the negotiations without an up-to-date map of the territory concerned and was happy to proceed with only a general idea of the extent of the territory he demanded for his government. He did not give due consideration to the long-term or legal implications involved – perhaps because of his background, which was more military than diplomatic... The arrogance of MacDonald and of the empire he served characterized Britain’s handling of the negotiations.”⁶⁷

In May 1899, on the pretext of the Taipo resistance and that China had violated the military security clause in the Convention, the British occupied the Kowloon Walled City and drove out the Chinese garrison there. The Chinese certainly did not accept such British action but they did nothing substantial to recover the lost city. It seems, in the eyes of the British colonialist historians, that China was at fault, and it did not care about the Kowloon Walled City. Liang’s findings have forcefully overthrown such biased arguments. To Liang, the building of the walled city in 1846-47 showed that China meant business in the area of national defence. Qiying, the Governor-general of Liang Guang gave the reasons for building the walled city as

⁶⁴ Tsang, *Appointment*, pp.9-10.

⁶⁵ Tsang, *Appointment*, pp.10-11.

⁶⁶ Tsang, *Appointment*, pp.8-9.

⁶⁷ Tsang, *Appointment*, pp.11-12.

follows: “Not only to station troops so as to foster prestige, but also, because of its nearness to the base of the barbarians, it is used to counter their forces” and so the existence of the walled city was to demonstrate Chinese power to the British and to warn the British not to act recklessly.⁶⁸ This national defence effort also received wide popular support: “The building of the walled city had not aroused people’s opposition. Rather it had shown the unity of the nation, high and low... The Kowloon Walled City can be said to be the product of the cooperation of the Court, the officials and the local people in general. After knowing this, one can understand that after the Second Opium War, with the cession of the southern half of the Kowloon Peninsula, the boundary line had to be set before the southern gate of the Kowloon Walled City. It is also the reason why in 1898, when China was forced to lease the whole of the Kowloon Peninsula and the adjacent islands to Britain, the Chinese remained insistent on retaining the sovereignty of the Walled City.”⁶⁹

According to Liang, China had done everything possible to get back the administration of the walled city. In 1899, China had even replaced Tan Zhonglin (who was seen as objectionable to the British) with Li Hongzhang (considered by the British as a more agreeable substitute) to be the Governor-General of Liang Guang, and to negotiate with MacDonald. All this shows the intentions of the Chinese government and their high regard for the Walled City. Many historians have not studied carefully the important historical documents and mistakenly believed that the Qing government did not consider the Walled City as important and therefore had not actively sought to regain the place from Britain.⁷⁰ The retention of the Walled City was symbolic of China’s sovereignty, and that was significant in the eyes of the Chinese government. Liang’s argument is very clear: “To put it bluntly, they [the Chinese] had tried to retain the Walled City. This was not to safeguard any material interests. The main purpose was to retain the symbol of a sovereign state over the leased territory. It would also stop other nations from pursuing similar measures against China.”⁷¹

⁶⁸ Liang Binghua, *Chengzhai yu Zhongying Waijiao* [The Kowloon Walled City and Sino-British Diplomacy] (Hong Kong: Qilin, 1995), p.3.

⁶⁹ Liang, p.22.

⁷⁰ Liang, p.61.

⁷¹ Liang, p.63.

Again, in relation to Tan Zhonglin's handling of the New Territories affair, Liang makes it quite clear that the British historians' judgement on him has been wrong. They have painted him as old and infirm, senile and conservative, and an easy prey of intriguing and corrupt persons.⁷² Tan was accused of being obstructionist and unable to control the villagers in the New Territories. Liang puts his objections very clearly, pointing out that the conflicts might have been due to some mutual or language misunderstandings. He relates the important meeting between Governor Blake and Tan: "It had an important connection with the British occupation of Shenzhen and the Kowloon Walled City, because, despite Blake's obtaining Tan's personal guarantee to protect the matshed builders in the New Territories, there was still the burning down of the matsheds and the attack on the Hong Kong officials. Blake was extremely annoyed and pointed out that Tan had betrayed his trust. In addition, there was a misunderstanding over the arrangements of the customs posts. Tan pointed out that Blake had agreed not to withdraw the Chinese customs, saying that it was not an issue then and that Blake had only asked Tan to send his army to restore order in the New Territories. On the other hand, Blake expressed that Tan had completely misunderstood his repeated statements: he said that the customs posts could not be stationed in the leased territory. This misunderstanding was most probably the result of the language barrier and mistakes in interpretation. It contributed to mutual acrimony."⁷³

Contrary to the general misunderstanding, Liang has explained forcefully that Tan had given his efforts in restoring order in the New Territories. On receiving Lockhart's report of the disturbances dated 4 April 1899, Tan was very cooperative and took immediate action. He admonished the local people to keep order and he also sent an army to quell the disturbances. Because of these measures, some portion of the New Territories gentry and elders capitulated and asked the Hong Kong government for mercy. To Liang, it shows that Tan had kept his promise and had put his efforts into restoring peace to the locality.⁷⁴ It is quite wrong to put all the blame on Tan for

⁷² Peter Wesley-Smith, *Unequal treaty 1898-1997: China, Great Britain, and Hong Kong's New Territories* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1998 revised edition), pp.10-11. Wesley-Smith is professor and head of the Department of Law in the University of Hong Kong.

⁷³ Liang, p.37.

⁷⁴ Liang, pp.40-41.

the New Territories disturbances, and Liang reminds us that the British should have reviewed whether their actions had been too rash and ill-prepared.⁷⁵

In conclusion, Liang passes a positive judgement on Tan: “By consulting only the British documents, many scholars have criticized Tan for his senile foolishness and administrative incompetence. But by carefully studying his admonitions against the Bao’an residents and his subsequent investigations of the incident, we can see that he fulfilled his duties responsibly... As Tan was an important official, he had the duty to protect his country’s sovereignty and interests and safeguard China’s important revenue sources. That is why he refused to withdraw the customs posts before mutual agreements were made. He had done his duty as a Viceroy in the region.”⁷⁶ To Liang, as an ethnic Chinese and as a Hong Kong historian who has consulted all relevant available British and Chinese documents, the British seizure of the Kowloon Walled City was a clear example of Britain’s rapacity, achieving its target “by force or by trickery” (*qiaoqu haoduo*): “In the 1899 incident, the Hong Kong Governor Blake had strenuously alleged that Tan Zhonglin was implicated in the popular resistance in the New Territories. The British had unilaterally declared that the Chinese presence in the Walled City was inconsistent with the defence requirements of Hong Kong. They had sent an army to occupy the Walled City and driven away the Chinese officials. Even though it was not a premeditated plan of the British, it is undeniable that they had seized the opportunity and the excuse to achieve a long-desired goal.”⁷⁷

Part Two

(D) Specific Case (D): The Tung Wah Hospital

British colonialist historiography has seen the colonial government as all-powerful and beneficent. The Mainland Chinese narrative has it that the Chinese in Hong Kong were all patriotic in resisting oppressive colonial rule. A real Hong Kong perspective sees neither of these as adequate interpretations. In her study of the early history of the Tung Wah Hospital (incorporated by government legislation in 1870),

⁷⁵ Liang, p.41.

⁷⁶ Liang, p.64.

⁷⁷ Liang, p.227.

Elizabeth Sinn is able to debunk all these myths. She has been able to paint a very different picture. The local Chinese, particularly the merchant community, were not pliant and submissive inhabitants. Within a colonial framework, they were active historical agents in negotiating with the government, shaping their destiny and making their mark on colonial Hong Kong. They tried to handle the issues of collaboration and double loyalty (in relation to Britain and China) with skill. Sinn also delineates the fact that there existed a highly delicate link between China and Hong Kong, so delicate that one may question whether China had really lost Hong Kong to Britain. The final picture that emerges from Sinn's research is a dynamic one, effectively questioning the validity of both the British and the Chinese discourses.

Sinn sets out to analyse three key themes in her book: relations between the colonial government and the Chinese community, social organization in terms of the concept and function of Chinese community leadership, and relations between China and the local Chinese.⁷⁸ With regard to the first theme, the two parties were rather ignorant of one another. Generally because the British had founded Hong Kong for commercial reasons, they tried to minimize the cost of administration by letting the Chinese run their own affairs, as long as public order and revenue derived from trade were not threatened. This, generally speaking, suited the Chinese. They had no particular liking for being ruled and they hoped to manage themselves as far as possible. There was therefore a real gap or segregation between the colonial government and the people in general. This was the reason why a "Chinese Hospital" was established: "The creation of the 'Chinese Hospital' was a manifestation of the segregation between the government and the governed. Conflicting ideas about sickness and death and about specific medical treatment and medical organization had made the medical facilities which the government offered irrelevant to the Chinese."⁷⁹ Basically, the Chinese in 19th century Hong Kong did not accept the concept of western medical practice. They viewed practices such as vaccination and surgery with great suspicion, and preferred instead to be treated by herbal medicines and other traditional methods already familiar to them. They "would rather die like dogs than enter the Government Civil Hospital."⁸⁰ To them, an illness manifested in a Chinese

⁷⁸ Sinn, *Charity and power*, p.1.

⁷⁹ Sinn, *Charity and power*, p.3.

⁸⁰ Sinn, *Charity and power*, p.21.

was a Chinese problem that needed a Chinese solution.⁸¹ Initially this view shaped the running of the Tung Wah Hospital until a change of government policy towards the end of the century: “Chinese concepts determined the way the Tung Wah Hospital operated for the first 20 years of its history while European ideas of how a hospital should be run gradually took over and imposed changes thereafter. In the process, communal hostilities came to the fore, transforming medical issues into social and political ones. These offer us a chance to test the extent to which segregation could survive, and see how the medical reforms which were eventually forced upon the Hospital in 1896 symbolized the gradual ‘de-segregation’ of the Chinese community.”⁸² The conflicts that occurred in 1894-96 will be discussed later.

