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BOOK REVIEW

La France et les Français à Hong Kong (1918-1941)

By François Drémeaux

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The monograph *La France et les Français à Hong Kong (1918-1941)* [France and the French in Hong Kong (1918-1941)] by François Drémeaux is the most comprehensive study of the French presence in Hong Kong from the end of the First World War until the Japanese occupation of the British colony. Histories of foreign communities in China are a rich, yet unevenly covered, field. From the unsurpassed studies of Britons in Shanghai by Robert Bickers (e.g. Bickers 1998; 1999; 2003) to more recent works shedding light on hitherto overlooked communities such as the Macanese in Hong Kong (e.g. Chan 2021), there is much we know, and much we don't, about the plural experiences of 'foreigners' in the country. The case of the British colony of Hong Kong, a cosmopolitan 'meeting place' (Sinn and Munn 2017) from early on, is itself a reflection of those variations in historiographical coverage, with existing works having a marked Anglophone focus covering the British, Americans, Macanese/Portuguese, as well as, to a lesser extent, the Japanese (Chu 2003; Kong 2023; Larkin 2024; Chan 2021; Nakano and Challen 2024). Scholarship on the French presence in China has mostly centred on Shanghai and, to a lesser extent, Guangzhouwan (Cesari and Varaschin 2003; Bensacq-Tixier 2014; Armand and Henriot 2022; Vannière 2020). It is perhaps surprising that it has taken so long to reconstruct the histories (plural) of the French in Hong Kong during a crucial period of the twentieth century. This book, however, addresses the previous historiographical neglect and affirms Drémeaux as, arguably, the leading historian of the French in Hong Kong, having also authored other studies specifically on the shipping company Messageries Maritimes (Drémeaux 2014) and on the Free French in the territory (Drémeaux 2024), the latter offering a sort-of follow-up chapter to the book under review here.

Comprising seven chapters, as well as an introduction, a conclusion and a series of additional materials (photographs, maps, lists of officials, four indexes), *La France et les Français à Hong Kong (1918-1941)* is structured thematically, while also paying attention to chronology. The book traces French state and non-state actors in Hong Kong, covering the diplomatic, commercial, religious, and other spheres. The author notes early on that the French presence was not merely human, it was also 'a language, a culture, products' (p. 27). The book draws on an impressive array of public and private archives from France, Hong Kong, and the UK: diplomatic and colonial archives, institutional archives such as company and religious mission records, oral histories, and private collections, showing meaningful engagement with visual materials such as family photographs.

The first chapter addresses the French consulate as a central axis of the country's presence in Hong Kong, linking it with diplomatic, commercial, and other French interests in Beijing, Shanghai, Macau, Guangzhouwan, and Indochina. Despite the chronological range indicated in the book's title, Drémeaux is meticulous in grounding his study in an earlier chronology of the French presence in the British colony, going back to its origins. When addressing the consulate's role and profiling its staff, the wider reach of this study becomes apparent: this

chapter is far from being merely a history of French diplomats abroad. Rather, it is a multi-faceted study linking consular representation – the ‘epicentre’ of the French community (p. 55) – with residents and commercial activities, and showing the close links with French Indochina. In other words, this book makes an important contribution to our understanding of inter-imperial networks spanning, in this case, two imperial spheres (the French and the British) in East and Southeast Asia.

The French were never a very numerous foreign community in Hong Kong, lagging far behind the British, the Portuguese, and the Japanese. In the period considered in this book, those registered in the consulate did not exceed 0.02% of the total population (p. 56), numbering no more than a few hundred. Yet they did have significant characteristics: women outnumbered men (p. 58) and the number of ‘Indochinese’ protected persons exceeded the ‘European’ French. The latter was a heterogeneous community in terms of occupation, gender, and class and, tellingly, it included consular employees. Indeed, the passages on the roles of Chinese and Vietnamese consular staff are particularly interesting (e.g. pp. 53–54). Throughout the book, one also finds numerous references to Portuguese staff of Macanese heritage (e.g. pp. 54, 123, 134, 209, 271) in French institutions, illustrating the presence of Portuguese in French official and commercial circles in East Asia, as I have briefly noted elsewhere (Lopes 2024) but which is more amply demonstrated in this book.

Chapter Two expands on the links between Hong Kong and French Indochina, also addressing French connections to Portuguese-ruled Macau and the French leased territory of Guangzhouwan. It brings together aspects of military, commercial, and transportation history.

The chapter addresses military connections in particular when covering the visits to Hong Kong of the Division navale d’Extrême-Orient, which were frequent in the interwar period, and could last as long as a fortnight (p. 73). Hong Kong was also a key commercial entrepôt for French businesses, namely for rice from Indochina (p. 85).

Connections to Indochina were also linked to the circulation of information, including intelligence, between different French representatives across China, especially in South China (pp. 74–78), and the monitoring of Vietnamese activities in the British colony and in Macau (pp. 87, 91–97, 102), including the well-known case of Ho Chi Minh. Here, as in previous and subsequent chapters, the interactions between consular, commercial, religious, and military circles are evident.

