

Historic and Contemporary Segregation

Segregation extends beyond Europe and the United States. An example to share is Hong Kong whose history is deeply intertwined with segregation. This segregation largely began in the 19th century when Hong Kong came under the rule of the British Crown through a series of “unequal treaties” (Wesley-Smith, 1998). Through this colonialism, Hong Kong’s way of life changed with a new rule of law and a free-market economy that is recognized by China in a treaty and constitution. The colonial influence heavily affected the pattern of settlements and physical built forms within the city, with its legacy lasting into contemporary society. The British authority created segregation first, by excluding Chinese people from certain districts and then by gradually making exclusion an overt statutory law. These statutory exclusion laws as well as contracts were initially written in architectural terms later expressly written in terms of ethnicity. Overt discriminatory laws and practices would be repealed in 1946, yet any ancillary laws that perpetuated segregation continued to exist. Notably, two of these ancillary laws are a restrictive covenant that specifies that a “European type house” (Lai, 2011) be built on certain lots and statutory grounds for refusing building permission for houses that are “incongruent” with the “immediate neighborhood”. These laws that often worked as a form of discriminatory zoning remain in effect today acting as powerful constraints over physical forms of development.



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Photo of multi-structural building in Hong Kong by Aleksandar Pasaric from pexels.com.

In contemporary society, Hong Kong still deals with a substantial amount of segregation coming from discrimination, particularly against darker-skinned south and southeast Asians. Racial discrimination is in part due to the high level of racial homogeneity with 96% of the population being Chinese, excluding foreign domestic workers. Supporting this racial homogeneity is a slew of harsh immigration laws that make it harder for certain groups to naturalize. Discrimination is present in many facets of life, notably including the housing market and workplace. Landlords often refuse to rent to ethnic minorities, while “longer working hours, lower wages, unfair dismissals, and a lack of opportunity in career advancement” (Yeung, 2020) speak to discrimination in the workplace. This discrimination is based on stereotypes that portray “darker-skinned minorities as unclean, dangerous or untrustworthy” (Yeung, 2020) and which are reinforced by the media who emphasize and sensationalize crimes that are committed by ethnic minorities. In addition to this, racial discrimination that creates segregation is reflected through high levels of income inequality. Research on the connection between income inequality and segregation within Hong Kong has had mixed findings largely credited to the high density and mixed-use urban areas as well as ambiguous neighborhood borders (Reardon, et al., 2008; Forrest, Grange, & Yip, 2004; Ray Forrest, 2002). However, recent research has found that even with higher levels of inequality socioeconomic segregation is slightly lower in Hong Kong than in the average U.S. city (Monkkonen & Zhang, 2011).



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Segregation Policies and Programs

The government of Hong Kong has introduced policies and programs that have had both positive and negative impacts on segregation in the city. One of these policies was a program aimed to expand Chinese language learning for non-Chinese speaking students. Despite the intention of the program, it came under international scrutiny as it led to educational segregation with minority and Chinese students attending different schools. The program was suspended in 2014, yet educational segregation appears to be continuing. As of 2016, over 60% of ethnic minority students attend just 10 schools out of the 840. Another policy launched was the Racial Discrimination Ordinance (RDO) in 2008 that criminalizes racial discrimination and harassment. However, critics argue that the policy is full of loopholes as it is too focused on individual cases instead of systematic racism, and it excludes discrimination by law enforcement. The international community has continued to put pressure on Hong Kong with the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination urging the government in 2018 to amend the RDO to include the government and law enforcement. Months after this pressure, the government announced plans to spend 500 million Hong Kong dollars (64.5 million USD or 62 million EUR) on initiatives supporting minorities through social welfare and education sectors (Yeung, 2020).



Photo of people on a street in Hong Kong
by Jimmy Chan from pexels.com

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