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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Contesting Epistemological Territory: History Education and Decolonisation in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Hong Kong's history remains contested during its decolonisation. The colonial government of Hong Kong, the People's Republic of China (PRC), and historians at the University of Hong Kong (HKU) all attempted to interpret the past in their own right. This article argues that the contest for epistemological territory between the Chinese and British colonial governments led to the fragmented accounts of Hong Kong history in official curricula. Unlike other cases, Hong Kong's decolonisation did not result in independence. Instead, the United Kingdom transferred the colony's sovereignty to the PRC in 1997. Both sides attempted to showcase their right and ability to shape the colony's past. Instead of having an ultimate "winner," both occupied a share of the epistemological territory regarding historical knowledge, producing fragmented accounts of the past. The article also recovers and examines the agency of locally trained historians. These people of Hong Kong did not have any chance to produce their own "autonomous history" precisely because of the impossibility of independence. This process resulted in the partially decolonised yet censored historical narratives that persist in Hong Kong under Chinese rule. Through this case, this article calls for further discussion of what 'decolonisation' meant for actors beyond the state.

Keywords: Hong Kong; People's Republic of China; British colonialism; History education; University of Hong Kong

In June 2022, Hong Kong became featured in numerous Western newspapers and social media platforms again. Textbooks, instead of protests, caught the world's attention this time. The Education Bureau of the Hong Kong government introduced a new compulsory subject "Citizenship and Social Development" to replace "Liberal Studies," which aimed to cultivate students' critical thinking.[1] Textbooks for the new subject followed the official rhetoric of the People's Republic of China (PRC). They claimed that Hong Kong was never a British colony, and China never recognised the treaties that ceded Hong Kong to Britain during the nineteenth century. *The New York Times* stated that the books "are part of China's effort to instil a particular historical narrative and to stress patriotic education in a city where a pro-democratic movement was crushed."[2] However, this "historical narrative" was

[1] *Citizenship and Social Development: Curriculum and Assessment Guide (Secondary 4-6)* (Hong Kong: Education Bureau, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, 2021), 3-5.

[2] Tiffany May, "In These New Textbooks, Hong Kong Was Never a British Colony," *New York Times*, 16 June 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/16/world/asia/hong-kong-textbooks-british-colony.html; another example came from the *Guardian*, which appeared one day earlier: Helen Davidson, "New Hong Kong textbooks 'will claim

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nothing new. It was not only about censoring accounts that are sensitive to the PRC but also those that are problematic from the British perspective. This is an issue that has aroused debates since the 1960s.

Focusing on the era from the late 1960s to 1997, this article argues that the contest for epistemological territory between the Chinese and British colonial governments led to the fragmented accounts of Hong Kong history in official curricula. Meanwhile, local historians attempted to claim Hong Kong's own epistemological sovereignty, but they only partially succeeded. Instead of manifesting self-determination like many other cases of decolonisation, the story of Hong Kong became subsumed into British colonial and Chinese national history. Authors of history textbooks made no attempts at claiming this epistemological sovereignty, as their writings were subject to official scrutiny or the wave of "self-censorship" in 1990s Hong Kong. This article proposes "epistemological sovereignty" and "epistemological territory" as distinct concepts. As the editors of this special issue have explained in the introduction, the former refers to "the interplay of telling one's own story to claim and reinforce one's self-determination and the self-determination to be able to tell one's own story."[3] In this case, local academic historians tried to instruct teachers how they should tell the story of Hong Kong as a place of its own. However, they only partly succeeded because of how the Chinese and colonial governments occupied the epistemological territory in Hong Kong. Unlike epistemological sovereignty, which asserts one's self-determination, epistemological territory refers to areas of knowledge that became subject to the control of political actors. As the UK government would have to leave Hong Kong and the PRC would take over the colony in 1997, both sides showcased their right and power to write and rewrite the past. They both imposed control on how Hong Kong history should appear in schools.

The fragmented accounts appearing in official syllabuses and approved textbooks were the combined results of British colonial and Chinese forces. The decolonisation process was negotiated between the UK and PRC governments, marginalising the voices of teachers and historians. While historians in nearby (former colonial) territories, especially those in Southeast Asia, had attempted to promote "autonomous histories" of their nations from the mid-twentieth century onwards, those in Hong Kong failed to do so because of authoritarian structures both from the PRC and the British.[4] This article presents a unique case of knowledge production in the age of decolonisation. In other cases examined in this special issue, partially decolonised histories emerged as the products of the historical actors' own limitations. The training in colonial or American universities produced "partially decolonised authors," who in turn produced "partially decolonised histories for partially decolonised spaces."[5] In Hong Kong, however, history failed to become fully decolonised because of how the PRC and colonial governments claimed epistemological territory in the colony. As Edward Vickers and Paul Morris have reminded scholars of education, the case of Hong Kong involves not only "Western" colonialism but also "a Chinese hegemonic project with strong colonial overtones."[6] Contesting claims for Hong Kong's epistemological territory through history education demonstrates how both colonial and Chinese actors co-exerted

city never was a British colony'," *Guardian*, 15 June 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/15/new-hong-kong-textbooks-will-claim-city-never-was-a-british-colony.

[3] Moritz A. Mihatsch and Casper Andersen, "Introduction," *Itinerario* 50, no. 1 (2026).

[4] See, for instance, another article in the special issue, Benjamin Goh, "'Asia, not the European in Asia, must be our theme': A Partial Decolonisation of Malayan History at the University of Malaya in the 1950s," *Itinerario* 50, no. 1 (2026).

[5] Mihatsch and Andersen, "Introduction."

[6] Edward Vickers and Paul Morris, "Accelerating Hong Kong's Reeducation: 'Mainlandisation,' Securitisation and the 2020 National Security Law," *Comparative Education* 58, no. 2 (2022): 189.