Chapter 3 zooms in on finance and trade, showing the interactions between trading firms, the shipping companies that assured the flow of their products, and the banks that financed their activities (p. 105). We find in the book some curious elements illuminating the history of transportation in Hong Kong and Macau: for example, the first motor taxis in Hong Kong were Citroën vehicles (p. 108) and the first seaplane company in the neighbouring territory, Macao Aerial Transport, was founded by Frenchman Charles Ricou, who also established

the Macau Electric Lighting Company (pp. 101–102, 189), that would later become a key British interest. This third chapter covers the activities of big names such as the Messageries Maritimes and the Banque de l'Indochine, but it also addresses smaller, and sometimes short-lived, institutions such as the Banque Industrielle de Chine.

Chapter Four is dedicated to the religious presence in Hong Kong, arguably one of the most significant, as well as the earliest, traces of French presence in Hong Kong. The Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP) had a base in Hong Kong from 1847 (p. 19) from which it 'directed its operations in Asia' (p. 145), with all MEP missionaries sent to China passing through the British colony (p. 154). The MEP was a powerhouse not just in religious services, but also in healthcare provision, printing, real-estate, and finance. It ran the Béthanie sanatorium and the Nazareth printing house. The MEP 'owned stakes in most of the big enterprises' in Hong Kong and 'there was no quarter of Hong Kong in which the MEP had not, at one time or another, invested or speculated' (p. 156).

This chapter also covers in detail the key presence of women amongst the religious personnel in Hong Kong. The Sœurs de Saint-Paul de Chartres were the first female Christian order in Hong Kong and established the territory's first orphanage, l'Orphelinat de la Sainte-Enfance, both in 1848 (pp. 166, 171). They became important actors in the educational sector, running the Anglo-French School, and in healthcare, establishing hospitals on Hong Kong Island and in Kowloon. The nuns hailed from different countries (pp. 169, 171), showing the intersection of the French with other foreign presences.

Chapter Five has clear links with Chapter Three in terms of thematic coverage. Dedicated to 'material and immaterial' presences, it has a middle section on aviation that would have more logically been included when discussing shipping companies. The chapter also covers luxury products such as wines and perfumes. The information on women who opened fashion establishments in Hong Kong, already introduced in Chapter Three, is particularly interesting (pp. 119–120, 184) and shows the author's concern with challenging the male-dominated narratives predominant in the historical records consulted. One area that is somewhat overlooked in the book is the strong French presence in the early cinema history of Hong Kong. Pathé is briefly mentioned on pp. 36 and 86 and listed on p. 115, but Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh's recent monograph *The Colonial Screen* (2025) adds more to the story.

The discussion of aviation in this chapter is, somewhat abruptly, followed by an analysis of the (limited) French cultural influence, covering education, language teaching, and editorial activities, as well as the presence of French newspapers and books in Hong Kong libraries. There are some crossovers with the chapter on the missionary presence, for example a return to the Anglo-French School case (p. 197). This is a useful chapter for consideration of a Hong Kong-focused history of French cultural diplomacy.

In the sixth chapter, the book turns to a range of more obscure ‘marginal presences’, covering a spectrum of figures and groups: tourists, travellers, adventurers, smugglers, and ‘women and children’. It is a chapter that, again, brings to the fore Hong Kong’s dimension as a place of passage and transit, and its links to Southeast Asia and to other locations in China. Connections to Macau and Guangzhouwan revolving around arms and drug trafficking are also illustrated with concrete cases. If previous chapters had their main characters (e.g. Père Léon Robert), this one also offers some curious vignettes that are true global micro-histories, such as the many lives of Réunion-born Francis Vetch (pp. 229–230).

The last main chapter proposes ‘a sociology of the French in Hong Kong’. On the one hand, it is perhaps the most theoretical of the chapters, seeking to make general sense of the multiple and diverse French presences. On the other hand, the chapter returns to case studies that could easily have been included before. Still, the chapter allows the reader to reflect on wider trends and delineate commonalities, including on characteristics of French networks, the role and limits of social mobility and social circles, a foray into ‘histoire des mentalités’, and conclusions on French visibility in the urban space. This includes the geographical concentration on Hong Kong Island of French contributions to the built environment, particularly the consulate, the Messageries Maritimes, the Banque de l’Indochine and the Catholic cathedral (pp. 257–258). This chapter is very good in using photographs and other records to seek to overcome the limitations of other sources. Some of these issues are revisited in the concluding chapter, which also addresses briefly how the Sino-Japanese War and the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong affected the French community.

Overall, François Drémeaux’s book makes a groundbreaking contribution to the history of the French presence in Hong Kong in its multiple, but intertwined, dimensions: diplomatic, religious, commercial, financial, military, social, cultural, and (inter-)imperial. It covers individuals and institutions, major players and marginal actors, and both long-standing and ephemeral endeavours. It is a very good example of how the apparently contained study of a single national group is actually revealing of various regional, transnational, and global connections.

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