

COLONIALISM WAS HONG KONG'S EXIT

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Jacobite Magazine

September 23, 2017

<https://jacobitemag.com/2017/09/23/colonialism-hong-kong-exit/>

On the 19th of September, 15 editors of *Third World Quarterly's* editorial board resigned, protesting that Bruce Gilley's article *The Case For Colonialism* had not been revoked despite violating COPE publishing guidelines and the peer review process.¹ As Nathan Robinson of *Current Affairs* wrote, it is true that Gilley, "excluded mention of every single atrocity committed by a colonial power." It may be true that this move is a trap to corner "snowflakes." Had he been sincere about his argument, well aware of today's political atmosphere, he might have at least acknowledged his awareness of glaringly obvious colonial atrocities. Since he did not, his essay is condemned in the judgment of today's academic reading public. A comment by "Jaquelyn" on [Political Science Rumors](#) makes a convincing case for why that is. Having published for over a decade on TWQ, Jacquelyn implies that his stridency seemed to be deliberate as he could have written a much more logical article. However, he seemed to be in a nihilistic mood, having resigned from the American Political Science Association. He has also just called for the [retraction](#) of his own article. While the [Daily Nous](#), [The Sooty Empiric](#) and others have made structural points and rebuttals, others denounce him as [racist](#). I, on the other hand, would like to step away from the arena by thinking about colonialism in one specific case — Hong Kong, where Bruce Gilley himself has lived and worked for the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and witnessed its handover from Britain to China, which has no doubt influenced the writing of his article.

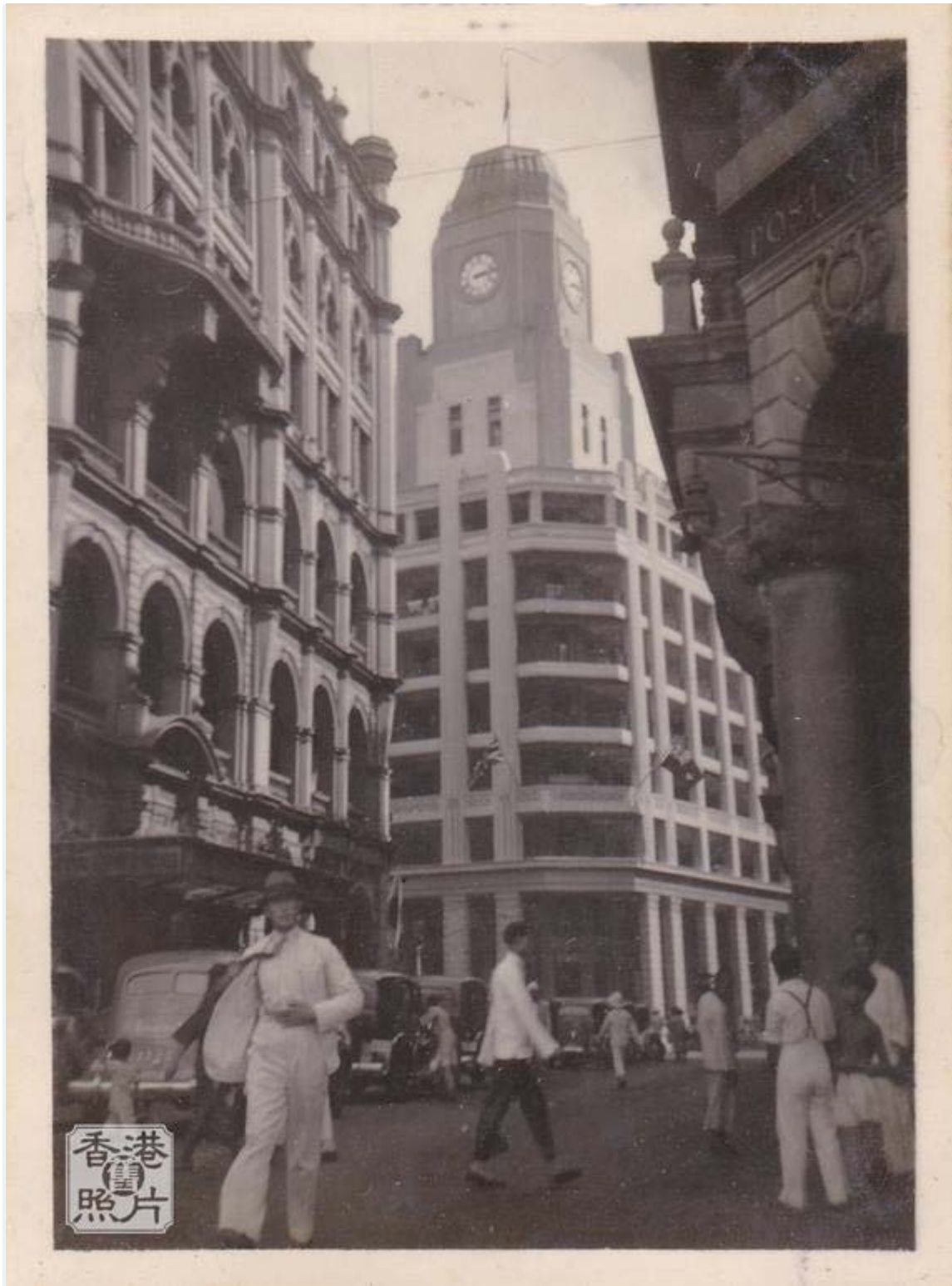
Before I begin, I would like to look at the use of the term "colonialism." It is true that Gilley's definition of colonialism is vague. He is right to criticize some academics for turning colonialism into a, "metropolitan flaneur culture of attitude and performance whose recent achievements include an inquiry into the glories of sadomasochism among third-world women and a burgeoning literature on the horrors of colonialism under countries that never had colonies." Colonialism is, above all, a political condition at a specific time and place in which sovereignty is "rented" to another nation. It indicates specific historical projects undertaken by European nations from the end of the 19th to the beginning of the 20th century to establish administrative organs in Asia and Africa, primarily promote their economic interests, during which many indigenous people were abused. The "ism" in the "colonialism" is a misnomer; "colonialism" is not general but specific.

