

Contesting Power in Victoria Park: Shaping and Re-Shaping Space in Colonial Hong Kong

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Abstract

This analysis pursues a transnational and spatial approach to the history of Victoria Park to examine the construction and experience of space within Victoria Park in Hong Kong. It applies Henri Lefebvre's categories of spatial analysis to facilitate an examination of how British and local Chinese meanings and experiences of space collided to create an arena of contested power within the spatial practices of the park. These resulting tensions provide an understanding of the larger tensions within Hong Kong's colonial order that points to the importance of recognizing local contributions to urban development and space in colonial histories. This framework provides an equal focus on the roles of the colonial government and the local Chinese working classes in shaping the use and meaning of Victoria Park and, thus, the urban landscape of colonial Hong Kong. Such a focus presents an intervention for a group that has been much overlooked both within Hong Kong's colonial history and within the broader field of imperial urban history.

Introduction

Since the government reclaimed land in Hong Kong and Kowloon's urban areas to promote public spaces and commenced construction of public parks, residents finally have opportunities to breathe in fresh air and take walks at their leisure. This directly benefits the sanitation of the entire city ... Of these projects, the grandest is Victoria Park in Causeway Bay. ("Victoria Park: A Plan" 9)

Even before the official opening of Hong Kong's Victoria Park in October 1957, the city's Chinese-language newspapers gushed over its promised grandeur and the life-changing benefits it would provide the city.

This language echoed that of the media, government officials, and social reformers across European cities in the second half of the nineteenth century. In this narrative, public parks were a beacon of the modern city: a solution to urban problems of housing, sanitation, and public health amongst the densely packed working classes.¹ The British Empire took pride in nineteenth-century colonial Hong Kong as a modern metropolis. Despite this, the colonial government did not incorporate public parks into Hong Kong's town planning until the mid-twentieth century.² Interactions between imperial imagination and the experiences of the local Chinese population shaped and re-shaped space in Hong Kong's Victoria Park from the end of World War II until the late 1970s. The park became an arena of contested power—significant in the challenge it posed to the idealized colonial order it was created to uphold.

Victoria Park's significance lay in its size and location. It was the largest park in the colony and was situated on Hong Kong Island, home to the colony's government and commercial centers (Ho 144–45). Its location in Causeway Bay placed it at the border of the Chinese residential and European commercial districts. It fell under the purview of imperial operations, yet it also served as a neighborhood park for the Chinese population, particularly its laboring classes, which formed the majority of Hong Kong's Chinese population during this period (Matthews et al. 27). This local, non-elite population and the colonial government both ascribed their meanings to the space of Victoria Park.

Space and everyday life are key concepts to examining the evolution of the meanings and uses of Victoria Park. Michel de Certeau described space as actuated by the movements and daily practices therein, separate from the mere location of place (118). Henri Lefebvre further developed this distinction to emphasize the social and political dimensions of space as a vehicle through which to examine “the problems of the urban sphere and of everyday life” (89–90). Lefebvre developed a tripartite theoretical framework that consisted of representations of space—the conception of space imposed upon place by power structures, representational space—the lived experiences of everyday subjects that used the space, and spatial practices, which “structure[d] everyday reality and broader social and urban reality” within space (Merrifield 173–75). This theoretical framework

¹ For more information on town planning and public parks in Europe, see: Richard S. Hopkins, *Planning the Greenspaces of Nineteenth-Century Paris*.

² For more information on the “modern metropolis” of nineteenth-century British Hong Kong, see: Pui-yin Ho, *Making Hong Kong: A History of Its Urban Development*.

helps us understand the significance of Victoria Park as a space of socio-political entanglements between the British colonial government and the local Chinese population. The colonial government imposed an idea of British imperial imagination on Victoria Park and created its representations of space through the planning and construction processes. The everyday experience of the local Chinese population informed representational space. As this group used and experienced everyday life in the park, different meanings of space collided to form the park's spatial practices. The colonial government and local Chinese population's shaping and re-shaping of the park's spatial practices thus created an arena of contested power that illuminated larger tensions between the colonizer and colonized in Hong Kong. This process shaped Victoria Park into what Chi Kwok and Ngai Keung Chan have called "one of the 'default' contentious spaces in Hong Kong" in contemporary history (Kwok and Chan 615–32).³

