



# 3

## Interconnected Histories: Locating Women's Lives in Time and Space

The lives of the women we discuss in this book have been shaped by differing social circumstances in separate locales on the opposite side of the world from each other. The older generation, the mothers, were born in the decades following the Asia-Pacific War and Second World War, from the late 1940s to the middle of the 1960s. The younger generation, their daughters, were born from the late 1980s to the beginning of the 1990s and came to adulthood in the twenty-first century. Over this span of time, there have been immense changes in social relations, including gender relations, in both Hong Kong and Britain but these changes have not followed the same trajectory and have been mediated by specific economic, sociocultural and political conditions. Importantly, this specificity cannot be understood only in local contexts but is, in large part, a result of the intertwined histories of Hong Kong and the UK and of their wider global connections. Crucially, Hong Kong's history as a British colony has profoundly affected its current inhabitants and accounts for many of the significant differences between Hong Kong and British women as well as differences between Hong Kong and mainland

China. Of course, cultural differences also figure here, but so do material social, economic and political circumstances, which in turn have an impact on local culture and how 'traditional culture' is perceived.

In this chapter, we will locate the women's lives in historical context, focusing primarily on the mothers' experiences from their childhood to early adulthood, covering the period from the 1950s to the 1970s. This was a time in which social conditions in Hong Kong differed markedly from those in Britain and our data reveal some stark contrasts in these women's biographies. We will then bring the discussion up to date by considering the challenges facing women today. Before doing so, and in order to understand how the differences between Hong Kong and the UK developed, it is necessary to take a brief look at a longer history.

Undertaking a study of two generations of women in two locations has alerted us to the importance of history in making sense of the lives we seek to document. This history has not only made Hong Kong and the UK what they are today, with attendant consequences for personal life, but is also important in other ways. Firstly, it provides an illustration of Bhambra's (2007) argument that modernity is a product of connected histories rather than an endogenous European achievement. Secondly, it helps us to understand how conceptions of modernity and tradition relate to the past and how the past is now imagined, remembered or forgotten in the life narratives of the women we interviewed. Finally, it is absolutely vital in order to understand Hong Kong's current political situation in relation to China and the wider context of China's global geopolitical ambitions. History matters to the Chinese Communist Party (see Lovell 2012; Brown 2017, 2018; Bickers 2018), and it matters, too, in understanding China's influence on the world stage. In particular, China's current assertive nationalism 'is rooted not in China's present power, but in its past weakness' (Bickers 2018: xxxii). This has implications not only for Hong Kong, but also for the world given China's 'aspirations to be a great, modern power restored to its rightful moral and geopolitical place' (Brown 2017: 205).

Given the brevity of our outline of this history, it necessarily simplifies complex events and processes, glossing over many details of China's, Hong Kong's and Britain's past. In the case of China, we focus on issues pertinent to British imperialism and Britain's acquisition of Hong Kong

and then provide a short overview of the history of the colony from its foundation. Our coverage of Britain in the same period is similarly sketchy. Here it should be noted that there are differences in the histories of the constituent parts of the UK, for example in the particulars of legal and educational systems in Scotland, which were and are distinct from those in England and Wales. In our coverage of specific developments *within* Britain, we refer mostly to the parts of the UK from which we recruited participants: England and Wales. In referring to relations between China, Hong Kong and the UK, the whole of the UK is implicated—the British who traded with China, who lived and worked in colonial Hong Kong and the troops who defended it came from all parts of the UK (and elsewhere in its empire). For example, two Scots, William Jardine and James Matheson played a particularly pivotal role in the events leading to the founding of Hong Kong and in the colony's early history.

## Global Interconnections and the Founding of Hong Kong

The story of how Hong Kong became a British colony—dating from the first Anglo-Chinese War or Opium War—exemplifies the global interconnections through which the modern world developed and is part of the wider history of British imperialism and colonialism, which were central to its rise as an industrial and military power. It should be noted that many of the technologies that facilitated European advancement—from paper to gunpowder, came originally from China. China was the world leader in technology, trade and administration until the sixteenth century. After the Ming dynasty went into decline and was supplanted by the Qing, China began to slip from its global pre-eminence but was not yet in decline. Indeed, the Qing Empire was rich and powerful and in the eighteenth century, under the Qianlong Emperor, expanded to encompass Tibet, Xinjiang and Taiwan. To Europeans at this time, the Qing Empire was 'dazzling' as 'an unequalled vision of power, order and prosperity' (Platt 2018: 9). To the Chinese, European nations were 'beyond

civilization' and the Qing 'Heavenly Dynasty' was 'in a position of superiority to all other countries' rulers' (Mao 2016: 6–7).

China's riches made it attractive to European traders, who had established sea routes to East Asia from the sixteenth century. By the end of eighteenth century, European nations had gained in power, wealth and military might, posing a threat to China of which the Qing rulers were still unaware. By the 1820s, Britain had become the premier power of Europe, the British East India Company was already well ensconced in India and Britain was expanding its trading and imperial ambitions, including in Asia. The British were, however, relative latecomers to China; the Portuguese settlement in Macau (now Macao) was the centre of the China trade from the mid-sixteenth century, whereby silver from the Americas found its way to China in exchange for tea, silk and porcelain. The Portuguese permitted the East India Company (EIC) to land in Macau and use it as a base for trading on an island in the Pearl River Delta (Huangpu, known to the British as Whampoa). In 1759, the Qing government designated Canton (Guangzhou) as the only legal port for overseas trade and in 1771 the EIC was allowed to open a post there. The EIC held a monopoly on British trade with China, granting some licenses to independent traders, until the 1830s when Britain appointed its first government representative, a Chief Superintendent, to oversee trade in Canton (see Carroll 2007; Tsang 2004). By this time, Britain's global influence and maritime power had far surpassed that of its erstwhile rivals in Asia, the Portuguese and Dutch, thus Britain—'master of the oceans, workshop of the world and an expansionist imperial power – came face to face with the Celestial Chinese Empire', an empire that still considered itself to be the centre of the universe (Tsang 2004: 3).

China had been able to conduct trade on its own terms from the sixteenth century. It sought to restrict foreign trade for a number of reasons: given its size and range of climates, it was self-sufficient in everything it needed, it considered its civilisation (not without cause) as superior to that of the 'barbarians' from Europe and sought to restrict European influence on its population. As a result, the conditions under which Europeans were allowed to trade were extremely restrictive; they had to conduct transactions through local Chinese merchants, known as cohongs. The main commodities Britain was importing from China

in the early nineteenth century were silk and tea. Tea was particularly important since, by the 1830s, it had come to be seen as an indispensable part of British life. It was also heavily taxed and thus an important source of government revenue. Steve Tsang cites figures indicating that in the years running up to the first Anglo-Chinese War the tax on tea was enough to pay for around 83% of the costs of maintaining the Royal Navy (Tsang 2004: 6), the navy that was central to Britain's imperial power. Britain had a substantial trade imbalance with China, since there was little that could be offered in exchange for tea and silk. This was remedied via the EIC's Indian interests, one of whose major products was opium, then consumed for medical purposes in Britain and completely legal. Opium was illegal in China, but it was widely traded through Canton making huge profits for the British, along with a few independent Parsee traders from India. The Chinese authorities saw the influx of opium as impacting negatively both on its economy and on the morale of its people. The British, meanwhile, resented the restrictions placed on them by the Chinese and the condescension with which they were treated. Tolerated in the name of profit when the EIC was running the trade, it became more of an affront when an official British government representative fared no better.

Things came to a head in 1839 when a Chinese official, Lin Zexu was sent to Canton to end the opium trade. He confined foreign merchants to their warehouses and confiscated, and then destroyed, their opium stocks. Britain and the East India Company sent an expeditionary force, which not only blockaded Canton but also attacked parts of China further north. Although China had invented gunpowder and firearms, by the early nineteenth century its military technology was about 200 years behind that of the European nations (Mao 2016). Britain won an easy victory that resulted in the acquisition of Hong Kong Island (where the harbour was already being used as a base for merchants and traders) in January 1841. The British, not content with this, used Hong Kong as a base for further attacks on China in the Autumn of 1841, fighting their way up the Yangtze river and threatening the city of Nanjing (then known as Nanking). The Chinese had little option but to capitulate. Defeat was a shock to the 'Heavenly Dynasty'; China could not conceive that 'it would not be a match for an "insignificant island *yi*"' (Mao

2016: 489). Under the treaty of Nanking, signed on a British warship in August 1842 and ratified the following year, Hong Kong officially became a British Crown Colony. As well as granting Hong Kong to the British, the Chinese government paid an indemnity of 21 million silver dollars and agreed to open five ports to trade, including Canton, and end the cohong monopoly on managing the Chinese side of trade. From the Chinese point of view, these concessions were excessive and humiliating. This, the first of many unequal treaties and foreign incursions, is remembered in China as the beginning of a 'century of humiliation', something that continues to figure prominently in Chinese patriotic education (see Lovell 2012).

