

The Walled City of Kowloon: Its Origin and Early History Revisited

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Abstract

At one point considered to have been the most densely populated place on earth, nearly thirty years after its demolition, Hong Kong's Walled City of Kowloon continues to be a topic of significant cultural memorialization and lively academic discussion. Yet despite the researchers' best efforts, its origin and early history continue to be riddled with fundamental inaccuracies. Tracing back to key primary sources, this article upholds that the Walled City was selectively built by the Chinese on empty government land between late 1846 and 1847, systematically arguing that it was therefore not an architectural palimpsest with an undue "centuries-old" history. Seeking to bring clarity as to "why" predominant academic discourses to date have differed, the article scrutinizes two of the most influential published narratives on the topic by Elizabeth Sinn and Julia Wilkinson, demonstrating how a fundamental lack of integration of key primary sources has resulted in the current state of knowledge. Closely aligned with and committed to efforts to decolonize the historical record, the article also proposes that such sources should be made more accessible for proper study, in the hope that narratives about the Walled City's origin and early history take account of the perspectives of those who built it.

Introduction

Since its demolition in the 1990s, significant interest in Hong Kong's Walled City of Kowloon has continued to grow. Believed to have been at one point the most densely populated place on earth (Lambot 124), its sovereign status became hotly contested by the British and Chinese as part of an evolving struggle for geopolitical power. An incredibly impoverished and neglected space, much of its myth and intrigue today is

perhaps owed to the scarcity of documentation and gaps in the historical record. For what it came to represent for some in the postwar period—a “lawless,” “anarchist” site, “neither British nor Chinese”—the origins of its liminality have not been missed by academic discussions. However, literature about its origin and early history has for decades propagated claims that are both unsupported and misplaced. This article analyzes how this issue came to be, arguing for a better supported version of the Walled City of Kowloon’s history using the best evidence available.

To advance the argument put forward, this article has been structured in three sections. First, it starts by setting out a brief introductory history of Hong Kong, the Kowloon area, and the Walled City’s general development. This will offer a broad context to pinpoint key historical events of interest for the discussions that will follow, which highlights the academic and social relevance of our research effort. This section will then be followed by the analysis, itself divided into three subsections; here, taking a chronological approach, each subsection will be centered around key documents under scrutiny—starting with Thomas Bernard Collinson and Gu Bingzhang 顧炳章, then Elizabeth Sinn, and lastly Julia Wilkinson. Finally, the article will close with a short conclusion reflecting on our findings, while providing some recommendations for future researchers to consider.

It is worth making explicit that the title chosen for this article (i.e., *The Walled City of Kowloon: Its Origin and Early History Revisited*) is deliberate on two levels. Firstly, to reinforce its engagement with Sinn’s and Wilkinson’s publications, the syntax is combinedly appropriated from the former’s own title (i.e., *Kowloon Walled City: Its Origin and Early History*) with the addition of “revisited” at the end in acknowledgment towards Greg Girard and Ian Lambot’s second edition of *City of Darkness Revisited* where Wilkinson’s 1993 *A Chinese Magistrate’s Fort* section was republished. Secondly, the use of the term “The Walled City of Kowloon,” instead of the more common “Kowloon Walled City” seeks to rectify an important difficulty found in the literature. This is because the terminology “Kowloon City” in the historical record most frequently refers to the Kowloon City district area instead of, exclusively, to the “Walled City of Kowloon.” The latter is exclusively situated in the former, but not vice versa. Therefore though “Kowloon City” is often employed as shorthand for the “Walled City of Kowloon,” this article seeks to tackle this mixed ontology from the start. A more detailed discussion will follow in the analysis. For the sake of clarity, this article does not utilize “Kowloon City” interchangeably for the “Walled City of Kowloon”—whenever the former is employed, it refers exclusively to the Kowloon City district area. For the

sake of succinctness and readability, “the Walled City of Kowloon” will hereafter mostly be referred to as simply “the Walled City.”¹

Key Events Leading to and Including 1847–99

By the early Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279 CE), the wider locality of “*Kuan-fu Chai* [官富場]” hosted “one of the chief official centers of production of salt in south China,” where, according to James C. Y. Watt, an administrative center for these salt pans was stationed (142).² As the Mongol conquest of China unfolded, the Chinese court as “royal refugees” in exodus temporarily located themselves somewhere within the Kowloon City district area before their ultimate defeat in 1279 during the Battle of Yamen (Jen and Kan 21; Barber). It is thought that by the end of the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368 CE), most of the land in the area had been settled by seven large families, followed by a migratory influx of people from nearby provinces coming to Kowloon throughout the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 CE) (Carroll). This period also saw the region’s first fateful encounters with European colonialists with the Portuguese Jorge Álvares’ arrival in

¹ To date, Peter Wesley-Smith has been the only one who seems to have sought to make the problem, and therefore the distinction, clearer in the literature. As noted in a footnote where he writes, “[t]erminology is confusing”:

The Walled City, which is neither walled nor a city, has a fascination all its own [...].¹

¹ Terminology is confusing: the Walled City, once a fort and administrative centre to the immediate north–west of a Chinese town called *Kay Lung Gai* [九龍街] (“Kowloon Street”), as known to the Chinese as *Kay Lung Shing* [九龍城] (“Kowloon City”). Foreigners in Hong Kong at the turn of the century usually referred to *Kay Lung Gai* when they used the term “Kowloon City,” and sometimes the whole complex of *Shing* and *Gai*. Nowadays “Kowloon City” often means the Walled City (*Shing*), though it is also the name of an administrative district. Perhaps adding further confusing in an attempt to minimise it, the following terms are used here: “the Walled City” for *Kau Lung Shing* (the fort); “the suburbs,” “the suburban area” or “the town” for *Kay Lung Gai*; “Kowloon City” for both fort and town—unless the context shows otherwise. (Wesley-Smith, “The Walled City of Kowloon and Its Law Today” 67, 120)

His decision to use “Kowloon City” interchangeably “unless the context shows otherwise” in this article’s view ultimately still falls short, and in this sense is an area where a clearer distinction is felt necessary and justified.