This analysis draws from a range of primary source materials that provide access to each category of this spatial framework. Of these, government archival materials reflect the narrow perception and administration of a hegemonic colonial order, yet they also reveal key insights into the version of the imperial imagination that shaped Victoria Park. Oral histories offer rare, direct access to the everyday experiences of the local Chinese population, particularly its laboring classes, despite the inherent limitations of the medium.⁴ Although the digital repository used here hosts only interview segments, the range of available interviews and detailed demographic profile of each subject nonetheless present a rich source base. Finally, a range of Chinese-language newspapers provide accounts of the spatial practices of Victoria Park. While newspapers carried their own biases, they were independent from the agenda of the colonial government and the local population, making them ideal for examining the contested space between the two.

This article presents a transnational, spatial approach to imperial urban history that existing historiography has largely overlooked. In the late 2000s, imperial history experienced a global turn. Its focus shifted from previously dominant Euro-centric perspectives to local, non-European perspectives that "[historicized] the globalized condition" of the present (Ghosh 778–79). This approach has resulted in a focus on continuities

³ Kwok and Chan's article focuses on the park as a space of protest and tension in the 1990s and discuss the urban theory behind this development.

⁴ On oral histories' epistemological limitations, see: Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki, "Who's Afraid of Oral History?".

within imperial networks, such as inflows of goods and people, and the adoption of ideas from the metropole in the colonies. Jeremy Adelman has argued that this emphasis on continuities overshadows the “separation, disintegration and fragility” that are as a part of empire as are “connection, integration and convergence.” This pertains particularly to Hong Kong’s colonial historiography, which has tended to emphasize the role that the colony and its residents played within the political-economic networks of the British Empire, even in scholarship with a local, socio-cultural focus.⁵ This historiography has subscribed to a narrative of colonial urban development that historical geographer Brenda Yeoh identified as the “political economy approach,” wherein the colonial city is only “seen to be enmeshed in a wider set of productive forces and social relations pertaining to the capitalist world economy” (7–9). This continuous approach to history has overlooked the local Chinese community, particularly its laboring classes, and its separation from the trans-imperial economic and political networks of the elite. The significance of the colonial context in shaping its historiography is evident when we compare the prolific fields of American and European urban histories and the dearth of comparable histories of colonial cities such as Hong Kong, Singapore, and Kuala Lumpur. While limited existing scholarship on colonial urban development has emerged from geography, geographer Pui-yin Ho has noted that, even within the field, works on Hong Kong’s historical urban development have focused largely on the colony’s development as an entrepôt for international trade (3–4). This analysis presents an intervention to both transnational and spatial discourses of global imperial history by acknowledging continuous transnational components while emphasizing the discontinuities found in the local contributions the local Chinese population made to the shaping of Hong Kong’s urban development.

This article examines first the imposition and dominance of imperial imagination over Victoria Park’s spatial practices in the 1950s, then the conflicts that emerged as the everyday experiences of the Chinese community came to define its uses of the park by the 1960s and 1970s. While the colonial government sought to impose a racially and culturally hegemonic colonial order upon the spatial practices of Victoria Park, the disconnections between this imperial imagination and the everyday experiences of the

⁵ For such examples, see: John M. Carroll, “Colonial Hong Kong as a Cultural-Historical Place”; Vivian Kong, “Exclusivity and Cosmopolitanism: Multi-Ethnic Civil Society in Interwar Hong Kong.”

local Chinese population created tensions and conflicts that emerged in the park's spatial practices.

