COLONIAL HONG KONG AND MODERN CHINA
Interaction and Reintegration

Edited by Lee Pui-tak
Hong Kong University Press
14/F Hing Wai Centre
7 Tin Wan Praya Road
Aberdeen
Hong Kong

© Hong Kong University Press 2005

ISBN 962 209 720 0

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Secure On-line Ordering
http://www.hkupress.org

Printed and bound by United League Graphic & Printing Co. Ltd., Hong Kong, China.

Hong Kong University Press is honoured that Xu Bing, whose art explores the complex themes of language across cultures, has written the Press’s name in his Square Word Calligraphy. This signals our commitment to cross-cultural thinking and the distinctive nature of our English-language books published in China.

“At first glance, Square Word Calligraphy appears to be nothing more unusual than Chinese characters, but in fact it is a new way of rendering English words in the format of a square so they resemble Chinese characters. Chinese viewers expect to be able to read Square Word Calligraphy but cannot. Western viewers, however are surprised to find they can read it. Delight erupts when meaning is unexpectedly revealed.”

— Britta Erickson, The Art of Xu Bing
Contents

List of Illustrations vii
Acknowledgements ix
About the Contributors xi

Introduction 1
History of Hong Kong and History of Modern China: Unravelling the Relationship
Lee Pui-tak

Part I: History of Hong Kong 7

1. The Common People in Hong Kong History: Their Livelihood and Aspirations Until the 1930s
David Faure 9

2. Religion in Hong Kong History
Bernard H. K. Luk 39

3. The Sunday Rest Issue in Nineteenth Century Hong Kong
Louis Ha 57

4. Governorships of Lugard and May: Fears of Double Allegiance and Perceived Disloyalty
Fung Chi Ming 69

5. The Making of a Market Town in Rural Hong Kong: The Luen Wo Market
Chan Kwok-shing 89
6. Recording a Rich Heritage: Research in Hong Kong’s “New Territories”
   Elizabeth L. Johnson

Part II: Hong Kong and Its Relations With Modern China

7. The Contribution Made by Frederick Stewart (1836–1889)
   Through the Hong Kong Government Education System
   and Its Pupil, to the Modernization of China
   Gillian Bickley

8. The Use of Sinology in the Nineteenth Century:
   Two Perspectives Revealed in the History of Hong Kong
   Wong Man-kong

9. The Guangxi Clique and Hong Kong: Sanctuary in a
   Dangerous World
   Diana Lary

10. Business and Radicalism: Hong Kong Chinese Merchants
    and the Chinese Communist Movement, 1921–1934
    Chan Lau Kit-ching

11. Made in China or Made in Hong Kong? National Goods
    and the Hong Kong Business Community
    Chung Wai-keung

12. Hong Kong’s Economic Relations With China 1949–1955:
    Blockade, Embargo and Financial Controls
    Catherine R. Schenk

Notes 219

Chinese Glossary 265

Bibliography 273

Index 291
List of Illustrations

Figures
11.1 Hong Kong’s promotion of Chinese products 189
11.2 Tin Chu in Hong Kong 190
11.3 Tin Chu and National Goods Movement 190
11.4 A guohuo label in Hong Kong I 195
11.5 A guohuo label in Hong Kong II 196
11.6 Strategy of Chinese products in Hong Kong I 197
11.7 Strategy of Chinese products in Hong Kong II 198
12.1 Tons of cargo in junks leaving Hong Kong 204
12.2 Hong Kong’s trade with China 1949–55 205
12.3 Hong Kong’s trade with China as a % of total trade 205

Tables
5.1 The subscription of shares in 1948 95
5.2 Names of the managing directors in the company 97
5.3 Names of the chairmen of the board of directors 97
7.1 Influence of Frederick Stewart (1836–1889) on Hong Kong education 118
7.2 A comparison of Hong Kong Chinese students studying western knowledge, and learning a western language (usually, English) in 1893 and March 1997 120
7.3 Hong Kong government Central School enrolments 1862–1905 121
7.4 Pupils in the Hong Kong government education system 1862–1889 129
7.5 Frederick Stewart and the Hong Kong government education system’s direct influence on educational institutions in Hong Kong and China, 1862–
About the Contributors

