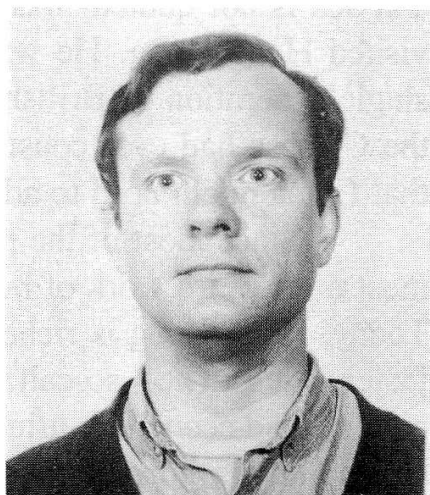


Handover of Hong Kong July 1, 1997

Five Different Views

by Michael J. Sloboda

When the First Opium War ended in 1842, photography was still in the experimental stage, the electric telegraph was a new toy, no one foresaw television, radio or even the phonograph. Newspapers with limited circulation reported the news as soon as sailing ships, which were faster than the early paddle wheel steamers, returned to port. In short, there was no media coverage of the Treaty of Nanjing (Nanking) by which Qing China ceded the island of Hong Kong to Britain. But, 155 years later, on the night of June 30/July 1, 1997 when the British flag is lowered here for the last time, to be replaced by the flag of the People's Republic of China, there will be several thousand reporters on hand, and people around the world will be watching the story live via satellite transmissions and undersea fiber optic cables.



Media coverage of the handover has been building since the signing of the Joint Sino-British Declaration on December 19, 1984 began the countdown to this July 1.

Here I look at five recent articles in English about the handover. Thousands of more articles will soon be written, but five is a lucky number in China and these five articles cover a spectrum of viewpoints on the hopes and concerns about the future of Hong Kong.

A year before the handover, *The Beijing Review* devoted six pages to Hong Kong.¹ Unlike articles from the Western press, the story begins with Britain's "forced occupation of China's lucrative territory of Hong Kong through three unequal treaties,"² in 1842, 1860, and 1898. These treaties, which China does not recognize, ceded Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and the New Territories. Thus July 1, 1997 will mark the end of "a long, humiliating history for the Chinese nation." The Chinese have long memories. The sneering

remark made by Lord Palmerston, the British Foreign Secretary in 1841 when he heard how little land Her Majesty's forces had seized: "A barren island with hardly a house upon it" apparently still stings. The *Beijing Review* mentions archeological finds and cites a source giving the population as 7,450 on the eve of the conquest³. But Sun Yat-sen is not quoted. As a young man, sometime in the 1880's, he visited Hong Kong. He was impressed to find a city built during a single generation of British rule that was more modern than any city the Chinese had ever constructed on their own. Sun began to reflect that China might need to adapt some things from the West.

Since most of the people in Hong Kong are Chinese, they did most of the hard work of building their city into an economic success. Today, Hong Kong is richer per capita than Britain and growing at a faster rate. The so-called "China factor," that is, the "positive cultural and economic influences from China," is more responsible for Hong Kong's current prosperity than the British input of a "non-interventionist economic policy," and "some necessary infrastructure construction". A comparison with non-Chinese and non-wealthy former British colonies shows this quite clearly.⁴ This also resonates with other voices from East and Southeast Asia which proclaim the superiority of Asian values. However, the intangible British contributions of a low tax rate, the rule of law, an independent judiciary, easy mobility of people and capital into and out of the territory, and freedom of the press and religion are not mentioned.

The second article, written eight months later, is full of good news for Hong Kong. It seems quite clear that mainland officials have been listening to people in Hong Kong. Lu Ping, the Director of the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office of the State Council, has heeded the concerns of business interests regarding the S.A.R. as a free port with free movement of goods. There is also the assurance that capital, banking and the financial market, monetary policy, the continued use of the Hong Kong dollar, no foreign exchange controls, no tax levies from the central government, local market rules will all remain intact after the handover. Hong Kong will continue to enjoy its usual high-level of local autonomy in these areas. There is more good news in the prospect of increasing trade with the mainland and foreign countries.⁵

The principle of “One Country, Two Systems” formulated by the late Deng Xiaoping shows up most clearly in Lu’s sentence: “The mainland’s reform and opening program has further enhanced Hong Kong’s position as a point of intersection between capitalist and socialist economic systems.”⁶

The only irony of the article, which escaped the eye of the editor in Beijing, is that the photo of a well-dressed crowd in Hong Kong was taken outside the Japanese Sogo department store, with the logo of the Daimaru department store in the distance, and at least one Japanese made car on the street. Japan has a huge investment in Hong Kong, and the people of this city favor Japanese name brands.

The *Far Eastern Economic Review* also ran a cover story on Hong Kong one year prior to the handover.⁷ It stressed that “in the eyes of the world, what happens to Hong Kong one year from now will bring great credit to China--or great shame” The *Review* also concentrated on ‘the slew of transition issues [which] remain unresolved.”

