



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Friends & Teachers. Hong Kong and Its People 1953-87 by James Hayes
Elizabeth Sinn

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of 12 new political parties since 1990, which hardly augurs well for the stable government Hong Kong needs. He also concedes that his party won 60 per cent of the actual votes (though only 15 per cent of the potential votes) in the 1995 elections partly because his opponents preached the then unpopular doctrine of dialogue with China – a perfect example of the disservice which democratic politics can do for a community. Not for Lee the dictum of Jimmy Lai here, that Hong Kong is “like a small ice-cube next to a big oven” – and needs to stay cool!

The two politically conscious women in this volume are democrats like Lee, and their explanations are revealing. The student leader Rosa Mok declares proudly that, unlike her passive university friends, she is ready to stand up and speak out on the issues, adding that otherwise, “I would not be personally fulfilled.” The lawyer Anna Wu roundly complains that the lack of democracy in Hong Kong has cheated her of a career. “Why shouldn’t people like me ... have had the opportunity to go all the way to the top of the political hierarchy?”

The cult of the self is certainly alive in Hong Kong, and that leads aptly to the final offering, a predictable defence of his record by Chris Patten. Everyone else writes or talks about China, he says, as if “nobody’s here.” Only he can speak for the populace which welcomed him on the streets so rapturously. His boyish enthusiasm for Hong Kong boils over on the last page with the enigmatic utterance: “Hongkong values represent the values of the future in Asia, as everywhere else.”

Blyth and Wotherspoon are to be congratulated for coaxing an awkward bunch of writers into an economical format within which they all say things of real interest in their own way, and for discreetly connecting and introducing them with minimal text. Few books are so humanly descriptive of the intellectual strands which Hong Kong carries into its new status.

DICK WILSON

Friends & Teachers. Hong Kong and its People 1953–87. By JAMES HAYES. [Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1996. xxiii + 320 pp. \$28.80. ISBN 962-209-396-5.]

James Hayes arrived in Hong Kong to join the civil service as a “cadet” officer in 1956 and retired in 1987. This book is a memoir of his career and the people he encountered in the course of public service. Tracing his service in the various departments chapter by chapter, he begins in each case by describing the department – its functions, organization and mode of operation and sometimes its history as well – followed by his own activities and observations. These two parts differ in content, style and quality, with the second being by far the more stimulating.

To reconstruct the story, he has relied mainly on his field notes, his own publications and published government reports. Readers might find the frequent quotation from the latter, though rich in information, rather disconcerting, not only because of the staidness of the “officialese,” but

also because they tend to present a one-dimensional view of reality. That Hayes, an accomplished historian, is prepared to use this source so uncritically may be interpreted as a reflection of his faith in the administration.

To him the government was basically benevolent, always with the greater good of the people in mind, and he minimizes its more controversial aspects. Such an attitude, however, sometimes raises more questions than it answers. For example, while he applauds the establishment of the Independent Commission Against Corruption in 1974, he does not question what kind of government could have tolerated such rampant corruption for so many years before that. Surprisingly too, he does not discuss corruption as part of his own work experience, though it is known to be prevalent in the Resettlement Department and with any work involving hawkers.

Readers expecting to find insights into the 1967 riots (at the time, Hayes was with the Secretariat for Chinese Affairs, which was responsible for liaising with the community), may be equally disappointed. Referring to them as the “Communist disturbances,” whose organizers aimed to disrupt communications and destabilize the colony (p. 110), he makes no attempt at exploring other factors which might also have contributed to this very complex and historically significant event, such as discontent arising from social injustice, unequal distribution of wealth and the inequality of opportunities for education, factors that many scholars have suggested. Without confronting these issues, he fails to explain the government’s post-riot change of policy which in fact improved the quality of life in Hong Kong in many ways.

Other aspects, equally fundamental, are omitted or only mentioned briefly. These include the Heung Yee Kuk, an institution which has played a crucial, and sometimes dramatic, role in representing the rights of the indigenous residents of the New Territories; the presence of China and its impact on Hong Kong on many levels; and in a more specific context, the tensions between Communist and Kuomintang elements in labour matters. The book, consequently, appears to present only a sanitized version of Hong Kong.

What saves it, however, are the many personalized accounts and vignettes of events and people which Hayes writes with wit and understanding. The story of the resettlement of the villagers in Shek Pik to make way for a reservoir in the 1950s is a fine example. Faced with problems which partly arose from cultural conflicts, he realized the necessity for an expatriate officer to negotiate with villagers in the context of Chinese cultural beliefs. Realizing also that he was “obtaining the last glimpse of a vanishing world,” he began to take copious notes of places he visited, and collected all forms of information about rural society. Hayes is at his best – colourful, instructive and touching – when writing about Tsuen Wan, describing how rapid development changed the lives of people, and their festivals and religions. Here we see the deeply caring official at work, listening attentively and trying to set things right for those in his charge. We see also the scholar diligently absorbing all

that he heard and saw, weaving the lives of ordinary men and women into a rich tapestry, capturing the essence of often neglected sectors of Hong Kong society.

The general mood of the book is nostalgic, especially for the passing of what Hayes considers to be a better form of government that was based on paternalism and personal contact. He criticizes the constitutional and administrative reforms of the 1980s for increasing the distance between the government and the people and so reducing efficiency. While I would not challenge his right to embrace a conservative political view, it would seem that his comprehension of what the “old system” is is not entirely sound. For one thing, apart from the New Territories, there had always been a wide gulf between the Hong Kong government and the people until the establishment of the City District Office, of which he writes at some length, and which was really a damage control measure taken in the wake of the 1967 riots. For another, and perhaps this is the more important, Hayes’ judgment of the “success” of the old system is largely based on his *own* experience as a District Officer, his *own* success. There were a few knowledgeable and caring District Officers, but the system was by definition rule by man, rather than rule by law, and even if it managed to continue despite the demands of a changing society, it would not be easy to find such persons to fill the posts.

Appearing in the last days of colonial Hong Kong, this book is an interesting record of the colonial administration and of the activities and thoughts of one very fine civil servant. Hopefully many more such memoirs will appear to provide materials for the study of Hong Kong history as well as inform the debate on the very complex phenomenon that is “colonialism.”

ELIZABETH SINN

Macau, China: A Political History of the Portuguese Colony’s Transition to Chinese Rule. By STEVE SHIPP. [Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1997. 229 pp. £26.55. ISBN 0-7864-0233-4.]

With the Hong Kong reversion now a reality we can expect a certain amount of attention to turn to the retrocession of Macau in 1999 – the last of the European coastal enclaves on the China coast. The 14 chapters of *Macau, China* cover almost all the major historical events associated with Macau in chronological order. The text is followed by five appendices: translations of the Sino-Portuguese Joint Declaration on Macau, the Basic Law of the Macau SAR, António Fialho Ferreira’s account of his journey to Macau with news of the restoration of the Portuguese crown written in 1643, and the 1976 Organic Statute of Macau, as well as a chronology of events related to the territory. A map of South East Asia, of the Zhu (Pearl) River delta, and three of Macau are included and positioned at the front of the text.

The first eight chapters describe events from early Sino-Portuguese contact up to just prior to the Second World War. No Portuguese or