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political forces on the colony's knowledge production. On the one hand, the colonial administrators understood they would retreat soon and hoped to portray British rule positively. On the other hand, PRC officials stressed Hong Kong's historical linkages to China, preparing for the city's integration with mainland China after 1997. Locally trained historians, meanwhile, were not always successful in promoting a critical understanding of the past due to the above intervention. The story of Hong Kong became partially "undecolonised" not because of the historians' training but the intervention of high politics.

The above process helps us re-think the nature of not only colonialism but also decolonisation. Recent scholarship on Hong Kong history has approached this era mainly through official policies and diplomacy.[7] Gina Anne Tam has also shown in *The Historical Journal*'s roundtable "Decolonizing Chinese History" that Hong Kong had complex layers of decolonisation, which involved not just nationalism vis-à-vis colonialism but also calls for local autonomy that reject elements of the Chinese nationalistic discourse.[8] Through this case of knowledge production involving both state and non-state actors, this article illustrates the historical roots of Hong Kong's complex decolonisation from the British imperial, Chinese, and local perspectives. It shows that the official end of a colonial regime does not necessarily decolonise the knowledge production process. Elements of colonial narratives persisted with the addition of Chinese political claims. This Hong Kong case, in fact, calls for further scrutiny of the extent to which 'decolonisation' became manifested to non-state actors who remained in (former) peripheries where colonial structure and knowledge persist.

Hong Kong's Late Colonialism and Decolonisation

The decolonisation of Hong Kong is an anomaly to many historians of decolonisation.[9] Instead of gaining independence, the colony was transferred by the UK to the PRC. The Qing empire ceded Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon Peninsula to Britain in 1842 and 1860 respectively. Later in 1898, the Qing court leased the rural area between Kowloon and the Shenzhen River to Britain. The lease would only last for ninety-nine years, meaning that Britain would have to return this area, known as the New Territories, to China. A key turning point of Hong Kong history took place in 1967, when a series of leftist riots broke out in the colony because of the Cultural Revolution in the PRC. After suppressing the riots, the British government realised that, due to Hong Kong's vulnerability (as illustrated by the PRC's support of local rioters in the early phases), they would eventually have to return the colony to China.[10] Shifts in Hong Kong's official historical narrative emerged as part of the wider political changes from the late 1960s onwards. The era from the late 1960s to the

[7] See, for instance, Chi-kwan Mark, *Decolonisation in the Age of Globalisation: Britain, China, and Hong Kong, 1979-89* (Manchester University Press, 2023); Florence Mok, *Covert Colonialism: Governance, Surveillance and Political Culture in British Hong Kong, c. 1966-97* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023), chaps. 7-8; and Michael Ng, *Political Censorship in British Hong Kong: Freedom of Expression and the Law (1842–1997)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), chap. 6.

[8] Gina Anne Tam, "Colonialism and Nationalism in Hong Kong: Towards True Decolonization," *Historical Journal* 67, no. 1 (2024): 169-77.

[9] John Darwin, "Hong Kong in British Decolonisation," in *Hong Kong's Transitions, 1842-1997*, ed. Judith M. Brown and Rosemary Foot (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), 16.

[10] A long-term study report by the British government in 1969 concluded that "Hong Kong's future must eventually lie in China" and that "our [the British government's] objective must be to attempt to negotiate its return, at a favourable opportunity, on the best terms obtainable for its people and for our material interests there;" "Hong Kong: Long Term Study," 28 March 1969, CAB 134/2945, The National Archives, UK [hereafter TNA], also cited in Chi-kwan Mark, "Development Without Decolonisation? Hong Kong's Future and Relations with Britain and China, 1967-1972," *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society* 24, no. 2 (2014): 323-4.

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early 1980s witnessed a series of reforms by colonial administrators to improve local conditions, aiming at stabilising the colony and improving the government's image.[11] Overall, the British and Hong Kong governments hoped to secure Hong Kong people's support so they could negotiate the colony's decolonisation on "the best terms obtainable" for Hong Kong people and British interests.[12] Education, including the issue of history curricula, became more important to both the government and the people with the introduction of free and compulsory education at primary and junior secondary levels in 1971 and 1978 respectively.

However, these reforms did not necessarily mean that the Hong Kong government was benevolent. Officials remained sensitive to anti-government sentiments and closely monitored student activities. They also suppressed activist campaigns, such as the New Left groups that were critical of colonial governance and prominent in promoting Chinese national identity among the youth.[13] To maintain its pro-business and low-taxation policies, the government under Governor Murray MacLehose also did not introduce a comprehensive welfare and social security system that could meet London's demands.[14] As Florence Mok has argued, 'covert colonialism' was a distinguished marker of governance in late colonial Hong Kong. In response to anti-colonial sentiments and public discontent, the government did not introduce democratisation. Instead, it monitored, assessed, and constructed public opinion through covert polling exercises and surveillance, such as the Town Talk in 1967 and the Movement of Opinion Direction in 1975.[15] In other words, the government, while introducing reforms to secure public support, continued to grasp the power to control the colony. New history syllabuses emerged as part of the above political control while adding a new layer of complexity. Changes to syllabuses formed part of the education reforms. However, they also demonstrated how the government controlled what students should and should not learn. As the next section shows, topics on Hong Kong history became a subject of concern in the 1970s. The development from the late 1980s to 1990s added complexity to the development, as the colonial government had to not only handle local politics but also how the PRC hoped to shape knowledge production regarding Hong Kong before 1997.

The issue of decolonisation becomes relevant here. Historians view decolonisation as a long-term process for the colony. From the political perspective, preparation for the end of Hong Kong's colonial status also started much earlier before 1997. Negotiation with the PRC was impossible during the 1970s due to internal political instability in mainland China. MacLehose believed that his government should prepare "the best prospect for the least unsatisfactory arrangement with China on the long term future of the Colony."[16] The preparation for this "decolonisation" with an uncertain timing began with local reforms to secure public support. With Deng Xiaoping coming to power in December 1978, the PRC became determined to take over Hong Kong in 1997. In 1984, after rounds of negotiation, the UK government agreed to return the entire colony of Hong Kong to the PRC on 1 July 1997. The Hong Kong government began to prepare for this transfer of sovereignty. It introduced curriculum reforms that aimed at preparing the people for this political transition, cultivating talents for local economic development, and instilling the idea of democracy among

[11] See, for instance, John M. Carroll, *A Concise History of Hong Kong* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 160-1, 172-6; Allan T. F. Pang, "Entertainment, Chinese Culture, and Late Colonialism in Hong Kong," *Historical Journal* 67, no. 1 (2024): 124-47.

