

An Introduction to Hong Kong, Britain, and China, Part II: 1965-1993

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Image – A clipping from *Ta Kung Pao* showing people from Canton, Shumchun and Macao giving their support to the Kong Kong leftist rioters. January 1-December 31, 1967. MS Commonwealth Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office: Hong Kong Departments: Registered Files, Hong Kong, British Honduras, British Indian Ocean Territories and the Seychelles FCO 40/113. The National Archives (Kew, United Kingdom)

Strong Support from Canton · Shumchun · Macao

'Down with the British imperialists!' is the main slogan in the rallies held in Canton recently for 5 consecutive days. A total of about 800,000 people took part.

The forceful demonstration in Canton staged by men of the Peoples' Liberation Army of the Canton Military Region, and the firm support they extended to their compatriots in Hongkong, greatly encouraged all the patriotic Chinese in Hongkong in their struggle against British imperialists.



Young Chinese in Macao went to the British consulate there to lodge their strong protests with the British consul, Norman Ions (left, lowering his head). They were orderly, and were only armed with the red book 'Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung'.



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Until 1997, Hong Kong was one of the last territories in a once-vast British Empire. From 1997, Hong Kong, a global city with a degree of autonomy, was governed by a twenty-first century superpower. For global and world historians, therefore, the FCO 40 and FC 021 series—contained in Gale’s digital archive collection titled *China and the Modern World: Hong Kong, Britain, and China Part 2, 1965-1993*—are extremely valuable; for historians of late twentieth-century Britain and China they are indispensable.

As explored in this cover essay, these series, released under changing [British laws of disclosure](#), enable historians to write accounts of:

- [Sino-British Relations \(and the Cold War in Asia\)](#),
- [Hong Kong’s Public Administration, and](#)
- [Socio-economic and Cultural Changes in Hong Kong](#).¹

This essay begins by classifying the documents in the files and then elaborates upon the above fields.

Document Types

For those that are unfamiliar with British government records, it needs to be recognised that these files were created by civil servants based in London working for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). The FCO was a powerful department of the British state headed by a high-ranking politician, the Foreign Secretary, who was just behind the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of Exchequer in terms of status. The Prime Minister of an incumbent government would appoint the Foreign Secretary (and other politicians as sub-ministers), and those heading the department changed reasonably regularly, with civil servants providing continuity across elected governments.

The FCO formulated British foreign policy and offered guidance to the Governor of Hong Kong, with the files in this collection deriving from a unit that specialised in Hong Kong affairs ([see the FCO 40 descriptor](#)) and from one which had expertise in

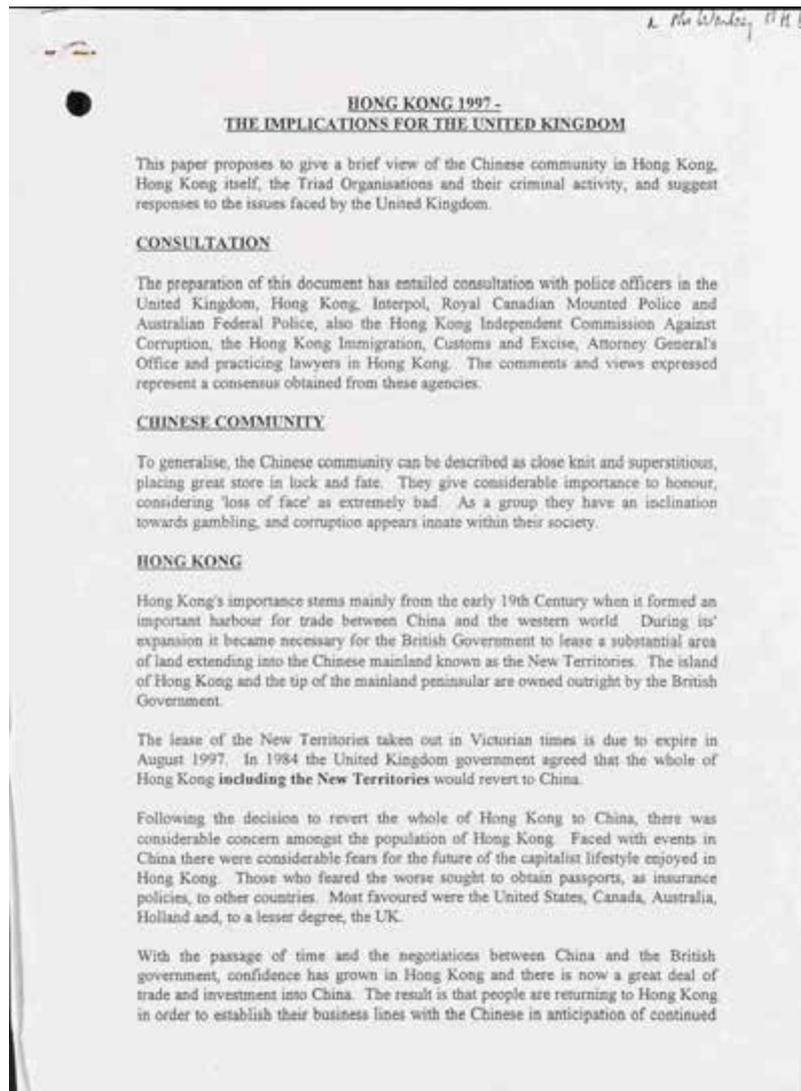
¹ See Steve Tsang, ‘Modern Hong Kong’, Tsang, *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Asian History* (Oxford University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.013.280>.