The British, however, remained dissatisfied with China's reluctance to trade on equal terms, ultimately leading to the Second Opium War, in which Britain was joined by France and the USA and which culminated in Anglo-French forces occupying Beijing, the burning of the Summer Palace and forcing the emperor into exile. The Convention of Peking (1860) ceded Kowloon Peninsula and Stonecutter's Island to Britain, so that it now occupied both sides of the harbour. In the course of the war, other concessions had already been extracted, including more ports open to trade, access to China's interior and tariffs on opium, effectively legalising it.

These were eventful times in the British Empire, fuelling tension that may have contributed to the Second Opium War. The 1850s witnessed the Crimean war and riots and uprisings in many parts of the British Empire, notably South Africa and, in India, the Rebellion (or Mutiny). In China, this was the time of the Taiping Rebellion, further increasing tensions. The British administration in Hong Kong responded to the fears this provoked by implementing restrictions on the Chinese population such as night curfews. Despite these upheavals, the colony began to prosper from the 1860s. There had never been unanimous support among Britain's politicians for establishing a small colony in such a distant location and the hopes of those who expected it to become a hub for the China trade were not initially realised since the opening of other treaty ports meant that much of this trade bypassed Hong Kong. Nonetheless, some individuals had already profited from the opportunities this rather fragile colony had to offer, including some local Chinese

who collaborated with the British in the two wars and received substantial recompense for so doing, as well as British merchants who had made their fortune from trading opium in Canton. Prominent among the latter were William Jardine and James Matheson, who had been instrumental in persuading the British government to use military force against China and who are commemorated in Hong Kong street names. Jardine, Matheson and Co was the largest British trading company in East Asia by the time Hong Kong became British, was one of the first firms to set up there and continues to base its headquarters there and has over 400,000 employees (Platt 2018). The legacy of the opium trade persists into the present.

A number of regional and global developments fostered Hong Kong's growth from the 1860s onwards. The Taiping Rebellion led many Chinese, particularly merchants, to flee affected areas for the treaty ports and Hong Kong, adding to the colony's potential for wealth creation. Another important development was the expansion of European colonies and the abolition of slavery within them, which created a demand for cheap, often indentured, labour. Many emigrants, escaping poverty and upheaval in China, transited through Hong Kong on their way to other British possessions or the USA, the latter increasing considerably with the discovery of gold in California in 1948. These 'coolies' worked on constructing railroads in North America and on plantations in British colonies. Emigration was technically illegal in Qing China, but a weak government coping with foreign incursions and domestic rebellion was in no position to prevent it. There was money to be made by recruiting agents in China as well as by intermediaries and shipping agents in Hong Kong (Keung 1999). Chinese migrants often suffered appalling working and living conditions, but many did manage to send remittances home, which again passed through Hong Kong, and contributed to the development of banking and financial services. This Chinese diaspora also facilitated the creation of trade networks that spanned the globe, further feeding into Hong Kong's growing economy and its importance as a regional centre of trade.

Opium, however, continued to play a central role, not only in Hong Kong's domestic development, but also in Britain's economy and a global

web of trade and industry. John Carroll sums this up perfectly, clearly illustrating the connected histories that fuelled the progress of modernity:

Britain's global position depended on opium: Britain used the revenue from the opium trade to buy tea and silk from China and to support the occupation of India...Indian producers used revenues from opium to buy British goods. And British merchants used profits from selling British goods to buy cotton from the United States. (Carroll 2007: 22)

That Cotton, produced by slave labour until the 1865 abolition, was destined for the mills of Lancashire; thus Opium, through a series of intermediate steps, became central to cotton manufacture in Britain. In Hong Kong itself, the port through which most opium passed, it remained an important source of government revenue right up until the Japanese invasion in 1941. The trade was only abolished when Britain regained control after the Japanese surrender in 1945.

In the meantime, Hong Kong had expanded. In the late nineteenth century, the colonial administration had been keen to enlarge its territory, but the British government was reluctant to do so. By the end of the century, however, Russia, France, Germany and the USA were competing with British influence in China, while Japan's increasing military strength, demonstrated by its defeat of China in the Sino-Japanese War of 1895 and subsequent acquisition of Taiwan, made the British more aware of the strategic importance of Hong Kong. In 1898 Britain negotiated a 99-year lease on what became known as the 'New Territories', a larger parcel of rural land on the mainland plus a number of islands, amounting to about 365 square miles, ten times the size of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon Peninsula combined, with the exception of Kowloon's Walled City, which remained under Chinese jurisdiction (Welsh 1997; Carroll 2007). The New Territories made the colony more viable, but the 99-year lease created the situation whereby the entire colony would eventually have to be returned to China—though this was not anticipated at the time. The British negotiators assumed that it was a 'permanent cession in disguise' (Tsang 2004: 40).



## Gender, Empire and Social Inequality in Britain and Hong Kong

Britain's empire continued to expand in the nineteenth century, increasing its wealth and influence, but of course this wealth was not shared equally; the poverty that existed throughout the Victorian era is well documented and the threat of the workhouse, the main remedy for those with no means of support, had hung over the working classes since the poor law reform of 1834. Industrialisation also had an impact on gender relations in Britain, with an increasing emphasis on domesticated femininity as an ideal, within what has become known as the 'domestic ideology' (Hall 1992; Davidoff and Hall 1987). In the early nineteenth century, the rising bourgeoisie moved their residences away from their factories and workshops and women, previously active in family businesses, were excluded from the public sphere of commerce and industry. Working-class women continued to engage in paid work, including in the cotton mills of North West England, processing the cotton purchased, through a chain of trade, with the proceeds of opium. Elsewhere they worked in a variety of occupations, almost always paid less than men of the same class, and child labour was also widespread. As the nineteenth century progressed, organised and skilled male workers began to agitate for a family wage sufficient to keep their wives at home; a domesticated wife became symbolic of status and respectability (Walby 1986). Middle-class philanthropists also saw this as benefitting the working class and as conducive to social stability. New ideals of femininity and domesticity also contributed to the exclusion of women and children from certain occupations, such as underground work in mining and restrictions on their working hours. These new gender ideals, the industrious husband and domesticated wife, came to be seen as markers of civilisation and propriety, differentiating the respectable British citizen from the underclass of the 'disreputable poor' at home and the colonised peoples abroad. This was also the era of 'scientific racism', the idea of a 'natural', biologically determined, hierarchy of 'races', which served to justify British rule over its colonies (Miles 2003).

With the advance of an industrial society, a more educated population was required. A national system of education was established by an Act of

parliament in 1870, but compulsory schooling (initially for children aged 5–10) was not introduced until 1880 and it was not free of charge until 1891. Working-class girls' education was geared to training in domestic skills to fit them for their future destiny as housewives and, importantly, for work as servants. Demand for domestic servants was increased by the expansion of the middle classes and was one of the main sources of employment for working-class women. Women were excluded from higher education until the 1870s and not until 1920 did all universities grant degrees to women. With the beginnings of both a feminist movement and middle-class women's philanthropy, there were campaigns to improve the working and housing conditions of the poor and to raise women's status, as well as labour activism among working women. Some advances were gradually made, such as the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882, giving women rights to control their own property and earnings, which had previously become their husbands' on marriage. By the beginning of the twentieth century, women were campaigning for the vote, finally won, for all women, in 1928.

Welfare provision also improved in the early twentieth century, partly through the efforts of campaigning philanthropists who had revealed the extent of poverty in Victorian Britain and partly because an imperial nation needed fit and healthy fighting men. Recruitment for the Boer War had revealed the impact of poverty on the bodies of potential soldiers, causing serious concern. The liberal government of 1906–1914 laid some of the foundations for the welfare state, including such measures as allowing schools to provide free meals for children, introducing old-age pension for the over 70s and a national insurance scheme for workers, covering short term sickness. Nonetheless severe poverty persisted, especially during the depression years of the 1930s. It was not until after the Second World War that free health care, unemployment benefits, better pensions and other reforms made working-class life somewhat less precarious.

This short sketch of changes occurring over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Britain provides some context for understanding the ways in which the colonial authorities governed Hong Kong. If the welfare of the working poor was not a priority in Britain, it is not to be expected that the Hong Kong authorities would care much about the

Chinese people they ruled over, especially given colonial racist attitudes. British interest in Hong Kong was primarily as an entrepôt, so that the local population mattered little to them. They had an interest in attracting Chinese merchants to the colony, since they served as go-betweens in the trade with China and contributed to wealth creation (Keung 1997; Clayton 2000; Carroll 2007), but the majority of the local inhabitants were seen as a largely disposable workforce of coolies for heavy labour and domestic servants. The British administration 'had little interest in governing the local Chinese beyond maintaining stability and good order' and the 'local Chinese were largely left to their own devices' (Tsang 2004: 67). The Chinese formed their own organisations to manage their affairs. There were no social services provided for the population by the authorities; it was European missionaries and local Chinese organisations that began to provide education, health care and welfare.

