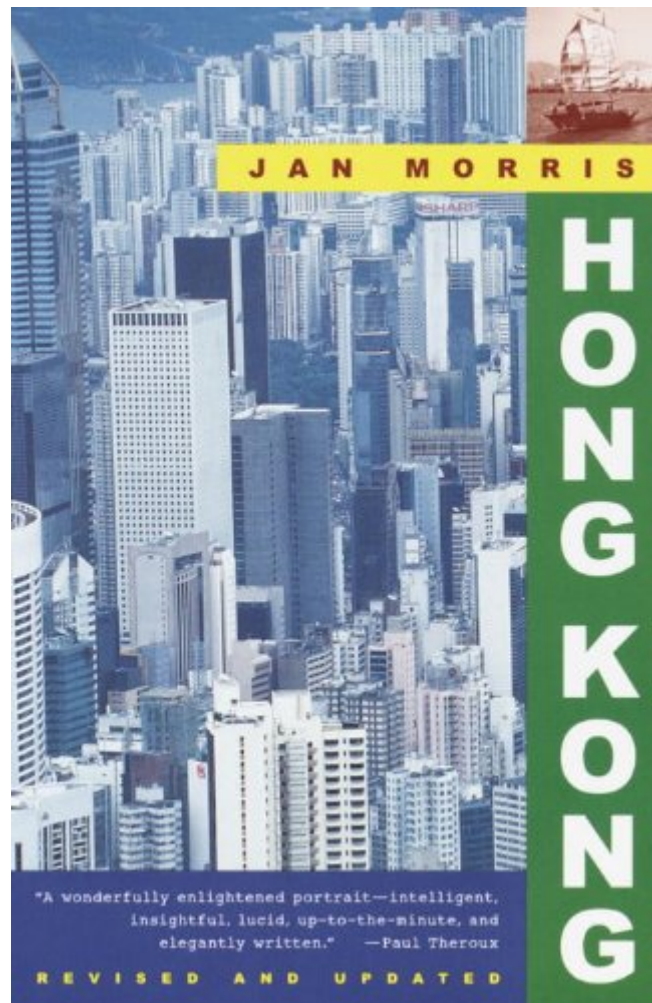




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Hong Kong (Vintage Departures)



Synopsis

In its last days under British rule, the Crown Colony of Hong Kong is the world's most exciting city, at once fascinating and exasperating, a tangle of contradictions. It is a dazzling amalgam of conspicuous consumption and primitive poverty, the most architecturally incongruous yet undeniably beautiful urban panorama of all. World-renowned travel writer Jan Morris offers the most insightful and comprehensive study of the enigma of Hong Kong thus far.

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Customer Reviews

Another recent re-reading of this excellent historical portrait led to this review, but it was also stimulated by another review in which the reader complains of Ms Morris as reflecting a 'western perspective'. Given that the Hong Kong of which Jan Morris writes was created by Westerners, from a declining pearl of the East, and that those same creators returned the territory and its teeming millions back to the East in an unprecedented action for a former Empire, a 'western perspective' would seem to me to be perfectly valid. Indeed, quoting Frank Ching, a noted Hong Kong author, from his own review of the book in the New York Times (1989); "She approaches the subject of Hong Kong as a student of British imperialism" and notes that she does a superb job. For decades

Hong Kong was not only a refuge for `mainland' Chinese but a destination that encourage the growth of a true Chinese middle and educated class that now inherits that `western' imperialistic generated wealth and relative democracy. Our `western' concerns and doubts of this, the first hand-over of free millions to a Communist regime, are not yet stilled and Jan Morris in her excellent book, outlines the historical roots that will eventually confirm the reality of the new `eastern" Hong Kong.

In this book, Jan Morris accounts Hong Kong's past and present concisely. This is a product of Jan Morris' accumulated years of intelligent perception and understanding of Hong Kong's history, culture, politics. Filled with quick-witted humor and details only perceived by someone who had travelled there, this book is entertaining and enlightening to read.

