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Citation

TANG, Tuck Hong James.(1999). Introduction: Hong Kong after the reversion: In search of a post-colonial order. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 8(20), 5-8.

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass_research/2160

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Introduction

Hong Kong after the Reversion: in search of a post-colonial order

JAMES T. H. TANG*

The political handover of Hong Kong on 1 July 1997 turned out to be a non-event with little political drama. Emotions ran high when the Union Jack was lowered and was replaced by the Chinese national flag (wuxing hongqi), peacefully ending over one and a half centuries of British colonial rule in Hong Kong. The handover took place smoothly, despite the heavy rain, without political and social turbulence. The Sino-British disagreement over the abolition of the Legislative Council marred the occasion, but the swearing-in of a pro-Beijing Provisional Legislative Council was largely accepted as a *fait accompli*.

In many ways Hong Kong has been very lucky. It had prepared for the reversion to Chinese sovereignty for almost one and a half decades, a luxury not bestowed to most colonial territories where decolonization is usually far more violent and painful. Major political, social and economic changes were already underway before China resumed sovereignty over Hong Kong. Most of the local population, an overwhelming majority of them Chinese, accepted that the territory should be China's. Economically, the Hong Kong economy was increasingly integrated with the mainland. The main challenge, therefore was seen to be largely political. From the mid-1980s onward Hong Kong's archaic colonial political structures were changed to accommodate rising political demands. The once politically apathetic public, apprehensive of the implications of the territory's reunion with a socialist motherland known to be politically intolerant, became far more active politically and demanded a more democratic system.¹

Since the inauguration of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR), to the surprise of many, the central government in Beijing has observed a 'one country, two systems' arrangement. Beijing leaders have repeatedly stressed that they have complete confidence in the SAR administration and have refrained from commenting on Hong Kong affairs apart from expressing support for the SAR's policies. The first SAR Legislative Council elections took place successfully within 1 year of the handover in May 1998, as promised. Although the new Legislative Council is still dominated by pro-Beijing forces, democratic forces which were

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1. A solid account of Hong Kong's democratization and the dynamics of the process are given by Lo Shiu-hing, *The Politics of Democratization in Hong Kong* (London: Macmillan, 1997).

unceremoniously removed, made a political comeback taking 19 seats, representing almost one third of the total number of 60 seats.²

Contrary to most predictions, Hong Kong's most serious post-handover problems have been economic and social rather than political. Since the reversion, Hong Kong has been rocked by health scares, economic recession, rising unemployment, the collapse of the real estate and stock markets, and serious disruption to air cargo traffic following the chaos during the opening of the new airport at Chek Lap Kok. But the political consequences of the economic and social problems are equally serious if less obvious. The administration under the leadership of Tung Chee Hwa, a former businessman who has won the trust of the central government, has insisted that since the reversion Hong Kong has been governed in exactly the same way as before. But the new leadership under Tung has appeared to be indecisive in managing the crises. Senior civil servants, who have continued to play dual roles as policy-makers and administrators, have apparently lost their sense of direction. The population has become so agitated that public confidence in the future of Hong Kong has plunged to a record low. Public satisfaction with the administration's performance has also plummeted. According to a survey in July 1998 conducted by the SAR government, 59% of respondents said that they were dissatisfied with the government's overall performance; with only 25% satisfied. This is the lowest rating that the administration has received since the question was first asked in the polls in 1991.³

Decolonization or modernization in other parts of Asia has led to the establishment of various forms of 'Asian democracies' characterized by the continuing dominance of one particular political party⁴ and political arrangements which have been described as 'semi-democracy', 'quasi-democracy' and 'low intensity democracy'⁵ where formal electoral participation brought almost no meaningful social reform or improvement in political and individual freedom. The SAR—an administrative state with limited democracy—may present another model of a liberal and effective government with a degree of partial political representation and a relatively high degree of personal freedom. Developments since the reversion, however, have raised questions about whether or not Hong Kong's existing political structures have the capacity to establish and maintain a stable post-colonial order.

The SAR administration, which is not democratically elected, has been given formidable constitutional power to govern. The SAR's elected legislature, admittedly with varying degrees of representation, has very limited constitutional power

2. The official results of the 1998 SAR Legislative Council elections can be found in *Daily Information*, 25 May 1998 published by the Hong Kong SAR Government. For analysis of the political representation see reports on 25 May 1998 in major newspapers such as *South China Morning Post* and *Ming Pao*.

3. *Daily Information*, 3 August 1998 (HKSAR Government).

4. See discussions by Chan Heng Chee, 'Democracy: evolution and implementation: an Asian perspective' in the Asian model of democracy in Robert Bartley, Chan Heng Chee, Samuel P. Huntington, and Shijuro Ogata, eds, *Democracy and Capitalism* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), pp. 1–26.

