In the 19th century, traditional Chinese banks, or qianzhuang (錢莊), weren’t worldly enough to offer trade finance or foreign exchange products. Within 25 years of Hong Kong’s establishment in 1841, a dozen international banks had set up shop to fulfil the burgeoning British colony’s needs, but only one was locally founded: The Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, established in 1865 by Scottish traders.

The new bank’s mettle was swiftly tested with the Panic of 1866 – a global financial downturn. It thrived amid the chaos and provided a substantial emergency loan to the Hong Kong government, beginning an enduring relationship between the bank and the administration. It also created a culture of prudence epitomized by generations of dour Scots who stayed true to their trade roots.

Colourful as HSBC’s early history might be, The Lion Wakes: A Modern History of HSBC, an authorized biography of Hong Kong’s most famous corporate export, focuses on the bank post-1970 – in particular its massive growth from an Asian to a global financial institution.

That means scant attention is given to giants such as Sir Thomas Jackson, chief manager in Hong Kong between 1876 and 1902, and Wang Huishan, a Shanghai “compradore” from the 1860s who made the bank a fortune through short-term “chop loans” to merchants.

The book, written by prominent British historians Richard Roberts and David Kynaston, skims through the Chinese revolution in 1911, World War I and Japanese aggression and skips the glitter of interwar life on the Bund told elsewhere, particularly in Frank H.H. King’s four volumes,
Author interview: Richard Roberts and David Kynaston

When HSBC separately approached two eminent British historians about a corporate history to mark the bank's sesquicentenary, they decided that working on it together might be the best answer.

After all, Richard Roberts and David Kynaston have a history of their own: their joint efforts had produced such well-regarded business and financial chronicles as City State: A Contemporary History of the City of London and How Money Triumphed (Profile Books, 2010) and The Bank of England: Money, Power and Influence 1694-1994 (Oxford University Press, 1995). They have also written a number of corporate financial histories.

“...we have complete trust in each other’s research conscientiousness,” says Roberts, Professor of Contemporary Financial History at King’s College London and Director of the Institute of Contemporary British History. “...we read each other’s text and very enjoyably discuss our respective interpretations.”

Kynaston, a Visiting Professor at Kingston University in London, says they have complementary styles. “Dick is a more technical financial person with a grasp of economic and balance sheets,” he says. “My kind of specialty is social history, looking at the people and the details.”

The commission meant four trips to Hong Kong for Kynaston (two accompanied by Roberts), which marked something of a welcome return. “I had been to Hong Kong in the 1980s and it left a real mark on me,” says Kynaston, whose fascination for the city had been inspired by friend and fellow academic Harry Ricketts and his Kiplingesque portrayal of expatriate ingénues, People Like Us: Sketches of Hong Kong (Eurasia Books, 1977).

In Hong Kong, the authors worked with HSBC’s team of in-house archivists. “The bank provided a very able project manager who acted as a liaison between us and the bank,” says Roberts. Kynaston adds: “We spent a lot of time in the Central Library, which is a wonderful institution, and the University of Hong Kong [Main Library].”

The history had to forgo Kynaston’s style of people-driven narrative. “They were keen not to be portrayed as excessively personality driven,” he says. “HSBC had this teamwork ethic; they weren’t individual glory hunters; it was a military-style system.”

Roberts says former group chairman Sir William Purves was the standout interviewee, while Kynaston praises his successor Sir John Bond’s record keeping. “Bond gave you the impression he was very much an executive chairman, responding to things that landed on his desk and you got a good sense of the day-to-day action.”

With the HSBC tome under their belt, both men are working on financial book projects. Roberts is writing a history of British fiscal crises, while Kynaston is working on an updated account of the Bank of England since its political independence in 1997.