The government was, however, interested in keeping the populace under control. The Chinese community was subject to restrictions on their freedom of movement through curfews, passes and all manner of regulations, though wealthy and 'respectable' Chinese could gain exemption from some of these controls. The priority was defending European inhabitants and their property, so that British justice for ordinary Chinese 'meant intrusive policing, racial and class discrimination, and periodic campaigns of repression', resulting in a one in ten chance of appearing before the magistrates in any given year (Munn 1997: 66–67). Europeans not only escaped such tight regulation, but if they did break the law, they were treated much more leniently than the local Chinese. Punishments for Chinese offenders could be draconian, including severe public flogging—inflicted on Chinese law-breakers, rather than Europeans. In the one case where a European, a Polish sailor, was sentenced to flogging, there was a huge outcry from European inhabitants. Flogging or caning was only abolished in 1990.

Hong Kong was, from its beginning, a multi-ethnic society, but one that was largely ethnically segregated. Residential segregation was initially informal, with Europeans settling in specific areas away from the local Chinese, and was reinforced by class differences and gulfs in income and standard of living (Tsang 2004). Between 1888 and 1918 a series of

ordinances were introduced that formalised segregation, reserving specific areas of Hong Kong Island for Europeans, maintaining their distinctive status and sense of superiority as the colonial class. Victoria Peak (known as The Peak) became an exclusive community of wealthy Europeans from where they could literally look down on those they saw as their inferiors (Lai and Yu 2001). In addition to the Europeans and Chinese, there were the Parsee traders involved in the opium trade and other Indians, mostly Sikhs and Muslims, employed in the police force. There were also Portuguese from Macau and Eurasians of mixed heritage, usually children of liaisons between local women and European men. While the Portuguese often intermarried with local Chinese, the British abhorred such unions. Eurasians were stigmatised as 'symbolising moral degradation and racial impurity' (Chiu 2008: 799). Eurasians did not easily fit into the Chinese community either, since they had lost their patrilineal ties to their ancestors—and it was through kinship and clan that the Chinese largely organised their social and economic lives (Carroll 2007). Even the all-important business of trade remained largely segregated along ethnic lines up to the beginning of the Second World War; the Europeans dominated the Chamber of Commerce, founded in 1861, which regulated trade and linked Hong Kong to World markets, while the Chinese organisations dealt with trade with South East Asia and overseas Chinese. Business between the two was arranged through compradors acting as go-betweens (Clayton 2000).

In the nineteenth century, Hong Kong was also a very masculine society, not only in the sense of being patriarchal but also in terms of numbers—among both local and European inhabitants, men far outnumbered women. While Chinese, Portuguese and Parsee merchants who settled permanently in Hong Kong established families in the colony, migrant male Chinese workers were often separated from their families in mainland China. Many Europeans were single men or, if temporary sojourners, had left families behind them. British and other European women in Hong Kong included those who were middle class—they were the wives of colonial officials or were missionaries and teachers, with some running small businesses catering to the expatriate female population (Hoe 1991). The philanthropy becoming common among this class in Britain was also manifested in Hong Kong, some of which was

directed towards local Chinese women, who had almost no rights and protections in law during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Various missionary societies set up schools for girls in Hong Kong, where converting them to Christianity was seen as a means of civilising the local Chinese population. These girls' education was influenced by the same domestic ideology prevalent in Victorian Britain, but 'the export and translation of it onto colonial soil by missionaries was loaded with religious interpretation under an imperial gaze' (Chiu 2008: 791). While this education reinforced gender divisions, it did sometimes open up new opportunities for young Chinese and Eurasian women, albeit not for many of them (Chiu 2008).

A major focus of activism was the campaign to abolish the *mui tsai* system (Hoe 1991; Lim 2015). *Mui tsai*, which literally means little sisters, were bondservants, girl children from poor families sold to richer households. In some families, they may have been well treated, but they were vulnerable to overwork, neglect and physical and sexual abuse. On adulthood they might be married off to men of their own class, but could also be sold on to brothels or as concubines (see Jaschok 1988; Lim 2015). This was, effectively, a form of slavery, which had supposedly been abolished in all British dominions before Hong Kong was colonised, yet the colonial authorities (in Singapore as well as Hong Kong) were reluctant to take action against it. It was recast as a 'traditional Chinese practice' and, since the authorities had assured local elites that they would not interfere with their traditions, it was allowed to persist. Campaigning against the practice began in the 1870s, but really picked up in the 1920s (Hoe 1991; Carroll 2007; Lim 2015). The European women who spearheaded the campaign and brought the issue to the attention of the British parliament had a mixture of motives, both philanthropic and feminist. Among the former, which Lim (2015) describes as maternalist, she detects elements of racism in the campaign's rhetoric. While some educated Chinese Christian women were involved, this could be seen as a twist on Spivak's depiction of colonial paternalism as white men 'saving brown women from brown men' (1993: 93). In this case, most white male colonisers had little interest in rescuing Chinese women and it was white women who took up the challenge, with the attendant racism. The keeping of bondservants was technically (though not actually) abolished

in China after 1911, which undermined the rationale of ‘respecting Chinese tradition’. There was, however, another argument made for retaining the practice—that without it, female infanticide was likely to increase as the only way the poor could rid themselves of unwanted daughters. This may well have been the case, but it was not suggested that the administration should do something to combat the poverty underlying this problem, still less challenge the gender order that made girls, rather than boys, into bondservants.

The vigorous campaign against the *mui tsai* system brought Hong Kong to the notice of the British public, who otherwise probably had little interest in, or knowledge of, this tiny outpost of empire. It also proved to be an embarrassment to the British government from the 1920s. Against the wishes of both the Hong Kong administration and local elites, it was made subject to progressively tighter regulation from 1923 to 1938, including registration, payment of wages, age limits to the work girls could do and restrictions on selling them on. These measures did improve the treatment of those girls who were registered, but many were not. Maria Jaschok (1988) found evidence of the existence of *mui tsai* as late as the early 1950s while Carroll (2007) suggests the practice may have persisted to the 1970s. In the meantime, Hong Kong had undergone much change, especially as a result of upheavals in mainland China, the Asia-Pacific War and changes to its economy.<sup>1</sup>

## War, Its Aftermath and Post-War Developments

Whereas the First World War made a major impact on the UK and was followed by an eventful period in British history including the achievement of women’s and universal suffrage and the great depression, these developments made little impact on Hong Kong. The First World War had, for the most part, passed it by; more significant were events in

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<sup>1</sup>We are aware that we are skipping a significant period in history here. Having established the interconnected histories that resulted in the establishment and development of colonial Hong Kong we have sacrificed coverage of the inter-war years in order to move on to the period in which the older generation of our participants were born and raised.

China and Japan's military expansionism. During the Second World War Britain experienced bombing and destruction in its cities, loss of life among both military and civilians, rationing and, after the war, a period of austerity—but, apart from the Channel Islands, not enemy occupation. The Asia-Pacific War was longer in duration and overlapped with civil war in China. The Qing dynasty had fallen in 1911, replaced by a republic, but the country was never fully under control of the new government and from 1927 China had been in a state of civil war between communist and nationalist forces. The Japanese invaded Manchuria in northern China in 1931 and in 1937 launched a full-scale invasion of China, occupying much of the East of the country. Many refugees fled to Hong Kong, an estimated 500,000 in 1938, and many banks and businesses relocated there (Carroll 2007; Tsang 2004). In December 1941, at the same time as the attack on Pearl Harbour, Japan moved against British possessions in Asia—Hong Kong, Malaya (as it was then known) and Singapore. The Japanese invaded Hong Kong on 8 December, taking only three weeks to defeat its defenders (see Snow 2003; Cracknell 2019). The colonial government surrendered on Christmas day. The occupation lasted until the final Japanese surrender in August 1945 and was devastating for Hong Kong. Most European civilians were interned while military personnel became prisoners of war (experiences many did not survive). Although the Japanese represented themselves as freeing Asians from British repression, the local Chinese population were subjected to much brutality including countless rapes, beatings and summary executions; an estimated 10,000 civilians were executed. Some local elites managed to do better through collaborating with the Japanese, at least at first, with the worst suffering falling on poorer people. As the war turned against Japan, many died of disease and starvation owing to acute food shortages. The Japanese also repatriated many local people to China. Hong Kong's population fell from 1.5 million to 600,000 (Snow 2006; Carroll 2007).

