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‘Hong Kong is my Home’: The 1940 Evacuation and Hong Kong-Britons

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Who were the Hong Kong British, and where did they live? This question sat at the heart of anguished and angry debates prompted by the colonial government’s edict in June 1940 ordering the evacuation to Australia of all women and children of ‘pure European descent’. In this article, I focus on thematic strands in the debate on Hong Kong British identity, such as race, class, legal domicile, reputation and migration, to explore the complex character of such British communities outside the Dominions. This article aims to characterise what it meant to be British in the wider empire, and deepen our understanding about the place of such communities in the picture of colonial migration.

Keywords: British migration; Hong Kong; Britishness; overseas Britons; World War Two British evacuees; British communities.

Introduction

Who were the Hong Kong British, and where did they live? This question sat at the heart of anguished and angry debates prompted by the colonial government’s edict in June 1940 ordering the evacuation of all women and children of ‘pure European descent’. This resulted in the sending of more than one third of Hong Kong’s British population to Australia, but the policy also led many to speak out about issues such as race, class, legal domicile, reputation and migration that were otherwise normally obscured. In this article, I focus on these thematic strands in the debate on Hong Kong British identity to explore the complex character of such British communities outside the Dominions. In doing so, I aim to characterise what it meant to be British in the wider empire, and deepen our understanding about the place of such communities in the picture of colonial migration.

Recent scholarship has demonstrated how British communities outside the Dominions were much more complicated than a homogeneous expatriate society.

Robert Bickers, Dane Kennedy, and Elizabeth Buettner have shown us how various types of local British identities developed amongst these overseas Britons. While some of these communities resembled the settler societies in the Dominions, their identities were much more complicated than the template of ‘settlers’ and ‘expatriates’ can present.¹ Alan Lester, David Lambert, and Catherine Ladds have examined particularly the career sojourners who formed the majority of the communities outside the Dominions. Through different approaches, their work unravelled career sojourners’ particular migration experience.² Mostly families of career sojourners, the Hong Kong British evacuees of 1940 provide us a model to study in-depth the issues facing overseas British communities and the highly individualised and contingent way in which these overseas Britons moved. Sudden relocation and war prompted many to express explicitly what home, class, and being British meant for them. This article presents the problems facing these career sojourners. Their experiences enhance our understanding of British migration framed by their ideas of home, migration, reputation, and class.

This article also illuminates the tensions between different conceptions of Britishness embedded in the colonial world. In the past decade, scholars have shown growing interest in the multiple forms of Britishness outside the Dominions. Recent scholarship has suggested that cultural interactions and practices allowed non-white subjects to process a sense of British identity.³ On the other hand, some have noticed how these different conceptions of Britishness – as a legal identification, a cultural identity, and commonly accepted racial distinction – often contrasted with each other.⁴ The formal colonisation of Hong Kong empowered the government with the legal power and obligation to protect its subjects, which included not only those of ‘pure European descent’ but also many others. Yet, the exclusion of these others from the

evacuation demonstrates the historical reality where the exigencies of war highlighted the sharp contrast between a widening notion of Britishness and racism in the empire.

I will first outline the evacuation policy to facilitate later discussion on the subsequent public debates. A moment of crisis that happened a year and a half before the Japanese invasion of Hong Kong, the evacuation made issues of legal domicile, race, class, reputation and migration more visible to the population and prompted them to respond on these issues both in speech and in practice. The rest of the article therefore discusses how the public discourse of the evacuation touches upon these themes. In doing so, this article further broadens our understanding about the complexity of colonial societies outside the Dominions, and aims to demonstrate what being British meant in the empire.

The Evacuation

The evacuation of British women and children in Hong Kong happened at one of the gravest moments facing the British Empire during the Second World War. It was a moment of terror at Home: France had just fallen a few days earlier, and Britain itself now faced the threat of invasion by Nazi Germany, which so far had been unstoppable on the continent. War was also looming over its empire in Asia. Japanese imperialism had escalated from localized military conflicts in China to a full-scale invasion in 1937. Since October 1938, the Japanese army had occupied parts of Guangdong, the province adjacent to the British colony of Hong Kong, and was garrisoned along the Hong Kong-China border.⁵ In June 1940, the Japanese army occupied several more towns on the border, making the likelihood of an attack on Hong Kong more visible.⁶ After several requests by General Officer Commanding of Hong Kong, the War Cabinet finally instructed the colonial government on June 28 to evacuate all British women and

children in the colony first to the Philippines, and when shipping became available, to Australia.⁷

The Hong Kong government therefore announced that evening an evacuation of British women and children would take place soon.⁸ While some did not take it very seriously, the government declared the following evening that the evacuation would go into effect immediately, and introduced the Evacuation Regulation as an amendment of Ordinance No. 5 of 1922 to empower the police in carrying out the evacuation.⁹ All British women and children under eighteen ‘of European race’ who were unnecessary for the defence or essential services to the maintenance of the colony were to be evacuated to Manila. Between July 1 and July 5, the government sent away 3,334 women and children evacuees – approximately forty-one per cent of the colony’s British population.¹⁰ After a brief stay in Manila, the evacuees arrived in Australia in mid-August 1940. With the assistance of the Australian government, the evacuees settled there, but only half-heartedly. Many were sceptical of the strength of the Japanese army, and quickly wished to return to Hong Kong. The evacuees and their husbands wrote to local newspapers and petitioned the authorities in Hong Kong, London and Australia. They questioned the necessity of the evacuation, complained about the government’s arrangements, and described the financial and emotional hardships they endured. The government, however, continued sending more women, children and elderly men away in the following months.