[12] Mark, "Development Without Decolonisation?" 323.

[13] These groups did not receive support from Beijing or CCP-controlled organisations in Hong Kong; Ng, *Political Censorship*, 145-9.

[14] Ray Yep, *Man in a Hurry: Murray MacLehose and Colonial Autonomy in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2024), 97-107.

[15] Mok, *Covert Colonialism*, chap. 1.

[16] TNA, FCO 40/391, Letter from Laird to Wilford, Monson, Logan, and Graham, 15 May 1972.

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students.[17] An important aim was to cultivate a sense of belonging to Hong Kong. Local history thus entered new curricula. However, both the PRC and colonial governments hoped to claim their epistemological territory through this curriculum reform, as both wanted Hong Kong students to study local history from their respective perspectives. The contest for epistemological territory thus emerged in this context of political decolonisation.

Disappearance of Hong Kong History

The Education Department eliminated Hong Kong history from the official secondary curriculum during the late 1960s and the 1970s. Colonial control of curricula was not a new development in 1960s Hong Kong. In the early post-WWII years, the Hong Kong government was anxious to eliminate any content that contained political ideologies from either Communist or Nationalist China. It sought to replace textbooks published in China with local ones and suppress communist activities at school.[18] Two distinct history subjects, "History" (i.e., world history) and "Chinese History" existed in Hong Kong from the 1950s onwards. The government created "Chinese History" partly to control Chinese nationalistic sentiments.[19] During the 1960s, students from Anglo-Chinese secondary schools (with English as the medium of instruction) could briefly study Hong Kong history if they chose to take "History" at senior forms.[20] As for Chinese Middle Schools, where Chinese was the medium of instruction, the description in the syllabuses was even briefer. After learning about the First Opium War and the Treaty of Nanjing, students had to study the topic "the creation of Hong Kong."[21] It is unclear whether Hong Kong history was a popular topic among teachers and students. Nevertheless, sensitive topics that might provoke anti-British sentiments or Chinese nationalism, such as the local anti-Qing revolutionary activities and the anti-British strikes in the 1920s, did not enter the syllabuses.

This existence of local history was short-lived in Hong Kong. Traces of Hong Kong history gradually faded out of the syllabuses. In 1969, Inspector of Education Louise Mok announced a new syllabus for the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination in the next academic year. In a public article to history teachers, she explained the forthcoming changes in the history papers, including the deletion of early modern history and the renaming of the "Far East" section as "East Asia." She added at the end of a paragraph that "Hong Kong is omitted" and gave no explanation.[22] While this was merely a syllabus for English schools

[17] *Guidelines on Civic Education in Schools* (Hong Kong: Government Printer, 1985), 28-38; Public Records Office, Hong Kong [hereafter PRO], Hong Kong Record Series [hereafter HKRS] 2131-2-8, "Recent Changes in Hong Kong and their Implications on Curriculum Development," 17 December 1987.

[18] Paul Morris and Anthony Sweeting, "Education and Politics: The Case of Hong Kong from a Historical Perspective," *Oxford Review of Education* 17, no. 3 (1991): 256-8.

[19] Flora Kan and Edward Vickers, "One Hong Kong, Two Histories: 'History' and 'Chinese History' in the Hong Kong School Curriculum," *Comparative Education* 38, no. 1 (2002): 75-6.

[20] "Form" referred to a year or class in a school. Forms One to Three (Years Seven to Nine) belonged to "junior forms", and Forms Four to Five (Years Ten to Eleven) belonged to "senior forms." Students completing Form Five would take the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination, which was equivalent to the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE); Edward Vickers, *In Search of an Identity: The Politics of History as a School Subject in Hong Kong, 1960s-2005* (Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Centre, HKU, 2005), 88-9; *Hong Kong English School Certificate Examinations 1963 & 1964: Regulations and Syllabuses* (Hong Kong: Government Printer, 1963), 21.

[21] *Wunianzhi Zhongwen zhongxue lishi kecheng gangyao jianyi* [Suggestions on the History Syllabus of the Five-Year Chinese Middle School Curriculum] (Hong Kong: Government Printer, 1962), 9; *Zhongwen zhongxue shijielishi kecheng gangyao jianyi* [Suggestions on the World History Syllabus of the Chinese Middle School Curriculum] (Hong Kong: Government Printer, 1969), 4.

[22] L. Mok, "The Proposed Syllabus for History in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education (English) Examination for 1970 with Special Reference to Multiple-choice Items of Contemporary History into the Syllabus," *History Bulletin* 3 (1969): 22.

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when the government first announced in 1970, it became the basis of the common syllabus for both Chinese and English schools in 1974. Hong Kong history continued to play no role in the new examination.

Deleting Hong Kong history from the curriculum was a political move. Existing archival evidence does not reveal the internal decision-making process. However, the Education Department publicly emphasised the need to avoid politics in history lessons during the 1960s. In 1964 the department stressed in the suggested history syllabus for English schools that "'Man, the adventurer' rather than 'Man, the politician' is the proper study of pupils in the early years of secondary school."[23] This line persisted in the new common syllabus for both Chinese and English schools in the 1970s.[24] Earlier in 1966, the department also told teachers to be careful in handling controversies. In an official publication *History Bulletin*, various inspectors of education answered queries from teachers. In response to a question regarding controversies, an (unnamed) inspector replied that teachers could allow students to be aware of the controversies and interpretations in different historical topics. However, teachers had "a duty to combat excessive nationalism and always to point out examples of this when found in textbooks."[25] History teachers during the 1960s, according to oral interviews by Edward Vickers, had limited freedom and "were not allowed to criticise the government."[26] This was a continuation of the education policy in the 1950s, which aimed at eliminating radical Chinese nationalisms (both Communist and Nationalist versions) in Hong Kong.[27]

