Preface

Hong Kong has created its own distinctive form of life, one that has its nineteenth-century beginnings in the intersection of two large empires: on the one hand, the long-established civilization of the Qing Empire, and on the other, the burgeoning power of the British Empire. Immediately following the violence-facilitated formal acquisition of the territory, and thus its identification as a place, not just another patch of rocky coastline, it became host to two flows of inward migration: European, in particular British merchants and assorted adventurers, and Chinese, notably members of existing networks of low-status coastal traders. These inward flows of migrants were the germ of Hong Kong. Thereafter, down the years, a colonial port city was created. A sharp division formed between the elite and the masses; however, both groups were made up of shifting populations: elites were sojourners, so traders came for business whilst administrators were colonial civil servants on postings, some settled, most did not, whilst the unremarked masses moved into the territory and they moved out. Colonial rule created a framework within which diverse social groups made their lives – groups within the elites, groups amongst the masses, and residual groups of indigenous peoples scattered around the territory and outlying islands – nonetheless, the port city, although never particularly orderly, prospered.

The edge of two empires turned out to be a favourable location, but it was not until late in the life of the colony that these agglomerations of groups began to coalesce, when, from the late 1960s, in response to popular demands (and a few riots), the government moved to intervene decisively in the lives of the now much more settled population. It was in the period from the 1960s through to the 1997 handover that reform-minded colonial officials along with local people made the community that now exists. Together with an avaricious, reluctant and politically laggard business elite they created a law-based species of liberal market together with the culture of a liberal democracy, yet this was all done whilst retaining formal structures of power and authority associated with a colony. In time the people who had made their lives in the territory came to understand themselves as ‘Hong Kongers’. It was an unusual model. More unusual still was its subsequent fate in 1997 when the
long-established distant master in London passed control to Beijing. A further model is now in place with the overall package tagged as ‘one country with two systems’. The local pattern of liberal market and vigorous public sphere continues, but the place is now turned towards a new distant master: it was a colony; it is a colony. But that status is in question. It has been in question since the 1960s and the creation of Hong Kongers; however, in the run up to the handover by London and Beijing, locally made proposals for reform to the political structures were cynically closed down by the British, whilst the last twenty or so years have seen Beijing following this same strategy. Over the years commentators have remarked on the low-key, subdued politics of the colony; occasional riots aside, it seemed one way or another to work. But these same commentators now suggest that this situation has changed. Speaking of Hong Kong after the transfer of power they identify multiple problems both in domestic governance and in external relations with Beijing (the one unsettled by popular discontent, the other clouded with uncertainty), issues running together in the unhappy public responses to the closed circle elections of the territory’s post-handover leaders; problems compounded by Beijing’s inept handling of the issue of universal suffrage.

All this is unfortunate. In any case, as the experience of the old distant colonial power fades into memory, the political community of Hong Kong must both order its domestic affairs and deal with its new distant master if it is to continue and perhaps reform its distinctive and prosperous pattern of life. Hong Kong is up and running. It has a species of liberal market economy, and it has a variant form of liberal-democratic political culture, but it has a quasi-colonial system of governance. Local reactions suggest that this last noted has become an unsustainable anomaly. The question becomes, how might present dynamics unfold? This, in turn, implies a further set of questions. How might a new political settlement linking Hong Kong and China be embedded in institutions, ideas and routine practice? How might domestic governance be ordered? What variant of democracy will be pursued? How will local class antagonisms be resolved? How will the existing form of life develop? To anticipate, two broad lines of advance will be mooted – two contrasting scenarios. In one, the optimistic progressive path of development, the territory will organize reforms to its systems of governance. A liberal market plus liberal-democratic political culture will be rationally supplemented by a liberal-democratic system of governance. It will be a variant form, a rehearsal of the model successfully engineered by the People’s Action Party (PAP) in Singapore, not a copy of an abstract general model – a product of its own historical development trajectory.
and present conditions. In the other, the pessimistic drifting path of development, the system of governance will be revised slowly in order to become a variant form of the mainland’s party-state system, and this will be met by dismay by significant sections of the local population. However, this will not overly concern the distant master in Beijing, and Hong Kong will become just another mainland city, one more city amongst a number in the Pearl River Delta region, prosperous, unequal and unremarkable.