

Man in a Hurry

Murray MacLehose and Colonial Autonomy in
Hong Kong

Ray Yep

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For my friends in Hong Kong

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Acknowledgements

I grew up in the MacLehose era. He is probably the first colonial governor I had ever paid attention to. This is however not much to do with his policies or benevolent rule. As a teenager, I had no knowledge or interest in the fact that my home in a public housing estate or my study in a local school both had something to do with his reform programmes. I remember vividly, though, my bus ride to Kowloon with my father on the first day of Cross-Harbour Tunnel operation, a few hours after MacLehose announced its opening. Kowloon was regarded as rough and unsafe in those days and crossing the harbour was something really special for me. My interest in this Scot only grew after my parents finally afforded to buy a TV in the mid-1970s. I watched TV whenever possible and he was on the news all the time. His height and well-combed hair somehow always gave me a sense of assurance. The way a kid saw the world did not always make sense. In fact, our 'bonding' almost elevated to another level as I was supposed to have a chance to meet him in person. As a committed boy scout, I was chosen to represent the Victoria District in St. George's Day parade. As the Queen was the patron of boy scouts all over the world, the Governor was expected to inspect the parade on her behalf. But he didn't show up, as he apparently had other more important events to officiate. We never got a chance to renew our bonding, as he left Hong Kong a few months afterward, after a long twelve-year tenure.

MacLehose has of course made a major impact on the development of Hong Kong. There were substantial progress in public service provisions and infrastructure development during his years and many people regard the creation of the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) as a pivotal moment in Hong Kong's history. I always wonder why there is no book-length study of his governorship. This book is, however, driven by my other (misguided) observation of colonial rule. I recall growing up under colonial rule without noticing the presence of the British sovereign. This is of course not true, as the image of the Queen was everywhere. Yet

in policy terms, until the commencement of the Sino-British negotiations in the early 1980s, I could not find much evidence of the involvement of London in domestic affairs. ‘Where is London?’, this question has always been at the back of my mind even since I started more serious inquiry into the history of Hong Kong ten, fifteen years ago. And the drive has been accelerated by what I regard as a stark contrast after 1997. Visits and directives of top Chinese leaders have become more and more frequent over the last two decades, and it is almost impossible to find a speech or announcement of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government officials without reference to Central People’s Government after 2019. How did the colonial governor actually interact with London? How did Hong Kong government work with the sovereign before? What has changed in this relationship since 1997? Or more fundamentally, how could local autonomy be defined? These are the questions I would like to address in this volume. The eventful governorship of MacLehose could be a window for understanding these puzzles.

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I must thank my family. I thank Carolin for her love, sacrifices, and support over the years. Without her understanding and devotion, I will remain stuck in my miserable space in Tat Chee Avenue. Charlie, Chelsea, and Paul are my guardian angels who always manage to brighten up my cold and lonely days during Britain’s winters. Last but not least, I am most grateful for my extended family: my friends in Hong Kong, for their warmth and courage. They are the reason why I somehow managed to survive the adversities over the last few years. They continue to show me how to live in truth and push me to solidify during trying times. We hold on to each other as we endure the traumas and dislocation. Hong Kong remains my home though I choose to continue my professional life elsewhere. It is a privilege to be able to continue writing on Hong Kong’s history. It is a pleasure that hurts. This book is dedicated to them.

Introduction

The Challenge of Running a Colony

An executive is sent out to take charge of a sensitive operation with full authority to sort things out and run the business on the ground. After a while, when one or two problems arise, the board starts to wonder whether its executive out there has got it quite right. 'I wonder whether this and that have been considered quite as fully as they might have been? Has everyone on the spot been properly consulted? Why didn't such and such get done?' Imperceptibly at first, and then more openly, head office succumbs to the temptation and starts to second-guess and micro-manage from the centre. Meanwhile the people on the ground become extremely frustrated. Should they make a fuss? Doesn't it all look rather petty if they do? If they appeal to the chairman, won't the chairman regard that as a distraction from more important issue?¹

This may sound familiar to a senior executive of a local branch of a multinational corporation. However, the author of this quote is not a business professional. This is a reflection by Chris Patten, the last Governor of Hong Kong, whose tenure was arguably one of the most eventful governorships in terms of relations with China. Not only did his proposal of constitutional reform for the colony anger Communist officials in Beijing, it also attracted severe criticism from 'old China hands' in the Foreign Office. His friendship with top officials in high places such as Douglas Hurd and John Major certainly enabled him to withstand the turbulence. Yet his authority waned during the last few months of his term after the Labour Party returned to power in the UK.

Running a colony is a colossal task. Stephanie Williams' accounts of colonial administrations across the British Empire between 1857 and

1. Chris Patten, *East and West: The Last Governor of Hong Kong on Power, Freedom and the Future* (London: Pan Macmillan, 1998), 107–108.

