

Kowloon Walled City: An Accident of Hong Kong History

A Strange Fortress

In the February 1991 issue of the *National Geographic* there is an aerial photo of a strange architectural structure in Hong Kong. What at first glance seems like a giant post-apocalyptic fortress, on closer examination reveals itself to be a jumble of many small buildings crammed so close together that they seem to form a single mass. The relative spaciousness of the surrounding area makes the extreme density of the structure even more striking. The magazine describes the area as:

“A slum that the government has started to dismantle, the neighborhood is a honeycomb of damp alleys, airless hovels, sweated labor, scurrying rats, and people eking out a living from making wontons, rulers, puppets, plastic flowers, pancakes, and soles for shoes. Because the sovereignty of the Walled City was long disputed, Hong Kong’s health regulations and licensing rules were never applied here.”

Terrill, Ross, and Jodi Cobb. "Hong Kong—Countdown to 1997." *National Geographic Magazine*, vol. 179, no. 2, Feb. 1991, p. 118 (images 120-121). *National Geographic Virtual Library*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/LRGIMV617729508/NGMA?u=asiademo&sid=bookmark-NGMA&xid=144b66b8.



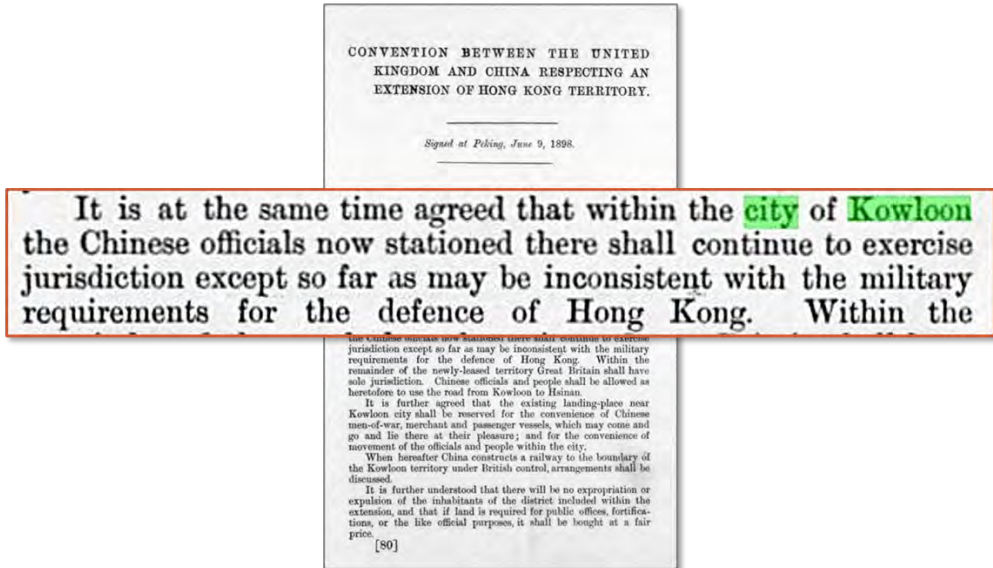
This was Kowloon Walled City, an infamous slum district that existed within colonial Hong Kong for nearly a century until it was torn down 30 years ago in 1994. Its haunting visual appearance, and the extreme density and anarchy of life within its compound continues to capture many people's imagination today, as evidenced most recently in the huge success of an action [movie](#) set in the now legendary location.

A Contractual Matter

To understand how this strange structure came into being, we need to turn the clock back to 1898. Kowloon Walled City was an unintended byproduct of the Second Peking Convention between Qing Dynasty China and Britain, which leased to the latter an expanse of land known as the "New Territories". This new land expanded the colonial area by more than six times, but it came with two important provisions that will later come to haunt the British. First, the New Territories were leased, not ceded, and the length of the lease was 99 years. Second, the "city of

Kowloon”, a small area containing a Chinese fortress surrounded by stone walls, was to remain under Chinese jurisdiction:

“It is at the same time agreed that within the city of Kowloon the Chinese officials now stationed there shall continue to exercise jurisdiction except so far as may be inconsistent with the military requirements for the defence of Hong Kong”



Various. Treaty. 1898. FO 17/1367, Image 130. The National Archives (Kew, United Kingdom). *China and the Modern World: Imperial China and the West, Part II: 1865–1905*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/HSKUTM300514301/CFER?u=asiademo&sid=bookmark-CFER&xid=85d2f06f&pg=130.

