**A Case Study of Misplaced Nostalgia for Colonial Hong Kong**

**Nathan H Chan**

**January 20, 2022. (500 words if excluding the endnote numbering in the text)**

During the recent violent protests in my hometown, Hong Kong, a news article [quoted](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hongkong-extradition-wong/flag-waving-grandma-wong-gives-hong-kong-protesters-lesson-in-endurance-idUSKCN1TY124) one protestor bearing a British flag, “The British colonial time was so good for us.” [[[1]](#endnote-1)] However, this paper argues that nostalgia for colonial Hong Kong is misplaced.

During the colonial era, ordinary people often had to bribe their way through life: A hospital bedpan, hawking, and squatting all [required](https://www.cb.cityu.edu.hk/CityBusinessMagazine/2016-autumn/en/fighting-corruption-the-hong-kong-way) “tea money.” [[[2]](#endnote-2)] Non-compliance would often provoke retaliation from public officials. [[[3]](#endnote-3)] Social justice advocate Elsie Elliot [said](https://doi.org/10.1525/as.1981.21.3.01p02592), "British Justice, of which we once imagined we were so proud, seems here to operate in reverse…its application is only a matter of...wealth.” [[[4]](#endnote-4)]

Corruption was a direct result of colonialism, with a small group of British expatriates serving as oligarchs; in 1950, 42 expatriates ruled 2.4 million people in Hong Kong. Though this group was largely immune to corruption, language and cultural gaps led to indifference towards the dishonesty of lower-ranking officials. [[[5]](#endnote-5)] The UK also implemented a free market system, resulting in an administration without the mandate or urgency to curb corruption. [[[6]](#endnote-6)] The situation was exacerbated by Chinese culture, which normalized certain corrupt behaviors, like influence-peddling through gifts. [[[7]](#endnote-7)]

In 1973, an expatriate Police Superintendent was exposed for selling “franchises” for police officers to profit from racketeering. Public outcry led the government to [establish](https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB110505446754319409.) the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC). [[[8]](#endnote-8)] The government also made legal, administrative, and educational changes to better demarcate legal and illegal practices, and minimize discretionary powers. By 1997, Hong Kong had [become](https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/695694) a global exemplar of anti-corruption measures. [[[9]](#endnote-9)]

With the exposure of corruption in the post-1997 Chinese-appointed government, [[[10]](#endnote-10)] it is understandable that some protestors emphasize the positives of the colonial era. However, it is dangerous to [make](https://doi.org/10.1017/s0305741000046828) sweeping generalizations by only looking at the last two decades of a 155-year British administration. [[[11]](#endnote-11)] It is incomplete to look at any colonial rule without a full reflection of history.

1. [] Roantree, Anne Marie. “Flag-Waving Grandma Wong Gives Hong Kong Protesters Lesson in Endurance.” Reuters. Thomson Reuters, July 3, 2019. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hongkong-extradition-wong/flag-waving-grandma-wong-gives-hong-kong-protesters-lesson-in-endurance-idUSKCN1TY124. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. [] College of Business, CityU. “Fighting Corruption - the Hong Kong Way.” City Business Magazine, College of Business, City University of Hong Kong, 2016. https://www.cb.cityu.edu.hk/CityBusinessMagazine/2016-autumn/en/fighting-corruption-the-hong-kong-way. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. [] Goodstadt, Leo F. Essay. In *Uneasy Partners: The Conflict between Public Interest and Private Profit in Hong Kong*, 256. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. [] Lee, Rance P. “The Folklore of Corruption in Hong Kong.” *Asian Survey* 21, no. 3 (1981): 355. https://doi.org/10.1525/as.1981.21.3.01p02592. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. [] Goodstadt, *Uneasy Partners,* p. 72 to 89. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. [] Goodstadt, *Uneasy Partners,* p. 254. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. [] Lee, *The Folklore,* p. 357-358. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. [] Mirsky, Jonathan. “Https://Www.wsj.com/Articles/SB110505446754319409.” *WSJ.com*, January 7, 2005. https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB110505446754319409. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. [] Smart, Alan. “The Unbearable Discretion of Street-Level Bureaucrats : Corruption and Collusion in Hong Kong: Current Anthropology: Vol 59, No S18.” Current Anthropology, April 1, 2018. https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/695694. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. [] Goodstadt, *Uneasy Partners,* p. 72 to 89. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. [] Chan, Ming K. “The Legacy of the British Administration of Hong Kong: A View from Hong Kong.” *The China Quarterly* 151 (1997): 567–67. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0305741000046828. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)