BOOK REVIEWS

Can Hong Kong Exceptionalism Last? Dilemmas of Governance and Public Administration over Five Decades, 1970s–2020, by Anthony B. L. Cheung. Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press, 2021. 470 pp. HK$210.00 (Paperback). ISBN: 9789629375911.

On July 1, 2022, the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, President Xi Jinping attempted to reassure the world that “One Country, Two Systems” is here to stay by reiterating that “there is no need to change this good system.” Yet just three years ago, Hong Kong descended into unprecedented political chaos, violence, and crackdown, resulting in the rapid plummeting of government popularity. The stable political order and effective governance that once characterized the city atrophied with the government’s hasty amendment of extradition legislation and the ensuing crisis. Anthony B. L. Cheung, a former President of the Hong Kong Institute of Education and Research Chair Professor in Education University of Hong Kong and Adjunct Professor at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, offers an anatomy of how this global city was governed from its colonial days to its experimentation as a special administrative region.

Very few major books on Hong Kong’s public administration and governance have been published since John Burns’ Government Capacity and the Hong Kong Civil Service (2004) and Ian Scott’ The Public Sector in Hong Kong (2010). Since leaving the government in 2017, Cheung has written two books on his experience and reflections as Secretary for Transport and Housing (2012–17) and one book on the Independent Commission against Corruption. These, however, deal with rather specialized, though important, topics. This timely book is a most welcome contribution to the literature on the politics and governance of Hong Kong prior to 2020, after which the National Security Law and the new electoral system have fundamentally recast its political fabric.

Some parts of the book have drawn from Cheung’s seminars and earlier publications, but all have been thoroughly updated to address the complexities arising from the interactions between politics and administration at different scales involving Hong Kong, the Mainland, and the rest of the world amid the declining liberal global order and China’s rapid ascent. This book is unlike an academic monograph applying one
single theoretical framework, and it is neither a purely academic study nor a commentary. Instead, the book combines insights of a seasoned practitioner and an accomplished academic with a compassionate inquiry of the limitations, possibilities, and future of Hong Kong’s exception-alism. Hence this review does not adopt the usual approach in reviewing an academic monograph by situating it in major debates in political science or public administration in order to best interpret its explorations on practical governance challenges facing Hong Kong.

Using exceptionalism as an analytical lens is a thoughtful and pragmatic way to characterize the unique configuration of Hong Kong’s polity. As Cheung argues, Hong Kong cannot be “susceptible to narrow conceptualization” such as “colonialism, post-colonialism, democracy, authoritarianism, libertarianism, and autonomy” (p. 8) because it has “a bit of all these and has always been a hybrid” (p. 8). After discussing competing arguments on Hong Kong’s political and administrative evolution since 1997, which often highlight the lack of democracy, conflicts, and uncertainties under increasing central control, he believes it is more “instructive and constructive to explore the what and how of Hong Kong’s governance in a less normative perspective” (p. 15).

After exploring Hong Kong’s exceptionalism and hybridity, the rest of the book is divided into three parts. Part I introduces the colonial legacy, covering the formation of the administrative state, the administrative modernization since the 1966–67 riots, and the public sector reforms introduced since the 1980s. Part II deals with the transition of key institutions and mechanisms in public governance, including the political transition to 1997, the establishment of the “ministerial system” (initially called the Principal Officials Accountability System or POAS), the civil service, the policy process and government capacity, the change from positive non-intervention to proactive government, and the assessment of trust and performance. Part III examines the tensions and challenges in governing Hong Kong, including the pursuit of democracy, the operation of the executive system, the challenges of “One Country, Two Systems,” identity politics, and the future of Hong Kong’s governance in the broader context of governance globally. Except for budgeting, there are very few critical challenges in public governance not touched by this work.

The three chapters in Part I offers a concise analysis of the establishment of Hong Kong’s administrative machinery in the colonial era and its transformation in the 1990s. While exceptionalism is used to characterize the systemic features of Hong Kong’s polity, Cheung has utilized mainstream
political science and public administration literature in his examination of the institutions and policies, and compare them with other Asian and OECD countries. Chapter 1 traces the development of the “executive-led” architecture of governance under the colonial governor and the changing relationship between the bureaucratic apparatus dominated by the generalist Administrative Class and an increasingly vocal society and legislative body after the onset of district and later territory-wide elections since the mid-1980s. Chapters 2 and 3 provide further analysis of the key milestones in the evolution of the colonial government—the McKinsey reforms, the generalist-specialist divide, and the reform of district administration—as well as key public sector reforms modelled after the New Public Management (NPM) in the 1990s and early 2000s. Unlike NPM reforms triggered by an efficiency or fiscal crisis in other countries, he aptly suggests that the public sector reforms in Hong Kong aimed to address the “decline in the political authority and relative autonomy of the British administration” during the transition to 1997. Yet “the expansion and growing organizational complexity of the public sector” amid a “turbulent and pluralist environment” had “created problems of policy leadership and coordination within the pre-existing structure” (p. 65). These succinct accounts offer a useful background for understanding the dilemmas of governance in the chapters to come.