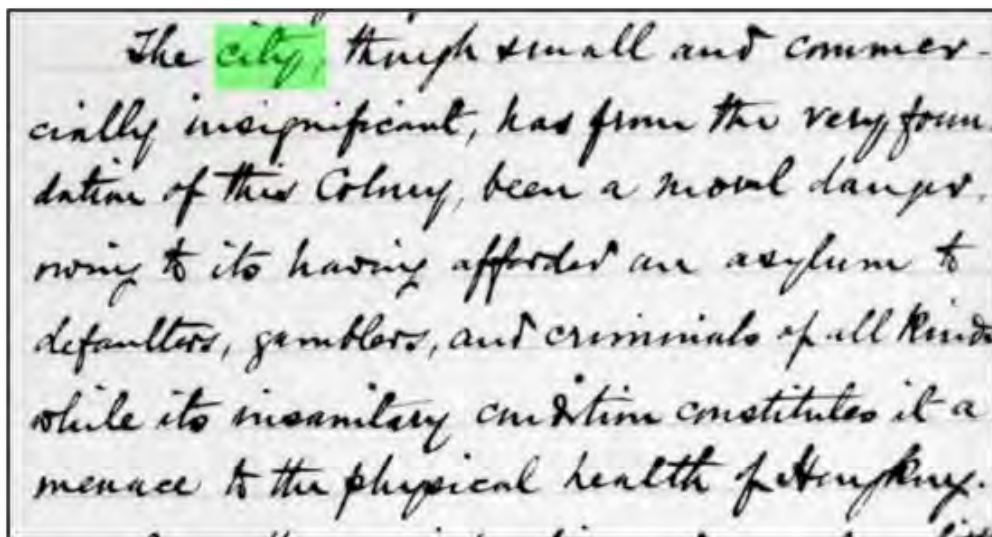
A map of the New Territories attached to the Convention text shows the word “Kowloon” in Chinese characters above a small box denoting the Walled City.



Ibid., image 129.

There were early misgivings among vested interests about the “city of Kowloon” provision. The Hong Kong Chamber of Commerce was particularly incensed, filing a petition with the British Prime Minister Lord Salisbury, which said:

“The city, though small and commercially insignificant, has from the very foundation of this Colony been a moral danger, owing to its having afforded an asylum to defaulters, gamblers, and criminals of all kinds, while its insanitary condition constitutes it a menace to the physical health of Hong Kong.”



Various. Volume 7. Diplomatic. August 10-31, 1898. FO 17/1362, image 378. The National Archives (Kew, United Kingdom). *China and the Modern World: Imperial China and the West, Part II: 1865–1905*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/HTJANC579673431/GDCS?u=asiademo&sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=d1698606&pg=378.

While there is perhaps a strain of racism in the above comment, their description of the city also proved to be eerily prophetic when we consider what the area became in later years.

Early Records of the Walled City

Brushing aside such concerns, the British officials began to busily survey the expansive new land they had just acquired. Sir James Stewart Lockhart, a high-ranking colonial official fluent in the local Cantonese language, produced a detailed report on the New Territories, including a whole section dedicated to Kowloon city which provides a rare glimpse into its early state:

“Kowloon is situated about a quarter of a mile from the sea shore. It is enclosed by a stone wall built in 1847, forming as nearly as possible a parallelogram, measuring 700 feet by 400 feet, and enclosing an area of 6 and 1/2 acres. . . . the total population of Kowloon city is 744; the garrison amounts to 544; the civil population to 200. The officials stationed within the city are, with the exception of one civil officer, a Deputy Magistrate, military officers, the head of whom is the Colonel Commanding.”

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Individuals, I-Z: 1898. 1898. CO 129/289, image 159. The National Archives (Kew, United Kingdom). *China and the Modern World: Hong Kong, Britain, and China, Part I: 1841-1951*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/TOTOLH475449333/CFER?u=asiademo&sid=bookmark-CFER&xid=b048d50d&pg=159.