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The handover of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 marked a new phase in Hong Kong’s history. Politically, the new Special Administrative Region government was set up, and the quasi constitution Basic Law decreed that Hong Kong should be ruled under the principle of One Country Two Systems. Implicit was that China should keep its hands off Hong Kong’s autonomous affairs. How have these political changes affected the analytical perspectives of historians? Many will say they have not seen many changes. To me, a student of modern Chinese history, it is clear we are at a crossroads of colonialism and nationalism, not knowing very clearly which direction to take. We cannot cut off the history of Hong Kong from modern China. The colonial history of Hong Kong can be viewed as important to the nationalistic history of China, and likewise, the nationalistic history of China can be viewed as important to the colonial history of Hong Kong. The histories of Hong Kong and modern China have been interwoven since Britain began the colonization of Hong Kong during the Opium War (1839–1842).

Hong Kong was a British colony for more than 150 years. An interesting question is how a small number of the British could successfully rule over the predominant majority of Chinese in Hong Kong? Apparently, Chinese collaboration played an important role. Hong Kong history
textbooks usually state that Britain used Hong Kong as a stepping-stone to the much bigger market in China. However, no historians have taken a close look at how Chinese merchants in Hong Kong followed the trail of the British. They had mutual benefits on the issue of China trade. We are accustomed to the idea that Hong Kong was a British colony, but actually it was a colony for China.¹ Not only British and Chinese merchants, but also the Chinese government was inclined to maintain the status of Hong Kong as a British colony from the birth of the Chinese Republic in 1912, through the establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949, and even to the 1970s.

It is interesting to know how the Chinese elites in this colony responded to China politically, socially, culturally and economically. Many of them were trained in colonial Hong Kong but tapped by Chinese regimes at different times. For example, Tang Tingshu worked for Li Hongzhang in the Self-Strengthening Movement’s programme on economic affairs in the late Qing period. Wu Tingfang and Wang Chonghui helped the new Chinese Republic in the 1910s to set up the diplomatic system, whereas Fu Bingchang and Chen Jintao helped in legal and finance systems, respectively. During the Sino-Japanese War and Civil War, a number of communist organizations like the Yuehua Company, the Eighth Route Army Hong Kong Office, and Dade College were set up in Hong Kong to organize underground activities against the Japanese as well as against the Guomindang in the colony. Comrades such as Liao Chengzhi, Lian Guan, Pan Hannian and Xu Dixin were sent to Hong Kong during that time.² Hong Kong helped every political party or regime in China. Even at present, finance and legal talents like Anthony Neoh (Liang Dingbang) continue to help China modernize its market and formulate its national monetary policy.³ So, history shows that the role of Hong Kong in modernizing China has been persistent.⁴

This book is divided into two main sections: the history of Hong Kong, and the history of Hong Kong with modern China. Each section consists of six substantial chapters.

The first two chapters, contributed by David Faure and Bernard Luk, deal with the topic of social and religious history, by looking at details of a neglected aspect of Hong Kong’s society. They attempt to give a macro-view of the characteristics of Hong Kong history: the close connection with China (particularly South China) and the unique society of accommodating multi-cultures (also religion), by taking a micro perspective. Faure describes the formative influences, which created a pattern of living for working emigrants from China during the period 1880s–1930s. He gives detailed information on their housing, sanitation, employment, and wages, and
assesses the contribution made by this common people to Hong Kong’s
development and prosperity. It is noteworthy that the identity and defining
characteristics of “common people” emerged in the process. Luk provides
an historical overview of the relationship between religion and Hong Kong
society, focusing on Christianity, Buddhism and Daoism during the three
key periods: the beginnings of the city, the mid-twentieth century, and the
1970s. Luk highlights major religious activities in Hong Kong history,
including liturgical worship, spiritual guidance, community service and
social action.

