



Hong Kong

Jan Morris

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In its last days under British rule, the Crown Colony of Hong Kong is the world's most exciting city, at once fascinating and exasperating, a tangle of contradictions. It is a dazzling amalgam of conspicuous consumption and primitive poverty, the most architecturally incongruous yet undeniably beautiful urban panorama of all. World-renowned travel writer Jan Morris offers the most insightful and comprehensive study of the enigma of Hong Kong thus far.

Hong Kong Details

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Author : Jan Morris

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Dominic Wong says

This book gives a relatively accurate portrait of Hong Kong up to right before the handover. As I listened to the audiobook while commuting to different places in Hong Kong, I feel like I am reliving the history. The streets are still named after the British governors and the 'Hong's' that ruled over Hong Kong since 1842 are still running the show.

Chris says

Even though the cover of the edition I have sports the subtitle 'Epilogue to an Empire', the correct subtitle to Jan Morris' *Hong Kong* is 'The End of an Empire', more accurate in that even this 1990 updating still long preceded the handing over of the colony to mainland China in 1997, a truer encapsulation of the eclipse of Empire. What this revision does do, however, is to take into account the social and cultural repercussions of the Tiananmen Square massacre which took place in the year which intervened between hardback and paperback, an inauspicious augury for the run-up to 1997 which Morris discusses in the closing pages.

I had two justifications to read this book, if any were needed. One was because I enjoyed Morris' foray into fiction, the two instalments that comprise *Hav*, in which she visited an imaginary Mediterranean country in her guise as a travel writer; into this she poured her experiences of commenting on many places worldwide and distilling the essential character or personality of each geographical entity, thereby successfully evoking the otherness of so many unfamiliar locations. The second reason was because, having myself spent a decade as a child in Hong Kong, I was curious to know both the changes which had taken place in the half century or so since I had left and to see if the impressions I'd acquired as that child under ten had any bearing on reality.

It was an unsettling read. Alongside many fleeting memories prompted by smells, sights and sounds that Morris hints at in passing she relates more uncomfortable historical facts largely concerning the forcible annexation of the island and adjacent territories, albeit by treaty, and multiple examples of misgovernment ranging from ineptitude to arrogance, occasionally mitigated by a kind of benign dictatorship. As well as more historically distant distressing episodes in the colony's history, I was largely unaware of the nature of the Japanese occupation which had ended less than five years before I was first taken to live there, on the Kowloon peninsula, at the tender age of less than two years old. I was however fascinated to have much of what I took for granted put into context: streets named after influential individuals, Hong Kong's significance in geopolitics and commerce, the isolated nature of the ex-pat community and the unique relationship that existed between native Chinese and transient British. I also had an inkling of why post-war Hong Kong itself felt transient, not just because populations and economies were growing, but because there was an uneasy stand-off involving Britain, Communist China and the United States, whose cultural sway was then much more prevalent than I understood.

I did find this a tough read: two or three times I put it aside, not because Morris is not an engaging writer (she certainly is, with the enviable ability to confidently intersperse dispassionate observations with personal anecdotes) but because the information she packs in is dense and, even for one with a little experience of the island, bewildering. Have no doubt about it, she writes with authority as a frequent visitor, a widely-read researcher and an experienced commentator, but I was often confused as to whether this was primarily a history, a social critique or a travelogue. Of necessity this is told from the viewpoint of an interested outsider; there is not much reflection of the views of the ordinary Chinese people, and it would be wrong to

This book is wonderful. It gives you a real sense of the place, and was perhaps particularly interesting to read about the lead up to The Handover in the context of Scotland's forthcoming referendum - we are a country on the brink of deciding whether or not we will become independent.

Artur says

Very slow-moving (in a good way), extensive look at Hong Kong. There are some gaps, I would say; I would love to read more about the Chinese population, for example, maybe by someone belonging to that culture – but Jan Morris can grasp the way a place *feels* like nobody else. I know that I will be coming back to that book, dipping in to read a section or two at a time. What a great journey, I really enjoyed it.

Alexander Tomislav says

Pretty good book summing up the history and development of Hong Kong since its establishment up to year 1997. From its start, it's been a business oriented place, shameful as it were, from the despicable practice of British Empire's opium trade to the modern financial centre, it's always been a special place, distinct from any other British colonies, while seen as a unjust theft by the China.

While a really good writeup on development of Hong Kong, objectively examining the causes of its change and growth, the lack of follow up after the year 1997 made me give it four stars. The style is also a bit difficult, sometimes with long, winding sentences.

Some selected quotes:

Almost nothing seems built to last. It is said that no city in history has grown so fast as has Hong Kong in the past thirty years, and the place has little time for posterity.

Everyone is trying to move on – to bigger apartments, to better-paid jobs, to classier districts, often enough out of the territory altogether. The national flower of Hong Kong is the Bauhinia, a sterile hybrid which produces no seed.