Seeing their calls unanswered, the irritated husbands decided to challenge the legality of the compulsory evacuation. Many believed that the Emergency Regulations Ordinance, which served as the legal basis of the policy, did not give the government sufficient power to deport so many people against their will. They argued that such a ‘deportation’ could only be empowered by legislation – an Act of Parliament – but not a

regulation.¹¹ On the following day, David Charles Edmonston, manager of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank, also threatened to bring the case to the Privy Council.¹² Worried that the local courts might rule against the government, the Colonial Office on 2 November 1940 – approximately four months after the issue of the evacuation verdict – instructed the Hong Kong governor to suspend any further compulsory evacuation measures.¹³ This did not however mean that the women and children evacuees could return.¹⁴ On 19 November the Hong Kong government introduced the Defence (Entry Restrictions) Regulations, which aimed to forbid the return of evacuees. Under the regulations, any person entering the colony without the permission to do so might be detained in police custody before shipping became available for them to leave.¹⁵

The Hong Kong-Britons were therefore still discontented, and husbands in Hong Kong formed an Evacuation Representation Committee to plead for the evacuees' return.¹⁶ Along with their wives in Australia, they criticised the government for deporting them from their homes. Such rhetoric continued well into the following year: 235 evacuees submitted a petition to the Governor of Hong Kong in November and on 3 December (five days before Pearl Harbor) those in Melbourne called a general meeting to propose plans for returning.¹⁷

The debates lapsed after the morning of 8 December 1941, when the Japanese army invaded Hong Kong. After sixteen days of fierce fighting, Governor Sir Mark Young surrendered in person to the Japanese army. Husbands became prisoners-of-war and civilian internees, leaving their wives and children stranded in Australia. While anxiously waiting for news of their husbands, these women found themselves helpless with children to bring up. Without the weekly remittances that their husbands made before the war, many women struggled to support their family. Some yearned to return to Britain. Because evacuees generally had no relatives in Australia who could

accommodate them, the amount of allowances needed for them to survive there was much higher than in Britain. The British government, which paid the evacuees' allowances, and the Australian government were therefore generally keen in facilitating their repatriation to Britain.¹⁸ But more insisted on staying, not only because Britain was still in the warzone but also because of pragmatic reasons and a fear of social alienation in Britain.

On 30 August 1945, 15 days after Emperor Hirohito announced Japan's surrender to the Allies, a British fleet finally arrived in Hong Kong, officially ending the Japanese occupation. After more than six years, those imprisoned in the colony could finally leave and be reunited with their wives and children. From late September 1945, former internees and prisoners-of-war arrived in Australia, but many evacuees there now learned for the first time of the deaths of men in Hong Kong.¹⁹ With the end of the war, the evacuated families could freely decide whether to stay on in Australia, or return to Britain or Hong Kong.

A large body of material produced between 1940 and 1946 about the evacuation reveals the complexity and tensions of colonial societies. The texts – the majority of them being letters, along with official documents, newspapers, and published memoirs – and the interviews I conducted encapsulated not only their response towards the policy. The fact that the Japanese invasion of Hong Kong did not happen until a year and a half after the evacuation made the evacuees impatient and unusually outspoken. They talked about legal domicile, class, race, reputation, and migration, issues that were otherwise rarely – if ever – discussed so intensively by different sectors of a colonial society.

Domicile

Although colonial officials and historians often saw Britons in Hong Kong as only sojourners, a parliamentary debate on 31 July 1940 in London generated a heated debate

in the colony that contested such assumptions. A Labour Member of Parliament, Denis Pritt, asked George Hall, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, about the evacuation, particularly whether the latter was aware that the racial discrimination had caused resentment among the Chinese and Portuguese in the colony. Hall answered the evacuation was restricted to the minimum considered to be essential and did not extend to persons and families 'domiciled in the colony'.²⁰ Hall's comment implied a racial assumption held by the Colonial Office that Hong Kong could never be a place where Europeans claim 'domicile', where English and Hong Kong courts had previously defined as a place where one intended to stay permanently. Those evacuated and their husbands however argued otherwise. Whether or not Hong Kong was their domicile formed the centre of the arguments against evacuation, and their debates on this issue went beyond the legal concept of domicile itself. Looking at the evacuees' discussion on the concept of 'domicile', this section provides us with a lens to rethink the debates on Hong Kong identity, and the issue of home and belonging among British communities outside the Dominions.

While the Colonial Office might have used it as an excuse to exclude non-'pure' British subjects from the evacuation, it was also a deep-rooted assumption held towards the Hong Kong Britons. The plan for evacuation drafted in 1939 states that the decision to evacuate only British women and children was to 'enable the morale of the defenders to be maintained at the highest possible level untrammelled by any considerations not directly affecting defence'.²¹ But this was also because officials had long assumed that no Britons could be domiciled in Hong Kong, unlike in India, where officials recognised a class of 'poor whites' to be domiciled subjects.²² Hong Kong Census reports often remarked on the sojourner character of the community. The 1921 census, for instance, stated that the British there had little intention to settle in Hong Kong. The

report describes the pattern of the community: men arrived in the colony in their early twenties and few remained after fifty-five. Some may have families and children there, but the families never stayed. Once the children reached seven, they would return to Britain for education, accompanied by their mothers. It even estimated that there was a five-year turnover rate for the non-Chinese population.²³

The Colonial Office therefore deployed a narrow definition of domicile to justify the racist and pragmatic exclusion of other communities from the evacuation scheme. In a confidential letter to Hong Kong, a Colonial Office official stated that: ‘it is not practicable compulsorily to evacuate British subjects of Chinese or other race whose permanent home is in Hong Kong, but it is both practicable and desirable in case of Europeans’.²⁴ In October 1940, when the Hong Kong government requested the Colonial Office to correct Hall’s ‘misinterpretation’ that the ‘pure’ Europeans were not domiciled there, the latter did not want to back down.²⁵ A comment in the Colonial Office’s internal correspondence further explained why it was practicable and desirable to evacuate only the British Europeans: ‘it was assumed here’, one wrote, ‘that no European women or children could in fact claim domicile in Hong Kong’.²⁶ While another official later reminded the others how the above assumptions might be ‘unsafe’, this correspondence reveals how many in Whitehall assumed all Britons there were non-domiciled and needed protection more than the Chinese – thus more ‘desirable’ and ‘practicable’ to be evacuated.²⁷ This perception served as their justification to evacuate only the ‘pure’ Britons, a community that, they thought, could not claim domicile in the colonial periphery.