The British Colonial Office papers also contain some interesting photographs which originally accompanied Lockhart's report:



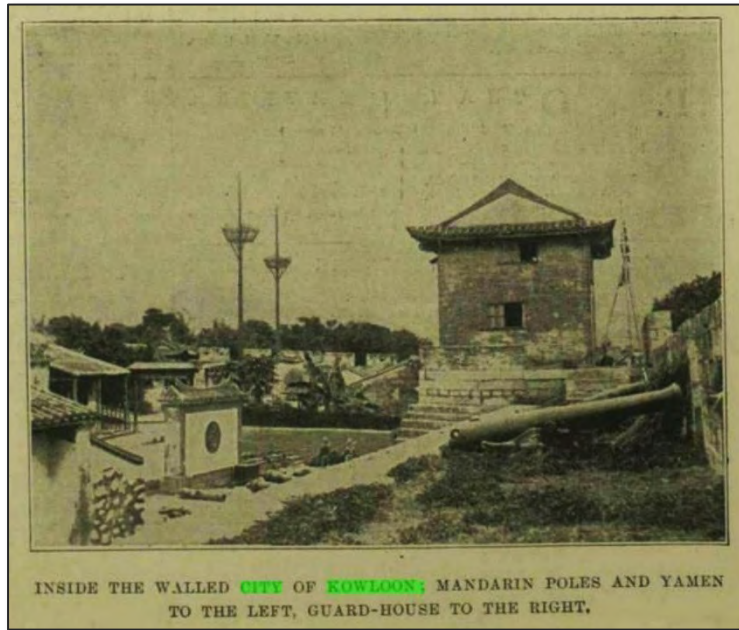
Hong Kong; Kowloon; Kowloon City. 1898. CO 1069/453/7, image 8. The National Archives (Kew, United Kingdom). *State Papers Online Colonial, Asia: Far East, Hong Kong and Wei-Hai-Wei*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/TYFMOJ278846584/SPOC?u=asiademo&sid=bookmark-SPOC&xid=411ff506.

A closer look at the above photograph reveals what seems to be the battlement structure of the stone walls that enclosed the Chinese fortress:



Ibid., detail.

Less than a year after the signing of the Convention, following a skirmish with the local Chinese, the British forcibly removed all Chinese personnel stationed there, and in December 1899 unilaterally proclaimed Kowloon City a part of the colony. A triumphant *Illustrated London News* article boasting of “our most recent acquisition in the Celestial empire” offers another rare photographic glimpse into the Walled City during this period.

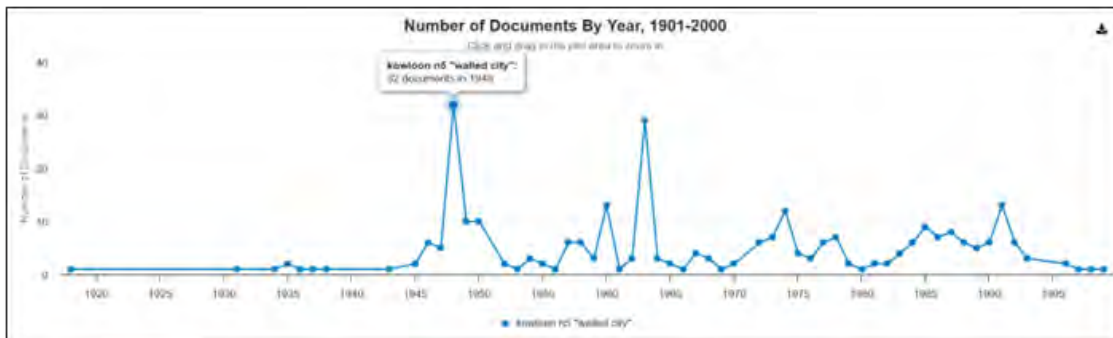


"Scenes in Kowloon City." *Illustrated London News*, 1 July 1899, p. 946. *The Illustrated London News Historical Archive*, 1842-2003, link.gale.com/apps/doc/HN3100472336/ILN?u=asiademo&sid=bookmark-ILN&xid=f576faf0.

However, the problem was that China never recognized Britain’s one-sided proclamation. In the following years, like the hopping undead *goeng-si* from Hong Kong horror movies, Kowloon Walled City will return again and again from its supposed grave to haunt the British.

