

EXCLUSIVITY AND COSMOPOLITANISM: MULTI-ETHNIC CIVIL SOCIETY IN INTERWAR HONG KONG*

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ABSTRACT. *While recent work has shown that interwar Asian civic associational culture was becoming more plural than previously understood, scholars focus mostly on transnational networks and neglect local associations co-existing in the colonial urban space. We also know little about how internationalist and liberal ideals interacted with notions of racial and national exclusion prevalent in the wider society. To overcome this, this article examines local organizations alongside transnational networks in interwar Hong Kong to understand fully how global trends in the interwar period affected colonial civic culture. Drawing on Freemasonry, Rotary, the League of Fellowship, and the Kowloon Residents' Association, I discuss the aspirations of multi-racial urbanites in interwar Hong Kong and their limits. I argue that, while internationalism and colonial hierarchies allowed solidarity to be forged amongst multi-racial urbanites and encouraged their civic engagements, racism embedded in the society, rising nationalism, and constitutional constraints put limitations on their aspirations.*

Perhaps no site captures the complex interplay between cosmopolitanism and exclusivity better than the multi-racial civil society in interwar Hong Kong. The British colony had long had a vibrant associational culture, but during the interwar years, its middle-class citizens became more interested than ever in voluntary societies with a multi-ethnic membership. Given many such institutions had a reputed membership of influential individuals, reasons such as acquiring social status and developing networks surely encouraged emerging urbanites to join. But their outwardly stated collective goals were to build

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cross-cultural friendships, to overcome rising nationalism, and to improve the local and international society to which they belonged. With their keen enthusiasm, a multi-ethnic civil society flourished in interwar Hong Kong, where, at the same time, legislation and social practices engendered the hardening of racial and class boundaries.

Recent historiography has suggested that cosmopolitanism was not only a vision, but a practice experienced by many in urban Asia as early as in the interwar years. Empirical studies on the public spheres of cities such as Rangoon, Singapore, and Penang demonstrate that clear-cut distinctions of ‘race’ broke down as multiple forms of cross-cultural interactions took place.¹ Institutional networks and a vibrant, globally-connected print culture helped equip urbanites there with internationalist ideals and enabled supranational identities to be developed. Multi-racial civic associations have received particular academic attention because they facilitated cross-cultural interactions, advocated civic sensibility, and encouraging ‘civilized’ and reasoned discussions in the colonial public sphere.² Nevertheless, this literature has focused largely on transnational networks and neglected local associations that shared with the former a strikingly similar membership. Furthermore, while existing studies have discussed how internationalism shaped this associational culture, we know little about how liberal civic ideals interacted with notions of exclusivity in the interwar years.³

To overcome this, this article develops a framework that draws on both local and transnational civic associations. Through the prism of two international institutions (Freemasonry and Rotary) and two local associations (the League of Fellowship and the Kowloon Residents’ Association), I examine how urbanites in interwar Hong Kong engaged with cosmopolitan ideals while living within the limits of colonialism and the hardening of racial and national identities. I identify more than 300 urban residents, including both white and colonial subjects, who were of a white-collar background and actively used civic organizations with different purposes to challenge exclusivity in both the local and global society.

I argue that, while internationalism and colonial hierarchies allowed solidarity to be forged amongst multi-racial urbanites and encouraged their civic engagements, racism embedded in the society, rising nationalism, and constitutional constraints put limitations on their aspirations. I structure my discussion

¹ Tim Harper and Sunil Amrith, ‘Introduction’, in Tim Harper and Sunil Amrith, eds., *Sites of Asian interactions: ideas, network and mobility* (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 1–9; Su Lin Lewis, *Cities in motion: urban life and cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia, 1920–1940* (Cambridge, 2016).

² Su Lin Lewis, ‘Rotary International’s “acid test”: multi-ethnic associational life in 1930s Southeast Asia’, *Journal of Global History*, 2 (2012), pp. 302–24; Lynn Hollen Lees, *Planting empire, cultivating subjects: British Malaya, 1786–1941* (Cambridge, 2017), ch. 4, ‘Urban civil society’.

³ Andrew Arsan, Su Lin Lewis, and Anne-Isabelle Richard, ‘Editorial – the roots of global civil society and the interwar moment’, *Journal of Global History*, 2 (2012), pp. 157–65, at p. 164.

here around their ambitions and more importantly, the limitations of such ambitions. While the first section explains how a multi-racial civil society emerged in the colony, the rest of the article focuses on how racial, national, and class exclusivity shaped interwar Hong Kong's multi-racial civil society. The second section uses the League of Fellowship to discuss how racial discrimination cast a shadow over the inter-racial friendships they intended to build. The third section examines how even though civic nationalism encouraged urbanites to think beyond a national framework, Rotarians and Masons used their civic engagements to articulate outwardly their identification with Britishness. The last section draws on the Kowloon Residents' Association and explains how class motivated the civic engagements of middle-class residents there. Overall, this article pushes our understanding of Asian cosmopolitanism by illuminating its interplay with exclusivity in the colonial society of Hong Kong.

I

A British crown colony on the South China coast, Hong Kong was the centre of multiple diasporic networks. Its British status attracted numerous Chinese who wanted a life outside China, for Chinese immigrants could enter without possessing any kind of identification until well after the Second World War. Hong Kong's colonial regime and thriving economy brought not only white Britons, but also those of neighbouring regions. The 1931 census records a population of 821,429 Chinese, 6,684 white Britons, 3,198 'Portuguese', 837 Eurasians, 3,475 Indians, and 2,046 'other European Races and U.S.A.' nationals.⁴

Ethnic divides existed in various ways there. Legislation kept colonial subjects from residing in the 'European' neighbourhoods of the Victoria Peak, Tai Po, and the islands of Cheung Chau and Lantau.⁵ Racially exclusive schools were built in the 1900s to prevent white British children mingling with those of other 'races'. Segregation also existed within the grown-ups' social world. As white Britons made the Hong Kong Club, the Hong Kong Cricket Club, and the Yacht Club racially and class-exclusive social spaces, their Asian counterparts established clubs of their own. The Portuguese had Club Lusitano and Club de Recreio, whereas the well-off Chinese and Eurasians had the Chinese Club and the Chinese Recreation Club.

⁴ William James Carrie, 'Report on the census of the colony of Hong Kong of 1931', Hong Kong, Census Department, 1931. Note that the Portuguese in Hong Kong, now termed 'Macanese', were mostly Portuguese Eurasians. See Felicia Yap, 'Eurasians in British Asia during the Second World War', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 4 (2011), pp. 485–505, at p. 487.

⁵ John M. Carroll, 'The Peak: residential segregation in colonial Hong Kong', in Bryna Goodman and David S. G. Goodman, eds., *Twentieth-century colonialism and China: localities, the everyday and the world* (London, 2012), pp. 81–91.

