Hong Kong has long been a port of call for American naval vessels. In May 1899, one year after the Battle of Manila Bay, Admiral George E. Dewey left the Philippines in his flagship USS Olympia, beginning the long journey back to New York. His first port of call was Hong Kong, where the admiral and his crew were welcomed with salutes from British and Italian warships and warmly entertained for the next fortnight.1 As Peter Hamilton points out, by the 1930s a number of Hong Kong hotels, bars, and restaurants aimed their services specifically at visiting American naval and military personnel, a pattern that intensified during the early Cold War years. Such American naval port visits have indeed continued up to the present day, curtailed by the Chinese government when relations with the United States are particularly fraught, resumed when tensions subside, serving in effect as a carefully calibrated index of the state of play between the two powers. U.S. service tourism peaked, however, during the Vietnam War, reaching its height in the second half of the 1960s and early 1970s, when 200,000 mostly young American servicemen visited Hong Kong every year, arriving by sea and air for respite from the pressures of the grueling conflict in Vietnam and Cambodia. Chi-Kwan Mark has described the diplomatic ramifications and Sino-British negotiations over these visits. They occurred and for several years expanded even as China was assisting North Vietnam with massive amounts of supplies and the services of Chinese military support personnel, while the United States poured men, money, and equipment into efforts to enable South Vietnam to resist a Northern takeover.2

Hamilton’s article focuses specifically upon the internal effects—economic, political, and societal—upon Hong Kong of this massive influx of U.S. military personnel, most of them male and generally

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unaccompanied by family members. It is, he suggests, a chapter of history that Hong Kong has largely sought to forget or ignore, given how significantly the alcohol, drugs, and sexual services available in the bars and night clubs of Wanchai and increasingly also of Tsimshatsui ranked among Hong Kong’s attractions for these often rowdy visitors. At the time, most of the bar girls were local Chinese, as opposed to the Southeast Asian sex workers who began coming to Hong Kong to ply their trade towards the end of the twentieth century. Hamilton points out that Vietnam tourism rapidly became “a pillar of the local economy,” with Hong Kong earning US$40 million annually from American servicemen in the late 1960s, a figure surpassed only by the proceeds of the textile and plastics industries. This was merely one aspect of the growing economic ties between Hong Kong and the United States, which had become the territory’s largest export market by 1959. Four years later, U.S. investment in Hong Kong surpassed that of either Britain or Japan, and for the rest of the 1960s and beyond, the American investment stake continued to grow. When the GI visits dwindled, falling to a mere 70,000 by 1973 and declining still further for much of the decade, the profits of the bars, restaurants, hotels, tailors, and other businesses patronized by them likewise fell dramatically. Chi-Kwan Mark has described how after the Hong Kong riots of 1967, the Hong Kong Tourist Association, in partnership with the government and local businesses, launched a major campaign to persuade international tourists, especially those from the United States, to return to Hong Kong. Prevailing upon the U.S. government to continue the war in Vietnam was, by contrast, something far beyond Hong Kong’s powers. The Seventh Fleet would continue to call at irregular intervals, with each such port visit temporarily flooding the streets and establishments of Wanchai and Tsimshatsui with free-spending sailors, but the steady procession of GIs on R and R visits from Indochina, with several thousand in Hong Kong at any given time, became only a past memory.

Hamilton further suggests that the internal political impact on Hong Kong of American military personnel on leave from the Vietnam War was far greater than is usually recognized. He goes so far as to compare their effects with those of the 1966 Star Ferry Riots and the lengthier, politically traumatic, and internationally publicized 1967 riots, which at least for a while seemed to jeopardize the prospects for continuing British control of Hong Kong. Here, he perhaps overstates his case. But Hamilton nonetheless draws attention to some interesting fall-out within Hong Kong of American Vietnam war tourism, not least because of “the asymmetrical race, class, and gender dynamics inherent to their presence” (567). He highlights the organized opposition by at least some residents of Tsimshatsui to the extension to their neighborhood of noisy bars, night clubs, and other establishments catering to GIs. Such groups as the Kowloon Residents Association tried—albeit unsuccessfully—to block the issuing of new liquor licenses to local bars. Hamilton does not point out that the organization’s president, Fred Clemo, was in fact a British expatriate, albeit one born in Hong Kong. Many local businesses seem to have been more concerned to make profits from American servicemen, regardless of any detrimental impact this might have upon the neighborhoods they patronized. Demands that responsibility for issuing liquor licenses in Wanchai and Tsimshatsui be vested in the semi-elected new Urban Council, rather than the Board of Licensing Justices, also had political implications. The Hong Kong government was less than eager to dilute its own powers by delegating responsibilities to an even partially elected body. But the effort of organizing in opposition to unwanted social developments was one

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3 Chi-Kwan Mark, “Hong Kong as an International Tourism Space: The Politics of American Tourism in the 1960s,” in Priscilla Roberts and John M. Carroll, eds., Hong Kong in the Cold War and Beyond (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, forthcoming, 2016).
that would promote the long-term growth of civic groups within Hong Kong, activist bodies whose existence would soon become one of the more prominent and enduring features of the city’s political landscape.