The need to "depoliticise" the curriculum became more urgent in the late 1960s. Vickers has suggested that the anti-colonial climate of the 1970s was a possible reason for the curriculum changes.[28] As Michael Ng has shown, the colonial government was actively monitoring and containing anti-colonial and pro-China activism of university students, especially those under New Left groups.[29] Historian Steve Tsang's interviews with MacLehose authenticate Vickers' inference. Tsang asked why the government deleted British and Commonwealth history from syllabuses during the 1970s. MacLehose replied that teaching British history risked antagonising the people of Hong Kong, who largely recognised themselves as Chinese. He also believed that the promotion of British identity or Hong Kong's ties to Britain would not work in the colony.[30] Hong Kong history, which involved sensitive topics on colonialism and was largely associated with the British Empire in the old syllabus, disappeared as a result.

An Education Department officer once suggested re-introducing Hong Kong history in the syllabus during the late 1970s. His superior dismissed this suggestion without any explanation.[31] History teachers also called for the re-inclusion of Hong Kong history in the junior forms. They expressed to Education Department officers in 1972 that "some local history

[23] *Suggested Syllabus for History in Anglo-Chinese Secondary Schools (1964 Revised Edition)* (Hong Kong: Government Printer, 1964), 3.

[24] PRO, HKRS 1225-1-86, "Proposed Suggested Syllabus for History in Secondary School," enclosed in letter from Brown to Heads of all secondary schools/colleges and Principals, Colleges of Education, 29 November1973.

[25] "Questions and Answers," *History Bulletin* 1 (1966): 43.

[26] Vickers, *In Search of an Identity*, 103-4.

[27] Bernard Hung-Kay Luk, "Chinese Culture in the Hong Kong Curriculum: Heritage and Colonialism," *Comparative Education Review* 35, no. 4 (1991): 664-8.

[28] Vickers, *In Search of an Identity*, 88-9.

[29] Ng, *Political Censorship*, 145-9.

[30] Western Library, University of Oxford, MSS. Ind. Ocn. s. 377, Transcript of interviews with Murray MacLehose, 13 and 26 April 1989, 12-14 and 29 March 1991, 285-7.

[31] Edward Vickers, "The Politics of History Education in Hong Kong: The Case of Local History," *International Journal of Educational Research* 37 (2002): 595.

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and Southeast Asian history should be included."[32] The department later announced the proposed common syllabus for both Chinese and English schools in 1974. While the department stated in the document that teachers could include local history, it included neither topics on Hong Kong nor suggestions on how they could relate other topics to the colony.

Both C. J. Symons, Headmistress of the Diocesan Girls' Schools, and the history teacher L. So wrote to the department that the syllabus overemphasised European history while overlooking Hong Kong history.[33] The government did not respond favourably until the late 1980s, revealing how colonial control coexisted with reforms. In fact, back in 1965, teacher and author Gwenneth Stokes had cooperated with the Hong Kong government regarding the teaching of Hong Kong history. He produced a booklet *Hong Kong in History* and a radio programme on the colony's past from the Chinese, colonial, and local perspectives. More importantly, Stokes produced both items for schoolchildren.[34] Resources for the teaching of Hong Kong history had been available. Both local and expatriate teachers also realised that the teaching of local history could arouse student's interests in the subject. For instance, in the 1960s, local teachers publicly expressed that Hong Kong history, such as studies of local monuments, could "bring reality to [the] teaching of History" and rouse "curiosity" among the youth.[35] It was the political context that prevented the topic from appearing in official syllabuses. In other words, curriculum changes emerged as part of the wider political control in 1970s Hong Kong.

The HKU History Department

Historians at HKU promoted a localised history of Hong Kong vigorously during the 1970s and the 1980s. The field has been one of the department's research focuses since the 1950s.[36] During the 1970s, they held similar views as many schoolteachers, who hoped to promote local history that separated Hong Kong from the imperial framework. Economic and social historian Alan Birch established the Hong Kong History Workshop in 1974 to facilitate students' interest in local history. Birch and his colleagues introduced local history to their students via primary source analysis in both English and Chinese.[37] These historians also reached out to the community. Birch, for instance, sometimes appeared in the media and introduced aspects of Hong Kong history to the public.[38]

These academic efforts also trained numerous students who did Hong Kong history and eventually became history teachers. Some of them became officials in the Education

[32] PRO, HKRS 1225-1-86, "A Report on the History Seminar held on 18th and 19th July 1972 at Clementi Middle School," 15 August 1972.

[33] PRO, HKRS 1225-1-86, Letter from So and Symons to History Inspectorate, Education Department, 27 March 1974.

[34] Gwenneth Stokes, *Hong Kong in History* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Government Printer, 1965). The government later published a Chinese version in 1967.

[35] Betty Baptista, "First Form Methods," *History Bulletin* 1 (1966): 28; C. K. Leong, "To Test or Not to Test," *History Bulletin* 1 (1966): 14.

[36] "Department of History: Annual Report, 1958-1959," *History Society Annual* (1960): 48; "Department of History," *History Society Annual* (1963): 58-9; Lo Hsiang-lin of the Chinese Department also taught and published on local history during the 1950s and 1960s.

[37] A. Birch, "Teaching History in the Workshop," *History Society Annual* (1977): 1-5; A. Birch, "Hong Kong History Project 1982-3," *History Society Journal* (1981-3): 67-8; *History Handbook 1983-1984* (Hong Kong: History Department of the University of Hong Kong, 1983), 2.

[38] For instance, see "When HK's Future Hung in Balance," *South China Morning Post*, 16 September 1981, 2; Elizabeth Sinn, "The Study of Local History in Hong Kong: A Review," *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 34 (1994): 151.