The uneasy relations between the colonial government and the Chinese community can also be found in the history of the Po Leung Kuk (Society for the Protection of Women and Children, founded in 1878). According to David Faure⁸³, another Hong Kong historian specializing in the study of rural Hong Kong, “The Hong Kong government was uncomfortable with these associations; for a long time, it did not quite know what they were, and by the time it did, it was suspicious that the Chinese leadership that was involved in voluntary associations might have harboured ulterior motives. The Po Leung Kuk, set up by Chinese merchants to protect women who had been sold into prostitution, would have been a case in point. The Hong Kong government agreed that poor young women snatched from their native villages should be saved, but did the Chinese directors of the Po Leung Kuk treat as well as they should the women it saved from prostitution? ...[T]he Westerners appointed to the commission to examine the activities of the Po Leung Kuk in 1892 were highly suspicious of the arrangements that had been made to marry off its inmates while the director of the Po Leung Kuk found the sense of fair play exhibited by these Westerners uncalled for even if not confrontational.”⁸⁴ One member of the commission even regarded the Po Leung Kuk as a secret society, saying that its activities were all carried out privately, without any public accountability. He also accused the Po Leung Kuk of assuming semi-judicial functions, out of step with its

⁸¹ Sinn, *Charity and power*, p.22.

⁸² Sinn, *Charity and power*, p.3.

⁸³ David Faure taught history in the Chinese University of Hong Kong before moving to the United Kingdom. He is now university lecturer in modern Chinese history at the University of Oxford.

⁸⁴ David Faure (ed.), *A documentary history of Hong Kong: society* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997), p.62.

original constitution.⁸⁵ What we can detect so far is in fact the growing fear among the government and leading members of the European community that the Chinese community was building up its own power base to rival against that of the colonial establishment.

With regard to the second theme, Sinn outlines how the Chinese merchants emerged to build their community and leadership among the Chinese populace: “The Chinese brought to Hong Kong, even after British occupation, their own ideas of social organization and leadership, and much of Hong Kong’s history can be understood in terms of their adaptation to colonial rule and to the special geo-political circumstances of Hong Kong. With these elements in the background, certain tendencies can be detected. In time, in terms of scale, small localized groups representing particularistic, sectarian interests gave way to larger and more universalistic groupings. In terms of status, the Chinese merchants’ increasing wealth and rate-paying ability transformed their self-image as well as their position vis-à-vis the government, the foreign communities, and the common people, and gradually led them to demand a greater voice in public affairs.”⁸⁶ On the surface, the colonial government did not care about how the Chinese grouped themselves together. Its greatest suspicion was over the so-called secret societies, whose members organized to engage in piracy or other anti-social acts. With regard to the Chinese merchants, the government had no objections, as long as they toed the line and did not exceed their social station. The Chinese merchants however had other ideas. They believed that, given their increasing financial power, they should have a greater public voice. It was exactly this point which brought about the conflicts: “We will see how this elite [Chinese merchant community] tried to perform its functions under a colonial government which neither understood nor appreciated sufficiently the social control exercised by informal Chinese power groups. Conflicts and confrontations were common, and the government’s dissatisfaction with the Hospital Committee’s influence over the local Chinese was finally instrumental in forcing it to reassess its own management strategy towards the Chinese community.”⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Chan Wai Kwan, *The making of the Hong Kong society: three studies of class formation in early Hong Kong* [hereafter as *Class formation*] (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp.127-128.

⁸⁶ Sinn, *Charity and power*, p.4.

⁸⁷ Sinn, *Charity and power*, p.4.

For the third theme, the China factor in colonial Hong Kong is subject to Sinn's close scrutiny. First of all, China's proximity to Hong Kong was a constant headache to the colonial government (even though the colonial government did not want to expose its own weakness in this regard). A more serious problem was China's reluctance to see Hong Kong as foreign territory, legally separated from China's control. To the Chinese officials, Hong Kong residents were still subject to Chinese law and jurisdiction. Or at least, the ethnic Chinese in Hong Kong were expected to positively respond to the calls of the Chinese government. This created a big problem: the problem of divided loyalty. The observations of Sinn are pertinent:

The struggle between the Chinese and Hong Kong governments for sovereignty over the Chinese in Hong Kong was long and bitter. Close connections with China – economic, familial, demographic, and political – made Chinese residents in Hong Kong susceptible to the influence and control of Chinese authorities, especially Canton's. It meant that besides a natural inclination to pay allegiance to the Chinese Emperor, vested interests made it additionally expedient to obey Chinese official instructions. This situation produced ambiguity, trapping the Chinese resident in Hong Kong in an ambivalent position as both the Chinese and Hong Kong governments claimed his allegiance and loyalty. It also enabled him, at other times, to play one government against the other, appealing to the one that could protect his interests more effectively on any particular occasion. This reveals the ambivalence of the Chinese resident in Hong Kong, sometimes serving two masters, sometimes serving none. The Tung Wah Hospital's experience effectively revealed this interplay of political forces, and the extent to which China's presence affected the making of government policy and the nature of the Chinese community itself.⁸⁸

So, in the eyes of the local Hong Kong Chinese, the China factor was not a simple and straightforward equation. It was not just a matter of ethnic affinity; rather it became a function of intricate political calculations. In this regard, it is questionable

⁸⁸ Sinn, *Charity and power*, pp.5-6.

whether Britain had really obtained and fully controlled Hong Kong and whether China had really ceded it unconditionally to the British.

The early history of the Tung Wah Hospital is therefore highly instrumental in explicating the dynamics of colonial Hong Kong. Sinn sums up well the basic situation: “The hospital situation illustrates a more fundamental reality – the government’s failure to understand and provide, and the Chinese determination to do things their own way. In practising non-intervention, the government found it convenient to ignore the Chinese community, spending taxes the Chinese paid on public facilities irrelevant to them. The Chinese in turn, distrustful of Europeans and obstinate in their own prejudices, looked to their own kind to solve problems in their own preferred way.”⁸⁹ Certainly, given its wide experience in managing different kinds of indigenous peoples in the colonial empire, Britain would not let the control of the Tung Wah slip away. It did it by legislation: the final powers over the Tung Wah Hospital remained in the hands of the Governor-in-Council. The circumspection of the government was not unfounded. The Hospital did not stop at providing a medical or hospital service to the Chinese; it always claimed to represent the Chinese community as a whole, in matters important to them all.⁹⁰ The unspoken assumption was that it was the second government of Hong Kong.⁹¹ It was natural that there were two conflicting views on the Tung Wah: the Europeans looked upon the Hospital as a potential usurper of government powers while the Chinese considered it their natural spokesman.⁹² The problem did not stop there. The fact that the Chinese merchants had to cultivate good connections with the Mainland Chinese officials was another sore point. As mentioned in the episode of the 1884 Strike and Riot, the Chinese merchants were subject to Mainland Chinese influence over anti-French actions. The Hong Kong colonial government was naturally apprehensive of this threatening link

⁸⁹ Sinn, *Charity and power*, p.29.

⁹⁰ Sinn, *Charity and power*, p.59.

⁹¹ The Tung Wah Hospital was made up of Hong Kong’s leading Chinese merchants. They believed that through their huge business success and charitable contributions, they could claim the leadership role among the local Chinese community. Indeed, many local Hong Kong Chinese deferred to Tung Wah Hospital for arbitration in legal and economic disputes. Generally, the colonial government had to rely on the collaboration of this pivotal group as well, reinforcing the sense of importance among the Tung Wah directors. Aided by strong local knowledge and connections with Mainland Chinese officials, they could perform functions quite beyond the reach of the colonial government of Hong Kong. See also Munn, *Anglo-China*, pp.371-373.

⁹² Sinn, *Charity and power*, p.83.

which might disrupt colonial governance. The colonial government was looking for opportunities to rein in the Tung Wah.

The chance came with the onset of the 1894 plague, as explained by Sinn: “The bubonic plague of 1894 ... marked a turning point. As a hospital, it naturally became involved right from the start, but the plague also led it to a bitter confrontation with the government which ended not only its autonomy in medical matters, but also its final autonomy as an informal power group”⁹³ The key point here is that the colonial government, in view of the seriousness of the plague, had refused to allow the Tung Wah to continue using traditional Chinese methods in treating the plague victims. They insisted in applying the Western method of total disinfection of the plague area (Tai Ping Shan district) which meant a direct intrusion into and cleansing of this area, against the will of the local Chinese inhabitants there, and in spite of the Tung Wah protestations. The government’s reply to the Hospital’s protestations was blunt and offensive: it condemned the Hospital for obstructing government policy and misleading the people against the government.⁹⁴ Adding to the fuel of the conflict was the racist overtone among the Europeans, as described by Sinn, “The plague was from the beginning identified as ‘Chinese’, not only because it had originated in China, but also, more tellingly, because it was carried by Chinese and recognized as a consequence of filthy, poor, Chinese habits. Neither the government nor the local English-language press disguised the fact that the main object of the sanitary measures was to prevent plague from spreading from the Chinese to the European community.”⁹⁵ What the government had ignored was its own responsibility in providing a more decent living environment for the labouring poor. Such finger-pointing was nothing more than an expression of colonial insensitivity.

For the Tung Wah Hospital, the most serious point was that it was unable to shield the Chinese patients from Western doctors and the house-to-house visits.⁹⁶ The Chinese population’s anger was subsequently directed at Lau Wai Chuen [Liu Weichuan], the Chairman of the Tung Wah Hospital, something totally unheard of in

⁹³ Sinn, *Charity and power*, p.159.

⁹⁴ Sinn, *Charity and power*, p.168.

⁹⁵ Sinn, *Charity and power*, p.180.

