

# Preface

The completion of this book marks a double tragedy. The second, our recent pandemic has reanimated my writing on the first, a deadly epidemic and its effects on the colonisation of Hong Kong Island in the mid-nineteenth century. It was an outbreak that indelibly altered the fledgling city. I began reviewing my work on this subject just as we started experiencing the early stages of Covid-19, the first global pandemic since the Spanish Flu. Our local sense of society and space had become fractured and cellular in extended lockdowns that stretched from the eastern to western hemispheres, revealing the constructed fragility of our communities. As a distant echo, Hong Kong's urban beginnings along the northern shore of its island were also fragmented and secluded. Immediately forged in uncertainty, its community staggered through a series of crises, first political and economic, and shortly after, epidemic. It was a tragedy of lost lives and squandered opportunities. Yet this forming, rupture, and reforming across the 1840s infused the city's muscle memory with a formal resilience, one through which we can trace stubborn examples of its physical language, including relentless land reclamation, building climate control, and vertiginous construction. The population's evolving conception of disease and its relations to the terrain, innate and made, was foundational to this transformation.

This study is the first in-depth historical account of the beginnings of Hong Kong society and its urbanism. It is a rare thing for a historian to be able to examine any city's formation and determine its constituent elements. But Hong Kong's circumstances were also highly peculiar, the basis for its existence intentionally uncertain. When I wrote the core of the manuscript more than a decade ago, while studying at the Department of

History at The University of Hong Kong (HKU), my initial intention had been to uncover and explain the motives and politics of colonists that drove the early construction of the settlement on the island. Surprisingly, what best tied the materials together as history was the outbreak of an epidemic, waves of malarial attacks stretching from the summer of 1841 onwards, though cresting in 1843. It turned out that the most poignant way one might attempt to explain the architecture and urban pattern of the young city was as manifestations that recorded in their making both the fears and opportunities of settlers brought about by a precariousness of life wrought by the disease. During the first half of this decade, the 1840s, the island gained a terrible reputation as a diseased and deadly location. Visual evidence of the time conveys as much about the paranoia and perils of life on the island as the textual, and both have been used interconnectedly throughout the book. The disease also accentuated the brutal colonial politics of race and class and the contours of privilege traced in well-timed land grabs that disempowered vulnerable sections of the community in favour of others. Imagery is never innocent. This study emphasises how Hong Kong's 'construction' was, by necessity, both physical and imagined, as it altered over time. So, my project mutated into a landscape history wherein settlers re-evaluated the topography, geology, society, and building of the early city settlement along the northern shoreline of Hong Kong Island in a desperate attempt to understand the nature and causes of a sickness that was killing them. This leveller was called 'malaria', as in 'bad air', believed to be a gaseous emanation from the land. Since malaria was considered a low-lying gas, it soon compelled the young city to be conceived of in 'section' as a divided community living at differing heights and atmospheres. Disease, therefore, added this vital third dimension to colonial urban space and division. When it comes down to it, histories of urban epidemics are, in fact, histories of political opportunity, separation, and social change. The question is, into whose hands does this power fall?

The research and writing of this book have involved the help and generous advice of many friends, colleagues, and institutions, and I sincerely apologise to those I have missed. I must begin my thanks with Dr. Peter Cunich. He was head of the Department of History at HKU when I joined it more than fifteen years ago. I was already a design tutor at the Department of Architecture, and moving into history as a discipline was daunting for me, but Peter took me under his wing. He became more than a supervisor; he became a mentor and a friend. I thank him for his patience, methodological care and training, his passion for history, and, equally, his compassion towards his students. Peter's

