

Review Article 3

Hong Kong : Past, Present and the Future

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This is a fascinating book written by Frank Welsh, who after reading history at Cambridge, worked in banking and industry, including service on boards of nationalised industries and on the Royal Commission on the National Health Service. Frank Welsh has been writing books since 1982.

The author's interest in Hong Kong was first aroused by a visit there in 1970 as a banker, and later the acquisition of the historic Westmoreland House by his family in 1972. This led to a painstaking research by the author with a view to avoid the pitfalls of one-sided accounts. In the 24 months between March 1991 and March 1993, the political developments in the island were rapid and of historic proportions, when the book was in the process of being written.

The author refers to the birth of Hong Kong as the "natural child of Victorian Britain and Ch'ing China in 1842. Initially, it was embarrassing for both parents to acknowledge the legitimacy of the infant: closely associated with notorious drug-smuggling trade, the circumstances of the birth were disruptable. Ever since, Hong Kong has presented Britain with a series of irritations, scandals concerning opium, prostitution, gambling, flogging and corruption, together with quarrels between Governors, Civil Servants, Government Departments, and also the community, erupted and arrived in Whitehall - and have not yet ceased to arrive - with depressing frequency."

Nor were Chinese rulers much pleased with the loss of the island. It may not be more than an inconsiderable pimple on the great empires extremity, but it has remained of symbolic significance to the rulers, and people of that Empire. The fact that Hong Kong was ceded to Britain as a result of an armed clash between China and a Western Power from which the mighty empire of China emerged decisively and rapidly as the loser. By the end of the nineteenth century, China had been defeated, indebted and humiliated. Many myths have become encrusted around this first foreign encroachment (the secession of Hong Kong) and have invested the subject of Hong Kong with a powerful emotional charge. As the loss of Hong Kong initiated these depredations, its recovery in 1997 will, it is believed, mark the end. The History of Hong Kong

A History of Hong Kong. By Frank Welsh, London, Harper Collins, 1993, p. 624, £ 25.00, ISBN 0-00-21-5852-3.

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is, therefore, closely linked with that of Chinese relations with the West and reciprocal Western attitude towards China.

At a point of time when the return of Hong Kong to the Chinese Empire is not far off, the unique diversity of Hong Kong needs to be understood. Apart from the well established Indian and Portugese elements, its population is mainly Cantonese, with millions having come from all parts of Communist China to this British Colony in search of security and prosperity. The author, in order to explain the evolution of Hong Kong, has, out of necessity, made some reference to the political history of Britain, Europe and China during the last two centuries.

Many students of history would want to know as to why did the British Government in 1898 only required a 99-year lease of the new territories rather than outright ownership : the author has given detailed explanations in chapters 3, 7 and 11, which attribute it to the changing policies of successive British Governments : a course of history in China has also been analysed while arriving at the settlement for handing over this British territory back to China. How will Hong Kong assimilate itself with the mainland will be seen on July1, 1997, when 156 years of British Colonial Rule will end and the Chinese sovereignty will be restored. The transition is already felt in many small ways. Though China has promised to keep the colony capitalist and autonomous for 50 years, but in a society of refugees from main land, Beijing's intentions are inevitably regarded with misgiving.

Frank Welsh's vivid historical account evokes the characters of those on the British and Chinese sides, who were responsible for shaping it. This single volume history, of one of the most remarkable and intriguing places, is an essential document, to understand and analyse the course of events which will affect the transfer of this British territory to the Chinese control in 1997.