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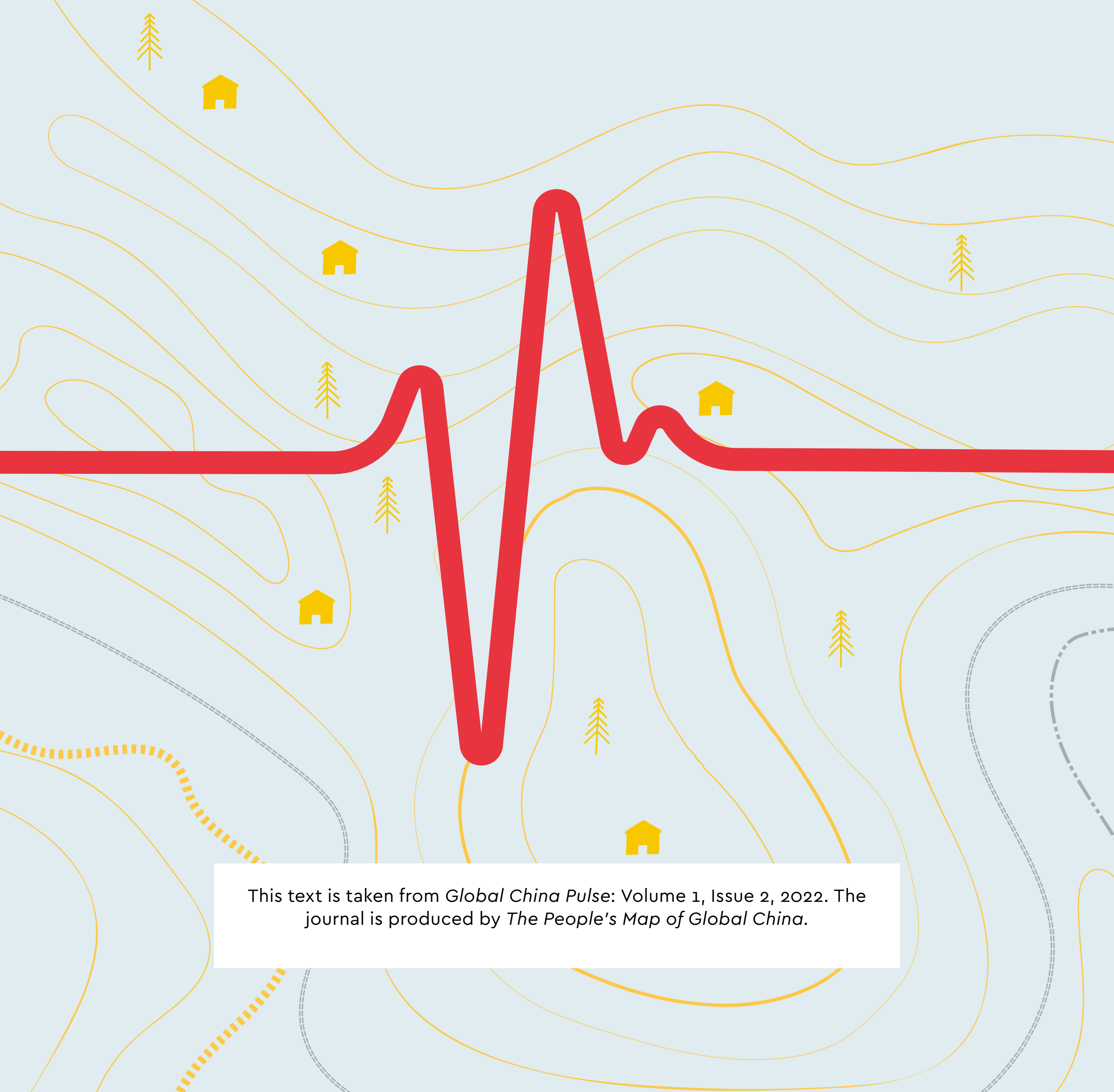

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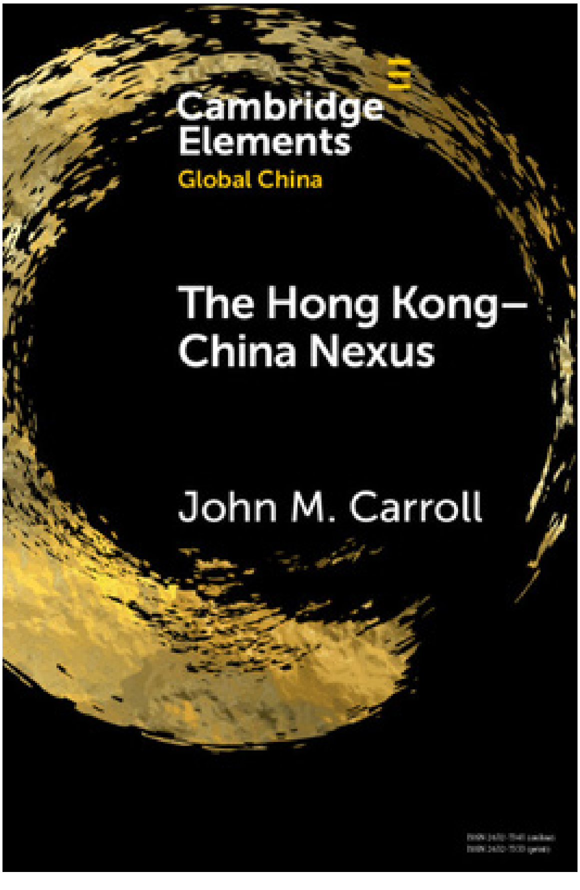


