



ALEX SANTAFÉ

REVIEW

## In-Between City

*Hong Kong has been caught between empires — and narratives — for almost two centuries. The diversity of its early migrants made the city what it is today. But that is changing.*

ANTONY DAPIRAN — APRIL 3, 2024

HONG KONG



In June 2022, the story broke that Hong Kong secondary school textbooks — for a revamped liberal studies subject named “Citizenship and Social Development” — were [stating](#) that Hong Kong was never a British colony. This change reflected the long-held [position](#) of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) that Britain, in the language of one *People’s Daily* [editorial](#) from March 1997, merely “exercised colonial rule” in Hong Kong, but “this does not mean that Hong Kong is a colony” in any legitimate sense. The editorial explained:

“

In the usual sense, colonies refer to countries that have lost their sovereignty due to foreign rule and jurisdiction. Hong Kong is part of China’s territory, so the colonial concept does not apply to Hong Kong.

”

Once a sparsely inhabited island off the southern coast of Qing China, since Britain first asserted its rights over the city under threat of violence in 1841, up until the handover of 1997 and the PRC’s more recent and brutal tightening of control, Hong Kong has not only existed in between rulers, but in between narratives. According to Beijing’s narrative, Hong Kong has always been a historical injustice: the result of unequal treaties forced upon China following Britain’s victory in the Opium Wars, and an enduring symbol of what China came to call its “century of national humiliation.”

One of the PRC’s first actions upon assuming its seat at the United Nations in 1971 was to lobby for the removal of Hong Kong and Macau from the UN’s [list](#) of “Trust and Non-Self-Governing Territories,” which were [entitled](#) to the right of self-determination under the 1961 “Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples.”


Ambassador Huang Hua, China's first representative to the United Nations, [stated](#) the PRC's position in March 1972:

“

The questions of Hong Kong and Macau belong to the category of questions resulting from the series of unequal treaties left over by history, treaties which the imperialists imposed on China. Hong Kong and Macau are part of Chinese territory occupied by the British and Portuguese authorities. The settlement of the questions of Hong Kong and Macau is entirely within China's sovereign right and does not at all fall under the ordinary category of “colonial Territories.”

”

In November of that year, Beijing's request was approved by a UN General Assembly resolution, with 99 votes to five. Most Hong Kong citizens were oblivious to the implications of this apparent technicality of international law, but it meant that the Hong Kong people would be denied the right to self-determination enjoyed by other colonized peoples.

Notwithstanding the obvious evils of colonialism, the PRC narrative never sat comfortably with the millions of Chinese who had sought refuge in the British-administered city during the colonial era, from the Taiping Rebellion of the 1850s, through to the Communist victory in the mainland in 1949, the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, and beyond. According to Hong Kong's 1971 [census](#) , only around half of the city's four million-strong population — and just 14% of those aged 40 or over — had been born there.

Meanwhile, the competing British narrative of Hong Kong was one of a benevolent colonialism, and the over-worn [trope](#) of a territory that had been transformed from “fishing village to financial centre.” Outgoing Governor Chris Patten [encapsulated](#) this view in his valedictory speech on the eve of Hong Kong's handover to the PRC (known in China as 回归 or “returning home”) on 1 July 1997:

“

[Britain's] contribution here was to provide the scaffolding that enabled the people of Hong Kong to ascend. The rule of law. Clean and light-handed government. The values of a free society. ... This is a Chinese city, a very Chinese city, with British characteristics. No dependent territory has been left more prosperous.

”

Previous histories of Hong Kong have tended to focus on these grand national narratives. For many years the only comprehensive history of the city in English was Frank Welsh's [A History of Hong Kong](#). First published in 1993, it was updated to “end” the story in 1997, betraying its bias as a history of British Hong Kong. More recent efforts by academics, such as Steve Tsang's [A Modern History of Hong Kong](#) (2004) or John Carroll's [A Concise History of Hong Kong](#) (2007), encompass the post-handover era and position Hong Kong as a local Chinese story as much as a British one, while journalist Michael Sheridan's [The Gate to China](#) (2021), as its title suggests, sets Hong Kong in the context of its relationship with the People's Republic.

“

According to Beijing, Hong Kong has always been a historical injustice: the result of unequal treaties forced upon China following Britain's victory in the Opium Wars.