This social world underwent tremendous changes in the late nineteenth century. Since the 1880s, a significant number of ‘Chinese bourgeoisie’ – mostly ‘returned’ overseas Chinese and Western-educated Chinese and Eurasians – rose in the colony.⁶ With a Western outlook, these Chinese bourgeoisie wanted to participate in European associational culture, both for sociability and asserting respectability. They established equally exclusive social institutions. Some actively challenged the colour bar in the colony’s social world: the Chinese chamber of commerce initiated various legal challenges to the Hong Kong Jockey Club, leading to its gradual acceptance of non-white members in 1927.⁷

The twentieth century witnessed an increasing number of colonial subjects participating in Hong Kong’s public sphere. Chinese and Eurasian elites were amongst the first colonial subjects joining the colonial polity: by 1930, eleven Chinese and Eurasians had served in the colony’s legislative council, with two on the executive council and many more on other public boards. The Portuguese were also keen participants in local politics. Several served on the sanitary board, the only official body then with elected members and executive powers to oversee the work of a government department.⁸ Since 1929, the legislative council had an unofficial Portuguese member. Merchants with connections with India, such as Indian-born Armenian Catchick Paul Chater, Frederick David Sassoon, and Emanuel Raphael Belilios (both Baghdadi Jewish), also served in the legislative council.

A professional class was also growing within Hong Kong’s white population. The 1911 population census recorded that, out of 1,899 employed Europeans in the colony, approximately 400 were businessmen and professionals.⁹ A bigger number was recorded in the 1931 census: at least 599 were professionals, alongside 855 individuals in ‘Commerce & Finance’.¹⁰ Because of their jobs, these white lawyers, doctors, university professors, journalists, and missionaries had more interactions with rising colonial subjects, who shared with them a professional, middle-class outlook.

⁶ John M. Carroll, *Edge of empires: Chinese elites and British colonials in Hong Kong* (Cambridge, MA, 2005), pp. 13–15.

⁷ ‘Chinese and the Jockey Club’, *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, 15 Mar. 1919.

⁸ Norman Miners, *The government and politics of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong, 1975), pp. 175–89.

⁹ The 1911 census recorded 124 merchants, 38 doctors, dentists, and medical students, 18 bankers, 36 brokers, 22 architects, 4 surveyors, and 189 professionals in ‘legal, literary, educational, and religious’ industries of the ‘British, American, European and Portuguese population’. P. P. J. Wodehouse, ‘Report on the census of the colony for 1911’, p. 47, in *Hong Kong Sessional Papers*, University of Hong King Libraries.

¹⁰ The 1931 census recorded 559 in ‘Professions’ and 855 in ‘Commerce & Finance’. The latter may include clerks and assistants, who were generally not regarded as part of the business and professional class. It also excluded the Portuguese, who were not regarded as Europeans for their Eurasian heritage, and included only ‘Europeans and USA Citizens’. Carrie, ‘Census of 1931’.

These demographic changes meant that, by 1900, Hong Kong housed a sizable group of residents who had a keen interest in shaping their society. A significant few were fortunate enough to enter the colonial polity through official appointments; but for many more, this option was not tangible. They had to seek other means to do so – and the ever-growing number of civic institutions provided them such opportunities. Rapid globalization in the nineteenth century led to the rise of civic associational culture in not only ‘the West’, but also Asia and Africa, where Europeans promoted a supposedly cosmopolitan and bourgeois associational culture.¹¹ Associational culture became an integral part of urban life.

Hong Kong’s multi-racial urbanites actively participated in this global urban phenomenon. A visitor to the colony would be most impressed by the great number of civic associations across town, including several fraternal organizations already internationally popular. Freemasonry, for instance, had been there almost as long as British colonialism: the first masonic lodge was formed in 1845, only three years after Hong Kong became formally British. Masons there included men of difference ‘races’: those with European, Chinese, Portuguese, Jewish, and Parsi names were initiated in the local lodges, while the aforementioned Catchick Paul Chater was the district grand master for more than two decades.¹² A Rotary Club was also formed there in 1930. Businessmen and professionals from diverse ethnic, national, and professional backgrounds met every Tuesday for lunch.¹³ Rotarians did not only eat together: they listened to speeches on international politics, scientific knowledge, and local affairs, hearing ‘each other’s problems and viewpoints, with a view to improving their mutual understanding and promoting fellowship’.¹⁴

There were also organizations that were simultaneously local and incredibly global. Like the Middle Eastern political entrepreneurs in Paris, New York, and Cairo, Hong Kong urbanites’ aspirations and claims were explicitly global, even when they were participating in local organizations.¹⁵ Take the League of Fellowship as an example. Formed in 1921, it was to ‘cultivate a closer relationship between Europeans and Chinese in Hongkong, and to remove misunderstandings that occasionally arose between the two communities’.¹⁶ Unlike Freemasonry and Rotary, it was not part of an international institutional network. Yet it had profoundly global origins and agendas. As discussed

¹¹ Arsan, Lewis, and Richard, ‘The roots of global civil society’, p. 158.

¹² ‘A list of contributing members of the Victoria Lodge, No. 1026, 1925’, ‘Return of grand lodge certificates issued to member of the University Lodge No. 3666’, ‘A list of contributing members of the University Lodge, No. 3666, 1924’, Library and Museum of Freemasonry, United Grand Lodge of England (LMF).

¹³ ‘Rotary Club’, *SCMP*, 22 Dec. 1930.

¹⁴ ‘Editorial’, *SCMP*, 8 Nov. 1930.

¹⁵ Andrew Arsan, ‘“This age is the age of associations”: committees, petitions, and the roots of interwar Middle Eastern internationalism’, *Journal of Global History*, 2 (2012), pp. 166–88.

¹⁶ ‘League of Fellowship’, *Hongkong Telegraph*, 29 Nov. 1921.

later, it was a response to the post-First World War global trends of religious pacifism and internationalism. Also notable was the Kowloon Residents' Association. Formed in 1919, it was clearly very local: members were all residents in Kowloon, an area on the southern tip of the peninsula across the Victoria Harbour that was only fully incorporated into the British colony of Hong Kong after 1898. As a pressure group formed to demand from the government more public work in the neighbourhood, it had very local purposes. Yet, its very existence was immensely connected to the global demand for political reforms and representation.

Not only were the League of Fellowship and the Association local responses towards the global trend of civic associational culture, but they shared many striking similarities with the international networks of Freemasonry and Rotary. They all accepted a multi-racial membership. They all advocated civic awareness and encouraged their members to contribute actively to the community. Most importantly, even though the four organizations had significantly different agendas and scopes, a notable portion of their memberships overlapped. Together, they showed a nexus of people using organizations with different purposes to shape local and international societies. Their activities give us valuable insights in understanding how those participating in the interwar global civil society navigated between several conflicting global trends. They aspired to battle against notions of exclusivity—racism, economic protectionism, and nationalist views—and yet they were not immune from some of these limits. It is to such battles we now turn.

II

The declared goal of urbanites who participated in this multi-racial civil society was to build inter-racial friendships. This collides the wave of internationalist movements sweeping across the globe after the Great War, as people believed that only through cross-cultural friendships could relations between 'races' and nations be improved. Founders of the League of Fellowship and Rotarians articulated this view as they recruited members for their organizations. But given the existing racial hierarchy in the colony, how did members of different 'races' in civic associations understand inter-racial friendships? And how far would they push to achieve this?