² The area of “*Kuan-fu Chai*” included what is now the Kowloon City administrative area but reached much further, as far as Joss House Bay to the east (Watt 142).

1513 (Edmonds; Porter). Upon arrival, the Portuguese moved quickly, building the “*Tamão* [屯 門]” trading post in order to expand its imperial ambitions by seeking to establish trade routes with Southern China before being expelled in the 1520s (von Glahn). By 1549, Sino-Portuguese relations had been re-established, followed by Portugal’s permanent lease of Macau in 1557 (Wills).

In the following three centuries, European colonial interests became even more forceful and present. Though there was high Western demand for Chinese commodities such as tea, silk, and porcelain, Western interest in Chinese goods remained unreciprocated. This perceived imbalance meant that Chinese goods could often only be purchased in exchange for precious metals. Exceptionally, one of the few commodities initially taken up with interest by Chinese merchants was Indian opium, predominantly traded by the British. Sold in large quantities, this became a significant source of revenue for the British Empire—and a growing source of concern to Qing officials, as the accumulating influx of opium had begun fueling a serious public health crisis (Chen 103). By the late 1830s, official relations between the British and Chinese had grown tense. Rejecting demands to legalize and legitimize the opium trade, Emperor Daoguang directed commissioner Lin Zexu in 1839 to take decisive measures to destroy illegal opium stockpiles and halt all foreign trade, triggering an immediate military response by the British known today as the First Opium War (Hoe and Roebuck). After an initial British victory and continuation of hostilities, Hong Kong Island was formally ceded by the Chinese through the 1842 Treaty of Nanking (Courtauld et al.). Relations between both empires remained hostile, however, and the expectation that the British would re-engage in conflict led the Chinese to fortify the region. It was in this context that the Walled City’s construction began in 1846, with completion in 1847 (Wesley-Smith, *Unequal Treaty 1898–1997* 18). The Walled City stood largely in this physical form until its (first) demolition by the Japanese in 1941 during their invasion and occupation of Hong Kong.

Continuing tensions led to another military escalation, resulting in the Second Opium War, where the Qing, once again forcefully defeated, were coerced to lease the Kowloon Peninsula and Stonecutters Island via the 1860 Convention of Peking (Carroll). This newly acquired territory was only a few kilometers from the (now-built) Walled City. The last gross colonial territorial expansion by the British in the region came in 1898, which saw the New Territories leased via the Second Convention of Peking (also known as the Convention for the Extension of Hong Kong Territory). The British now controlled an area expanding well beyond the Walled City. As part of the negotiations, however, the British initially agreed that the

Walled City would remain under Chinese jurisdiction, making it de facto an enclave within the territories leased for the next ninety-nine years (*The New Territories Order in Council*). Yet, a series of events a year later led the British to unilaterally claim that Chinese jurisdiction over the Walled City had become “inconsistent with the military requirements for the defense of Hong Kong” (*The Walled City Order in Council*), thus from thereon becoming, as the British argued, “part and parcel of Her Majesty’s Colony of Hong Kong for all purposes during the continuance of the term of the lease” (*The Walled City Order in Council*, 27 Dec. 1899). The Chinese never acknowledged the British Order in Council nor granted jurisdiction over the Walled City, and for the better part of a century, its territory would continue to represent an unresolved dispute between the British and the Chinese.

The Walled City’s Postwar Development and Relevance Today

The Walled City’s development between the 1899 Order in Council and World War II (WWII—hereafter “postwar,” “prewar,” or “the war”) constitutes an important history. China’s rapid modernization after World War I (WWI), catalyzed by the May Fourth Movement, and the growing imperial struggle between a decaying British Empire and an emergent, struggling Chinese Republic were in many ways continuously trialed and re-negotiated through the Walled City’s contested status and positionality. For the purposes and scope of this article, this is not a period that will be explored in depth—the Walled City’s origin and early history are strictly periodized here as falling between the time in which its construction began (1846) up until the formalization of its contested enclave status as embodied by the 1899 Order in Council. The postwar period, however, as will be briefly outlined in this section, is of particular importance for the analysis put forward for two important reasons. Firstly, it is in this period that academic interest and discussion about the Walled City’s origin and early history began, allowing the misinterpretation of the emerging literature to be both produced and possible. Secondly, it also represents a period where popular interest and discussion about the Walled City’s origin and early history—in constant, interwoven exchange and discourse with these academic findings—emerged, and thus, when the popularization of these narratives started to take hold. Both trends will be deconstructed and examined later during the analysis, but it is important to first consider “why” this happened during this particular period. The purpose of this section is therefore to briefly summarize how the Walled City went from being an obscure, contested enclave to becoming a truly global

cultural imaginary capable of gaining a mesmerizing “second life” even after, and perhaps due to, its demolition in 1993 (Fraser and Li).