approach has indelibly shaped my early training as a historian. Professor John Carroll, one of our great Hong Kong historians, had just joined the department. John shared with me, on countless occasions, detailed advice and the sum of his experiences, ranging from archival approaches to writers and the broader field of research. I have enjoyed our many warm discussions. He generously reviewed this manuscript in its earliest form, chapter by chapter. Early in my work, Dr. Elizabeth Sinn at HKU's Centre of Asian Studies (now part of Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences) kindly shared her research into early Chinese culture, especially concerning the dim pre-colonial history of stonemasonry on the island. This insight led to my understanding of a relatively sophisticated culture of construction labour and building contracting within the region that the British used rather than created. As I wrote the manuscript, I had the privilege of many enjoyable conversations with Jonathan Wattis, Hong Kong's preeminent map dealer. His boundless passion and imagination for Hong Kong history and his expertise in regional paintings, drawings, and maps have challenged, provoked, and inspired my interpretations. Dr. Graham Mooney, at the Institute of the History of Medicine at Johns Hopkins University, has kindly shared his expertise on the literature of malaria and medicine concerning urbanism. It has, I hope, made this work stronger, as it has enriched my sense of the lines of research within this specialist field.

Despite my subsequent doctoral research at Columbia University having shifted emphatically towards India, Hong Kong history occasionally stormed back in. The most significant incursion began with a surprise communication I received from Derek McDonnell, founding director of Hordern House, Sydney, and one of the world's leading antiquarian book dealers. Ironically, he contacted me just as I was heading back to New York from a conference in Sydney, so we failed to meet. A recent trove of long-lost water-colours by the architect Edward Ashworth surfaced in Australia. Purchased by Hordern House, Derek asked for attribution and help in identifying each painting, its date, its context for the artist, and its relationship to Ashworth's movements. The peripatetic English architect has proved to be an outsized figure in colonial urban history, not just for early Victoria in Hong Kong but for Auckland and Sydney. He provides a rare linkage to the nascent construction industry on Hong Kong Island and is a crucial illustrator of the city's growth. And so, the second phase in my research work on this period of Hong Kong began and of a more intense architectural and scenographic nature. I completed the catalogue in late 2014, and to my delight, the Hong Kong Museum of Art purchased

the Hong Kong portion of the collection. The book benefits immeasurably from their inclusion, and apart from the catalogue, these works have not been published before nor situated in their proper context against other visual evidence. I must thank Derek for reviving my explorations into early Hong Kong and opening up further dimensions from which this book has benefited.

I thank my friends and fellow travellers on the historian's path. Dave Macri, then completing his PhD in the department, inspired me with his meticulous attention to detail and his forensic approach towards research, all churning within his ever-growing database. I have been fortunate to share experiences and insights with Cecilia Chu, Chang Jiat-Hwee, and Cole Roskam, architectural historians then at Berkeley and Harvard, respectively, who all coincidentally converged in London just when I needed them the most and was finding my feet in the various archives. They have, perhaps unwittingly, planted the seeds of many disciplinary branches in my secondary literature knowledge. I must also mention two good friends, Humphrey Yuen and Lawrence Tse, whose passion for the dwindling built heritage of Hong Kong corresponds with my own and with whom I have spent many hours thinking about the history of Hong Kong from various vantage points. At HKU's Department of Architecture, I must thank Zhu Tao and Eunice Seng, who gave me much helpful advice on extending my research. Tao became a sounding board, helping me to frame my broader thoughts and providing critical and theoretical insights. If Tao and Elaine Zhu had not approached me in 2020 to contribute an article on disease and urbanism in Hong Kong for their SpaceAction China blog, this book would likely not have come about. In parallel, as part of this unfortunate zeitgeist, I was invited by Ian Tan, co-editor, to contribute an abridged form of my earlier writing on malaria and early Hong Kong for the *Hong Kong Institute of Architects (HKIA) Journal* later that year, further signalling reader interest in a book.