The League of Fellowship helps us understand how interwar Hong Kong's urbanites were confronted with the issue of 'race' in their civic engagements. In October 1921, journalists reported excitedly that Henry Pollock, a prominent white British resident and member of the legislative council, organized a 'League of Fellowship and Service' (usually abbreviated as 'League of Fellowship'). The press were excited about the League's major objective to 'cultivat[e] a closer relationship between Europeans and Chinese in Hongkong'. Owen Hughes, another founder and also a long-term white British resident, stated explicitly in its inaugural meeting that 'it was in the power of men and

women in the Colony to do a great deal in the way of creating a better understanding'.¹⁷

This call to build cross-cultural friendships seemed to have worked: soon after its formation, the League found significant success almost immediately. Only a month after its formation, journalists reported that the League had about 300 members, 200 of whom were Europeans and 100 Chinese.¹⁸ By the time the League was 'wound up' in 1925, it had 408 members, including 270 Chinese.¹⁹

It is notable that the League was a local response to the global movement of religious pacifism. The outbreak of the Great War in 1914 prompted British Quaker missionary Henry Hodgkin to form an interdenominational Protestant organization, the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), in Britain to advocate for world peace and oppose war and violence between nations.²⁰ Hodgkin's organization soon received support from his fellow pacifists in America – an American Branch of FOR was established in 1915 – and FOR became the centre of Protestant pacifism.²¹ After the war, both Hodgkin and his organization continued to work to maintain world peace. In October 1921, Hodgkin visited Hong Kong and delivered several lectures centred around FOR's works and his views on post-war reconstruction, a topic much relevant to the Washington Naval Conference due to take place a month later.²² Hodgkin's lectures were well attended, and questions asked by his audience indicated the enthusiasm that Protestant pacifism received in the colony. Most importantly, his lectures inspired the formation of the League of Fellowship.²³

Given how other religious social institutions had already existed in the colony, both the size and the ethnic diversity of the League's membership are telling. The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) had provided middle-class male Protestants like Pollock with a place to socialize and provide a service to the local community since its formation in 1901.²⁴ But the League offered something these earlier institutions did not: multi-racial interactions. Even the YMCA established in 1905 a separate branch – the 'Chinese YMCA of Hong Kong' – to separate its Chinese members from the European branch.²⁵

¹⁷ 'League of Fellowship and Service', *SCMP*, 19 Oct. 1921.

¹⁸ 'League of Fellowship', *SCMP*, 29 Nov. 1921.

¹⁹ 'Wound up', *China Mail*, 22 Jan. 1925.

²⁰ Jill Wallis, *Valiant for peace: a history of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, 1914–1989* (London, 1991).

²¹ On American Protestant pacifism, see Patricia Appelbaum, *Kingdom to commune: Protestant pacifist culture between World War I and the Vietnam era* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2009).

²² 'World reconstruction', *SCMP*, 6 Oct. 1921; 'World reconstruction', *SCMP*, 8 Oct. 1921; 'World reconstruction', *SCMP*, 10 Oct. 1921; 'The real world', 12 Oct. 1921. For more on the Conference, see Erik Goldstein and John Maurer, eds., *The Washington Conference, 1921–1922: naval rivalry, East Asian stability and the road to Pearl Harbor* (Portland, OR, 1994).

²³ 'League of Fellowship', *Hongkong Telegraph*, 29 Nov. 1921.

²⁴ *YMCA Hong Kong centenary celebration, 1901–2002* (Hong Kong, 2001).

²⁵ Law Yau Sang, 'A Chinaman and the policy of the YMCA', *SCMP*, 14 Oct. 1905.

In contrast, not only had Pollock stated explicitly that the League would accept members of all 'races', but the sixteen committee members elected two months after its formation included not only Britons, but also four Chinese, two Eurasians, two Portuguese, and one Indian.²⁶

Also accepting a multi-racial membership, the Rotary International movement came to the colony in 1930. Started in Chicago in 1905, the Rotary movement soon became a global phenomenon. The first Rotary Club in Asia was formed in Manila in 1919, and the following decade witnessed the formation of Rotary Club branches in several other Asian cities. Despite being initially known as 'enclaves of foreign devils', Asian professionals and business elites soon became convinced by its compatibility with local commerce and promotion of civic internationalism.²⁷ Similarly, Hong Kong urbanites found this appealing. Journalists praised the movement's ethnic diversity and its claim of 'universal good citizenship'.²⁸ They believed that, in encouraging the development of 'true friendship among the members of nations and society', Rotary served the 'great need of the world' by building 'friendliness in international relations'.²⁹ Those who had joined a Rotary Club elsewhere also expressed their desire to start one in the colony.³⁰ Attempts were made in 1920, 1924, and 1927 to form a Rotary Club there.³¹ When the first Rotary Club was finally established in the colony in December 1930, 95 people attended its first meeting. Most of its founding officers were businessmen and professionals who came from diverse ethnic, national, and professional backgrounds.³²

The immediate success of the League of Fellowship and the Rotary Club supports claims in recent historiography that colonial societies in interwar Asia were less ethnically divided as conventionally understood. The two case-studies show that Hong Kong's multi-racial urbanites showed eager interest in interacting with those beyond their own diasporic group. But it is notable that, unlike the Rotary Club, the League was very short-lived. While the local press had intensively reported its activities in the first three months, the organization suddenly faded out from the colony's public sphere after its meeting in December 1921 (the third month of its existence). It was only in 1922 that a reader mentioned in their letter to the editor that the League was 'now prematurely extinct'; and in 1923, the League appeared in another reader's letter in a similar capacity.³³ At last, *China Mail*, a local English-language newspaper,

²⁶ 'Racial disabilities in Hongkong', *SCMP*, 13 Dec. 1921.

²⁷ David Shelley Nicholl, *The golden wheel: the story of Rotary 1905 to the present* (Estover, 1984).

²⁸ 'Pacific Rotary', *China Mail*, 2 Oct. 1928; 'Keeping well in Shanghai', *SCMP*, 22 Apr. 1925; 'To the Rotarians' Convention', *SCMP*, 7 June 1927; 'Editorial', *SCMP*, 8 Nov. 1930; 'The sphere of Rotary', *China Mail*, 29 Feb. 1928; 'Editorial', *China Mail*, 8 May 1926.

²⁹ 'Rotary Cubs', *SCMP*, 14 July 1927; 'Editorial', *China Mail*, 8 May 1926.

³⁰ Resident, 'A Rotary Club', *SCMP*, 8 Feb. 1928.

³¹ 'Editorial', *SCMP*, 8 Nov. 1930.

³² 'Rotary starts in Hongkong', *Hong Kong Telegraph*, 9 Dec. 1930.

³³ Old Hand, 'Correspondence: racecourse facilities', *SCMP*, 25 Oct. 1922; Civis, 'European Reservation', *SCMP*, 24 Apr. 1923.

reported in 1925 that 'it is desirable that the League be wound up'.³⁴ Although it did not explain why the League had ended, the correspondence column of *South China Morning Post* in April 1923 offers a small hint.