Drawing upon the cultural differences, political standpoints, and
different economic interests between the British and Chinese in the
nineteenth century, Louis Ha and Fung Chi Ming provide full and interesting
accounts of the debate at different levels of Sunday rest and double
allegiance of the Chinese elites. Ha’s chapter reviews arguments adduced
by the opposing factions, against the background of Chinese religious and
cultural difference, and the colonial government’s need to balance Christian
objections against local realities and the principal requirements of the
growing port-city to secure its steady development. It is noteworthy that
Hong Kong had an awareness in the 1870s of the potential competition from
Shanghai in the shipping and harbour businesses. Fung’s chapter describes
the conflicting allegiances of the Chinese elites in the process of Sino-British
diplomatic negotiations. He highlights the crisis, which occurred during
1911–1914 and describes how the two governors, Lugard and May, had
different views over the issue.

Two chapters in this book touch on one specific region, the New
Territories. Chan Kwok-shing’s chapter demonstrates how the formation of
Luen Wo Market was closely related to changes in agricultural land use in
Hong Kong and to the government’s agricultural policy which was made in
response to the potential unrest in China in the late 1940s. The chapter also
shows the dynamic process of creating and maintaining elite power on the
local level in rural Hong Kong. Elizabeth Johnson’s chapter provides a
thoughtful survey of the historical, anthropological, cultural and religious
studies of the New Territories’ inhabitants, society and institutions, which
have been conducted since the Second World War. Johnson emphasizes how
research was naturally shaped by the political and economic development
of the colony, and her chapter coincidentally complements well the one by
Chan on Luen Wo Market.

Based upon archival and other relevant materials, Gillian Bickley
provides a detailed account of the biography of Frederick Stewart (1836–
1889), whose students contributed to the modernization of China during and
after his term as headmaster at Central School. Wong Man-kong discusses the different orientations and perspectives on the study of sinology by two prominent figures, James Legge (1815–1897) and Ernest John Eitel (1838–1908), both of whom conducted research and developed careers in the colony of Hong Kong. This paper successfully draws our attention to how these two sinologists, who had exceptional Chinese language skills, promoted the missionary cause and assisted the colonial government. Most likely, Stewart, Legge, and Eitel shared the same view that understanding China is the first step to helping China, as they put effort into translating Chinese classics, compiling dictionaries, and promoting Chinese education in Hong Kong.

In the twentieth century, the relationship of Hong Kong with China entered a new phase as political chaos and social unrest persistently occurred in China. Different political parties or regimes in China competed to establish their networks in Hong Kong. Diana Lary’s chapter demonstrates that Hong Kong was a most useful refuge for China’s southern warlords, an important channel for collecting and sharing information, for intrigue, and for the acquisition of money and armed supplies. These warlords, as Lary points out, “… had very little to do with Hong Kong’s own history. They showed little interest in what was going on there … Their only interest in the place was a stable, comfortable refuge.” Lary shows that Hong Kong had not only played a positive role in the process of China’s nation-building, but also played a negative role in bringing local chaos and civil war. Based upon different sources of information, Chan Lau Kit-ching’s chapter provides a concise and convenient summary of the story of Hong Kong Chinese merchants’ perceptions of, and responses to, the Chinese communist movement during 1921–1934. Chan persuasively demonstrates that the colony’s Chinese merchants and populace dreaded Chinese communism, and more importantly, that the anti-communist sentiment during this period transcended social class division.