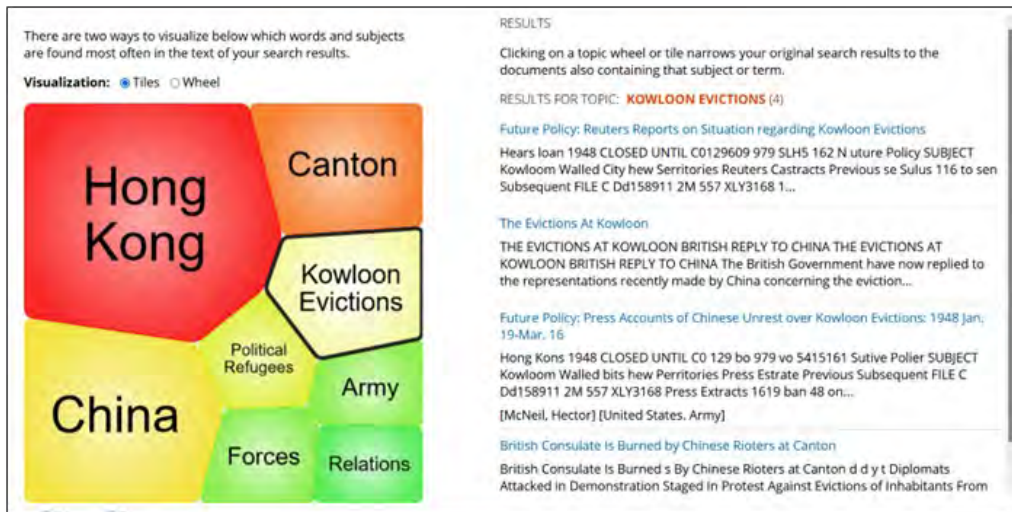
Twin Peaks in Term Frequency

A Term Frequency analysis on how frequently Kowloon Walled City appears in Gale Primary Source documents from the 20th-century shows two clear peaks in 1948 and 1963.



Term Frequency analysis of search term [kowloon n5 "walled city"] from 1901 to 2000. *Gale Primary Sources*.

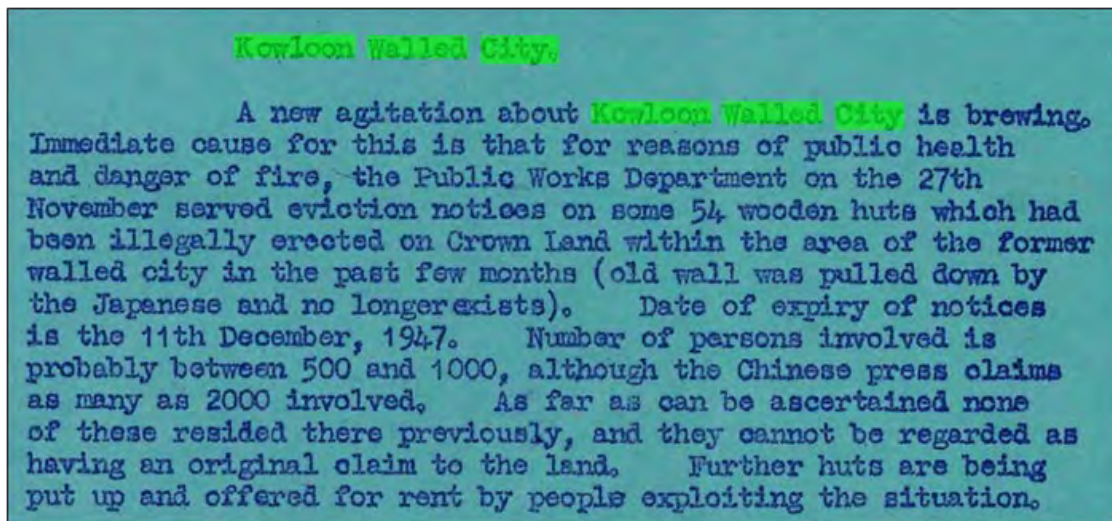
I decided to do a Term Cluster analysis on the 1948 results to find out what was happening in that year, and found, among words like "Force", "Army", the term "Kowloon evictions".



Topic Finder analysis of search term [kowloon n5 "walled city"] for the year 1948. *Gale Primary Sources*.

Apparently in this year, the Hong Kong government tried to forcefully evict many Chinese squatters who had come to the Walled City to escape the war-torn mainland:

“A new agitation about Kowloon Walled City is brewing. Immediate cause for this is that for reasons of public health and danger of fire, the Public Works Department on the 27th November [1947] served eviction notices on some 54 wooden huts which had been illegally erected on Crown Land within the area of the former walled city in the past few months (old wall was pulled down by the Japanese and no longer exists)”



Hong Kong. Future Policy: Kowloon Walled City. 1947. CO 537/2190, image 24. The National Archives (Kew, United Kingdom). *State Papers Online Colonial, Asia: Far East, Hong Kong and Wei-Hai-Wei*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/HGAMIP469796780/SPOC?u=asiadem&sid=bookmark-SPOC&xid=838eb7d5&pg=24.

