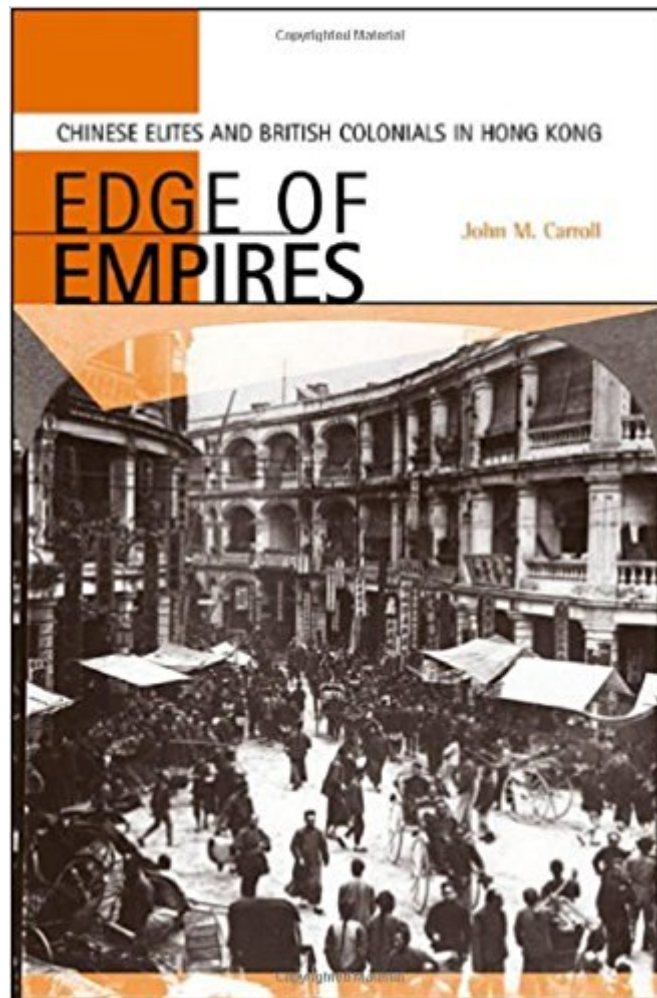




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# Edge Of Empires: Chinese Elites And British Colonials In Hong Kong



## Synopsis

In an engaging, revisionist study, John M. Carroll argues that in the century after the Opium War, Hong Kong's colonial nature helped create a local Chinese business elite. By the end of the nineteenth century, the colonial government saw Chinese businessmen as allies in establishing Hong Kong as a commercial center. The idea of a commercially vibrant China united them. Chinese and British leaders cooperated on issues of mutual concern, such as the expansion of capitalism and political and economic directions for an ailing China. These Chinese also found opportunities in the colonial system to develop business and commerce. In doing so, they used Hong Kong's strategic position to underscore their own identity as a distinctive group unlike their mainland counterparts. Nationalism took on a specifically Hong Kong character. At the same time, by contributing to imperial war funds, organizing ceremonies for visiting British royalty, and attending imperial trade exhibitions, the Chinese helped make Hong Kong an active member of the global British Empire. In *Edge of Empires*, Carroll situates Hong Kong squarely within the framework of both Chinese and British colonial history, while exploring larger questions about the meaning and implications of colonialism in modern history.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Even more than most new history monographs, John M. Carroll's carefully argued, informative study of the Hong Kong bourgeoisie circa 1841–1941 is one that it is easy to imagine readers picking up with very different goals in mind, only to come away with contrasting senses of the novelty and importance of its arguments. The author has interesting things to say

about a variety of specific individuals (including colorful figures who moved skillfully between different cultural milieus), institutions (such as the fascinating District Watch system of maintaining order in the overwhelmingly Chinese sections of Hong Kong), and events. Carroll has unquestionably done specialists in several fields a service by providing us with such a richly textured picture of the multifaceted process of "embourgeoisment" in an intriguing colonial setting, that of a one-time part of the British Empire that since 1997 has not been de-colonized but rather re-colonized, with the metropole simply shifting from London to Beijing. (Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom *American Historical Review*) Carroll argues that in the century after the Opium War, an upper middle class appeared among the Chinese in Hong Kong. Western in outlook and education yet Chinese in value and connections, this bourgeoisie collaborated with their British rulers to build a place they considered their own. Chinese endeavors instead of British governance transformed Hong Kong from a collection of barren rocks to a gleaming metropolis of stability and prosperity. Britain's crown jewel thus bore eloquent testimony to a productive encounter between the East and the West. This book fills an important gap in the scholarship on Hong Kong. As a close study of the rise of a Hong Kong-based Chinese bourgeoisie, *Edge of Empires* has much to offer to current studies of Chinese diaspora, business history, and political culture. It also challenges prevailing theories of global empires and colonialism. (Wen-hsin Yeh, University of California, Berkeley)

John M. Carroll is Professor of History at the University of Hong Kong.

The *Edge of Empires* offers a different vantage point for examining the early development of Hong Kong as special place, different from the usual view of it as "a borrowed place and a borrowed time." In this work, Hong Kong is viewed less from the perspective of the British colonial authorities and Western expats and more from the experience of the Cantonese Chinese majority (in mid-late 1840's, the European segment of the population was about 1.7% of the population). Specifically discussion centers on the contributions of resident sojourner Cantonese merchant elites and their three important contributions to the development of Hong Kong in the latter 19th century. They are 1) proving a useful nexus linking Chinese (Cantonese) and British (Westerner) communities; 2) an increasingly major contributor to HK economic development as an entrepot trade and financial center, by way of investments, enterprises, employment of Chinese, and control of the Cantonese emigrant system out of HK (largest in S.E. China after 1860's), and 3) leadership of the Chinese

(Cantonese) community in HK, by way of establishing and controlling charitable, medical, and community institutions. These merchants became enormously wealthy and powerful, as they negotiated British-Chinese relations in HK, they also became the Chinese (Cantonese) community's spokesmen/advocate. This template replicated itself in other English-speaking societies in Australia, America, Canada, and the British West Indies (Caribbean). The book is as readable as it is informative. It balances well with Elizabeth Sin's Pacific Crossing.

This is a brilliant account of the emergence of particular identities and social structures in colonial Hong Kong. Although focused on this unique British colony, the book will be fascinating to anyone interested in colonialism, imperialism, or cultural identity.

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