After the war, colonial rule resumed (though this had not been a foregone conclusion). Hong Kong recovered quickly and the population began to grow again, swelled by a new influx of refugees with the victory of the communists and founding of the Peoples' Republic of China. While some of these brought wealth with them, most had

little or nothing and were disadvantageded relative to the settled population (Chiu et al. 2005). They also had nowhere to live. Many constructed their own housing, building informal squatter settlements, huts put together from any available materials. Our own memories of Hong Kong in the 1960s are of these settlements being a ubiquitous and highly visible feature of the Hong Kong landscape, with huts covering the hill-sides in many areas apart from the central business district. Other newcomers crammed themselves into already overcrowded tenement buildings. Mimi, one of the Hong Kong mothers, told us about her family's experience. They were among those who had left Shanghai for Hong Kong when the Japanese invaded China. Her father was a tailor and 'was famous for making traditional Chinese clothes such as *qipao* and cotton padded jackets'. While he was setting up business in Hong Kong, they lived in a partitioned unit in an apartment shared with many other families. Somehow they survived the occupation. Mimi was born in the early 1960s. When she was two or three years old, they moved to a 'better' partitioned unit, which was 'part of someone's living room', so they still did not have self-contained accommodation. This is where Mimi grew up, along with her three siblings. The family did not manage to improve their living conditions further until Mimi reached adulthood, when her father bought a property in Tuen Mun in the New Territories.

In the years following the Second World War Britain underwent a period of austerity, with continued rationing until 1954, but this was soon to give way to a period of rapid economic growth, booming manufacturing industries and full employment. Better employment prospects, the welfare state, particularly the National Health Service (NHS) and free secondary education, along with a rapid growth in public housing in the 1950s, eased many burdens on working people. Nancy, one of the British mothers, described to us the impact this had on the family into which she was born. Both her parents came from 'very poor backgrounds' and had married at the beginning of the war. While her father had been away in the services for most of the duration, they had three children by 1946. Her account stands in sharp contrast to Mimi's:

They had a very small flat in London and then all the rebuilding was going on after the war and they had an opportunity to move to a big



new council estate in Essex and this was a new start for them to go to what was a big three-bedroomed house and it was end of terrace so a big garden, I mean from a very *very* small flat...Where they moved from was basically from a slum clearance programme, so they moved to this house in rural Essex, its only as extension of London now, but it was out in the countryside then. They moved there in 1950 and I was born in 1953...they were economically far more secure, you know by the time I was born and certainly through my childhood, and so there was more money. I was the youngest one, but everybody [in the family] saw the benefit of the boom years after the war.

Not all British people were so fortunate; many continued to live in the slum conditions Nancy's family had escaped, but generally the 1950s was a period of optimism and improvement in living standards. Hong Kong also experienced an economic boom in the 1950s, but without the benefits of a welfare state. It had lost its original *raison d'être*, not only with the ending of the opium trade, but also the closing of the border with China after 1950. Under these new economic conditions, the Hong Kong government took more control of the economy, but continued to endeavour to rule the colony cheaply and keep state intervention to what was required to facilitate business and commerce (see Clayton 2000, 2013). It did little to encourage manufacturing, which largely grew from below (Choi 1999). Manufacturing was already established before the war but expanded in the 1950s and was aided by an influx of capital from China when the Communists took over. Industry remained labour intensive as there was little incentive to restructure when the rapidly growing population ensured a supply of cheap labour, including that of many young women (see, e.g., Salaff 1995). Hong Kong produced textiles, plastic flowers and toys and also electronics such as transistor radios. Some of this production also involved homeworking, mostly undertaken by women, sometimes aided by their children. In his memoir of growing up in the squatter village of Diamond Hill, Feng Chi-Shun (2009) recalls assembling plastic flowers at home, just as Sik Ying and her family did. British people became aware of Hong Kong though such products and other cheap exports; 'Made in Hong Kong' was a familiar label.

Since low costs were seen as central to maintaining Hong Kong's competitive edge in the export market, the colonial state's attitude to any

calls for improvement in working and living conditions was one of ‘apathy, if not downright hostility’ (Choi 1999: 152). Hong Kong lacked welfare provisions but the government did invest, to a degree, in infrastructure and encouraged the growth of education, although it did not become free and compulsory until the 1970s. The one form of welfare the government did begin to provide, early in the post-war era, was housing. The growth of squatter settlements was a major cause for concern as the continued influx of refugees from China swelled the numbers of the homeless. The government did provide some minimal facilities for the squatters—one water tap per 500 people and one latrine compartment per 100 (Goodstadt 2013b, 2018) and began to build ‘resettlement blocks’ in the 1950s. The housing programme is often attributed to a major fire in the squatter settlement of Shek Kip Mei in 1953, but this has been convincingly contested by Alan and Josephine Smart, anthropologists who lived among squatters in Hong Kong for several years and who have also conducted extensive archival research (Smart 2006; Smart and Smart 2013). Not only were the government already considering strategies for the clearance of squatters before the fire, but there were also numerous other reasons, apart from the very real fire risk, that motivated the government. There was the fear of the disease that could spread easily in unsanitary, overcrowded conditions and many considered squatter settlements to be an eyesore. A crucial factor was that they were occupying land that could be used for lucrative development, and land sales were—and continue to be—a major source of government revenue. Smart and Smart (2013) argue that the attempt to clear away the squatters was part of a wider move to ‘formalize’ Hong Kong, to tidy away the informal economy of self-built housing, hawkers and street traders who were such a central part of Hong Kong life and its post-war vibrancy (see also DeWolf 2017).

The resettlement blocks that sprang up in the 1950s and 1960s were grim—one family to a small concrete room, very rudimentary communal sanitary facilities, with a lack of privacy that was particularly problematic for women, and no kitchens. Cooking had to be done in the corridors (see Tu 2003; Goodstadt 2013b, 2018). They also did not solve the problem, as the flow of migrants from China continued to outstrip housing development. The upheavals of the Cultural Revolution led to a new

wave of migration in which desperate refugees took extraordinary risks to escape to Hong Kong (see Chiu et al. 2005: 203–204). The parents of two of our focus group participants, Jane and Susie, came to Hong Kong at this time—in the latter case by swimming across the border. An idea of what this involved is provided by one of our own relatives, Sik Ying's cousin. His father was a teacher and had taught under the KMT (Kuomintang, the nationalist government), and was therefore a KMT employee, which made the family 'bad elements'. They were all sent down to the countryside in the Cultural Revolution and, on return to their homes in Guangdong, he, along with his sister and a group of young people, resolved to escape by swimming across the border. He wrote this account:

We could not see any future. At that time, we knew that Hong Kong would accept illegal immigrants, and so we decided to prepare ourselves and started practising swimming. We practised every day and made sure that everyone could swim continuously for hours. I tried and got caught for the first time by the soldiers at the border and got repatriated. I was imprisoned for a while. When I was released, I started my exercises again. I succeeded the second time and crossed the border and escaped the border guards. I swam across Tai Pang Wan [Big Hawk Bay, also called Mirs Bay] and landed somewhere in Sha Tau Kok [just south of the border].

He was luckier than most in having a home to go to; he and his sister joined Sik Ying's family in their public housing. This was not a resettlement block, but 'low cost housing', of a better standard, being self-contained and designed for longer-term residents in housing need. Sik Ying's family had moved from an old tenement building on Hong Kong Island to one of the first of these new estates, built in the 1960s. Ten people shared this desirable residence—two rooms—Sik Ying, her parents, her five siblings and the two cousins. This was far from being the worst overcrowding in Hong Kong. In 1963 a government working party reported that in the private rented sector it was 'not unknown for 60 or 70 people to be living in a three bedroom flat' (quoted by Goodstadt 2013b: 34).

The tide of refugees from China was not stemmed until the 1984 Sino-British agreement (on handing Hong Kong back to China), which led to more effective policing of the border. Political change in China,

with the end of the Mao era, economic reform and China's 'opening up' to the outside world may also have helped ease the situation. It was only in the 1980s that squatter settlements gradually began to be cleared, and some of this informal housing survives to this day. Housing has remained a major problem in Hong Kong, despite the growth of, and improvements in, public housing—the major form of welfare that both the colonial and SAR governments have provided.

## **Education and Social Mobility; Unequal Opportunities**

Our depiction of social conditions in post-war Britain and Hong Kong is intended to give readers an impression of the very different societies in which the older generation among our participants grew up. The British mothers' lived their childhoods in an already industrialised society (moving towards post-industrial) and after the establishment of the welfare state, while those in Hong Kong inhabited a colonial society marked by extensive poverty, with a per capita GDP less than a quarter of Britain's at the time and with only a rudimentary and largely voluntary welfare system until the last decades of the colonial period—it was only in the 1970s that state welfare provision began to grow. Until then the colonial administration continued to neglect the needs of the Chinese population (Tsang 2004; Tang and Lou 2009). As late as 1965 it was claimed that state welfare was not necessary since the Chinese relied on their families for mutual support (Tang and Lou 2009); but family members had to rely on each other as they had no other recourse.