1912 depict challenging conditions of governorship: colonies were mostly regarded as backwaters beyond the pale of civilization, and a governor 'was usually seen as someone who had been passed over at home, relegated to a small provincial society of second-raters abroad'.² Patten's reflection uncovers essential aspects of a governor's job. Firstly, the relationship between the governor and the British government was hierarchical in nature. Colonial governors were held accountable to the Colonial Secretary, and then to the Foreign Secretary after 1968. Formally speaking, the governor was expected to be subordinate. Nevertheless, colonial administration also implies a process of delegation of power under which the governor could adapt and improvise in response to local situations. Consequently, the actual scope of the autonomy of colonial administrations was hardly preordained; both the interests of their superiors in London and their confidence in the ability of these colonial officials would determine the degree of freedom enjoyed by the governors. The fate of these governors hinged thus upon their success in placating two constituencies simultaneously, both the British side and the colonial community. It is, however, not always easy to decipher who this 'British side' was and what they really wanted. The perception of British empire as a coherent entity is misguided, for it represented not only the interests of kings and queens, politicians or career civil servants, but it was also shaped by the multitudinous and frequently conflicting concerns and activities of individuals in Britain: merchants, missionaries, soldiers, scientists, scholars, bankers, businessmen, and idealists. Governors were obliged to respond and attend to the fiats and directives issued by officials in Whitehall, but the latter were in turn pulled and pressured by a multitude of interests and lobbying efforts at home and abroad. The quarrels and bargaining of these 'imperialists' in diverse guises rendered the expectation of a British Empire with a unified centre unrealistic.

Even within the government, fights and altercations between departments were permanent features of bureaucratic life. Each department looked at the colonial problem through a different lens. The Treasury, a powerful state agency, was fixated on the financial implications of any development in colonies. It may not be fair to paint these financial officials as merely hyper-conservative and negative-minded, but the question of whether local administrations could address their domestic issues without financial contribution from the United Kingdom was their primary, if not their only, concern. The Foreign Office, on the other hand, took great pride in overseeing and managing the global interests of Britain as a whole. The parochial concerns of colonies were not always within their reckoning

2. Stephanie Williams, *Running the Show: Governors of the British Empire* (London: Penguin, 2011), 10.

and the situation of any British overseas possession was seldom viewed in isolation. Most importantly, neither of these departments had to bother with the task of administering the colonies, the primary responsibility of the Colonial Office.

Interdepartmental wrangles and clashes were simply integral parts of the policy process. For the colonies, the situation was further compounded by the relatively low status of the Colonial Office, the champion of their interests in the British bureaucracy. The miserable physical conditions endured by this unit in its early days may be illustrative of its low esteem. The old Colonial Office in Downing Street in the 1830s was situated in an unsuitable building that was declared inadequate, unsafe, and unworthy of substantial repair. This was matched with a lack of equipment for proper office operations. As a young officer complained, ‘we have no maps that are fit to be consulted . . . we have no furniture—carpets, chairs, tables are all decrepit’.³ The situation certainly changed with the arrival of Joseph Chamberlain in 1895, and the Office expanded further in the 1930s with the development of specialist departments complementing those handling the general affairs of a subgroup of colonies. Yet a general perception of the Foreign Office as unhelpful remained by and large intact until their merger into the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) in 1968.⁴

The incoherence and intermingling of private and public interests within the British establishment bred a certain degree of ambiguity which in turn offered some space that the colonies could exploit to pursue local interests. Their endeavours were further helped by the general character of the British Empire, which was primarily a commercial project. As pointed out by John Darwin, British imperial ambition was mostly confined to the capture of profits and commerce via control over the terms of trade with slight interest in raising a direct local revenue to invest in public goals limited.⁵ There was thus little incentive to rule closely and oppressively once the challenge of rival imperialists was excluded, and it made no financial sense to install a huge British administrative machinery on the spot. The history of British Empire also reveals a certain degree of hesitation with regards to imperial expansion, which was particularly prevalent during the mid-nineteenth century. The American Revolution was one of several catalysts for growing concerns about the emergence of colonial nationalism, and later developments in South Africa, India, and Rhodesia further ignited

3. John Cell, *British Colonial Administration in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (London: Yale University Press, 1970), 4.

4. Ronald Hyam, *Understanding the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), chapter 7.

5. John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of British World-System 1830–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

the debate on how ties with the Empire's vast overseas possessions could be maintained. Anti-imperialists argued that as colonies grew and matured, they would drop off the vine when they ripened just as the American territories had. Free-trade advocates, on the other hand, contended that if favourable trading ties could be maintained, there was no reason to hold overseas possessions against their will. The notion of responsible government was the compromise. First introduced in Nova Scotia in 1846, it gradually expanded to Western Australia, Africa, and other parts of the British Empire.

Both the anti-imperialist and the free-trade positions undermined the propensity of British imperialists to adopt a highly interventionist approach to running the empire. Instead they believed in 'respecting the man on the spot', or, as Sir Cosmo Parkinson succinctly summarized, the general philosophy of overseeing the colonies was that 'it was not for Whitehall to usurp functions which could, or at any rate should, be adequately performed in the colonies themselves'.⁶ Such laid-back attitudes underlined the need for colonies to have a degree of autonomy in colonial rule, with several characteristics discernible. Given the general lack of enthusiasm from the centre for meddling in the governing of colonial society and its reluctance to invest in the development of colonial administrative structures, British bureaucracy on the ground was small in relation to the size of colonial population or territories. On the eve of the Second World War, the administrative division of the colonial service in Africa numbered slightly more than 1,200 persons, who were responsible for governing over 43 million locals and 2 million square miles. Even India, 'the jewel in the crown of the British Empire', for a population of 353 million, the maximum number of covenanted members of the Indian Civil Service was capped at 1,250.⁷

The limit of bureaucratic capacity contributed to distinctive governing styles within British colonial rule. With their capacity to reach out to indigenous societies hamstrung by this scarcity, colonial authorities tended to rely on local institutions of governance. The use of intermediaries between the colonial rulers and local population was common, and respect for traditional practices and values was upheld as a social contract under alien rule. The British rule of Weihaiwei between 1898 and 1930 is exemplary. Even since the beginning of British administration of this leasehold, the British government decided to maintain good relationships with village headmen. These were lineage leaders chosen by the villagers a result of their wealth, personality, and social position, and they were responsible for