Cambridge Elements
Global China

The Hong Kong–China Nexus

John M. Carroll

The Hong Kong–China Nexus: A Conversation with John Carroll

Denise Y. Ho,
John Carroll

How do we understand the trajectory of Hong Kong's relationship with China? In *The Hong Kong–China Nexus* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), John Carroll—one of the foremost historians working on Hong Kong today—introduces the fateful history of the city, from its establishment as a British colony to its status as one of China's Special Administrative Regions. As he points out, Hong Kong was a node in many networks: within the British Empire, connected to China's treaty ports, enmeshed in US trading networks and paths of immigration, and with Southeast Asia, Japan, and Taiwan. Drawing on decades of research, Carroll in this book focuses on the most central nexus: that between Hong Kong and China.

Denise Y. Ho: The title of your book refers to what you term the Hong Kong–China nexus, which is a relationship of mutual benefit—economic, political, social, and cultural—that has relied on a porous boundary. Would you tell us more about how you decided to frame your book in this way?

John Carroll: When Ching Kwan Lee invited me to contribute a volume to her new Cambridge Elements series, she suggested doing something on the 'Hong Kong–China nexus'. That was back in 2019, when Hong Kong was in the throes of its worst political crisis ever. The first topic that came to mind was how the relationship between Hong Kong and China had been so good before 1997, and how ironic that seemed, especially within the contexts of British imperial history and modern Chinese history. It was something I had been thinking about for several years, as reintegration since 1997 appeared on the one hand to be so smooth and successful, yet on the other hand to be so fragile and problematic.

DYH: That is really fascinating. Could you give us an example of those fragilities and problems? When did they become evident, and in what ways?

JC: They became evident soon after 1997, starting with the right-of-abode controversy in 1999—when the new Legislative Council issued ordinances making it more difficult for mainland Chinese to apply for permanent residency—and then with the SARS [Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome] fiasco in 2003, which made many Hong Kong people lose faith in both the Hong Kong Government and the Chinese Government, and which caused the Hong Kong Government to drop a proposed anti-sedition bill endorsed by Beijing and in accordance with the Basic Law and led the Chinese Government to intervene more directly in local affairs. And it is telling that 1 July became an annual day for protest in 1998, only one year after reunification.

DYH: In the introduction to the book, you suggest that 'the region is as much a part of British imperial history as it is of Chinese history' (p. 3). What does Hong Kong history—a subject you have taught in Hong Kong for many years—tell us about the British Empire? And about the story of modern China?

JC: Since coming to the University of Hong Kong (HKU) in 2006, I have been fortunate enough to teach, in Hong Kong, courses on modern Hong Kong history and on the British Empire. Believe it or not, the first iterations of the British Empire course barely dealt with Hong Kong, my (rather fuzzy) logic being that the students would get the Hong Kong part in the Hong Kong history course. That was a mistake and I revised the course several years ago, trying to mention Hong Kong throughout and devoting the 'end of empire' lecture to Hong Kong.

Being a British colony for more than 150 years of course automatically makes Hong Kong part of British imperial history. And the history of the British Empire certainly helps us understand the history of Hong Kong. But my sense is that Hong Kong does not necessarily tell us a lot about the British Empire, partly because, when all is said and done, Hong Kong was in many ways an outlier. The British encountered almost no resistance when they first occupied Hong Kong Island in January 1841. In fact, they found no shortage of Chinese helpers. There was only one (still one too many!) massacre during the colonial period: in April 1899, when the British formally occupied the New Territories. There were no famines like those in India. And whereas many colonies (British or otherwise) were in dire shape economically when they became independent, Hong Kong's gross domestic product per capita was higher than that of Britain, Australia, and Canada when it was returned to China in 1997.

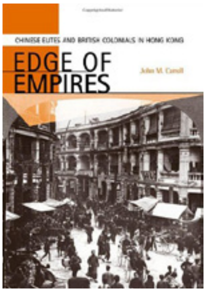
As for the story of modern China, when I started my PhD research almost 30 years ago, it was in modern Chinese history. Nothing could have been further from my mind than tiny Hong Kong, despite my having grown up here. I honestly cannot remember how I started reading about Hong Kong, though it was within the context of treaty port culture and China's encounters with the West. In my PhD thesis, which became my first book, *Edge of Empires: Chinese Elites and British Colonials in Hong Kong* (Harvard University Press, 2005), I argued that one reason Chinese business and professional elites did so well in Hong Kong was because they were not in China 'proper', and that Hong Kong's success was in many ways China's failure to provide a secure and stable business environment. We might also consider how many modern 'Chinese' business practices and institutions, such as department stores, started in Hong Kong and were then imported into mainland China. But the book on why scholars of Chinese history need to know about Hong Kong history has yet to be written.

