



# HONG KONG

A COUNTRY PROFILE FROM INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS, INC.

## GEOGRAPHY

Hong Kong, the Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China, is situated on the southeastern tip of China. The total land area is only 420 square miles—about six times the size of Washington, D.C.

Land is at such a premium that many cemeteries lease plots, later exhuming and cremating the remains.

Hong Kong centers around Victoria Harbor. On the south side is Hong Kong Island; to the north is the Kowloon Peninsula and the New Territories. The New Territories, which represent most of Hong Kong's island mass,

adjoin China to the north. Hong Kong also encompasses some 235 outlying islands, most of which are uninhabited.

Victoria District, better known as "Central," is the center of government and finance. North, across Victoria Harbor, is Kowloon. Just a few years ago, Kowloon had the territory's largest population. However, with the government's policy of increasing development in the New Territories, that has changed.

The terrain consists primarily of rugged mountains and rolling hills, along with rocky coastlines. Only six percent of the land is arable, and only one percent is used for growing crops.

Hong Kong has a subtropical climate with

definite seasons. Autumn is the most pleasant, with comfortable temperatures and abundant sunshine. Winter is cool; spring is humid and warm, and summer is hot and rainy.

Hong Kong receives 88 inches of rain annually and is subject to typhoons during the months of June through September.

## PEOPLE & LANGUAGE

About seven million people live in Hong Kong, giving it one of the world's highest population densities—nearly 6,300 people per square kilometer. About 95 percent of the population is ethnic Chinese, mostly Cantonese from nearby Guangdong Province of China. Chinese

(Cantonese) and English are the two most common languages. However, since Hong Kong's reversion to Chinese rule, "the mother tongue"—Cantonese is being pushed in those schools that have traditionally taught in English.

The birthrate in Hong Kong has showed a steady decline since 1981.

Hong Kong is growing at the rate of about 1.3 percent annually with immigrants exceeding births (birth rate 12.85/1,000 pop. and immigrants 15.41/1,000 pop. in 1998). In preparation for reversion, some 400,000 citizens applied for the British National Overseas passports which would enable them to travel

more freely than on a Chinese passport. At the same time, many Western expatriate residents applied for naturalization, so that they could remain in the territory as permanent residents. Those who did emigrate due to impending reversion usually went to the U.S., Canada, Australia, or New Zealand.

## POLITICAL HISTORY

Hong Kong had been part of China from ancient times up to the last century. For years, it primarily consisted of small fishing villages, with its many coves also serving as hideouts for pirates. Portuguese traders appeared in Hong Kong in the early 1500s, followed shortly thereafter by other European powers.

In 1842, following the Opium War, China gave control of Hong Kong Island to Great Britain. China then ceded Kowloon to Britain after the Arrow War in 1860. In 1898, Britain acquired a 99-year lease on the New Territories, which included the outlying islands.

Once under British control, the colony became an important naval sta-

tion and shipping port, and a gateway to China. Japan took control of Hong Kong during World War II, during which time the population dropped by more than half to 600,000. More than a million refugees from Mainland China poured into Hong Kong the year following the establishment of the Communist regime in China in 1949. By 1961, the population had soared to 3.7 million. Through the years, Hong Kong has been a haven for refugees from all over.

On December 19, 1984, Britain and China agreed under the Sino-British Joint Declaration, that the People's Republic of China would resume the exercise of sovereignty over Hong Kong on July 1, 1997. Nearly 150,000 visitors and journalists came to Hong Kong to witness the former British colony become the Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China (SAR). Christopher Pattern, the last British governor, handed authority over to Tung Cheehwa, the new Chief Executive of Hong Kong. Under this one country, two systems principle, China guaranteed the preservation of Hong Kong's current economic,

social, legal, administrative, and judicial systems and a high degree of autonomy for 50 years beyond 1997.

