



HONG KONG: A SUPER-CHARGED CITY AT THE CROSSROADS OF MUTATING EMPIRES¹

Hong Kong is a unique peninsula in the South China Sea that presents itself to the world as an exceptional intermediary space. For while it actively looks outwards across the ocean, it is also grounded in the continent by its neighbours Shenzhen, Macao and Guangzhou, the latter of which is two hours away by car. This breathtaking landscape, where sheer cliffs mingle with clusters of distant islands, is the setting for one of the major scenes in the ongoing clash between mainland- and ocean-based empires. These empires have a chameleon-like ability to change. The old mainland Chinese empire, which once looked resolutely towards the barbarian tribes north of the border, now intends to combine a liberal economic model with a reaffirmation of its military might. It has turned its gaze back towards the ocean and become particularly protective of its previously neglected coastal cities. Once ruler of both the waves and trade, the British Empire has since disintegrated and re-emerged via the United States and, in later years, the nebulous world of the liberal internet, always with largely the same mindset. In a city where shadow puppets and marionettes are still a beloved part of culture, the key question remains “who is the puppet master behind the most recent clashes?” To answer this, we need to look back at Hong Kong’s military origins and the city’s innate characteristics.

A Warehouse for Maritime and Mainland Empires

Once a coastal outlier that fished, farmed pearls and exported salt, Hong Kong has become a major trading and military port over the course of a century and a half, handling a third of the foreign capital coming into China. After being carefully selected by the British East India Company, the port developed from the early 18th century onwards. However, Hong Kong only truly started to thrive a hundred years later as, at the start of the 19th century, the British Empire’s trade in China was mainly based on tea imports. The British exported luxury items such as clocks and watches to the Chinese, but trade relations were nonetheless lopsided. China wanted silver in exchange for its tea, but Great Britain struggled to procure this precious metal. The imbalance was made all the more evident by opium exports to China. The latter used military force to try to prevent opium flooding across its borders in massive quantities. After the Royal Navy and Royal Marines claimed a series of victories over the Chinese during the First Opium War (1839-1842), Hong Kong island was

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occupied by the British on 20 January 1841. The Convention of Chuenpi was negotiated at that time, but it was not recognised by either the Qing Dynasty in Peking or the British monarchy. Hostilities resumed and ultimately led to the Treaty of Nanking of 1842, through which the territory became a British colony. Great Britain was not the only European country to take this initiative. In fact, several European countries sealed concessions with China's port cities to meet their commercial needs at around the same time. These concessions, however, remained under Chinese sovereignty.² In reality, two territories could be compared to Hong Kong. One was Portuguese-controlled Macao, the other Kouang-Tchéou-Wan, a later French copy of the British colony.³ France's attempt to replicate Britain's warehouse city would eventually prove to be a failure⁴ but Hong Kong's population grew rapidly as trade swelled. Opium merchants and British businessmen partnered up with American bankers. In 1860, the Convention of Peking granted the British a permanent lease over the Kowloon Peninsula. In 1862, around 120,000 people lived in Hong Kong. In 1898, the United Kingdom – aware it would be unable to defend Hong Kong if it did not also have control over the surrounding area – signed a 99-year lease for the New Territories. Britain's trading hub then extended its relationships, procuring raw materials from as far away as French Indochina.⁵ Hong Kong prospered, only dropping out of the economic scene when it was militarily occupied by the Japanese from 1941 to 1945. During this period, when it became peripheral to the imperial Japanese maritime empire, Hong Kong found itself under surveillance and its bankers were imprisoned. Its population fell by half. In contrast, when the Chinese Communist Party came to power on the mainland in 1949, the population rose again when thousands of refugees fled from China. This restored Hong Kong's status as an important holding area for goods, until the United Nations embargoed China because of its support for the Korean War.

A Flourishing, Heady Yet Obscure Warehouse

² Concessions in China were regulated by the Treaty of Nanking (signed on 29 August 1842), the Treaty of the Bogue (8 October 1843) and the Treaty of Tientsin (June 1858). A 1937 article on the legal status of concessions states that the Chinese government granted some 23 concessions to eight foreign powers in ten port cities and that, at the time of writing, only four countries still had these Chinese concessions: Great Britain (which had two: Canton [now Guangzhou] and Tientsin); Japan (which had three: Hanchow [now Hangzhou], Hankou and Tientsin); France (which had four: Canton, Hanchow, Shanghai and Tientsin) and Italy (which had one: Tientsin).

³ Kévin Seivert, “Les débuts du territoire français de Kouang-Tchéou-Wan, Carnets de voyage du médecin de la Marine Charles Broquet (décembre 1899-mai 1901)”, *Annales de Bretagne et des pays de l'Ouest*, (No. 124, 2017), pp. 113-134.

⁴ Following on from the Treaty of Kouang-Tchéou-Wan of 1898, Napoleonic France was granted a 99-year lease for what is now Guangzhou Bay. Kouang-Tchéou-Wan, as it then was, was a territory spanning 1,300 km². It fell under French Indochina's administrative control and covered the north-east coast of the Leizhou Peninsula west of Guangdong, an area whose notable features included Zhanjiang city as well as Donghai and Naozhou islands. This administrative hub was named Fort Boyard. By taking control of this territory, France was attempting to extend its sphere of influence from Indochina to Yunnan, Sichuan and Guangdong in south-west China. It wanted to transform Kouang-Tchéou-Wan into a major trading port that would rival and act as a counterweight to Britain and Portugal's influence over southern China (via Hong Kong and Macao respectively). But from 1920, it started to become clear to the French that this initial project had failed.