Residents of Wanchai and Tsimshatsui were themselves divided—often on class as well as racial lines—over the desirability of the presence of lucrative if somewhat unsavory businesses servicing U.S. military personnel. As so often in Hong Kong, ultimately the government adopted a laissez-faire policy. Gentrification and economic development, rather than popular opposition, would ultimately close down many of the more picturesque businesses in Wanchai, including not just those from the world of Suzie Wong, but numerous small and specialized traditional shops. Tsimshatsui rapidly evolved into a somewhat down-market tourist haunt, catering not just to Americans but to visitors of many different nationalities. The cessation of Vietnam War tourism did little to check these developments. As cheap air flights burgeoned, budget travelers headed for Tsimshatsui. It was perhaps most notorious as the site of the near legendary Chungking Mansions, a sprawling rabbit Warren of cheap rooming houses, eateries, and businesses of every kind, home to a population of diverse nationalities engaged in a variety of trades, many of them illegal. Chungking Mansions featured in various novels and films about Hong Kong. By the late twentieth century, if not before, it was also a destination that would be ruled off limits to visiting U.S. servicemen.

Here the demands of local policing and international politics intersected. The presence at any one time of thousands of American military personnel on the streets of Hong Kong might easily have been seen as a major affront to the mainland government, which for almost half a century effectively tolerated British rule in Hong Kong, on the tacit understanding that Hong Kong must provide useful services to the People’s Republic and should not serve as a base for activities that might seriously destabilize that regime. Just where the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable lay was often unclear. Young and vigorous military men seeking relief from stress during their few days in Hong Kong, before returning to what might well be hazardous or life-threatening combat situations, could add an explosive element to a territory engaged in a constant balancing act among various opposing and potentially irreconcilable forces. The left-wing press in Hong Kong enjoyed a field day whenever U.S. soldiers broke the law and ended up in court, especially when this involved public drunkenness or violence, the latter often targeting employees in Chinese restaurants, bars, or shops whose services of whatever kind were considered unsatisfactory.

Yet even at the height of the Vietnam War, despite its rhetorical condemnations of their presence, the Chinese government did not, it seems, wish to ban American servicemen from Hong Kong. Instead, understandings on the rules of engagement developed, negotiated largely between the British and Americans, but always with one eye on the Chinese government just across the border. The colonial police rarely prosecuted visiting misbehaving American servicemen, preferring to leave such discipline to the fairly harsh penal code of the U.S. military, which conveniently removed the culprits from Hong Kong, thereby avoiding undue controversy. American forces personnel were given guidelines that they were expected to follow, while extremely tough-looking U.S. shore police normally patrolled the streets, ready to step in should trouble.

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4 Richard Mason, The World of Suzie Wong (London: Collins, 1957), a bestselling novel set in Hong Kong’s Wanchai district during the 1950s, featured a romance between a British artist and a beautiful Chinese prostitute who plies her trade in a seedy hotel in the area, catering to British and American sailors. The pair ultimately marry. In 1960 it was made into a film starring William Holden, with the hero transformed into an American. Despite its somewhat seedy connotations, the Hong Kong tourist business made heavy use of the novel and film when publicizing Hong Kong’s attractions.
Other precautionary measures were likewise, it seems, rather effective. In the years from 1965 to 1973, somewhere between 1 million and 1.5 million American servicemen probably came to Hong Kong, many in search of commercial sex. Yet in Hong Kong—unlike Vietnam—they apparently did not produce a cohort of Eurasian children who would eventually seek to be reunited with their American fathers.