Life in Britain was better, but it was far from egalitarian. Despite the gains made in the post-war era, many of the welfare provisions of the time, especially in terms of social security benefits and pensions, revealed the extent to which Britain was still a patriarchal society. Workers were assumed to be men, with women positioned as their dependants, as wives and mothers, which often resulted in intrusive policing of poor women's personal lives. The inequities of the system attracted much criticism from the new wave of feminist writers in the 1970s (see, e.g., Wilson 1977). Women had been drawn into the labour market in large numbers during

the war, but were expected to cede their places to returning servicemen afterwards, with a re-emphasis on female domesticity. In the 1970s, most married women were full-time housewives and a higher proportion of the western population were married than ever before. Yet things were changing, full employment and economic growth in the 1950s and 1960s had created more opportunities for women in both factory production and the clerical work associated with it, as well as in the growing state sector and service industries—at a time when jobs were very much segregated by gender. Increasing numbers of women were entering the labour market so that the male breadwinner model of family life was already changing (Lewis 1992, 2001), with attention being given to issues of women's 'two roles' in the family and the workplace (Myrdal and Klein 1962).

The mothers' generation in our British sample had, on the whole, gained from the post-war developments, which opened up possibilities for them that had not existed for their own mothers, particularly through education, enabling many of them to be upwardly mobile from working-class origins; only two of them had clearly middle-class backgrounds, Michelle and Cherry, one the daughter of teachers, the other the daughter of an officer in the military and a teacher. Most had benefitted from the increased economic security of their families, free secondary education and the expansion of higher education, both universities and polytechnics, in the 1960s. Despite this growth, however, in 1970 the participation rate in higher education was only 8.4% (Bolton 2012), with men outnumbering women about 2:1. Our sample is not representative in this respect; far more of them had received higher education than would be expected (and more than we expected), ten of the twelve. Karen, the most academically successful, had a Ph.D. and three others were pursuing postgraduate qualifications at the time of interview: Judith, Michelle and Frances. All but Ann and Patricia had undergraduate degrees.

Patricia, who was born in 1948, followed what was probably a more typical path to limited upward mobility for working-class girls of the time—from school to secretarial work. In reflecting on her experience, she highlights its gendered dimensions.

I suppose girls weren't encouraged to be academic then unless you were exceptionally bright... I think if I've had had time spent with me and

encouragement when I was younger things might have been different, because I'm not thick or stupid you know, but anyway I went to a commercial college where all I did for two terms was shorthand and typing so it was very intensive and I passed my exams in those two terms so I started work, I was 17 in the December and I started work in the April

The welfare state by no means lifted everyone out of poverty and it was still a reality for many in the 1960s and 1970s (Coates and Silburn 1970; Townsend 1979). Ann, one of the youngest of the British mothers, was born in 1960. Her parents had been divorced when she was 10 years old. Her mother, a factory worker, struggled to bring up five children. Ann recalls the stigma attached to receiving free school meals (available, still, on a means-tested basis to poor children) and the way the school dealt with this: 'you were sort of singled out, all the children with free school meals, "here are your coupons."' Whereas I think these days it's done more [discreetly] people don't know which children are on free school meals'. For Ann, higher education was never envisaged as a possibility: 'we weren't a university family' was how she put it.

Among the majority of the British women who did gain degrees, there were two common narratives: benefitting from the previous generation's frustrated ambitions and, especially among the older cohorts who passed the 11+ and went on to grammar school, the idea of a 'natural progression' on to higher education. These two narratives were not mutually exclusive—often they both featured in accounts of educational experiences. The parents of this generation, growing up in the inter-war years and during the Second World War, had often lost out on education and encouraged their children to grasp the opportunities they had lacked (see, e.g., Devine 2004). Stories told by a generation who were denied education have become woven into their daughters' narratives of educational success. Diane describes both her parents as being unable to achieve their potential and the encouragement she received from her mother who was 'very aware of the value of education' and therefore her 'homework always came before chores'. Similarly Karen said of her father, 'I think he was always very upset that he hadn't finished his education because of the war, so I think I did have a great deal of support'. Janet had a

rather different version of this narrative of benefitting from parents' frustrated ambition. Although she describes her origins as working class, her mother, very unusually, had gone to university and trained as a teacher, but once married had fallen foul of the marriage bar, which, until after the war, had excluded married women from many professional occupations.

In those days if you got married you had to give up your job, well professional job certainly. So she had to give up teaching to get married and I think she always resented that, so I think that's where it all came from, her encouraging [sister] and I to be independent so we wouldn't have to feel as though we were sacrificing ourselves because I think you know she absolutely loved teaching and it was a big decision for her, but that's what people did then and it was accepted thing that you got married and you had to do what the social norms were.

In some cases, families made considerable sacrifices to ensure their daughters' educational success. Susan was one of six children. She recalls being unable to join the Brownies because her parents could not afford the uniform and, like Ann, refers to the stigma of free school meals. Her four older siblings had all passed the 11+ and gone to grammar school, but by the time she was due to go to secondary school the 11+ was abolished. Her parents then paid for her to go to a fee-paying grammar school, despite the hardship this caused, but 'there was never any question that I wouldn't go there'. She reflects on her awareness of the cost but also not being 'appreciative enough of the sacrifices people were having to make because I was going to that school'. Like many of those who went to grammar school, this meant entering a world where a university education became a possibility. Susan deploys the 'natural progression' narrative, but with a recognition of the lack of options available to girls who did not succeed.

It never occurred to me not to go [to university], I didn't even think about it...going to a grammar school gave you that – if you were clever enough you went to university, if you weren't, well you could perhaps be a nurse or work in a bank. Those were the only options.

Janet, who describes herself as having been without specific career ambitions, spoke of her transition from school to university in very similar terms:

I went to a grammar school and it was kind of accepted that if you were of a certain education or whatever you did well in exams then you would move from one step to another step so I never really knew what I wanted to do at all apart from the fact that I knew I wanted to be able to be independent.

Not surprisingly those from more privileged backgrounds, Cherry and Michelle, describe a relatively unproblematic transition from school to university; it was simply followed from gaining good 'A' levels; if you didn't, as Michelle put it, you were 'left behind'. For others the path to higher education was not so smooth and predictable. Karen, despite being the best educated, did not initially do well: her 'A' levels were not good enough to gain access to university. She therefore worked for a few years before doing a degree as a mature student. Diane, too, went to university as a mature student after a number of false starts. One of only 4 in her primary school class who passed the 11+, she went to the local grammar school where she took 'O' and 'A' levels but did not attain high grades. After school she moved to London, sharing flats with friends and had 'some really fun jobs like London Zoo and a sex shop in Kensington Market'. Later she tried to gain admission to university but her A level grades were too low. After marriage she tried an Open University degree, which went well at first but was disrupted by childcare and never completed. She finally succeeded in gaining a degree from her local university. She later tried to do an MA but again family problems disrupted it; 'we had lots of problems with illness with my husband's parents and in the end it was just too much of a problem and I thought I don't really need to do this now, I was doing it for me because I wanted to do it...and it was a difficult choice to make in some ways'. Once again she sacrificed her own ambitions for the sake of her family.

While some of the British women faced challenges in gaining an education, the Hong Kong women typically negotiated much greater obstacles. The mothers in our Hong Kong sample had on average less



education their British women counterparts but, like them, were better educated than was usual for their contemporaries. Gaining an education for children was not easy. The Hong Kong education system was modelled on the British one with O and A level equivalents (HKCEE and HKAL), but was not free. Free compulsory education was not introduced until the 1970s—1971 for primary and 1978 for secondary schooling. Until then, poor families often gave priority to boys' education, with girls generally having lower levels of schooling than boys (Mak 2009). In schools run by charitable organisations, fees were low and affordable to most, but there was the added pressure of finding money for uniforms and school textbooks (which were not provided free). The extent of poverty among those who did have some schooling was revealed by a social welfare report, which estimated that almost 70% of schoolchildren were undernourished and recommended a school meals service for the worst affected, which was rejected by the colonial administration (Goodstadt 2013b). This puts complaints about the stigma of free school meals in Britain into perspective.

To add to the problems of educating children, many families were large; for example, Ellen was one of seven children, Elsie was one of eleven. Nonetheless, all had at least some education. Only four had entered higher education: Maria had a Bachelor's degree, Felicity and Rosemary had MBAs and Ms Au had qualified in Chinese medicine. Most of the others had secondary education, but May had only primary education and two, Mimi and Ms Tsang, had dropped out part-way through primary school. Here, among both the educationally successful and the unsuccessful, the dominant narrative was one of struggle: either their families struggled to survive and to enable them to be educated or they themselves struggled against the odds. Given Mimi's impoverished living conditions in her partitioned unit, it is not surprising that she did not fare well educationally. In addition, her mother died when she was five years old and, as the eldest of three children, she was expected help out:

I was the one who sacrificed the most in the family...When I finished school every day I had to help out in the kitchen. I began helping out and cooking at age 7. As my father was getting older, the need for another

breadwinner was stronger so I had to give up further study after primary 3, even though I had always been an achiever at school, as much as I can remember. I started earning money right after.