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Department. For instance, HKU's History Department offered papers that aimed at examining Hong Kong history beyond the colonial lens from the early 1980s onwards.[39] The Education Faculty, with the efforts of Anthony Sweeting (who obtained his PhD in History at HKU), also required future teachers to acquire ways of teaching and promoting Hong Kong history.[40] These graduates became interested in the colony's past. Jane Cheng, an HKU graduate who later became an Inspector of History in the government, was a key actor in introducing Hong Kong history in the new syllabuses in the 1990s.[41]

The Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984 sparked off a shift in education policies and led to further cooperation between the colonial government and HKU's historians. As this document confirmed Hong Kong's impending return to China, local officials initiated a new wave of policies to prepare for the British retreat. During the final years of colonial rule, British officials in London and Hong Kong portrayed this forthcoming retreat as an "honourable" event with optimism. They emphasised British "achievements," such as free trade and the rule of law, in public occasions ranging from press conferences to radio broadcasts. The unwillingness to receive mass immigration of Hong Kong Chinese to the UK was one of their major concerns.[42] In November 1984, the History Subject Committee (which was responsible for drafting history syllabuses) had to discuss ways of incorporating "civic education" in history lessons.[43] The Education Department later stated in an internal report that "political changes" brought by the declaration would lead to an "increased demand for civic awareness."[44] Local history education was part of the department's response. In a series of *Guidelines on Civic Education*, the department suggested to schools that they introduce Hong Kong history to students. It hoped to instil a "sense of belonging" and "sense of duty" to Hong Kong students while enabling them to "appreciate the cultural heritage" of the colony. Other topics suggested in the guidelines included rights, freedom, and responsibilities of citizens, representative systems of liberal democracies, and various modes of participation in political affairs.[45] In other words, the colonial regime attempted to cultivate students' political consciousness only before its end. This was an effort to decolonise the curriculum by emphasising the people and their city, yet under the control of the colonial government.

The Education Department later explained the re-inclusion of Hong Kong history in the syllabus through its *History Newsletters*, a publication modelled on the *History Bulletins* of the late 1960s. In the inaugural issue, Jane Cheng pointed out the linkage between local history education and civic awareness: Studying local history "can enhance pupils' understanding of the local setting, enforce their sense of identity to the local community and activate the search for and interest in cultural heritage."[46] These *Newsletters* also revealed the government's change of attitude towards historians. Throughout the issues from 1989 to 1995, the Education Department invited historians from HKU to introduce sources on local history. For instance, Elizabeth Sinn, who had obtained all her degrees at HKU and became a

[39] *History Handbook 1982-83* (Hong Kong: HKU History Department, 1982), 15.

[40] HKU, Special Collections, "Postgraduate Certificate in Education: Major, The Methods of Teaching History," 19 May 1989.

[41] Kan and Vickers, "One Hong Kong, Two Histories," 77.

[42] Mark Hampton, *Hong Kong and British Culture, 1945–97* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 187-90.

[43] PRO, HKRS 1225-1-87, "C. D. C. History Subject Committee (Secondary) Minutes of the First Meeting 84/85," 30 November 1984.

[44] PRO, HKRS 2131-2-8, "Recent Changes in Hong Kong and their Implications on Curriculum Development," 17 December 1987.

[45] *Guidelines on Civic Education in Schools* (Hong Kong: Government Printer, 1985), 28-9, 38.

[46] Jane Chee-hing Cheng, "History: A New Perspective," *History Newsletter* 1 (1989): 18.

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member of the History Department, suggested in 1989 a variety of primary and secondary sources and introduced the works by her department.[47]

Sinn and Sweeting also contributed to the drafting of the new history syllabuses. They promoted critical approaches to the colony's past. They adopted local, rather than colonial perspectives and used this chance to include Hong Kong history in the official curriculum. Academic considerations were key in the first years. Sweeting consulted Sinn's opinion, and their academic judgements shaped part of the finalised syllabus. For instance, in 1990, Sinn stressed to Sweeting that students should not simply study Hong Kong from the local and Chinese perspectives but also from the regional and global frameworks.

> We would do well to avoid either studying Hong Kong only as local history or only in terms of Hong Kong and China. Hong Kong has always had regional and global relations, and we can see them in many had different contexts: with Southeast Asia, the Pacific Rim, as part of the British Empire, as part of the global world of Overseas Chinese, and of course the world in general.[48]

Sinn also believed that students could interrogate the Chineseness of Hong Kong. She reminded Sweeting that the topics on Hong Kong-China relations should not simply focus on how the country affected the colony but also vice versa. For instance, Hong Kong "had played, and does still an important role in China's modernization, in material, intellectual and technological terms."[49] Movements that took place in the colony also had "far-reaching consequences for China."[50] Students could also think about "how 'Chinese' Hong Kong is in terms of social and cultural practice and ideal," and "how Chinese customs and forms of social organization survive (or fail to survive) and adapt in colonial and cosmopolitan situations."[51] In other words, students should be critical of the Chinese dimension of Hong Kong history. This academic perspective of investigating Hong Kong's Chinese and global linkages entered the Sixth-form syllabus, which required students to study both Hong Kong's internal development and its relations with the "wider world."[52] The voices of unofficial actors, who were academics in this case, formed part of the official history after decades of efforts.

Reappearance of Hong Kong History

The Hong Kong government allowed the colony's history to reappear to meet its political needs. As the previous section explains, the government re-introduced Hong Kong history to prepare for 1997. At the same time, a trend of self-censorship prevailed among curriculum drafters and textbook authors. They omitted sensitive content that would either embarrass the colonial government or alarm the PRC government. Colonialism continued to be something precarious at the junior secondary levels, which was applicable to most schools in Hong Kong. Both the syllabus and textbooks avoided criticism against British colonialism. Officials in the Education Department believed that, because of the political climate of the 1990s and the fact they were still working under the British government,

[47] Elizabeth Sinn, "A Matter of Sources," *History Newsletter* 1 (1989): 20-8.

[48] Emphasis in original; HKU University Archives, Anthony Sweeting Papers, box 28, Letter from Sinn to Sweeting, 3 January 1990.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Students completing the Sixth-form education would take the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination, which was served as the university matriculation examination in the colony. Hong Kong history was one of the optional modules for students taking History; *Syllabus for Secondary Schools: History (Advanced Level)* (Hong Kong: Government Printer, 1992), 14-5.

