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Vivian Kong’s *Multiracial Britishness* is a thought-provoking exploration of the deceptively simple question it opens with, “What does it mean to be British?” (p. 1). The surface-level answer given both today and in the past is that it rests on having the legal status of British citizenship by birth or acquisition. A more liberal response would challenge the centrality of being recognized as such by the British state and include notions of residency and self-identification. If we were to go down the abstract and conceptual route, this would expand the definition further by ascribing a particular ethos or set of values that people identify with being British. Yet, as Kong shows us, this only begins to scratch the surface. By interrogating what being British meant in Hong Kong between 1910 and 1945, she provides a complex account that not only adds new layers to the rich history of the “Pearl of the Orient” and its multiracial residents but also contributes to live debates about who gets to be British and how they understand and ascribe meaning to it.

This academically rigorous yet eminently readable monograph exists at the interstices of two overlapping historiographies alongside belonging to the venerable field of Hong Kong history, which has always been rich but has hit a new productive seam in recent years.[1] At its core, it sits comfortably alongside an array of recent reassessments of the idea of “Britishness” that look outside the metropole and reveal occluded histories of Asian and mixed-race communities who forged new understandings of what it meant to be British during the empire’s apogee in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[2] The book also provides a significant contribution to the literature on colonial port cities in Asia and their status as sites of intersecting networks and mobilities, of which Hong Kong is perhaps the exemplar.[3] Over the course of six chapters spanning thirty-five years of British rule in Hong Kong, the
book takes readers on a journey of the making, unmaking, and remaking of Britishness. *Multiracial Britishness* seeks to reconstruct the lives and times of a diverse cast of Hong Kong’s characters and does so by drawing from a similarly varied set of evidence, including government records, legal documents, memoirs, newspapers, oral history interviews, private papers, and student magazines. Kong deftly weaves together these sources to reveal a complex tapestry of connections and contestations not just between the various communities who called the colony home but far beyond it as well, given the intricate threads of commerce, kinship, religion, knowledge, and culture that tied the port city to the rest of the world.

From the very first chapter, she carefully recovers the agency of Hong Kong’s colonial subjects in claiming their British status in spite of the state’s longstanding practice of constructing racialized hierarchies intended to undermine the Britishness of non-white subjects. One particularly valuable intervention that the monograph makes is eschewing the usual dichotomous construction of colonizer/colonized, unraveling the fissures that existed not just between the various communities that considered Hong Kong home but far beyond it as well, given the intricate threads of commerce, kinship, religion, knowledge, and culture that tied the port city to the rest of the world.

While nationalism continued to be tied intimately with race, a rising sense of cosmopolitanism in the early twentieth century translated into a willingness by some white Britons to consider a wider array of communities as British albeit in circumscribed ways. These undulating notions of inclusivity and exclusivity are evoked most clearly in the co-construction of Britishness and Chinese-ness. In Kong’s narrative, the founding of Hong Kong University (HKU) in 1910 functions as the perfect launching point, given that it was intended to deliver a colonial education that would enable its graduates to “acquire Britishness, but only to a limited extent so that they remained sufficiently Chinese and would live in China with their British influence” (p. 92). Such efforts were complicated by the student body of predominantly middle- and upper-class British subjects of Chinese descent from Hong Kong and the Straits Settlements who embraced “Westernization” and British values but were more reluctant of Chineseness. Nevertheless, they lived and studied with a coterie of students from mainland China who were less enthusiastic about immersing themselves within the British milieu. These contestations about the value of Chineseness as an identity in contrast to Britishness became particularly acute in the wake of rising Chinese nationalism over the course of the early twentieth century, with HKU students coming to be characterized as “un-Chinese” by their...
mainland counterparts for failing to engage with revolutionary and anti-colonial politics. Such conceptualizations held truth, given that the university community remained quiescent during the May Fourth Movement (1919), the Seamen’s Strike (1922), and the May Thirtieth Movement (1925), but such narratives elide students who—though very much in the minority—were vocal patriots and criticized the apathy of their contemporaries.

The co-production of Britishness and Chinese-ness as oppositional identities contrasts with another community’s experiences: the Hong Kong Portuguese or Macanese, as they have come to be known. A creolized community born of the union between Portuguese and a variety of Asian communities in Macau, the Macanese occupied an ambivalent position in Hong Kong society. Kong highlights how the Macanese—like many of their counterparts across the empire—sought to acculturate themselves within the milieu of Britishness through English education. In government- and missionary-run schools, Macanese boys were socialized toward being British through the curriculum as well as musical performances, school- and empire-wide celebration parades, sports, scouting, and theater performances (William Shakespeare, of course). These experiences not only equipped Macanese for public service but also encouraged them toward expressions of loyalty to the empire: like joining the Hong Kong Volunteer Corps in such droves that a specifically Portuguese Company with two platoons was formed in 1927 and by taking up positions in civic institutions, government boards, and the Legislative Council. Despite their substantial contributions, the Macanese faced continuing discrimination from white Britons. They were viewed as ranking below Europeans within the racialized colonial hierarchy, which meant being denied access to higher ranks in school, the workplace, and the social world. Ironically, their efforts at becoming British also resulted in the community being seen by some Portuguese, especially those with stronger connections to Macau and to the metropole, as having become detached from their roots. Yet, in the contest between embracing Portuguese-ness or Britishness, the Macanese chose the latter despite the Portuguese community seeking to bring them back into the fold.