The horrors of the war in Hong Kong were characterized by its Japanese invasion in 1941. Inasmuch as the Chinese and the British co-shaped the Walled City’s morphology, so too in a profound sense did the Japanese: its stone walls were demolished and repurposed as building materials during occupation for a series of projects (including the Kai Tak airport extension). After the war, with the return of British colonial occupation, the absence of the Walled City’s “wall-determined” boundaries brought lasting consequences to shared, unformalized understandings between local inhabitants, the Chinese, and the British regarding its morphology. Indeed, as has been more recently discussed, its northern triangular wall creeping over Pak Hok Shan (White Crane Hill) disappeared from consideration—representing a radical shift in the conception and enforcement of its boundaries that prevails still today when one considers the boundaries of the “Walled City Park” built to memorialize it after its demolition. The lack of clarity surrounding its contested status combined with: (1) disastrous British housing and social policies that fostered rapid development of slums throughout Hong Kong; (2) failed plans by the British and Chinese to evacuate and demolish the towering and unregulated structures within the Walled City’s postwar boundaries (1948, 1963, as well as previously before the war in 1933) foiled by fierce resistance by residents (who were backed by the Chinese government) (Wesley-Smith, “The Walled City of Kowloon and Its Law Today”; Miners); and (3) a sudden, high influx of refugees from China during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s contributed to the Walled City’s growth. From then on, with the swelling impasse of what would happen after the British 99-year lease’s expiration due in 1997, the colony and its contested enclave became a central point of discussion for different publics³—diplomatic relations, academic research, cultural production, and beyond. It was in this context that the Chinese and British resolve after almost a decade of negotiations brought clarity to the Walled City’s future: Hong Kong would return to China, the Walled City would be demolished by the British before the Handover, and in its place, a park would be built to both memorialize and contrast its legacy. Most illustratively, the demolition itself, as Alistair Fraser and Eva Cheuk-yin Li highlight, “turned into a media event, with t-shirts bearing the legend, ‘I was there at the demolition of Kowloon Walled City,’ given to those participating” (221). In a certain way, both the academic and popular “trends”

³ See the concept of “publics” as set out in *Publics and Counterpublics* (Warner).

discussed above can be periodized as “before” and “after” the demolition—or, indeed, to further borrow from Fraser and Li, into its “first” and “second” lives (221). On the one hand, once its looming foreclosure was widely felt and known, a sense of urgency to document what it “had been” and “still was” spread among interested publics in anticipation for what it “would” become. Dialogue during this “first life period” seems to have taken a broader interest in its origin and early history, resituating, and re-engaging with wider debates and reframings of Hong Kong’s colonial and “pre-colonial” past and the complexities of what “post-coloniality” could even mean after the resume of Chinese rule over a people now shaped and shaping an entirely new intersectional culture. Sinn’s publication, which will later be scrutinized in more depth in the analysis, should be understood as belonging to and being situated within this historical context of postwar academic research about the Walled City. On the other hand, popular depictions of the Walled City seemed to follow a similar pattern, as Fraser and Li highlight in contrast to its “second life’s cultural memorialization” as exemplified through films:

[T]racing a similar pattern, there is a marked difference between film depictions of the Walled City from the period before demolition and those from the period after. Where early films such as *Brothers From the Walled City* [城寨出來者; 1982], *Long Arm of the Law and Crime Story* [省港旗兵; 1984] use the Walled City as a backdrop for crime and lawlessness—“a slum to escape from” or no man’s land of darkness and crime—they nonetheless take care to show a version of the lived experience in the Walled City. In the postcolonial era, however, the Walled City has been increasingly represented as a symbol of nostalgic communality (*Kung Fu Hustle* [功夫], 2004; *A Fist Within Four Walls* [城寨英雄], 2016), thrilling aesthetics (*Re-Cycle* [鬼域], 2006) or anarchic urbanism (*Ip Man: The Final Fight* [葉問：終極一戰], 2013). (Fraser and Li 225)

The list of such public imaginaries is by far not exhausted in this passage. Beyond films, numerous depictions and discourses of the Walled City have been produced to date. It continues to be a source of direct referencing and inspiration, capable in recent years of stirring and inciting as several new artifacts of cultural memorialization continue to engage with it. It is no understatement to reckon that the Walled City’s cultural memory has been—and continues to be—diverse and thriving in its “first” and “second” lives. In this sense, this article could be understood as being situated within this “second life turn” from a more critical perspective.

Analysis

In its simplest form, the central narrative being contested by this article is that the Walled City's development had emerged from some form of architectural palimpsest, that it "existed" in some way before 1847, thus allocating it with an undue "centuries-old history." As it will be demonstrated, though this discourse has had many variations over time by different sources, the core idea remains relatively unchanged. What will be argued here is that the evidence available does not support this claim; rather, as far as it can be known with relative certainty, the Walled City was selectively built on empty land sometime shortly before completion in 1847. To argue this point, the analysis will be divided into three overarching sections. Firstly, by revisiting important historical documents with "fresh eyes" and critically analyzing the most readily available sources close to the Walled City's construction under the section of "Collinson and Gu: Resituating the Walled City," some of the earliest examples in the historical record of these misconceptions will be demonstrated, as well as what better claims can be made instead from the existing evidence. Secondly, building upon this evidence, a critical analysis of Sinn's foundational 1987 article under "Sinn: Establishing the Narrative" will seek to answer how these claims were perpetuated and popularized in scholarly and popular publications. Third and lastly, under "Wilkinson: Popularizing the Narrative," elements of the overarching research question (i.e., "how did misconceptions about the Walled City of Kowloon's origin and early history emerge?") will be brought together to determine the critical path that has resulted in the current, predominant state of knowledge. Once delivered, this will be followed by a conclusion reflecting on the findings and pointedly counseling future research. Before proceeding, a brief explanation of why Sinn and Wilkinson's works have been selected is due.

First, regarding Sinn's article, since its publication, it has rightly become one of the key reference points for those with an interest in considering the Walled City's history. Often cited by scholars, the extent of its influence has not, however, been restricted to academic literature; in popular works too it is acknowledged, explicitly and otherwise. In all its aspects, it is a laudable, foundational work deserving of the influence and respect it carries. Without the groundwork that Sinn single-handedly set, our research would not have been possible—and for this, we are truly indebted.

