

BOOK REVIEW

## *Let There Be Light: How Electricity Made Modern Hong Kong*

By Mark L. Clifford. Columbia University Press, 2023. 312 pp.  
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*Let There Be Light* is a business history of the successful transfer and development of technology from Britain to Hong Kong, a city without local sources of coal or oil, without a manufacturing infrastructure able to produce the necessary equipment, and initially without the local engineering expertise needed to install and run that equipment. China Light and Power's (CLP) chief executive, Lawrence Kadoorie (1899–1993) overcame these deficiencies. A Jewish businessman of Iraqi origin, he orchestrated continual improvements in the power system and encouraged Chinese factories to relocate from Shanghai and other cities. His investments and leadership helped Hong Kong to become both a manufacturing hub that employed thousands of refugees and a brightly lighted symbol of entrepreneurial capitalism, in contrast to the drab cities of Mao's China.

Mark L. Clifford rejects the idea that colonial Hong Kong had a *laissez faire* economy. Rather, the colonial state and private enterprise became increasingly intertwined in the decades after 1945, as the government both imposed regulations and also proved willing to invest in large infrastructure projects. Focusing on CLP and using its archives, Clifford demonstrates how, by building capacity ahead of demand, the electrical supply system became a crucial stimulus to the colony's rapid economic development, particularly in Kowloon and the territories. Another supplier, Hong Kong Electric, chiefly served Hong Kong Island. It began in 1889 but proved less dynamic than CLP.

As in Britain, gas dominated public lighting in Hong Kong from the nineteenth century until ca. 1930. Extravagant illuminations including neon signs only emerged in the late 1940s and became a hallmark of the city by the 1960s. Both machinery and engineering expertise were long sourced from Britain, with almost continual investment in new equipment. As was the case with the introduction of electricity in Europe, the new power source was at first common in businesses, factories, and public buildings but not in ordinary residences. It gradually passed from being a domestic luxury for the few to a necessity for all, and by 1975 service was even being extended to squatters.

By the late 1950s, electrical supply was becoming a controversial issue, because rural areas were underserved and paid far higher rates than large industries. CPL was widely perceived as a reverse Robin Hood that stole from the poor. Voltage fluctuations were another problem for customers with advanced equipment such as X-ray machines.

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The colonial government held public hearings, pushed for price controls, and tried to force a merger between the two corporations. However, the adjacent monopolies persisted, apparently without even a load-sharing interconnection, and CLP avoided nationalization through protracted negotiations and accommodation. It even adopted an employee pay scale identical to that of the colony's administration. By the following decade, CLP had negotiated a contract with China, which became its customer in 1979. (A similar engineering detente took place between eastern and western Europe around the same time.) By the 1990s, the flow of energy had been reversed, as China sold electricity to Hong Kong from a new nuclear plant that CLP had helped to finance.

As this collaboration suggests, the company made strategic changes well before the end of colonial rule, framing a new investment policy with its partner ESSO and cultivating contacts with Deng Xiaoping who met with Kadoorie in 1985. As it turned out, "Deng's program of pragmatic economic reform closely resembled Kadoorie's scenario" (203) for growth that had already been articulated in 1979.

Clifford's well-written narrative focuses on politics, economics, and leadership, particularly that of Kadoorie. It opens the way for further studies of such topics as the adoption and use of household appliances, which varied even between similar nations such as Canada and the United States. There presumably were more pronounced differences between mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. The Chinese use of impressive illuminations, from early modern fireworks to modern light shows, is another subject awaiting comprehensive research. Future studies might pay more attention to how and when electricity transformed manufacturing, as Philip Scranton has done for Mainland China,<sup>1</sup> as well as engage engineering questions, such as the adoption of alternating instead of direct current, load balancing, pollution controls, and other technical issues, both at CLP and at Hong Kong Electric. Clifford's pioneering work provides an indispensable foundation for future studies of the technical and social construction of electrification in Hong Kong and the incorporation of that system into the Chinese economy.

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<sup>1</sup>Philip Scranton, *Enterprise, Organization, and Technology in China: A Socialist Experiment, 1950–1971* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).