

Hong Kong, the Next 50 Years

BY SIN-MING SHAW

FINALLY, the often acrimonious, sometimes suspenseful transition has drawn to a close and Hong Kong, special administrative region of China, is now a reality.

Yet the question remains: What is Hong Kong's future? Will it remain a great city? The question piques the mind, exercises the imagination.

Will it become — as Beijing and Hong Kong's new Chief Executive C.H. Tung never cease to assert — much better under Chinese rule than British? There is, of course, much racial pride in wanting to do better than the departing Brits.

I have no crystal ball, so I think about history. Fifty years ago, in 1947, Hong Kong was a minor colonial trading outpost, well-known only among Scottish traders of certain "pharmaceuticals." A trickle of Chinese immigrants from war-torn China was only then working its way to the Fragarant Harbor.

Hong Kong was a "whites only" town socially and politically. The Brits and the Chinese did business as rough equals, but equality never penetrated the colonial corporate world, where locals to this day are still mainly in positions well below their talents. The British were willing to trade equally, but not to share the same room. That's actually rather fortunate for the Chinese, who thrived on trading and self-help.

Outside of business, Hong Kong was one city, two societies. It still is. The Brits, too condescending to learn Chinese, are now essentially an alien group, absorbed in their own misplaced self-importance. Even after a century and half of cohabitation, the two races never really met. Expediency has been their only bond. Each group thinks of the other as racist. The Brits have few local Chinese allies, and Hong Kong will not remember them particularly fondly.

Pity that the British are not leaving behind a better



Hong Kong University: alas, it's no Stanford



SHANGHAI-BORN BUSINESSMAN SIN-MING SHAW WAS BITTEN BY THE MASS-MEDIA BUG EARLY IN A CAREER THAT HAS PROPELLED HIM FROM ACADEMIA TO JOURNALISM TO THE HELM OF HIS OWN INVESTMENT COMPANY IN HONG KONG. SHAW SHARES HIS INSIGHTS ON THE REGION'S LEADING ISSUES IN A REGULAR ASIA, INC. COLUMN

legacy. Granted, they have done some good work. One important achievement was to put into practice, however imperfectly, the concept of the supremacy of law over power.

Hong Kong's Chinese, for all their cosmopolitan exposure and education, succumb easily to the seduction of nationalism, a direct result of Western subjugation of China. The colonials' haughty treatment grates on all Chinese. And in the countdown to 1997 Beijing played the nationalistic card as only a political master could.

In any event, the future Hong Kong, a small province in the Chinese body politic, will have little control over its destiny, promises of "one country two systems" notwithstanding. That concept was tactically brilliant for the period before, during and shortly after the transition, but morally flawed.

Well within the next 50 years, as China continues its market reforms, there will be little need for two systems, and the nationalistic Hong Kong Chinese will clamor for integration to prove their loyalty. Even without full absorption, Hong Kong's promised "high degree of autonomy" will be comparable to that of China's autonomous regions: more than elsewhere, but within limits. Press and other freedoms will progress only as fast as the motherland's. Hong Kong will not long be out-of-sync with the mainland. Beijing and local politicians will see to that.

Culturally, Hong Kong will remain a pygmy compared with the vast pool of mainland talent now resurfacing with impressive speed after years of suppression. A simple illustration: For 50 years Hong Kong has been one of the world's three major movie producers, after Hollywood and India. Yet no directors, writers, playwrights or actors have come close to