Second, regarding Wilkinson's work, arguably not quite any other work has done as much as it to popularize the Walled City's history, and particularly to memorialize its postwar stories. Wilkinson's text is an

awe-inspiring, ambitious attempt to succinctly chart the Walled City's historical development, from its origin to (final) demolition, in a manner that is accessible to the general public. Our research revises but does not dismiss Wilkinson's efforts—after all, just like Sinn, without them there would not have been a starting point to inspire and invite a breach into the literature.

Though our research engages quite critically with the content of these publications, it is by no means an effort to “blame.” Rather, with politeness and admiration, our effort is solely about raising an intellectual query for the sake of future research. Thus, as we place our own critique, we eagerly invite it upon our claims, as it should be for the proper functioning of an open and fair scholarly community. For these reasons, both sources were selected, and we have tried our best to balance the tone and language of our critique.

Collinson and Gu: Resituating the Walled City

Delving into the primary sources, this section is divided into two parts: a high-level analysis of the three figures presented (see figures 1 to 3 below) and an in-depth reflection through complementary primary sources about their context and implications.

For the purposes of this analysis, it is first worth taking a brief stock of what the Kowloon Peninsula had become just a few years after the 1898 lease of the New Territories, and perhaps there is no better source than the 1904 Ordinance Survey plates for the area (Figure 1). This map highlights a few key pointers for the analysis that have been annotated for clarity, namely:

1. It clearly shows the Walled City, including its northwestern triangular wall rising to Pak Hok Shan with an elevation point of some c. 263 meters accompanied by ...
2. ... another, adjacently northeastern, elevation of c. 170 meters;
3. It clearly shows the location, boundaries, and shape of the Nga Tsin Wai village northeast of the Walled City;
4. It highlights the “old” boundary line from the First Convention of Peking in 1860; and
5. It rightly names the district in which the Walled City is located as “Kowloon City.”

Keeping this information in mind, our scrutiny of Collinson's sketch can be quite productive. As a source from a military body, it represents the British colonial gaze on Kowloon “pre-first convention,” a gaze that would indeed expand northwards well beyond the sketched region.

Considering what has been demonstrated by the 1904 Ordinance Map, the following can be derived from Collinson's sketch (as annotated in Figure 3):

6. The c. 263 meters Pak Hok Shan elevation (corresponding with Figure 1's "1") is clearly well represented, along with ...
7. ... the c. 170 elevation northeast of it (corresponding with Figure 1's "2");
8. At an almost unbelievably fortunate angle for our purposes, capable of denoting where the Walled City should have been placed in view, there is nothing there. Not even a trace of a structure. Indeed, what seems to be under gaze is empty, hilly land with a patch of trees and (crucially, as will be discussed below) ...
9. ... some houses here and there that represent the furthest spread of the "Kowloon Kai" (Kowloon Street) settlement beginning by the bay;
10. A structure which in its location, boundaries and shape seems to correspond to the Nga Tsin Wai walled village is wrongly labeled as "the old town Cowloon" (corresponding with Figure 1's "3");
11. A location and label for the "Cowloon Fort" are provided.

Consequently, what this reading of Collinson seems to indicate is clear: it fundamentally challenges claims that the Walled City's development had evolved from some form of architectural palimpsest and, rather, offers that the Walled City was built on land seemingly empty of human structures. It is now important to consider the context in which Collinson produced the sketch and the other evidence available about the Walled City.

One of the most credible counterarguments to what this reading of Collinson seems to indicate is, putting it bluntly, that he could have just "missed" or "broad-brushed" the Walled City or any other previously existing structure(s). Though possible and certainly open for revision, there are three reasons why this article feels the simplest and strongest explanation is that, as far as it can be known, the Walled City was deliberately built on empty land sometime shortly before completion in 1847. In ascending order of strength, these reasons are due to: (1) the reported quality and merit of Collinson's work in Hong Kong; (2) a critical cross-check against key dates and information about the Walled City's construction taken from Chinese primary sources; and (3) what is known about the structures from which the Walled City is claimed otherwise to have been "descended."

Collinson, then a Lieutenant of the British Colonial Empire, set off to Hong Kong from Woolwich, London, on May 24, 1843, boarding the *Mount Stuart Elphinstone* (Hawkins 40), where, upon arrival on October 4,

1843⁴ he would be stationed for 982 days, trusted with producing a map of Hong Kong and assisting with local duties until his next posting was up—this time setting off to Auckland, New Zealand, on June 11, 1846.⁵ During his stay in Hong Kong, “Collinson had been hard at work for two years on a detailed survey of the island, and early in 1846 he had completed a fine map of Hong Kong and some nearby islands at a scale of 4 in to 1 mile with ‘vertical shading’ to show gradients” (Hawkins 44). Such a “fine map” it was, rich in detail and delivery that “the series proved extremely useful and remained in use, with periodic revisions, for more than 40 years” (Empson 36). As Christopher Cowell aptly notes, “Collinson’s masterwork, his four-part Ordinance Map of 1845, would overlay the added dimension of mapped altitude and produce the first published set of plans within the British Empire to exhibit the use of the contour line” (360). Sketches such as the one under inspection demonstrate, according to Empson, that “Collinson was perhaps even more famed for panoramic sketches, which he himself penned to illustrate the environment of Hong Kong,” adding, “[e]xcellently drawn, they have been widely used as examples of panoramic field sketching and for comparison with contemporary developments” (36).⁶ According to Collinson himself, he “was ambitious of making it a perfect map,” remarking on the result that it would eventually have become “of great use to surveyors and engineers and I have been told since that the maps have proved of good service in this respect”; and, highlighting finally, he “was recorded by the engraving of the map at the Ordinance Survey

⁴ Connolly seems to attribute a slightly later date for the arrival, i.e., October 7, 1843 (427). Precedence has been given to Collinson’s own claim (Collinson, *Seven Years Service*).