On the whole, the colonial government and the American military proved remarkably effective in managing these visits so as to maximize the benefits to all concerned, while minimizing their potential disruptive effects either within Hong Kong or on relations with mainland China. This was not, it should be stressed, a foregone outcome. During the Vietnam War, Hong Kong was by no means the only available potential destination for American troops who needed a break from the often ill defined theater of war in Vietnam. Nor was it the only port where U.S. warships might be serviced. The Philippines, Japan, and Singapore all offered viable regional alternatives. Hamilton suggests that, from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, visiting U.S. servicemen from Vietnam constituted a highly visible presence within Hong Kong, with several thousand on the streets at any given time. One wonders if he perhaps overstates their impact. While undoubtedly boisterous, energetic, and high-spirited, and quite possibly under stress, those who were letting off steam with drugs, alcohol, and women were for the most part confined to fairly specialized districts within Hong Kong. Decades later, a casual visitor to Wanchai could tell immediately whenever the U.S. fleet was in town. The streets were awash with muscular young men, some—at least in the early evening—politely if hopefully saying “Good evening, ma’am” to any reasonably attractive unaccompanied woman who came by, whatever her nationality. But few strayed any great distance from the haunts designed for their entertainment. And, as ever, their money was still extremely welcome.

The British did, of course, have their own garrison in Hong Kong, patrolling the border with China and on occasion, as during the 1966 Star Ferry riots and those of 1967, supplementing the colonial police force. British soldiers were perhaps less visible than the visiting Americans, not least because they probably had less money to spend than the Americans, particularly since the latter generally had only a few days in which to paint the town red. But the experience of maintaining a substantial military contingent in Hong Kong since 1949, without provoking direct confrontation with China, had perhaps given the British some guidelines to reducing potential flashpoints that the presence of shifting but large numbers of American forces conceivably might have ignited. Gurkha soldiers from Nepal, for example, who constituted a significant portion of the British forces, were largely deployed not in densely populated Hong Kong or Kowloon, but in the relatively remote areas of the New Territories, attempting to intercept illegal immigrants from the mainland. Air crews from the British, Australian, and New Zealand air forces also regularly came through Hong Kong, usually managing to enjoy a few days of relaxation there. Yet for the British administration, and perhaps even the Chinese government, the scale of the American Vietnam war era deployments undoubtedly represented a real challenge, in terms of handling their relationship.

For post-1949 China, leaving Hong Kong under British administration had always represented a calculated balancing act, in which the profits of various kinds derived from its anomalous status were set against concerns related to Cold War ideological battles and rivalries, as well as Chinese nationalist sentiment. Adamant Chinese opposition to the Vietnam war-related influx of U.S. servicemen would have forced the British to exclude them from Hong Kong. One can only conclude that Chinese officials—who were clearly

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well aware of their presence—were not simply willing to tolerate this traffic, but may even have seen positive advantages in it. As Hamilton rightly points out, American military spending gave a massive boost to the Hong Kong economy at a critical time. In whose coffers, one wonders, did the foreign currency that Hong Kong earned from hosting U.S. military personnel and servicing American naval vessels ultimately end up? With mainland Chinese commercial activity seriously affected by the Cultural Revolution from 1966 onward, such a revenue windfall may well have been particularly welcome. Strategic as well as economic motives may have impelled this acquiescence. For the Western powers, Hong Kong was an important intelligence listening post and China watching center. Was the same true in reverse for China? According to Calder Walton, a Cambridge-trained historian who worked closely with Professor Christopher Andrew, from 1949 onward British Joint Intelligence Committee reports argued—“correctly”—that “the Chinese government relied on Hong Kong as a base for its espionage operations against the West just as much as the West relied on Hong Kong for its operations against China.” Did the presence of American forces and warships in Hong Kong offer convenient opportunities for espionage and information gathering, not least in terms of assisting North Vietnam and China itself in prosecuting the war in Vietnam more effectively? The figure of the beautiful but treacherous Asian seductress is something of a racist stereotype. Yet, among all the thousands of GIs and sailors seeking release from the stresses of combat tours, some must have indulged in indiscreet pillow-talk, or simply talked rather too loudly in the bars and restaurants they patronized.

What is somewhat remarkable is how smoothly the entire system worked. The very fact that ships from the U.S. Seventh Fleet, moored in Hong Kong harbor, hosted school trips suggests that the U.S. government had no great fears over security issues within the territory. Even at the height of the 1967 riots, moreover, American ships and troops in Hong Kong did not become targets for communist activists. Hamilton shows a sensitive and subtle appreciation of the complexities of Hong Kong’s hospitality and services to the American military during the Vietnam war era, opening new ground for discussion in terms of their impact on Hong Kong, both internally and externally. Broadening his focus somewhat might offer yet more insights into the deep inconsistencies that seem to have been inherent in these encounters, contradictions that all sides apparently tacitly and very successfully colluded to overcome.

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