With "colonialism's" historical background, many see ethnic difference – and therefore racism – as a requisite for colonialism. But by doing so, ethnically homogenous instances of colonialism are airbrushed out (*e.g.*, mainland Chinese colonizing Hongkongers)? If non-European powers do not qualify as colonizers, then what to make of the actions of Asian powers like China and Russia? Africa's natural environment is being torn to pieces by China, which is currently buying up swaths

of the continent and sucking up its natural resources. Critics of colonialism devote their time to excoriating “Western imperialism” but turn a blind eye to China, which ought to count as a “colonizer” by any reasonable definition.

While there is no doubt that colonialism has destroyed many lives, there is also no doubt that “British colonialism” has its successes, above all in Hong Kong. British colonialism is, plainly put, an essential part of Hong Kong culture. Without the British, Hong Kong would never have flourished economically; it would have been subsumed into the PRC from the start. Despite many who identify differently, some as “Hong Kong Chinese,” some as “ethnic Hongkonger” with views that favor total political sovereignty, 70 percent of Hongkongers do not view themselves as Chinese. While it is nominally a “Special Administrative Region,” it has its own government, which has been increasingly kowtowing to the interests of China for economic reasons.

British Colonialism in Hong Kong



1945, Gloucester Tower, Central. Before Gloucester Tower was built, this used to be the original site of Hong Kong Hotel, which was built in 1868. The north tower of the hotel was destroyed in a fire in 1926. Later, Hong Kong Land Holdings Limited bought the land and built Gloucester Tower. It used to be the tallest building in Hong Kong. At the end of the 70s, it became the Landmark, a mall.

Since the beginning of Hong Kong's colonization by Britain, China's despotism has been influencing the course of events in Hong Kong. In the middle of the Opium Wars the British had a losing streak, losing both battles at Kwun Chung Hill (now today's Jordan neighborhood) and Kowloon Peak. Running out of sustenance and refused aid by the Portuguese in Macau, they sought help from the indigenous Hongkongers in the south. The indigenous people – in particular the Tankas – helped the British, giving them the food and water to sustain their battle on the coast of China. At that time, Hong Kong's agricultural economy was already starting to develop slowly. And yet, Britain had reservations about the continued colonization of Hong Kong.