⁹⁶ Sinn, *Charity and power*, p.164.

the past.⁹⁷ To add to Tung Wah's humiliation, in 1896, the government conducted an enquiry into the working and organization of the Tung Wah Hospital with the specific purpose of finding out whether the Hospital was fulfilling the object and purpose of its incorporation or not.⁹⁸ The concluding remarks of Sinn are clear enough: "That an enquiry was instituted at all was a blatant loss of face for the Hospital. Some of the Commission's recommendations, which the Government forced on the Hospital, struck at the very basis of its autonomy. The fundamental issue was not whether a Western-trained doctor should be recruited but whether the Hospital Committee was able, as an independent informal power group, to resist the change, and whether, as defenders of the Chinese community, to keep it 'Chinese'. This ability, as we have pointed out, was one of the prerequisites of leadership."⁹⁹ The prestige of the Tung Wah as the leaders of the Chinese community declined precipitously. Their ability to mediate Chinese affairs dropped markedly and by the 1920s they were no longer considered as legitimate leaders of the Chinese community. Some Chinese workers even called them *yangnu*, slaves of the foreign imperialists.¹⁰⁰ While the Tung Wah suffered, it remains an open question whether the colonial government had really won the war in regaining a firmer grasp of governance over Hong Kong. Hong Kong in the early 20th century was not an easy place to govern at all. The occurrence of numerous strikes in the 1910s and 1920s testified to the difficulty.

(E) Specific Case (II): Class Formation in Early Hong Kong

Chan Wai Kwan's findings represent another aspect of the voice of Hong Kong.¹⁰¹ He is able to refute the British colonial narrative of tarnishing the character of the Chinese population (calling them the filth and scum of Canton) in Hong Kong. He is also able to question the Chinese communist narrative that the history of Hong Kong was a matter of a simple and straightforward class-struggle between the colonialists and the Chinese labouring class.¹⁰² Through a careful historical and sociological analysis, he has succeeded in giving us a more holistic picture: one of the political supremacy of the British and the economic indispensability of the Chinese,

⁹⁷ Sinn, *Charity and power*, p.166.

⁹⁸ Sinn, *Charity and power*, p.196.

⁹⁹ Sinn, *Charity and power*, p.207.

¹⁰⁰ Sinn, *Charity and power*, p.210.

¹⁰¹ Chan Wai Kwan received his PhD from the University of Essex.

¹⁰² Chan, *Class formation*, p.3.

and in terms of the relationship between the British and the local Chinese population, one of political and racial hostility mixed with economic interdependence in the China trade.¹⁰³ His research focuses on the study of three major classes in colonial Hong Kong: the British traders, the Chinese merchants, and the Chinese labourers.

According to Chan: “Because the British traders [including the European traders in general] had been a closely knit community in Canton, when they moved to Hong Kong they naturally brought with them their collective identity and social relations. They were thus the first major ‘class’ that appeared in Hong Kong.”¹⁰⁴ As a class, they considered themselves superior, this sense of superiority being derived from several factors: their position as conquerors and founders of the colony, their close relations with the colonial government, their familiarity with the colonial commercial and legal framework, and the lack of competition from (because of the absence of) an established gentry class made up of the local population.¹⁰⁵ Through the creation of exclusive clubs such as the Hong Kong Club, and the fostering of a re-invented and high-class life-style, they were able to build up a status-oriented community with a recognized leadership of their own. As Chan remarks, “Although competition for status and prestige among the Europeans might be fierce, the stable ranking order it established bound them together, rather than tearing them apart. As a result it strengthened them against any possible opposition from the mass of alien and often hostile Chinese whom they subordinated.”¹⁰⁶

Any sense of superiority aside, the British traders could not subsist on their own: they needed the assistance of Chinese trading partners and the service of Chinese labourers. As Chan explains their situation: “Because of their inability or unwillingness to communicate with the coolies whose labour they required, the Europeans were forced into a mutually dependent relationship with a group of middlemen: the Chinese who could communicate both with them and with the workers. Some of these, mainly the compradors, were directly in their employ, while others were their business associates.”¹⁰⁷ Chan continues to explain how this system

¹⁰³ Chan, *Class formation*, p.5.

¹⁰⁴ Chan, *Class formation*, p.11.

¹⁰⁵ Chan, *Class formation*, p.11.

¹⁰⁶ Chan, *Class formation*, p.193.

¹⁰⁷ Chan, *Class formation*, p.55.

of compradore collaboration worked, saying that "...it was through middle agents like the compradores that the Jardine taipans were able to enlist the essential labour of the Chinese workers, without having to deal directly with them. As such the compradore represented not just an individual but a mechanism of appropriation of labour power which the Europeans could comfortably control."¹⁰⁸

Seen from this angle, the Chinese merchant and compradore class became indispensable in colonial Hong Kong. And as the volume of trade grew, the economic power of this class grew accordingly. They had in fact become a distinct group capable of rivalling the social and political power of the British.¹⁰⁹ They had an added advantage over the British, as Chan explains, "Though politically subordinate to the British colonists, they had the advantage of being closer to the Chinese labourers, which enabled them to assume positions of leadership in the Chinese population. In this manner they not only strengthened themselves as a class but also helped bring about order within society. The formation of this Chinese merchant class was therefore a crucial process in the social development of Hong Kong."¹¹⁰ Chan reminds us that wealth and power are not a simple equation. The Chinese merchants had to earn their recognition by substantially contributing to community affairs. They did so by organizing associations such as the Tung Wah Hospital and the Po Leung Kuk, showing that they were philanthropic-minded enough to earn their elevated social status. Yet, the Chinese merchant class was not altruistic, pure and simple. As a class, they wanted to reinforce their class importance and to reap the advantages out of it. Chan gives us a succinct explanation: "Despite the altruistic and philanthropic outlook, their sacrifices often brought them economic and political advantages which perpetuated their privileged positions, even though these advantages might not have been intended. From the beginning when Loo Aking [Lu Ajing, alias Lu Agui] built a gambling house for the poor in 1843, where the poor not only rested but lost money and continued to be poor, the generosity turned out to be a form of investment with which further class advantages could be reaped."¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Chan, *Class formation*, p.60.

¹⁰⁹ Chan, *Class formation*, p.11.

¹¹⁰ Chan, *Class formation*, p.11.

¹¹¹ Chan, *Class formation*, p.99.

Indeed, once the Chinese merchant class had established and entrenched themselves in high social and class positions, they began to move away from the Chinese mass in general. It is because social distance was a key ingredient in class formation. Chan gives us a clear example of their behaviour: "...in 1901, the foreign residents petitioned the government to establish a school for European children in order to prevent their mixture with Asiatic school children. Actually, six months before their petition was made, the Chinese merchants had made a similar petition for a government school to be founded exclusively for their children."¹¹² One should not easily jump to the conclusion that they were exhibiting double standards. The issue of race and class interests is not a simple equation. If the British colonialists and traders were exploitative, then the Chinese merchants were equally guilty of exploiting their compatriots (i.e. the Chinese labourers). If the British wanted to racially segregate themselves from the Chinese, then the Chinese merchant class also wanted to socially segregate itself from the poor and labouring mass. Indeed, one might argue that the Chinese merchant class was more exploitative. Many of the big compradors were labour contractors themselves and through the control of the labour contract system, they were able to push down wages, squeezing the Chinese labourers to a mere subsistence level. Equally, as property-owners and landlords, they could manipulate the rents to their own advantage. As a result, the Chinese labouring class suffered a double deprivation from their own countrymen. The story of the poor living conditions of the labouring Chinese is highly illustrative, as elaborated by Chan: "...the Chinese leaders [i.e. the Chinese merchant class as a whole] tried to convince the government and themselves that the Chinese population were content with these [living] conditions and would not like any changes, even if these changes were to bring improvements to their living conditions. But the reality was that the Chinese labourers lived in overcrowded and insanitary conditions not by choice but by compulsion. The cost of building was severely constrained by two things: the high cost of land and site preparation, and the low rent-paying ability of the labourers due to their low wages. In addition, many cabins were administered by the owners' 'compradores', who, in all likelihood, were linked to, if not identical with, labour contractors. It was in the interest of these compradores and labour contractors to raise

¹¹² Chan, *Class formation*, p.138.

the price of houses and lower the wages of labourers. The only way these two opposing conditions could be met was by constructing poor quality houses.”¹¹³

So in general, the economic and social situation of the Chinese labourers was one of poverty and deprivation. It was difficult for them to recognize and organize themselves as a class capable of advancing their own interests. They had to wait until the early 20th century before they could really establish themselves as a class with a sense of solidarity. Chan gives us a neat description on how they developed in the 1920s:

A breakthrough came in 1920 when the skilled mechanics organized a successful industrial action against their employers. In 1922 the Chinese seamen confronted their employers with a demand for higher wages and went on strike when their demand was not met. Persecution of the Seamen’s Union by the authorities led to an all-out sympathetic strike involving nearly all other trades in the colony. By demonstrating their ability to paralyse the economy of the colony, the seamen obtained a settlement in terms much to their favour. Their victory was quickly followed by similar demands from other occupational groups, with the result that a general round of wage increases followed. Through the seamen’s strike, labourers of various occupations were drawn together into a collectivity capable of developing solidarity and struggling for their class benefits. The strike also marked the breach of the labourers from the Chinese merchants, who appeared as adversaries rather than leaders of the public in the course of the strike. In other words, the strike brought the contradiction between capital and labour, inherent in the relationship between merchants and labourers, into the open. It also marked the perfection of labourer into a social class in opposition to the Chinese and European merchant classes.¹¹⁴

It was the time when the leaders of the labouring class condemned the Tung Wah directors as running dogs of foreign imperialism, signalling the onset of a new era in the Chinese labour movement.

¹¹³ Chan, *Class formation*, p.153.

¹¹⁴ Chan, *Class formation*, pp.195-196.