While the book gave me a great history of the former British Colony it was written before the turnover to China. Great review of the power-brokers of Hong Kong, however it left me with a desire to know more about what has transpired since 1997. I suppose the rating I gave Jan Morris' book was due simple to this fact. I hope someone extends on what she has written and bring those of us interested up to date on the new role Hong Kong has in the world and China's dealing with this financial center of the world. It saddens me to think that in 2047 China will probably have destroyed the ambiance of this wonderful city. However, I will not be against Hong Kong people. Going fast now is the Cantonese language that is being replace with Mandarin.

Outdated, tedious, inaccurate, romantic drivel. If you think this is a useful guide for a visitor or resident of Hong Kong, it is not

Two lions made of bronze guard the entrance of the old Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank building on the Bund in Shanghai. One looks cross, the other one snarls. Their paws shine from the touch of thousands of hands. Many people hope that some of the lions' power (and some of the bank's wealth) will rub off on them. The two guards of good fortune even had names once. In the 19th century, the snarler was called Stephen, and the cross lion was called Stitt in honor of their resemblance to two senior managers at the bank's offices in Hong Kong. This piece of trivia is part of the fun of reading Jan Morris's "Hong Kong: Epilogue to an Empire". As the subtitle suggests, the main focus of the book is on the British influence in Hong Kong. This is particularly evident in the four chapters that deal with selected periods of the history of Hong Kong: (1) the 1840s when Hong

Kong was founded on a barren island as the base for British drug trafficking into China, (2) the 1880s when the colony and the British Empire were at the pinnacle of their power, (3) the 1920s when Shanghai began to eclipse the city, and (4) the 1940s when Hong Kong was occupied by the Japanese and later became the refuge for Chinese (many of them entrepreneurs from Shanghai) who fled the Communist revolution in China. The historical chapters are well-researched, and Morris enjoys elaborating on the quirks of the British in Hong Kong. The historical chapters are embedded in five chapters that take a more anecdotal look at the social, cultural, administrative, and economic aspects of life in Hong Kong. The chapter on administration is aptly named "Control Systems". Not surprisingly for Hong Kong, the most extensive and interesting chapter deals with business and the economy. "Means of Support" is a very understated title for this aspect of life in Hong Kong. It would be more fitting to call it "Get rich quick". Jan Morris knows how to sprinkle delightful illustrations of Chinese industriousness and entrepreneurial talent into her tale. With a smirk she revels in the "endless variety of ingenuity, given to the world by such splendid-sounding concerns as "the Grand Dragon Universal Sales Company, the Ever-Rich Industrial Company, or the perhaps unfortunately named Flying Junk Industrial Company Ltd."The book has only two shortcomings. One is the fact that most parts of the book have been written in 1987, and only minor revisions were added in 1997, just before Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region of China. To understand today's Hong Kong, the epilogue to an empire ought to be appended by a prologue to an uncertain future. The other shortcoming is the effect of Ms. Morris's expatriate perspective on Hong Kong. Her point of view omits many aspects that shape the life of the Chinese who have always been the majority of the city's inhabitants. There is still some truth in William Somerset Maugham's observation in the 1920s: the vast majority of foreign residents has not the slightest notion what is happening among the Chinese masses. Yet, in defense of Ms. Morris I want to state that she writes about what she knows best - and that is a writer's job. Currently Ms. Morris's book is the best work about the vibrant, greedy, contradictory, and ultimately inscrutable city of Hong Kong, a place where it seems that only the temporary is permanent (except for the constant, ubiquitous noise of jack-hammers maybe), nothing is rooted and everyone is trying to move on. There is no simple denominator for this city and its inhabitants. Having lived in Hong Kong for half a year, I can recommend Jan Morris's book as an entertaining introduction to the history and character of this fascinating city. I have enjoyed her Western perspective and her sense of humor as evidenced in her illustration why the Hong Kong Chinese are opportunists of genius: "When communal lavatories were first installed in Hong Kong, Chinese entrepreneurs took to sitting on them for so long that people were obliged to bribe them to come off."

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