British Prime Minister William Lamb was not particularly enthused by the idea, as the War and Colonial Office were of the opinion that Hong Kong was barren, and would not have a significant effect on the expansion of Britain's colonial ambitions. And yet because Hongkongers aided the British, the Islanders of Hong Kong were already considered traitors by the Chinese government and were facing capital punishment from the Chinese court any time. Thus, Admiral Sir Charles Eliot, the first administrator of Hong Kong, wrote to the East India Company and the War and Colonial Office about Hong Kong's situation, demanding Britain continue its occupation of Hong Kong to protect its residents. After the British won the war, Hong Kong Island was officially ceded to the British in 1841.

Under the British, Hong Kong enjoyed relatively liberal governance. In fact, Hong Kong's population today consists of Chinese people who have immigrated here because of the famine, the Cultural Revolution, and because of economic opportunity. As better institutions have been created by the British, many mainlanders withdrew the dysfunctional forms on the mainland. Fragmentation from China came without popular deliberation, but mainlanders themselves exited to the city. In the early 20th century, many Chinese immigrants and refugees came here with the illusion that they could return to China. Many writers saw Hong Kong as a port of transition. The generation born around the 70s were the ones who felt themselves to be native Hongkongers, born and raised as Cantonese-speaking people in a British colony that offered them social security and economic opportunity.

Indeed, it is the hybridity of British and Chinese cultures and ideologies that gave Hong Kong its reputation for freedom. Many of us are educated in Western-style primary, secondary and tertiary educational institutions. Similar to British schools, many local schools – especially local schools with long histories – are single-sex and religiously aligned. Classes were conducted in English with the exception of Chinese history and Chinese. Sun Yat-sen, acknowledged by both the communists and the Kuomintang as the “Father of the Nation,” was educated in Queens College and went on to medical school in the University of Hong Kong, at which he met many like-minded intellectuals who were equally frustrated by the Qing Dynasty. Named one of the “[Four-Bandits](#),” the freedom of thought that he experienced in Hong Kong no doubt inspired his revolutionary activities. Sun Yat-sen is not the sole revolutionary in Hong Kong – Ho Chih Minh also founded the Indochinese Communist Party here ([only to be thrown into Victorian Prison later on for two years](#)). José Rizal, the father of Filipino nationalism, opened his ophthalmological practice here in the early 1890s during his self-imposed exile. Cold War Hong Kong was a center where ideologies parried. While the Shaw Brothers Studios [made movies](#) that represented the ideas on the Communist left, American organizations funded movies that were on the “right,”^[2] not to mention the publications representing a huge variety of political spectrums. It was a known spy capital,

where political activities were both discreet and open. It is no coincidence that Edward Snowden landed in Hong Kong, only to discover the previously Westernized port known for being a bastion of freedom and security is gone.

Squatter Areas of Shek Kip Mei in 1960s, where KMD fly in the air. Ma Ying-jeou, the president of Taiwan from 2008-2016, was rumored to have been born in Tiu Keng Leng, another area where KMD intellectuals gathered. Photo Credit: Tim Chan

Apart from cultural hybridity, the colonial administration also took pains to maintain social stability with effective governance and infrastructure. In 1967, with the help of the Chinese communist party, Communists staged an anti-colonial riot in Hong Kong, with an attempt to overthrow the British government. Many bombs (including lab-made bombs by students) were thrown and many casualties were involved, though the damages made by communists were censored by the HKSAR government. During the [riots](#), to maintain the sustenance of workers, Chow En-Lai approved 11.9 million from Bank of China to bankroll the workers that struck and rioted.^[1] Colonial rule was seriously threatened in Hong Kong, and the British administration considered leaving. Ultimately, however, they restored order and peace. After the riots, Maclehoze implemented many [social policies](#) to relieve anti-colonial sentiments of the Communists, such as introducing a massive housing program, labor ordinances, and improving public health. Hong Kong's [outstanding healthcare system](#) is a colonial legacy. Finally, there is the attempt of Chris Patten, the last governor of Hong Kong, to increase the number of directly elected lawmakers despite threats from the undemocratic Beijing to replace the new legislature with an appointed body. No doubt, the fact that Hong Kong's drainage system is much better than that of Macau's owes itself to better infrastructure implemented by the British, as reflected in the recent Typhoon Hato that devastated Macau. (Despite [Macau having a higher GDP per capita](#) of 73,186.96, while Hong Kong has one of 43,681.14.) Both the Portuguese colonial government and the Macau S.A.R's government (known for being corrupt) failed to build good drainage facilities, leading to deaths as well as business losses, while the British colonial government had already undertaken precautionary measures. In 1996, after an extensive study of the Hong Kong drainage systems, the Hong Kong West Drainage Tunnel was built with [3.4 billion](#), greatly reducing flooding in storms.