Both the English and Hong Kong courts in fact had previously defined the concept of ‘domicile’. In a case in England in 1869, when the court had to decide which

law – Scottish or English – to use to handle a deceased man’s legacy, Lord Chelmsford stated that:

But in a competition between a domicile of origin and an alleged subsequently-acquired domicile there may be circumstances to shew that however long a residence may have continued no intention of acquiring a domicile may have existed at any one moment during the whole of the continuance of such residence. The question in such a case is not, whether there is evidence of an intention to retain the domicile of origin, but whether it is proved that there was an intention to acquire another domicile. Therefore, a wish or a desire expressed from time to time to return to the place of the first domicile, or any looking to it as the ultimate home, although wholly insufficient for the retention of the domicile of origin, may yet amount to material evidence to rebut the presumption of an intention to acquire a new domicile arising from length of residence elsewhere.²⁸

This case, *Udny v Udny*, remains the classic precedent cited in determining domicile. The Hong Kong Supreme Court cited it in 1937, not long before the evacuation, when an Australian John Reville attempted to claim domicile there so that the Supreme Court would handle his divorce case and he could discontinue paying his wife’s maintenance. Born in Melbourne and moving to Hong Kong in 1933 for work, Reville claimed that he wished to stay there permanently. Although a friend testified to his desire to stay, his wife provided a letter in which he wrote: ‘I will never come back to Hongkong unless you want me’. Based on that evidence, the Chief Justice Sir Atholl MacGregor concluded that Reville had no ‘fixed intention of giving up the domicile of origin and acquiring a domicile of choice’.²⁹ This case, along with similar precedents in courts in Hong Kong and Shanghai, emphasised that to acquire a new domicile, one needed to intend to stay in that place permanently.

Whether the Britons there saw Hong Kong as their permanent home therefore became the centre of the evacuation debate. Indeed, some Britons saw living there only as another sojourn to fulfil their imperial mission: one evacuee said explicitly that

‘Britain is home to us, not Hongkong’.³⁰ Some believed that only a few families of ‘unmixed European descent’ had been in Hong Kong for more than two generations and could claim actual domicile’.³¹ The editor of the local English language newspaper *South China Morning Post*, however, disagreed:

A large proportion of the evacuees are domiciled in the Colony. Their homes and their livelihood are here – hence the objections to the premature deportation. To describe them as not domiciled is pretence, presumably to excuse discrimination.³²

Many shared this view and argued that the colony was in fact their permanent home. One evacuee’s husband, ‘Still Bewildered’, articulated his family’s deep connection with the colony, argued that Hong Kong was their domicile, and questioned why they had to leave if the government was to evacuate only non-domiciled subjects:

My wife came to the Colony at the age of three, lived here for eighteen years with her parents and has since lived here for a further eleven years as my wife; both our children were born in Hongkong, while I myself have lived here for nearly twenty-one years and (if I ever reach the stage of retirement) shall retire here! If in spite of this, my family is considered to be not domiciled in Hong Kong, where are we domiciled?³³

Others also pointed out that many prominent member of the community would have been domiciled in Hong Kong. One reader of the *Post* asked: ‘does Sir Henry Pollock, for instance, agree he is not domiciled in Hongkong?’³⁴ A senior unofficial member of both the Legislative and Executive Councils, Pollock came to Hong Kong in 1888 as a Police Magistrate. Despite transferring to Fiji in 1901 to serve as Attorney General, he left government service a year later only to return to Hong Kong. He only left Hong Kong in mid-September 1940, when he travelled to Australia with his wife and another seventy evacuees.³⁵ A reader believed that officials in Whitehall ‘do not count the term [domicile] in its strictly legal aspect, but in its distinction between Europeans, or people

of unmixed European origin, and those who are Asiatics or of mixed origin with no ancestral home in a European country'. He criticised the Colonial Office for not taking the term's 'dictionary and legal meanings' into account; instead, it only used 'race' to determine domicile: 'in any case, Hongkong is not looked upon officially as a Colony which can be colonised by white people, and nobody is likely to be considered as "domiciled" here who is of unmixed European extraction, even if born here'.³⁶

Those that applied for exemptions and challenged the policy's legality justified their applications by claiming domicile in Hong Kong. In September 1940, the government appointed an Evacuation Advisory Committee to consider granting exemptions for those who desired to return.³⁷ The Committee received eleven applications in October 1940, and at least three applied on the ground of being domiciled in Hong Kong.³⁸ In January 1941, Mabel Evelyn Blair asked the Supreme Court to declare that the regulations prohibiting evacuees' return were *Ultra Vires*. When barrister Leo d'Almada e Castro Jr. appeared for her, he argued on the grounds that the regulations had insufficient power to regulate someone domiciled in Hong Kong into exile. He stated that she had lived in the Colony for 20 years – 'it was her permanent domicile'. 'She says, in effect, "this is my home", just as much as anyone in England says "this is my home; this is my country"'. He quoted from an authority in England, 'no power on earth, except by an Act of Parliament, can send an Englishman out of his country against his will'. Using the ground that Hong Kong was her permanent domicile, the barrister challenged that the Regulations would 'regulate her out of Hongkong, regulate her into exile', and should be *Ultra Vires*.³⁹ Although the Chief Justice considered that such regulations were for 'securing the public safety' and so not *Ultra Vires*, the case demonstrates how the question of domicile and the rhetoric of a deportation from home remained crucial in the discourse of the evacuation.⁴⁰

Those in Australia also made similar arguments. Betty Clemo, whose husband was the honorary secretary of the Evacuation Representation Committee, was interviewed in Sydney in July 1941. Having lived in Hong Kong since the age of six, she spoke on behalf of the 800 Hong Kong families in Sydney and stated that although they liked the city, 'it was not home'.⁴¹ On the very same day Clemo's interview was published, another evacuee Marjorie Elston wrote to Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Born in Hong Kong in 1904, Elston and her sister decided to stay on there, even though her father retired to Britain in 1924. There she met her husband, an English policeman in Hong Kong, built a family together, and gave birth to their two sons. In her letter to Churchill, Marjorie wrote about details of the poor treatment they received in Manila, the financial hardships they endured, and the disruption the evacuation brought to family life. Above all, she stated firmly that:

Hong Kong is my home. I am English, although born in Hong Kong and have lived nearly all my life here. I married an Englishman and he too, has spent twenty-two years in the Hong Kong Government service working for this country too.⁴²

Declaring 'Hong Kong is my home', Elston's letter articulated a local British identity. One could indeed argue that evacuees only deployed such rhetoric of Hong Kong as their 'Home' and 'domicile' strategically to justify their return to the colony. Some, however, demonstrated a determined, strong sense of belonging to the colony even after Hong Kong fell.