The Imperial Imagination

The colonial administration conceptualized Victoria Park in continuance of European traditions of urban development. The representations of space created through colonial urban development reflected the socio-political hegemony of the colonizer and colonized in the imperial structure (Yeoh 12). The construction of Victoria Park marked, in Hong Kong's colonial history, a shift in the government's policies regarding the local Chinese population. In the early years of colonial rule in Hong Kong, the British colonial government established zoned districts along racial lines and did little to develop the sanitation, housing conditions, or public services in the neighborhoods zoned for the Chinese, particularly the laboring classes (Ho 10–15). The parks and gardens constructed by the colonial administration were barred to Chinese residents (*Public Health Ordinance 1887*). Zoned districts further separated the population along racial lines, and the government took little efforts to develop sanitation or housing conditions in the Chinese residential districts (*Public Order Ordinance Consolidation*; *The Directory & Chronicle for China*, and *Chinarail*). Following the end of the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong during World War II, however, the British government was faced with the city's reconstruction, mounting anxiety about maintaining imperial hegemony over a colony that saw an influx of refugees from mainland China, as well as a post-war trend of post-colonial independence (Ho 143–44). As such, the urban development of Hong Kong and the conceptualization of its space took on an aspect of control over the local Chinese population. While representations of space in Victoria Park marked continuity with imperial traditions of power and control, the impositions they made upon the spatial practices of the park, throughout its construction process and its early years, reflected an imperial anxiety over control of the native population and a drive to suppress perceived fragilities of socio-political colonial order.

Hong Kong's colonial administrators drew from urban development traditions in nineteenth-century London to conceptualize the public park as a space of control. In London, the development of public parks carried a strong character of social control over the working class through a rhetoric of social reform. The 1833 Select Committee on Public Works recommended

a “provision of open spaces” in public parks to provide an “alternative to drinking houses, dog fights and boxing matches” of a morally degenerate nature for the masses (United Kingdom Parliament). This rhetoric also made it clear that such reforms would ultimately benefit the upper classes. Concern for the public health of working-class neighborhoods was superseded by the fear of epidemics that could spread to wealthier neighborhoods, while the “decorous, recreational areas” of leisure for the working class would serve to dissuade them from staging socio-political protests (United Kingdom Parliament; Daunton 117). The disdain with which the upper classes looked upon the working classes further reinforced the overarching goal of social control. John Claudius Loudon, an early advocate for London’s public parks, argued in the 1820s that parks would “raise the intellectual character of the lowest classes” (1–2). Hong Kong’s colonial administration drew from these objectives of social control, similarly colored by disdain, in their town planning efforts. As the colonial government turned its attention towards solidifying the colonial order, it applied similar rhetoric to that used in conceptualizing London’s public parks. Planning reports of Hong Kong discussed the need for open spaces to “improve the sanitation of densely-packed Chinese residential districts,” but also to prevent hindrance to the health and commercial activities of European residents (Abercrombie and Great Britain Colonial Office 3). Although the discourse was not explicitly coated in contempt for the local Chinese population, oral histories from the period asserted that “it was clear that the Europeans looked down on the Chinese” (Hong Kong Oral Histories, “Anders Nelsson”). The colonial administrators’ prejudices and goals, informed by similar ideologies in the metropole, revealed an imperial imagination that emphasized control over the native population and served as the foundation of Victoria Park’s construction.

This imperial imagination both reflected and addressed anxieties about colonial governance, which were present in the space of the park even before its construction. In November 1954, *Wah Kiu Daily News* reported a twenty-seven-day-long strike of some 45,000 Chinese workers from a neighboring construction site (“London Pier Workers” 4). Before the colonial government imposed its imperial imagination on the representations of space of Victoria Park, the Chinese laboring classes had already transformed the yet-meaningless place of the newly reclaimed land into a meaningful space of contested power. This threatened the order envisioned by colonial administrators. In fact, construction plans for Victoria Park were announced in Chinese newspapers for the first time on November 19, 1954, less than a month after the strike’s end (“Victoria Park to be Constructed” 5; “Reclaimed

Land” 8). The timing of this announcement suggests an effort on the part of the colonial government to reclaim control of defining space in Victoria Park. In the early stages of the park’s construction, then, the colonial government grappled with the disjointedness between its need to impose colonial order and the everyday spatial practices of the local Chinese population.