The class analysis of early Hong Kong would not be complete without mentioning the condition of the European working class of the time. Luckily the gap has been filled by Henry Lethbridge, a sociologist in the University of Hong Kong. He classifies them into five broad groups: (1) beachcombers; (2) police or those with quasi-police functions: inspectors, supervisors, and overseers in the government employ; (3) soldiers, sailors, and merchant seamen; (4) mechanics, artisans, and others in low status occupations; and (5) outcastes.¹¹⁵ A number of European prostitutes occupied the last group of outcastes. In terms of their social life, it was rather familiar to see the soldiers and sailors drink excessively (out of boredom and isolation) and become infected with venereal diseases (through prostitution).¹¹⁶ Why did the lower class Europeans come to and remain in Hong Kong? Lethbridge gives us some ideas: "Some, such as beachcombers, were at the end of the line, at the end of their tether; they were trapped there (temporarily at least) by poverty, circumstances, and character. Soldiers and sailors, and merchant seamen were transients or temporary sojourners; and the decision to come to Hong Kong was made not by them but by their superior. Inspectors, supervisors, and overseers stayed in Hong Kong primarily because most experienced a degree of upward mobility...Lastly, many inspectors had served in the army, navy, or merchant marine; the jobs they took in Hong Kong usually satisfied their instinct for hierarchy, order, and discipline."¹¹⁷ In terms of social relations with the upper (merchant) class Europeans, the lower class European suffered many disadvantages. They were excluded from the exclusive clubs and they had little say in the colonial government. Those at the top often considered these lower classes as lowering the prestige of the white man in the East.¹¹⁸ What about their relationships with the local Chinese population? Basically, there existed a level of mutual contempt and misunderstanding between the two groups. But it did not stop some working class Europeans having illicit relationships with Chinese women (particularly of Tanka origin who were regarded as social outcastes as well). But generally they had to live a life of relative isolation, as Lethbridge concludes, "A working class European was excluded both from polite European and Chinese society;

¹¹⁵ Henry Lethbridge, "Condition of the European working class in nineteenth century Hong Kong" in Henry Lethbridge, *Hong Kong: stability and change, a collection of essays* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1978), p.191.

¹¹⁶ Lethbridge, pp.201-203.

¹¹⁷ Lethbridge, pp.205-206.

¹¹⁸ Lethbridge, p.208.

he was forced to live in his own constricted social world, a type of marginal man; and those Europeans who married Chinese women tended to cluster together socially, to form their own minority group.”¹¹⁹

Combining the findings of Chan and Lethbridge, a class analysis of early Hong Kong gives us a colourful picture of the colonial society: it was a multifaceted and complex society with each of the social components trying to carve out their own destiny and identity. Though there was a system of hierarchies, each member was a historical agent hoping to make a mark on history. A simple picture of the rulers and the ruled cannot tell a true and interesting story of Hong Kong.

(F) Specific Case (III): Hong Kong-Guangdong Links

The following is a more detailed and specific analysis of the Hong Kong-China links. Here the contributions of Ming K. Chan are most remarkable. His general thesis is that Hong Kong has traditionally had to achieve a precarious balance in the long history of Sino-British conflict. He argues that: “Hong Kong under British rule was a direct result of the first major Sino-British conflict in modern times. Since its origin, Hong Kong has remained both a focal point and an arena, and sometimes the bone of contention or even a hostage, in Sino-British conflicts.”¹²⁰ Again as a result of the “infamous” origin of Hong Kong, the triangular relationship between China, Hong Kong and Britain was ambiguous, as Ming Chan explains, “The Chinese state... considers Hong Kong under the British flag an affront to Chinese sovereignty and national pride and has seldom been able to look at it in a positive light. On the other hand, the Chinese living in Hong Kong have complex and mixed feelings toward the colony and the British rulers because of their loyalty to their motherland and their resentment toward colonial discrimination.”¹²¹ Problems of governance (as those of the 1920s) occurred usually when the colonial government of Hong Kong was not sensitive to this basic fact, as a British diplomat had reflected in 1922, “The root of all trouble in the modern years between Hong Kong and South China is laid in the fact

¹¹⁹ Lethbridge, p.210.

¹²⁰ Ming K. Chan, “Hong Kong in Sino-British conflict: mass mobilization and the crisis of legitimacy, 1912-26,” in Ming K. Chan (ed.) *Precaious balance: Hong Kong between China and Britain, 1842-1992* [hereafter as *Precaious balance*] (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press, 1994), p.27.

¹²¹ Chan, *Precaious balance*, p.28.

that Hong Kong appears to be governed as a part of the mainland of England entirely for the British, without regard for the fact that in origin and in reality Hong Kong is part of the mainland of China and is inhabited mainly by Chinese.”¹²² Given the basic paternalism and arrogance of British colonialism, it would be difficult for the colonial regime to heed his message.

With specific reference to Guangdong, the close linkages mean that the issue of sensitivity is even more pronounced. The basic fact remains that the two places are inseparable: “The sense of community and belonging between the people of Hong Kong and Guangdong has been so strong and pervasive in human, cultural, social, and economic terms that an old saying, ‘the province and Hong Kong as one family’ (*XiangGang yijia*), is a very apt characterization of their many overlapping ties and multiple linkages despite their divergent developmental paths and different political jurisdiction.”¹²³ The linkages, however, were not all of a benign nature. Hong Kong and Guangzhou were once rival port cities competing for dominance in international trade and regional traffic in the 19th century since 1842. “Many Guangdong natives never really “forgave” Hong Kong as a British colonial creation whose prosperity was achieved at the expense of Guangzhou’s pre-eminence as the economic hub of south China.”¹²⁴ The abolition of the Guangzhou-controlled Cohong System and the opening of the four additional treaty ports had ended Guangzhou’s foreign trade monopoly. Adding to the damage was the rise of Hong Kong as the key entrepot in South China, displacing the role of Guangzhou. It seemed that Guangzhou’s loss was Hong Kong’s gain.¹²⁵

This argument is not without some grounds. The explanation of Ming Chan is clear:

After the British occupation of Hong Kong in 1841, thousands of Chinese from the Pearl River Delta flooded the colony, where they found employment and took up residence. The Chinese population in Hong Kong rose from 12,361 in 1842 to 69,251 by 1856. In view of the depression in Guangdong,

¹²² Quoted in Chan, *Prekarious balance*, p.54.

¹²³ Chan, *HK-Guangdong*, p.32.

¹²⁴ Chan, *HK-Guangdong*, p.32.

¹²⁵ Chan, *HK-Guangdong*, p.35.

Hong Kong's development meant economic opportunities for which the people should have been grateful. Yet, fresh from their humiliating defeat by the British, and still suffering from the subsequent economic disaster, the people of Guangdong were extremely sensitive to further foreign infringements on their interests and assaults on their pride. As Hong Kong was snatched away by the British in revenge for the Guangzhou Cohong System, the colony soon became the symbol of British imperialism and thus the target of patriotic outbursts in Guangdong. In this sense, the frontline of defense for Guangdong started with the Chinese in the colony.¹²⁶

It is with this historical background in mind that we can have a better understanding of why the Chinese officials (in Guangdong particularly) had urged the Hong Kong Chinese to act in defiance of the colonial government in Hong Kong. Such episodes occurred during the Second Opium War, the Sino-French War over Annam, and most ominously during the Guangzhou-Hong Kong General Strikes of 1925-26. In each of these cases, the Hong Kong colonial government panicked because the local Hong Kong people were subject to immense pressures from Guangdong. The exodus from Hong Kong could effectively paralyse the colony and behind the exodus was the political and economic support of Guangdong in providing shelter and leverage to their Hong Kong Chinese compatriots. The strikes in the 1920s almost wrecked Hong Kong. With reference to Hong Kong historiography, it reminds us that Hong Kong history cannot be isolated from the China or Guangdong factor.

This is exactly the starting point of Jung-fang Tsai's *Hong Kong in Chinese History*. He argues that his approach is to capture the real "lives, activities, aspirations and feelings of the great majority of the Chinese population in Hong Kong," and his book "seeks to explore the social reality hidden behind the veneer of prosperity, stability, and harmony so often portrayed by the colony's dominant groups and ruling elite."¹²⁷ But most importantly, Hong Kong history has to be seen in the context of its Hong Kong-China connection. This is what he puts forward:

¹²⁶ Chan, *HK-Guangdong*, p.42.

¹²⁷ Tsai, *Hong Kong*, p.6.

Unlike most books on Hong Kong that are too Hong Kong-centered, this is a study of Hong Kong in Chinese history. Events in the British colony are studied in the context of the history of China in modern times. Hence the title of this book, *Hong Kong in Chinese History*. Since the very beginning the development of the port of Hong Kong has been closely related to the political and socioeconomic conditions of the Chinese mainland and the Sino-foreign relations. For this reason, Hong Kong cannot be studied in isolation.

Constantly subject to the repercussions from the changing political and socioeconomic conditions outside the colony, all major events in Hong Kong have been the results of interactions between local and external forces. In examining the community and social unrest in Hong Kong, this book pursues a number of linkages—between national politics and local interests, between events in Canton and those in Hong Kong, and between elements of the Chinese diaspora throughout the Pacific basin.¹²⁸

More importantly, Tsai is able to dispel the myth that Hong Kong's historical development was "a story of continuous growth and stability with a politically apathetic Chinese population. Rather, the development was punctuated by a long series of social crises in which both coolies and merchants expressed their dissatisfaction with British rule."¹²⁹ Colonial historiography can no longer prevail with this kind of critical reassessment.

(G) Specific Case (IV): Pros and Cons of Colonialism

Hong Kong historians have a basically open mind about the performance of colonialism in Hong Kong. To them there is no need to be an uncritical trumpeter or denouncer of Hong Kong's colonial system. All judgements have to be arrived at rationally and based on facts and evidence. In the eyes of Steve Tsang, British colonial rule in Hong Kong was not a simple black-and-white issue. He even concedes that the Hong Kong colonial government was preferable to the Chinese alternative: "...from its earliest days the British government of Hong Kong was accepted by the local Chinese residents if not simply as a good government, then at

¹²⁸ Tsai, *Hong Kong*, p.8.

