Lim cleverly uses the story of a slightly mad calligrapher, Tsang Tsou-choi, to discuss Hong Kong's erased historical identity. Known as the King of Kowloon, Tsang was a poorly educated man who claimed that his ancestors owned large swaths of the district of Kowloon. From the 1890s until the early 2000s, he furiously wrote out his claims in messy calligraphy on telephone poles, electrical boxes, and any public space he could find. He listed the twenty-one generations of his family lineage, along with the lands that they had lost, and sometimes added “Puck the Queen!” for good measure. Tsang’s story is skillfully woven into the main text, which recounts the past decades of history, from Lim’s childhood to her returning to raise a family on limited means in one of the world’s most expensive cities.

Lim also makes use of original research in the British archives. She unearths extensive interviews done by the UK-based historian Steve Tsang, who talked to most of the major British and local Hong Kong figures in the years leading up to the handover. His interviews were sealed for thirty years, and Lim was one of the first to mine them, revealing a devastating picture of how the British bungled the negotiations: they acceded to almost all Chinese demands and failed to stand up to its power. Very differently. She is also withering in her assessment of how the British quashed all local efforts at democracy until they had one foot out the door. That led China to view the partially elected local parliament as a trick the British had played on them before leaving.

Lim’s book is touched by a sense of loss, even while she hopes for Hong Kong’s renewal in the future:

People like me—the half-eastern and mixed-bloods—had never really fit anywhere, but Hong Kong’s own hybrid status had made it feel like a place where we could thrive. Now the forces that were changing Hong Kong were leaving me behind. It was around this time I stopped calling myself a Hong Konger. But I didn’t really know what else I was.

Mark Clifford is not a native Hong Konger but lived for nearly thirty years in the city, working as one of its most prominent English-language journalists. He was a reporter at the Far Eastern Economic Review and BusinessWeek, and later editor in chief of The South China Morning Post and The Standard. He also served on the board of Next Digital, the company founded by the media tycoon Jimmy Lai, who owned the territory’s feistiest newspaper, Apple Daily. Clifford left Hong Kong in 2021 when Lai was arrested and Next Digital crushed.

In his new book, Today Hong Kong, Tomorrow the World, Clifford uses his background in business journalism to give a sure-footed, brisk explanation of how the city’s real estate oligarchs rig the property market. He writes scathingly of how the British worked hand in hand with the business elite to suppress popular aspirations. And his firsthand account of Lai’s arrest is heartfelt and telling: the owner of the biggest media company in Hong Kong was denied bail and paraded in shackles. Clifford has exchanged numerous letters with the now seventy-four-year-old, who remains optimistic in prison thanks in part to his Roman Catholic faith.

Like Hong Kong, Clifford cautions against writing Hong Kong’s obituary. He says that for its elite, especially the new elite from the mainland, it will remain attractive, with world-class dining, spectacular hikes in the mountains, and a famous skyline and harbor. Thanks to China’s partially closed economy, Hong Kong will keep a special position as the country’s window on international financial markets. It is no longer a free city, but Clifford echoes many others in a romantic but perhaps wise warning not to bet against this remarkable place:

Hong Kong will be tested as the party tries to crush those who stand up to its power. Very different times are bound to follow, and many people will suffer for their beliefs. But ideals of freedom have outlasted every dictatorship. Hong Kong will not be an exception.
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