”

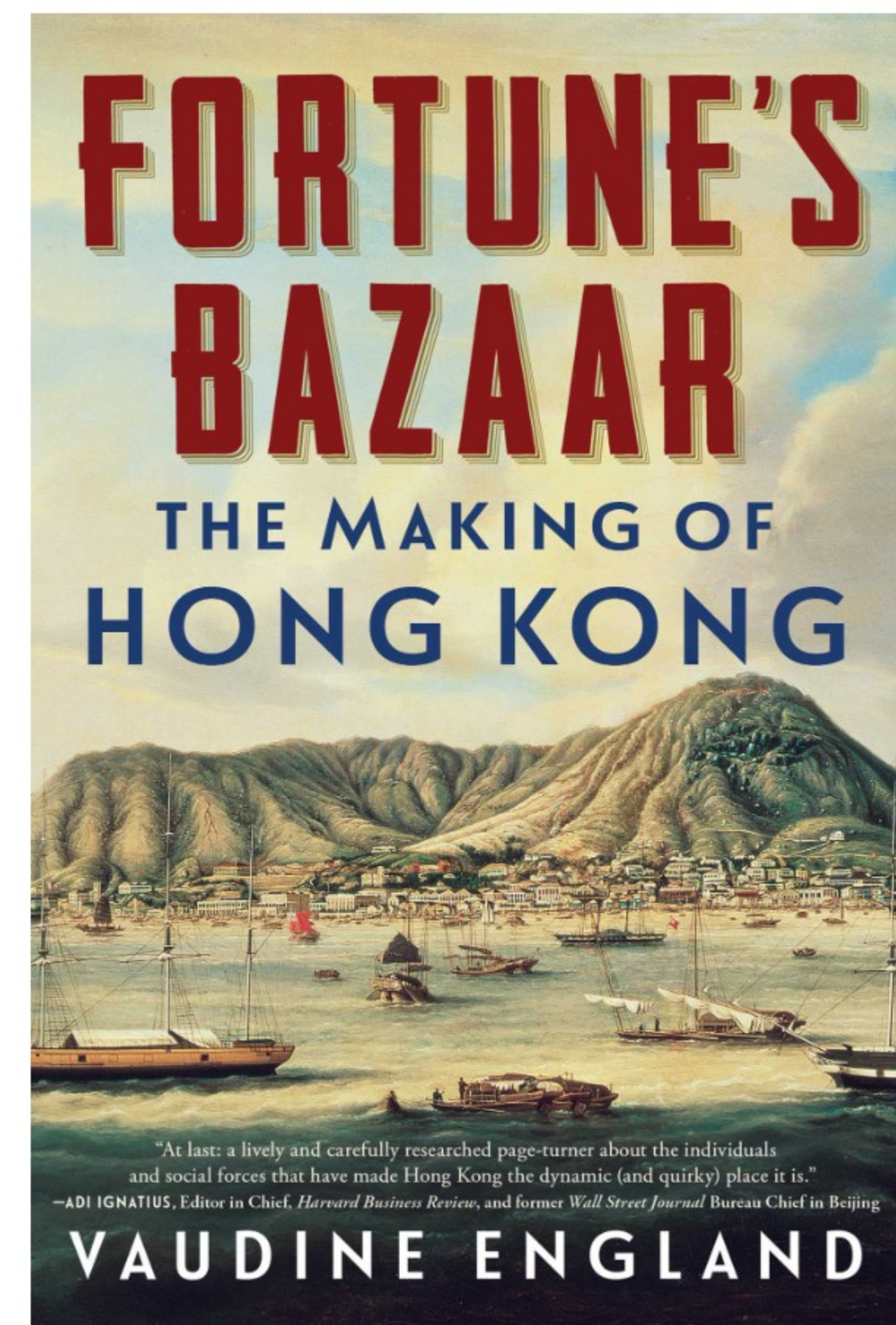
In *Fortune's Bazaar*, a recent book by journalist and historian Vaudine England, these long-received narratives are complicated in a vivid and colorful history of Hong Kong, seen through the lens of its ethnic minorities and mixed-race communities. England was born in New Zealand, then based in Hong Kong and South East Asia for three decades covering the region for the BBC, Reuters and several newspapers, before relocating to the Netherlands where she is a historian and researcher.

Rather than binary and tendentious grand narratives, England gives us a Hong Kong of many cultures, hues and stories. She embraces early colonial Hong Kong's "fascinating mix of Indians, Parsis, Goans, Macanese, Malays, Filipinos, Japanese, and West Indians, and Lascars," its Jewish families (including the renowned Kadoories and Sassoons), its "Portuguese" (a term which covered various people of mixed-race background originating in Macau) and its Eurasians. England adopts an expansive definition of this latter (now somewhat unfashionable) term as those from the "continent [that] stretches from Asia to Europe and back," including the offspring of Western and local couples, beginning from the earliest years of British presence in Hong Kong (often, although not exclusively, the "second families" of Westerners who kept "protected women" alongside their wives).