⁵ Similarly to the note above, Hawkins seems to attribute a slightly earlier date for the departure, i.e., June 10, 1846 (44). Again, precedence has been given to Collinson’s own claim (Collinson, *Seven Years Service*).

⁶ The remarkability of Collinson’s work in Hong Kong is such that, as accentuated by some personal genealogical research by Heath, “Thomas Collinson was rewarded by the engraving of his map at Ordinance Survey, Southampton, and a complement from the geographer J. Arrowsmith that it was the most complete map he had ever seen. Collinson’s pictorial drawings were of such an admirable standard that Major Aldrich, R.E., used Collinson’s work to illustrate his 1846 report on the erection of Ordinance buildings in Hong Kong, published in the Royal Engineer Papers in 1849.” The source(s) for these claims are unknown, but some of Heath’s other claims seem credible since they are verifiable by Connolly, Cowell, Empson, Hawkins, and in part by Collinson himself (e.g., trace the note below on John Arrowsmith).

office in Southampton and by the opinion of John Arrowsmith,⁷ the geographer, that it was the most complete map he had ever seen. Some outline sketches I took during the survey were lithographed to the Board of Ordinance” (Collinson, *Seven Years Service*). Under these grounds, the plausibility of Collinson’s completeness as the operational assumption corroborated by himself, his contemporaries, and more authoritative, recent sources seems a most persuasive fit that the Walled City or any other significant structure(s) would not have been missed by his diligent labor. This is not all.

The consensus regarding the date of completion of the Walled City’s construction is relatively straightforward: 1847. The claim is put forward by many scholars, though a problem with citations seems prevalent; for sources published in English, none to date seem to have ever directly referenced what seems to be the most authoritative source available, used by some publications in Chinese (Chen and Mo xxii), though even with the latter there are problems with citations (Liu [3rd ed.] 28). This is particularly saddening since the existing complete collection of primary sources held at the Guangzhou Library and more recently edited in print by Chen Huixun and Mo Shixiang provides unique insight with remarkable precision (Gu). Indeed, what makes it particularly important is that this is a compilation of key primary source accounts of events from the Chinese perspective, likely written by key local Chinese official Gu Bingzhang (Chen and Mo xxii),⁸ these were events in which the British did

⁷ John Arrowsmith was an acclaimed nineteenth-century British cartographer and geographer whose London Atlas of Universal Geography went through numerous editions in the 1830s and 1840s.

⁸ Though perhaps not quite unlikely, it is unclear whether Collinson personally met Gu in order to get “permission of the head Chinaman of the district” for some “winter sport [...] into the extensive and numerous valleys of Mirs Bay beyond” in an encounter “in state of Cowloon Town” (Collinson, *Seven Years Service*). It is interesting to know that the reference to “Cowloon Town” could not have meant the Walled City but must have meant “Kowloon Gai” (Kowloon Street), the market-town settlement that started by Kowloon Bay and extended back towards what would become the Walled City site. Though it may seem trivial, it is important to note that to better deal with and prepare against British presence, the regional official military Chinese hierarchy was “upgraded” in Kowloon in 1843, as well as further customs and anti-smuggling personnel being elicited—leading to officials apparently being temporarily stationed in rented residential houses in “Cowloon City” (i.e., residential Kowloon Gai) until a longer-term fix would become available (i.e., the Walled City). Using residential houses as an imperial *yamen* 衙門 seems to have been considered improper, and is certainly a contributing reason to the building of the Walled City. (Lau et al. 8; Sinn 31).

not seem interested nor able to document from their own colonial positionality. As an important point of reflexivity, it is therefore paramount in the ongoing project of decolonializing British-dominated histories of Hong Kong that these sources become more widely read and rendered accessible when continued, evolving revisions of the Walled City's early history and origins are produced and revisited by future scholars. A selection of some of these primary sources seems to have been first made accessible by Liu Shuyong in 1989, where most crucially in line with Chen and Mo's 2018 more recent and comprehensive editorial publication ([3rd ed.] 15, 22). According to Gu, the Walled City project began on November, 25, 1846 (168 days after Collinson's departure for New Zealand) and was completed on May, 31, 1847 (22; Gu 86–89).

Beyond the known dates for the Walled City's construction, Gu shares two paramount pieces of information from this article's perspective: Firstly, when surveying the land to find a suitable spot for the Walled City's construction in order to reinforce the region's fortifications, the site was selectively chosen by officials because it was known as—and supposed to be—empty government land (77–82). Secondly and most interestingly, Gu highlights that some buildings did have to be demolished to give way for the Walled City, but none of these were “centuries-old” government structures; these were the residential homes of locals (74). Indeed, though Collinson's sketch is not a perfect topographical, “photographic” representation of the landscape, if closely studied and compared against sources such as the 1904 Ordinance Map and prewar photographs of the Walled City, it is possible that the houses captured in view (as highlighted under annotated “9” in Figure 3) are all, if not at least some, of the structures that were demolished. Overall, these sources overwhelmingly strengthen the case for the argument at hand being the simplest available: Collinson did not sketch an imperial structure on the site because one did not yet exist.

