



**Danny Paau, ed.** *Reunification with China: Hong Kong Academics Speak.* Hong Kong: Asian Research Service, 1998. 137 pp.

**Reviewed by** Daojiong Zha (Miyazaki International College, Miyazaki, Japan)

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## Hong Kong's Reunification with China

Eighteen months after the historical transfer of Hong Kong's sovereignty from Britain to China, Hong Kong's own economic contraction overshadows the pre-transfer preoccupation over the level of political freedom Hong Kong's new sovereign would prove willing to permit. Were it not for the breakdown in diplomatic cooperation between Beijing and London in setting up a set of institutional arrangements for post-transfer Hong Kong, the contrast would not have been as sharp. At a philosophical level, differences between Beijing and London over what is in the long-term interest of the Hong Kong society as a whole are rooted in opposite convictions over the value of representational democracy. For London, its last colonial governor Chris Patten in particular, a full-fledged parliamentary democratic system was seen as the prerequisite for long-term stability and prosperity. For Beijing, its most important priority was stability, i.e., a smooth transfer of sovereignty and thereafter implementing its "one country, two systems" formula for Hong Kong, a concept enshrined in the Hong Kong Basic Law. The Basic Law favors stability and phased-in changes to the political structures of Hong Kong left over from the colonial era.

A group of social science university professors based in Hong Kong took issue with the British approach to effecting the future development of Hong Kong. They do so not by arguing for Beijing's views or approaches. Rather, they put Hong Kong in the center of consideration and scrutinize implications of the political differences between Beijing and London for Hong Kong's future. As Danny Paau, editor of *Reunification with China*,

makes clear, the purpose of publishing the book is to provide "a necessary supplement to the more frequently undertaken discussion on democracy and human rights" (p. 2). Below is a brief introduction of the issues the collection considers: Britain's moves in its final years colonizing Hong Kong, the constitutional and legal environment of post-transfer Hong Kong, and such social issues as group and political culture that the authors believe should have received more attention by Hong Kong watchers.

So Wai Chor situates his criticism of Chris Patten's failed attempt (due to Chinese opposition) to institute a political structure different from the Hong Kong Basic Law provisions. By taking into consideration the Cold War global political dynamics, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ensuing end of the value of the "China card" in East-West confrontations, and the fall (after 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown in Beijing) of sinologists in the British foreign policymaking establishment, Chor constructs a fairly complete background of Patten's choice of confrontation with Beijing. Against the background of major Western powers attempting to discipline Beijing, "Britain's honor and moral responsibilities suddenly became important in the final phase of de-colonization of Hong Kong" (pp. 13-14). Chor's dissatisfaction with Patten's confrontational approach is not meant to negate the benefits of representational democracy for Hong Kong. Instead, he is more concerned with the need for pragmatism: without Beijing's approval it is unrealistic to expect democratization in Hong Kong to succeed. Nonetheless, is there a need for a faster pace of

democratization in Hong Kong? If so, are there ways to win Beijing's consent? Such questions and a host of others are not raised or addressed in Chor's contribution.

Danny Paa's chapter title "Curious Maneuvers?" is indicative of the low level of confidence sectors of the Hong Kong society placed on Britain in the final years of its colonial rule. Paa examines allegations of the British government's relentless pursuit of its interests in Hong Kong by examining a number of controversial cases that are directly related to the livelihood of Hong Kong residents. In several large infrastructure projects (a new airport, the harbor development project), it is questioned that a more economical approach could have prevailed. In localization of personnel in the Hong Kong government bureaucracy, Britain is said to have been half-hearted in turning over real management powers to the locals. In the handling of voting rights for expatriates, Paa sees an imbalance between their rights and contributions to Hong Kong. And finally, Paa raises the question of why Britain promoted issuing passports to Hong Kong residents that China steadfastly and repeatedly declared its refusal to recognize. Paa's conclusion that "whether or not the Hong Kong people wish to trust China or the SAR government, there is little ground for them to invest any hope in the British instead" (p. 77) in some ways explains the societal mood that is prevalent in Hong Kong today. The popularity of Chris Patten's visit to Hong Kong in October 1998 notwithstanding, there have been few outcries in Hong Kong's local media for the good old days under British rule.

Wong Ka Ying's contribution looks into the structural similarities and differences between the roles of the colonial governor and post-colonial Chief Executive of Hong Kong (as a special administrative region or SAR of China) as well as the early signs of Tung Chee-hwa's style of governance. Nominally, "the only major difference seems to be that the Chief Executive will no longer serve as the Commander-in-Chief" of military forces stationed in Hong Kong (p. 24). The executive-led power structure of government in Hong Kong will continue as well. But, the SAR legislature is structured so that "chances of motions introduced by individual members being adopted are further weakened as compared with the [Patten years of the] colonial system" (p. 25). However, Tung's room for autonomy is constrained by factors originating from the Chinese government, Hong Kong society, the process of Tung's selection as the Chief Executive, the legislature, the civil service, and public resources. What is unique in this complex web of constraint outlined by Wong is the colonial legacy of the Hong Kong bureaucracy, which

"has developed its own operational logic and momentum for development" (p. 31). Interesting in this regard is Tung's choice, apparently with Beijing's approval, to inherit the colonial bureaucracy in a whole-sale manner. Tung has publicly identified with the central government in Beijing "in exchange for autonomy in governing Hong Kong" (p. 39). Moreover, the focus of Hong Kong's "internal" politics is to "de-politicize" policymaking in Hong Kong with the focus placed on improving people's livelihood. The Asia-wide economic meltdown that has accompanied the start of the Tung administration is indeed putting the Tung administration to a full test.