¹²⁹ Tsai, *Hong Kong*, p.292.

least as one preferable to what they found in mother China.”¹³⁰ Even at the height of the civil disturbances in the 1920s or the 1960s there was no call for the overthrow of the colonial government and a retrocession of Hong Kong to China. According to the same historian, the Hong Kong Chinese seemed to be quite satisfied with the colonial rule: “Most Chinese who have lived in Hong Kong probably have never given much thought to whether the Hong Kong government was a good one, still less whether it measured up to that of as good a government as possible in traditional expectations. Nevertheless the lack of any indigenous rebellion against the alien British rule in over 150 years, and Hong Kong’s continuous attraction to Chinese immigrants, suggest they have voted with their deeds and feet.”¹³¹ Tsang continues to argue that: “[t]he government which the British established in Hong Kong in the nineteenth century was simple but efficient for what was required of it. There was little, if anything, in terms of administration, that the non-demanding Chinese had expected of the government which was not handled with reasonable expedition.”¹³²

We can see that Tsang has been measuring the Hong Kong colonial government with reference to that of traditional China and he believes that on this account the colonial government performed reasonably well. He comments: “As far as fairness was concerned, the Chinese were basically satisfied. Despite the fact that the Hong Kong authorities had at times adopted summary measures somewhat arbitrarily, such as cutting off the queues of many Chinese for minor offences or requiring Chinese residents to carry lanterns and passes after dark in the mid-nineteenth century, they compared well with what the Chinese were used to expecting from officialdom in their own country.”¹³³ Tsang is particularly impressed with the “non-intrusiveness” of the government: “In regard to the extent of government intrusion into the private life of the Chinese, Hong Kong had a record of non-intrusion probably second to none in the modern world. The British administration was merely interested in providing the basic political and legal infrastructure for all residents. The non-interfering ethos of the government is reflected in the fact that for almost a century it levied no income tax, imposed no immigration control on the Sino-Hong Kong border, and organized only a

¹³⁰ Steve Tsang (ed.), *A documentary history of Hong Kong: government and politics* [hereafter as *Documentary history*] (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1995), p.5.

¹³¹ Tsang, *Documentary history*, p.5.

¹³² Tsang, *Documentary history*, p.5.

¹³³ Tsang, *Documentary history*, p.5.

haphazard registration of birth. It also made no attempt to convert the Chinese to a British way of life, nor to direct the economy, nor to attempt a restructuring of the social order. Even when the government turned, from the Chinese point of view, intrusive over sanitary matters towards the end of the last century in the midst of a plague, it merely intended to tackle a pressing health and sanitary problem. Indeed, most Chinese residents in the first century of British rule had little to do with the government.”¹³⁴

It would be wrong to say that Tsang has no adverse comments on the colonial government. In the aspect of honesty, for example, he is critical enough to point out that whilst the senior government officials were basically honest, many of the lower functionaries were corrupt. Tsang gives the following elaborations:

In fact...the Hong Kong government was basically honest, particularly at the senior level. But this was of no relevance to the ordinary Chinese who almost never dealt with senior officials directly and would draw their conclusions on the basis of their dealings with government functionaries, many of whom were corrupt. However, the highly non-intrusive nature of the government meant contact even at this level was minimal, and thus corruption was less of a problem. Furthermore, the strict separation between senior officials and functionaries in pre-war Hong Kong meant the latter, who dealt with the people, could not affect government policy or the administration of justice. It reduced the opportunities for major corruption. The negative side to this situation was that petty corruption was rampant among functionaries as senior officials were somewhat out of touch and did not do much about it. On the whole, the Hong Kong government before 1941 passed the test of traditional Chinese expectations of a good government, but it did not score particularly highly.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Tsang, *Documentary history*, pp.5-6. However, one can certainly query the rationale behind the “light-handedness”: could it mean the government did not really care about the welfare of the people or it had not assumed a more responsible role in governing Hong Kong.

¹³⁵ Tsang, *Documentary history*, p.6. But obviously, the Hong Kong colonial government could have done much more. The Chinese were not really so “non-demanding” but they could hardly expect anything from an uncaring colonial government.

Overall, then, Tsang's assessment on the colonial government is basically positive. But he is not without his critics. Christopher Munn, for one, raises the question about the "non-intrusiveness" of the colonial government. He does not believe that the local population was "lightly governed". He puts his argument in the following manner: "...the paradigm of 'non-intervention' or 'indirect rule', so often used to characterize the relations between government and Chinese inhabitants in Hong Kong and usually applied specifically to the early decades of colonial rule, appears to be inappropriate. An intensively policed community whose members were forbidden to walk the streets without a pass after nightfall and statistically stood a one in ten chance in any given year of appearing before an English magistrate can hardly be described as lightly governed."¹³⁶ In the eyes of Munn, issues like the night-pass were an infringement of people's liberty whereas Tsang does not regard the same thing too seriously, believing that traditional Chinese governance could be even more oppressive. Again, Munn disputes the early colonial government was a fair government. With reference to the criminal justice system, Munn "has attempted to show that English justice in early Hong Kong, even at its highest levels, was not the neutral, beneficent institution that some historians have assumed it to be: rather, it was a rickety, unpredictable contraption that failed to deliver justice, systematically handicapped Chinese defendants, and required extensive tinkering before it could begin to offer the security demanded by colonists for themselves and their property."¹³⁷ In support of his argument, Munn has particularly cited the remark of Governor MacDonnell (1866-72) on the English criminal justice system, saying that it was an instrument for "the '*self-preservation* and protection' of a beleaguered European colonial elite against the '*migratory refuse* of many millions of Chinese'."¹³⁸

On the issues of "non-intrusiveness" and "corruption", Lethbridge tells of an episode related to the 1894 plague, and this could serve as a critical reminder to Tsang's positive assessment: "That corruption always flourished in Hong Kong is indisputable; that its forms have not markedly changed can be demonstrated. The real

¹³⁶ Christopher Munn, "The criminal trial under early colonial rule" [hereafter as *Criminal trial*] in Wing-tak Ngo (ed.), *Hong Kong's history: state and society under colonial rule* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.67.

¹³⁷ Munn, *Criminal trial*, p.68.

¹³⁸ Munn, *Criminal trial*, p.47, original italic.

problem is to determine how far the practice infected the higher levels of government, and that is not easy. At lower levels it was rampant and institutionalised, a customary habit known to all. Every government attempt to enforce its prohibitory and regulatory laws normally created fresh opportunities for the corrupt. Thus, in the 1890s, legislation designed to force all house-holders to whitewash their homes regularly (a precautionary measure to control endemic plague in Taipingshan) directly encouraged corruption; it did so by providing an opportunity for sanitary inspectors to report the whitewashing as having been done when clearly it had not. No one checked their reports. And if someone had, no doubt he too might have been susceptible to bribery.”¹³⁹ There was no doubt that some actions of the “whitewash brigade” were both corrupt and intrusive. Even though we do not need to denounce colonialism in a wholesale and uncritical manner, there is still a need to pinpoint the inadequacies of this system whenever and wherever they occurred historically. This is exactly what Munn has offered us: “... in our questioning of the colonial interpretation we should be careful not to assume that Hong Kong’s early history can only be explained in terms of unrelieved colonial oppression. We need to locate exactly where the oppression took place, how far it was restrained by ideological or practical limitations, foiled by resistance or evasion, and tempered by collaboration or co-operation.”¹⁴⁰

(H) Conclusion: Towards a Hong Kong Historical Perspective

Some basic facts: Hong Kong was a British colony inhabited by a Chinese majority. Over time, Hong Kong has transformed itself to become an open and international city, but its Chinese characteristics remain indelible. History is a product of the society. Colonial historiography has made its marks on Hong Kong because the colony was once ruled by a British colonial government. Colonial historians such as Eitel and Endacott could not have written about Hong Kong in any other way than they did.¹⁴¹ Their intellectual products reflect the historical ethos of their respective times. Their books are therefore historical records themselves, giving us more than what they have written on paper. By reading between the lines we are able to decipher

¹³⁹ H.J. Lethbridge, *Hard craft in Hong Kong: scandal, corruption, the ICAC* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.24.

¹⁴⁰ Munn, *Criminal trial*, pp.67-68.

¹⁴¹ Alan Birch, “Approaches to Hong Kong history” in David Faure, James Hayes and Alan Birch (eds.) *From village to city: studies in the traditional roots of Hong Kong society* (Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1984), p.229.

the unspoken assumptions of these historians and the age in which they lived. Equally, Mainland Chinese historians such as Liu Shuyong, Liu Cunkuan and Yu Shengwu have offered us not just a glimpse of the Hong Kong history they want us to know. Their intellectual products tell us also about the Chinese society and political environment under which they have worked. The connections between society and history apply equally to the Hong Kong historians. The group of twenty or so Hong Kong historians under investigation in this thesis has emerged from rather diverse backgrounds, which are inscribed on their products. Some of them have tended to lean more closely towards the British or the Mainland Chinese viewpoints. There is nothing “wrong” about this as long as their judgements are supported by enough historical evidence and are not fettered by pure personal temperament or bias. Indeed, some of the British and Chinese viewpoints are correct in themselves. The majority of the Hong Kong historians, however, have moved away from these viewpoints and towards a more autonomous path. They have demonstrated a high degree of intellectual maturity by showing the inadequacies and constraints of both the British and Chinese historiographies. They believe that they can handle the topics of Hong Kong history more competently and that their Hong Kong perspective is closer to historical reality. A few examples will be used to illustrate my point.