Writing under the alias of 'Civis', the reader wrote to ask the government to establish more European Reservations in the colony. Since 1888, the Hong Kong government had used several laws to reserve residential areas for Europeans only. 'Civis' supported expanding such residential segregation. In their letter, they admitted that it was a 'delicate', 'certainly touchy' topic. They then wrote: 'the League of Fellowship and Service broke, practically at its first meeting, on this obstacle', referring to a meeting the League had in December 1921.³⁵ That meeting, originally called to amend the rules and objectives of the League, was widely reported in the local Chinese- and English-language newspapers due to a 'sharp discussion on racial distinction'.³⁶

In the meeting, J. P. Braga, a well-known Portuguese and also member of the sanitary board (and later the legislative council), proposed that the objective of the League should be 'to promote good fellowship by seeking the elimination of racial disabilities within the Colony'. Speaking in front of Chairman Henry Pollock, he mentioned an example of 'racial disabilities' in the colony: the European Reservation legislations, some of which were passed when Pollock was a legislative council member.³⁷ The *South China Morning Post* gave a detailed narrative of Braga's speech in the meeting:

No one was better acquainted than their worthy Chairman [Henry Pollock] that there was a great deal of racial disability in Hongkong. Whether the Chairman liked to admit it or not, Mr. Braga affirmed that it existed in Hongkong [in] a very pronounced fashion. (Applause). So long as the League of Fellowship permitted the Peak Reservations Ordinance to stand upon the Statute Books of the Colony they were asking for trouble. (Applause). So long as they created racial distinctions by the reservations on the island of Cheung Chau, they had no business to call themselves a League of Fellowship.³⁸

In response, Pollock denied any 'racial disabilities' existing in the colony. 'Mr. Pollock remarked that, when Mr. Braga said he knew of racial disabilities', the *Post* wrote, 'he felt inclined to get up and say he knew of none'. In repeating the government's claim that the European Reservations were merely an economic question, Pollock's speech illuminates the extent to which racism was embedded in interwar Hong Kong. Even he, a man inspired by liberalism to facilitate inter-racial friendships, said that 'there are hundreds, thousands of rich

³⁴ 'Wound up', *China Mail*, 22 Jan. 1925.

³⁵ Civis, 'European Reservation', *SCMP*, 24 Apr. 1923.

³⁶ 'Boai hui xuhui [博愛會敘會 League of Fellowship Meeting]', *Chinese Daily* [華字日報], 14 Dec. 1921; 'Racial disabilities and the Peak Reservation', *Hongkong Daily Press (HKDP)*, 13 Dec. 1921; 'Racial disabilities in Hongkong', *SCMP*, 13 Dec. 1921.

³⁷ Examples include the Peak District (Residence) Ordinance, 1918, and Cheung Chau (Residence) Ordinance, 1919.

³⁸ 'Racial disabilities in Hongkong', *SCMP*, 13 Dec. 1921.

Chinese in Hongkong who would buy us out of the place'. He refused to support Braga's proposed amendment to make eliminating racial disabilities the League's major objective. To this, Braga replied: 'Racial disability does not exist only in the matter of our habitations; it exists also in the commercial and other spheres of our local activities.'

Braga's experience appeared to echo with that of many attendees, as evidenced by the amount of applause journalists recorded during his speech. Braga insisted on a vote for his proposal to add 'eliminating racial disabilities' to the League's objectives. Even though 'many present abstained from voting', Braga's amendment was eventually carried by 25 votes to 21.³⁹ After this heated debate, the meeting also elected officers and committee members. Notably, another attendee J. H. McGuigan suggested that 'they wanted someone more in touch with the common people' and proposed the election of Braga. To this, Pollock remarked that 'he should like to see Mr. McGuigan practicing what he preached', hinting bitterness about McGuigan's suggestion. Nevertheless, those present elected Braga to the committee.

As mentioned above, little about the League of Fellowship can be found in local newspapers after this episode, and in 1925 the *China Mail* reported its official closure.⁴⁰ Without further evidence, it is hard to confirm whether members' different views on 'racial disabilities' led to its abrupt end. But this episode is worth noting, not least because it enriched our understanding about multi-ethnic associational culture in interwar Asia. Recent literature has suggested that transnational associational networks such as Rotary and Freemasonry had offered a channel for colonial societies to overcome ethnic divides.⁴¹ But here we can see that even within this multi-racial civil society, not everyone was interested in that. Lynn Hollen Lees has pointed out that cosmopolitan sensibilities existed alongside 'persistent divisions and disputes over power and belonging'.⁴² What created the colour bar in colonial societies was not the lack of chances for different 'races' to interact with each other, but a socio-political system that actively constructed and reinforced racial hierarchies. While internationalism inspired British elites such as Pollock and Hughes to advocate for inter-racial friendships, their interest seemed confined to friendship itself, rather than challenging hierarchy. This is clear if we consider how many members refused to cast their votes in supporting Braga's proposed amendment to the League's objectives. Their refusal to confront racism clashed with colonial subjects' eagerness to challenge ethnic divides, presaging the inter-racial friendships they intended to build. The dissolution of the

³⁹ 'Racial disabilities and the Peak Reservation', *HKDP*, 13 Dec. 1921.

⁴⁰ 'Wound up', *China Mail*, 22 Jan. 1925.

⁴¹ Lewis, 'Rotary International's "acid test"'.
⁴² Lees, *Planting empire*, p. 219.

League then offers us a fresh perspective for understanding the social dynamics within interwar Hong Kong's multi-racial civil society.

III

Equally evident were the influences that nationalism had on Hong Kong's civil society. After all, the wider objective of these urbanites' civic engagements was to improve international relations. But a closer look at their civic engagements highlights the limitations that nationalism imposed on the global civil society. Focusing on how Masons and Rotarians appropriated civic internationalist ideologies in their associations to promote imperial cosmopolitanism, this section discusses how Hong Kong's internationalist urbanites confronted rising nationalism.

Scholars have noted that an internationalist agenda characterized transnational movements in the early twentieth century, especially after the First World War.⁴³ The Great War showed to many the appeal of using a universal fraternity to reduce misunderstandings between different nations. Masons in Britain, for instance, suggested the formation of a 'Masonic League of Nations' to draw English-speaking Masons together.⁴⁴ The Rotary International also promoted a 'civic nationalism' in which to apply Wilsonism in their civic engagements. They aimed to provide a service to both the local and international community and rise above politics.⁴⁵ Those in Hong Kong were eager to uphold such values – or so they tried.

Hong Kong Rotarians' activities demonstrate the dilemma that many faced between internationalism and nationalism. Talks delivered at its meetings were not supposed to contain strong political views. Exceptions, however, happened more often than not. In 1938, a reader of the *South China Morning Post* complained about a Rotary meeting where a speaker commented on the second Sino-Japanese War. 'I cannot help feeling that the Rotary Club of Hongkong is committing a breach of the rules by permitting such frankly political speeches', a 'Briton' wrote. 'Rotary Clubs were founded to promote international goodwill, and I feel it is time the local organization decided whether it is to permit political talks which cannot but create an atmosphere of prejudice.' They also wrote that 'this is not the first instance within the past few months, and perhaps the most strongly-worded of all'.⁴⁶

⁴³ Daniel Laqua, ed., *Internationalism reconfigured: transnational ideas and movements between the world wars* (London, 2011).

⁴⁴ Jessica Harland-Jacobs, *Builders of empire: Freemasons and British imperialism, 1717–1927* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007), p. 261.

⁴⁵ Brendan Goff, 'Philanthropy and the "perfect democracy" of Rotary International', in David C. Hammack and Steven Heydemann, eds., *Globalization, philanthropy, and civil society: projecting institutional logics abroad* (Bloomington, IN, 2009), pp. 47–70.

⁴⁶ Briton, 'Rotary and politics', *SCMP*, 6 Oct. 1938.

Indeed, the deteriorating international political situation in the late 1930s prompted Rotarians to breach the ‘no politics’ rule and explicitly comment on international politics. After the second Sino-Japanese War broke out in 1937, the Hong Kong Rotary Club frequently invited speakers to talk about the areas of conflict in China and regarded it as their mission to support China during the war.⁴⁷ In October 1938, Freda Utley, a British correspondent for the *News Chronicle*, spoke in a Rotary meeting about her ‘recent visits to the Chinese front’. After describing the plight of Chinese cities under attack from the Japanese army, she asked British authorities to help stop supplies from reaching the Japanese. She asked ‘anyone having any feeling for the suffering of the Chinese people’ to ‘refuse to buy Japanese goods’. She emphasized that: ‘the Japanese had already made it sufficiently clear that the aim was to turn the British and Americans out of China’.⁴⁸ Pointing fingers at Japan’s atrocities in China, Utley’s speech provides us with an example of how, despite their ‘no politics’ rule, Rotarians still engaged with international politics at their luncheon meetings.