At the time of writing this review, ringleaders of a notorious gangster group based in Hong Kong were captured, tried, and sentenced to death in China. In contrast, death sentence has been abolished by the colonial government in its final years in Hong Kong and not reinstated by the SAR government. Not only were the convicts citizens of Hong Kong, significant portions of their crimes were committed in Hong Kong against other Hong Kong citizens. The above-mentioned case in some ways manifests the worries aired by Derry Wong, a professor and lawyer in Hong Kong. Wong's chapter sees the post-transfer Hong Kong legal system being problematic in several areas: the non-binding nature of the Sino-British Joint Declaration on the future of Hong Kong (in international law); the questionable foundation of the Basic Law, Hong Kong's mini-constitution; China's National People's Congress being the final arbitrator of interpretations of the language of the Law; and the need to find a balance between China's national interest and Hong Kong's regional interest. In its totality, Wong's essay provides ample evidence to demonstrate that "the contradictions inherent in the concept of 'One Country, Two Systems' [sic] form the basis, substance and climate of the new legal context" for Hong Kong (p. 59). "Were they found to be deficient," Wong writes, "the HKSAR and its people must rely on their own ingenuity and confidence to survive and, hopefully, to prosper" (p. 59). However, interested readers will have to search elsewhere for suggestions of possible remedies to the legal environment Hong Kong is now in.

Ricardo Mak's reading of the problem of local identification among the residents of Hong Kong points to a seeming emergence of "Hong Kong centrism" around the time of transfer of sovereignty. Mak's exhaustive investigation of descriptions of societal issues in Hong Kong newspapers finds that the notion of "Hong Kong natives" has been accepted to represent the center, with mainlanders (i.e., recent immigrants from China), prosti-

tutes (many of whom are illegal immigrants from China) and “outsiders” being the lower class (pp. 86-89). “West-erners” are identified to be the privileged class who will inevitably have to live with the reality of joining the center group along with the change of sovereignty and promotion of use of Chinese language (Cantonese and Mandarin dialects) and local customs.

While Mak’s chapter is mainly a survey and more space is needed to conduct a deeper anthropological/ sociological analysis, I find his purely descriptive stance in treating a subject matter that has serious socio-political consequences rather troubling. The simple fact of the matter is that pride is often accompanied by prejudice. Further research into the same subject matter should seek to identify the root sources of self-identification and propose solutions for promoting positive social change, for the benefit of Hong Kong as an international city.

Herbert Yee’s research of the Hong Kong and Macao residents’ attitudes towards politics concludes that in both Hong Kong and the Portuguese colony of Macao (due to revert to Chinese rule in 1999), his research subjects are reported to demonstrate a similar apathetic attitude toward participatory democratic governance. Traditional Chinese political culture, which is heavily influenced by the notion of benevolence of the government/gentry towards the subjects, is identified as the major cause. The absence of democratic governance under colonial rule is identified as the other major cause. Like many other writers in the collection, Yee falls short on offering insights about what future evolutions of public sentiments toward democratization projects in either Hong Kong or Macao.

F. Gilbert Chan’s chapter summarizes predictions about Hong Kong’s future as aired in the international

English language media in the months leading up to the July ceremony of transferring Hong Kong’s sovereignty to China. Chan cautions against quick judgement and calls for patience in seeing the process of implementing the “One Country, Two Systems” concept in Hong Kong.

The eight chapters in this collection serve the book editor’s purposes well by airing the various issues of concern to the Hong Kong society. Indeed, in the age of globalization, developments in such a global center as Hong Kong cannot be viewed using a simplistic model of Western democracy versus the influence of Chinese communism or what remains of it. All contributions are well documented, especially in the utilization of local source materials. The book has a unique reference value to students interested in studying contemporary Hong Kong.

This book also has its shortcomings. If, as its various authors point out, neither Britain nor China was fighting for Hong Kong’s interests in the years preceding the transition of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty, then, how can Hong Kong fight for itself after the hand-over ceremony is over? Is there a possibility to for Hong Kong to be in better control of its own destiny? In the substantive issue areas the book addresses, what should be done to improve the status quo? How can Hong Kong effectively negotiate with the central government in Beijing to maximize the high degree of (administrative) autonomy promised to it? Questions like these need to be raised and answered if (Western notions of) democracy and human rights are not the sole issues of concern to Hong Kong watchers.

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