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any evaluation of colonialism would be inappropriate.[53] In the early 1990s, the Education Department conducted a local history pilot project and produced curriculum packages for teachers to experiment with teaching of Hong Kong history. While the preparation involved academics, it was occasionally pro-colonial. For instance, the package for Form Three, which focused on the twentieth century, presented Hong Kong's recent past from the colonial perspective. Much of its content simply described official policies in housing, education, and social welfare after 1945.[54] It even attached an excerpt of the official annual report of 1967, which described how a "confrontation" began due to the Cultural Revolution in Hong Kong, how the majority supported the disciplined police in suppressing local communists, and how the colony maintained its stability despite of the violence.[55] The overall message for teachers was that the colonial government had been managing Hong Kong and its people well.

Syllabus drafters appeared to be neutral in their choice of words. For instance, in teaching the topic on nineteenth-century British administration, the document only reminded teachers that "the focus should be on political, social and economic changes in Hong Kong since 1842 up to the early twentieth century."[56] It did not require any assessment of colonial governance. The first batch of the new textbooks, published from 1998 to 2000, also contained oversimplified descriptions about British colonialism. The narratives were positive in a subtle way. For instance, the colonial government continued to appear as a provider of education, public housing, and other kinds of social welfare, while issues that can illustrate the problems of colonial rule seldom appeared.[57] One exception would be British discrimination against Chinese people. This biased narrative about British colonialism served as the basis of textbooks in the 2000s, which became even more pro-colonial.[58] For instance, one textbook published in 2007 guided students to reach the conclusion that Western education always triumphed over traditional Chinese education. In a section on education in nineteenth-century Hong Kong, Chinese education appeared to be only about "traditional Chinese literature and history" with expensive "school fees," while Western education allowed students to "learn everything... free of charge."[59]

Self-censorship also existed across the 1997 divide when it came to the PRC's official rhetoric. The term "colony" did not appear in the syllabus. The curriculum drafters followed the PRC's official line, which insisted that Hong Kong was never a colony. To the PRC, recognising Hong Kong as a former colony would legitimise the "unequal treaties" that the Qing court had signed with Britain in the nineteenth century. It would also mean that Britain once held the sovereignty of Hong Kong. After joining the United Nations in 1971, the PRC demanded that Hong Kong be removed from the list of colonies to show that it had

[53] Vickers, *In Search of an Identity*, 176.

[54] CUHK Chung Chi College Elisabeth Luce Moore Library, "Local History Package for Secondary 3: Sub-topic 3," 1990, 25.

[55] *Hong Kong Report for the Year 1967* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Government Press, 1968), 1-20.

[56] *Syllabus for Secondary Schools: History (Secondary I-III)* (Hong Kong: Government Printer, 1996), 18.

[57] For instance, see Wang Shuqin, *Chuansuo shijie lishi* [Shuttling through World History], vol. 3 (Hong Kong: Educational Publishing, 2001), 91-6; Gordon King and Kwok Tat-leung, *Exploring World History*, vol. 2B (Hong Kong: Lingkee Publishing, 1999), 156.

[58] Mark Hampton and Florence Mok have suggested that, in post-1997 Hong Kong, a new generation of Hong Kong people who had little (or no) personal memories of the British administration gradually turned to the colonial era for "a usable past," especially in protest discourses confronting the HKSAR and PRC governments. While their analysis focuses on protests in Hong Kong, it is also useful to contextualise the emergence of colonial nostalgia in the city. See Mark Hampton and Florence Mok, "Remembering British rule: The uses of colonial memory in Hong Kong protest movements, 1997–2019," in *Memory and Modern British Politics: Commemoration, Tradition, Legacy*, ed. Matthew Roberts (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 257-73.

[59] Nelson Y. Y. Kan, *Growth and Development of Hong Kong up to the Early 20th Century* (Hong Kong: Aristo Educational Press, 2007), 14-5.

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always possessed the city's sovereignty. Its official rhetoric was that China did not exercise this sovereignty and allowed Britain to keep the city for the time being. As Edward Vickers has argued, the "self-censorship" among curriculum developers and textbook publishers was a result of Beijing criticism. Stirring up further controversies would produce troubles for publishers in the textbook industry.[60] The finalised syllabus in Hong Kong followed this PRC rhetoric and did not describe Hong Kong as a "colony" at all.

The 1996 syllabus for junior forms and the new textbooks emphasised the Chinese nature of Hong Kong to an even greater extent. This trend could also be a response to Beijing's criticism against the Education Department's proposed syllabus. During the mid-1990s, the Education Department announced that they would include local history in the "History" syllabus, instead of the "Chinese History" one. This attracted criticism from the PRC, which would soon take over Hong Kong. In 1995 a Chinese official said that this decision was not "in tune" with the "principle" that Hong Kong was "part of the Chinese sovereignty."[61] Pro-Beijing press in Hong Kong followed this line and attacked the department.[62] Tension grew between Beijing and Hong Kong within the same year. The PRC's Preliminary Working Committee, headed by its Foreign Minister Qian Qichen to prepare for 1997 from the Chinese side, publicly expressed its disapproval of the new history syllabus. Committee members believed that Hong Kong history should be separated from world history and became part of Chinese history.[63] Hong Kong's Legislative Council member Cheung Man-kwong rebutted these claims. He accused the committee of infringing Hong Kong's autonomy. The Curriculum Development Council of Hong Kong, Cheng stressed, oversaw local syllabuses and the committee should not intervene the decision-making process. He also added that the committee might have broken the PRC's promises of maintaining Hong Kong's autonomy.[64] Publishers and some commentators thus doubted whether the new syllabus and the respective textbooks could be "transited" to Hong Kong's postcolonial era, as the new regime might impose another new curriculum.[65]

Their worries did not come true. The post-1997 government implemented the history syllabus. History textbooks approved before 1997 could also enter classrooms in the new era. Schoolteachers could freely adopt any of the officially endorsed textbooks. Nevertheless, the outcomes became more Chinese-oriented. Authors focused much more on the "Chineseness" of Hong Kong to ensure that their textbooks could smoothly enter classrooms after 1997. Form One students had to study the history of pre-colonial Hong Kong. The syllabus did not specify that they had to focus on the city's Chinese ties in this era. Examples of the sub-topics included "life of people in Hong Kong in pre-historic times," "the major groups and the great clans," and "life in the rural community."[66] However, the

[60] Vickers, *In Search of an Identity*, 178-9.