Chung Wai-keung discusses how Hong Kong presented itself to China and elsewhere in the world in terms of “guohuo” (Chinese national product), showing how problematic the notion of being “Chinese” could be in the colony. In this chapter, Chung describes the adverse effects on Chinese industrialists of producing manufactured goods in the British colony at a time of intense nationalist feeling among China’s people and government, whereby their goods were not allowed free entry into the Chinese market. An ongoing campaign to publicize Hong Kong products as “national goods” failed in China but succeeded in Southeast Asia. This issue is quite meaningful when today Hong Kong industrialists are encouraged by the
newly launched “CEPA” programme (Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement) to boost the sale of Hong Kong products in China’s domestic market. Catherine Schenk addresses the impact of three shocks to the economic relations between Hong Kong and China during the period of 1949–1955, namely as trade embargoes, the Guomindang blockade of 1949–1950, and the freezing of Chinese-owned US trade balances in 1950. Schenk argues that the Guomindang naval blockade and financial controls were the important factors affecting the relationship between Hong Kong and China, balancing attention paid previously to the US / UN embargoes on trade with China in the 1950s. In this chapter, Schenk also examines and assesses the impact of smuggling between Hong Kong / Macau and China, which is a common issue today when the integration of the economies of Hong Kong, Macau, and Guangdong province is considered.
Index

1911 Revolution 84, 169
Abeel, David 138
Aplichau 21
Artisan Masons’ Guild 25
Ashton, Samuel 62

Bai Chongxi 157
Bank of China 215
Bank of England 199, 217
Barnes, W.D. 74
Basic Law 1, 88
Bell-Irving, J. 71
Birch, Alan 153
Blodget, Henry 147
Bombay 123
Bremer, Gordon 71
Bricklayers’ Guild 25–26
Bridgman, Elijah Coleman 138
Britain (England, United Kingdom) 1, 45, 52, 53, 59–60, 62, 70, 71, 82, 87, 93, 107, 112, 117, 122, 153, 207, 211, 217
bubonic plague 132
Butterfly and Swire 176, 200–201
Butters, H.R. 32