It is an abnormal city. Until our own times it has been predominantly a city of refugees, with all the hallmarks of a refugee society – the single-minded obsession with the making of money, amounting almost to neurosis, and the perpetual sense of underlying insecurity, which makes everything more tense and more nervous.

Great Seal of the colony, designed in 1844 by the Queen's own medallist-in-chief, depicted beneath the royal crest a waterfront piled profitably with what might have been tea-boxes, but

were generally assumed to be opium chests. In 1844 the Governor himself declared that almost anyone with any capital in the colony was either in the Government service, or else in the drug trade.

Yet all too often Hong Kong depressed its visitors – ‘like a beautiful woman with a bad temper’, thought Lawrence Oliphant, who went there in the next decade. Was it just the climate? Was it the cramped and improvised environment? Was it the lack of any higher purpose or ideology, such as inspired the imperialists in other parts of their Empire – Raffles of Singapore, for instance, who hoped the British would leave a message for posterity ‘written in characters of light’? Or were the colonists of Hong Kong even then, consciously or subconsciously, overawed by the presence of China beyond the harbour, so enervated and contemptible in the 1840s, but surely so certain, one day, to come mightily into its own?

Bear in mind that just across the bay, on Stanley Beach in 1943, thirty-three British, Indian and Chinese citizens were beheaded for alleged High Treason against the Japanese occupying Power! The Japanese association with Hong Kong has been ambiguous indeed. On the one hand their armies were the only armies ever to invade the colony, on the other for many years their foreign trade was largely financed by the colony’s banks. On the one shore the children merrily bathing, on the other the bloodied heads falling on the sand.

True feng shui had nothing to do with magic, although in the old China it used to be given an esoteric mystery by magicians in yellow robes. It was a matter of harmony between man and nature, and was concerned with location, with colour, with proportion. As he scribbled some illustrative diagrams in my notebook, and considered the question of whether feng shui was an art or a science (a philosophy, he rather thought), he told me that he was never short of geomantic business.

They are extremely lively, extremely neat, extremely polite and engaging young people. Talking loudly, laughing a lot, with their bright blue rucksacks, their sneakers and their Walkman radios they look thoroughly modern, and if you engage them in conversation you will find that they are liberated in their emotions too. They may seem to think more practically, calculate more exactly than their counterparts in the west. They are still, as a rule, far more devoted to their families. But they are certainly not interested only, as the old Hong Kong canard has it, in money, and they are noticeably not respectful to the old Confucianist ideas of a rigid social order. They are just as idealistic, no more, no less, than young Europeans or Americans, just as concerned with a proper balance of life, between the necessary making of money and enjoyable ways of using it. Some are power-hungry, some drop-outs, some honest plodders, some dreamers. All in all, they are as likeable and normal a generation as you will find anywhere in the world, freed at last from the burdens and inhibitions of the Chinese condition.

The proximity of Portuguese Macao, neutral in time of war, jolly with food, wine and gambling halls in peace, has always been an inescapable fact of Hong Kong life. Sometimes it has been politically convenient to go there, sometimes it has been economically handy. Villains have fled to refuge, unmarried couples have found solace, escaped prisoners have been succoured, and in the early years of Hong Kong rich merchants still possessed pleasure-houses in Macao, as they had in the day of the Guangzhou hongts. Even during the Second World War the Macao ferries still sailed.

...by the 1970s Hong Kong industry was relatively respectable, and the colony was no longer an underdeveloped country with a sophisticated entrepreneurial superstructure, but one of the world's great productive Powers. The 418 registered factories of 1939, the 1,266 of 1948, had become by 1986 148,623. It was the most phenomenally rapid of all the world's industrial revolutions. Now Hong Kong stands, they say, sixteenth among them all, exporting, with its 6.4 million population, more than India's 880 million. Its average wages are second only to Japan's in Asia. Critics say it is still too improvisatory or even amateurish of method, too dependent upon cheap labour and traditional management, and that there is a growing shortage of sufficiently advanced technicians. Nevertheless the territory shows no signs of falling back.

Hong Kong is the world's largest exporter of textiles, toys and watches. It prints books in every language, and makes more films for the cinema than anywhere else except India.

The chief strength of this economy has always been its flexibility. Because it has been relatively free from Government interference, it has been able to switch easily from idea to idea, method to method, emphasis to emphasis. If it is frighteningly changeable sometimes, it has proved resilient too, swiftly recovering its poise after wars, revolutions, riots, share collapses and even treaties about its future.

Hong Kong enjoys absolute freedom of speech and opportunity, but no freedom at all to choose its rulers.

In 1966, at a time when Triad infiltration of his force was rampant, Hong Kong's Commissioner of Police admitted that there was corruption in virtually every walk of life, but added cheerfully that 'in terms of money the police force is probably not the worst'.

The Hong Kong Tramway Company is the only surviving builder of wooden double-deck

streetcars (though it does not exactly build them, but rather maintains them as palimpsests, constantly replacing parts, adding improvements, so that none of its 160 vehicles are exactly the same, and none can really be dated).