6. Sir Cosmo Parkinson, *The Colonial Office from Within* (London: Faber & Faber, 1947), 25.

7. John Cell, 'Colonial Rule', in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume IV, The Twentieth Century*, ed. Judith Brown and W. M. Roger Louis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 232.

the maintenance of order and peace in their villages. In addition, headmen were required to collect land tax and keep records of land deals, and to relay official notices to the villagers. Not only did the British administration continue to respect their role as intermediaries, it made further efforts to institutionalize their responsibilities. A new position of district headman was introduced, who was responsible for twelve villages on average. The headmen were still chosen by the villagers, but the appointment was now formally confirmed by the British authority and rewarded with a monthly allowance.⁸ This call to respect traditional institutions was echoed by Frederick Lugard, whose famous thesis of the ‘dual mandate’ was seen by many as a major reference point for colonial rule. He warned against the dangers of ignoring indigenous authorities:

It becomes impossible to maintain the old order—the urgent need is to adapt to the new—to build up a tribal authority with a recognized and legal standing, which may avert social chaos. It cannot be accomplished by superseding—by the direct rule of the white man—such ideas of discipline and organization as exist, nor yet by “stereotyping customs and institutions among backward races which are not consistent with progress.”⁹

The institutionalized use of intermediaries was more than simply a pragmatic measure to meet the challenge of the paucity of resources; it was also imperative to the legitimation of colonial rule. Prasenjit Duara’s notion of a cultural nexus of power is relevant here. In his seminal work on the failure of state-building efforts by the Nationalist government in rural north China between the 1920s and the 1940s, he offered important insights on the significance of cultural symbols and norms embedded in traditional organizations. These moral values, he argued, define status, prestige, honour, reciprocity, and, most importantly, social and political responsibility. The Qing government had skilfully exploited these symbolic assets by making use of the traditional brokerage system in rural China—such as gate association and the *baojia* system, under which respected leaders and chosen by local communities could continue to play a role in assisting the county government in implementing arduous tasks, particularly tax collection. Via this process, the cultural affiliation lent the Qing state respectability and legitimacy and this, in turn, further motivated those aspiring locals to seek out positions and influence within the formal institutions of power. The Nationalist government, however, failed to achieve a similar rapport with local communities, breaking with traditions by replacing

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8. Pamela Atwell, *British Mandarin and Chinese Reformers* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1985).
 9. Frederick Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (London: Forgotten Books, 2012), 217.

brokers with more reform-minded outsiders or entrepreneurial tax collectors. Such moves alienated rather than engaged the local community and undermined its legitimacy. Duara contends that the lack of moral alignment between these state agents and the local population accounted for the widening rift between state and society in Republican China.¹⁰ This was, in fact, exactly the case in Weihaiwei. The return of Weihaiwei to China in 1930 brought about a fundamental change in the philosophy of its governance. Respect for traditional organization was seen as a hindrance to the modernization project of the Nanjing government. The Nationalist officials now expected the locals to see themselves not as members of lineages or villages, but as Chinese nationals and citizens. A more proactive and intrusive approach in governance was evident in extensive efforts by local government to introduce surveillance of the landscape and the documentation of land deals and tax payments. Consequently, the scope for adaptations at the grass-roots level lessened, and local officials were deprived of their own discretion. The size of the national state expanded, but there was a parallel rise in local complaints and resentment. There was a glaringly obvious chasm between state and society.

Serving the Sovereign and the Indigenous

While the previous discussion underlines the ideal conditions for and necessity of colonial autonomy, one should not lose sight of the other side of the equation that the sovereign still mattered. Governors, after all, acted under a general metropolitan supervision. The trust of their superiors in London was of great consequence to the personal careers of these governors. They were expected to govern, and the tradition of respecting the man on the ground did not excuse these royal agents from blame and castigation if the home government found the situation in the colonies undesirable and uncomfortable. Isolation from the metropole and insulation from the rigour of parliamentary affairs may have brought tranquillity and peace to some colonial officials, but it could also herald professional uncertainty and the marginalization of aspiring talents. Minimal attention from London could be damaging for an ambitious official aiming at an eventual return to the homeland departments or a reassignment away from the backwater which was under their care. At the very least, London had to be accurately informed whenever a response from the colony was warranted. Maintaining the confidence of London was thus essential for the survival of governors, and this confidence took considerable effort to nurture.

10. Prasenjit Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State: Rural North China 1900–1942* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988).

Governors deployed a wide array of strategies in maintaining a 'comfortable distance' from the metropolitan government, with a bottom line of not arousing attention from London. Written communications were the major ways of presenting the local situation in the best possible light in the colony's favour, and the outward dispatches carefully crafted by governors and other senior colonial officials were intended to shape and structure home officials' understandings of local developments. These were usually supplemented by unofficial communications like private letters, in which more personal and candid reflections were included. The latter probably also offered a façade of intimacy or even friendship with superiors in London, and may even have made governors feel more like insiders than isolated subordinates. Among governors, there was a general concern over the lack of understanding of colonial reality in London, with Frederick Lugard observing that 'it is naturally galling to high officials in the colonies to know that their suggestions are criticized by youth almost free from school or college, and their mature and well-weighted advice possibility rejected on the recommendation of these embryo statesmen'.¹¹

Face-to-face engagement was perhaps a more effective mode of communication and persuasion. Advancement in aviation technology made regular duty visits to London possible for governors. These were opportunities to explain queries, pass on information, publicize colonial development, put pressure on MPs and officials, and collect gossip and updates on British politics. Traffic went in the other direction as well, and visiting MPs and ministers could serve similar functions. Fed with detailed policy briefings, elaborate meetings with colonial officials, selective presentation of highlights in local development, and generous hospitality, these politicians and career civil servants were expected to go home with empathy towards the colonies, transformed into informed participants in policy discussion concerning these remote parts of the world.