Even for families that were better off than Mimi's, life was often hard and required the co-operation of the whole family to ensure survival and future prosperity. Girls and young unmarried women were expected to contribute their wages, labour or both to their families (Salaff 1995). Ms Lui's parents were farmers in the New Territories who were 'neither rich nor poor' and her early childhood was a happy one, with the freedom to roam about outdoors. The absence of her father overseas, however, meant she had to leave full-time education after primary school and go to work in a garment factory. She managed to complete her secondary education at night school.

Whether or not they worked outside the home, it was normal for daughters of Hong Kong families to take on domestic responsibilities, and most of the women we interviewed mentioned this. Often the eldest would act as a second mother to younger siblings. Ellen was from a better off family than Mimi, but as the eldest of seven children had to pull her weight in making the family enterprise function, as well as studying hard at her school work. She told us 'my mother expected me to take care of the housework as well as the younger brothers and sisters ... I also needed to work in the *shanzhai gongchang* [pirated goods factory] that my family ran'. Despite these responsibilities, and claiming not to be very able academically, Ellen managed to complete five years of secondary schooling.

Rosemary's family also ran a small businesses, a *dai pai dong* (cooked food stall), which celebrated its 60th anniversary in 2019. She recalls how hard her mother had worked: 'My mother used to wake up at 4 or 5am every day for the preparation. I remember how my mother had to carry pots of hot water across the street to open up the mobile tea shop every day. It was a dangerous thing to do'. Her mother also brought up eight children, four sons and four daughters. The *dai pai dong* involved the whole family: 'All of my brothers and sisters have helped with the running of the business and it supported the living of my whole family'. Indeed, it enabled the family to pay for Rosemary to receive part of her

schooling abroad, which gave her the qualifications to go on to undertake a degree at Hong Kong Open University. As Alan and Josephine Smart point out, small enterprises such as these, originating as part of Hong Kong's informal economy, 'offered paths to survival and even upward mobility for the poor and new arrivals' (2013: 73), which has been the case for Rosemary's family. Such opportunities no longer exist in Hong Kong. There are still *dai pai dongs* but, like that of Rosemary's family, they have been tidied away into indoor cooked food markets and no longer so readily provide a way of making a living for those with almost nothing to their name.

Not all had the support of their parents to continue in education, though there was usually someone in the family who encouraged them. With the emphasis on daughters helping out in the home or in small family businesses, education was not always a priority. Mei-Li finished secondary education despite her mother's disapproval. She described her mother as 'feudal' in only encouraging her brothers' schooling. Elsie studied at school until the third form and then transferred to evening class for her HKCEE: 'the school I used to study at did not offer education beyond form 3, so I needed to look for another school and my parents did not help me at all'. She did not do well in her exams because she had to work in the family business and found studying tiring. Her parents owned a *chalou*, a traditional teahouse serving morning and afternoon tea and dim sum. She said: 'My parents wanted me to work for them instead of studying or working for other people'. It was her elder sister who encouraged her to find a factory job and then clerical work and establish some independence. Felicity was one of the luckier ones, though she said her parents largely ignored her and that she did more than her share of housework 'to get their attention'. Her brother supported her to go to university in Australia.

The struggle narrative contrasts strongly with the 'new opportunities' and 'natural progression' narratives of the British women. Also present in many of the British women's narratives is the trope of the 'happy childhood,' which is unsurprisingly rare in the Hong Kong accounts. The British women often described secure and carefree childhoods: 'my childhood was lovely I enjoyed my childhood' (Janet). Even if there was little money to go round, childhood could be depicted as 'poor but happy', as

it was in Ann's and Barbara's accounts. More privileged women could also look back on positive memories; Cherry had 'really enjoyed' her early childhood, moving to different countries when her father was posted overseas. Not all paint such a rosy picture and some childhoods were affected by personal misfortunes or family tensions. Judith and Patricia both complained of strict, overbearing fathers; Frances's childhood was clouded by her mother's long-term mental illness and Michelle's father had suffered a nervous breakdown when she was a small child. Two suffered the death of a parent when they were ten or eleven years old, Barbara, her father and Susan her mother, which disrupted their previously happy lives. In general, though, the British women did not experience the hardships described by their Hong Kong contemporaries.

Despite the emphasis on struggle in the Hong Kong women's narratives, they expressed no resentment against the colonial government; they did not hold it responsible for the conditions that made life so hard. The past neglect of the local population has either been forgotten or was simply not seen as contributing to the hardships they faced as children or relevant to the stories they told us. Possibly, after Japanese occupation or escape from China, the colonial administration seemed relatively benign. It may also be that the upward mobility they achieved, though family businesses and the existence of moderately affordable education, has coloured their view of the past. It also enabled them to construct a positive narrative of self, of having the courage and tenacity to succeed against the odds. A further factor is that the Hong Kong SAR government is no better than the past colonial administration, while the Beijing government is increasingly undermining the autonomy Hong Kong is supposed to enjoy as a Special Administrative Region.

## **Protest and Change: 1960s and 1970s**

In the 1960s and 1970s, some of the mothers were still children, others were in their teens or early adulthood. This era is often remembered in the UK in terms of the 'swinging 60s' and the 'sexual revolution'—though the 60s did not swing for all, as we have illustrated in Ann's account of her childhood and there was less a revolution in sexuality than

a culmination of gradual change. There were, however, some legal and social changes in the late 1960s and early 1970s that affected gendered and sexual lives, such as the liberalisation of divorce and censorship, the partial decriminalisation of male homosexuality, the availability of oral contraception and the beginnings of equal pay and equal opportunities legislation. This was an era of counter-cultural movements, women's liberation, gay liberation and new left activism. Those who went to university in the 1970s recalled the influence of feminism, left-wing politics, 'the pill' and the hippy movement on their lives—and certainly these generally liberalising trends affected how they conducted their sexual and romantic relationships (see Chapter 6). The 1960s and early 1970s were still periods of full employment making those who entered university at that time relatively relaxed about managing the transition to work.

Life in Hong Kong was very different. In the 1960s Hong Kong was still a very visibly poor society. In addition to the squatter settlements and resettlement blocks, many families lived on small boats—sampan—and there were still rickshaws in the streets, though mostly used by tourists and elderly locals. Women carried babies on their backs in colourful embroidered slings, often to work—and many returned to work within days of giving birth. Men and women toiled building new high-rise towers with no safety equipment. Workers had almost no legal rights or protections, worked long hours and had limited or no entitlements to sick pay, maternity leave or paid holidays. Some improvements were made in the working conditions of factory workers in 1959 and 1962; they gained an entitlement to twelve days of sick leave at half pay and the working hours of women were reduced to sixty per week, but they still had no rights to a rest day or paid maternity leave. Moreover the enforcement of these laws was lax and many occupations remained unregulated (Clayton 2007). It was, as we saw in the introduction, a labour dispute that sparked off the serious disturbances in Hong Kong in 1967. These events certainly shocked the British administration, particularly given the chaos of the Cultural Revolution in China at the time, with some border incursions by the Peoples Liberation Army and the fear that China might invade. These events are often seen as a watershed in Hong Kong history (Cheung 2009), leading to reforms from the late 1960s into the 1970s which provided somewhat more employment protection, social

assistance, a new public housing initiative and health care, as well as free compulsory education.

Many of these reforms were already under discussion before 1967, under pressure from successive governments in Britain and proposed by more progressive elements in the colonial bureaucracy (Clayton 2013; Goodstadt 2013b, 2018). From the post-war period onward, however, attempts to improve working and social conditions in Hong Kong were repeatedly stalled and delayed. The administration failed to act on recommendations of reports into social conditions it had itself commissioned and resisted demands for change coming from the government in London and from international bodies. It was repeatedly argued that Chinese people did not mind bad working and living conditions. A key factor here was the power of the business community. While the government refused to provide some of the incentives to businesses offered in other East Asian jurisdictions, such as subsidies and cheap land rents, the deal it made with the commercial sector was to keep taxes low and resist moves that might increase labour costs. The reforms introduced in the 1970s were, therefore, piecemeal and limited (Goodstadt 2013b, 2018), but were sufficient to persuade the populace that the government 'had become relatively reasonable' (Cheung 2009: 140). In any case, by the end of the disturbances, the extreme violent tactics adopted by the leftists had alienated most of the population and led them to side with the colonial administration.

One of the reforms of this era was significant in terms of gender relations: the abolition of polygyny. There had been a campaign for marriage law reform for some decades, spearheaded by the Hong Kong Council for Women, which had been founded in 1947 by elite expatriate and educated Chinese women (Lim 2015). Replicating the resistance to abolishing the *mui tsai* system, the colonial administration defended the retention of polygyny as 'respecting Chinese tradition' even though the nationalist government in China had attempted to abolish it and the PRC had succeeded in doing so through the 1950 Marriage Act. It was, of course, only elite Chinese men who could afford secondary wives and concubines, so this was another case of collusion between the

colonial administration and local elites. Legally sanctioned polygyny persisted longer in Hong Kong than in any other Chinese majority society and was finally abolished in 1970 (Lee 2003; Lim 2015).