The last reason supporting the claim hereby argued concerns what is known about the structures from which the Walled City is claimed to have “descended.” In its review of the literature, this article has identified six main structures that are claimed to be the predecessors of the Walled City. Of all counts, (1) two are categorically known to have been sited elsewhere, (2) three are both no longer known and often likely to have been situated elsewhere, and (3) one's claimed existence is itself so far unverifiable. Table 1 below summarizes these findings:

Name	Dates	Description
Salt pan administrative fort	1197	Existence not known. ⁹
Young (Southern) Sung Emperors' temporary/"travelling" palace	1277–1278	Location not certain, though unlikely at the Walled City site. Some sources claim, with circumstantial evidence, that it was located around Sacred Hill (Watt 142; Ho et al. 12–13, 120–22).
Kowloon Beacon Tower, also called the "Kowloon Mound" (<i>Jiulong dun tai</i> 九龍墩台)	1668	Location not certain, though not at the Walled City site. Impossible to locate with certainty, though likely placed in what is today called "Beacon Hill" within Lion Rock Park (Yanne and Heller 119; Ho et al. 175; Liu 18–19).
Kowloon Guard Station, also called the "Kowloon Garrison" (<i>Jiulong xun</i> 九龍汛)	1682	Location not certain, though not at the Walled City site. See the row above: possibly a "reorganization" of Kowloon Beacon Tower (Ho et al. 16; Liu 18–19).
Kowloon Fort, or old "Fat Tong Mun Fort" (<i>Jiulong paotai</i> 九龍砲台)	1810–1811	Location known, not at the Walled City site (Gu 77–81; Ho et al. 175–77). See Figure 3's "11".
Kowloon Sea Guard Station (<i>Jiulong hai kou xun</i> 九龍海口汛)	1811	Location known (modern day Kwun Tong, south of Kowloon City district), not at the Walled City site (Lu 22).

Table 1. Known Palimpsest Claimed Structures of the Walled City.

⁹ Though Lawrence W. C. Lai and others claim based on a dubious source by the "Kaifong Welfare Promotion Association" that there was a "fort built of stones [...] erected using stones obtained from Pak Hok Shan [White Crane Hill]" in "1197" (338), any authorship by the Kaifong Association during its supposed time of publication deserves heightened scrutiny given the geopolitical tensions in which it was situated and operated—no reflexivity on this is provided by Lai and others in their otherwise excellent article. Though an examination of the Kaifong Association's role in the promotion of the narrative of the Walled City's "ancient" history is worthwhile, it sadly sits beyond the scope and purposes of this article. Lastly, Wilkinson, without citing any sources, claims there was a "small fort was established here early on in the Sung Dynasty, to house Imperial soldiers who controlled the salt trade" ("A Chinese Magistrate's Fort" [1993 ed.], 60). This particular publication will be scrutinized in more detail later in the analysis. We suspect any evidence of the true nature of this salt pan administration will only be found in Chinese primary sources.



Figure 1. Annotated extract of the map “China Kowloon and Part of New Territory Surveyed in 1902–1903 Under Superintendence of Major H.S. King. R.E.”

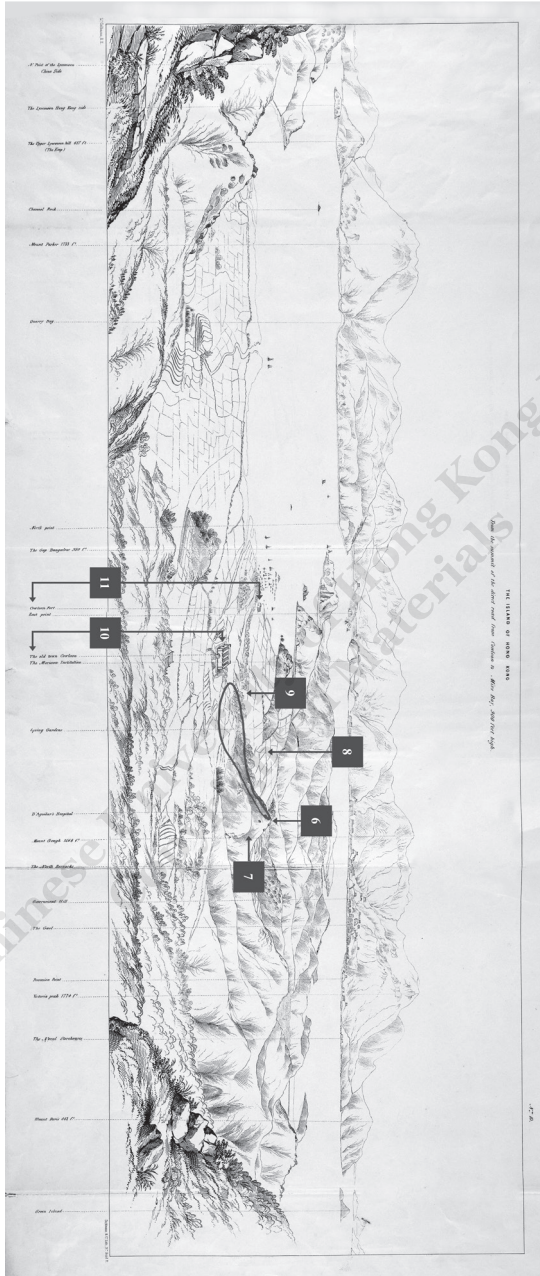


Figure 3. Annotated “No. 10. The Island of Hong Kong from the Summit of the Direct Road from Cowloon to Mirs Bay, 900 Feet High”

Sinn: Establishing the Narrative

Sinn's timely 1987 "Kowloon Walled City: Its Origin and Early History" article has been one of the most fundamental scholarly contributions in capturing and memorializing the Walled City's past. Following the announcement earlier that year of the Walled City's demolition, Sinn notes, "interest has multiplied" to such a level that "[h]ardly a day passes now without some group of visitors trooping down the alleys hoping to see this unique physical, legal, historical and social edifice before it is gone forever" (30). As it is worth re-emphasizing, the article has since rightly become one of the key reference points for those with an interest in considering the Walled City's history. Often cited by scholars, the extent of its influence has not, however, been restricted to academic literature; in popular works too, it is acknowledged, whether explicitly or perhaps more often implicitly. In all its aspects, it is a laudable, foundational work—and, yet, for the purposes and scope of this article, it is also one that contains a critically unverified claim that likely influenced others to maintain and develop it.