Collectively, England calls these groups Hong Kong's "in-between people," correctly arguing that they have been neglected in previous historical accounts. In her history, she deliberately ignores the British colonial powers and families — the Jardines, Keswicks and Swires — as well as the majority Chinese population, for which she "makes no apology." This is a partial account — in both senses of the word — but deliberately so, intended as a historical corrective. England empowers the subaltern, recentring the Eurasian community as a key source of power and influence in late 19th and early 20th century Hong Kong. They are, she writes, "the chameleons of a dynamic port city, the people able to parlay their mixed heritages, multilingualism, or simply their open minds into positions of indispensable power."

In so doing, England challenges the received view of early colonial Hong Kong as a city of two self-contained communities of (clearly-defined) British and Chinese, living segregated lives. Instead, she looks at life in the colony as it was actually lived, asserting the "definitional power" of daily life: "Most people, most of the time," she argues, "lived somewhere in between." Different ethnic communities did business together, socialized together, and, England adds with a heavy nudge-and-a-wink, "were sleeping together most nights." They met in life at the Happy Valley race track, and again in death at the multi-faith cemetery on the adjacent hillside.

Of particular impact on the development of early Hong Kong were merchants of Armenian, Jewish and Parsi (Zoroastrians originating from Persia who lived in the Indian subcontinent) background, who made their way to Hong Kong from elsewhere in the British Empire and beyond. Many of their names endure on the map of Hong Kong today: Chater, Kotewall, Bisney, Mody, Ruttonjee. (Occasionally pro-Beijing politicians [make noises](#) about "de-colonizing" Hong Kong's place names; if that were ever to happen, let us hope that these important Hong Kong names are not tossed out along with those of Queen Victoria and her former governors Pottinger, Hennessy, Des Voeux and Harcourt.)



[Buy the book >](#)



A Hong Kong bay in 1868 (*John Thomson*)

To give one example: the businessman Sir Catchick Paul Chater, born of Armenian parents in British Calcutta, literally changed the face of Hong Kong through his coordination of the Praya Reclamation Scheme, with the support of Jewish and Parsi business associates. Hong Kong's central business district, which today ranks among the world's most expensive real estate (including the Mandarin Oriental Hotel and the Hong Kong Club) all sit on land that Chater imagined out of the sea in the late 1880s, with a road bisecting it that still bears his name.

Other Hong Kong institutions were similarly founded by its in-between people. The University of Hong Kong was financed by a significant gift from Hormusjee Nowrojee Mody, a Parsi businessman and associate of Chater's, who also founded the Kowloon Cricket Club. The Star Ferry — running from Hong Kong Island to Tsim Sha Tsui on the Kowloon peninsula — was the invention of Parsi hotelier Dorabjee Nowrojee, beginning in 1888 when he lent his private boat to family and friends who wanted to cross the harbor on outings to the gardens of Kowloon (most of which were owned by the city's Portuguese community). Due to heavy demand, the ferry service soon grew into a commercial enterprise that endures as one of Hong Kong's most recognizable symbols.

Beyond their material contributions, these were also the first Hong Kongers to see the territory as something more than just a temporary residence — whether as a colonial posting or a temporary haven pending a return to the mainland. Eric Peter Ho, born in 1927 into one of Hong Kong's most prominent Eurasian families, the Ho Tung family, wrote that, in the pre-war era, “aside from the Eurasian community, few considered themselves permanent residents of Hong Kong.” The mixed-race middle class, led by Sir Robert Kotewall (the son of a Parsi cotton dealer and his Chinese mistress), helped to settle various incidents of civil unrest during the 1920s including the Great Canton-Hong Kong Strike of 1925, an anti-imperialist strike that lasted sixteen months and crippled the territory. In 1929 they established the Welfare League, a benevolent society that initially cared for destitute Eurasians but soon broadened its remit to provide for the welfare of all needy residents of the colony and their families, regardless of background.