The anxiety about this challenge to colonial order in the space of the park is further evident in photographs of Victoria Park from British colonial archives. These photographs reflect the imagined imperial order the park represented for the colonial administration. Until the late 1960s, photographs depicted only wide shots of the park, emphasizing the modern, man-made greenspace juxtaposed against man-made commercial and government buildings, as seen in figures 1.1 and 1.2. Photographs of the park from colonial archives, like these wide shots, did not feature the local population until the late 1960s. The angle of high elevation in these shots also suggests a sense of distance and elevated status. In the years between the announcement and completion of Victoria Park, the meaning of space propagated by this imperial imagination overshadowed other meanings of space associated with the park for the local population as well. This can be seen in Chinese-language newspapers from the period. The colonial government did not control the output of these publications. As such, the discourse in these newspapers created and reflected a widespread Chinese community response to the promised park. Articles across newspaper outlets extolled the promised features of the park, which included “separate swimming pools for advanced swimmers, beginners, and children, and a manmade hill with a garden at the peak to beautify the park” and proclaimed the contribution to public health, sanitation, and leisure this “jewel of Hong Kong and Kowloon” would provide (“Victoria Park of Ball Field” 5; “Victoria Park Official Opening” 6). These articles reflected a mounting anticipation among the local population that mirrored European and imperial justifications for public parks.

In a direct attempt to exert imperial dominance over everyday use of the park, the colonial administration placed explicit restrictions on activities in Victoria Park that targeted the Chinese population. In May 1955, over two years before the park’s official opening, *Wah Kiu Daily News* published a list of eight governmental restrictions on actions in Victoria Park. This list not only reflected governmental control of space, but it also emphasized British disdain for the local laboring classes in its efforts to expel the pre-colonial conditions of the Chinese population. The first restriction listed prohibited entry to “people carrying coolie packs,”

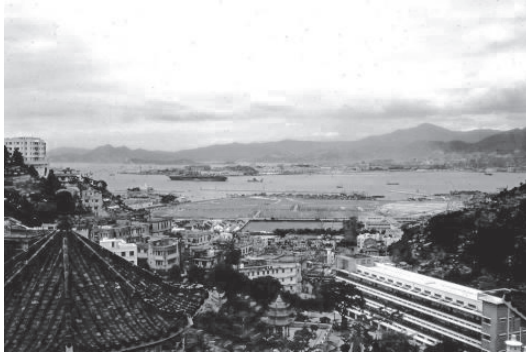


Figure 1.1. Victoria Park from Tai Hang, 1956. Photographs of Victoria Park in British Hong Kong, 1957–1997. Victoria Park Photographic Collection. Gwulo Historical Archives, Hong Kong.

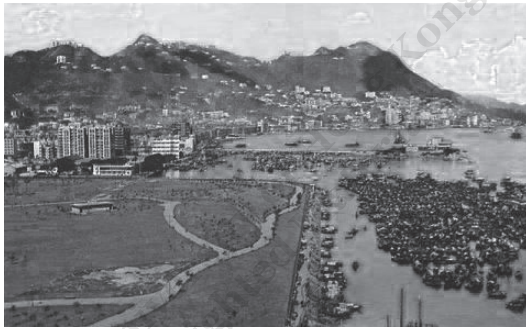


Figure 1.2. Victoria Park, 1958. Photographs of Victoria Park in British Hong Kong, 1957–1997. Victoria Park Photographic Collection. Gwulo Historical Archives, Hong Kong.

which were integral to the work and lives of the Chinese laboring classes. The second prohibited entry was for those not dressed “according to proper standards,” as designated by European standards of dress. Another restriction prohibited kite-flying, a traditionally popular and financially accessible leisure activity for the Chinese (“Victoria Park Publishes Park Restrictions” 6). These regulations sketched out the representations of space that the colonial administration sought to create—one that would adhere to European traditions and present itself as part of a continuous imperial network. Established as they were before the opening of the park, the regulations became ingrained in the meaning of its space before the Chinese population could shape it according to their everyday practices.

