

The Hong Kong History Centre at the University of Bristol

Robert Bickers, Vivian Kong, and Ray Yep

We are historians with a capacious understanding of what the discipline can and should do. Outside the histories of health, it would be fair to say that Hong Kong was little incorporated into wider historical discussions until the 2000s. China historians resisted seeing it as a real Chinese city; and British imperial historians concerned themselves with bigger fry. The oncoming handover of sovereignty in 1997 prompted some wider interest, but mostly Hong Kong's histories were insular, and very often administratively shaped: one British governor following another.

As with the Hong Kong History Project that preceded it, the Centre at Bristol has no specific thematic research agenda. We support excellent work brought to us



Fig. 1: Book stall, pedlar, and shoppers, Hong Kong, c.1938 (Photo courtesy of Historical Photographs of China Project, Hutchinson Family Collection, reference Hn-d044)

by PhD applicants, postdoctoral and visiting scholars, or those joining our workshops or conferences – projects that use Hong Kong case studies to intervene within, contribute to, and reshape wider debates. Our funded projects have included ones on British citizenship, migration and mobility, histories of US imperialism, and histories of refugees and occupation.¹ We have projects in progress on youth, elite networks, Kai Tak Airport, working class mobilities, and British subjecthood in the great era of Asian migration, as well as projects exploring colonial governance, Chinese medicine, and Cantonese music in the diaspora.

Certainly, the ten years of this project have coincided with ten years of unwelcome and disheartening changes in Hong Kong, which have led to a significant break with its past. More than ever that past needs better understanding, and at Bristol we are doing just that, and training and nurturing emerging scholars to take their work into mainstream debates and departments.

We are also working actively with communities internationally, in person in Hong Kong and in Bristol, and online through video profiles of practitioners in and outside the academy. Bristol's Faculty of Arts has a sustained record of engagement and co-creation with publics, and the Centre builds on that with its History Day events, community forums, and work supporting family historians.

The Hong Kong History Centre was formally launched in September 2022, evolving out of an eight-year Hong Kong History Project that had supported seven PhD projects, MA work, two international conferences, workshops, exhibitions, and related activities. The tagline was 'Rethinking a City's History', and this is what we continue to do, now with a better-resourced platform, a larger team, and busy collaborations with partners in Hong Kong, North America, Southeast Asia, and further afield. It is the first centre globally dedicated specifically to the history of Hong Kong.

We are also building an archive. Despite a nearly 200-year history of connectivity with its former colony, no institutional repository in the UK explicitly identifies Hong Kong as a collection development priority. HKHC has a team working within the University Library Special Collections who are cataloguing significant donations of material. Building on the Historical Photographs of China project,² we are building a Historical Photographs of Hong Kong platform. This strand of visual work already bore fruit with a collaboration with HK-based arts platform WMA and the Royal Photographic Society on an exhibition at the Bristol Photo Festival in 2024. The exhibition 'Realms of Memory' showcased new work by Hong Kong artists Billy H.C. Kwok, Jay Lau, and Lau Wai, inspired by historic photographs we hold.

We understand 'Hong Kong' as a subject providing a wide range of opportunities, as a city and a territory with a distinctive past that is entangled globally, and that has never been more alive than it is today. The accompanying essays showcase the work of some of our community of scholars that encapsulates this. Kelvin Chan looks at psychiatry and late colonialism, Hoi Ching Tracy Leung at government and youth after the Second World War, and Thomas M. Larkin shows how emerging digital humanities methods can map out novel understandings of the city. All chart new contributions in their fields, drawing on the richness and complexities of Hong Kong's history.



Centre website: www.hkhistory.net

Robert Bickers, FBA, is Professor of History and Co-Director of the Hong Kong History Centre. His most recent book is *China Bound: John Swire & Sons and its World, 1816-1980* (2020). He is preparing a new history of Hong Kong.

Vivian Kong is senior lecturer in modern Chinese history and Co-Director of the Hong Kong History Centre. Vivian is a social historian of colonial Hong Kong, and her work has focused largely on the city and its global connections. She is the author of *Multiracial Britishness: Global Networks in Hong Kong 1910-45* (2023).

Ray Yep is Research Professor and Research Director at the Hong Kong History Centre. He was formerly Professor of Politics and Associate Head of the Department of Public and International Affairs at City University of Hong Kong. His recent publications include *Man in a Hurry: Murray MacLehose and Colonial Autonomy in Hong Kong* (2024).

Notes

- All now published: Vivian Kong, *Multiracial Britishness: Global Networks in Hong Kong, 1910-45* (Cambridge University Press, 2023); Catherine S. Chan, *The Macanese Diaspora in British Hong Kong: A Century of Transimperial Drifting* (Amsterdam University Press, 2021); Thomas M. Larkin, *The China Firm: Elite Americans and the Making of British Colonial Society* (Columbia University Press, 2023); Helena F. S. Lopes, *Neutrality and Collaboration in South China: Macau during the Second World War* (Cambridge University Press, 2023)
- The Newsletter previously featured the Historical Photographs of China project in issue #46 (<https://www.ias.asia/the-newsletter/article/historical-photographs-china-collections>) and issue #76 (<https://www.ias.asia/the-newsletter/article/historical-photographs-china>).

Madness, Medicine, and Empire: Rethinking Colonial Psychiatry in Asia through Hong Kong

Kelvin Chan

What if colonial governments presented themselves not through overt repression, but through promises of care and rehabilitation? This question first struck me when I began researching post-war Hong Kong. At first glance, Hong Kong may appear peripheral in the global history of psychiatry – a small, bustling city shaped by Cold War politics and British colonialism. But Hong Kong was deeply entangled in broader regional and imperial transformations, including urbanization, developmentalism,

and decolonization. By focusing on this site, I explore questions that resonate across colonial and post-colonial Asia: How was psychiatry adapted to colonial and decolonial contexts? How did it intersect with local knowledge systems such as traditional Chinese medicine?

My research focuses on the transformation of colonial psychiatry in Hong Kong from the 1940s to the 1980s. Drawing on hundreds of patient case files and government records from local archives, I examine how

psychological knowledge became central to welfare and legal reforms in the age of decolonization.

One of the clearest examples is the colonial government's campaign against heroin addiction. If opium symbolized the height of British colonialism, then addiction treatment marked the empire's decline. Pressured by the United States, colonial and postcolonial states across Asia were compelled to ban opium. Heroin quickly filled the gap. Beginning in 1959, Hong Kong – like many places in Southeast Asia – declared a "war on drugs." Addicts were sent to rehabilitation camps and psychiatric hospitals. American medical experts were invited to oversee experimental treatment programs. Methadone maintenance, then a controversial practice in the US, was trialed in Hong Kong through randomized clinical experiments, turning the city into a laboratory for international drug policy [Fig. 1].

These efforts were widely promoted as a model of modern addiction treatment. But a closer reading of the archives reveals a more



Fig. 1: The image of a "typical" addict from *The Problem of Narcotic Drugs in Hong Kong, 1965*. (Photo: author's collection)