Some Rotarians even appropriated Rotary’s ‘civic internationalist’ ideology to assert the alleged benefit of British imperialism to the international order. This was most evident in the late 1930s, when meetings often featured speeches celebrating imperialism. In January 1937, the Rotary Club invited S. P. Williams to speak about his work as the secretary of the Royal Empire Society, an organization formed in Britain to ‘promote the preservation of a permanent union between the Mother Country and all other parts of the Empire and to maintain the power and best tradition of the Empire’. In his speech, William argued that ‘a strong and united British Empire’ was ‘one of the most potent factors contributing to the preservation of peace in the world’. An active member of both the Hong Kong Rotary Club and the Royal Empire Society, L. C. F. Bellamy asked his fellow members to join the Royal Empire Society after William’s speech.⁴⁹

More speeches delivered at the Rotary meetings in the late 1930s argued that Britons were the exemplars of internationalism and British imperialism promoted cosmopolitanism. Scholars have discussed how the British public imagined tolerance, stoicism, and democracy to be the core values of Britishness, particularly in the 1930s when relations deteriorated between European countries.⁵⁰ This view was also prominent in the activities of the Hong Kong Rotary Club. Like the German elites who customized the Rotary movement—an American ‘invention’—with their own practice and ideology, Hong Kong Rotarians appropriated the practice and ideology of the Rotary movement to

⁴⁷ ‘Hong Kong and refugees’, *HKDP*, 15 Sept. 1937; ‘Rotary Club’, *SCMP*, 26 Sept. 1937; ‘Red Cross work in China described by Dr. Grey at Rotary Tiffin’, *HKDP*, 21 Sept. 1938; ‘China war zones’, *SCMP*, 26 July 1939.

⁴⁸ ‘Miss Freda Utley gives stirring address before Rotary meeting’, *HKDP*, 5 Oct. 1938.

⁴⁹ ‘Royal Empire Society’, *HKDP*, 13 Jan. 1937.

⁵⁰ Tony Kushner, *The battle of Britishness: migrant journeys, 1685 to the present* (Manchester, 2012).

celebrate Britishness.⁵¹ In 1937, the club invited Salvation Army Commissioner William McKenzie to speak on the subject of ‘Empire’. McKenzie called the British ‘the perfect coloniser’, and praised their ‘extraordinary stamina and powers of adaptability’. Like Williams, McKenzie regarded the British empire as a contributor to international goodwill. ‘One of the Empire’s outstanding qualities was freedom. Another asset was the solidity of British law and justice’, he said, ‘a great event too was the liberating of slaves’.⁵² In 1938, the club asked a Rotarian, Professor C. A. Middleton-Smith of the University of Hong Kong, to give a talk entitled ‘What is the Empire’. Like Williams and McKenzie, Middleton-Smith spoke highly of the empire, and considered the ‘true empire spirit’ to be a ‘safeguard of freedom’.⁵³ Indeed, Rotarians had little control over the content of speeches given, and one could argue that the speeches cannot tell us what Rotarians there actually thought about the British empire. But the fact that they actively invited speakers like Williams and McKenzie, who had been well known as strong advocates of British imperialism, is telling.

Demonstrations of empire loyalism were more obvious in the masonic lodges. Historians have explored the reciprocal role that Freemasonry played in consolidating British colonialism. While Britain’s rapidly expanding empire provided a basis for Freemasonry to become a global institution, Freemasonry in turn facilitated the building of empire. For one, Freemasonry made lives of overseas Britons easier by providing spiritual refinement, material assistance, and social advancement.⁵⁴ Since 1813, the grand master of the United Grand Lodge of England had always been a member of the British royal family; this close association between Freemasonry and the royal family further consolidated the role that Freemasonry played in the cohesion of empire. Vahid Fozdar has argued that, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, British Freemasonry progressed into an ‘institutionalized, quasi-official, and de facto “civil religion”’ in India and functioned as an ideological ‘glue’ that reconciled colonial subjects to British rule.⁵⁵

Likewise, Freemasonry reinforced its Hong Kong members’ connection with Britain and its empire. Minutes of meetings and annual reports of the masonic lodges show that Masons there frequently circulated reports received from other masonic districts, especially those from ‘Home’ and British territories.⁵⁶ These reports contained updates on the British royal family, complemented

⁵¹ Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible empire: America’s advance through twentieth-century Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 2005), ch. 1.

⁵² ‘British empire’, *SCMP*, 19 May 1937.

⁵³ ‘Empire Day address to Rotarians’, *HKDP*, 25 May 1938.

⁵⁴ Harland-Jacobs, *Builders of empire*, pp. 3–4.

⁵⁵ Vahid Fozdar, “That grand primeval and fundamental religion”: the transformation of Freemasonry into a British imperial cult’, *Journal of World History*, 22 (2011), pp. 493–525.

⁵⁶ LMF, ‘Minutes of the fifty-seventh annual meeting of the District Grand Lodge of Hongkong and South China’, 12 Jan. 1933, p. 15.

by formalities that emphasized Masons' allegiance to the British monarch. For instance, as King George V's health deteriorated in the late 1920s, meetings of the District Grand Lodge of Hongkong and South China often featured reports on his declining health. In January 1929, the District Grand Master John Owen Hughes stated in his speech that before 'proceeding with the business on the agenda':

I refer to the continued and serious illness of His Majesty the King. Brethren it is very fitting that we should on this occasion, express our Loyalty and Devotion to his Majesty and the Royal Family, and our deep sympathy with them, and particularly with the Most Worshipful the Grand Master [Prince Arthur, duke of Connaught and Strathearn] in their anxiety.⁵⁷

He therefore proposed sending a cable to Prince Arthur to send 'loyal and sympathetic greetings to M. W. The Grand Master and Royal Family'. These meetings also often mention other royal family members.⁵⁸ Through formalities and rituals that paid respect to the British royals and frequent references to other British territories, Freemasonry helped reinforce Hong Kong Masons' sense of belonging to the British empire.

Imperial cosmopolitanism clearly affected these urbanites. Like the Straits Chinese in British Malaya, they identified strongly with being 'British' through their civic engagements, and their loyalty may not necessarily have been towards Britain itself, but the British empire as a political entity.⁵⁹ To them, British imperialism allowed them to live in a cosmopolitan and inclusive society. Speeches delivered in the Hong Kong Rotary Club clearly conveyed this belief. Masons and Rotarians in Hong Kong believed that being a part of the British empire, a multi-racial empire that was supposed to be tolerant and democratic, allowed them to exercise their cosmopolitan ideals.