“ England empowers the subaltern, recentring the Eurasian community as a key source of power and influence in late 19th and early 20th century Hong Kong. ”

The Xinhai Revolution of 1911, that deposed the Qing dynasty and ushered in the Republic of China (ROC), brought the first changes to the position of Hong Kong's Eurasians. This was “a nationalist struggle, with clear racial undertones,” writes England, a time “for the Chinese ... not a time for people who were half or three-quarters Chinese.” Those Eurasians who did not choose to identify as Chinese found themselves excluded from the nationalist euphoria. On the British side, an earlier tolerance of cross-cultural relationships in the unruly early years of the colony gave way to increasing racist discrimination and exclusion after World War I, when ethnic-based nationalism increasingly took hold throughout Europe. The interwar years also saw the rise of powerful Chinese trading families, including the Kan, Fung and Li families — all originating from Guangdong — who, together with Shouson Chow, founded the Bank of East Asia in 1919. Their influence began to eclipse those of the Eurasian merchants.

Racial divisions further sharpened with the onset of the World War II, and the Japanese invasion and occupation of Hong Kong in December 1941. Both Japanese occupiers and allied nations struggled to classify and deal with “third nationals,” those who were neither British (and therefore subject to internment as enemy aliens) nor Japanese. When Governor Geoffrey Northcote announced in June 1940 that British women and children would be evacuated from Hong Kong, it was unclear precisely



A satellite view of Hong Kong, 2018

who qualified: was the distinction made on the basis of a British passport (which many Eurasians held) or on a racial basis, restricted to “white” Britons? Even if the British were willing to recognize all passport holders, an added complication was that the destination for many of the evacuation ships was Australia — which at the time still maintained its racist “White Australia” policy and denied entry to non-whites. This left many ethnic minorities — including the families of Eurasian, Portuguese and Indians fighting for Britain — in a precarious position, while the British hoped they would find sanctuaries in their ancestral places of origin. The ill-feeling this engendered among the Eurasian community resulted in a significant loss of confidence in the colonial administration, especially as many of these men fought bravely to defend Hong Kong against the Japanese.

*Fortune's Bazaar* depicts World War II as a defining moment for these in-between communities and their sense of a Hong Kong identity: a loyalty to Hong Kong as a home they were willing to fight — and die — for, and to return to when peace finally came. In the words of Colonel Lindsay Ride, Hong Kong University vice-chancellor and founder of the wartime resistance British Army Aid Group: “When the real test of war came [the Eurasian community] not only served to the best of their ability, but ... have remained absolutely loyal. There can be no doubt that Hong Kong is for them of all people their home.”

That would change after the war. From 1945 to 1949, Hong Kong became home to millions of refugees from the Chinese civil war between Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists and Mao Zedong's Communists, rapidly increasing the city's ethnic Chinese population. Among them were wealthy Shanghainese industrialists, who arrived with capital, ambition and an entrepreneurial dynamism of their own, and who quickly gained influence in the territory. At the same time, the post-war British governor Alexander Grantham appeared not to appreciate the complexity of Hong Kong's communities, and had little sympathy for the notion of a Hong Kong identity. England speculates:

“

Perhaps [Grantham] listened too much to the newly arrived wealthy Shanghainese who brought money and industry but no Hong Kong history with them. He simply decided that Hong Kong was a Chinese port and ... [backed] the local Chinese elite.

”

The ending of the Hong Kong story, for many of these multicultural families, came with the Cultural Revolution-inspired riots of 1967, when a series of labor disputes supported by pro-communist trade unions escalated into violent confrontations with police and a broader anti-colonial protest against British rule. In order to win public support to quell the unrest, the British colonial government appealed to a sense of community among the local populace, encouraging people to think of Hong Kong as home. Scholars and commentators have [pointed](#) to this as a moment that began to crystallize a unique Hong Kong identity, at least among its Chinese community. But it was also the point when many Eurasian families left Hong Kong and “spread into their global diaspora” (Britain, the U.S., Canada, Australia) as the space available to them in the city they called home appeared to be shrinking.

“ In the face of an ethno-nationalist narrative ascendent in mainland China, England’s account reminds us that Hong Kong *is* different from China. ”

Today, Hong Kong’s identity is once again shifting, along with its demographics. In the wake of the 2019 pro-democracy protests, and passing of the National Security law in 2020, many native and long-time Hong Kongers have left, increasingly replaced by migrants from mainland China. As England notes, “the gray zone that had allowed Hong Kong ... to thrive is becoming, step by step, more black-and-white.” In 2023, the Hong Kong government approved 55,000 residency applications under a new “Top Talent Pass Scheme,” launched to combat the city’s recent brain drain; around 90% of them came from the mainland.

Where does that leave the Eurasian communities today? Michael Tse, a member of the extended Ho Tung clan, told England with poignancy:

“

There are no Eurasians anymore. We are descendants, but not a community. We only meet in weddings and funerals; at the latter, sometimes no one turns up. Yes, Eurasians, Armenians, Jews, Parsis were the backbone of Hong Kong’s first one hundred years. ... But the community has disappeared.

