

Tak-Wing Ngo's Hong Kong's History

Review >
Hong Kong

Recent publications on the history of Hong Kong tend to focus on its transition from British to Chinese rule, discussing the problems of this transition and, not seldomly, warning the reader of the presumed negative consequences for the hitherto flourishing capitalist economy of Hong Kong following the takeover by the Communists of mainland China. The books that concentrate more strictly on the history of Hong Kong itself mainly emphasize the advantages of British colonial rule and administration, in particular for the economy and thus, in the eyes of their authors, also for the people of this former "barren-rock island".

By Angela Schottenhammer

Meanwhile, other publications, mostly Chinese ones, seek instead to highlight the humiliation to which China was exposed by and because of the Opium Wars, and the brutal way in which the British, when they took Hong Kong, opened a new market – China. Equally, they underline the anti-colonial struggles of the indigenous Chinese population against British rule. A Western inclined standpoint, stressing the British contribution to the development of a market economy in Hong Kong, thus contrasts with the description of China and Hong Kong as the victims of colonialism, which often bears the traces of a nationalist Chinese point of view. Both narratives tend to be biased, although it may of course not be denied or contested that the British takeover of Hong Kong was, in fact, a colonial-imperialist political measure, in disregard of Chinese sovereignty and accompanied by a plethora of extortionary measures that the British exerted on the weaker Chinese Qing Empire.

Against the background of these two contradicting views, which regard Hong Kong's historical course as either positive or negative, the present volume wants to present "an empirical and historically rooted account of state-society relations in the making of Hong Kong that differs from recent celebrations of British colonialism and anti-colonial Chinese nationalism, [by] highlighting the roles of a variety of actors' (preface). As the editor, Tak-Wing Ngo, puts it, most narratives share the common deficiency that "they ignore the complexity of British colonial rule in Hong Kong" (p. 2). Consequently, by comprehending the complexity of colonialism, the contributors to this volume wish to open new avenues of research for historians of the colonial past to pursue (p.11). "Evidence shows that colonial policies both advanced and constrained Hong Kong's development". The most obvious case of positive intervention has been the colonial state's contribution to Hong Kong's commercial and trade development, whereas it played a clearly negative role in discouraging any industrialization before World War II as well as in blocking the opportunities for industrial upgrading in the 1960s (p. 8).

The volume's promise to show the reader more aspects of the complex colonial rule in Hong Kong is fully redeemed by the authors. The articles provide a wealth of information not widely known about the history of Hong Kong. They reveal many aspects of British rule in Hong Kong that were hitherto rather neglected. Details of Chinese collaborators and compradors (John M. Carroll, pp. 13-29; Hui Po-Keung, pp. 30-45), and of the criminal justice system, investigating some particular issues of justice and oppression (Christopher Munn, pp. 46-73), are expounded on in the first three contributions. Stephen W. K. Chiu and Ho-Fung Hung (pp. 74-100) comment on the rural policy of the British concerning, for instance, the commercialization of the land and the reasons behind the low occurrence of social unrest among the farmers in response to state intervention. Also discussed are the role of social movements and their public discourse (Tai-Lok Lui and Stephen W. K. Chiu, pp. 101-118), the reference to and control by British rule of the local economy - far from being the outcome of a free enterprise response to free markets - (Alex H. Choi, pp. 141-161), and the changes and flexibility in the manufacturing sector (textile, garment, and electronics industry) (Kim-Ming Lee, pp. 162-179). In all the contributions, details normally neglected or even suppressed in the established historiography are brought to the reader's attention. Tak-Wing Ngo devotes one article to the refutation of the myth or common belief ("constructed belief", p. 119) that Hong Kong's economic success was a result of a "laissez-fair" policy. Writings on and interpretations of Hong Kong's history have followed and presently continue along a biased path moulded according to political standpoints, thereby neglecting many parts of the whole story; consequently, it is necessary to view and investigate more aspects of Hong Kong's history.

It is, of course, a matter of honour not to judge historical developments a priori, either positively or negatively, and thus to try to be objective. The authors of the volume are certainly correct and untiring at stating that, unfortunately, it is only all too often that this is refrained from in modern historiography. This is not to say that the analysis of a great number of detailed facts should not converge on general conclusions about the history that have been investigated. One should be careful not to confuse objectivity with drawing no conclusions at all, thereby obviating the pronouncement of any general judgement about colonialism - the focus of concern. In the 19th century, the British used force and did not think twice about taking those military and political measures they regarded as necessary against the Chinese in order to open up China and its market. Their goal was that the latter would become a market for British products and thereby help to accumulate capital for British enterprises and to strengthen British industry, from which the government as the politico-economic entity profited. This is a simple historical reality which can be deduced from what had happened before, during, and after the Opium Wars. Far from simple, subjective partisanship for the Chinese and anti-Britishness, it is an objective conclusion derived from historical facts. Nor is this historical reality reversed by, for example, the fact that the indigenous people were often very willing to collaborate. Without exception, such willingness existed in colonial systems, though admittedly to different extents.