DYH: Among the themes that reappear in this book are the elements of Hong Kong history that have disappeared from public view, including, as you just mentioned, the Six Day War of 1899. The topic of history also reappears when you discuss education over the decades, from the place of Chinese history in 1952 to more recent debates about 'national security education'. You have written about and taught the subject of museum history in Hong Kong. Why is historical narrative so important to our understanding of the Hong Kong–China nexus?

JC: I am not sure if historical narrative is any more important for the Hong Kong–China nexus than it is for any historical experience. What is important here, however, is how this narrative is now being shaped very quickly to fit new political needs and realities. School textbooks, for example, will no longer refer to pre-1997 Hong Kong as a 'colony', instead claiming that Hong Kong was only under 'colonial rule'. The removal in December 2021 and January 2022 of statues and sculptures commemorating the Tiananmen Massacre from four local universities were efforts to erase the history of Hong Kong's commemoration of Tiananmen. Narratives in museums, too, are also changing, though exactly how that will play out remains to be seen.

DYH: You write in the book that 'many Hong Kong people today forget the role China played in Hong Kong's modernization' (p. 53). Why is this? Is it because Hong Kong identity is bound up in the idea of distinctiveness, or is it something else?

JC: Yes, Hong Kong identity, as anywhere, is very much based on distinctiveness—in this case, especially against Chineseness on the mainland. This is hardly new and, in *Edge of Empires*, I traced it back to the late nineteenth century, arguing that the porous nature of the border between Hong Kong and China increased



The Reasons for Hong Kong's Success

Edge of Empires: Chinese Elites and British Colonials in Hong Kong (Harvard University Press, 2005) a sense of localness, at least for Hong Kong Chinese elites. This localness became even stronger after 1949, but it has grown far more intense with reintegration since 1997. I am not at all sure many Hong Kong people are willing to accept how much China contributed to Hong Kong's modernisation starting in the late 1970s, partly because it does not jibe well with the idea of Hong Kong being such a special place.

DYH: You were present during the recent years of protest in Hong Kong, including the 2019 Anti–Extradition Bill protests. You chose to illustrate these events with a pamphlet aimed at travellers. Will you tell us more about the artwork and public messaging around the protests?

JC: The airport posters and pamphlets are only one small part of those created during the 2019 protests. But as someone who is now working on the history of Hong Kong tourism, I found them particularly intriguing. Travel and airports in Hong Kong (both Kai Tak, the old airport, and Chek Lap Kok, the current one) have long been symbols of mobility and modernity, and a symbol of hope, especially in terms of emigration. There has always been a contrast with the rail border crossing, which only meant entering and leaving mainland China. A modern international airport often signified what Hong Kong had and the mainland lacked, though of course this is different now with all the high-speed railways and new airports in the mainland.

The airport protests were a way for the protesters to take their case to the world (literally). The protesters tried to pressure the Hong Kong Government by gaining the attention of tourists. They knew the airport was a safe zone where the police could not use tear gas or pepper spray. The airport was also a symbolic space, representing both Hong Kong's modernity and openness but also the state. The protesters even acted as a kind of unofficial tourist association to help explain their cause, but also to counter the official image of Hong Kong and to show what kind of place they believed Hong Kong was becoming.

DYH: In your conclusion, you provide an answer to many people who have asked about the fate of Hong Kong as 'Asia's World City'. You suggest that Hong Kong will remain 'a thriving metropolis, a vibrant financial center, and a gateway for China and the rest of the world' (p. 74). At the same time, you assert that 'this is likely to be the end of a relationship between Hong Kong and China that endured for more than 150 years' (p. 74). You go on to say that the city will not be a site of political reform or of protest. Reflecting on your definition of the 'Hong Kong–China nexus', is this also history?

JC: Yes, this reform and protest component of the Hong Kong–China nexus will indeed be history. I doubt we will ever see such a nexus again, though I will be happy to be proven wrong.

DYH: Your remarks have made me think a lot about the future of Hong Kong history. Accounts of the protests by social scientists have brought new energy to the study of Hong Kong as a contemporary society. What is next for Hong Kong history?

JC: There is more to Hong Kong history than protests, of course, but the events of the past few years have certainly created a huge interest in Hong Kong history both here and overseas. Courses on Hong Kong history in our universities have become immensely popular, and at HKU we have a new MA program in Hong Kong history that is drawing students from here and from the mainland. Hong Kong has long been a research subject in Japan, and new centres and programs focusing on Hong Kong are opening in Britain, Europe, and North America. But academia is not the only place for doing Hong Kong history. Local historical tourism is thriving. We have seen a flourishing of walking tours, for example, and websites devoted to promoting Hong Kong history. There have also been some interesting corporate–state–civil society initiatives to interpret and preserve Hong Kong's heritage. Even if I am not so optimistic about the future of some aspects of the Hong Kong–China nexus, I have no doubt that interest in Hong Kong history will continue to grow. ●