Given the discernible effects of growing Chinese nationalism, it may seem odd that the discourse of imperial cosmopolitanism characterized the civic engagements of multi-racial urbanites there. To increase its political power, the Chinese nationalist government orchestrated a populist, anti-imperialist movement during the 1920s. Protests, strikes, and boycotts took place in many major cities with a prominent foreign interest and interrupted economic activities there.⁶⁰ But the Chinese nationalists targeted not only cities on Chinese soil. They engineered nationalist and anti-colonial sentiments in the

⁵⁷ LMF, 'Minutes of the 53rd annual meeting on the District Grand Lodge of Hongkong and South China', 3 Jan. 1929, p. 11.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Neil Khor Jin Keong, 'Imperial cosmopolitan Malaya: a study of realist fiction in the *Straits Chinese Magazine*', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1 (2008), pp. 27–47; Clive J. Christie, *A modern history of Southeast Asia: decolonization, nationalism and separatism* (London, 1996), pp. 27–51. Also Sunil S. Amrith, 'Empires, diasporas, and cultural circulation', in Andrew S. Thompson, ed., *Writing imperial histories* (Manchester, 2013), pp. 216–39.

⁶⁰ See Robert Bickers, *Out of China: how the Chinese ended the era of Western domination* (London, 2017).

British colony of Hong Kong, triggering the outbreak of various strikes and boycotts there. Even though none of these events imposed a serious threat to colonial rule there, they devastated the local economy. During the strike-boycott of 1925–6, for instance, 250,000 Chinese residents left the colony for Canton leaving the local economy paralysed.⁶¹

But it was precisely this adverse effect on the colony's economy that pushed urbanites there to embrace Hong Kong's colonial status and dismiss Chinese nationalism. As John Carroll pointed out, Chinese bourgeoisie there – many of them active participants in Hong Kong's multi-racial civil society – regarded the strikes as a threat to their own class interests, and they worked closely with the government in ending the strikes.⁶² If the strikes showed them how rising Chinese nationalism affected their economic interest, the political turmoil that China experienced in the 1930s – the Central Plains War, the Encirclement Campaigns, and advancing Japanese invasion – helped them visualize what a departure from British colonialism might bring to Hong Kong. Many therefore believed that neither Chinese nationalism nor a 'Hong Kong nationalism' would benefit the colony, and saw British imperialism as the protector of their cosmopolitan lifestyle, and class interest. This does not only help us understand why they actively promoted imperial cosmopolitanism through civic engagements, but also why, as we will see in the next section, they remained co-operative with British colonialism even when they tried to democratize the local government.

IV

Associational culture helped shape the middle class, and the middle class defined this culture. Scholars have discussed how middle-class Britons defined themselves against the elites through associational life, and how voluntary societies similarly helped emerging colonial urbanites assert modernity and cosmopolitanism to distinguish themselves from the other classes.⁶³ Likewise, class drew middle-class residents in interwar Hong Kong together and they articulated their class identity in their civic engagements. The Kowloon Residents' Association (KRA) in Hong Kong provides us with a case-study of an association where its members joined because they thought they were not elites: they were, in their opinion, *merely* middle class. Here, the term 'middle class' does not connote any rigorous, sociological meaning. It was but a discursive term used to express a self-perceived inferiority relative to the *real* elites – senior government officials or business tycoons. Indeed, these individuals were largely of a white-collar class. Many were successful businessmen and

⁶¹ John M. Carroll, *A concise history of Hong Kong* (Lanham, MD, 2007), pp. 353–74.

⁶² Carroll, *Edge of empires*, pp. 131–58.

⁶³ Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the middle class: the political representation of class in Britain, c. 1780–1840* (Cambridge, 1995); Keith David Watenpaugh, *Being modern in the Middle East: revolution, nationalism, colonialism, and the Arab middle class* (Princeton, NJ, 2006).

professionals, who were well off and enjoyed a life that most in the colony could not afford. But because of the colony's constitutional limits, these 'middle-class' residents, including both white and colonial subjects, felt that their class status undermined their political rights. They therefore sought to use the KRA to participate in local politics. Focusing on the KRA, this section will discuss Hong Kong middle-class urbanites' long (and largely failed) battle for their political rights.

From its beginning, the objective of the KRA was to allow middle-class residents in Kowloon to fight for their political rights. After the British acquired the whole of the Kowloon Peninsula and the New Territories in 1898, Kowloon became a popular neighbourhood for middle-class families in the colony. Urban development there, however, failed to match this rapid population growth. In the 1910s, the lack of medical facilities and public transportation there received increasing attention. In December 1919, a group of Kowloon residents proposed calling for a public meeting to form the KRA. Their major objectives were to advocate for the 'general betterment of conditions of residents in Kowloon and the adjacent Territories' and 'to periodically meet and discuss improvements in these districts with special regard to Housing, Lighting, Police, Communications, Sanitation, Water, etc.'⁶⁴ As such, the KRA was a pressure group for demanding more public works in Kowloon.

But its formation also occurred when a demand for constitutional reforms rose in the colony. Like other British crown colonies, Hong Kong had a legislative council consisting of a majority of official members so that the governor could retain control over the legislature.⁶⁵ By the 1900s, many British residents became dissatisfied with this. To them, the few unofficial members in the legislative council could hardly represent their interests, as big merchants dominated most of these unofficial seats. In the 1910s, some 'European' residents (mostly white Britons) lobbied London and the colonial government for political representation and more control over the colony's finances. When the Colonial Office rejected their petition in 1916, they formed a Constitutional Reform Association. Even though the authorities ignored all their requests, their desire to have political representation and more control over local policies persisted.⁶⁶

This desire prompted the establishment of the KRA. Its founders formed the Association not only because they wanted to pressure the government to develop Kowloon, but to have a say on how exactly the government would do so. The founding president B. L. Frost firmly stated in his inaugural speech

⁶⁴ 'Kowloon Residents' Association', *HKDP*, 2 Dec. 1919.

⁶⁵ Robert Bickers, 'Loose ties that bound: British empire, colonial authority and Hong Kong', in Ray Yep, ed., *Negotiating autonomy in Greater China: Hong Kong and its sovereign before and after 1997* (Copenhagen, 2013), pp. 29–54.

⁶⁶ Carroll, *A concise history of Hong Kong*, p. 292.

that 'we want more representation and better representation on the Legislature': 'we want the Government to know our needs and we want to be able to state our needs to the Government with the weight of a representative body of residents backing our statement'.⁶⁷ He complained that the government was unaware of their 'intimate needs' because officials depended only on 'three quite inadequate sources of information': its own staff, unofficial members of the legislative council, and 'wealthy landowners'. With 122 members joining even before its official formation, the KRA would, he hoped, act as a representative body so that the government could not easily dismiss their demands.⁶⁸

The KRA indeed had quite a sizable membership. Throughout the interwar years, the KRA had more than 200 (sometimes 300) paying members every year. These included men and women of different 'races'. Between 1920 and 1925, the Association's committee members were predominantly white, with the exception of a few Portuguese. Chinese journalists therefore called the Association 九龍西人居民協會, meaning 'Kowloon Western Residents' Association'.⁶⁹ Things changed, however, starting from 1926, when committee members of other 'races' were added. Three Chinese who had already been active in the colony's public sphere, S. W. Tso, B. Wong Tape, and Wong Kwong-tin, joined the executive committee.⁷⁰ In 1928, the Association had its first Chinese vice-president, and in 1931, F. C. Mow Fung, a returned Australian Chinese and a Mason, became its first Chinese president.⁷¹ The following years also saw the election of Parsi and Eurasian committee members in the Association. In 1931, the 387 members of the Association included at least 85 Chinese, 6 Eurasians, 58 Portuguese, 1 Filipino, 3 Parsi, and 5 Jews.⁷² Notably, there were 13 female members.

