

Book Review: The Politics of China—Hong Kong Relations: Living with Distant Masters by Peter Preston

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Recommended Citation

Zhu, Zhiqun () "Book Review: The Politics of China—Hong Kong Relations: Living with Distant Masters by Peter Preston," *International Social Science Review*: Vol. 94 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol94/iss1/14>

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Preston, Peter W. *The Politics of China—Hong Kong Relations: Living with Distant Masters*. Northampton: Edward Elgar, 2016. x + 230 pages. Hardcover, \$120.00.

Hong Kong was formerly a colony of the British Empire. However, in 1997, it became a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China generally maintaining a separate political and economic system from China. This book is a thoughtful study of the delicate relationship between Hong Kong and the Chinese government by political sociologist Peter W. Preston. The book is divided into five chapters, with the first chapter framing Hong Kong in terms of sociological, political science, and cultural perspectives, and the second chapter discussing the historical trajectory of how Hong Kong became what it is through colonization. Chapters three and four focus on post-1997 elite and popular politics in Hong Kong, and the final chapter sketches out possible scenarios for the city's future, ranging from deep integration with the mainland to the Singapore model in which Hong Kong would have strong local leadership ready to upgrade its global footprint.

The Politics of China—Hong Kong Relations: Living with Distant Masters is thoroughly researched with extensive notes, and therefore provides a useful reference for those who are interested in learning more about Hong Kong's unique history, politics, and its relations with Beijing after 1997. Preston makes some penetrating points throughout the book. For example, he argues that what has happened in Hong Kong is a transfer of power between sovereigns made without considering the wishes of the local population, which makes the settlement inherently flawed and unstable in the long term. Joining the philosophical debate in the literature about Hong Kong that usually generates competing discourses about colonial rule, anti-communism, patriotism, democracy, and globalization, the author posits a new discourse: the self-construction of Hong Kong by local people as a process of embedding a new political settlement. He explains that a "viable settlement" between Hong Kong and the mainland remains to be constructed (p. 193).

The author sympathetically highlights the dilemma Hong Kong elites have faced in the form of "intrusive demands" of distant masters either in London or Beijing (p. 4). However, Preston's portrayal of Hong Kong-China relations is inevitably problematic based on his pessimistic assessment of the issues facing Hong Kong as it adjusts to rulers in Beijing. Preston paints a gloomy picture of Hong Kong's future and Hong Kong-Beijing relations, and makes some controversial statements. For instance, he suggests that since the first three Chief Executives "are widely taken to have failed," the system is "dysfunctional," and the current settlement is "failing" (p. 6). He also asserts that Hong Kong is now a "colony" of Beijing (p. 159).

The author painstakingly presents an idealistic picture of what Hong Kong should look like; namely, its residents should be the masters of their own lives without having to follow the

marching orders from afar. Preston keeps deploring that Hong Kong elites, unlike their counterparts in places like Singapore or South Korea, are subject to many restrictions because they have to work with distant masters. This is certainly true, but Hong Kong is different from those Asian countries that enjoy independence. It is not very helpful to point out the obvious and simply wish that Hong Kong was like the others. Preston fails to note that politics rarely works according to an idealist's blueprint. The 'one country, two systems' model, though imperfect, is a creative way of decolonizing Hong Kong and ensuring its smooth transfer of power.

The dichotomies of 'elite *versus* masses' and 'those looking to Beijing *versus* those looking to Hong Kong' may also be problematic. Yes, the elite and masses are different in their economic status, education, conditions of living, etc., but how can one distinguish the two groups in terms of their desires for political freedom and economic opportunities? For example, in 2003, when Hong Kong's Tung Chee-hwa administration was trying to pass an anti-subversion law prohibiting any act of treason or ties with foreign political organizations, some 500,000 Hong Kongers came out to protest the proposed law. It is impossible and indeed makes no sense to try to figure out how many protesters were 'elites' and how many were members of the 'masses.' Furthermore, why cannot one look to both Beijing and Hong Kong in preserving Hong Kong's autonomy and promoting the wellbeing of its residents? After all, Hong Kong and the mainland whose economies, societies, and politics are deeply intertwined, both aspire for the continued success of this Special Administrative Region. Perhaps a more objective and comprehensive assessment of Hong Kong's post-1997 performance would have led Preston to different conclusions.

The Politics of China—Hong Kong Relations: Living with Distant Masters is a detailed, thought-provoking study of the relationship between Hong Kong and the Chinese government. Although one may not necessarily agree with the author regarding his overall judgement of Hong Kong politics, this book is very a useful resource for political science and international relations students and scholars.

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