Canada 57
Canton (Guangzhou) 13, 16, 21, 24, 28, 42, 75, 78, 123, 162, 171, 173, 183, 188, 203, 209
Carpenters’ Guild 25–26
Causeway Bay 31
Central School (Queen’s College) 4, 44, 118–119, 121, 124, 127, 132, 154
Chadwick, Osbert 10, 12, 14
Chadwick Report 1882 10, 32
Chan Kai-ming 76
Chang Ming-chi 74
Chater, C.P. 71
Chau Siu-ki 76, 80
Chen Jintao 2
Chen Jiongming 156, 159, 163
Chen Jitang 162
Chen Lianbo 174
Cheng Siyuan 158
Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi) 155, 159, 177
China (Mainland China) 1, 20, 31, 43–44, 48–49, 53, 57, 70, 73, 76, 82, 87, 90, 93, 103, 108, 117, 119, 121, 137, 145, 147, 167, 189, 201, 209, 213
China Mail 66, 123
China Products Company 193
Chinese Club 175
Chinese Language Movement 50
Chinese Manufacturers’ Union of Hong Kong 188
Choa, G.H. 12
Chow Shou-son (Zhou Shouchen) 28–30, 165, 171
City Hall 18, 145, 147, 176
Civil War 166
Clos er Economic Partnership 
Arrangement (CPEA) 5
Cohen, Maurice Two-Gun 164
Colonial Office 12, 14, 17-19, 71, 73, 78, 208, 212
Colonial Secretary 74, 83
Colonial Surgeon 12-15, 17, 19, 21
Communism 170, 174, 177, 182
Dade College 2
Daily Press 67
Dalian 158, 164
Deane, Walter Meredith 150
Deng Xiaoping 161
Deng Zhongxia 175
Des Voeus, G W 61
Des Voeus, William 122
Diaoyutai Movement 50
District Watch Force 44, 170, 180
Dyer, Samuel 138
East Asia 145, 197
East India Company 137
Edge, J C 60
Eighth Route Army Hong Kong Office 2
Eitel, E J 18-19, 138
Elliott, Charles 72
Endacott, G B 82, 152
ethnic identity 9
Eurasian 129
Europe 54, 74, 108, 186
Executive Council 14, 71, 170
Fanling 90-91
Fanling Rural Committee 98
Fatshan 16
Feng Yuxiang 158, 160, 165
Fleming, Francis 62
Foochow (Fuzhou) 123, 188
Foreign Office 208, 212, 217
Friend of China 58, 66
Fu Bingchang 2
Fujian 138
Germany 77
Gockchun, Philip (Guo Quan) 192
Goldsmith, A G 61
Guangdong (Kwangtung) 5, 28, 32, 34-35, 46, 48-49, 54, 92, 114, 138, 144, 153, 156, 158, 162, 170-171, 172, 177, 180, 194
Guangzhou-Hong Kong-Strike Boycott 1925-26 175, 182
Guangxi 46, 144, 155, 162
Gutzallff, Karl 119, 138
Hakka 113, 144
Halifax, E R 74
Hankou 188
Hennessy, John Pope 12-13, 18, 23, 60, 125, 151
Heung Yee Kuk 90-91, 98, 107
Ho Fook 76
Ho Kai 12, 17, 44, 70, 76, 78, 80, 84-85, 125-126
Ho Tung 119, 125-126, 171, 181
Hong Kong Buddhist Association 40-41
Hong Kong Chinese Chamber of Commerce 30, 174, 192
Hong Kong Civil Service 83
Hong Kong College of Medicine 122
Hong Kong culture 57
Hong Kong education system 131
Hong Kong Federation of Catholic Students 50
Hong Kong General Chamber of Commerce 61, 71, 148,
Hong Kong government 40, 44, 47, 53, 55, 92-93, 117, 119, 135, 138, 149, 153
Hong Kong Island 49
Hong Kong Overseas Chinese National Goods Manufacturers’ Union 186-187
Hong Kong people 57, 73, 198
Hong Kong police 177, 181
Hong Kong products 191, 198
Hong Kong Protestant Cemetery 119
Hong Kong Taoist Association 41
Hong Kong Tramway Company 84
Hong Kong Seamen's Strike 1922 171
Hong Kong Seamen's Union 171
Hong Kong society 40, 47, 55, 69
Hong Kong University 53, 80, 106, 181
Hongkong Bank (HSBC) 199, 201, 203, 211, 215
Hu Hanmin 75
Huang Shaoshiong 157

India 210
Indonesia 188
Ip Lan Chuen 191, 193

Japan 77, 123, 208
Japanese invasion (occupation) 55, 166, 186
Jardine Matheson & Co. 71, 200, 215–216
Justice of Peace 170

Kennedy, Arthur 121, 124, 150
Kennedy Town 31
Korean War 156, 211
Kotewall, Robert (Lo Xuhe) 165, 176, 181, 191
Kowloon 36, 48–49, 109, 213
Kowloon Walled City 48
Kowloon-Canton Railway 77
Kuo Sung Tao 124

Lau Chu-pak 30, 76, 78, 80, 171, 181
Lechler, Rudolf 144
Legge, James 45, 120, 138
Legislative Council 12, 20, 61, 63, 71, 75, 79–80, 81, 84–85, 148, 149, 170–171, 176
Li Hongzhang 2
Li Jishen 156

Li Lisan 178
Li Zongren 155, 165
Lian Guan 2
Liao Chengzhi 2
Lo Pan Temple 24
Lobscheid, William 138
London 18, 62, 63, 147, 166, 208
London Missionary Society 120, 135
Luen Wo Land Investment Company Limited 91, 94
Luen Wo Market 89, 94, 100
Lugard, Frederick 70, 73