Ethel Egan's multiple letters to the Australian government during the war showed her loyalty to Hong Kong – and Hong Kong only. The evacuation brought Egan and her four children to Australia in 1940, while her husband and elder sons stayed in Hong Kong. Having heard the rumour of Hong Kong evacuees' repatriation to England in 1942, Egan wrote to the Navy Office, requesting to stay.

Will you please allow myself and my family to stay right where we are in Australia, as we have neither home or people anywhere, except my husband's brother and sister whom we barely know. Plus here is my case - my dearest husband left Royal Naval Dockyard twenty years back with myself and our family for Hong Kong. There two of our children were born and gradually built up our home and our life, living happily but carefully to save for our old age, all we had was in Hong Kong...⁴³

Egan's refusal to return to Britain also reflected how a career-long sojourn detached her and her husband from Britain. When later that year the authorities informed her of her son's death, they offered to repatriate her as 'it might be to your advantage to return to England where you could possibly be among your relatives and friends'. Egan rejected the offer, as Britain was no longer home to her anymore:

You ask would I like to return to England. Oh no thank you. Since leaving there twenty years back, my people - also my husband's - have died, with the exception of a brother and sister of my husband's, whom I hardly know. And I would never take my troubles to anyone. I have neither relations or friends anywhere other than Hong Kong.⁴⁴

When in September 1943 the authorities informed her of her husband's death, Egan replied with a seven-page letter, reminding them of her wish to return to Hong Kong:

Mr Cummings, please, will you tell them to return us to Hong Kong, when the war is over. For when I have cared for my family, until they have made good. I want to stay near the graves of my husband and son, and give my life voluntary in the service of a necessary native Hospital... help the people who need it. I know their language, their habits, the climate, the people. I never again want a luxurious home after the war to be one of the helpers when help is needed, to work there - to die there, and be next of my husband and son.⁴⁵

Although contemporary critics and historians rarely regarded Hong Kong a permanent settlement for British residents there, Egan's letter proved otherwise. Knowing the

‘language’ and the ‘people’ there, she and her family were not only integrated but also grounded in the colony. Appreciating this, the Australian officials therefore noted in internal correspondence that ‘when the time comes for repatriation, she herself be sent, not to England, but to Hong Kong’.⁴⁶

While some evacuees confirmed the Colonial Office’s assumption about Britons being non-domiciled in Hong Kong, more in fact contested this view. Although English law and the Hong Kong court had previously defined the concept, the Colonial Office deliberately deployed a narrow definition of domicile for a racist and pragmatic purpose, that is, to provide only those of ‘pure European descent’ the privilege to leave for a place of safety at government’s expense. These comments triggered those evacuated and their husbands to offer unexpected responses towards such an assumption – both in speech and in practice. Demonstrating a strong sense of local British identity and affinity with Hong Kong even during the war, these responses show the Hong Kong-Britons as more than a sojourning community of which none ‘thought of bringing up his children to regard Hong Kong as a permanent home’.⁴⁷

Class Fissures

Contemporary writings about colonial societies in the wider empire often contained a ‘colonial myth’ that equates whiteness with economic superiority. Historians have argued, however, that this perception was far removed from the reality of colonial life. Those working on British India, for instance, have pointed out that a considerable number of British residents there could be categorised as ‘poor whites’, a group often known as ‘domiciled Europeans’.⁴⁸ ‘Innumerable divisions and subdivisions’ also existed amongst Hong Kong’s European population, more than half of which were Britons.⁴⁹ Henry J. Lethbridge has divided Hong Kong’s pre-war European population into four major categories: officials, merchants, professionals, and those who held

supervisory or low status occupations. He argued that the majority of Europeans there could be categorised as mostly middle- or lower-middle class, with only ‘few exceptions’ who were of working or lower class in the society.⁵⁰ The 1921 census findings recorded that out of the approximately 4,300 ‘British nationals of European race’, there were 1,037 employed in public administration and defence, 110 merchants, 940 in commerce and finance industries, and 295 professionals.⁵¹

While such studies and census reports throw light to the class divisions within the British community in Hong Kong, what Britons at the time thought about these divisions remained rather obscured. The unjustified permission for some to stay, however, prompted less-privileged Britons to address the issue of class fissures, which provides us a rare opportunity to obtain a clearer picture of what they felt about the colonial society they lived in. The evacuation brought to the forefront of discussion social fissures otherwise largely obscured within a colonial community.

Although evacuation exemptions were supposedly only for those involved in essential services for the maintenance of the colony, hundreds of ‘evacuation dodgers’ saw it as a loophole. While the evacuation order required all British women and children to leave, the government stated that it would grant exemptions to women working for businesses or providing essential services for war preparations. Many saw it as a loophole and remained in the colony under the pretence of work of auxiliary nurses and stenographers. A letter to the editor of the *South China Morning Post*, an English language newspaper in Hong Kong, revealed the extent to which the evacuation was evaded:

I work it out that, if all the British women at present in this Colony are ‘nurses’, and if in the event of hostilities every soldier in this Colony is wounded, and if there are not too many female casualties, the proportion of ‘nurses’ to patients should be about one to three.⁵²

Others sneaked back to Hong Kong, even though the government prohibited entry of British women and children into the colony. For instance, 'Red Hilda', wife of Sir Selwyn Selwyn-Clarke, the director of medical services, and her four-year-old daughter managed to evade the evacuation by making a 'short visit' to the British Consul in Canton on the day of evacuation, and returned to the colony afterwards.⁵³ By October 1941, 1,080 British women remained in Hong Kong, while 428 were not in essential services.⁵⁴

Many soon attributed the issue of unjustified exemptions with class. A reader stated bluntly the reason why the evacuation dodgers could stay: 'because their husbands are taipans and have influence'.⁵⁵ In their letter to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, the Evacuation Representation Committee also stated that:

It is beyond mere coincidence that among those women who were successful in this were the wives and families of many of the leading government officials in the Colony and of the more highly placed members of the social community.⁵⁶

Some also noted that even if the government allowed their families to return, they could not afford the expenses of the return journey.⁵⁷