The overall tone of the non-Chinese journalists is one of concern about the future of the rule of law, the great “gulf between Hong Kong’s system and China’s centrally planned, politically controlled economy.” They also worry about the tax rate, corruption within the civil service, plus heavy handed intervention by intrusive bureaucrats and government agencies “with their potentially limitless influence”.⁸

The *Review* underlines a number of legal loose ends still on the agenda for the last year of British rule. These are also of concern to China. Secretary Jiang Zemin took steps as far back as July 1995 to prevent the “encirclement” of Hong Kong by mainland bureaus and state enterprises.⁹

The German magazine *Geo* features glossy photos of natural scenery, architectural marvels, and ordinary people.¹⁰ Much of the human interest side of life in Hong Kong, such as labor, crime and the arts, comes across, as well as colorful minority groups such as Filipinas and British. These are aspects of the territory which statistics cannot convey. But concern for freedom of the press and an influx of poor relations from the mainland are also on people’s minds. The author, Stuart Richard Wolfendale, sympathetic towards Britain concludes with what he sees as Britain’s contribution to Hong Kong,

“a set of Establishment values that I can relate to; an attempt at decency in public affairs; the promise (if not always the fulfillment) of a sense of fair play; an ability to get to the heart of a problem and to make things function.”

A great deal of printer's ink has also gone into the question of religion in Hong Kong after July 1, 1997. Catholic and Protestant clergy have been analyzing the situation of their churches, which have been treated favorably by the colonial government. In Hong Kong they have run schools and social welfare services. In recent years they have also been in contact with churches in the mainland. There are some differences of opinion regarding the handover, and certainly some anxiety about the future, yet this new era will also be a splendid opportunity to give a Gospel witness.

Democracy advocates, journalists and those working for the Diocesan Justice and Peace Commission are well aware that their work meets with incomprehension, irritability or even hostility from many mainland officials, as well as from a number of local people. Some are even fearful of a crackdown. Yet this is their home. They feel a commitment to Hong Kong, and they want to improve it, rather than run away. At any rate, they do not doubt their competence to meet together, analyze the local reality and relate it to the Gospel and the teachings of the church.

The *National Catholic Reporter*, a US Catholic Weekly, sent a reporter to Hong Kong to do a variety of interviews on the Catholic Church after the handover. Among those interviewed was the Roman Catholic Governor of Hong Kong, Christopher Patten.¹¹ The *NCR* asked Gov. Patten if the Basic Law, effective July 1, and the Joint Declaration will be enough to protect the different religious communities in Hong Kong. He replied: “I hope these are questions that never need to be faced or answered. A vigorous religious life in Hong Kong, vibrant church activity, heavy involvement of the churches in social and educational work, all those things are a central feature of civil society in Hong Kong...The Joint Declaration says Hong Kong will continue to be the same society tomorrow as it is today. It is important that people should behave like that.”¹² The governor does not expect huge numbers of those with foreign passports to leave, despite some challenges to a free society.

One local joke in 1996 took the form of a question and answer: "What will happen after 1997?" "1998." The articles reviewed here were printed with a few spoonfuls of the ocean of ink that is staining paper made from a forest of trees. Yet no matter how many words are written or TV documentaries filmed, the future remains notoriously unpredictable in Hong Kong, as elsewhere in the world. But to a limited extent, both optimism and pessimism are self-fulfilling promises. God once said to Israel: "My plans for you are plans of peace, and not of affliction" (Jer. 29:11). The local people who will stay and work for their city, as well as pray for the new government, have a major contribution to make to peace and justice, as well as to the prosperity and stability of Hong Kong. Foreign missionaries are committed to staying with them after July 1, 1997. □

Endnotes

¹ ...Beijing Review, vol. 39, #27, (July 1-7, 1996, by Ren Xin, pp. 7-9, "A Legacy of Colonialism" by Liu Shuyang, pp. 10-12, and "China Reaffirms Hong Kong Policy," by Lu Ping, (box), pp. 10-11.

² ..Ibid., p. 7.

³ Ibid., p. 10.

⁴ Ibid., p. 9.

⁵ ..."Hong Kong to Maintain Prosperity and Stability," by Lu Ping, *Beijing Review*, vol. 40, Nos. 7-8 (Feb. 17 - Mar. 3, 1997), pp. 18-21.

⁶ Ibid., p. 20.....

⁷ "The End of the Beginning," by L. Gordon Crovitz, pp. 22-24, and three articles by Bruce Gilley: "A Midsummer Night's Dream," p. 24, "Ready or Not," pp. 28-30, and "Party Control," p. 29, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, vol. 159, No. 26 (June 27, 1996).

⁸ Ibid., p. 23.

⁹ Ibid., "Party Control," p. 29.

¹⁰ *Geo*, (English edition), #10 (August 31, 1995), entire special issue.

¹¹ "Stepping into the Unknown in Hong Kong," by Arthur Jones, *National Catholic Reporter*, Oct. 4, 1996, pp. 8-10.

¹² Ibid., p. 11.