UK relations with what was then called the Far East [\[see FCO 21 descriptor\]](#). The information contained in these files can be used to capture **metropolitan perspectives** and **Hong Kong insights**.

Metropolitan Perspectives

Metropolitan perspectives can be found in the following types of documents:

- Hand-written and typed minutes record how a bureaucratic elite thought through diplomatic problems—including how to initiate negotiations with the Chinese People’s Government (CPG) on Hong Kong’s status post-1997 and how to manage the backlash against Hong Kong’s export growth which adversely affected UK relations with the US, Europe and the Commonwealth from the mid 1950s. Typically, these minutes reveal how UK policy goals traded-off Hong Kong’s political autonomy.
- Position papers were written in London, sometimes with input from other departments of state such as the Ministries of Defence, Health, Technology, Transport and the Home Office, and Board of Trade; FCO files also contain reports written by other UK agencies (see, for example, FCO 40/3902, which includes a UK police report on organised crime). Some of these papers were presented to the Prime Minister and/or the Cabinet. Files on the ‘Future of Hong Kong’ post-1997 cluster in the mid-1970s; in the late-1970s—that is, in the run up to Governor Murray MacLehose’s visit to Beijing in 1979 (see FCO 40/1058-1061: Future of Hong Kong: New Territory Leases, 1979); and before the 1984 Joint Declaration (see FCO 40/1546-58).



[Hong Kong 1997-The Implications for the United Kingdom \(FCO 40/3902/0010\).](#)

- Letters received from UK and international organisations and from individuals with interests in Hong Kong affairs; responses to parliamentary questions and reports on parliamentary debates (notably on future of Hong Kong in 1984: FCO 40/1736-1740); briefs for visits by FCO officials, FCO ministers and MPs to Hong Kong; and reports on their visits.

Hong Kong Insights

These refer to information created by those living in Hong Kong communicated to the FCO via:

- Telegrams, facsimiles and letters which reveal the views of high-ranking bureaucratic elites, such as the Governor or senior officials working within the Government Secretariat; see, for instance, documents written by 'the

political adviser' in FCO 21/541. The attitudes of these elites were informed by ad hoc encounters between officials and social elites, by scientific polling and routine analysis of Hong Kong newspapers.² These communications also relayed messages from representatives of the CPG.