That several of its key members such as Thomas Petire, Ben Wylie, and Alfred Hicks worked for the press also helped make the KRA's voice heard. Notably, quite a few of its members were land developers. J. P. Braga and M. A. Figueiredo, for instance, were part of the Hongkong Engineering and Construction Co., which developed the 'Garden City' in Kowloon, whereas Wong Kwong-tin was actively involved in the development of Kai Tak Bund.⁷³ Their careers in property development perhaps motivated them to push the government for more sanitary and public facilities in Kowloon. In any case,

⁶⁷ 'Kowloon Residents Association', *SCMP*, 21 Jan. 1920.

⁶⁸ 'Kowloon residents', *Hongkong Telegraph*, 2 Dec. 1919.

⁶⁹ 'Jiulong jumin xiehui xu hui [Kowloon Residents' Association Meeting 九龍居民協會敘會]', *Chinese Mail* [香港華字日報], 24 Mar. 1922.

⁷⁰ 'Kowloon Residents' Association', *Hongkong Telegraph*, 23 Feb. 1926.

⁷¹ 'A communal "Oliver Twist"', *SCMP*, 21 Feb. 1928; 'Kowloon Residents' Association', *HKDP*, 10 Mar. 1931.

⁷² *Report of the general committee of the Kowloon Residents' Association for the year ended 31st December 1931* (Hong Kong, 1932), pp. 78–82.

⁷³ Lyn-wah Dennis Lu, 'Kadoorie Hill: the garden city of Kowloon' (M.Sc. dissertation, Hong Kong, 2007).

the results of KRA activities were evident. It was only after its lobbying that the government introduced a motor bus service in Kowloon in 1921, enlarged the area's postal service, and opened the Kowloon Hospital in 1925.⁷⁴

While we tend to associate political awareness and participation in colonial societies with elites, it is worth noting that for KRA members it was their status as non-elites that motivated them to join the KRA. Recent studies have illuminated how associational life appealed to emerging non-white professionals because despite their newly acquired wealth and power, the existing colonial hierarchy limited their participation in local politics.⁷⁵ Likewise, although many were white, KRA members felt that Hong Kong's colonial hierarchy made it impossible for them to influence local politics because they were not 'elites'. B. L. Frost, a white British businessman who had lived in the colony for nearly two decades, saw himself as a 'middle-class European'. He formed the Association because he felt that 'elites' in the colony – colonial officials, *taipans* (managers of major companies), and the 'wealthy landlords' – dominated local politics. Government policies concerning local development could not actually improve the lives of middle-class Europeans like him: 'These roads are delightful for motorists, but the majority of residents do not possess motors!'⁷⁶ On 24 January 1920, only four days after the KRA's inaugural meeting, the *South China Morning Post* published an article entitled 'The New Kowloon: A Dream', a fictional account of Kowloon in twenty years' time contributed by an anonymous author. The article showed how the author aspired that the KRA would 'make Kowloon's voice heard above the levels of the Peak'.⁷⁷ That they lived in Kowloon, an area for residents who could not afford to live on the Peak, was crucial. They compared themselves with the wealthy residents on the Peak – the real elites – who had a say in local politics. It shows that a self-perceived non-elite status prompted KRA members to participate in this civic association.

The Association demanded repeatedly for the political representation of Kowloon residents. When the KRA first recruited members in December 1919, it set out its aim as being 'to approach the Government with the view to obtaining adequate representation of these districts on the Legislature', and 'to make representations to the Government in regard to the annual financial estimates affecting these districts'. Thenceforward, whenever opportunities arose, KRA members and leaders articulated their desire to have political representation for Kowloon in the legislative council. In 1923, the president D. Purves said:

until the day arrives when residents will have their direct voice in the Councils of the Colony we can only go on asking for this and for that, in the hope that Kowloon will

⁷⁴ *Report of the KRA, 1931*; 'Kowloon Residents' Association', *HKDP*, 13 Feb. 1923.

⁷⁵ Lewis, 'Rotary International's "acid test"'.
⁷⁶ 'Kowloon Residents Association', *SCMP*, 21 Jan. 1920.

⁷⁷ 'The new Kowloon', *SCMP*, 24 Jan. 1920.

thereby get its fair proportion of consideration by those whose duty it is to recommend the carrying out of public improvements.⁷⁸

In its annual meeting in 1925, then-President W. S. Bailey pressured the government once again: ‘the question of representation of Kowloon on the Legislative of this Colony...[is] an issue of extreme importance’.⁷⁹

Nevertheless, KRA members did not once challenge British colonial rule over Hong Kong. Members often acted as an advisory body for the government and assisted officials in assessing public opinion: in 1938, they helped the governor-appointed Rents Commission investigate the impacts of rent increases on tenants in the colony. For several days in March 1938, the KRA posted a notice in local newspapers – both Chinese- and English-language – along with a questionnaire that they asked all residents in Kowloon to fill in and return to the Association.⁸⁰ Besides the 200 late returns, the KRA passed on 321 returns to the Rents Commission for their investigation report.⁸¹ Their allegiance to British colonialism was more vividly demonstrated after the Second World War, when they remained co-operative with the colonial government while other parties, such as the Reform Club and the Hong Kong Civic Association, contested the government in urban council elections.⁸²

Several KRA members worked keenly with the government through sitting on public boards. These included S. W. Tso, a Chinese lawyer, and W. Jackson, who sat on the board of education.⁸³ Numerous KRA members also ran for unofficial seats on the sanitary board (and later the urban council). When the government appointed two Kowloon residents, Tso and J. P. Braga, to the legislative council, both sat on the council and displayed strong loyalty to the British empire. Braga, in particular, played an active role in the reception committee for the visit of the prince of Wales in 1922, and organized the First Grand Military Tattoo in the colony, as well as the 1932 and 1933 Empire Products Fairs.⁸⁴

While the KRA successfully pressured the government to include some Kowloon residents in the official polity and quicken its development of Kowloon, some of their demands were left unanswered. As early as October 1920, ten months after its formation, members had pressed for municipality status in the colony. President B. L. Frost proposed that the government

⁷⁸ ‘Kowloon Residents’ Association’, *HKDP* 13 Feb. 1923.

⁷⁹ ‘Kowloon Residents’ Association’, *SCMP*, 10 Feb. 1925.

⁸⁰ ‘Kowloon Residents’ Association’, *SCMP*, 10 Mar. 1938.

⁸¹ ‘Rent Commission’, *SCMP*, 18 Apr. 1938.

⁸² Yik Man Tsang, *Xianggang zui zaoqi zhengdang ji minzhudoushi: Gexinhui ji gongminxiehui* [香港最早期政黨及民主鬥士：革新會及公民協會 Earliest political parties and democracy fighters: Reform Club and the Hong Kong Civic Association] (Hong Kong, 2019).

⁸³ Anthony Sweetings, *Education in Hong Kong, pre-1841 to 1941: fact and opinion* (Hong Kong, 1990), p. 347.

⁸⁴ Stuart Braga, ‘Making impressions: the adaptation of a Portuguese family in Hong Kong, 1700–1950’ (Ph.D. thesis, Australian National University, 2012), pp. 284–5.

should form a Kowloon municipal council to celebrate the jubilee of Kowloon as a British possession.⁸⁵ Such a hope, however, remained unachieved for decades. Although the colonial government replaced the sanitary board with the urban council in 1936 and enlarged it with more comprehensive powers, only two of the eight unofficial members were elected, and the governor appointed all other unofficial and official members.⁸⁶ Despite discussions of giving the colony greater self-government after the British resumed its rule there in 1945, the British government refused to implement such plans.⁸⁷ It was not until 1994 that Hong Kong had its first municipal councils election, where all seats were elected based on universal suffrage.⁸⁸ But even such universal suffrage did not last long – the urban council was disbanded after the transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong in 1997.