[61] PRO, HKRS 1174-1-22, "Xianagangshi jiuqihou bianru shishike zhongfang zhi bufu zhuquan huigui xianshi" [Hong Kong history will be included in the world history subject after 1997; the Chinese government pointed out that this does not conform to the fact of the retrocession of sovereignty], *Express*, 16 July 1995.

[62] Yang yaozhong, "Xianggangshi yinggui shijieshi ma?" [Should Hong Kong History Be Included in World History?], *Wen Wei Po*, 4 October 1995, D4.

[63] PRO, HKRS 1174-1-22, "Yuwei jianyi zhongshi lie bixiuke Xianggang lishi ying shoujin Zhongguoshi" [The Preliminary Working Committee Recommended that Chinese History Should be a Compulsory Subject, Hong Kong History Should be Included in Chinese History], *Sing Tao Daily*, 26 September 1995.

[64] Stella Lee, "PWC Move on History Rebuffed," *South China Morning Post*, 27 September 1995, 6; PRO, HKRS 1174-1-22, "Yuwei tan zhongshike he Xianggangshi Zhang wenguang zhi yuwei ganyu jiaoyu" [The Preliminary Working Committee Talked about the Chinese History Subject and Hong Kong History, Cheng Man-kwong Said the Committee Had Intervened Education] *Ming Pao*, 27 September 1995.

[65] PRO, HKRS 1174-1-22, "Xinding lishishu kongnan 'guodu' shushing danxin touzi xueben wugui" [New History Textbooks Might be Difficult to Undergo the Transition, Publishers Worried that They Might Lose All of the Money They had Invested], *Sing Tao Daily*, 1 November 1995.

[66] *Syllabus for Secondary Schools: History (Secondary I-III)*, 12.

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situation differed in the approved textbooks. They stressed that Hong Kong became part of China in ancient times, when the First Emperor of Qin unified China. For instance, the textbook published by the Aristo Educational Press (both the Chinese and English versions) stated that the "unification" of China in 221 BC by the Qin dynasty "ended Hong Kong's prehistory," and Hong Kong history started after "Hong Kong became a part of the Qin dynasty."[67] By emphasising how the notion of history began with the incorporation of Hong Kong into the Chinese civilisation, this textbook followed Beijing's narrative about China's timeless ownership of the city.[68]

Both the Aristo textbook and other texts, including those by the Hong Kong Educational Publishing and the Ling Kee Publishing, explained Hong Kong's ties to China during different dynasties. Examples included the Eastern Han tomb discovered in Hong Kong, the connection of Tuen Mun (a district of Hong Kong) to the Tang and Song courts, and the Song princes who fled to Kowloon.[69] They then explained how the people of Hong Kong originated from different parts of China, such as the Hakkas who came from Shandong and the Tankas who came from Guangdong and Fujian.[70] The Ling Kee version, meanwhile, has an additional section that showcases how Hong Kong's early industries were connected to the Chinese economy, such as incense and pottery production in the Ming dynasty.[71]

Textbooks for Form Two students emphasised the roles of Chinese elites in Hong Kong. The syllabus required students to study the "role played by the Chinese" under the topic "British administration since 1842."[72] All textbooks devoted paragraphs to introduce Ng Choy, the first Chinese member of the Legislative Council, and Chow Shouson, the first Chinese member of the Executive Council.[73] Some textbooks also explained how the British and colonial government racially discriminated against the Chinese. For instance, the textbook published by Macmillan stated:

> The British administration generally thought that:
> - the Chinese were disobedient and so they were not ready for self-government;
> - the Chinese would not understand the workings of Western-style government; and
> - greater freedom would make Hong Kong unstable.
>
> The British Government therefore decided not to give the Chinese a share in the administration of the territory.[74]

[67] Nelson Y. Y. Kan, *Journey Through History: A Modern Course*, vol. 1 (Hong Kong: Aristo Educational Press, 1998), 30.

[68] As Edward Vickers has described, Beijing used archaeology to "assert China's timeless unity" and stress that Hong Kong has been "part of the Great Chinese National Family" since the Qin and Han dynasties; see Vickers, *In Search of an Identity*, 215-6.

[69] Kan, *Journey Through History*, vol. 1, 31-33; Wang Shuqin, *Chuansuo shijieshi* [Shuttling Through World History], vol. 1 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Educational Publishing, 1998), 33-34; Gordon King and Frank Owen, *Exploring World History*, vol. 1A (Hong Kong: Ling Kee Publishing, 1998), 34.

[70] Kan, *Journey Through History*, vol. 1, 33; Wang, *Chuansuo shijieshi*, vol. 1, 36-37; King and Owen, *Exploring World History*, vol. 1A, 35.

[71] King and Owen, *Exploring World History*, vol. 1A, 41.

[72] *Syllabus for Secondary Schools: History (Secondary I-III)*, 18.

[73] Nelson Y. Y. Kan, *Journey Through History: A Modern Course*, vol. 2 (Hong Kong: Aristo Educational Press, 1999), 151; Wang Shuqin, *Chuansuo shijie lishi* [Shuttling through World History], vol. 2 (Hong Kong: Educational Publishing, 2001), 165; Albino C. Morales, *The Story of Mankind, Book 2: Transition to Modern Times* (Hong Kong: Macmillan, 1999), 121; King and Owen, *Exploring World History*, vol. 2B, 157.

[74] Morales, *The Story of Mankind*, 120.