If the Chinese were better colonizers than the British, perhaps they could have done more to prevent seeds of hatred between the Chinese and Hongkongers from being sown. Since 1997, with a loosening immigration policy, 1.5 million Chinese have immigrated to Hong Kong – [about 150 everyday](#) – despite our already exaggerated population density. Under an increasingly pressured social and health care system, [beds are increasingly difficult for local pregnant women to acquire in local maternity wards](#). Milk powder has also been purchased from our pharmacies by the Chinese through [parallel trade](#), resulting in a shortage for our newborns. Indeed, the Chinese parallel traders have forced many shops catered to local needs to out of business, replacing them with a “pharmacy economy.” Apartments have been bought up by the Chinese for investment but not for inhabitation, leading to shortage for the locals.

Efforts made in the previous 20 years to promote Chinese hegemony in Hong Kong lacked an awareness of the gulf of 150 years that separates us from them. Although many readers of Gilley's article are loath to admit it, my previous colonizers were much more effective and humane than my present ones. Although the British may not have been perfect, at least they gave us some material benefits. Now their descendants are helping them to apologize for doing so. While the

CCP also did try to give us material benefits, they are spread among the business tycoons. An autocracy always falsely regards a place's ruling class as the only plenipotentiary of that place.

The Anti-Colonial Intellectual or “Left-Plastic^ㄟ” (左膠)



A Polymer

Within the political spectrum of Hong Kong, some are called “Left Plastic” – those with romantic ideas, entertaining the idea of independence without doing anything practical to realize them. There are many types of “Plastic,” and those who uncritically follow their ethnic identification and patriotic affinity for China, believing democracy can be granted by China, are called “Greater China Plastic” (大中華膠).

Sure, it is true that the British had their faults, such as discrimination.^ㄟ Some pro-Chinese academics like Law Wing-Sang thus argue that many Hongkongers partake in “collaborative colonialism” – that is, accept co-optation by the British and “forget our Chinese roots,”^ㄟ oppressing those who do not pass the bar to be “gentlemen.”

Law’s criticism of local Hongkongers is that we have supposedly betrayed our identities. However, Hongkongers are not Chinese. We belong to a hybridized culture shaped by the British. With our colonial history and culture, and because of the strong importance we place on democratic values,

we do not have a good colonial relationship with China. As Gilley states in his article, “any colonial relationship requires a high degree of acceptance from the local population.” (9, Gilley)

When reading Law, one must keep his political biases in mind. When he studied in the Chinese University of Hong Kong as an undergraduate, he was the chief editor of the student paper and was also the head of the student council (1983). At the cusp of being returned to China,²¹ the student movement yearned to embrace Chinese culture and their Chinese ethnicity. In 1982, Margaret Thatcher visited Hong Kong to discuss Hong Kong’s future with Deng Xiaoping. As she arrived at the airport, Law was one of the 13 students who greeted her with a protest, opposing her suggestion that the three unequal treaties should remain effective into 1997. While Singaporean activists in the 1950s rallied for total autonomy, activists like Law naively spread the idea of “democratic return” (民主回歸). He and his fellow student activists believed that Hong Kong could be returned to China and yet at the same time be granted democracy. As Law and the Pan-democrats misled the public with these naive ideas, Margaret Ng advocated the continuation of British administration and democratic rule over Hong Kong. Her ideas are well received today, but no one paid attention to them back in the 80s. This is how historical tragedies are created. As June 4th slapped Law and the Pan-democrats in the face, they made the even more absurd call to “democratize China.” As Liu Xiaobo famously claimed, “It took Hong Kong 100 years to become what it is. Given the size of China, certainly it would need 300 years of colonisation for it to become like what Hong Kong is today. I even doubt whether 300 years would be enough.” What is even more absurd is that they believed that it is possible for China to democratize, yet impossible for Hong Kong to gain the right of self-autonomy from Britain.