After compiling and selecting a whole range of historical documents of Hong Kong, Steve Tsang has come to the following conclusions: that, though there was corruption at the lower levels, British colonial rule was not basically exploitative; that the colonial government was preferable to the Mainland Chinese one; that it was basically fair, non-intrusive and expeditiously met popular needs; and that the Chinese people came to Hong Kong out of economic imperatives and not to spread political chaos.¹⁴² Tsang is most emphatic that we should not uncritically discredit the British colonial record in Hong Kong. Fok Kai-cheong, previously a lecturer in the University of Hong Kong, however, comes closer to the Mainland Chinese viewpoint. To Fok, Hong Kong history has to be studied with reference to China and it has to take on a patriotic hue, and help to instill a sense of patriotism among students:

¹⁴² Tsang, *Documentary history*, pp.1-6.

Certainly, the study of Hong Kong history is not confined to the study of the development of Hong Kong alone. We need to take notice of the linkages between Hong Kong and the rest of the world, especially the close connections with China. With Hong Kong returning to China, and as a Special Administrative Region, the younger generations of Hong Kong residents should naturally have a basic and correct understanding of the development of modern Chinese history, traditional Chinese culture and the recent political changes in China. As well as that, it is important to know about the historical, cultural, economic and political linkages between Hong Kong and China. Knowing these will enhance people's national and patriotic consciousness. The Hong Kong Chinese will be proud of being Chinese. They will also respect Chinese culture and tradition. They will understand that historically, Hong Kong has been contributing to China's economic development. They will naturally be glad to contribute to China's future economic development. At the same time, they will realize the importance of how China has maintained the stability and prosperity of the Hong Kong region...

Secondly, the skills derived from the study of Hong Kong history will also help the Hong Kong people to take up civic duties in the future Hong Kong society.¹⁴³

The majority of the Hong Kong historians have focused on re-evaluating the British and Chinese historical narratives. Ngo Tak-wing, for one, is emphatic in denouncing the British colonial approaches: "The first is the one-dimensional view that reduces complex and multi-faceted dimensions of colonial rule to the story of a benevolent colonial state exercising indirect rule over an apathetic society. The second is the static view of colonial rule that slights the agency of such diverse actors as the ruling elite, business classes, compradors, rural interests, social activists, marginalized groups, etc. in shaping colonial rule in Hong Kong."¹⁴⁴ His picture of Hong Kong is a complex and intricate one, revealing many aspects that sit uncomfortably and inconsistently with the colonial grand narratives. The

¹⁴³ Fok Kai-cheong, *Xianggangshi jiaoxue cankao ziliao* [Reference Materials for Teaching Hong Kong History] (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., 1995), pp.4-5. Fok's judgement might be affected by his affiliations with Mainland Chinese historians. See footnote 11 of this chapter.

¹⁴⁴ Ngo, p.xi.

contributions of Elizabeth Sinn and Chan Wai Kwan are most prominent in this regard.

With a similar vigour, Tsai attacks the weaknesses of the Chinese patriotic historical scholarship: “First, using Marxist-Leninist historical perspectives as the basis, they [the Mainland Chinese historians] condemn imperialism’s aggression on China and colonialism’s exploitation of the Chinese. Second, they have used rather extensive space to cover how imperialism launched the wars to seize Hong Kong, Kowloon and the New Territories. Third, they have also used extensive space to discuss Sino-British diplomatic negotiations and relations. Fourth, they emphasize the Chinese contributions to Hong Kong’s economic development. Fifth, they emphasize that Hong Kong has been China’s sacred territory since time immemorial and that the Hong Kong people passionately loved the mother country and constantly launched heroic anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggles. Sixth, they strongly affirm the basic identity of interest between the Hong Kong people and the mainland Chinese people. Both had a common task in resisting capitalistic imperialism. Seventh, using China as the centre, and adopting a Chinese stand in studying Hong Kong history, they consider Hong Kong as just a part of China with no special characteristics or rights. The anti-imperialist movements of the Hong Kong people were part of the Chinese patriotic democratic movement. If there was any conflict of interest between Hong Kong and China, then China would be given the priority.”¹⁴⁵

To the Hong Kong historians, the crude Marxist-Leninist or anti-imperialist approach has no particular appeal. The Hong Kong Chinese had not automatically or unconditionally responded to China’s anti-imperialist patriotic calls. When they did react accordingly, it was more in conjunction with other pragmatic considerations. Hong Kong was not just the arena for Sino-British diplomacy. Even though not independent, the colony and its local Chinese population could and did have their own skills of negotiation and survival whilst walking a precarious tightrope. Ming K. Chan has clarified this point with force and effectiveness. Lastly, the Hong Kong historians argue that Hong Kong must have its own special character: even though it was and is unquestionably a part of China, it has shown, throughout its colonial history, that it

¹⁴⁵ Jung-fang Tsai, *Xianggangren zhi Xianggangshi* [The Hong Kong people’s history of Hong Kong] [hereafter as *People’s history*] (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.7.

was also separated apart from the motherland. The Hong Kong historians' ability to speak the voice(s) of Hong Kong shows that these historians are a generation worthy of being called the "Hong Kong People", the demographic foundation of the Hong Kong School of historiography. The remarks of Wang Gungwu¹⁴⁶ are suitable for our conclusion:

The outside settlers began to settle down and the native inhabitants were open to the world. Through a continuous and homogenizing education system, a new social consciousness began to form. In the 1970s, deriving from the Chinese cultural values, an independent Hong Kong consciousness emerged. It was different from the mainstream consciousness of Britain and China. The new word 'Hong Kong People' was able to include its characteristics and it is because of this that we decided to conduct a complete review of the existing histories written on Hong Kong. A new generation of historians, including many scholars from the University of Hong Kong and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, began to pursue their discourses on the Hong Kong story. Their main contributions were their attention on the Hong Kong Chinese: How did they form themselves? What forces drove them to move forward? What woke them to respond from their heart? What did they want to say? At the same time, Western historians were still concerned about the achievements Hong Kong made as a political and economic entity. And then firstly from Mainland China and secondly from Taiwan, their historians were also interested to write Hong Kong history from a Chinese perspective. But new perspectives have to come from the local historians. They let us know the origins of the concept of the 'Hong Kong People' and the process in which they came to the forefront.¹⁴⁷

The group of Hong Kong historians mentioned has fulfilled Professor Wang Gungwu's expectations. The Hong Kong Chinese organized themselves in a typical Chinese manner within the opportunities offered by British colonialism. The quest for money and power (merchants) and the struggle for survival and social improvement

¹⁴⁶ Wang Gungwu served as the Vice-Chancellor in the University of Hong Kong.

¹⁴⁷ Wang Gungwu (ed.), Preface to *Xianggangshi Xinpian* [Hong Kong history: new perspectives] v. 1 (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., 1997), p.2.

(workers) drove them forward, creating the prosperity of Hong Kong as we know it today. Different compelling forces woke the Chinese from their mundane activities. Pragmatism rather than patriotism seemed more powerful. What they wanted to say must best be told by real Hong Kong historians. And the history of Hong Kong written with the rightful centre anchored in Hong Kong itself is highly valuable, as Tsai explains, “The historical knowledge of the ‘Hong Kong-centred history’ can also help the Chinese leadership to understand the facts, to adopt those policies appropriate to Hong Kong people’s wishes, enable Hong Kong people to create their own freedom, democracy and a political system based on the rule of law, to let them develop fully their intellect. Only then can the Hong Kong people’s hearts be won. If not, they will adopt a negative attitude and see the Chinese government as an alien power, similar in nature to the British colonial rule.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ Tsai, *People’s history*, p.2

Chapter Ten – Some Concluding Reflections

British colonial historiography and Chinese patriotic historiography represent two centres discoursing their respective grand-narratives. The British discourse justifies British colonial rule in Hong Kong and the Chinese discourse defends China's re-unification of the colony. Post-modernism and post-colonialism deconstruct and refute their claims to "historical truth". These two "centres" are not "dead" (as the post-modernists would have it), but rather, as my thesis shows, they are still well and alive. More importantly, they can show particular perspectives providing us with useful clues to unveil the message behind. The history books written by the British colonial and Mainland Chinese patriotic historians are the "documents" from which we can draw interesting and revealing conclusions. Whether they are open in professing their "manipulations" in history writing or whether they have tried to hide their agenda, we are equipped with the methodological tools to expose their underlying ideologies.

The British colonial discourse starts by denying the importance of the "opium issue" in the 19th century Sino-British conflicts. It then tries to belittle Hong Kong as a "barren rock", hoping to show that the place was unimportant to China and its pre-British past was only marginal to mainstream Chinese history. The discourse wants us to accept that the history of Hong Kong "only began in 1841" when the British started to rule the Colony. The native Chinese in Hong Kong or the Chinese who migrated to Hong Kong after the establishment of British colonial rule, it is argued, welcomed British rule and praised its justice and benevolence. The Chinese did not feature prominently in Hong Kong history because they were described as "uninterested in public affairs" or "lacking in civic-mindedness". The importance of the Chinese, in short, was deliberately blotted out. Any inconvenient facts to this British grand-narrative, such as the economic indispensability of the Chinese merchants and labourers, were variously removed. The political indispensability of Chinese collaborators was again sidelined as far as possible. Various forms of resistance to British rule were usually not given their due consideration. Instead, the Hong Kong Chinese needed, as it is put in the British discourse, to be "protected" or they were so politically "apathetic" (the Chinese were said to be only interested in making money) that they did not want to have a share of political power. The British

administration thus provided the just and benevolent rule for what the Hong Kong Chinese wanted. This British discourse had affected how the British negotiated with the Chinese government in the early 1980s. The British still hoped to concede a nominal return of Hong Kong's "sovereignty" to China in exchange for a continued British "administration" of the Colony. This pre-conception was proved wrong.