## From the 1980s Onwards

The daughters in our study were born in the late 1980s and early 1990s when further global changes were afoot with the rise of neoliberalism and, in Hong Kong, the impending return of the colony to China. It could be said that Hong Kong was always already neoliberal given its lack of welfare and the emphasis on individuals and families being responsible for their own well-being. In the UK, the breakdown of the so-called post-war consensus, which had sustained commitment to the welfare state, is usually dated to the period of Margaret Thatcher's premiership (1979–1990) and carried through to subsequent Conservative and New Labour administrations. The 1980s saw tax cuts for the rich, large-scale privatisation of state controlled utilities, the sale of council (public) housing, attacks on the trade unions and efforts to cut expenditure on welfare. At the same time, from the 1980s onwards, the labour market was undergoing restructuring, affecting both class and gender relations (Irwin 2005). More women were entering the labour market; by the 1980s, most married British women were employed and their earnings were becoming crucial for family finances. Secure, well-paid and skilled manual jobs of the kind monopolised by men were in decline, undermining the 'family wage' and the privileges previously enjoyed by white working-class men (Williams and Neely 2018). Partly this was a result of political decisions such as the closure of the mines in the 1980s and the privatisation of sectors of the economy, partly it was a result of technological changes rendering old skills redundant and finally because of outsourcing of industrial production to parts of the world where labour was cheaper—and less unionised. Britain was becoming a 'post-industrial' society.

The world, however, is not post-industrial. There is still a demand for the manufactured goods previously produced in Britain and other countries in the Global North; industry has moved elsewhere—and one key site of industry today is China. China's 'opening up' and economic

reform post-1979 led initially to the creation of Special Economic Zones (SEZs), in which Foreign Direct Investment was encouraged through preferential business conditions and the availability of a pool of cheap labour provided by migrants from the rural hinterland. This opening up to foreign capital and companies was then broadened out to many other coastal sites and eventually inland areas as China's modernisation project gathered momentum. Now much of the world's industrial output comes from China. Its exports, particularly in light industries, include high-profile global brands, such as Apple's iPhones, which are manufactured in China by the Taiwanese company, Foxconn, under a labour regime whose conditions of work would not be tolerated anywhere in Europe (see e.g. Pun and Chen 2012).

The first SEZ was set up in 1980 and was on Hong Kong's doorstep, in Shenzhen, just across the border with China. Shenzhen has expanded from a fishing village to a mega-city of over twelve million registered inhabitants and an actual population, including unregistered migrants, of about 20 million and is part of the much larger megalopolis of the Pearl River Delta, which has developed over recent decades. The availability of much cheaper labour and facilities just across the border led to most of Hong Kong's factories relocating there. In addition to the business opportunities, this created another, gendered, set of opportunities—for Hong Kong men working in China or travelling on business there to keep a 'second wife' (*bao ernai*) across the border (see Ho 2014; Xiao 2011; Ho et al. 2018). This is a well-known source of anxiety for many Hong Kong wives. It was mentioned by a number of our participants and had directly affected two of them—Mimi and May.

The opportunities, both economic and erotic, that China's opening up created for some have been matched with a decline in opportunities for others in hastening the end of Hong Kong's industrial era, with the consequent loss of many working-class jobs, as was happening in the UK. Between 1991 and 2001, employment in manufacturing fell dramatically, among skilled and semi-skilled workers by 19.3% and among 'plant and machine operators' by 34.8%, while the labour force as a whole was growing. The growth was in work in services, from the humble, such as shop workers, to managers and professionals, whose numbers increased substantially (Chiu and Lui 2009: 83). Hong Kong's economy



had shifted to one based on finance and other services. Financial and banking institutions had long been a central aspect of Hong Kong's economy, dating back to its history as an entrepôt; for example, the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC) was established in 1865 and incorporated in 1866 to facilitate the China trade—and is now a global brand, though no longer headquartered in Hong Kong but in the UK. Hong Kong was already becoming a major global financial centre by the 1980s, and its importance as such grew with China's opening up. The resultant restructuring of the labour market contributed to the widening gulf between rich and poor even as Hong Kong's overall wealth continued to grow (Chiu and Lui 2009). Since one of the growth areas was investment in real estate accompanying the global commodification and financialization of housing (Madden and Marcuse 2016), it also contributed to putting a decent place to live beyond the reach of those unable to secure the still scarce public housing.

Alongside this economic transformation, there were other major changes in Hong Kong society, politics and culture. One of these was the emergence of a distinctive Hong Kong identity: the 'Hongkonger', which commentators generally date to the 1980s (Carroll 2007; Tsang 2004). In part this was the result of a settled population, rather than the transients and refugees of the past, and a young adult generation who had grown up in Hong Kong. Although, as Carroll (2007) points out, some settled local inhabitants had distinguished themselves from mainland Chinese since the late nineteenth century, now this sense of distinctiveness was beginning to characterise much of the population. This development is also attributable to Hong Kong's increasing prosperity compared with the Mainland at the time and the 'efforts of the Colonial government to foster a sense of identity' and, most of all, in the early 1980s, 'the realization that Hong Kong would revert to Chinese sovereignty in 1997' (Carroll 2007: 168), which was formalised in the Sino-British Joint declaration of 1984, ratified in 1985.

It is understandable that China would want Hong Kong returned: it symbolically marked the beginning of the end of 'a century of humiliation'. Hong Kong people had no choice in the matter—they were simply handed from one form of colonial subjection to another. The colonial administration's belated attempts to introduce greater democracy raised objections from China and were abandoned. Since the handover, Hong

Kong's population has been divided on the issue of the relationship with China, with some defiantly asserting their Hong Kong identity, others accepting or even embracing their Chineseness. Most of those who participated in a study in the early 2000s were somewhere in between, defining themselves as Chinese but Hong Kongese or Honkongese but also Chinese (Matthews et al. 2008). In the last few years, and especially since Xi Jinping became president of China, there has been increasing disquiet over Beijing's growing interference in Hong Kong affairs, undermining the freedoms it was supposed to enjoy under 'one country two systems'. This helped fuel the major pro-democracy protests in 2014 and 2019, which further strengthened the Hong Kong identity. According to a poll conducted by the Public Opinion Programme of the University of Hong Kong in June 2019, 75% of those aged 18–29 identified exclusively as 'Hongkongers' (rather than Chinese or hybrid Hong Kong/Chinese). Among the population as a whole, over half did so (POP 2019).

Hongkongers' sense of distinctiveness from 'mainlanders' has acquired new significance since the handover. It is manifested not only in the sphere of politics, with resistance to Beijing's rule most evident in the 2014 and 2019 protests, but also in everyday complaints about mainlanders. Increasing numbers from across the border visit as tourists and newly rich Chinese have bought property in Hong Kong and are seen as exacerbating housing problems. There have also been moral panics about pregnant mainland women coming to Hong Kong to give birth; they have been depicted as locusts consuming Hong Kong's limited resources. It has been argued that mainlanders, rather than being seen as fellow Chinese, have become racialised as 'other' and inferior (Lowe and Tsang 2017). While many of those campaigning for democracy oppose this racialisation, not all do there is no doubt that anti-mainlander feeling has increased in the context of the 2019–2020 protests—not helped the coronavirus outbreak in China in early 2020, which has intensified the hostility to those from the mainland who are now seen as carriers of disease.

One particular feature of the antipathy to mainlanders is that they are seen as less civilised. In part this reflects changes in Hong Kong society and culture; over the last half-century. As Hong Kong evolved into

a much richer society, it has undergone, in Elias' terms, 'a civilizing process' (Elias 1994). In the western context, Elias argues, the concept of civilisation 'sums up everything in which Western society of the last two or three centuries believes itself to be superior to earlier societies or "more primitive" contemporary ones' (1994: 3), and which also served to justify colonialism. Western societies do not, of course, have a monopoly on defining civilisation; China, in particular, has recently developed its own conceptualisation of a 'socialist spiritual civilization' (see Ho et al. 2018). This has not prevented Hongkongers from regarding their neighbours across the border as lacking the manners that define civilised and civil conduct. It is not uncommon to find reports in the Hong Kong media, or on social media, about mainlanders' rudeness and lack of decorum, from the loudness of their speech to allowing their children to urinate in the streets, spitting in public and not knowing how to use a western-style toilet bowl.<sup>2</sup>

An important element in the civilising process, for Elias, is a transformation in manners, especially in the management of bodily functions, their 'isolation from public life'. This is partly a result of the development of technologies that facilitate this development (e.g. advances in plumbing) but it also reflects 'the advance in the frontiers of shame and the threshold of repugnance' (Elias 1994: 114). Spitting is a pertinent example, and one that Elias discusses as having been common in European societies until a few centuries ago but is now considered disgusting and something that, in recent times, 'many Europeans find particularly unpleasant when travelling in the East' (1994: 128). Loud throat-clearing and spitting was once a ubiquitous feature of Hong Kong street life. In his memoir of childhood in Hong Kong in the 1950s, Martin Booth (2005) recalls being particularly fascinated by this phenomenon as a small boy. Most Europeans, like the travellers mentioned by Elias, found it objectionable and one of many practices that justified racist attitudes to the Chinese population. It was still common in the 1960s and early 1970s but has now almost disappeared among Hong Kong people, but