Recently, Law returned to academia to study “colonialism”, and yet his methodology was typical of an anti-west leftist, repudiating the systems and policies that Britain has given to Hong Kong. Falsely and absurdly believing that Britain has given Hong Kong people a “colonial mentality,” he refuses to acknowledge what Britain has done for Hong Kong in the short 150 years of rule, its difficulties, and the regrets they had for policies that they could not implement.

Continued “Colonialism” through Self-Determination

In 2009, Bruce Gilley wrote an essay called “Elegy for a Colonial Perspective,” lamenting the folding of the *Far East Economic Review* that was bought up by Dow Jones. According to Gilley, the folding of the *Far East Economic Review* meant that the most influential voices in the region will have passed from the relatively removed perspective of the “colonizers” (not in its pejorative sense but in the sense of westerners in Asia), to the hands of local media. In his opinion, the Asia that was in between cultures, where “Asia-hands and Asian elites who shared a perspective on the region’s development” was passing away, and becoming “subducted under powerful new forces of localism and globalization.” The focus of media in Asia is shifting from an international and comparative perspective to the extremes of provinciality and the interests of global business elites. He quotes Michael Vatikiotis, a former editor of the *Far East Economic Review* and who recently gave a talk in Hong Kong, who writes, “Increasingly, the media that survives is local and circulates in Asia’s larger cities, rather than between them.”

South China Morning Post is a prime example. Being bought up by red money, it bends more and more to the interests of China and businessmen in Hong Kong, who care as much about Hong Kong as the health of their businesses, but not Hong Kong itself as a home or place which they

have a stake in. Like the *Far East Economic Review*, one may accuse the *SCMP* for being an “English language publication, written by Western journalists, and catering to regional elites.” Yet, its international and comparative perspective of the boozy expat could be its strength. There are many types of expats. There are expats that are fresh graduates coming to exotic Hong Kong for a short stint in banking, but there are also expats who root themselves here, learning the language and assimilate, and no doubt British colonialism did help bring those voices into Hong Kong. While her politics might be a little bit off, where do we find people like [Elsie Tu](#) again? Or politicians like James Legge, who is also an academic, that obviously cherished Chinese culture and translated many Chinese classics into English? With the increasingly localized media — *SCMP* has ceased to be reputable; being an NGO, *HKFP* lacks the financial and editorial resources to publish long and detailed editorials — foreigners and the British alike would no doubt find Hong Kong affairs more difficult to engage with. International outlooks like those of Claudia Mo (who is married to Paul Bowring, the former editor of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*), and Paul Zimmerman would be more difficult to find. There was definitely more cooperation between the commonwealth countries in the past, creating more ethnic and cultural diversity in Hong Kong, which became home to Indians, Pakistanis, Jews, the Nepalese community. Many of the Nepalis in Hong Kong currently descended from the [Gurkha army](#) that defended Hong Kong. Many ethnic minorities live in Hong Kong, and they would have faced less marginalization when our government was still British, as the English language would have asserted greater importance. While I don’t agree with Gilley’s use of the word “colonialism,” the colonial Hong Kong is no doubt a more worldly one than the postcolonial one. Radical academics may discredit the European colonizers, but what about local nationalists, what about the Emperor of the Chinese Kingdom who threatened to exterminate ethnic minorities and other Han Chinese who refuse to conform? Gilley Writes:

The colonial perspective provided the only possible authoritative outlook on the region because it alone had a sufficient breadth, liberality of spirit and insistence on minimal principles of good government that could unite elites into a common purpose. I risk the opprobrium of hundreds of Western and Western-influenced academics brandishing Edward Said’s Orientalism to explain how the review was complicit in an imperial project. So be it. Because what may replace this unique period of shared understanding created by the colonial perspective is a return to a feudalism created by the postcolonial one — each to his own castle, there to nurse grievances and secret musings.