Some colonies were further determined to make their case with more elaborate metropolitan connections. There were colonial governors who found it useful to send an envoy with colonial experience back to London. These were, in most cases, the private staff of governors, although they were usually sent at the expense of colonial finance. Their role was to inform and persuade London the colony was in good shape. By the 1830s, most of the American and West Indian colonies had made similar arrangements in London. Meanwhile, it was also common to find senior colonial officials making serious efforts to cultivate or maintain their ties with the metropolitan society. Global networks connecting veterans with common military experience, university and school alumni, members of extended

11. Lugard, *The Dual Mandate*, 159.

aristocratic families, enthusiasts of shared interest in scientific matters, and activists of religious or civic causes in Britain and the colonies were businesses taken seriously by all involved.¹² These were platforms where patronage and influence were nurtured, and networks through which accessibility to metropolitan policy makers was enabled.

Engagement with the colonies could also be initiated by London. A Royal Commission of inquiry could be set up if politicians in the homeland decided to dig into unfortunate developments in the colonies, in order to allocate blame and responsibility and inflict punishment. The disgraceful downfall and political and financial ruin of Warren Hastings in India was a powerful reminder of the repercussions of London's wrath for all colonial officials.¹³ In most cases, however, attention from metropolitan government was more mundane and routine, reflecting a rising demand for facts and statistics. The Board of Trade founded the first statistical unit in Britain in 1832, and the passage of the Registration Act of 1836 led to both the creation of the General Registry Office and the registration of births, marriages, and deaths from 1837 onward. This drive towards scientific administration naturally spread to the colonial order across the globe. More detailed requirements for quantitative reporting were introduced, with landscape surveys becoming routine. The joint auspices of the Indian Survey and the British Museum in the late nineteenth century, for example, represented one of the major efforts to produce and classify knowledge about the empire.¹⁴ Oversight of colonial finances also became an integral part of metropolitan supervision, and this was further reinforced in the early post-Second World War years by London's strategy of subsidizing welfare development as a method of leverage for maintaining ties with overseas possessions.¹⁵

Running a colony was thus a precarious business. Colonial governors struggled with the tension inherent in their roles as local administrators and royal agents. They were neither independent autocrats who could do whatever they wanted under royal prerogatives, nor were they puppets of metropolitan officials. Colonial administrations were mostly undemocratic until after the Second World War, yet electoral politics in Westminster interacted with colonial affairs when the British public perceived developments

12. Zoe Laidlaw, *Colonial Connections, 1815–45: Patronage, the Information Revolution and Colonial Government* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

13. Michael Cullen, *The Statistical Movement in Early Victorian Britain: The Foundations of Empirical Social Research* (Brighton: Edward Everett Root, 2017).

14. Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London and New York: Verso, 1993).

15. Michael Havinden and David Meredith, *Colonialism and Development: Britain and Its Tropic Colonies, 1850–1960* (London: Routledge, 1993).

in overseas possessions overlapping with their interests and concerns. Respect for Indigenous values, customs, and practices was crucial for effective local administration, but colonial practices still had to be reconciled with the traditions of freedom and legality of the British polity. Ultimately, colonial government was created to serve British interests, but this was hardly tenable if local community felt that it was being abandoned and exploited.

How to get the balance right? When and how could colonial administrators make their case to London when colonial officials perceived metropolitan assessment inadequate or unfair and felt compelled to stand up for local interests? What were the motivations for the sovereign to meddle and intervene in colonial administration? What were the limits and leverages of the colony in its pursuit of local interests? These are the fundamental issues related to the running of the British Empire, as well as for the understanding of the legitimation of colonial rule, and these are the questions this book seeks to answer.

The Long 1970s

Hong Kong in the 1970s is a good lens for understanding the intricacies of colony-sovereign relationships. It was a period of transition, during which the colony made a major stride towards becoming a modern city and set out on its trajectory of reunification with China. It was also during this decade that a fundamental reconfiguration of the socio-economic outlook of the city and a major shift in the approach to its governance took place. All these developments were propelled by vicissitudes within domestic conditions as well as changes in global geopolitics. It was a time when the colonial governor was presented with opportunities for and challenges in defending the local interests, and it was also a key moment for London to reconsider its commitments to the colony and reassess Britain's strategic priorities.