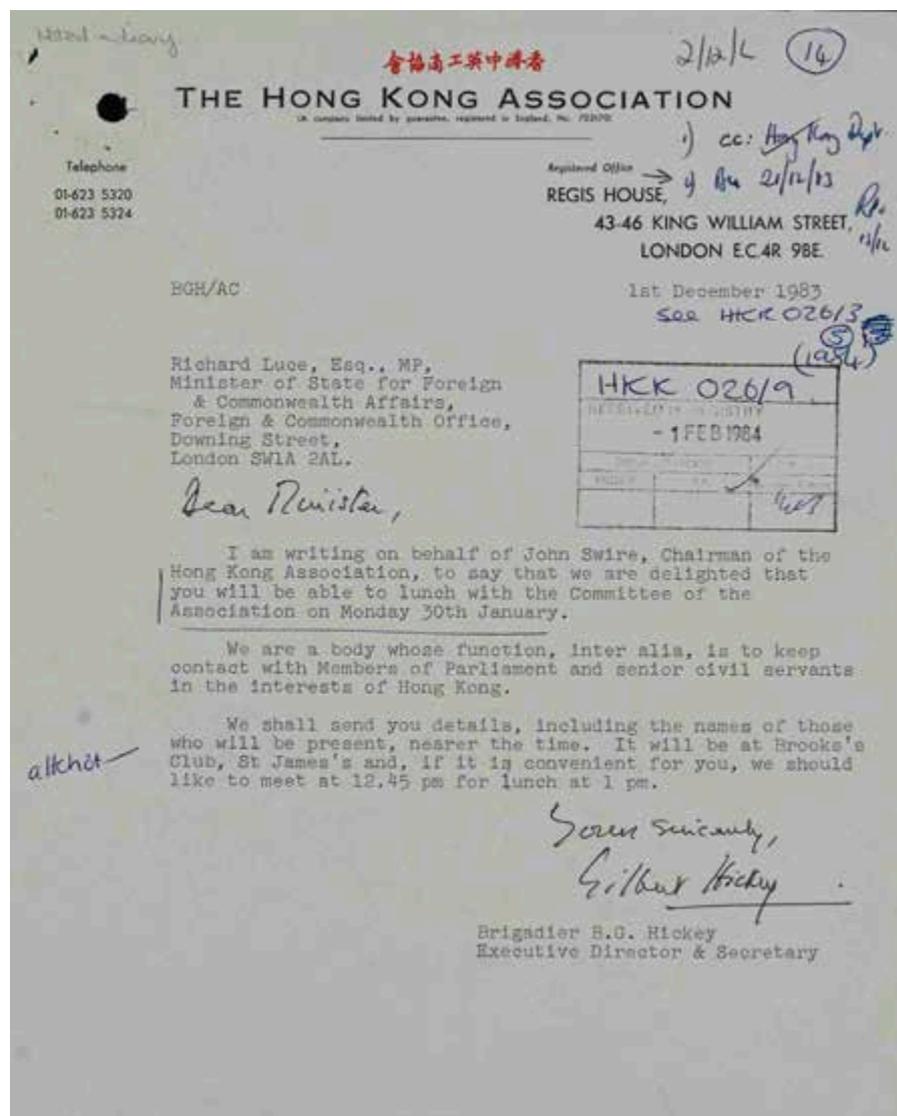
- A diverse range of unpublished reports, from, *inter alia*:
 - (i) Branches of the Hong Kong government—such as economic or social services/housing/lands and works/education/city and New Territories/security/home affairs/councils and administration—detailing progress with legislation, the take up of socio-political entitlements (including to vote), infrastructure projects and community-liaison schemes (see, for example, FCO 40/1419);
 - (ii) Executive Council minutes and memorandum;
 - (iii) Security and legal advisers commenting on, for example, prosecutions for public order offences including against pro-democracy activists (FCO 40/2852); and emigration statistics (FCO 40/4225);
 - (iv) Special Branch of the Hong Kong Police on anti-colonial activities, including labour activism (FCO 40/267).

SOCIAL SERVICES BRANCH PROGRESS REPORT 1 MAY 1982 TO 31 JULY 1982			
Subject	Purpose	Progress made and present position	Next quarter target
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>MEDICAL</u></p> <p>機密</p> <p>The practice of pharmacy and ancillary matters</p>	<p>To review the existing legislation relating to dispensing, the employment of pharmacists, and the need for training facilities.</p>	<p>The Working Party Report was submitted to EB on 12 July 1982.</p>	<p>To submit the report to Executive Council for advice.</p>
<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">CONFIDENTIAL</p> <p>Medical Registration Ordinance (Cap. 161)</p>	<p>To amend the existing legislation:</p> <p>(a) relating to qualifications for registration, fees, etc.; and</p> <p>(b) to revise the various fees.</p>	<p>Executive Council advised that all proposed changes to registrable qualifications should be omitted as Members queried the appropriateness of the Medical Council having discretion over the tenure and conditions of registration to be granted to the holder of a foreign diploma when the Council had already accepted that the medical school issuing that diploma maintained reputable standards. The amended Bill was introduced into the Legislative Council on 7 July and received its third reading on 28 July.</p>	<p>(a) To resubmit the draft Regulations to Executive Council</p> <p>(b) To discuss with Medical Council points raised in Executive Council and prepare a further Bill.</p>

[Social Services Branch Progress Report \[May 1–31 July 1982\] \[FCO 40/1419/0022\]](#)

² Florence Mok, 'Town Talk: enhancing the "eyes and ears" of the colonial state in British Hong Kong, 1950-1970s', *Historical Research: the Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 95(268), (2022), 287-308, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hisres/htab039>.