Before the grand opening of Victoria Park, the colonial government made efforts to shape the meanings attached to the park to reflect colonial

order and dominance over the local Chinese community. While the rationale of social control and its accompanying rhetoric extended traditions of urban development in the metropole, the specific conditions of Hong Kong's colonial context marked discontinuities in this attempt to create the continuous trans-imperial narrative of social control. This process of imposing the imperial imagination on the space of the park played a significant role in shaping the representations of space and the initial spatial practices of Victoria Park. These disconnects continued to surface in the form of tensions and conflict between the colonizer and colonized as the park opened and the Chinese laboring classes could ascribe their own experiences and uses to its space.

Reshaping Space

On October 16, 1957, Hong Kong's colonial governor Sir Alexander Grantham hosted the opening ceremony of Victoria Park. *Wah Kiu Daily News* reported a "lively affair of much pomp and circumstance" that boasted "a fancy diving performance and the dedication of a plaque inscribed in both English and Chinese at the park's entrance" ("Victoria Park Grand Opening" 8). Grantham further emphasized that the park was for the use of all residents of the colony in his opening speech, declaring that "he hoped to enjoy sports games and new health benefits in the new park alongside the public" ("Victoria Park Opens" 5). However, as this section will explore, Chinese residents soon found that their everyday experiences did not align with the government-imposed constructs that detailed how they were supposed to use and experience the park. The tensions that resulted from the disconnect between representational and representations of space surfaced in the spatial practice of the park, as conflicts became increasingly direct in the 1960s and 1970s. These tensions provide a window to larger conflicts in the colonial order during this period, which legal scholar Albert Chen described as the "golden age" of Hong Kong's social movements (122). While the colony's Chinese population in the 1950s was made up largely of immigrants who had fled political turmoil in mainland China and avoided political involvement, the 1960s and 1970s saw the coming of age of Chinese Hong Kong residents whose identities were rooted in the colony, and who actively participated in its socio-political affairs (Matthews et al. 28–34). This group gradually re-shaped the meaning of space in Victoria Park from one of imperial power to an arena of contested space driven by the everyday experiences of the local Chinese population.

Although the colonial government's imperial imagination continued to govern the spatial practices of Victoria Park in its early years, this imposed colonial order began to break apart by the early 1960s. During this period, Chinese residents began to ascribe their own meanings to the space through everyday practices in the park. In the early days of Victoria Park's opening, Chinese-language newspapers continued to highlight the park's public benefits. Less than two weeks before the opening ceremony, a two-page spread appeared in *Wah Kiu Daily News* about the benefits the park provided for raising children beyond the previously extolled health benefits of open spaces and fresh air. For example, one column in the spread argued that "sharing playground apparatus [would] help children develop civic mindedness" ("Happy and Healthy Families" 12). Even in 1959, *Ta Kung Pao* praised the park for introducing "extended pool hours during weekends and public holidays to allow more people to enjoy the pool" ("Victoria Park Swimming Pool" 8).

While newspaper articles discussing the use of Victoria Park continued to employ such rhetoric of public good and accessibility by the end of the 1950s, they also began to report behavior that countered the dominance of imperial power within the park's spatial practices. For example, a 1959 *Wah Kiu Daily News* article pointed to "numerous disputes between school and public use of the [Victoria Park] swimming pool" and resulting regulations for pool reservation that local community leaders argued "compromised public access to the pool" ("Victoria Park Swimming Pool Sets Regulations" 8). The incident suggested tensions pertaining to direct power over space. Other articles continued to report injuries and crimes in the park, such as the sexual assault of a nine-year-old girl in broad daylight in 1959, a mental asylum escapee who took refuge in the park in 1960, and a drowning at the pool in 1964 ("Pervert" 6; "Mental Asylum" 1; "Life" 4). These instances reflected aspects of the common, everyday experiences of the Chinese population that resisted integration into the colonial authority's ideal of a secure colonial order.