Hong Kong's origin as an 'enclave colony'¹⁶ engendered favourable conditions for colonial autonomy. That is, the colony was valued not for its natural resources, as in the case of Spanish conquest of South America in search of silver and gold, or for the climate's ability to sustain lucrative cash crops as with British Malaya. Hong Kong was colonized in order to act as a gateway to China, a haven of British laws and security which could facilitate penetration into the mainland.¹⁷ With Hong Kong merely a component of a larger British informal empire in China, there was a limited

16. Jurgen Osterhammel, *Colonialism* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2005).

17. John Carroll, *Canton Days: British Life and Death in China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2020).

incentive to foster a strong British presence in the colony. The cultural gap between expatriates and the local community and the lack of numbers in British personnel on the ground moreover generated a persistent sense of insecurity despite Britain's political and social domination. The small tax base of the administration and the resultant paucity of administrative capacities further reduced the colonial rulers' ability to engage with locals. All these rendered the general approach of relying on customary practices and intermediaries even more important in the case of Hong Kong. The first hundred years of British rule in Hong Kong was thus characterized by social segregation,¹⁸ intermediation of the Chinese elites,¹⁹ and general indifference towards the governed population.²⁰

However, the environment of colonial governance fundamentally changed during the post-war years. Local people became more assertive in demanding proactive engagement from the government in local affairs. The trauma of the Japanese Occupation of 1941–1945 had several consequences for the relationship between colonial rulers and the governed. The image of British invincibility was gone, and the feeble defence that the British force put up against the Japanese invaders was seen as a betrayal by considerable number of locals. There was an urgent need for the colonial government to recapture the trust and respect of disillusioned local communities.²¹ This marked the beginning of a more engaged style of governance, with gradual increases in public expenditure and infrastructure. This was fortunately made possible by Hong Kong's strong economic growth from the 1940s. The industrialization process prompted by the trade embargo against China during the Korean War had laid a solid financial basis for public sector growth. Meanwhile, the emergence of the baby boomer generation in the post-war years and the demographic change which resulted from the increased local birth rate contributed to discernible changes in feelings of belonging within the local community. Together with the steady expansion of public services, especially housing, education, and healthcare, and the resulting increase in interaction with the colonial administration, a new sense of citizenship and a nascent civil society was on the horizon by the 1970s.²² Popular acquiescence with social ills like general filthiness, cor-

18. John Carroll, *A Concise History of Hong Kong* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007).

19. Wing Sang Law, *Collaborative Colonial Power: The Making of the Hong Kong Chinese* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009).

20. Elizabeth Sinn, *Power and Charity: A Chinese Merchant Elite in Colonial Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003).

21. Philip Snow, *The Fall of Hong Kong: Britain, China and the Japanese Occupation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

22. Agnes Ku and Pan Ngai, eds., *Remaking Citizenship in Hong Kong: Community, Nation and the Global City* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

ruption, or exclusion of Chinese residents from the policy-making process could no longer be assumed.

Post-war Hong Kong also witnessed another seismic change in the global political landscape: the rise of Communist China. For the first time in almost a hundred years since the commencement of colonial administration in Hong Kong, there was a powerful and united regime reigning in the mainland. The ideological outlook of the People's Republic further complicated the picture. Its socialist stance entailed fundamental tension with Britain, which China regarded as a core member of the wicked capitalist-imperialist band led by America and denied the unequal treaties signed between the Qing government and the British authorities. Fortunately, the Communist leaders were shrewd in their calculations, helping to contain these tensions to generally manageable levels. This pragmatism prevailed, with Chinese Communist policy towards Hong Kong phrased as the principles of 'long-term planning and full utilization', a code message for paying lip service towards sovereignty concerns and its continuous use of the colony as a platform for foreign trade and outward engagement. The realism was however mutual. Britain was persistent in engaging the new regime despite their ideological differences and territorial dispute. Britain was among the first batch of Western governments to acknowledge the People's Republic of China as a sovereign state.²³ Persistent efforts to bolster Britain's diplomatic relationship with Beijing also illustrated London's positive approach towards the new power in Asia. British businesses, such as Jardine, were also keen to maintain their presence in the mainland despite the anti-capitalist stance of the Communist Party. Both sides adopted restraint, caution, and flexibility when navigating this maze of conflicting ideologies, diplomatic loss and gain, and tangible economic growth. The metropolitan government's strategic investment in this game with China always prompted London to advise, instruct and intervene in Hong Kong's handling of its powerful neighbour.

Colonial Hong Kong's cardinal principle for survival was thus not to provoke Communist China. This strategy worked most of the time, with local Communists mostly content with propaganda and networking building in local community. Yet the turbulence of Cultural Revolution was overwhelming, and Hong Kong was not immune to this tsunami of violent radicalism. The 1967 Riots, largely an extension of political fanaticism in the mainland, caused the most serious disruption in the territory during the post-war years. The leftists took most of the blame for the mayhem, but the saga uncovered various structural problems, such as the gap in social

23. Chi-Kwan Mark, *The Everyday Cold War: Britain and China, 1950–1972* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

Final Remarks

Introduction

At a press event a few months before his anointment as the first head of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government, and still basking in the exuberance of his electoral victory in late 1996, Tung Chee-Hwa, the Chief Executive-select, found it hard to swallow a provocation from a foreign journalist who asked him whether he had ever said ‘no’ to China. Generally seen as an even-tempered man, Tung reacted quite out of character and retorted by asking when a British Governor had ever stood up to London. Chris Patten was not impressed. ‘Where has he been all these years?’ the last Governor ridiculed Tung’s rhetorical question. ‘There was a time when Lord MacLehose used to be described as the second most unpopular foreign leader in the FCO after Dom Mintoff,’¹ Patten added.²

Like many of his predecessors, MacLehose stood up to London on countless occasions. The story told in the preceding pages, however, is not just about how the Governor resisted and heroically battled with the sovereign. Rather, it is about how a royal agent could navigate all the obligations and constraints inherent in his role as the Queen’s servant in the territories and find a balance between his potentially conflicting responsibilities towards the home government and the local community. It is an account of bargaining as well as of collaboration and persuasion in a tense environment. Ultimately, it is the tale of how autonomy was earned, stretched, and

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1. Dom Mintoff was the Maltese Prime Minister who played a key role in Malta’s independence from the British Empire and the creation of the Maltese republic. His relationship with London had been tense; one of his political ambitions was to rid the island of all military bases and to eventually force Britain to pay for its right to station troops on Maltese soil. He was also hated by British diplomats for his failure to show deference to Britain. ‘Dom Mintoff obituary’, *The Guardian*, 21 August 2012.
 2. Chris Patten, *The Hong Kong Diaries* (Hong Kong: Allen Lane, 2022), 436.

defined under imperial rule. The episodes revisited here shed new light on the complexity of the colonial order, with relevance for understanding 'One Country, Two Systems', a scheme which has only just reached its halfway point.