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<sup>2</sup>For a mainstream media example see: <https://www.scmp.com/comment/article/1499786/protect-hong-kong-tourism-stigma-bad-manners>. For a debate on social media see: <http://www.city-data.com/forum/asia/2877387-chinese-mainlanders-manners.html>. Both accessed 5 March 2019.

not among the mainland Chinese. Thus the 'threshold of repugnance', here and in relation to other bodily functions, has advanced among Hong Kongers such that they can now express the same disgust at mainlanders' behaviour that Europeans had previously expressed towards them. There are other ways, too, that Hong Kong manners have changed in the direction of more orderly behaviour, such as the institutionalisation of queuing, so that it might be possible to see a parallel in the formalisation of manners and the formalisation of the physical environment that Smart and Smart (2013) see in the clearing of squatter settlements and the decline in open-air markets and street trading.<sup>3</sup>

While Hong Kong people come to terms with being part of China and their uneasy relationship with both the Beijing government and mainland incomers, they continue to grapple with the bread and butter issues of living in a rich society marked by growing inequality and insecurity. Even those who are relatively well off cannot always guarantee their long-term security, particularly in the context of recurrent economic crises. The lack of welfare and pension provision, and generally inadequate occupational pensions, leads many middle-class Hong Kong people to invest in the stock market, which can make them vulnerable to the vagaries of the market. Mei-Li's experience is illustrative. Her husband had been successful in business and they owned a few properties, but were hit hard by the Asian Financial Crisis in the 1990s and by subsequent economic shocks. They lost much of what they had accumulated, including the luxury apartment in which they had lived, and had to move to more modest accommodation in Fo Tan, in the New Territories, where housing is less expensive than in more central districts. Nonetheless, Mei-Li is proud of how she coped with this setback. She opened a laundry shop in order to earn money to support the family and contributed to restoring their financial security, if at a lower level than before.

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<sup>3</sup>It is worth noting, however, that the formalisation of manners is not always a linear, one-way process and that in some spheres of life there are trends towards the informalisation of manners (Wouters 2006, 2007), especially in relations between men and women and in their romantic and sexual conduct (see Chapter 5).

## Twenty-First Century Lives

In both the UK and Hong Kong, life has become more difficult for many as a result of economic crises, political uncertainty, precarious employment and fewer predictable opportunities for young people. Changing conditions, locally and globally, create a new set of challenges for the daughters of the women whose lives we have discussed in this chapter. Where their mothers were either upwardly mobile or maintained middle-class status, it is not so certain that their daughters will be successful. Even a good degree does not guarantee career success. In the UK, we have witnessed increasing precarity of employment, the erosion of welfare benefits, cuts to council services and a rise in homelessness. Food banks and people living on the streets have become commonplace. Even the professional classes cannot guarantee a secure future given changes in the job market and the end of generous final salary pension schemes.

Yet Britain's welfare state, undermined though it has been, still offers greater protections than are available in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong SAR government has continued the many of the worst features of the colonial regime in its lack of provision for the poor. Pensions are a case in point. Elderly people, unless they have financial resources or their families can support them, are reliant on the means-tested 'comprehensive social security'—and means testing includes taking the wider family's income into account, which sometimes acts as a deterrent to claiming it. One of the saddest, and very common, sights in contemporary Hong Kong is the work very elderly people undertake to survive—pushing heavy trollies around the streets, whether to load and unload delivery trucks or, especially among old women, to collect piles of cardboard for resale. They can also earn a pittance by handing out advertising fliers to passers-by. That they are reduced to such measures in their later years reflects the lack of pension provision. The idea of a universal old-age pension had been floated and blocked five times between 1967 and 1995 (Goodstadt 2018). A Mandatory Provident Scheme was introduced in 2000, but it will be a few decades before anyone will benefit from it and it is flawed in many other respects, raising demands, again, for a universal retirement pension. In 2013, in a parallel with past practices, the government commissioned a report of the feasibility of such a scheme from the

University of Hong Kong and then proceeded to dismiss it. The team was led by a much-respected academic expert on social policy, Professor Nelson Chow. Their report recommended a universal, non-means-tested benefit for all over 65 funded by the government and employer and employee contributions. It was put out to public consultation but in such biased terms that it was easy for the government to dismiss it as unaffordable and as unfair—on the rich, who would have to contribute more. As we were completing this book, in January 2019, a fresh scandal broke when Hong Kong's Chief Executive, Carrie Lam, proposed to raise the age at which comprehensive social security allowance was paid to the elderly poor from 60 to 65. With remarkable insensitivity to the living conditions and harsh lives of those affected, and the toll it takes on their health, she asserted that since she could work beyond the age of 60 so could everyone else. At the same time, it was reported that for every dollar the Hong Kong government collects in tax (which is not its only source of revenue) it spent only 97 cents. The public outcry led to a partial climbdown by Lam, and the introduction of a supplementary payment to those social security claimants aged 60–64. The lack of a universal pension and the continued reliance on means-tested benefits alone will continue to disadvantage not only the very poor, especially those deterred from claiming, but also those struggling just above the level at which social security is paid.

Housing is an issue in both Britain and Hong Kong. The shortage of affordable housing is exacerbated by the use of property as an investment by the wealthy, pushing up prices and helping to deny those less well-off a decent place to live. A further problem is the lack of public housing or, as it is known in the UK, social housing; in Hong Kong the public housing building programme slowed down after the turn of the millennium. Between 2000 and 2010 government spending on housing was cut by 57%, new public rental units completed fell by 71% and the price of private flats rose by 68% (Goodstadt 2013b: 47–48). In Britain, the legacy of the sale of council housing and lack of adequate alternatives has meant that many of the houses once available for rental by the less affluent have now been bought by the middle classes. The price of housing continues to rise except in depressed areas with few job opportunities. Even those

young people, such as the daughters in our sample, who have a university education—and even if they secure good jobs—are being priced out of the housing market and may not be able to envisage buying a home, leaving them at the mercy of the private rental sector. Young Hong Kong women simply stay living with their parents, while their British contemporaries tend to rent-share with friends or boyfriends or they become ‘boomerang children’, returning to the parental home if they cannot survive. In both places, there are hidden slums, hidden homeless, as well as people living on the streets. In Hong Kong, the problems are particularly acute.

At the time of the handover, it looked as though Hong Kong might be on the way to solving its housing problem with 52% of the population rehoused, but the cutbacks to the public housing programme were accompanied by a slow-down in building in the private sector. While old tenement blocks continue to be demolished—and their erstwhile tenants left to fend for themselves—they are largely being replaced by luxury developments well beyond the reach of ordinary people. Meanwhile much of the older private housing stock, into which many Hong Kong people bought during the later colonial era, was not built to last and is now rapidly deteriorating. The situation has been worsened by the subdivision of many of the already small apartments for rent, putting more strain on the worn wiring and plumbing in dilapidated buildings. These sub-divided units (SDUs), though illegal, are tolerated by the government, despite the fire risks and other problems they pose, because of the lack of any alternative affordable rentals. They are the only recourse for many Hong Kong people, including young people who move out of the parental home. It is estimated that 200,000 tenants are living in these new slums, 70% of whom are employed and most of the rest being their dependants (Goodstadt 2018: 99). At the ‘better’ end of this rental market SDUs have tiny private bathrooms and sometimes rudimentary cooking facilities. These would therefore be a little better than those Mimi lived in as a child. At the other end, they offer only a sleeping space, often not even partitioned by more than a curtain, with bathroom facilities shared by many residents. These are typically occupied by the elderly poor—the only homes they can afford.

We draw attention to these conditions in Hong Kong to underline the continuing problem of extreme poverty, the lack of even basic safety nets and the ways in which the neglect of the needs of the population established in the colonial era has continued. We would hope that none of our participants end up in such dire circumstances, but in today's world few can afford to be complacent about their future and their children's future. Nonetheless, the Hong Kong women we interviewed were better off than many. Neither the British nor the Hong Kong samples are representative of their local populations, but the stories the women of the mothers' generation told us about growing up in Britain and Hong Kong illustrate trends in social change in both locations. For many of these women, they are stories of success, of upward mobility, though achieved under very different conditions. We recognise that their stories are the result of processes of remembering and forgetting, of what they chose to tell us at the time and of their reconstructions of the past from the standpoint of the present (Jackson 2010). As narratives, they are also indicative of the way these women made sense of their lives. As such they form an essential backdrop to issues we discuss in the following chapters: the meaning of family; relationships between mothers and daughters; the negotiation of romantic and sexual relationships; and women's understanding of life in the late modern world, including their anticipated futures.