Although many citizens of Hong Kong were angry that they had no voice in the negotiations which led up to the reversion, a large number felt great pride in watching the Chinese flag rise on that historic day in July. Memories of how being Chinese in colonial Hong Kong equated to being a second-class citizen fueled this pride. In many citizens, this ethnic pride was moderated by anxiety of what lay ahead. Prior to the reversion, China introduced amendments spelling out restrictions on any activities or published statements that threaten "national security," reassuring China that the SAR would not become a base for undermining

## ECONOMY

Communist Party rule. Hong Kong's economy revolves around its busy harbor. It is the natural gateway for trade and investment in Mainland China. The SAR's mini-constitution—the Basic Law—provides a legal framework for continuing

economic prosperity. Strategically located in the center of East Asia, Hong Kong is the world's fastest growing economic region. Hong Kong's open economy, consistent free trade and free enterprise policies make it an easy place to do business. Tourism, an important foreign exchange earner, continues as Hong Kong is still a mecca for those who love shopping.

Hong Kong's main exports include toys, games, clothing, watches and clocks, imitation jewelry, and electronics.

Hong Kong's per capita income—about \$23,571 U.S. currency—offers an affluent market. There are, however, definite pockets of poverty, with many of the poor and middle class living in bedspace apartments struggling to make ends meet. Expanding inflation in recent years and spiraling housing prices has aggravated the situation. Although the economy was threatened by brain drain, when many of Hong Kong's brightest citizens left in advance of reversion, many have returned with the security of dual citizenship.

## EDUCATION

The Chinese place a high value on formal education. In Hong Kong, the educational system has gained additional prominence as a way of providing skilled and trained personnel to keep up with the demands of the economy.

Schooling is free and compulsory through age 15. Competition prevails at all levels, with students striving to qualify for the best schools as they move on.

Percentage of the population attending grade school averaged 96 percent; for high school that number was 85 percent in 1997. Over 8,000 students from Hong Kong studied in the U.S. during the 2002/03 academic year.

## CULTURE

Hong Kong is a blend of old and new, East and West—ancient Chinese tradition and superstitions mixed with sophisticated Western influences and modern comforts and amenities. It is a fast-paced, extremely capitalistic society fused with the Confucian

ethics of reserve, modesty, and courtesy.

**Hong Kong consumes more oranges per capita and boasts more Rolls Royces than any other place on earth, according to the Hong Kong Tourist Association.**

Individuals in Hong Kong are quite conscious of their social position in relation to others. One way this manifests itself is in parents striving to save money to provide the best higher education for their children, which often entails sending them overseas to study. “Saving face”—avoiding shame or dishonor—is an overriding concern in social interaction.

Hong Kong’s people are noted for their energetic and hard-working nature. The area’s economic prosperity, however, has been tainted with the growth of an underworld of crime. Drug addiction, prostitution, theft, and gambling are all significant problems. On the other hand, Hong Kong has a higher life expectancy rate than either the U.S. or Britain. This is

remarkable considering the very high densities of urban population, pollution, and psychological stress levels.

Western-style dating and marriages are the norm, with couples tending to marry at an older age than those in the West. Hong Kong has one of the world’s lowest divorce rates.

Smaller families have been the trend recently. The sharp difference between Western and traditional values and practices cause strain in many families and among the generations.

Horseracing is a multi-million-dollar business and the most popular pastime in Hong Kong. Mahjong, a tile game that is a cross between dominoes and cards, is another popular gambling activity.

## HOLIDAYS

Hong Kong celebrates numerous and colorful holidays and festivals, including a few Western holidays such as Christmas and Easter. The Chinese New Year, which usually falls in February (according to the lunar calendar), is the highlight of the year’s festivals. A giant fireworks display over the harbor

welcomes the incoming year, and friends and relatives visit and exchange gifts.

Other important celebrations include: Chin Ming Festival, honoring the dead (April); Dragon Boat Festival (May/June); Return to the Motherland Day (July 1); Seven Sisters (Maiden) Festival is a celebration for lovers and a time when young girls pray for a good husband; Hungry Ghosts Festival (August) is a time when food is set out to placate roaming spirits.