The Long 1970s: A Call for Action

During the 1950s, the colonial administration was hesitant and inactive on domestic issues. Governors before David Trench saw no urgency to invest in public services and build up institutions, despite the glaring signs of the growing inadequacy of the local community in addressing various social ills. Their reticence seems even more ridiculous when the steady development of the colony's economy and the consequent swelling of the public purse in the post-war years is considered. They were equally evasive when it came to handling corruption. Colonial officials were not unaware of the prevalent socio-economic dislocation and growing frustrations within the local community, but they lacked the drive to attack these issues face-on and were content with modest responses and limited reforms at the margin. David Trench, who never enjoyed a particularly strong rapport with the local society, was an unsung hero of social reform. Under his leadership, the colonial government started to conduct meticulous reviews of social service provisions, and long-term initiatives finally took off. He also gave anti-sleaze efforts the final push and passed the Prevention of Bribery Ordinance, which was a game changer in the battle against corruption. Even so, most of his reviews did not deliver results until after the outbreak of the 1967 Riots. Even in his crusade against corruption, Trench stopped short of making the ultimate decision to create an independent institution detached from the police establishment. Yet the most glaring evasion concerns the fate of the colony. The sovereignty issue of Hong Kong was like Voldemort in the Harry Potter stories—no one dared or wanted to raise it in any conversation. Notwithstanding the hostility of the Communist regime towards the 'unequal treaties', London's approach was not to provoke Beijing on this matter, and if a response was necessary, to try to be as pragmatic and flexible as possible. The colony was seen as an asset, but not as indispensable or deserving of military intervention if threatened. The prospective negotiations over the future of Hong Kong became visible concerning the aftermath of the 1967 Riots, but there was still no concrete action plan by the late 1960s.

MacLehose inherited a range of these unsettled issues, chronic uncertainty about 1997, and half-baked reforms that did not fully address the various problems. The 1967 Riots had however served as a wake-up call

for the colonial administrators, and sweeping demands for reforms under the carpet was no longer an option. The Governor was further prompted to invest in social services and infrastructure because these interventions would consolidate the colony's role as an industrialized economy and a regional financial hub. There were, however, many unexpected developments along the way. For example, it was the embarrassing escape of Peter Godber which pushed the Governor to make the final leap in his crusade against corruption and create the ICAC. He also did not anticipate the Labour government's strong interest in welfare conditions in Hong Kong and its disregard for the convention of ruling the colony at arm's length.

The biggest surprise, nevertheless, was the rise of China. MacLehose arrived at a time when the Cultural Revolution had already lost momentum, with the moderate wing of the Chinese leadership reasserting their grip. This was soon followed by the seismic shift in China's diplomacy and its desire to engage with the world. The ascendance of Deng Xiaoping paved the way for a pragmatic approach in China's economic development. An ideological straitjacket of Maoism was replaced by an embrace of market economy, via the creation of Special Economic Zones in the coastal region. Deng's China was ready to embark on the journey to the Open Door Policy and capitalist reforms. This was an opportunity for Hong Kong, as the colony could serve as a platform for relaying foreign capital and business knowhow to China. Beijing was particularly keen to consolidate the economic partnership between Hong Kong and Guangdong.

A new China presented various challenges for MacLehose. A materialistic China could be friendly and pragmatic, yet growing confidence could also make it more assertive. Huang Hua's request to delist Hong Kong from the category of a colony in the United Nations in 1972 illustrates this shift. More importantly, an improved Anglo-Chinese relationship also made negotiations about the colony's future a more material prospect. When compared with the revolutionary regime under Mao, London saw the stable and moderate leadership of Deng as a more manageable audience for dialogue and exchange. With the clock ticking, MacLehose assigned greater salience to the 1997 issue than his colleagues in London. Hong Kong needed to brace itself for the ultimate dialogue and he wanted the socio-economic development of the colony to create preconditions for prospective negotiations. He was emboldened by the role of Hong Kong in China's modernization programme, and worked on the assumption that Beijing would have much to learn from the colony—a poster boy for capitalism. A new China, therefore, represented opportunities as well as challenges for Britain and Hong Kong. The re-engagement both nurtured a degree of confidence but also bred anxiety among colonial administrators.

On the subject of 1997, MacLehose made a move with his idea of separating the legal issue of land leases in the New Territory from the political future of the colony and he raised this idea when he met Deng Xiaoping in 1979. While the policy process of Communist China remained opaque, it would be wrong to label this a misjudgement, but the Governor failed spectacularly on this occasion, and then misunderstood the significance of the Tin Shui Wai project. However, it was his initiative that instilled the process with a sense of urgency and accelerated the negotiations between the two sovereigns. It helped to deliver the eagerly awaited agreement over the future of Hong Kong by the mid-1980s, right before local anxiety reached breaking point.