5. See, for example, Chai-Anan Samudavanija, 'Thailand: a stable semi-democracy' and Zakaria Haji Ahmad, 'Malaysia: quasi democracy in a divided society' in Larry Diamond, Juan J. Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds, *Democracy in Developing Countries: Asia* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1989); and Barry Gills, Joel Rocamora, and Richard Wilson, eds, *Low Intensity Democracy: Political Power in the New World Order* (London: Pluto Press, 1993).

for directly participating in the policy process. This combination has given rise to a difficult situation: while the administration is determined to exercise its constitutional power in order to maintain the executive-led approach to government, an increasingly assertive legislature, which represents the interests of their constituents by elections, finds it important to challenge a government without popular mandate. The contradictions of the political arrangements are gradually surfacing as the SAR confronts a series of social and economic crises and is likely to become even more intense as the system democratizes further.⁶

In fact, the dominance of the bureaucracy in the governance of Hong Kong has been challenged by political forces both within and outside of the establishment. Many of the Chief Executive's key advisers are reported to have policy ideas different from those of the civil service. The establishment of high-powered bodies, such as the Commission for Strategic Development, has been seen as attempts by Tung Chee Hwa to develop policy initiatives from outside the bureaucracy.⁷ With the introduction of competitive electoral politics, however limited, political parties across the pro-Beijing/pro-democracy ideological divide have become more critical of the administration as they formulate strategies to strengthen their political position. Although no single political party is able to dominate the first SAR Legislative Council, political parties are becoming increasingly important in Hong Kong. In fact, different political forces have united in pressing the government to accept their plans for rescuing the economy. The focus of political power in the SAR has become more diffuse and difficult to locate as different political forces compete and regroup.⁸

Finally, although the central government has demonstrated its commitment to maintain Hong Kong's special status as a SAR, the question of how one country can square with two systems is still not fully answered. The management of mainland-SAR relations, for example, is still evolving. Hong Kong also faces the challenge of balancing its position as an international city on the one hand and its identity as a Chinese SAR on the other hand. Hong Kong is changing rapidly, even if such changes are not always obvious to the outside world, and it is moving in new directions that few had anticipated. The post-colonial order in the SAR is therefore in flux and the drama of China's Hong Kong experiment is still unfolding.

This special issue on post-colonial Hong Kong (in two parts) was initiated by Professor Suisheng Zhao in early 1997. When Suisheng approached me to organize a special issue on Hong Kong as guest editor, our minds were very much focused on the political turbulence Hong Kong was going through during the last stage of

6. For a general review by the author on political developments in the SAR see: James T. H. Tang, 'The Special Administrative Region Government and the changing political order in Hong Kong' post-handover update for Norman Miner, *The Government and Politics of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 246-270. A brief analysis of more recent developments of the relationship between the SAR administration and the Legislative Council is given in James T. H. Tang, 'Executive-legislative relations in Hong Kong', *Hong Kong Update*, August 1998 (Asia Studies Programme, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C.), pp. 6-8.

7. The setting up of the Commission on Strategic Development was announced by the Chief Executive in his Policy Address on 8 October 1997.

8. See commentary on Tung's failure to establish a new focus of policy initiative outside of the bureaucracy in the forum page of *Ming Pao*, 19 August 1998; Tsang Yok-sing, leader of the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong, also commented that no one knew exactly what were the responsibilities of Exco members and they would not be able to do much given the political structures of the SAR, *Ming Pao* 20 August 1998.

its transition to Chinese rule. As a result of further discussions, we both felt that a more fruitful endeavour would be a special issue (or issues) examining post-handover Hong Kong when the scholarly community would have had the opportunity to evaluate developments after the transfer of sovereignty and to make sense of major changes in post-colonial Hong Kong.

For this special issue we have assembled a team of Hong Kong-based scholars (or those who spend time in Hong Kong regularly) who have been monitoring events from close range with different disciplinary backgrounds. They address a wide range of issues, including: the political legacy of British rule, the transition of the civil service, current economic and social crises, problems of democratic development, the changing constitutional and legal framework, emerging problems of economic governance, and the political interface between mainland China and the Hong Kong SAR.

In Part 1 of this special issue Richard Baum examines the British legacy for Hong Kong, S. K. Tsang addresses the economic crisis that Hong Kong is confronting, Elaine Chan and Rowena Kwok evaluate the electoral arrangements of the first SAR Legislative Council elections, John Burns looks at the civil service in transition, and T. L. Lui analyzes the changing mood of Hong Kong society. Four more articles will be featured in Part 2 of the special issue. They include an assessment of the changing constitutional order in the SAR by Michael Davis, an analysis of democracy and local governance by S. H. Lo, an examination of government-business relations by James Tang, and an exploration of mainland-SAR dynamics through the role of Hong Kong deputies to the National People's Congress by Suzanne Pepper. Although not all the contributors share the same views about where post-colonial Hong Kong is heading, it is clear from their contributions that Hong Kong is changing politically, socially and economically in its first year as a SAR. The process of establishing and maintaining a stable post-colonial order may prove to be far more gruelling than the process of de-colonization.

A number of the articles were first presented at a special panel organized by the Journal at the annual meeting of the Association of Asian Studies in Washington, D.C. in March 1998. In late May 1988 we convened a workshop at the University of Hong Kong, bringing together most of the paper writers for half-a-day of intense discussions. I would like to thank Professor John Burns, Head of the Department of Politics and Public Administration for facilitating the organization of the workshop and also Dr Shir-ming Shen, Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences, for additional financial support.

I am also grateful to other participants of the workshop who contributed to the project by both stimulating discussions during the workshop as well as serving as peer reviewers for the papers. They are: Dr Joseph C. W. Chan, Dr Peter C. Y. Cheung, Dr Anthony B. L. Cheung, Professor Lary Diamond, Mr Andy Ho, Dr Richard W. X. Hu, Mr S. K. Lau, Dr Lee Pang Kwong, Professor Lynn White III, and Dr Thomas Wong. Professor Steven Y. L. Cheung and Professor Richard Y. C. Wong served as additional reviewers.