Macau (Macao) 5, 13, 199, 203–204, 207, 212–213
Malacca 13, 136, 137, 153
Man Mo Temple 23, 43, 48
Manila 207
Mass Transit Railway 48
Master Masons’ Guild 24
May, Francis Henry 70, 81, 83
Merchant Corps Incident 1924 172, 174, 182
Mongkok Workers’ Children’s School 55
Morrison, Robert 136
Muit-sai problem 151

Nam Pak Hong 20, 23–24, 180
Nam Tau (Nantou) 21, 23, 42
Nanjing 156, 159, 162, 188
Neoh, Anthony (Liang Dingbang) 2
Netherlands 93
New Guangxi Clique 155
New Territories 3, 20, 28, 42, 84, 89–90, 92–93, 103, 105, 107, 113, 134
Ng Choy (Wu Tingfang) 2, 12, 44
Ng Hon-tsaz 76, 80
Nicoll, J.F. 211
North, Alfred 138
Northern Expedition 155, 160, 167
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Page Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One Country Two Systems</td>
<td>1, 2, 88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owen, W.H.</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>210, 214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pan Hannian</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pang Fu-wah</td>
<td>96–97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peking (Beijing)</td>
<td>125, 160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penang</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peng Pai</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phillippo, George</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Po Leung Kuk</td>
<td>23, 43–44, 151–152, 170, 172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional Council</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registrar General</td>
<td>14, 23, 27, 74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robinson, Hercules</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robinson, William</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules and Regulations with respect to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese graves</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saigon</td>
<td>13, 123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saiyingpun (Syingpun)</td>
<td>13, 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanitary Board</td>
<td>12, 17, 78, 80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sha Tau Kok</td>
<td>28, 91, 101, 111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanghai</td>
<td>60, 78, 123, 138, 148, 158, 164, 188, 192, 199–202, 204, 209, 216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shantou</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shatin</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shek Wo Market</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shektongtsui</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheung Shui</td>
<td>92–93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheung Wan</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>123, 188, 202, 208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sino-British Joint Declaration</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith, Cecil Clementi</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South China</td>
<td>3, 46, 156, 166, 186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast Asia</td>
<td>136, 186, 188–189, 194, 197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soviet Union (Russia)</td>
<td>158, 183, 207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Star Ferry riots</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stubbs, Reginald</td>
<td>171, 175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sun Chuanfang</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sun Yat-sen</td>
<td>44, 77, 126, 129, 158, 166, 172–173, 182–183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supreme Court</td>
<td>60, 152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveyor General</td>
<td>12–14, 16–19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tai Po</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taikoo Dockyard</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taipingshan</td>
<td>10–11, 16, 22, 24, 43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tang Tingshu</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tarrant, William</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomson, Ross</td>
<td>28–30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tian Chu</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tientsin (Tianjin)</td>
<td>123, 158, 160, 164, 200–202, 204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonnochy, Malcolm Struan</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treaty of Nanking</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tso Seen-wan</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tsun Wan Daily News</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuen Mun</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tung Wah Hospital</td>
<td>13, 23, 42–43, 170, 172, 174, 176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Nations</td>
<td>199, 211, 213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States (America)</td>
<td>107, 166, 186, 199, 202, 207, 209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Council</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>urbanization</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wah Tsz Yat Po (Huazi ribao)</td>
<td>174, 186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanchai</td>
<td>18, 24, 34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wang Chonghui</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wang Jingwei</td>
<td>159, 163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wang Ming</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wang Tao</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War Office</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wei Yuk</td>
<td>75–76, 78, 125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Hong Kong Chinese People Must Know</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Whyte, John Charles 59
Williams, Samuel Wells 148
Wilson, David 133
Wong Tai Sin Temple 48
Wright, George Bateson 119

Xiamen 188, 203
Xu Dixin 2

Yan Xishan 160
Yaumati 31
Young, G.M. 176
Yuan Shikai 182
Yuehua Company 2

Zhang Zongchang 163
Zhou Enlai 178