Beyond the confines of ethnicity, Britishness in Hong Kong was most powerfully developed and articulated within its civic institutions. During the interwar period, middle- and upper-class Hong Kongers from a range of communities embraced civic internationalism within their associational life to reformulate Britishness as “cosmopolitan, benevolent, and civically engaged” (p. 165). Such notions were articulated in global movements like the Freemasons and the Rotary Club and also more local bodies like the Kowloon Residents Association, the League of Fellowship and Service, and the Eugenics League. These organizations contained overlapping sets of multiracial urbanites who coalesced around a distinctly imperial sense of cosmopolitanism to counterbalance the emergence of more virulent strains of nationalism in the 1930s. Kong’s examination of these spaces for socialization bring to life the intimacies of Hong Kong’s multiracial populace and the ways they were enmeshed within a global milieu thanks to circuits of trade, knowledge, and culture that the city was entangled within. This history of engagement between many British communities (and identities) will be of particular interest to scholars of colonialism and decolonization, given the recurrence of myriad communities in various—mostly urban—locales in European colonies across Asia and Africa embracing a particular sense of cosmopolitanism inflected with ostensibly imperial values. Yet an embrace of liberal internationalism and cross-cultural friendship continued to be undermined as efforts by British subjects of color to claim equal rights faced resistance from white Britons whose commitment to such values were contingent on maintaining racialized colonial hierarchies.
The loss of Hong Kong to Japanese forces in 1941 upended the colonial order more than any other political or social upheaval before it. World War II was a crucible for Britishness, providing the impetus for confrontations between the institutionalized racism of the colonial state and the cosmopolitan imaginary of Hong Kong's diverse population. The former can be seen in the colonial government's evacuation of 3,334 mostly white women and children to Australia in 1940.[5] While colonial authorities initially attempted to evacuate British subjects of color as well, when it came to the final decision, it was racialized Britishness that won out. And in the case of the Macanese, for some of the nearly 5,000 who fled to Macau during the war, the continued doubting of their Britishness by the colonial authorities and, conversely, the support rendered by Macau's Portuguese government dissolved their ties with that aspect of their identity. Yet cosmopolitan and inclusive Britishness were kept alive through the Japanese occupation by the acts of solidarity shown by a diverse array of British subjects. This included relief efforts organized by HKU professor Gordon King and British ambassador in Chungking Sir Horace Seymour to get HKU students out of Hong Kong to unoccupied China so they could continue their education, a display of recognition by two white Britons that these predominantly Chinese students were indeed British subjects deserving of rights and support. British subjects of color also took the initiative in highlighting their commitment to the Crown through taking up arms as part of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps (HKDVC). Many colonial subjects from the various communities gave their lives in defense of the colony, and those who survived continued to serve as guerrilla forces and intelligence agents operating across both Hong Kong and South China in an effort to liberate their home from Japanese clutches. Alongside efforts to claim Britishness through military service, British Chinese and Macanese refugees were also made to feel a sense of Britishness because of how they were treated by mainland Chinese and Macau Portuguese respectively as outsiders.

In her epilogue tracing the continued grappling of Hong Kong’s populace with Britishness in the lead-up to the handover and up to the fallout of the democracy movement protests of the 2010s and 2020s, Kong highlights how the question of what it means to be British is one that reverberates today. As her brilliant survey demonstrates, because being British meant different things to different people at different times in Hong Kong’s history, it is precisely this ambiguity that continues to give it power and appeal among various sections of its populace even despite the official ending of the city’s connection to the British Isles nearly thirty years ago now.

Notes

[1]. Tony Banham, Reduced to a Symbolical Scale: The Evacuation of British Women and Children from Hong Kong to Australia in 1940 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2017); Stacilee Ford, Troubling American Women: Narratives of Gender and Nation in Hong Kong (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011); Peter E. Hamilton, Made in Hong Kong: Transpacific Networks and a New History of Globalization (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021); Mark Hampton, Hong Kong and British Culture, 1945-97 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016); Abe Kaori, Chinese Middlemen in Hong Kong’s Colonial Economy, 1830-1890 (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017); Kuo Huei-Ying, Networks beyond Empires: Chinese Business and Nationalism in the Hong Kong-Singapore Corridor, 1914-1941 (Leiden: Brill, 2014); and Florence Mok, Covert Colonialism: Governance, Surveillance and Political Culture in British Hong Kong, c. 1966-97 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023).

[2]. Catherine S. Chan, The Macanese Diaspora in British Hong Kong: A Century of Transimperial Drifting (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021); Lynn Hollen Lees, Planting Empire, Cultivating Subjects: British Malaya, 1786-1941


[5]. For a detailed study of the 1940 evacuation, see Vivian Kong, “‘Hong Kong Is My Home’: The 1940 Evacuation and Hong Kong-Britons,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 47, no. 3 (2019): 542-67.

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