- Newspaper cuttings and press releases collected by the Information Services Department, Hong Kong.
- Letters lobbying for imperial interventions sent by individuals or organisations based in Hong Kong, the UK and overseas; for example, the Association of Women for Action and Research on Governor Chris Pattern's political reforms (as contained in FCO 40/4053).
- Minutes of meetings between FCO officials and Hong Kong officials and councillors; and with 'leading personalities' (FCO 40/506) and 'prominent businessmen' (FCO 40/1539).



[Letter from Hong Kong Association, inviting FCO secretary to a lunch meeting on January 30, 1984 \(FCO 40/1539/0005\)](#)

Sino-British Relations (and the Cold War in Asia)

Historians have consistently argued that managing Britain's diplomatic and commerce relations with Communist China imposed constraints on British rule in Hong Kong.³ Historians have also shown how Hong Kong was a key location for the continuation of conflict between the Nationalist regime in Taiwan and the Communist regime in Beijing, as inflected by the Cold War in Asia. Britain (and America's) role in Hong Kong therefore affected Sino-American and Anglo-American relations.

The FCO files provide abundant empirical evidence of how Cold War tensions were managed across the following sub periods:

- circa 1967 to 1979: when Britain and China formulated new policies to resolve the '1997' question against a backdrop of an improvement in relations between the US and communist China and of serious conflicts in Asia—most notably in Vietnam.
- 1979 to 1984: when there were discontinuous negotiations leading to the signing of the Sino-British Declaration—a general agreement to transfer the sovereignty of Hong Kong.
- 1984-1997: when preparations for the transfer of power were overseen by a Sino-British Joint Liaison Group; when the Basic Law (Hong Kong's post-1997 constitution) was framed by Beijing nominees; and when there were disagreements over 'democratisation'.⁴

With the FCO reviewing the timing and form of its approach to China annually from circa 1971, there are abundant documents which set out the legal practicalities (and political infeasibility) of British administration post-1997. These documents also reveal how local Chinese and expatriate civil society groups, business leaders and colonial bureaucrats affected UK policy.⁵ Governor Murray MacLehose's visit to Beijing in 1979 is illustrative of how FCO files can be used to reconstruct the limits of British power.

³ See Robert Bickers, *Out of China: How the Chinese Ended the Era of Western Domination* (Penguin, 2017), especially pages 384 to 388, which used PREM files; and for what is likely to be the most comprehensive account to date, Chi-Kwan Mark, *Decolonisation in the Age of Globalisation: Britain, China, and Hong Kong, 1979-89* (Manchester University Press, [July 2023](#)).

⁴ For background, Suzanne Pepper, *Keeping Democracy at Bay: Hong Kong and the Challenge of Chinese Politics Reforms* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2008).

⁵ See Yui Chim Lo, 'The Last Stand of Colonialism? The Unofficial Members of the Executive and Legislative Councils and the Sino-British Negotiations Over Hong Kong, 1982-1984'. *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 48, no. 2 (2020), 370-94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2019.1689620>; Milia Hau, 'The Official Mind of British Post-Imperialism: Influencing Parliamentary Opinions during the Anglo-Chinese Negotiations on the Future of Hong Kong, 1982-84'. *The International History Review* 43, no. 6 (2021), 1198-1216, <http://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2021.1876135>; and Matthew Hurst, 'Britain's Approach to the Negotiations over the Future of Hong Kong, 1979-1982'. *The International History Review* (on-line, January 2022): 1-16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2021.2024588>.

From the late 1960s, British government debated making an informal approach to the CPG (see FCO40/160), which was finally undertaken in 1979 by MacLehose. In 1979 MacLehose sought (but failed) to gain the CPG's approval for new legislation in Hong Kong that would have provided those buying land in the New Territories with greater security under leases expiring after 1997. As documented (see FCO 40/1058 to 1062) Chinese leaders recognised that this was an attempt to use a legal question to open up a political one about sovereignty.