At this point in human history, regions will always be administered by governments, and colonialism is a historical condition which our current cultural and economic resources cannot enable again. I don’t think there is a need to “recolonize,” as the infrastructure the British have built is already in place. What we need is an independent executive branch that can cater to our civil culture and is strong enough to counter the overbearing Chinese Communist Party, and Gilley’s proposition of an intervening third party as safeguard might be feasible for Hong Kong. This is why [foreign judges](#) are crucial to the health of Hong Kong’s judicial system. No doubt, attempts to introduce a foreign “third party” will unavoidably, strongly irritate Chinese government and Chinese people, causing unforeseeable results. Nationalist sentiments can flare with the prospect of international inference; it can be conceived by Mainlanders and publicized as invasion. And yet, what has your love for China reaped for the last twenty years, patriots? This is a case of unrequited love, love’s labour [lost](#).

Thus, it is lamentable that since the end of the British Empire, interests of Britain in Hong Kong have much declined. With many trade opportunities with China and the growth of Special Economic Zones in China, it is doubtful that the western powers will turn again to Hong Kong unless it involves economic interests. Indeed, the significance of Hong Kong to the foreign power may be nothing but a banking center and one of the four great stock exchanges in the world. But how much do I wish that the protestors of the Umbrella Movement consisted of fewer “Left Plastic,” and that they plucked up their guts, occupied and paralyzed the stock exchange! That would have given us the ability to call our own shots — to create a Hong Kong even better than the one the British made for us. A less capitalistic Hong Kong more hospitable to ethnic minorities, refugees, where nature need not be developed for business interests, with tighter labor laws, a better educational system, a more protective economy and a higher standard of living, where local culture and businesses survive, to become a place where our ordinary, banal aspirations may be fulfilled. In Hong Kong, at least, the workers of the world didn’t unite. We have been beaten by capitalists, from Zhongnanhai to Central, who have been united with each other. But even if we did stand up, we would still need external help from those brave enough to stand up to China.

Born and raised in Hong Kong, Laika just graduated from college and is seeking the possibility of permanently exiting her city, with its decay of civil freedoms and welfare. Some editorial help was provided by Alistair Macpherson. Also born and raised in Hong Kong, Alistair studies in England. “The only thing Oriental about him is his face.”

^[1]“We all subscribe to the principle of freedom of speech and the value of provocation in order to generate critical debate. However, this cannot be done by means of a piece that fails to meet academic standards of rigour and balance by ignoring all manner of violence, exploitation and harm perpetrated in the name of colonialism (and imperialism) and that causes offence and hurt and thereby clearly violates that very principle of free speech.” From the *Letter of Resignation From Members of the Editorial Board of Third World Quarterly*.

^[2]Re-theorizing Colonial Power, Law Wing-Sang, P. 87. Or see <http://lawws12.blogspot.hk/2007/06/blog-post.html> under section “南來文化人及美元文化”

^[3]From the documentary *Vanished Archives*.

^[4]Plastic, or 膠 is almost a homophone to the swear word 鳩. For details see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cantonese_profanity#Gau

^[5]Chinese people faced discrimination in the job market. Since 1936, the salary for local officials were lower than their European counterparts, and both Chinese and Eurasian members of the Legislative Council never insisted that Chinese should be granted the same salary as Europeans. Up to 1966, only a handful of Chinese had been appointed to senior government positions. (John M Carroll, *The Concise History of Hong Kong*). As Carroll quotes David Faure, “Until localization was the order of the day, in the 1980s...no Hong Kong Chinese, however well-educated and however well established in his or her own profession, could reasonably have seen that he or she could have gone very far in government service.” Many were not allowed to travel to Lamma Island or the Peak because they are reserved for the British or the western elite, but the British did do their part in nurturing “native gentlemen” who could serve a bridge between the British and the locals. Ho Kai, is above all a prominent example.

^[6]In his book “Collaborative Colonial Power: The Making of the Hong Kong Chinese,” he quotes Lugard, the founder of HKU: “The primary function of education would in my judgement be to fit the ordinary individual to fill a useful part in his environment with happiness to himself, and to

ensure that the exceptional individual shall use his abilities *for the advancement of the community and not to its detriment or to the subversion of constituted authority*...It should be the aim of our new system to train up a generation who shall exchange this bitter hostility for an attitude of friendly co-operation, and who shall be able to recognize and achieve ideals of their own, without a slavish imitation of the European and be *proud of a nationality with its own clear aims and future*.” (69-70, Law. Emphasis by Law.)

▣ The Sino-British Declaration was signed in 1984.