China's Nationalist government seized upon the evictions as a propaganda opportunity to stoke up patriotic fire. By claiming the City as their own, they not only boosted their anti-colonialist credentials, but perhaps also managed to

momentarily distract attention from their disappointing performance in the ongoing civil war against the Communists:

“... the Chinese magistrate of the Pao On district of Kwangtung Province paid a visit to the "Walled City" on January 7 [1948] and addressed the crowd under the Chinese flag, which was interpreted in the Chinese newspaper *National Times* as a reaffirmation of Chinese sovereignty.”



"The Evictions At Kowloon." *Times*, 28 Jan. 1948, p. 3. *The Times Digital Archive*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS52643388/TTDA?u=asiademo&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=3a0b70f5.

With Hong Kong's post-war continuation as a British colony still on the fence, the British decided not to push the matter. Interestingly, they even floated a proposal to convert the area into a "Garden of Remembrance", "in memory of all members of the Allied forces who fell in the common struggle against Japan . . . to create a lasting bond between those who fought together in the common cause."

3. Proposal is that the site of the Kowloon walled city should be cleared and the area converted into a Garden of Remembrance in memory of all members of the Allied forces who fell in the common struggle against Japan. We should wish to consult with the Chinese as to some suitable form of memorial to be erected in the Garden. It is my hope that this solution will not only commend itself to the Chinese Government, but that it will create a lasting bond between those who fought together in the common cause.

Hong Kong. Kowloon Walled City. 1948. CO 537/3705, image 29. The National Archives (Kew, United Kingdom). *State Papers Online Colonial, Asia: Far East, Hong Kong and Wei-Hai-Wei*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/JHDCOP283015892/SPOC?u=asiademo&sid=bookmark-SPOC&xid=e4a4d570 (image 29).

However, this too was rejected when it became apparent that both sides could not agree which country should have jurisdiction over the “Garden of Remembrance”.

To the Chinese government, Kowloon Walled City had become a symbolic last stand against Western colonialism, and maintaining their sovereignty over it a matter of “face”, even though they no longer had any practical control over the place.

An Enclave in Communist China

The second peak in my Term Frequency analysis was in 1963. In this year, with the Communists now in power in the mainland, another similar crisis played out in the context of the Cold War. Once more, the British planned an eviction, this time as part of a large-scale resettlement plan throughout the colony. Again, the Chinese reacted fiercely, this time apparently goaded by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's taunts that China was powerless to resist the Capitalists in Hong Kong:

“What has made the Chinese Government suddenly decide to make an issue of the old Chinese city of Kowloon . . . ? . . . It must surely be some words spoken in Moscow a month or so ago that have been echoing in Chinese ears. "From these colonies", MR. KHRUSHCHEV said of Hongkong and Macao, "there rises a smell that is no better than the stench that rose from colonial Goa." And why had the Chinese not extinguished these smells, he asked; and, answering himself, said that it was because it did not suit them to do so; nor was it his business to prod them into action.”

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"A Stench and a Taunt." *Times*, 18 Jan. 1963, p. 9. *The Times Digital Archive*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS151610418/TTDA?u=asiademo&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=94cefa95.

The result was another deadlock. Again, the British caved in, and Kowloon Walled City remained an untouchable enclave.

An Enclave Within an Enclave

In a sense, the Walled City was an enclave *within an enclave*, as Hong Kong itself was a small capitalist territory within vast Red China. And while British Hong Kong thrived as its remarkable post-war economic boom took off, the Walled City absorbed many hapless mainland refugees escaping famine and political persecution. Like Dorian Gray's portrait, it morphed into a grotesque and twisted mirror image of Hong Kong itself, hoarding its vice and greed in a no man's land where colonial officials looked the other way while notorious triad gangs imposed order. A *Sunday Times Magazine* article entitled "The Forgotten City" reports on the squalid living conditions:

"The flats, unhampered by building regulations either British or Chinese, are finished without sanitation, without water, enjoying only that daylight which they can seize before new flats arise alongside. Bound by the limits of the old walls they can expand nowhere but inwards, slowly the thoroughfares are throttled with raw concrete as the quick, new walls arise, nearly touching, towards the disputed sun. . . .

"In the bakery where Ah Ping helps, the baker and his girl work into the night. They kneel together wrapping up rice-cakes and chicken-cakes, made with pork and sugar, by which tomorrow they may earn another day. He was a heroin-addict, but is reclaimed. She remains a heroin-addict; she is pregnant. Over the filthy oven, over the mangled bedclothes, the rice-cakes and chicken-cakes, love reaches still; and contrives to touch."



