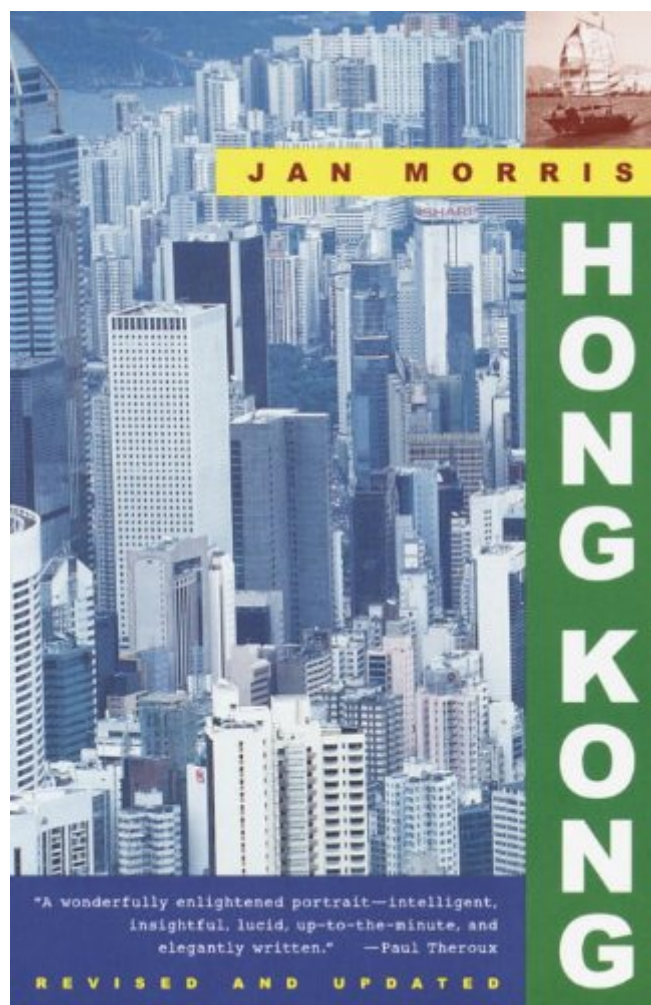


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Hong Kong (Vintage Departures)



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

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.

This well-written and well-researched book is a fascinating introduction for those looking to get a feel for the history and dynamic of Hong Kong, its people and its historical rulers. This is not strictly a history book, nor is it a guidebook. Instead, Morris has woven together a story of a colony together with a writer's journal, laced with historical anecdotes and relevant passages from other writers and historians who have recorded their observations of Hong Kong over the course of its relatively short history. Morris does an excellent job of explaining how the demographics of Hong Kong evolved and continue to evolve, how an unlikely cast of characters landed on a once unwanted island and created a thriving port and city-state, and what the post-1997 future may bring to the former British colony. While Morris' account of Hong Kong's past, present and near future is extremely insightful, the book does have certain limitations. This is clearly a view of Hong Kong through the eyes of a European. Insightful as Morris may be, this perspective inevitably will have holes, as Europeans make up only a tiny fraction of Hong Kong's current population and lead a much different lifestyle than the other inhabitants. To give one example of such limitation, the experience of Filipinos, who make up the largest non-Chinese group currently living in Hong Kong and dominate the scene as domestic helpers and laborers in certain other low-wage fields, is described on portions of only two pages. Morris merely scratches the surface of one of the more complex storylines of Hong Kong. Still, while Morris is not able to present a Chinese (or Filipino) perspective of Hong Kong, the reader can see that Morris is intellectually honest and is aware of the limitations.

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