The paradigmatic shifts witnessed by MacLehose were not confined to Hong Kong's changing relationship with China and domestic development. The 1970s was a period of major realignment within global politics with major efforts to reduce the tension between the United States and the Communist camp. The Nixon administration altered the containment approach against the Soviet Union and China and the US strategic priority shifted to Indochina. Desperate to overcome Communist insurgency, Washington committed to neutralizing the role of the two dominant Communist powers in Vietnam. A split within the Communist camp and the rise of pragmatism in China, provided the US with the scope to adopt new policies. The military operation, however, did not proceed as planned, with the US eventually forced to retreat in disgrace from Vietnam. Hanoi soon discovered a new tactic for destabilizing international powers, allowing people to leave and take up the status of refugees. This was partly triggered by the fear of authoritarian rule, but it was also a result of Hanoi's anti-Chinese stance. The resultant humanitarian crisis was a global challenge. The US administration was determined to share the bill with other developed countries. Notwithstanding the reconfiguration of world politics in the twilight years of Cold War, a golden rule of British diplomacy lingered: when Washington made a request, London must reckon. Britain in effect subcontracted its obligations to support the US to Hong Kong. The colony was pressurized to shoulder a disproportionate share of coping with refugees. MacLehose stood up for Hong Kong as best he could, but this episode confirmed the harsh reality that there was always a limit to the colony's defiance.

Motivating Metropolitan Intervention

The book attempts to map out the relationship between the metropolis and the colony. More specifically, it intends to answer these questions: 'when

would London get involved in the colony's business?' and 'how far could the colony push back?' While there is a long tradition within the British Empire of respecting the man on the spot,³ it is erroneous to think that the colony as free from the interference of the sovereign. From the four cases discussed, it is evident that London was motivated to get involved whenever its interests were at stake. The level of metropolitan intrusion was largely determined by two variables: the cost of reticence and the exigence of the issue. The former refers to the actual or potential impact of a colonial development on London. Tangible and immediate costs such as incurring financial burden or damaging the British economy would lead to the close monitoring of Hong Kong affairs and London interfering in colonial governance in ways that eroded Hong Kong's political autonomy. For example, the prospect of extra expenses for supporting refugee intake and threat to the balance of trade triggered intervention from Whitehall. Yet in most cases, it was political pressure on the British government that prompted metropolitan policy responses. Parliamentary interest in and British media attention on colonial affairs, especially scandals (such as the escape of Peter Godber) were embarrassments and irritations for the Foreign Secretary and FCO officials were always alert to the imperative of protecting the reputation of their bosses. The escalation of these awkward moments into a full-fledged crisis must be avoided, even if this meant quarrels with the governor and colonial officials. While some political pressures could peter out quickly, other concerns were more fundamental and had a lasting effect on the calculations of British officials. For instance, the rise of the Labour Party in the 1970s meant that its ideological outlook defined London's disposition and policies towards the colony via a renewed commitment to welfarism and social reforms.

Nevertheless, it was the geostrategic calculation of London that appeared to be the most important factor in shaping its proclivity towards the colony. London had striven to maintain a working relationship with China even during her most radical years, and Beijing's moderate turn in the 1970s gave further weight to the China factor, with the economic potential of this gigantic market looming large. Britain's 'special relationship' with the United States was, however, the ultimate concern of her diplomacy. Leveraging American influence by making Britain useful to Washington was London's primary method of maintaining global relevance. The tiny colony of Hong Kong should never undermine the sovereign's relationship with these two powers.

3. Robert Bickers, 'Loose Ties that Bound: British Empire, Colonial Autonomy and Hong Kong', in *Negotiating Autonomy in Greater China: Hong Kong and Its Sovereign before and after 1997*, ed. Ray Yep (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2013), 29–54.

London's decision to get involved in the colony's affairs was also affected by the exigence of the issue. This concerns London's perception of the urgency and necessity of intervention in the colony's affairs. This was in turn determined by two factors: confidence in the colony's ability to solve the problem in hand and its disposition to comply and cooperate with the sovereign. Central to these was London's trust in the colonial governor. There were several mechanisms in place that would guarantee the loyalty of this official. With the exception of Chris Patten, all governors were transferred from the British bureaucracy or the colonial service, and their common career trajectory and socialization should ensure a considerable degree of similarity in temperament, values, and general outlook with their colleagues in Whitehall. The presence of a political adviser, a seconded officer from the FCO, would also provide London with an on-the-spot monitor for the colony. The convention of bestowing lordship on a retiring governor should also help to entice compliance from the man on the ground. MacLehose was experienced in diplomacy with a rich knowledge of the culture, etiquette, hidden rules, and personal networks with former colleagues in the foreign ministry. FCO officials certainly found him more approachable than David Trench, yet he was however not always a kindred spirit. The Scot may have been more tactful and diplomatic in handling the officials in London, but as seen in the preceding discussion, he could also be an irritation to them. Nevertheless, London's confidence that the colony has been well run did not rest solely on its perception of the governor's characters, but it also hinged on its assessment of the overall capacity of the local administration. Here are some key questions which London asked when deciding whether immediate intervention was necessary: Does the colony have a plan to clean up its own mess? And does it have the resources to get the job done? For example, the creation of the ICAC in 1974 was a masterstroke in defusing the pressure on both Hong Kong and London and bought the colony more time and autonomy to handle the embarrassment of Peter Godber's flight. Similarly, despite London's strong desire to push a rigorous reform programme onto the colony, this programme was, after all, financed by the colony's money. The fiscal independence did, in a way, put a brake on London's encroachment.