The Mainland Chinese discourse starts as a political task to facilitate Hong Kong's re-unification with Motherland China. It sets out to write Hong Kong history with the aim to dispute and dethrone the Anglo-centric historiography. According to this discourse, Hong Kong's origin must be related to the "opium" wars, emphasizing the hideousness of the British "imperialist conquerors". Hong Kong, the discourse continues, was a part of China's sacred soil, and because of this, it was given a reasonable measure of defence which was no different from the rest of coastal China. Hong Kong's history was not marginal to mainstream Chinese history, it is argued, because local Chinese in the Hong Kong region were fully integrated to the culture of the Mainland. The Chinese discourse continues to argue that the local Chinese in Hong Kong constantly resisted British colonial rule and hoped to return to the fold of the Motherland. The "patriotism" exhibited in various instances of resistance (particularly in the years 1857 and 1899) was given a prominent place in the Chinese discourse. The issue whether the Hong Kong Chinese were intimidated to join and the fact that some Hong Kong Chinese collaborated actively with the British were seldom mentioned. The Chinese who migrated en masse to Hong Kong did not "like" British colonial rule, the discourse argues, because it was inherently racist and harsh against the Chinese. Instead, the Hong Kong Chinese were naturally related to the Mainland: they contributed "whole-heartedly" to "patriotic movements" of China (such as the 1911 Revolution, May Fourth Movement, Northern Expedition and Anti-Japanese War of Resistance). It is argued that British colonial administrators usually placed restraints on the Hong Kong Chinese's expression of patriotism. The Chinese discourse argues that the colonial nature of British rule in Hong Kong was the root-cause for the British refusal to grant a fair share of power to the Chinese. Even so, it is argued, the Chinese were shown to be indispensable to the economic well-being of the Colony. The development of the Colony came essentially from the "contributions" of ethnic Chinese there and its links with Mainland China. Indeed, the discourse continues, particularly after 1949, Hong Kong's political and economic

survival and its later economic prosperity depended on the sufferance or assistance of the PRC. So when the negotiations over Hong Kong's future emerged in the early 1980s, the Mainland Chinese government believed that they had held all the cards and the hearts of the local Chinese in Hong Kong. They believed that the return of Hong Kong to the Motherland was just a matter of course. This Chinese view was also faulty.

Finally, we should particularly be alert to the manipulation of evidence in both the British and Chinese discourses. The British colonial historians often used their language to denigrate the Chinese. Their behaviour in negotiations were often high-handed and arrogant, almost certainly a reflection of their imperialist confidence. The Mainland Chinese historians, for their part, were very selective in the use of evidence. They often deliberately ignored those points which were contrary or inconvenient to their argument.

Now that the British and Chinese discourses are found to be so domineering, the natural questions are: Who should write Hong Kong's history? Should the historians of the "Hong Kong School" alone speak for Hong Kong? It is found that anyone (even including non-professional historians such as the journalists) can have important contributions. Anglo-centric and Sino-centric historiographies of Hong Kong are equally useful if they are read with a judicious eye. Elizabeth Sinn is emphatic that we should "decolonize" our minds in welcoming historical perspectives from all different angles.¹

In reading the competing histories from both the British and the Mainland Chinese sides, we are particularly aware of the present-mindedness of their historians. There is nothing special about it as this is the very relevance that history can or

¹ Sinn talks about this issue as follows: "Constitutionally, Hong Kong's decolonization defies all conventional patterns of the process. However, it is said that the hardest part of decolonization is the decolonization of the mind. The great danger is that while one abandons old myths and prejudices one simply replaces them with new myths and prejudices. Hopefully here, where the decolonization process is so unconventional, we may be spared such folly. Hopefully, there will be enough courage in Hong Kong for policy-makers and citizens alike to make judicious choices in an open-minded fashion, seeking wisdom from the past even as we embrace the future. Only then, perhaps, can we be truly decolonized." See E. Sinn (ed.), *Hong Kong, British crown colony, revisited* (Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 2001), p.9. See also C.K. Lau, *Hong Kong's colonial legacy: a Hong Kong Chinese's view of the British heritage* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1997).

pretends to serve. Many historians search the “past” with an eye to pointing out certain directions for practical (present or future) policies. There were many “John Seeleys” in British colonial historical circles who wished to help run the British Empire. Colonial administrators and policy-makers read history for exactly such guidance. Peter Wesley-Smith highlights a similar situation in the 1984 edition of his *Unequal Treaty 1898-1997*:

The subject-matter of this book, first published in 1980, has been frequently and urgently discussed: the New Territories treaty is due to expire, and with it into oblivion in 1997 goes the United Kingdom’s claim to much of the colony... In 1981 or before it was thought in Whitehall that some arrangement was needed to secure the status quo, or something like it, in Hong Kong up to and after 1997. The strategy adopted was to seek, in a highly public manner, a new agreement with China. A series of contacts culminated, in September 1982, in a visit to Peking by Mrs Margaret Thatcher. The British prime minister, perhaps wanting to negotiate from a position of strength, stated firmly and uncompromisingly that the unequal treaties were valid and must be observed until varied by mutual consent. Chinese officials were thus forced to reassert, in as visible a fashion, the traditional line that the treaties were unequal and of no binding force.²

The New Territories and the “1997” question was the background and the political consideration leading to the official response (in terms of writing Hong Kong history) from Mainland China. The official stand of Mainland China is pretty rigid, given that the “1997” question was regarded as a cardinal foreign policy issue. It is interesting to note the Chinese official historians’ selection (through translation or direct quotation) of materials in support of their arguments. It is even more interesting and revealing to see how they “dis-select” the materials so as to avoid inconvenient facts. Official stand aside, it is refreshing to see some major breakthroughs, particularly in academic circles, regarding the interpretation of the Opium War and some aspects of the colonial governance of Hong Kong. China does not speak with

² Peter Wesley-Smith, *Unequal treaty 1898-1997: China, Great Britain and Hong Kong’s New Territories* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1980; third impression 1984), p.vii. Mainland Chinese historians have a high regard of this book and have made extensive use of its materials. They do not, however, accept Wesley-Smith’s conclusions. See Liu Cunkuan, *Xianggangshi luncong* [A critical collection of Hong Kong history] (Hong Kong: Qilin Books, 1998), p.242.

only one voice. The same can certainly apply to the British discourse. Decolonization has brought about major revisions and re-interpretations of British colonialism and Britain's imperial past.

The same "1997" question certainly compelled Hong Kong to respond. The "Hong Kong Becoming China: the Transition to 1997" series published by the University of Hong Kong can be regarded as representative.³ Historians of the Hong Kong School are certainly dissatisfied with being treated as an appendage in British colonial and Chinese patriotic historiographies.⁴ Hong Kong Chinese in the past were not merely and subservient subjects under British colonial rule. Neither were they necessarily and blindly patriotic every time China called upon them to be. They were, as rightly depicted by historians of the Hong Kong School, able to survive and prosper in a "precarious balance". Post-modernism and post-colonialism offer us, though not necessarily endless readings of the events and significance of Hong Kong history, numerous and sufficient re-interpretations of this wonderful place called Hong Kong.

It is important to consider now the future of a Hong Kong-centred historiography, in the context of present-day globalization. The dominance of the British and Mainland Chinese discourses on Hong Kong history and a concomitant suppression of the local Hong Kong voices have been shown to be politically motivated. Post-modernism and post-colonialism provided us a much needed redress of the situation. Indeed, in the age of post-modernism and post-colonialism, the "local" voices must be considered as vital ingredients to the "global" configuration. Any overt or covert attempt to downplay or undermine the "locals" is no longer acceptable. A Hong Kong-centred historiography, as my thesis shows, will definitely add to the variety and diversity of this multi-faceted world.

³ A total of seven books were published (in Hong Kong by the University of Hong Kong Press) in this series and they are: M.K. Chan & D.J. Clark (eds.), *The Hong Kong basic law: blueprint for 'stability and prosperity' under Chinese sovereignty?* (1991); Berry Hsu, *The common law in Chinese context* (1992); G.A. Postiglione & Y.M. Leung (eds.) *Education and society in Hong Kong: toward one country and two systems* (1992); M.K. Chan (ed.), *Precarious balance: Hong Kong between China and Britain, 1842-1992* (1994); R. Skeldon (ed.), *Reluctant exiles? Migration from Hong Kong and the new overseas Chinese* (1994); R.Y.W. Kwok & A.Y. So (eds.) *The Hong Kong-Guangdong link: partnership in flux* (1995); and G.A. Postiglione & J.T.H. Tang (eds.) *Hong Kong's reunion with China: global dimensions* (1997).

⁴ We must be alert also that, in differentiating from the British and Chinese historiographies, Hong Kong historians could be open to their own biases. They might tend to paint a picture exaggerating Hong Kong's own importance and downplaying the very fact that Hong Kong's past was inexorably related to and affected by both Britain and China.

Glossary of Chinese Names and Terms

(The Chinese words are given where they can be identified.)