In the 1960s, the disconnect between the everyday experiences of the local Chinese population and the imperial imagination grew starker as the colonial government increased its efforts to strengthen colonial order in the use and experience of space within the park. This disconnected surfaces clearly in a survey of oral histories. Oral histories of the Chinese population centered around the harshness of everyday life: the crowded living situations without direct access to water or fire for cooking, the long hours of hard labor for little money, and the contempt Europeans held for the Chinese (Hong Kong Oral Histories, "Shek-lin Chu," "Choi-yun So"

and “Oi-lin Lee”). On the other hand, oral histories of the British colonial elite centered around transnational business deals and the excitement of balls held at Hong Kong’s Peninsula Hotel (Hong Kong Oral Histories, “Anne Marden,” “Sir David Akers-Jones”). The government’s construction of new park facilities suggests attempts to strengthen colonial control by creating more continuity with the imperial network.

These efforts, however, failed to recognize the disconnect between representations of and representational space. In 1960, for example, *Wah Kiu Daily News* lauded a new man-made pond where “children can play with model boats,” and which “brought a staple of European parks to Hong Kong” (“Victoria Park Pool” 8). Given the difficulties of financial sustenance amongst the majority of the Chinese population, however, the cost of buying imported model boats from Europe would not have been feasible for individual families. Further, public performances in the park featured only Western music played by groups such as the British Royal Military Band and the Sydney Brass Band (“Music Performance” [25 Sep. 1960] 3; “Music Performanc” [19 Apr. 1963] 3). The colonial administration’s sanctioning of only Western-style musical performances highlighted a cultural hegemony that cast Western music as superior to traditional Chinese music. Efforts to strengthen colonial hegemony in the park’s spatial practice thus served to heighten the separation between the colonial government and the Chinese population.

Fueled by this disconnect, the Chinese community began to challenge aspects of British imperial order in Victoria Park between the mid-1960s and the 1970s. The first such reported incident in 1967 saw graffiti sprayed across the statue of Queen Victoria at the park’s front entrance, which provided a tangible reminder of the goal of colonial order that drove the park’s construction. Photographs showed the messages on each side of the statue: “Topple the British Empire,” “We Must Win,” “British Hong Kong Must Fall” and “Debts of Blood Must be Repaid in Kind” (“British Queen Statue” 1). In 1972, *The Kung Sheung Evening News* reported “one of many rallies protesting British imperial rule at the park.” While the incident did not erupt into violence, it “garnered close police and governmental attention” (“Rally” 1). The contest of power in these spatial practices was not confined to open displays of protest. In 1973, *The Kung Sheung Evening News* reported “mounting anti-imperialist violence in the wider colony,” which “prompted police to conduct searches in public spaces, uncovering a large number of concealed weapons in Victoria Park” (“Large Amount of Weapons” 7). In so directly challenging the imperial power that had been imposed upon the meanings of space in Victoria

Park, Chinese residents of Hong Kong not only re-shaped the park's spatial practices according to their everyday practices—they also subverted the imperial power that the colonial government had embedded into the conception and creation of the park.

The interactions between the colonial government's imperial imagination and the everyday life of Chinese residents in Victoria Park from its opening until the 1970s illuminate the disjointedness and resulting tensions between the two. The shaping and re-shaping of Victoria Park from a space of imperial hegemony to one of contested power reflected the agency of the colony's Chinese community in claiming Victoria Park as a space of their own, rather than as a space solely of imperial hegemony. This process created a space of dual contribution, wherein larger socio-political conflicts between the colonizer and colonized in Hong Kong unfolded.

Conclusion

The tensions between the imposed colonial order and everyday experiences of the general Chinese population that unfolded in shaping and re-shaping meanings of space in Victoria Park provide an understanding of larger tensions of colonial order in mid-twentieth-century Hong Kong. While the colonial government attempted to create a space of imperial hegemony and control in the initial stages of the park's construction and opening, the everyday experiences of the local Chinese population came to re-shape the meaning of space in the park as their uses of the park countered the meanings ascribed to it by the colonial government. The resulting tensions created an arena of contested space that continued as Victoria Park became an important staging ground for political and civil movements throughout Hong Kong's history. Such local contributions, even though acts of everyday life, were crucial to urban development and space in colonial histories. Hong Kong's development was not driven solely by the British colonial government. Rather, it was shaped as well by its Chinese residents—by the elements of disconnect within the British Empire's trans-imperial network.

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