”

Yet, England argues, the enduring legacy of these in-between people in defining the character of Hong Kong over its first century is a key to understanding the territory’s distinct character today. She sees Hong Kong as “so much more than an East-West binary,” arguing that “the mixing has created something greater than the sum of its parts.”

It is perhaps trite to say that a book of history helps us to understand the present. Yet this work gains greater urgency because it cuts against an ethno-nationalist narrative already ascendent in mainland China, and fast becoming the dominant position of authorities in Hong Kong. In the face of this, England’s account reminds us that Hong Kong *is* different from China, “because it has lived a different history, it is made of different peoples, and their lives over generations have forged a different place.”

Might this help us understand why public opinion polls show that residents of the city since 2010 increasingly identify as “Hong Kongers” rather than “Chinese”? Or why hundreds of thousands of Hong Kongers marched in its streets in 2019 chanting *Heung gong jan, gaa jau!* (“Go, Hong Kongers!”)?



It is worth bearing in mind that among those who have taken to Hong Kong’s streets in recent years have been members of the in-between communities, who are still here and who still see Hong Kong as their home. In the fraught, simmering nights of late September 2014, at the outset of protests that would come to be known as the “Umbrella Movement,” among the crowds on the streets of Admiralty I encountered a group of Hong Kongers who were members of South Asian communities, marching with banners that read “We are one Hong Kong!” and “Together we are strong!” In October 2019, as a protest

passed Chungking Mansions (a crumbling [tower block](#) in Tsim Sha Tsui that is home to a melting pot of South Asian and African traders, laborers and refugees),

representatives of the South Asian community [handed out](#) bottles of water to marchers, and voiced their support in an act of cross-community solidarity.

The story of Hong Kong's in-between people is not purely a colonial remnant: it is the lived experience of many in Hong Kong today, including my own. 25 years ago this month, I arrived in Hong Kong from Australia to start my career as a lawyer. Hong Kong then was full of people like me, who expected to stay a few years and were surprised to find themselves still here decades later. Recently, though, I have found myself increasingly lonely in the face of Covid restrictions, political crackdowns and economic stagnation. These changes have rendered Hong Kong unrecognizable, at least in terms of its civic society and its reputation for effective governance, prompting a chorus of voices to (again) [declare](#) it on the path to becoming "just another Chinese city."

However, for all it has endured, Hong Kong does remain different from the rest of China. I can see it in the people on the streets: the passing parade of habitués in Central district; the vibrant South Asian community; the domestic helpers from across South East Asia, without whom the city's middle class would not function; and the Chinese professionals from across the border who arrive in Hong Kong not looking to remake it in the image of the mainland but, like so many generations before them, seeking the opportunity to write a new story for themselves and their families.

These nuances run counter to Beijing's overarching narrative of Hong Kong — one where the city has always been Chinese, and protests were [defined](#) by a violent minority as the result of interference by "foreign forces." England sees this recent government obsession with foreign forces as ahistorical, "an entirely new way of looking at Hong Kong's traditional openness [which] wilfully ignores the large extent to which today's Hong Kong was made by a multitude of non-Chinese people and ideas." Yet any official acknowledgement of Hong Kong's unique history seems unlikely when the ruling party of the nation state of which it forms a part regards any independent sense of identity as an existential threat.

In Beijing's attempt to control this narrative, every moment of Hong Kong's history becomes a battleground, stretching back to the beginning of British presence in the city. The contemporary relevance of the history described in *Fortune's Bazaar*, then, is that it reminds us where this city and its people have come from — and gives us a new way to understand Hong Kong at a time when its identity continues to be contested.

The ultimate legacy of this history, sadly, may be to sharpen the sense of loss as it fades into the past. In re-centering the city's in-between communities, the Hong Kong of England's account assumes its place alongside other great multi-ethnic port cities of the 19th and 20th centuries: cities such as Smyrna, Salonica and Alexandria. All of them, at one time, were great centers of trade and culture; all were racially, linguistically and religiously diverse; and all succumbed to the inexorable logic of the 20th century ethno-nation state, ultimately subsiding in stature to become monocultural, monolingual and, largely, backwaters. In the fate of those cities, perhaps, lies a foreshadowing of Hong Kong's future. ■

---



Antony Dapiran is a Hong Kong-based writer and lawyer. He is the author of *City of Protest: A Recent History of Dissent in Hong Kong* (2017) and *City on Fire: The Fight for Hong Kong* (2020), which was nominated for Australia's Walkley book award.

---

**Browse the full archive >**