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Meanwhile, the textbook by the Educational Publishing stated that:

> In the early days, foreigners took up most of the positions in the ruling class of Hong Kong, while the Chinese, who formed the majority of the population, were being excluded from the legislative and executive branches for a long time. This reflects the discrimination against them under British rule.[75]

It also pointed out the growing importance of the Chinese elite during the nineteenth century and the corruption of the colonial police force.[76] The description not only pointed out the problems of early colonial governance but could also stimulate Chinese nationalistic sentiments against the British. Considering the colonial control over history teaching since the 1960s, this change was unprecedented. The coexistence of pro-colonial and Chinese national perspectives signified that, instead of having one dominate narrative, both forces occupied a share in the epistemological territory regarding historical knowledge. The historians' claims to epistemological sovereignty remained limited, as they became overshadowed by the colonial and Chinese politics.

Students continued to study Hong Kong's connection to China in Form Three. The final section of the syllabus required students to study Hong Kong's relationship with mainland China during the twentieth century. Sub-topics included "Hong Kong and the 1911 Revolution," "China's contribution to the development of Hong Kong," and "transition to a Special Administrative Region."[77] The textbooks went further. They presented students with extra content illustrating the close ties between Hong Kong and mainland China. The additional events include the Strike-boycott of 1925, the anti-Japanese movement in the 1930s, and China's beneficial policies to Hong Kong during the Reform and Opening-up.[78] The textbooks devoted pages to portray the transition as a smooth process during the 1980s and 1990s. They also listed various promises the PRC made concerning the future of Hong Kong. Claims such as "local people would live the same life as before," "Hong Kong's social and economic systems [would remain] unchanged for fifty years," and "Hong Kong would not implement socialist systems and policies" appeared in all textbooks.[79] The authors also portrayed the retrocession of 1997 as a moment of celebration. Worries, fear, and the crisis of confidence over Hong Kong's future, especially after the Tiananmen Square Massacre on 4 June 1989 and the crackdown on the prodemocracy demonstrations in Beijing, had nowhere to exist.[80]

Conclusion

Politics surrounding the Chinese and British colonial governments led to a contest for epistemological territory in Hong Kong. On the one hand, colonial administrators controlled history curricula from the 1970s to the 1990s to serve its political needs. Hong Kong history disappeared from official curricula during the 1970s-80s, and it portrayed British colonialism in a subtly positive manner when it reappeared in the 1990s. On the other hand, the PRC pressured curriculum drafters and textbook publishers during the 1990s, leading to waves of self-censorship and textbooks that conformed to the official Chinese rhetoric. Beijing's

[75] Wang, *Chuansuo shijieshi*, vol. 2, 165.

[76] Ibid., 165, 168.

[77] *Syllabus for Secondary Schools: History (Secondary I-III)*, 21.

[78] Nelson Y. Y. Kan, *Journey Through History: A Modern Course*, vol. 3 (Hong Kong: Aristo Educational Press, 2000), 99-101; Wang, *Chuansuo shijieshi*, vol. 3, 100-4; Gordon King and Frank Owen, *Exploring World History*, vol. 3 (Hong Kong: Ling Kee Publishing, 2000), 83-88.

[79] Kan, *Journey Through History*, vol. 3, 102-6; Wang, *Chuansuo shijieshi*, vol. 3, 105-6.

[80] See Carroll, *A Concise History*, 190-4.

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accusation that Hong Kong history should not appear in the "world history" subject and the idea that Hong Kong history began with the Qin unification illustrate the Chinese intervention of this era. Instead of having one dominant narrative, the colonial and Chinese influences coexisted in the syllabuses and textbooks. What guided the writing and rewriting of the past was Hong Kong's political future. Instead of serving as narratives for a postcolonial independent nation, historical writings in Hong Kong aimed to prepare the colony for its transferral from the British coloniser to the Chinese regime. Colonial administrators introduced a sanitised version of Hong Kong history, while the PRC was injecting accounts that were "politically correct" in mainland China.

This censorship did not mean that unofficial actors had no role in writing the past. From the mid-twentieth century onwards, HKU scholars sought to promote the history from a critical perspective. They cultivated teachers and officials which helped promote Hong Kong history in later decades. However, their activities also illustrate their limited agency. Despite their pioneer role in claiming epistemological territory in Hong Kong, they only received a favourable response from the colonial government in the late 1980s, when officials hoped to utilise local history to prepare for the retrocession. Even though academic voices partially entered the syllabuses, they remained foreclosed overall. Locally trained historians never had any chance to fully claim the epistemological territory in Hong Kong precisely because of the impossibility of achieving independence. Overall, this article has presented the unique case of decolonisation in Hong Kong, which never became independent. This knowledge production resulted in "partially undecoloinsed history" not because of the historians' training but how the Chinese and colonial governments concurrently attempted to establish their foothold in Hong Kong's epistemological territory.

The historical narrative we can see today resulted from both forces during the colony's complex decolonisation. Pro-colonial description examined above persisted in history textbooks during the early 2000s. The self-censorship among publishers in the 1990s gradually evolved to become official censorship. A year after the retrocession in 1998, the Curriculum Development Institute of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government issued a definitive list of terminologies that textbook authors should follow. Regarding the term "colony," authors had to use it with "quotation marks" or italics. They might also provide the "historical background" of how Hong Kong became removed from the list of colonies in the United Nations.[81] More than two decades later, in 2022, the HKSAR government adopted a tougher stance after suppressing the pro-democratic movement. Textbooks for the new subject "Citizenship and Social Development" could no longer describe Hong Kong as a British colony. They had to emphasise how China never recognised the "unequal treaties" that ceded Hong Kong to Britain during the nineteenth century. In this regard, the HKSAR government successfully "decolonised" Hong Kong history by deleting the term "colony" from its official rhetoric. Yet, the censored past of Hong Kong that originated in the late colonial era continues to exist. The Chinese foothold in the epistemological territory of Hong Kong also persists.

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[81] Vickers, *In Search of an Identity*, 180.

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