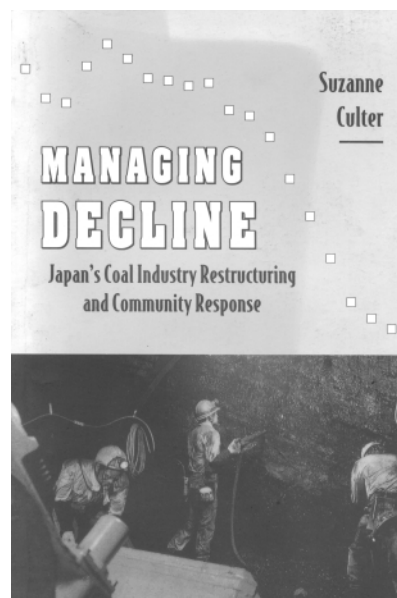
The present volume is neither a conventional account of Hong Kong's colonial history nor a linear description of its economic development (preface). It does, in fact, reveal various aspects of state-society relations hitherto obscured in Hong Kong's history and, consequently, it may help to revise the simple, conventional picture of the history of Hong Kong. What it does not provide is an explanation of the British colonial policy and aims when they acted in a particular way. An enumeration of as many aspects as possible is no substitute for an explanation of an historical phenomenon: in this case, British colonialism and its impact on Hong Kong. In order not to have Hong Kong's history completely reduced to an accumulation of details and aspects, it would have been desirable for the authors to have laid a little more emphasis on general causes and explanations. Yet, for all those wanting to learn more details about and aspects of the history of Hong Kong, which are normally not included in relevant publications, and - this must be highly valued - for everyone who has grown tired of reading all the relevant biased publications, this volume constitutes a collection of articles which are really worth reading. ◀

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responses were highly variable. Japan's approach sought to anticipate and ameliorate the costs and consequences of adjustment. It included direct government assistance to firms and workers, incentives for labour retraining and mobility, the orderly scrapping of excess capacity, and the restructuring and upgrading of remaining capacity. This stands in sharp contrast to the approach of the USA, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia where import protection was used to buy time for adjustment to take place through domestic market mechanisms.

The measure of successful industrial adjustment is the reduction of its social costs, the avoidance or minimization of the human suffering consequent upon plant closures, redundancy, and the loss of incomes. These costs are all the greater when the depressed industry is the local monopoly employer, as is often the case in the shipbuilding and coal-mining industries. Then everyone suffers, whether directly employed by the mines or not. People without incomes do not purchase goods and services. Curiously for all that the impact of adjustment upon the individuals involved is the test, the tendency has been to analyse industrial restructuring from a macro-level perspective, to look at the role of government agencies, the processes and players of the industrial sector, and so forth, rather than at the communities that bear the impact of adjustment policy. Suzanne Culter takes the correction of this misguided emphasis as her point of departure in a meticulously worked case study of industrial adjustment in the coal industry. Her aim in *Managing Decline: Japan's Coal Industry Restructuring and Community Response* is to contribute a view of the lives of workers and citizens from a coal-mining community in Hokkaido, a community that has long been dependent on the coal company for employment and services and that lost its major industry as a result of industrial policy for restructuring'. The community is Yuubari, a major source of coal production at its peak, with seventeen mines, 16,000 labourers, and a total population of 107,972. That was the 1960s. By 1990, the last pit had closed and seventy-five per cent of the population had gone. The details are as bleak as the outline. An industrial estate was opened and subsequently failed in the 1980s. The town received massive financial assistance, the main targets of which were, appropriately enough, the coal miners and yet we learn that they were the group who lost the most: jobs and community, income and meaning. If they wanted to work, they had to leave Yuubari as the replacement jobs were few in number and low in income. Young people, workers, and retirees left in droves. Those left behind were old and/or on low incomes. Twenty-seven per cent of shops closed. Fifty-seven per cent of small eating and drinking establishments went with them. Essential services, firemen, Post Office workers, teachers, and medical personnel declined at a similar pace. On the other hand, mental health disorders increased to more than double the regional average. Is this a success story? Culter is reluctant to judge, mindful of the great efforts of the municipality to reinvent Yuubari as a tourist town. Arguably, the town was saved and the workers were lost without any challenge to political order. Small comfort here for Koizumi? We shall see. ◀

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