London's desire to intrude into local affairs, was also affected by the firmness of the colony's pushback, which showed how willing Hong Kong was to comply and cooperate with the sovereign. This was a delicate issue, since a certain degree of firmness from the governor could give the colony more room for manoeuvre, yet it could also backfire and provoke a strong response from the metropolis. The case of the altercations over social reform is illustrative of this. The open defiance of the Governor as well

as the Financial Secretary aroused London’s suspicions about the colony’s commitment to the reform agenda. Consequently, an elaborate monitoring scheme was put in place. A detailed plan for implementation which defined the pace and scope of the reforms was imposed, and a regular and comprehensive reporting arrangement was required. Even the idea of creating the post of a second political adviser as extra leverage for this monitoring had been considered. London’s perception of the incongruence of interests between the sovereign and the colony surely motivated this intervention.

Based on these considerations, the London–Hong Kong relationship exemplified in the four cases under review can be categorized into four patterns that vary in terms of level of intervention, as summarized in Figure 7.1 below.

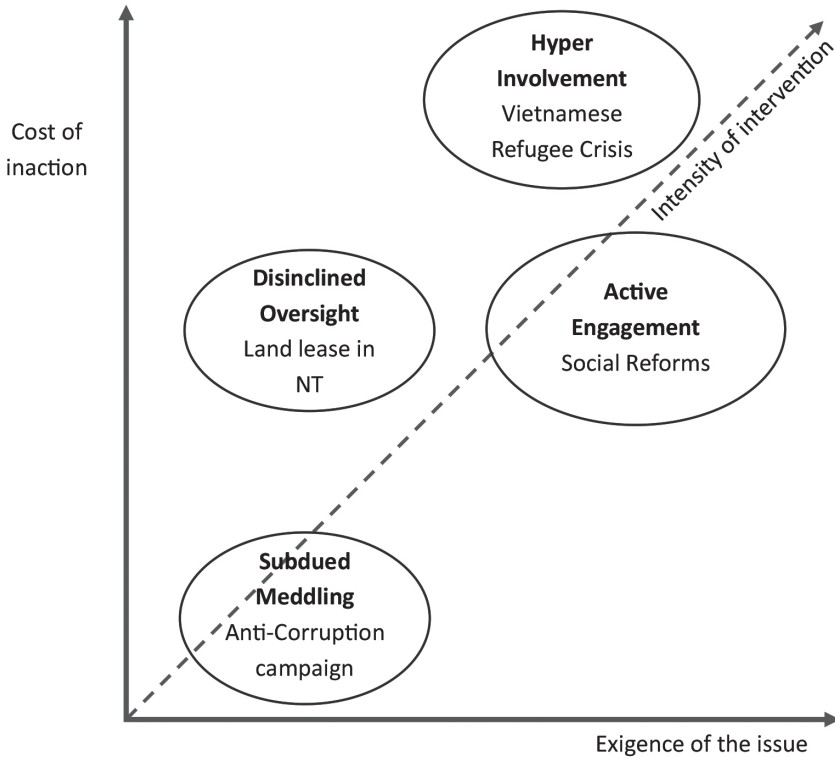


Figure 7.1 Patterns of London’s involvement

Hyper Involvement: For example, the Vietnamese refugee crisis. This is a case where the fundamental interests of the sovereign were at stake. London was hard pressed to respond to the American request for greater contribution and was under tremendous pressure to increase refugee intake. In a sense, London and Hong Kong were trapped in a zero-sum situation where the colony's accommodation of refugees was an escape route for the sovereign. London played an active role in delivering the American vision of the global solution to the humanitarian crisis and ensuring that the assigned role for Hong Kong in this scheme would be materialized, even at the expense of the colony. Meanwhile, London was also determined to minimize the impact of refugee intake on the homeland economy and British society and was entangled in heated exchanges with Hong Kong on this matter. This particularly became the case when Margaret Thatcher came to power, at a time when the exodus of refugees had resurged in the late 1970s. Thatcher's preference for a more proactive mode of tackling the crisis reinforced this sense of urgency. For London, the colony was a useful piece in the global chess game and had to be deployed for the sake of her overall plan. Despite the Governor's diplomatic initiatives, the resolution of the global humanitarian crisis primarily hinged upon bargaining and cooperation among sovereign states. At times, London's support for amplifying the colony's voices was crucial. This dependence would however invite further involvement of the sovereign in the handling of refugees crisis in Hong Kong.

Active Engagement: For example, social reforms and the Hong Kong Planning Paper. This is another case where London was highly motivated to get involved in the colony's affairs. The ideological disposition of the Labour government, together with the domestic pressure from the left (unionists) and the right (British manufacturers) created sustained pressure for social reforms in the colony. The Wilson and Callaghan administrations took a rather exceptional approach in handling the whole matter. London chose to dictate a detailed blueprint for the implementation of its visions in the colony, the Hong Kong Planning Paper, and supplemented it with a comprehensive reporting and monitoring mechanism. MacLehose was not entirely against the idea of expanding the role of the government in social development; in fact, he regarded this as a crucial step for maintaining stability and an integral part of the preparation for the prospective negotiations over the future of Hong Kong with Beijing. However, he and Philip Haddon-Cave found the pace and scope of the reforms unrealistic. Their relentless pushback trapped the colony and London in a vicious cycle of mutual distrust and further intrusion. Nevertheless, at the end of the day, implementation of the social reform programmes was fundamentally a