Due to this approach, the FCO came to understand China's determination to reunite Hong Kong with China under a "One Country, Two Systems" model, and thereafter tried to "educate" China about what made capitalism work in Hong Kong (and thus for Communist China), including during Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's visit to Beijing in 1982.⁶

Hong Kong's Public Administration

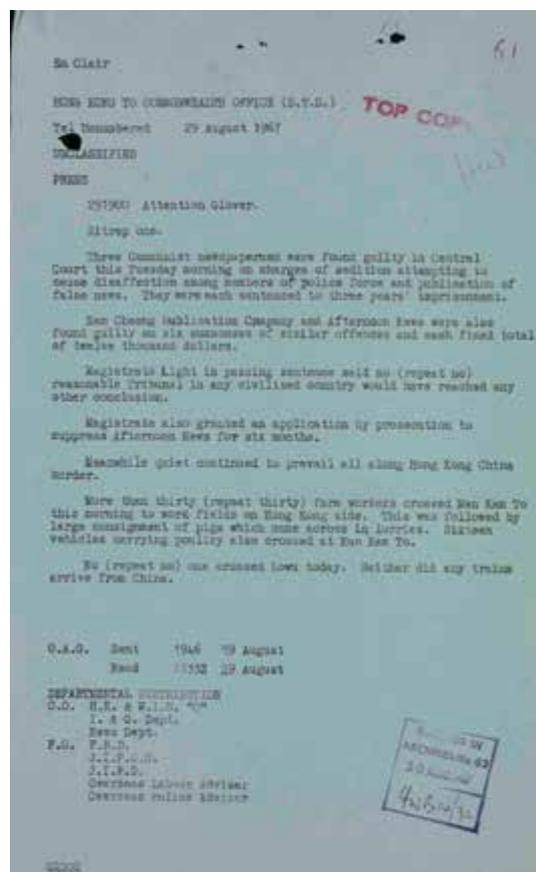
After 1967, in response to social problems in Hong Kong and in anticipation of Sino-British negotiations regarding Hong Kong status post-1997, British governments increased pressure on the colonial administration to intervene more extensively in society.⁷ Against a backdrop of rising demands within Hong Kong for social and political reforms, FCO files highlight persistent tensions between British governments and the colonial administration over a range of policies:

- Public housing schemes: even though the tax revenues of the colonial administration were rising due to economic growth, these long-lived commitments had large fiscal implications; they also had repercussions for Sino-British relations, as schemes (including new towns) were planned for the New Territories and thus required secure leases lasting beyond 1997.
- Labour standards: Hong Kong labour laws were not fully aligned with International Labour Organisation Conventions and protectionists demanded improved labour conditions, so FCO experts encouraged the Governor to extend legal protections to Hong Kong workers, with metropolitan nudges particularly strong under the Labour Governments of the 1970s.

⁶ Chi-kwan Mark, 'To "Educate" Deng Xiaoping in Capitalism: Thatcher's Visit to China and the Future of Hong Kong in 1982'. *Cold War History* 17, no. 2 (2017): 161–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2015.1094058>; 方侃实. '1978-1982 年中国收回香港的决策背景与历程'. *当代中国史研究*, 24, no. 5 (2017), 35–43; 高望来. '中国谈判风格理论与中英关于香港问题的谈判 (1992-1997)'. *外交评论* 2 (2019), 36–45; Michael Sheridan, *The Gate to China: A New History of the People's Republic & Hong Kong* (William Collins, 2021); the Thatcher papers, held at Churchill College, Cambridge, include digital versions PREM files—[by way of illustration](#); Pao Sohmen, Anna. *Y. K. Pao: My Father* (Hong Kong University Press, 2014). Thanks to Matthew Hurst for these references.

⁷ For the standard entry text, Ian Scott, *Political Change and the Crisis of Legitimacy in Hong Kong* (Hurst, 1989); and for case details Ray Yep and Tai-Lok Lui, 'Revisiting the golden era of MacLehose and the dynamics of social reforms', *China Information*, 24 (3) (2010), 249-272, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0920203X10379360>; and Alan Smart and Fung Chi Keung Charles, [Hong Kong Public and Squatter Housing: Geopolitics and Informality, 1963-1985](#) (Hong Kong University Press, June 2023).