As such, those irritated evacuees and their husbands who mostly did not have the financial means and influences to facilitate the much-desired return of their families started to express bluntly their perception of class fissures in Hong Kong. Betty Clemo said in an interview that 'all of us are annoyed at the injustice of so many women being allowed to return to Hongkong – for one reason or another – while others, just as deserving, are forced to remain. Some are trained nurses'. She added, 'most galling to us is the fact that many wives are coming down from Hongkong with their husbands for a holiday here, enjoying themselves, and then going back. Is that fair?'⁵⁸ In May 1941, another evacuee Winifred Casey wrote to Lady Dugan, wife of Sir Winston Dugan,

governor of Victoria. She named eight women whom she considered to be unjustly exempt from the evacuation, whose husbands were all affiliated with the Hong Kong government. While observing that the Peak School, a school located in a residential area for upper-middle class Europeans in Hong Kong that was mostly attended by children of military officers and government officials, was now reopened, she asked: ‘who is attending this school? Are they entitled to stay any more than those children already evacuated? Why this class distinction?’⁵⁹ Four other evacuees wrote almost identical letters to the Australian authorities, questioning why they could not return while Lady Northcote, wife of the Hong Kong governor, was there to fulfil social engagements.⁶⁰

These criticisms not only shed light on the existence of class fissures within the British community in Hong Kong, but also provide rare perspectives of those coming from the lower classes. The absence of surviving records of lower class Britons often obscures their perception of their standing within the community. The evacuation however illuminates their perception about class distinction in their community.

Reputation

Debates about the evacuation also tell us much about issues of reputation. The sudden relocation of the evacuees from their familiar surroundings prompted many of them to comment on the treatment they received and complain. Reading their complaints while Britain itself was at one of its darkest moments during the Second World War, some fellow Britons in Hong Kong and observers in Australia criticized them for being ungrateful and insensible about the threat of war. While these comments clearly contained hostility – sometimes loaded with misogyny – they also tell us much about the insularity and evident sense of entitlement that colonial life encouraged amongst these women. Such writings therefore provide us an opportunity to examine how others in the empire saw these overseas Britons.

Although the evacuation happened at a moment of utter terror for the British Empire, many failed to recognise the threat of war imposed on Hong Kong and so made unreasonable complaints about the evacuation. While the Japanese army had been garrisoned along the Hong Kong-China border, Britons in Hong Kong remained largely ‘unperturbed’.⁶¹ Many were unable to see the necessity of the evacuation. Not only were the evacuees ‘convinced that we would all be back home very soon’, the husbands also believed that the evacuation only happened as ‘somebody in authority misread a cabled instruction from home’.⁶² Even in October 1941, only two months before the Japanese invasion of the colony, the Evacuation Representation Committee called a Japanese attack a ‘remote event’.⁶³

The majority of the narratives on the journey to Australia emphasized the ‘plight’ of the evacuees despite courtesies provided by the authorities in Manila. They found the food there ‘unfit for human consumption’, and grumbled about the ‘heat, cockroaches and mosquitoes’.⁶⁴ Some appeared to find lives without domestic help difficult: a man seemed to find it unacceptable that his wife had to ‘mind our baby and prevent him from eating the filth on the floor’, and ‘bought and cooked the food for herself and our children’.⁶⁵ Some continued to complain in Australia. Another evacuee, Alice Stanford wrote to her husband that, ‘We have a lot to thank the Aussies for they have caused us nothing but heartache, why did they have to pick this country to send us to?’ wrote Stanford, ‘I would rather be at the mercy of the Japs than these people – we all hate them and they hate us’.⁶⁶

Although Stanford’s letter might have been – in the words of the Australian officials when they censored the letter – ‘abusive and exaggerated’, it also illuminates the image of colonial societies across the empire.⁶⁷ Outsiders of these societies often observed an imperial mentality of colonial societies as pretentious and ‘abnormal’.

Scholars have shown how such tainted reputations came under attack in the British discourse after the fall of Hong Kong and, more so, Singapore.⁶⁸ The discourse of evacuees in Australia in fact reflects how such negative perceptions of colonial Britons had been embedded in the Dominions even before the war. Australian authorities, for instance, often commented in internal correspondence how some evacuees ‘would never be satisfied’.⁶⁹ When asked by the Hong Kong government to inform the evacuees whom they should complain, an Australian official complained with his colleague that it was ‘rather superfluous’: ‘I am under the impression the evacuees bring their complaints to you – some of them too often I fear’.⁷⁰ Press coverage of evacuees often focused on evacuees’ complaints of the treatment they received in Australia compared to their lifestyle in Asia.⁷¹

While it is less often to see how those insiders thought about the insularity of their community, the evacuees’ complaints also generated a discussion within the British community in Hong Kong on how being in the empire distanced them from the wartime reality. The evacuation opened a window for those to comment on such an issue. One evacuee believed that ‘everyone concerned should have realised that they weren’t out on a luxury cruise. It was an exigency we had to suffer’, when another acknowledged that ‘other evacuees, leaving Holland and Belgium, must have far worse troubles and discomforts’.⁷² Some men believed that this lack of gratitude were because of the privileges these British women enjoyed in Hong Kong. One claimed that the evacuated women ‘took things too easy when they were here, just because the Chinese are here to slave, and I am sure that most of these don’t even know what housework means, but on the other hand, they ought to think for a moment what they will have to do if they were in England’.⁷³

These comments also reflected the negative perception of British women in colonial societies embedded in the empire. Historians have noted literary works and critics often characterised white women in colonial societies as lazy, self-centered and pampered.⁷⁴ Those in Hong Kong and Australia in fact held a similar bias against the evacuees. A presumably British man in Hong Kong criticised the evacuees in Australia that, 'now they are in a place where they can get everything, and they are still growling'. He dismissed their claims as trivial not just because of the privilege they enjoyed as Britons, but because of the particular privilege he attributed to British women. He wrote, 'the whole trouble is some of these women have had amahs even taking off their shoes for them after returning home from a tiring game of mah-jong'.⁷⁵ Similar depictions were also apparent in press coverage in Australia. When some evacuees boarded on ships for Hong Kong in 1946, Peter Russo, an Australian journalist, reported that an evacuee 'was longing to return to Hong Kong to have her hair brushed two hours daily by her personal amah'. When the ship reached Hong Kong, he depicted some women as refusing to accept a downgraded lifestyle: 'one returning wife soundly berated her husband because he did not have a comfortable flat ready'.⁷⁶ Misogyny aside, these comments show us what outsiders assumed about the lives of colonial Britons.