Ah Chian	阿燦
Annam	安南
Ayi	阿憶
Bai Gang	白鋼
Bai yue	百越
Bao Peng	鮑鵬
Baoan	寶安
<i>baodi</i>	寶地
<i>baojia</i>	保甲
<i>baojia</i>	保家
<i>cai</i>	才
Cai Chimeng	蔡赤萌
Canton (Guangzhou)	廣州
Cao Jiaji	曹家齊
Chan Ming Kau (Ming K. Chan)	陳明鈺
Chan Wai Kwan	陳偉群
Chang Li	張麗
<i>changqiliyong</i>	長期利用
Chaozhou-Shantou	潮州汕頭
Chefoo Convention	煙台條約
Chen Duo	陳多
Chen Fulin (Gilbert Chan)	陳福霖
Chen Liansheng	陳連升
Chen Tiejian	陳鐵健
Chen Xinglun	陳勝莽
Chen Ziehuan	陳介玄
Cheong Ahlum	張亞霖
Cheung Chau	長洲
Chiang Kai-shek	蔣介石
<i>chongfendasuen</i>	充分打算
Chow Shouson	周壽臣
Chuenpee (Chuanbi)	穿鼻
Chusan (Zhoushan)	舟山
Confucius	孔子

<i>dai huen chai</i>	大圈仔
Dai Qing	戴晴
<i>dan min</i>	蛋民
<i>de</i>	德
Deng Tingzhen	鄧廷禎
Deng Tuo	鄧拓
Deng Xiaoping	鄧小平
Diaoyu Island	釣魚臺
Ding You (Du Dingyou)	丁又 (杜定友)
Duke of Zhou	周公
Empress Lu	呂后
Empress Wu	武后
E-sing	裕盛
Fan Wenlan	范文瀾
<i>fankwei</i>	番鬼
Fat Tau Chau	佛頭洲
Feng Bangyan	馮邦彥
Feng Youlan	馮友蘭
<i>fengyong</i>	蜂湧
Fok Kai-cheong	霍啓昌
<i>fu</i>	撫
Fujian	福建
<i>fung shui</i>	風水
<i>fu-wu guan</i>	父母官
Gangying zhengfu	港英政府
Gao Chengzu	高承恕
Ge Hongyuan	葛洪源
Gong Gangming	龔剛鳴
Gong, Prince (Yixin)	恭親王 (奕訢)
Guan Tianpei	關天培
Guangzhouwan	廣州灣
Guo Chaoren	郭超人
Guo Moruo	郭沫若
Guo Weifeng	郭偉鋒
Guomindang	國民黨
Hai Rui	海瑞
Hainan	海南
Hakka (Kejia)	客家

Han Su-yin	韓素音
Han	漢
<i>han-chien</i> (Hanjian)	漢奸
Hankou	漢口
He Xiaoming	何曉明
Heung Shan	香山
<i>Heunggongyahn</i>	香港人
Ho Kai	何啓
Ho Yaomin	賀耀敏
Hu Sheng	胡繩
Hu Weijing	胡偉平
Huang Fengwu	黃鳳武
Jiajing	嘉靖
Jian Bozan	翦伯贊
Jian Youwen	簡又文
Jiang Qing	江青
<i>jiao</i>	剿
Jin Yaoyu	金堯如
Jiujiang	九江
<i>jueduihua</i>	絕對化
Kam Tin	錦田
Kap Shui Mun	汲水門
Kat Hing Wai	吉慶圍
Keying (Qiyong)	耆英
Kishen (Qishan)	琦善
Koo, Wellington (Gu Weijun)	顧維鈞
Kowloon	九龍
<i>kowtow</i>	叩頭
Kwangtung (Guangdong)	廣東
Kwok Acheong	郭亞祥
Kwok Nai-wang	郭乃弘
Kwun Chung	官涌
Lai Enjue	賴恩爵
Lam Tsuen	林村
Lao Chongguang	勞崇光
Lau Siu-kai	劉兆佳
Lau Wai Chuen	劉渭川
Lee Ming-kwan	李明堃

Lee Pui-tak	李培德
Lei Da	雷達
Leng Xia	冷夏
Leung On (Liang An)	梁安
Leung Ping-kwan	梁秉鈞
Li c.t.	李中堂 (李鴻章)
Li Hongzhang	李鴻章
Li Jinwei	黎晉偉
Li Wenhai	李文海
Li Yang	李揚
Lian Jintian	連錦添
Liang Binghua	梁炳華
Liang Guang	兩廣
Liang Qichao	梁啓超
Liang Xingyuan	梁星源
Liao Mosha	廖沫沙
<i>likin</i> (lijin)	釐金
Lin Ganquan	林甘泉
Lin Tianwei	林天蔚
Lin Zexu	林則徐
Lintin (Lingding)	零丁
<i>Lishi Yanjiu</i>	歷史研究
Liu Bingyan	劉賓雁
Liu Cunkuan	劉存寬
Liu Shuyong	劉蜀永
Liu Xiaojing	劉小青
Liu Zhiji	劉知幾
Lo Hsiang-lin (Lo Xianglin)	羅香林
Lu Aking (alias Loo Aqoi)	盧亞景 (盧亞貴)
Lu Dequan	陸德泉
Lui Tai-lok	呂大樂
Luk Hung-kay Bernard	陸鴻基
Ma Kit-wai Eric	馬傑偉
Macao	馬交 (澳門)
Mao Haijian	茅海建
Mao Zedong	毛澤東
Ming Dynasty	明朝
Ming Taizu	明太祖

<i>minzu gongzuo</i>	民族工作
<i>minzu shibie</i>	民族識別
<i>minzu</i>	民族
Mo Wenzheng	莫問政
<i>mui-tsai</i>	妹仔
Nanking (Nanjing)	南京
Ngan, S.F. Irene	顏淑芬
Ngo Tak-wing	吳德榮
<i>nuhua jiaoyu</i>	奴化教育
Ou Jiafa	區家發
Pakhoi	北海
Peking (Beijing)	北京
Peng Dehuai	彭德懷
Po Leung Kuk	保良局
Qi Pengfei	齊鵬飛
<i>qian hai</i>	遷海
Qian Yibing	錢益兵
<i>qiangzhi</i>	強制
<i>qiangzu</i>	強租
<i>qiaoqu haoduo</i>	巧取豪奪
Qin Shihuang	秦始皇
Qing	清
Qu Lindong	瞿林東
<i>qubi</i>	曲筆
Rey Chow	周蕾
San On (Xin'an)	新安
Sanyuanli	三元里
Sham Chun (Shenzhen)	深圳
Shanghai	上海
<i>Shangshu</i>	尚書
Shataukok (Shatoujiao)	沙頭角
Sheung Tsuen	上村
<i>shi</i>	史
<i>shi</i>	識
<i>shih-k'o chi-chih</i> (shike jizhi)	適可止之
<i>Shiji</i>	史記
<i>shishe</i>	施捨
<i>Shixue Lilun Yanjiu</i>	史學理論研究

<i>Shixue Yuekan</i>	史學月刊
Sinn, Y.Y. Elizabeth	洗玉儀
Siu, F.H. Helen	簫鳳霞
Song Dejin	宋德金
Song Dynasty	宋朝
Sun Yat-sen	孫逸仙 (孫中山)
<i>t'uan-lien</i>	團練
<i>Ta Kung Pao</i> (Dagongbao)	大公報
Tai Hong Wai	泰康圍
Tai O	大澳
Tai Ping Shan	太平山
Tai Po	大埔
Taiping	太平
Taiwan	台灣
Tam Achoy	譚亞才
Tam S.M. Maria	譚少薇
Tan Zhonglin	譚鍾麟
Tangs	鄧氏
Tanka (Danjia)	蜃家 (蛋家)
Tao-kuang (Daoguang)	道光
Tiananmen	天安門
Tiandihui	天地會
Tientsin (Tianjin)	天津
Ting Sun Pao	丁新豹
Tongmenghui	同盟會
Tsai Jung-fang	蔡榮芳
Tsang Yok-sing	曾鈺成
Tsang, Yui-sang Steve	曾銳生
Tsim Sha Tsui	尖沙咀
Tsungli Yamen	總理衙門
Tuen Mun	屯門
Tung Chee-hwa	董建華
Tung Kwun	東莞
Tung Wah Hospital	東華醫院
Uen Long (Yuen Long)	元朗
<i>waiguo</i>	衛國
Wang Ching-wei	汪精衛
Wang Depeng	王德朋

Wang Gungwu	王賡武
Wang Jencheng	王寅城
Wei Yuan	魏源
Weihaiwei	威海衛
<i>Wen Wei Pao</i> (Wenhuibao)	文匯報
Whampoa	黃埔
Wong J.Y.	黃宇和
Wong Wang-chi	王宏志
Wong, W.P. Thomas	黃偉邦
Wu Han	吳晗
<i>Xianggang Bainian</i>	香港百年
<i>XiangGang yijia</i>	省港一家
Xianggang zhengfu	香港政府
<i>xianxue</i>	顯學
<i>xin wenxue</i>	新文學
Xinhua Chubanshe	新華出版社
Xinhua News Agency	新華社
Xiongnu	匈奴
Xu Dishan	許地山
Xu Ke'en	徐克恩
<i>xue</i>	學
Yan Jiaqi	嚴家其
Yang Ji	楊奇
Yangzi River	揚子江
Yao Wen yuan	姚文元
Yao Xitang	姚錫棠
Yao Zongyi	饒宗頤
Yao	瑤
Yapian zhanzheng	鴉片戰爭
Yau Ma Tei	油麻地
Ye Shiheng	葉適恆
Ye Yonglie	葉永烈
Yeh Ming-chin (Ye Mingchen)	葉名琛
<i>yingshe shixue</i>	影射史學
Yu Baochun	余保純
Yu Ming	俞明
Yu Pei	于沛
Yu Shengwu	余繩武

Yu Ying-shih	余英時
Yuan Bangjian	元邦建
Yuan Ming Yuan	圓明園
Zeng Guofan	曾國藩
Zhang Bin	張斌
Zhang Yutang	張玉堂
Zhang Zhidong	張之洞
Zhao Ziyang	趙紫陽
Zhejiang	浙江
Zheng Chenggong	鄭成功
Zhang Xuecheng	章學誠
<i>zhibi</i>	直筆
<i>zhisang mahuai</i>	指桑罵槐
<i>zhongxin</i>	中心
<i>zhongyuan</i>	中原
<i>zhongzai qu</i>	重災區
Zhou Enlai	周恩來
Zhou Jiming	周積明
Zhou Nan	周南
Zhou Yang	周揚
Zhou Yizhi	周毅之
Zhu Zongyu	朱宗玉
<i>Zuozhuan</i>	左傳

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