Hongkong and Shanghai Bank is in effect the Central Bank of Hong Kong, one of the very few non-Governmental concerns to fulfil such a role in the modern world. It holds the colony's reserves, and together with the Bank of China and the Chartered Bank, which is part of a London-based conglomerate, it issues all the colony's notes in denominations of ten dollars and above; they are ornamented with pictures of the Bank's offices, and signed by the Chief Accountant.

Joshua Rigsby says

Morris interposes descriptions of Hong Kong's founding with the status of Hong Kong in its waning years as a colony in the late 1980s. Many of the descriptions and speculations are necessarily dated, but the early work examining the origins of the colony (my reason for reading the book) were still quite good.

Kerry says

Read this when I first went to Hong Kong to live. Loved the writing style and it was my first effort to find out more about the history of my new home. Enjoyed it immensely and would recommend it highly.

Jeffrey says

This book is a mix of history and some contemporary portraits of colonial Hong Kong. The book focuses almost exclusively on British personages and mundane colonial details and really never gets around to exploring the Chineseness. I was really disappointed by this. The book is also dated, curiously fixates on arcane and somewhat random details and quotes and does not shed much light on the actual people of Hong Kong (aside from the aristocracy and business elites). Barely got through it on my trip to Hong Kong and was constantly wishing I had a different book. A more balanced and nuanced history would make for a better travel read.

Laura says

I wanted very much to like this book because I adore the author, but it just wasn't a hit for me. It's a bad sign when I find myself reading the New York Times health page to get my reading fix, instead of opening my current book. The best thing about this book was also the worst thing: too much detail. In certain places the level of detail was exciting, bringing the feel of Hong Kong right into my head. In far more places it made my mind wander, and was quite effective at putting me to sleep at night.

Amy says

In preparing for my move to Hong Kong, I looked for book recommendations, both fiction and non-fiction, and this book by Jan Morris came up on every list. I listened to the audiobook, which was expertly narrated. It was a great history lesson, made more interesting (though perhaps also somewhat biased) by its narrator. I look forward to reading the book again after we have settled in Hong Kong and I have more context for understanding the places and history she references.

Love says

Jan Morris is my favorite historian, in this travel book she visits Hong Kong shortly before 1997 when it is about to be turned over to the Chinese government. Morris is a great historian of the British empire, many of her books focusing on Queen Victoria's 1897 diamond jubilee. Which Morris repeatedly argues was the very high point of the Empire, where the institution reached its peak. If this is true then 1997 with its turnover of Hong Kong to Red China might be seen at the end of the Empire.

Unlike her Pax Britannica trilogy this book isn't a history book in the strictest sense, it is a travel book. But as even if Morris visits Hong Kong in modern times, through her journey we will be filled in on all the important events in the history of the territory.

The book is great but not quite as good as her Pax Britannica trilogy, which I can't recommend enough.

While reading this book I had some thought of Hong Kong and individual freedom that I thought I could share here if anyone is interested. Morris writes a great deal of the absence of democratic elections in the territory, where all political authority is placed in the hands of the governor. While this lack of democracy in one sense makes the inhabitants of Hong Kong less free, it is also true that they enjoy or at least enjoyed a great deal of political freedom in the form of near absolute freedom of speech, freedom of organization, freedom of thought etc. Equal or greater than that enjoyed in western democracies. But then you have the other aspects of individual freedom such as economic freedom, which in many ways for the individual is more important than something like free elections. Here Hong Kong had the edge over most western democracies, with its largely unregulated economic life and for all but the rich nearly non-existent taxation. So it is not necessarily true that the imperial subjects of Hong Kong were less free than their imperial masters back in Britain, it might actually have been the other way around.

Odette says

Greatly enjoyed this book especially since I read this right before a trip to HK.

Matt Seidholz says

Jan Morris called Britain's handling of the 1997 handover of Hong Kong "sufficiently stylish". I think that's meant to be faint praise.

Funnily enough, that's the exact phrase I'd use to describe her book. But my praise isn't faint.

Morris has a lot of love for word-play and a lot of love for Hong Kong. The prose is luxurious and the history enlightening.

A powerful strain of colonial nostalgia pervades the book. Morris never lets us forget, though, Britain's exploitative history with China, and that's definitely to her credit.

Reading it now, this attitude of the British expatriate in Hong Kong seems impossibly distant. Almost unrelatable. In 2013, with Shenzhen looming large in the north, it's hard to imagine Hong Kong as a European outpost. For me, though, that was part of the fun of this book -- it's an interesting relic.

I recommend "Hong Kong" for people who live there. It will definitely strengthen your sense of place, and will help you appreciate the historical moment that you find yourself in one of the world's great, complicated cities.

Bonnie says

The history chapters and interesting the "modern" chapters are pre handover and outdated.