I must also thank several archives and staff for their generous help. Though in a fragmented state, the Hong Kong SAR Government's Public Records Office stands out among these, with thoughtfulness and care from the staff that I was more than eager to receive while adrift in historical drawing materials. Most fortunate has been the discovery of T. B. Collinson's family letters and valuable references contained in the card files of the Carl T. Smith Collection. Also within Hong Kong, The University of Hong Kong's Special Collections had become a months-long nocturnal home for me. The Morrison Collection's mid-nineteenth-century newspapers and the library's extensive microfilm and

microfiche collections have proved extremely valuable. The British Library in London was essential for various rare nineteenth-century publications, particularly travel journals and periodicals, including the *Professional Papers* of the Royal Engineers. The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) Library and its staff assisted me in exploring specialist architectural journals of the period, such as *The Builder*, Edward Ashworth's dictionary entry on Chinese architecture, and other valuable contemporary commentary within the discipline. Staff at the Caird Library and Archive at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London, helped with my investigations into various naval materials, particularly surgeon Edward Cree's extraordinary illustrated diaries. I got lost in The National Archives at Kew, particularly among its CO 129 materials (the Colonial Office's enduring code for Hong Kong) and the War Office's visual documentation. This repository has proved vast and vital for almost all governmental correspondence between Hong Kong and Britain, contained in reports, memos, ordinances, legislation, and various maps, plans, and drawings, much of their counterparts destroyed in the invasion of Hong Kong during WWII. Outside of London, I must thank the Institution of Royal Engineers for permission to spend some days at the archive and library adjacent to their museum and barracks at Chatham, Kent, a space they specially opened for my use. The library has offered a wealth of further published and unpublished materials on their endeavours. I must also thank Matheson & Co., London, for granting access to the substantial Jardine Matheson Archives at The Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cambridge University Library, revealing the ambitions and fears of colonisation by the most significant single investor on the island.

For the compiling of this book, I must thank the following institutions and individuals for their kind permission to use various visual sources: The National Archives, Kew, London; the Hong Kong Museum of Art, Hong Kong; the Caird Library and Archive, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London; the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts; the Public Records Office of Hong Kong, Hong Kong; the British Library, London; the Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand, Wellington, New Zealand; the Yale Center for British Art, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut; the Baker Library Special Collections and Archives, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts; the Wellcome Collection, London; Mr. Anthony Hardy, Sze Yuan Tang Collection, Hong Kong; Mr. Richard Castle, Castle Fine Arts Inc., Sacramento, California; the UK Hydrographic Office Archive, Taunton, Somerset;

the Victoria & Albert Museum, London; and the Barry Lawrence Ruderman Map Collection, Stanford University, Stanford, California.

I understand this book to be pioneering in the oeuvre of The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press (CUHKP), introducing colonial architecture and urban history in Asia as new strands in the publisher's long-standing work on Chinese art and architecture. I was keen to approach them, recognising CUHKP's unique mission to publish their works in English and Chinese and desiring the book to reach beyond the English-speaking world. And so, I must thank the Press for their unstinting dedication and care in realising this project, first here, for the English edition of the book. I thank Director Qi Gan and Acquisitions Editor Minlei Ye, both of whom, to my delight, immediately saw the work's worth and remained committed and enthusiastic throughout the lengthy peer review. At the other end of production, I am very grateful to Zoe Ross, my indexer based in Edinburgh, for her careful eye and for working extremely hard to finish the work within a tight timeframe. But, in particular, I must thank my editor, Brian Yu, for his sensitive and patient efforts as he accompanied me through the various stages of production. I must apologise to him and his colleagues for the numerous delays on my side as I juggled teaching commitments and moved country. But the result speaks for itself: a product surpassing expectations. This book has been generously supported by a publications grant from the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and a second grant from the Trinity College Dublin Association and Trust. I am both glad and relieved that this hitherto neglected yet strange and fascinating early history of colonial Hong Kong can now be read, pondered, debated, and imagined across the English- and Chinese-speaking worlds in all its rapid and raw drama, and hopefully make better sense of modern Hong Kong.

**Chris Cowell**

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