Racism

The discourse of the evacuation also underlined the tensions between different conceptions of Britishness in the empire. In many cases Britishness was a racial identity held by those from the British Isles, but it was also a legal identification that all those born in the empire were entitled to, and a cultural identity characterised by those considering themselves as the king's/queen's subjects. While the interwar years were a period where 'racial and national classifications took on growing importance', new

research suggests that urbanisation and increased international interactions created an increasingly inclusive and plural cosmopolitan public life in Asian colonial societies.⁷⁷

Although the discourse of the evacuation conveys a wider notion of Britishness, such notion was confronted with the racist policy in the empire at the event of war.

The evacuation highlighted the sharp contrast between a broader definition of Britishness and a racially defined British identity. Stating that ‘all British women and children’ were to be evacuated, the evacuation verdict illuminates the problem of defining ‘British’ in the colonial context.⁷⁸ With the British nationality laws before 1948 granting all those born within the empire full British subjecthood, hundreds of thousands in Hong Kong were therefore British nationals regardless of their parenthood.⁷⁹ Immediately after the government announced the evacuation, confusion therefore aroused as to whether the Chinese, Portuguese, and Eurasians holding British passports were included in the evacuation. Eurasians, for instance, wondered ‘whether they are to go this week’ or not.⁸⁰ Many went to the registration centre for the evacuation, only to be stopped from doing so by officials who did not know what to do with ‘the likes of you’.⁸¹ Some officials, however, allowed Eurasians to register for the evacuation. These Eurasians successfully sailed with the ‘pure’ British evacuees for Manila, but only to be sent back to Hong Kong later.⁸² Also debated were the inclusion of ‘white’ women and children who could be questionably British. American-born and married to a senior civil servant with Irish nationality, Helen Kennedy-Skipton, applied for exemption from evacuation on the ground that she was an American citizen. The Evacuation Advisory Committee rejected her application on the grounds that she had also held a British passport since 1927.⁸³ These varying arrangements demonstrated how Britishness was a complicated notion that did not have a clear-cut definition.

Complaints about racial discrimination contested the narrow notion of Britishness. An 'Anxious Eurasian Parent' reminded the government that 'they were British by birth, and though they could not claim to be pure European, they were not Chinese'.⁸⁴ A 'Chinese citizen' also said that they were 'nevertheless citizens of the Colony and have contributed their full share to this growth and prosperity of this part of the British Empire'.⁸⁵ 'BA BA', presumably a Chinese father, wrote that 'I suppose the Chinese children would also suffer similarly – unless they are hardened by heredity or something. But I forgot: it's the blue blood that matters. Excuse me'.⁸⁶ When the government announced in November 1940 voluntary evacuation arrangements for 'all others', the editors of *South China Morning Post* criticized that such arrangements did not do 'justice to the claims of British subjects, whose nationality has already become lamentably meaningless'.⁸⁷ While these comments all speak to a vision in which Britishness transcends the boundary of race, the official correspondence between different parts of the empire, however, demonstrates the historical reality in which Britishness was reserved to those of 'pure European descent' at the time of war.

The unfavourable responses towards a proposal of evacuating the non-white population made racism in the empire nakedly obvious. Although the Hong Kong government attempted to arrange evacuation for its non-white British subjects, racist immigration restrictions found in other parts of the empire posed a barrier. For a start, the official evacuation scheme could not include the Chinese, Portuguese and Eurasian British subjects because of Australia's White Australia policy, despite Hong Kong government's request to the Australians to lift immigration restrictions.⁸⁸ The Hong Kong government later requested the governments of Fiji, Ceylon, Burma and India to receive about 2,393 Portuguese, Chinese and Eurasian British subjects in the event of crisis; only Fiji agreed to take the Chinese.⁸⁹ Six days before Pearl Harbor, Governor Sir

Mark Young requested the evacuation to Singapore of a small number of Chinese British subjects whom he described as ‘reputable and of some financial standing’, as he thought it was ‘politically most desirable to give to the Chinese population an equal opportunity with Europeans to leave Hong Kong under prevailing conditions’.⁹⁰ The Executive Council of the Straits Settlements however declined his request considering the ‘difficulty and danger in waiving the immigration regulations in favour of any class of Chinese’.⁹¹

Although all born in the empire were British subjects by law, the immigration restrictions proved that the rights came with this legal Britishness were still subject to the concept of race. The evacuation therefore highlights the inner-contradictions of the concept of Britishness, and how a moment of crisis made the sharp contrasts between these concepts much more visible. While being British was a legal identification and cultural identity that many non-‘pure’ subjects affiliated themselves with, they found at the exigency of war that Britishness was only for those of racially ‘pure European descent’.

Migration

The British evacuees’ post-war trajectory also elucidates the movement of British career sojourners. Existing literature has identified the difficulty of placing these Britons who lived a particular lifelong sojourn between the categorisation of ‘settler’ and ‘expatriate’.⁹² The evacuees’ highly individualised post-war movement demonstrates the complexity of their migration. After the end of the war, the evacuated women and children finally had the chance to freely decide where to go next. One could easily summarise three major patterns of their movement: returning to Britain, returning to Hong Kong, and staying on in Australia. But their experience also presented a high contingency of the way they moved. Addressing their range of experiences helps us

understand how being British contributed to the factors that detached them from 'Home', Britain. Emotional affinity, pragmatic, and trivial reasons all complicated their migration trajectories, and made it hard to pinpoint a 'domicile' for these Britons.

Many families of military personnel and colonial administrators returned to Britain, where they always regarded as 'Home'. One of my interviewees recalled that although her father was repatriated to Australia in October 1945, her family finally returned to England in early 1946, after her father restored his health for further travel. 'It was alright for us children, but I don't think my mother was very happy there. And she wanted to go back to England. So when my father was repatriated and picked us up, we could have stayed in Australia, but she decided she wanted to go back to England. So we did'.⁹³ Many other evacuees, however, never made the return to Britain.