Right at the beginning of Sinn's article, the following claims are made under two statements: "The City's site at the northeastern corner of Kowloon peninsula was first fortified in 1668 when a signal station was established. About 1810, a small—and according to one account "miserable"—fort was built at the head of the beach." (30). The first statement is the only triggering concern, for the latter does not seem to imply the "miserable fort" had been built on what would become the Walled City's location, although it is possible this statement has been misread by the many who often claim the 1810 fort was a direct predecessor of the Walled City. Notwithstanding, regarding the first statement, the previous opening paragraphs make it unequivocally clear that "The City" is thereby used interchangeably for the "Walled City" and not the "Kowloon City" district area. Additionally, the date provided ("1668") is also an important indicator, for, as argued above in Table 1 of this article, the "1668 signal station" seems to be a clear reference point to the Kowloon Beacon Tower, whose location, though impossible to determine, was most likely placed in what is today called "Beacon Hill" (indeed presumably named after the Tower itself) within Lion Rock Park (Ho et al. 175; Liu 18–19). Its most flawed characteristic however is that it is not clearly referenced. Here is exactly where the second statement is important. Its closing endnote ("1") references works by Anthony K. K. Siu ("The Kowloon Walled City"; *Jiulongcheng*) and Rev. Mr. Krone, indicating

scholarly emphasis on the former. When studying Siu's works, for Beacon Tower, "watchpost" is mentioned but is not explicitly claimed as a structural "ancestor." However, it is written in such a way where the implication could be reasonably drawn: "At the beginning of the Ch'ing period, there was no walled city. In the 7th year of the K'ang Hsi reign (1668), there was only a watchpost, called the *jiu you po tai* 九有婆台 [the third character seems to be a typo, rather *Jiulong dun tai* 九龍墩台¹⁰] recorded as having thirty guards" (Siu, "The Kowloon Walled City" 139). Though conjectural, this could quite understandably have been the basis of Sinn's uncited reference, and so, with it, in the most influential publication about its origin and early history, the Walled City was bestowed with an increasingly extensive past—an instance turned into tradition, with publication after publication continuing it, in its waves influencing and transforming popular depictions, and in full circle being dialectically reinforced "back" by them in a closed feedback loop. Enter Wilkinson.

Wilkinson: Popularizing the Narrative

Girard and Lambot's deeply humanizing and enticing *City of Darkness* is perhaps the single most cited and referenced non-academic work on the Walled City in and outside of academia. Its enduring popularity proved itself with a second, 2014 edition backed by a very successful online Kickstarter campaign.¹¹ Arguably not quite any other work has done as much as it to popularize the Walled City's history, and particularly to memorialize its postwar stories and edifice. Both editions enjoyed a range of contributions, and for the purposes of this article, a particular one deserves scrutiny: Wilkinson's "A Chinese Magistrate's Fort" published in both editions.¹² Wilkinson's text is an ambitious attempt at succinctly charting the Walled City's historical development, from its origin to (final)

¹⁰ "*Jiu you po tai* 九有婆台" indeed does not seem to make into Siu's 1987 *Jiulong cheng shi lunji* 九龍城史論集 [*Studies on the Kowloon Walled City*] also cited by Sinn, whereas "*Jiulong dun tai* 九龍墩台" does instead, in line with other sources and existing literature.

¹¹ Raising an impressive £84,817 of their £50,000 goal supported by 1,303 backers (Girard and Lambot, "City of Darkness Revisited"). In view of transparency, it should be noted that the author, Elaine Wisbey, of this article was one of those Kickstarter backers, and her name is therefore recorded in the back of the book.

¹² See both 1993 and 2014 editions of Julia Wilkinson, "A Chinese Magistrate's Fort."

demolition. Not positioned as a scholarly contribution, it is regrettably not accompanied by any citations besides an acknowledgment printed only in its first edition: “The editor and author gratefully acknowledge the Royal Asiatic Society, Dr Peter Wesley-Smith, author of *Unequal Treaty 1898–1997*, and Gillian Chambers for their help in locating the sources used in researching this chapter” (Wilkinson, “A Chinese Magistrate’s Fort” [1993 ed.] 71). It is, of course, not clear, though it may be quite certain that its grateful acknowledgment to the Royal Asiatic Society may have entailed a reading of Sinn’s “Kowloon Walled City: Its Origin and Early History” among other key publications by its journal. The key passage that concerns this article is present in both editions without alterations. Its tangled, “architectural palimpsest” narrative has come to dominate much of what has been written by academics since—in its own right, a true “literary palimpsest” building on and extending Sinn’s “1668.” In full, the passage reads as follows:

It wasn’t sin, but salt, which first gave the Walled City life. In the Sung Dynasty (960–1297), north-east coastal Kowloon was an important salt-field, one of several in the district of San On. It was known then as Kuan-fu Ch’ang – Kowloon, the vernacular name, was only officially adopted in 1840. *A small fort was established here early on in the Sung Dynasty, to house Imperial soldiers who controlled the salt trade. For a brief time, too, in 1277, it probably hosted the “travelling palace” of the young Sung Emperor, fleeing from the Mongols who had invaded south China two years earlier.*

This distant military outpost of Imperial China, called Kau Lung Shing (Kowloon City) by the locals, was situated immediately north-west of a settlement known as Kau Lung Gai (Kowloon Street), an area which became notorious in the 1890s for its gambling dens. *The fort itself made no headlines for several centuries, until 1668, when a watchpost was established on the site with a small garrison of 30 guards. In later years this number reduced to 10. In 1810, an additional fort was built near the coast. Its strategic position, just a quarter of a mile from the sea and across the harbour from Hong Kong, was soon to bring it lasting fame.*

In 1841 Britain occupied Hong Kong Island, forcing the Chinese to respond. How could they defend Kowloon from a possible British invasion? In 1843 they decided to transfer a deputy magistrate; administratively responsible for 492 neighbouring villages, to the Kowloon City, together with the chief military officer of the county and an increased garrison of 150 soldiers.