⁵ Frédéric Thomas, *La forêt mise à nu : essai anthropologique sur la construction d'un objet scientifique tropical : "forêts et bois coloniaux d'Indochine" : 1860-1940*, thesis (2003): “Construction timber and other wood could be ‘floated’. The French referred to ‘wooden ducks’ on the Mekong or ‘lost log floating’ because, while this technique for transporting timber was inexpensive, logs floated on river currents often ended up lost at sea. This mode of transportation was very commonly used to move teak out of Laos and Burma. To avoid too many losses in the river's many large waterfalls, logs were thrown into the water ideally during the rainy season. They reached the sea and were transported by cabotage to Saigon port before being sent on to Hong Kong.” Translation from the original French.

Hong Kong's creativity is expressed equally well in its university's teaching methods⁶ as in its cinema. Its film industry is rooted in a unique culture that has prioritised Cantonese over Mandarin and uses the traditional, more complex characters that were commonplace before the People's Republic of China introduced simplification. As a result, mainland China's visiting inhabitants can neither understand nor read the language. This singularity does not mean that the Hong Kongese repudiate any sense of belonging to China. When in 1999, NATO (apparently accidentally) bombed China's embassy in Belgrade, the people of Hong Kong were among the first to condemn a calculated attack by 'Western imperialists' on Chinese interests. Hong Kong was returned to China in 1997 and, now that it is being economically embedded within the mainland, it is regaining its role as a trading hub linking China to the rest of the world.⁷ Yet since the turn of the millennium, China's most advanced cities have caught up with Hong Kong, making its superiority less evident. Along with Macao, the city now has special regional administrative status. As the world's third financial centre, Hong Kong's economy is considered to be the most liberal on the planet, according to the Heritage Foundation.⁸ It also has large expat communities made up of 34,000 British citizens, 22,000 Japanese, 60,000 Americans, 300,000 Canadians and 20,000 French nationals. Most of these are employed by multinationals. Hong Kong is in direct competition with Singapore and, to a lesser extent, Shanghai. An analysis of Asia's maritime export trade structure highlights Hong Kong and Singapore's pre-eminence as international ports for Chinese and Taiwanese transporters. Taiwan has established direct, official relations with China yet, out of respect for public political discourse, Taiwanese ships anchoring in Hong Kong do not raise Taiwan's flag.⁹ Hong Kong is also a black market hub for heroin trafficking¹⁰ and a flourishing cybercrime scene¹¹. China is also very willing to use this port as a Trojan Horse for entry into Africa. Hong Kong (which handles three quarters of Chinese direct investment stock) is an intermediary for the mother-country's African projects. Chinese exports travel to Hong Kong before penetrating the continent via certain 'dispersal' countries.¹²

Hong Kong's high strategic value magnifies any protest movements that occur there. In 1967, its workers' movement (orchestrated by the People's Republic of China) led to the killing of journalist Lam Bun, who had openly criticised the riots.¹³ Since 2014, the struggling middle classes have taken to the streets armed with umbrellas to protect themselves from tear gas deployed by the police force. Many of

⁶ David W. Chan, "Creative Teaching in Hong Kong Schools: Constraints and Challenges", *Educational Research Journal* (Vol. 22, No. 1, summer 2007).

⁷ Randall Jones, Robert King and Michael Klein, "L'intégration économique entre Hong-Kong, Taïwan et les provinces côtières de la Chine", *Revue économique de l'OCDE* (No. 20, spring 1993), pp. 129-163.

⁸ Alongside New York, London and a few others, Hong Kong is one of the world's biggest financial centres. In fact, some sections of the English-speaking media refer to this trio as 'Nylonkong'.

⁹ Claude Comtois and James Wang, "Géopolitique et transport, Nouvelles perspectives stratégiques dans le détroit de Taïwan", *Etudes internationales* (Les détroits maritimes : des enjeux stratégiques majeurs, Vol. 34, No. 2, June 2003), pp. 213-227.

¹⁰ Carl Grundy-Warr and Elaine Wong, "Geopolitics of drugs and cross-border relations: Burma-Thailand", *IBRU Boundary and Security Bulletin*, spring 2001, pp. 108-121.

¹¹ Trevor Moores and Gurpreet Dhillon, "Software piracy, a view from Hong-Kong", *Communications of the ACM* (December 2000, Vol. 43, N°12), pp. 88-93.

¹² Jean-Raphaël Chaponnière, "Les échanges entre la Chine et l'Afrique: Situation actuelle, perspectives et sources pour l'analyse", *STATECO* (No. 100, 2006), pp. 149-162.

¹³ Lam Bun was covered in petrol and set alight.

their leaders belong to Hong Kong's Christian minority.¹⁴ However, their movement is being hindered by Hong Kong's dwindling importance to the Chinese economy compared with other cities¹⁵, as well as by the fact that the city is increasingly integrated into mainland China itself.¹⁶ In this regard, Hong Kong's history is not unique and can be compared to that of other coastal cities. Was Venice not, in some ways, Hong Kong in reverse? This maritime trading power was once a subject of the Byzantine Empire, but it won its independence and was a long-time importer of Chinese gold before being brutally conquered by Napoleon on 12 May 1797.

¹⁴ Lida Nedilsky, *Converts to Civil Society: Christianity and Political Culture in Contemporary Hong Kong* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014).

¹⁵ Hong Kong's share of the Chinese economy has gone from 27% just before the recession to less than 3% today.

¹⁶ At least one Hong Kong citizen out of seven is now born in mainland China and is more likely to speak Mandarin (specifically Putonghua) at home than Cantonese. On the other hand, increasing numbers of Hong Kongese live and work in mainland China, with 500,000 based in Guangdong alone.