- Environmental protections: country parks—the majority of which were designated in the 1970s—began to conserve local ecologies, many of which contained reservoirs delivering a degree of water security; and, with these areas protected from development, Hong Kong gained clean supplies of water.⁸
- Media management: the colonial administration provided the FCO with information on regulation and censorship, including by reporting back on court cases (see FCO40/113), with these files revealing how ‘freedoms of speech’ were extended, albeit it, only late under British rule.⁹



[Telegram of August 29, 1967 on actions against Communist press \(FCO 40/113/0030\)](#)

⁸ David Clayton, 'The Roots of Regionalism: Water Management in Postwar Hong Kong', in Gary Chi-hung Luk, ed. *From a British to a Chinese Colony? Hong Kong before and after the 1997 Handover* (University of California, 2017), 166-185.

⁹ Michael Ng, *Political Censorship in British Hong Kong: Freedom of Expression and the Law (1842-1997)* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

- Monetary matters: the FCO, which had a financial relations department, was concerned about the financial stability of Hong Kong; and about Hong Kong's sterling assets held in London—but due to be transferred on retrocession.¹⁰
- Public procurement: With public contracts going to non-British firms, there were tensions between Hong Kong and London regarding Hong Kong practices of public procurement.¹¹ Hong Kong's commitment to expensive large-scale infrastructure projects (notably a new airport) also adversely affected Sino-British relations, especially in the 1990s.
- Anti-corruption controls: Arguably, the most far-reaching public policy reform of the period was the tightening of anti-corruption controls as attributed to colonial state-building plus new social attitudes which created the conditions for a divergence from British legal norms.¹²

The FCO 40 series contains, for example, insights on the case of Peter Godber. Godber, a senior police officer, escaped from Hong Kong when under investigation under the 1971 Bribery and Prevention of Corruption Ordinance. FCO files show how this episode revived debates within Whitehall and in the Hong Kong Secretariat about whether there needed to be an external commission set up by the UK government that investigated corruption (see especially FCO 40/451).¹³

After the Godber incident, and on setting up an Independent Commission Against Corruption, the colonial administration took investigatory powers away from the police. Significantly, this new commission forestalled UK government interventions which would have further undermined Hong Kong's political autonomy. This new local commission, however, gained sweeping powers whose consequences (including on a 1977 police mutiny) were monitored by the FCO. The FCO was also provided with information on the effects of anti-corruption campaigns, including by the Commission.

¹⁰ Catherine Schenk, *International Economic Relations Since 1945* (Routledge; 2011).

¹¹ Adonis M. Y. Li, 'Hindrances or Helping Hand?: Hong Kong and Sino-British Railway Commercial Diplomacy, 1974–84,' *The International History Review* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2022.2160781>.

¹² H.J. Lethbridge, 'The Emergence of bureaucratic corruption as a social problem in Hong Kong', *Journal of Oriental Studies*, XII, nos. 1 and 2, 1972, pp. 33-50; and Mark Hampton, 'British legal culture and colonial governance: the attack on corruption in Hong Kong, 1968-1974', *Britain and the World: Historical Journal of the British Scholar Society*, Volume V, no. 2, 2012, 223-240, [request PDF here](#); Ian Scott and Ting Gong, *Corruption Prevention and Governance in Hong Kong* (Routledge, 2019).

¹³ Ray Yep, 'The Crusade against Corruption in Hong Kong in the 1970s: Governor MacLehose as a zealous reformer or reluctant hero?' *China Information*, 2013, 27 (2): 197-221, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X13482244>. For an important Hong Kong Government document note: 'Public Impressions of the Independent Commission Against Corruption', in MOOD Report (Covert Opinion Polling Exercise conducted by Home Affairs Department), 4 March 1980, HKRS471-3-2, held by the Government Records Series, and available via the Public Record Office, Hong Kong.

In short, the extension of anti-corruption controls illustrates how, over public policy matters, the colonial administration retained a degree of political autonomy. The extent of political autonomy was, however, negotiated on a case-by-case basis.