The Viceroy of Canton soon suggested further improvements to the fort, including offices, barracks and training facilities. But his most significant proposal was to build a wall. By 1847 it was finished, transforming the nondescript fort into the Kowloon Walled City, a visible and psychological symbol of Imperial control to the barbarians in Hong Kong. (our emphasis in italics; Wilkinson, “A Chinese Magistrate’s Fort” [1993 ed.] 60; Wilkinson, “A Chinese Magistrate’s Fort” [2014 ed.] 62)

Referring back to Table 1, it is possible to almost repurpose it as a checklist against the excerpts emphasized above. Wilkinson starts off with the “Salt Pan Administrative Fort” claim being clearly and unequivocally spelled out (“A small fort was established here early on in the Sung Dynasty, to house Imperial soldiers who controlled the salt trade”). If we are being generous to Wilkinson, we may say they imply, rather than outright claim, that this “small fort” occupied what would later become the site of the Walled City. However, the unclear wording and the implication have been enough to establish the narrative. This is then followed by the familiar, tentative “travelling palace” description (“in 1277, it probably hosted the ‘travelling palace’ of the young Sung Emperor”), supplemented with a clear denomination of “Kowloon City” as being used by “locals” to refer to a not-yet-existing Walled City. In line with Sinn, the “1668” claim makes a traditional feature (“The fort itself made no headlines for several centuries, until 1668, when a watchpost was established on the site”). It is then, finally, wrapped up with all the letters necessary to crown the narrative (“By 1847 it was finished, transforming the nondescript fort into the Kowloon Walled City”)—“nondescript” indeed since it does not seem present in any of the available sources. It was thus how a misinterpretation of the literature creepingly grew and transformed itself, amplifying its popularized reach everywhere. To take so much of the early history of this locality and mythologize it into a single narrative of the Walled City neatly packages it, but it also does its complexity and variety a disservice. The myth of the architectural palimpsest has been continuously produced and reproduced through a literary palimpsest of unverified claims after unverified claims. A great deal of this is owed no less to Girard and Lambot’s effort to capture and memorialize the Walled City’s post- and pre-war development in the best way available to them to the greatest audience possible. In this sense, this article revises but does not dismiss Wilkinson’s work—after all, without it, there likely would not have been a starting point to inspire and invite a breach into the literature.

Conclusion

This article set out with the ambition to first and foremost provide answers to how narratives about the Walled City's origin and early history emerged. First focusing on determining what precisely these narratives have been and why they represent a misbelief, it employed evidence-based revisionism through the introduction of two key primary sources—Collinson's sketch and Gu's "The Complete Case of the Walled City of Kowloon's Construction"—in order to provide comparative grounds for what better claims could be made instead from the existing evidence. This effort quite persuasively puts the Walled City's construction within clear "boundaries" (i.e., November, 25, 1846 to May, 31, 1847), categorically highlighting that the selection for the land in which it was built was in great part due to it being identified by Chinese officials as being "empty government land." Collinson's sketch was hereby positioned as corroborating evidence of an almost "photographic quality" to support this counternarrative, whilst highlighting its shortcoming of wrongly labeling the Nga Tsin Wai village as "the old town Cowloon," and therefore being, on the other hand, one of the earlier examples in the historical record of these narratives. With this accomplished, an analysis of the two most influential texts to date about the Walled City's origin and early history, Sinn and Wilkinson, respectively, was contextualized and deconstructed, framing how such narratives emerged in the particularly interwoven fabric of academic and non-academic discourses about the Walled City. The process of this revisionist critique of Sinn and Wilkinson also yielded insights on how these narratives were perpetuated and popularized in scholarly and popular publications.

Though referenced, this article has not expressively sought to chart and categorize in detail all instances in which such narratives feature in scholarly and popular publications. It believes this analytical approach has been sufficient to help future researchers stand closer to the truth. Yet, the project is far from over. The implications of these findings raise pointed questions that only further work may hope to tackle. Therefore, a broad recommendation should be noted. The exclusion of Chinese primary source material such as the ones published in Chen and Mo should be rectified, ideally through the production and publication of high-quality translations to drive accessibility and inter-linguistic dialogue for scholars and the general public. It is important for this effort to be squarely situated in a broader attempt to decolonize historical narratives and biases in archival records—a task that must be reflexively engaged with by

scholars already making a systematic commitment to doing so. Moreover, this move to enhance general accessibility should be accompanied by a call for further scrutiny, evidence-based revision, and integration of the unique insights these sources provide in the current state of academic knowledge. This article's scope has limited fuller involvement with much of what can be utilized from these sources regarding, for example, the official practices of Chinese representatives seeking to fortify the region against the British, the broader cultural considerations that went into their selection for the space and morphology for an emerging military institution such as the Walled City, and the general state of Hong Kong's development during the period seen from something other than the dominating British gaze in historiographies. With much beyond being understood, researchers should, above all, continue revising based on evidence—the story never ends.

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