Despite its failure to obtain municipality, the KRA's pre-war history is still illuminating. Recent work has directed much attention to the birth of anti-colonial sentiments in the interwar period that would prompt the waves of independence movements after the Second World War.⁸⁹ Here, the KRA shows hundreds of individuals who, while fighting vocally for their political rights, appeared to be at ease with British colonialism. This again highlights how Hong Kong's multi-racial urbanites engaged with the discourse of imperial cosmopolitanism. Despite pressing for constitutional reforms and criticizing government policies, KRA members were eager to show that they were not an oppositional group. This section then opens up discussion about colonial subjects' varied forms of political participation in the interwar era. Examining how KRA members participated in local politics sheds new light on discussion about colonial municipal politics and on colonial 'elites'.⁹⁰

Another illuminating finding about the KRA lies within its membership, much of which overlapped with other institutional networks this article has examined. Amongst the 379 KRA members in 1931, at least thirty-five were also Masons and another fourteen were Rotarians.⁹¹ Four had been executive

⁸⁵ 'Kowloon Residents' Association', *China Mail*, 5 Oct. 1920.

⁸⁶ 'The urban council', *SCMP*, 30 Dec. 1935, 2.

⁸⁷ Steve Tsang, *A modern history of Hong Kong* (London, 2004), pp. 145–60. Also see Steve Tsang, *Democracy shelved: Great Britain, China, and attempts at constitutional reform in Hong Kong, 1945–1952* (Oxford, 1988).

⁸⁸ Carroll, *A concise history of Hong Kong*, p. 710.

⁸⁹ See Michael L. Louro, *Comrades against imperialism: Nehru, India, and interwar internationalism* (Cambridge, 2018); Carolien M. Stolte, 'Social and political movements: experiments in anti-imperialist mobilization', in Cátia Antunes and Karwan Fatah-Black, eds., *Explorations in history and globalization* (London, 2016), pp. 94–110; Michael Goebel, *Anti-imperial metropolis: interwar Paris and the seeds of third-world nationalism* (Cambridge, 2017).

⁹⁰ See Freek Colombijn, 'The colonial municipal council in Padang (Sumatra) as political arena', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 2 (1995), pp. 263–88.

⁹¹ Obtained from obituaries and news articles in the Hong Kong presses, these figures (especially those of Rotarians) are likely to be underestimated, for they excluded Masons who died outside Hong Kong, while Rotarians' names were rarely reported in news about the Rotary Club.

officers of the short-lived League of Fellowship, while many more were active in other civic associations including the YMCA, the Hong Kong Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and the Helena May Institute. Also noteworthy is that amongst the twenty-three executive officers of the League of Fellowship, at least four were Masons and five were Rotarians. The overlapping memberships suggest the emergence of a nexus of middle-class individuals who used organizations with different purposes to influence society in interwar Hong Kong.

V

This article has demonstrated the interplay between exclusivity and cosmopolitanism in the interwar period, revealed through the prism of the multi-racial civil society in interwar Hong Kong. Much like their counterparts in Penang, Bangkok, and Singapore, multi-racial urbanites in Hong Kong had a cosmopolitan outlook and were eager to exercise internationalist ideals in their civic engagements. A major contribution of this article, however, lies in its reflection on how such ideals had their limits in an age of hardening racial and national identities. While internationalism inspired urbanites in the colony to overcome ethnic divides, some regarded that merely interacting with those of other ‘races’ was enough and withheld from addressing racism prevalent in the wider society—let alone their own prejudice. This failure to acknowledge existing racial discrimination in the society made it hard for people of colour not to question such initiatives. International fraternity networks such as Rotary and Freemasonry helped transport civic internationalism to Hong Kong’s civil society. But rising nationalism worldwide had its effect. Perhaps overwhelmed by the implication of rising Chinese nationalism on British colonialism in Hong Kong, urbanites in the colony actively appropriated the ideologies they learned in the civil society to endorse imperial cosmopolitanism.

The findings of this article do not undermine what recent literature has said about cosmopolitanism in Asian port cities. After all, a civic culture with a multi-cultural, global outlook flourished in interwar Hong Kong. Hundreds believed that active civic engagements would make their local and international communities a better place, and they made efforts to do so. It is notable that, despite the failure of the League of Fellowship in the mid-1920s, some persisted in trying to cultivate inter-racial friendship. They asked repeatedly for a Rotary Club; and when it opened in 1930, it received immediate support and has thrived to this date. But in highlighting the tensions and intersections between cosmopolitan sensibilities and notions of exclusivity, a theme often underplayed in existing literature, this article enriches our understanding about the social dynamics in multi-racial civil society in interwar Asia.

This study also underscores the importance of moving beyond the historiographical trend of only examining international institutional networks when addressing the interconnectivity of global civil society. My discussion here has

proved that Masons and Rotarians also participated in local institutions, which, despite being ‘local’, were in fact responses to a wider, if not global, phenomenon. Looking at both local and international networks shows more comprehensively how interwar socio-political trends affected the global civil society.

Here, I wonder if we should rethink the way we consider the colonial middle class. In undertaking this project, I am confronted with the issue of categorizing the Hong Kong urbanites. While contemporaries, historians, and even myself had previously regarded these subjects as ‘elites’, my examination of the KRA has proven that such a practice could misrepresent their civic engagements. To the subjects examined here, they were not elites, but ‘only’ middle-class residents whose political significance was below those living on the Peak and/or holding senior posts in the official polity. Without this self-perceived inferiority, solidarity against ‘elites’ would likely have been absent among middle-class Britons and the Indian, Portuguese, Chinese, and Eurasian businessmen, land developers, and professionals in the colony. The non-elite status of these urbanites is, then, crucial, because it gave life to their peculiar political identity.

Narratives often describe Hong Kong as somewhere that had ‘no politics but only administration’. Historical studies exploring how the state took advantage of the perceived political apathy of residents only reinforced this image.⁹² My examination here (particularly that of the KRA), however, gives solid proof to the contrary. Despite racial and class hierarchies, hundreds of men – and some women – actively participated in local and international politics through organizations with different purposes. Evidence presented shows that even as those in Hong Kong did not push harder for electoral politics, they were not politically apathetic.

The 2019 Hong Kong protests highlight the need to re-examine civic movements in the city’s earlier history – especially if we consider how claims that KRA members made almost a century ago about widening political representation and constitutional reforms sit at the heart of the ongoing protests.⁹³ It is, for instance, worth thinking about how KRA members’ co-operation with the colonial government helped them achieve some – but not all – goals. Most demands that KRA members made about political reforms failed, not solely because their co-operation gave the regime little motivation to change, but also because the government they hoped to participate in did not actually possess any power over the issue. Additionally, the prevalent racism against mainland Chinese and South Asians in the protests makes it more crucial than ever to understand the value that multi-culturalism brought to the city’s development. The civic engagements of these urbanites thus teach us as much about the interwar global civil society as about contemporary Hong Kong.

⁹² Gavin Ure, *Governors, politics and the Colonial Office: public policy in Hong Kong, 1918–1958* (Hong Kong, 2012).

⁹³ ‘Five key demands, not one less’, *SCMP*, 4 Sept. 2019.