## RELIGION

Many Hong Kong residents, especially older ones, adhere to folk religions that blend aspects of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, mixed in with the practice of ancestor worship. Several of these beliefs and practices are deeply intermingled with everyday life. Among Hong Kong’s young people, however, secularism—hunger for money, prestige, and status—predominates.

Christians number about eight percent of the population. Smaller communities of Muslims, Hindus,

Sikhs, Jews, and Zoroastrians also reside in the region. The majority of Hong Kong citizens (about 57 percent) do not associate with any religious institutions.

## CHRISTIANITY

Christianity came to the region in the early 1500s with the arrival of Westerners. The first church was established in 1842, coinciding with Britain's acquisition on Hong Kong Island. In 1997, the number of Protestant and Catholic believers were approximately equal.

The Hong Kong church experienced tremendous growth in the 1950s and 1960s. This was a result of the influx of refugees from the mainland coupled with substantial evangelistic activities, including the arrival of many missionaries who had fled China after the Communist takeover.

As reversion approached, an estimated 10 percent of Christians left Hong Kong, including a number of mature pastors, leaving a need for Protestant ministers in many congregations. The church helped to prepare Christians for

reversion by breaking down congregations into small cell groups that could better function on the event of a crackdown on Christianity. Threat to religious freedom also resulted in increased interest in spiritual issues, with many Christians becoming more serious about their faith. Whereas political issues were once seldom discussed in the church, renewed involvement in political affairs was seen especially in young Christians.

**The average age of pastors in Hong Kong is extremely young, perhaps less than 30.**

Although religious freedom is guaranteed by Article 32 of the SAR Basic Law, many Christians, upon hearing stories of religious persecution in China, are wary of what lies ahead.

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Hong Kong Tourism Board  
115 East 54th Street,  
2/F, New York, NY  
10022-4512  
Email: [info@hktb.org](mailto:info@hktb.org)  
[www.hktb.org](http://www.hktb.org)

HKSAR Government  
[www.info.gov.hk/eindex.htm](http://www.info.gov.hk/eindex.htm)

Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office  
[www.hongkong.org](http://www.hongkong.org)

## SOURCES

*Doing Business in Hong Kong: Hong Kong USA Key Facts, What Makes Hong Kong Tick*, [www.hongkong.org](http://www.hongkong.org), February 2004.

*Countries of the World and Their Leaders Yearbook 2004*, Vol. 1, Status of the World's Nations. Gale, Thomas: ISSN 0196-2809.

*Facing Up to Beijing Sovereignty: Reflections on the Situation of Religious Communities in Hong Kong*, Lauren, Frederick Pfister, Hong Kong Baptist University.

*Fodor's '98 Hong Kong*. Fodor's Travel Publications, Inc. 1998.

*Going Native*. The Economist, December 13, 1997, v345, n8047, p. 4.

*Open Doors 2002/03*. New York, Institute of International Education, 2003.

*The "Cage People."* Maclean's, July 7, 1997 v110, n27, p. 38.

*The Far East and Australasia 1997*. Europa Publishers, Ltd., 28th Edition.

*Demographic Trends in Hong Kong 1981-1996*, [www.info.gov.hk/censtatd/intro/demo.htm](http://www.info.gov.hk/censtatd/intro/demo.htm), February 2004.

*Hong Kong Superlatives*, [www.hkta.org/superlatives](http://www.hkta.org/superlatives), February 2004.

*The World Factbook*, CIA, February 2004: <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/hk.html>.

For more information about International Students, Inc., call 1-800-ISI-TEAM or (719) 576-2700, fax (719) 576-5363, email [information@isionline.org](mailto:information@isionline.org), or write: ISI, PO Box C, Colorado Springs, CO 80901. Visit our website at [www.isionline.org](http://www.isionline.org).