The six chapters in Part II constitute the core of the analysis of major governance mechanisms and issues. Chapter 4 offers an excellent assessment of the transition from late colonial rule through last Governor Chris Pattern’s political reforms to the new institutional design under the Basic Law, including an updated overview of central organs dealing with Hong Kong. As Cheung rightly argues, the institutional incompatibility between the polity designed under the Basic Law, which is largely built upon the old colonial system, and the changing political environment constitute “a fundamental source of the stress and uncertainty in institutional relationships” (p. 86). Chapter 5 examines the political appointment system of POAS introduced in 2002 which enables the Chief Executive to choose his political appointees and form his governing team, rather than just to rely on the career administrative elites. Most of the difficulties of this system are well analyzed, but a more thorough and critical inquiry of the recent problems of this Hong Kong-style “ministerial system” is necessary because the institutional defects and their political consequences, aside from the lack of effective political and policy leadership, are probably the main source of many of Hong Kong’s governance and accountability crises in the past decade. Chapter 6 is on the civil service system and reform, but it is
relatively short (12 pages) and it focuses mainly on the first ten years since 1997. Given the primacy of the civil service in Hong Kong’s governance, more evaluation of the developments in the bureaucracy and challenges in the past decade (e.g. personnel management, performance and political neutrality) should be offered.

Chapter 7 addresses the conundrum of government capacity and the changing policy environment, where he reiterates that the “old architecture” can no longer meet the challenges posed by the new policy habitat and new actors. Chapter 8 concerns the role of government in socio-economic governance, but with only 15 pages, the chapter is unable to offer more analysis of this significant change. By offering broad strokes on the move from “positive non-interventionism” toward a “proactive and steering government,” Cheung reminds us of the government’s lack of “sufficient political power or strategic capacity” due to “the constraints imposed by the existing political system” (p. 156). Nonetheless, much remains to be written on the attempts of the CY Leung and Carrie Lam administrations to establish a more “proactive” form of governance and the bureaucratic and political constraints they confronted in steering society and economy beyond the 3 pages set for this task. This part concludes with a most fitting assessment of the government’s deficit in performance and trust in chapter 9.

Part III addresses the political tensions and challenges haunting Hong Kong since the transition. Chapter 10 examines the key episodes in Hong Kong’s precarious quest for democracy since the mid-1980s, cumulating in “the radicalization of the pro-democracy movement by localist sentiments in recent years” (p. 197) and a “a prolonged period of constitutional stagnancy,” hence “putting further stress on the existing defective political system which still has to deliver practical governance amidst widening political divides, rising public frustrations, and falling expectations” (p. 199). Whereas Chapter 11 scrutinizes the core predicament of Hong Kong’s defective political system—a government without parties or votes, Chapter 11 studies the tensions of two systems and two existentialisms, addressing the changing, and sometimes conflictual, Mainland-Hong Kong relations amid China’s rise and its growing involvement in Hong Kong’s governance. He believes Hong Kong’s challenge is to “learn to construct a third existentialism upon and transcending the two pre-existing existentialisms” under colonialism and the initial practice of “One Country, Two Systems” (p. 237). Chapters 13 and 14 explore respectively the rise of identity politics and the Hong Kong experience with reference to the intellectual debates concerning globalization, democracy, authoritarianism, and good
governance. He cautions that “Hong Kong has to be relevant to China—now and in the future—to help define Hong Kong’s prospect and self-worth” (p. 257) and become “a city of growth, diversity, respect, and opportunity” requires cultural and social cosmopolitanism (p. 257). As the manuscript was finalized in July 2020, his conjectures on Hong Kong’s prospects are put in the Epilogue and Postscript. These prognoses are understandably general, given the fluidity of Hong Kong, Chinese and global politics, but a more elaborate investigation of how the institutional logic of the key pillars of governance—the political appointment system, the civil service, the policy mechanisms, and the civil society—may facilitate or constraint their future adaptation in view of the reforms tried in the past 25 years and the unfolding national and global contexts are essential.

The book has some unusual features. It carries lengthy endnotes (87 pages), compared with 294 pages of text and a long bibliography (56 pages). The notes are often detailed elaboration of arguments or discussion of key events, which should preferably be incorporated into the main text, or perhaps condensed. Historical events can be put into boxes and a chronology for clear reference. The information in these lengthy endnotes are particularly valuable for those readers who are less familiar with Hong Kong affairs. The absence of an index, however, is a disadvantage which makes it difficult to locate the many topics and events covered.

Somber but always hopeful and not pessimistic, Cheung has offered us a balanced, well-written and sophisticated analysis of Hong Kong’s unique existence in this admirable work, weaving together the threads of path dependence of governmental institutions and historical legacies of Hong Kong’s unique past, the growing impact from the Mainland, and the repercussions from global economic and political transformations. This is a must-read for anyone interested in Hong Kong’s pre-2020 system of governance and serious about exploring its prospects under the evolving framework of “comprehensive jurisdiction” by the central authorities in Beijing. The insightful academic discussion and the comprehensive scrutiny of Hong Kong’s governance mechanisms and challenges make this work an ideal text for teaching and for training professionals as well. If available in Chinese, it can reach a much wider audience in the Chinese world and enrich the discourse about the past and future of this exceptional hybrid community.

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