

BOOKS

The Fall of Colonial Hong Kong

Hong Kong's History of Racial Tension

By MISHI SARAN

British Hong Kong had been a long time dying," writes Philip Snow in his book, "The Fall of Hong Kong" (Yale University Press, \$35), which zooms in on the period between 1941 and 1945 — when the Japanese snatched the territory from British rule. Although the British did return to govern after the war, Mr. Snow sees the Japanese occupation as launching the slow death of Britain's hold over Hong Kong.

Finally, here is a solid history of Hong Kong under the Japanese, written with empathy and skill, and filled with choice detail. According to Mr. Snow, fellow Asians hated the Japanese. At the same time, the Japanese occupation "dealt a mortal blow to the prestige of the whites." The book thus implies not only that the history of Hong Kong is the story of race relations, but that to stay in power, the victor needs the coop-

erated the obvious with such lucidity before. Mr. Snow maintains that ethnic suspicions helped fuel Britain's road to defeat as the Japanese invasion loomed in 1941. The British were uncomfortable with offers of help from the Chinese Nationalists on the mainland. Nor were the British willing to galvanize the local Hong Kong Chinese against the Japanese, although their Chinese subjects would have been natural allies. Why? They simply could not trust the Chinese.

Hong Kong's fall was followed by Singapore, in February 1942. Watching from the mainland, Madame Chiang Kai-shek penned a trenchant article in the New York Times. "During the last three months the Chinese people have watched with amazement the spectacle of Western armies surrendering because, it was explained, of Japan's superior might." Mr. Snow demonstrates that this was a pivotal point, as nationalist leaders for the first time

ing Eurasians like Sir Robert Kotewall who previously helped the British govern Hong Kong, quickly switched sides to support the Japanese, attending banquets and making speeches to the "glory of the Imperial army." One Japanese official even commented on how leading citizens were drawn to "whoever was in authority."

This same pragmatic attitude of Hong Kong's well-heeled non-British gentry toward their new Japanese rulers in 1942 strikes a recognizable note for anybody who watched Hong Kong return to Chinese rule in 1997. We also learn that Hong Kong's gift of sniffing out business opportunities in spite of adversity is not new. In 2003, during the outbreak of SARS, manufacturers churned out decorated face masks to turn a quick profit. This mirrors a period during the Japanese occupation when local Chinese traders hoarded their stocks of firewood, food, tobacco and soap to nudge the prices and profit upwards. In this sense, Mr. Snow's book sheds light on today's Hong Kong, and should be required reading for anyone living there.

Mr. Snow's book is also valuable in that it gives a more nuanced view of Hong Kong's history. He comments that, "the Chinese sources focus on the terrible suffering, they tend to portray the Japanese as uniformly fiendish."

His book digs a little deeper, noting that the Japanese recruited many more Chinese into Hong Kong's administration than the British ever had; they created district assemblies that allowed a much broader popular representation. Simultaneously, the Japanese made sure the 10,000-odd British and Canadian prisoners of war were publicly humiliated. Some of the allied captives had to bow to the Hong Kong Chinese citizens, or pull rickshaws with Indians or Chinese in the passenger seats. "Once again every opportunity was taken to drive home the message that the ethnic tables had turned," Mr. Snow writes.

After Japan was defeated, the British attempted to restore the colonial order in Hong Kong under the shaky British Military Administration (BMA) headed by David MacDougall who flew

into Hong Kong on Sept. 25. Suddenly, it was much harder to get back to old colonial ways.

Changes were almost inevitable, with a few bumps in the road. Mr. Snow writes that somebody whispered into MacDougall's ear, "You know, Hong Kong is very much needed. Somebody takes care of the houses and all the big cars. After the war Asians were finally allowed to live on Victoria's Peak, a prime Hong Kong real estate. In 1947, Hong Kong became the first Hong Kong allowed to join the Privy Council. Jardine Matheson, Hong Kong's largest firm, no longer tolerated bad British behavior. When 10,000 villagers were displaced for an airport project, the present eviction notices back to Hong Kong or turned to Canton for lead-

The post-war reform drive was not last very long, and British rule returned quickly enough: Mr. Snow applying for a job as a secretary in Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank in 1956 was told that Chinese were taken on as janitors. Nevertheless, Britain never regained its prewar control over Hong Kong, particularly in the arena. Much of the business property was evacuated after the war, and the Hong Kong Chinese, who came back in their tens of thousands, made efforts to kick-start the colonial business life won the admiration of observers," writes Mr. Snow.

Mr. Snow has produced a nuanced picture of those years, told from different angles. Mr. Snow reads Chinese. He also interviews Japanese sources with the help of a translator and then double-checks the translations. He interviews people who lived through that historical period, Chinese and Japanese, and their diaries of those who had written during that period. As a result, he succeeded — through 350 pages and over 1,600 footnotes — in subduing the demon of overt bias. This is a feat.

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The British Mr. Snow has a wiry build, unruly thinning hair and square glasses. His understated, precise manner defines the word professorial, although he is careful to stress that he is not an academic. "This period was written overwhelmingly from the point of view of the British," Mr. Snow said in a recent interview. "I have tried to redress that balance . . . I was anxious to be fair to everybody, it is part of the reason why the book took so long." Mr. Snow's daughter was born as he began to research the book, and by the time he finished, she was helping with the index.

The book so clearly illustrates Asia's delicate racial hierarchy of race, and its decisive role in the region's history, that it's a mystery why nobody has

dared to launch a formal diplomatic campaign to induce Britain to relinquish its rights in Hong Kong.

Furthermore, Hong Kong's stiff colonial order collapsed under the Japanese occupation. "All the neat ethnic barriers of the pre-war decades had dissolved in the new mixture of chaos and deliberate Asianization. With the bulk of their maids and 'boys' put to flight by the conquest the surviving memsahibs were forced to squeeze in among the crowds in Queen's Road Central and buy their own groceries from the proliferating hawker stalls," writes Mr. Snow.

The Japanese brought with them a vigorous pan-Asian, anti-British agenda. And Hong Kong proved to be extremely pragmatic. Almost unanimously, the Hong Kong gentry, includ-

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Changes were almost immediate, with a few bumps in the road. Mr. Snow writes that somebody whispered into MacDougall's ear, "You know, being reoccupied is very much like being occupied. Somebody takes all the big houses and all the big cars." Still, after the war Asians were finally allowed to live on Victoria's Peak, a prime piece of Hong Kong real estate. In late 1945, a Eurasian became the first Hong Konger allowed to join the Private Office of Jardine Matheson. Hong Kong Chinese no longer tolerated bad British behavior. When 10,000 villagers were to be displaced for an airport project, they sent eviction notices back torn in half, or turned to Canton for leadership.

The post-war reform drive did not last very long, and British snootiness returned quickly enough: A woman applying for a job as a secretary at the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank as late as 1956 was told that Chinese were only taken on as janitors there. Nevertheless, Britain never really regained its prewar control of Hong Kong, particularly in the economic arena. Much of the business community was evacuated after the war. "It was the Hong Kong Chinese, streaming back in their tens of thousands, whose efforts to kick-start the colony's business life won the admiration of outside observers," writes Mr. Snow.

Mr. Snow has produced a multi-layered picture of those years, taken from different angles. Mr. Snow speaks and reads Chinese. He also consulted Japanese sources with the help of a dictionary and then double-checked the translations. He interviewed people who lived through that history, British, Chinese and Japanese, and read the diaries of those who had written about that period. As a result, he has often succeeded — through 350 pages and over 1,600 footnotes — in subduing the demon of overt bias. This is no mean feat.