Although many interviewees' families planned to eventually return 'Home', pragmatic reasons and emotional affinity hindered them from doing so. Freda Pooley recalled that her parents always 'talked of returning to England' before the war. But because her father died soon after his release from the camp and her sister married, Freda was the only one left to support her mother. She needed her job in Australia and therefore remained there after the war.⁹⁴ Another evacuee also stayed for a similar reason. With her husband dead, Audrey Kilpatrick's mother started to work and then met a man in Australia, whom she was going to marry. The Kilpatrick sisters had no choice but to stay in Australia.⁹⁵ Emotional affinity to the places they resided in also detached them from Britain. Scholars have argued that overseas Britons often encountered hardships readjusting to British life after returning.⁹⁶ After repatriating to England, W. Casey returned permanently to Australia again with her daughter, as she found it difficult to resettle in English society.⁹⁷

Returning to Hong Kong was another option. Indeed, the disruptions that the nearly-four-year-long war had brought to Hong Kong prevented some women and children evacuees from returning. On the other hand, a few hundred did return to the colony after the war, even though it was then ‘a pitiful sight’.⁹⁸ In July 1946, six years after the evacuees’ exodus, the government arranged the *Duntroon* to bring back 450 Britons, including many evacuees.⁹⁹ A report conducted in 1947 on the standard of education of British students in Hong Kong also shows that at least eighty-seven child evacuees above the age of 10 had returned to the colony after the war.¹⁰⁰ Some families returned to Hong Kong to continue their husbands’ career-long sojourn because despite having been interned some agreed to stay in Hong Kong to fill jobs essential to ‘rebuilding civilian life in the city’.¹⁰¹ While Peter Russo’s report of evacuees’ return to Hong Kong mentioned earlier appears to be strongly biased towards the women evacuees, it sheds light on how colonial privileges would have been another reason why some returned.¹⁰²

Others however returned to Hong Kong not out of ease of obligation to the city, but because it was their home and their permanent domicile. Amongst them was Ethel Egan, whose letters demonstrated a strong sense of belonging to Hong Kong. Having lost her husband and one of her sons, her wish to return home finally came true after the war.¹⁰³ Egan would spend the rest of her life in Hong Kong with her second husband, whom she would meet there, her married daughter and her grandchildren who all finished school in the colony.¹⁰⁴ Egan remained in Hong Kong until her death in 1965.¹⁰⁵ Through her death there, Egan’s story conformed to the ultimate definition of domicile, and contested the assumption by the colonial government that no Britons were domiciled in Hong Kong.

Some evacuees' post-war trajectory, however, demonstrates the complexity of British migration across the empire. Amongst those was Marjorie Elston, who wrote in 1941 to Winston Churchill stating that 'Hong Kong is my home'. Elston moved back to Hong Kong after the war with her husband. When her husband retired in 1948, the Elstons moved back to England.¹⁰⁶ But she still closely followed what was happening at her 'home': in 1973 (twenty-five years after she moved back to England) she wrote to the *South China Morning Post* to correct some mistakes made in its 'Recollection' series.¹⁰⁷ Also on the *Duntroon* to Hong Kong were Betty Clemo and her husband Freddy Clemo. Like Betty, Freddy was a long term resident of Hong Kong, and had worked for the China Light & Power, a Hong Kong electric company. When he retired as a manager in 1953, Clemo established the Hongkong Tours and Travel Service and became a pioneer of the Hong Kong tourist industry. Freddy also actively participated in Hong Kong's public life: he was the founding president of the Kowloon Rotary Club and a member of many organisations.¹⁰⁸ In the 1960s, he became the president of the Kowloon Residents' Association, one of the colony's earliest political organisations.¹⁰⁹ In the 1970s, Freddy and Betty retired to Portugal, where Betty's sister and brother-in-law – also long-time residents of Hong Kong – had retired to, after living in Hong Kong for more than fifty years.

Deeply embedded in the development of the colony and outspoken about how Hong Kong was their 'home' on the news, the Clemo and the Elston families clearly demonstrated a strong sense of belonging to Hong Kong. They came under the definition of 'expatriates': they came for employment. But at the same time they also lived the life of settlers. They spent the majority of their lives, built their careers, and raised their children in Hong Kong.¹¹⁰ So did their extended families.¹¹¹ Through actively participating in the community's public life, they also built Hong Kong with a

vision for their 'home'. If Hong Kong was not their home, where was? But the Elstons' return to Britain and the Clemos' move to Portugal after retirement reminds us how these overseas Britons, as career-long sojourners, are often inclined to a predisposition to migrate, leaving them constantly switching between 'settlers' and 'expatriates'.

Conclusions

Focusing on the debates surrounding the evacuation, this article studies a range of issues that we must examine in order to fully understand the complexity of being British in the colonial context. As war did not happen until a year and a half later, the society had much time to discuss, complain, and self-reflect on issues such as identity, class, and race that were otherwise obscured. Their discussion was essentially on one question: what did being British mean in the empire? An imperial experience transformed a Briton's life, and in eyes of many, evidently to their detriment in some ways. Like their counterparts in India, the women evacuees found themselves being described as pampered, insular, and querulous not only by those in Hong Kong, but also by government officials and journalists in London and Australia. Clearly shown across evacuees' experience was also a predisposition to migrate. Pragmatic and even trivial reasons drove one away from Home, but more surprising was the emotional affinity to places they were not supposed to settle in.

The debates also tell a powerful story about home, belonging, and commitment. When evacuees protested against the Colonial Office's statement implying that no Britons could be domiciled in Hong Kong, their protests were never confined to the legal concept of domicile itself. What they actually meant when they wrote 'where are we domiciled?' was 'where is our home?' Hong Kong was never supposed to be a place they should consider home – at least as far as officials in Whitehall were concerned, as shown when they decided that 'domicile' could be a legitimate justification for

evacuating only the 'white' Britons. But the reality was that many Britons there did see the colony in this way. They said 'Hongkong was my home', not only because it was a convenient place to be, as their husbands were there. Hong Kong was where they were emotionally attached, where they could retire, and where they had integrated. 'Home' rhetorically was usually Britain – 'Home with a capital H', as an interviewee said – but Hong Kong was actually home for many.¹¹² Indeed, evacuees' post-war trajectory mostly points to the possibility that the Colonial Office's view had some basis in fact: even the Clemos and the Elstons did not settle in Hong Kong for good. But this should not distract us from seeing how a career-long sojourn in the wider empire complicated what home meant for overseas Britons. Looking at the evacuees then forces us to rethink the issue of home and belonging among British communities outside the Dominions.