Socio-economic and Cultural Changes in Hong Kong

In the 1960s and 1970s, as they struggled for new rights in the context of the colonial administration intervening more in everyday lives, Hong Kong Chinese people came to appreciate how they were different from new migrants from China and began to identify themselves more closely as being from Hong Kong.¹⁴ By providing insights on social movements, FCO documents allow historians to reconstruct these processes of identity formation.¹⁵ FCO documents detail the activism of elites and evaluate political organisations, which will be of use to political historians.¹⁶

FCO files on immigration from China are particularly valuable because they provide a way of assessing cultural differences between Hong Kong Chinese people and recent migrants from the mainland. With new border controls having repercussions for Sino-British relations, information on this topic is held in a range of files—that is, beyond those with ‘immigration’ in the title.

These files show that, even though the number of migrants entering Hong Kong from China was much lower in the 1970s than in early periods, illegal immigration was perceived from the early 1970s as contributing to overcrowding and a crime wave, with new migrants from China (but not from Southeast Asia) identified as being ‘inferior’.¹⁷

FCO files also document the politics of a large-scale and long-lasting international refugee crisis arising from the Vietnam War (and China’s involvement in it), with

¹⁴ For orientations into a diffuse field: John Carroll, *A Concise History of Hong Kong* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007); Law Wing Sang, *Collaborative Colonial Power: the Making of the Hong Kong Chinese* (Hong Kong University Press, 2009); Lam Wai-man, *Understanding the Political Culture of Hong Kong: the Paradox of Activism and Depoliticization* (Routledge, 2015).

¹⁵ Florence Mok, *Covert Colonialism: Governance, surveillance and political culture in British Hong Kong, c.1966-97* (Manchester University Press, [July 2023](#)).

¹⁶ There are additional files in FCO 53, mainly on the British Nationality Act, 1981, as explored in Mok, *Covert*; and Chi-Kwan Mark, ‘Decolonising Britishness? The 1981 British Nationality Act and the Identity Crisis of Hong Kong Elites’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 48, 3 (2020), 565-90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2019.1638619>.

¹⁷ Florence Mok, ‘Public opinion polls and covert colonialism in British Hong Kong’, *China Information*, 33(1) (2019), 66-87, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X1878743>, and Florence Mok, ‘Chinese Illicit Immigration into Colonial Hong Kong, c.1970-1980’ <https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X1878743>, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 49(2) (2021), 339-367, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X1878743>; and, for the quote, Mok, *Covert*, 200.

escapees from Vietnam (including ethnic Chinese peoples) travelling to/via Hong Kong where they were held in camps.

Ways Forward for Historians Using the FCO Series

Historians must appreciate that there are limitations with the FCO series, most notably:

- Only an extremely small proportion of original records have been preserved permanently, with the rest destroyed.
- Documents have been retained or redacted under the UK Freedom of Information exemption scheme: for example, note documents taken out of FCO 40/2608, 'Sensitivity Review of Hong Kong Government Records'; and from FCO 40/4122, 'Sewage Strategy in Hong Kong'.
- The digitised FCO files must be used with other primary sources that provide context and corroborative/conflicting information:
 - (i) For the study of Sino-British relations (and the Cold War in Asia), Chinese Communist, Chinese Nationalist and American government records and published memoirs of diplomats and politicians;
 - (ii) For the study of public administration: Hong Kong government and media records; and
 - (iii) For the study of socio-economic and cultural changes: media records, oral testimonies and social surveys.

Even so, it is hard to imagine how historians of late twentieth century Sino-British relations and Hong Kong can ignore this Gale digital archive collection. Moreover, with FCO files in digital form, researchers can deploy dual techniques:

- Searching the 2,980 FCO 40 file titles plus 56 FCO 21 file titles; reading documents within a selection of these files; and using context (information not contained in the file) to turn facts within documents into evidence.
- With many millions of words contained in an estimated 390,000 pages, historians can also use key-word searches to trace individuals; to plot linguistic patterns—including for identifiers such as Hongkonger; and to capture prevailing sentiments.¹⁸

In sum, *China and the Modern World: Hong Kong, Britain, and China Part 2, 1965-1993* is, arguably, the foundation stone upon which historians will write new accounts of Sino-British (and the Cold War in Asia), the public administration of Hong Kong and socio-economic and cultural changes in one of the world's great cities: Hong Kong.

¹⁸ Ninja Schulz, Carolin Biewer and Lisa Lehnen 'Hongkongites, Hong Kongers, Hong Kong Belongers? Tracing identity (re)constructions in news discourse in Hong Kong from 1903 to 1999', *English World-wide*, 41(3) (2020), 295-324, <https://doi.org/10.1075/eww.00052.sch>.