In doing so, this episode also provides us with an opportunity to start to rethink the role that developments in interwar Hong Kong played in its later history. The occupation period is too often seen as providing a sharp break. That Hong Kong's population was so transient before the Second World War had distracted many from recognizing how its pre-war history was central to the colony's post-war development from a colonial backwater into an important global trade centre. The most surprising and significant finding of this research is perhaps that a particular sense of belonging to Hong Kong had emerged amongst these Britons before 1940. While most scholars and observers have argued a local Hong Kong identity did not emerge until the 1960s, John Carroll's study of Hong Kong-Chinese elites has proved that it in fact had existed well before the war.¹¹³ If we consider Hong Kong-Britons' evocative claims that 'Hong Kong is my home' in 1940 in the context of such debates, this article then points to the need to understand the crucial role that developments in the interwar period played in

shaping the colony's society and culture. While it is true that such sense of belonging had not been widely claimed by its population until two decades later, this article, along with Carroll's findings, suggests a longer history for discussion about the construction and negotiation of what it meant to be a 'Hongkonger'.

More importantly, the debates also remind us the fundamental problem of defining Britishness in a multiethnic empire. The events and discussions of 1940 presage later developments that undermined notions of imperial citizenship, and replaced them with a narrower, more exclusive definition of Britishness based on race.¹¹⁴ While many articulated what being British meant for a white British person in the empire, others asked who exactly could be British. Although existing literature often sees Hong Kong as a colonial backwater in Asia overshadowed by other British settlements such as India and Shanghai, this article demonstrates how the colony's history helps us better understand colonial societies.¹¹⁵ The formal colonisation of Hong Kong gave its government not only the power, but also the responsibility of protecting a wider population other than its white subjects. The war however tested the empire's willingness in accepting these subjects' British status. With the evident racism shown in the evacuation, Britishness was only reserved to those of 'pure European descent' at the exigency of war. This article therefore illuminates how different notions of Britishness clashed in interwar Asia, which recent literature suggested as increasingly inclusive and liberal. Seemingly only an episode with little consequences in the history of Hong Kong, the evacuation of less than four thousand women and children from the colony tells us as much about the Britons in Hong Kong as about being British in the empire.

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87. 'Evacuation Sop', *SCMP*, 13 November 1940, 8.
88. CO 323/1657/47, O.A.G. Hong Kong to the Colonial Office, 13 August 1940.
89. CO 323/1657/47, O.A.G. Hong Kong to the Colonial Office, 13 August 1940; Governor of Hong Kong to Governor of Fiji, 20 August 1940; Governor of Ceylon to Governor of Hong Kong, 21 August 1940; Fiji Governor to Colonial Office, 28 August 1940.

90. CO 129/590/1, Hong Kong Governor Sir Mark Young to the Secretary of State for the Colonies Walter Guinness, 1st Baron Moyne, 2 December 1941, TNA.
91. CO 129/590/1, Strait Settlements Governor Sir S. Thomas to Hong Kong Governor Sir Mark Young, 3 December 1941.
92. Darwin, 'Orphans of Empire'; Lambert and Lester, 'Introduction: Imperial Spaces, Imperial Subjects', 1.
93. Phone interview with anonymous interviewee #1, 8 February 2014.
94. Letters from Freda Pooley, 5 June and 15 July 2014.
95. Skype interview with Audrey Kilpatrick, 14 June 2015.
96. Buettner, *Empire Families*, 196-207.
97. 'No Place like Frankston', *Standard* (Frankston, Australia), 13 June 1946, 9.
98. Snow, *The Fall of Hong Kong*, 263.
99. 'Going Home to Hong Kong', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 July 1946, 4; 'Duntron Arrives in Hong Kong: Many Residents Return After Six-Year Exile in Australia, Disembarkation this Morning', *SCMP*, 10 August 1946, 1.
100. CO 129/608/3, Report on British Children who have returned to school in the Colony', TNA.
101. '400 Stranded in Sydney', *Daily News* (Perth), 16 March 1946, 5.
102. 'Hong Kong Evacuees Home Again', *Argus*, 12 August 1946, 6.
103. MP 151/1, 466/201/325, Acting Secretary of Navy H. C. Allen to Mrs Ethel Egan, 14 June 1946.
104. 'Announcement: Woodcraft Doris Egan', *SCMP*, 26 October 1976, 16.
105. 'Mrs Emily Old', *SCMP*, 3 October 1965, 3.
106. 'Honours List: Sir Man-kam Lo, Col. Owen Hughes Awarded O.B.E. Service Awards', *SCMP*, 10 June 1948, 1; 'Personalities: Lecture on Life in Hong Kong, Mrs A. H. Elston', *SCMP*, 30 March 1949, 4.
107. Mrs A. H. Elston, 'More Recollections of Old Hong Kong', *Sunday Post – Herald* (Hong Kong), 26 August 1973, 6.
108. 'Fred Clemo Mourned by Many', *SCMP*, 17 July 1975, 5.
109. 'Too Many "Honky-Tonk" Bars in Kowloon, Claims KRA President', *SCMP*, 20 September 1969, 6.
110. While reporting Freddy's death, *SCMP* stated that Betty Clemo founded the world renowned clothes shop in the Peninsula 'Betty Clemo'. 'Fred Clemo Mourned by Many', *SCMP*, 17 July 1975, 5.

111. 'Sudden Death of the Baby Boy', *SCMP*, 15 June 1938, 5; 'Obituary: Old Resident of Hong Kong in Durban, Mr Duncan Tollan', *SCMP*, 20 September 1949, 8; Email from Barbara Anslow, 20 January 2017.
112. FaceTime interview with Barbara Anslow, 28 February 2017.
113. Carroll, *Edge of Empires*. For works discussing the emergence of a 'Hong-Konger' identity in later times, see Baker, 'Life in the Cities'; Turner, '60's/90s'; Lui, *Xianggang si dai ren 香港四代人* [Four Generations of Hong Konger]; Hampton, *Hong Kong and British Culture, 1945-97*, 160-85.
114. Scholars have explored how a racial notion of Britishness emerged in response to immigration in postwar Britain. See, for instance, Paul, *Whitewashing Britain*; Schofield, *Enoch Powell and the Making of Postcolonial Britain*.
115. Bickers, 'On not being Macao(ed) in Hong Kong: British official minds and action in 1967', 67.

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