Norman, Philip. "The Forgotten City." *The Sunday Times Magazine*. *Sunday Times*, 9 June 1974, pp. 20[S]-21[S]+. *The Sunday Times Historical Archive*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/FP1800597666/STHA?u=asiademo&sid=bookmark-STHA&xid=4b1d57fb.

In some ways the Hong Kong people were complicit, as they benefitted from the cheap goods produced by the Walled City's unprotected labor:

"But the city's economic activity was not restricted to vice. Many legitimate businesses flourished, too, albeit in conditions of great squalor and exploitation. Refugees who did not dare leave the place for fear of being picked up by the colonial police lived there in a state of virtual slavery, penned up in cages when they were not sweating in the factories. The Walled City housed some of the colony's most prosperous textile factories, as well as plants turning out toys, sweets, metallic bits of this and that such as watch straps, and huge amounts of food. It was and remains to this day, for example, the principal source of that *sine qua non* of Hong Kong gourmandising, the fish ball."

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"City of Darkness." *Magazine*. *Independent*, 19 May 1990. *The Independent Historical Archive*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/FQ4201448697/INDA?u=asiademo&sid=bookmark-INDA&xid=feec599f.

By the 1970s, the Walled City had grown so large within its confines that its over-height buildings were posing a safety hazard to airplanes to and from the nearby Kai Tak Airport (itself notorious as the world's most terrifying

airport due to its proximity to the city center). The British conducted detailed surveys of the situation, produced a detailed report containing multiple annotated maps, charts, tables, a historical summary and a survey of current vested interests. Again, the conclusion was the same—no decisive action will be taken.



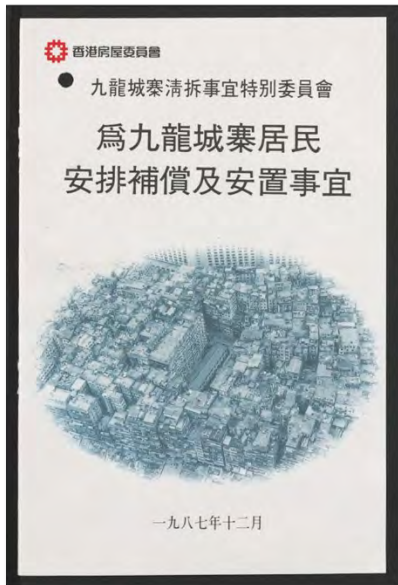
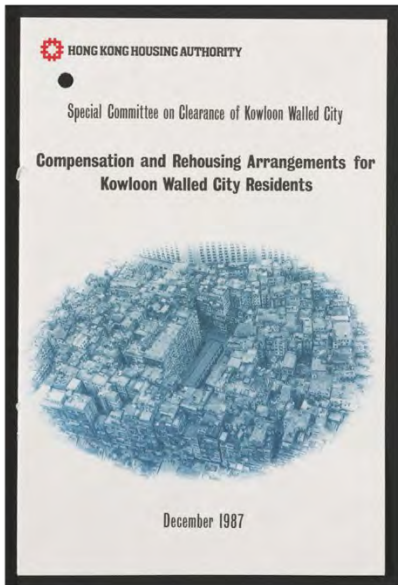
(Left) Photograph of the Walled City; (right) Plan indicating in color the over-height buildings that pose a safety hazard to planes in nearby Kai Tak Airport

Kowloon Walled City and aircraft safety in Hong Kong. January 1-December 31, 1977. FCO 40/790, images 10 and 109. The National Archives (Kew, United Kingdom). *China and the Modern World: Hong Kong, Britain, and China, Part II: 1965-1993*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/WTDLVZ200172361/CFER?u=asiademo&sid=bookmark-CFER&xid=80900abc&pg=10.

The End of the Walled City

Yet all of this was bound to come to an end. As explained earlier, the Second Peking Convention of 1898 that gave birth to the Walled City also contained a ticking time bomb—the New Territories, now practically inseparable from the permanent cessions Hong Kong island and Kowloon peninsula, was a 99-year lease. As the twentieth century drew nearer to a close, its expiry date of 30 June 1997 loomed into the British consciousness.

In the 1980's, formal negotiations began between the British and Chinese regarding Hong Kong's future. Following the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1985, the British proposed to clear and redevelop the Walled City area. This time the Chinese did not object—of course they didn't, as they will be getting it back in a short while anyway. Like any shrewd landlord, they would prefer to have their rightful property returned in pristine condition.



(Left) Compensation and Rehousing Arrangements for Kowloon Walled City Residents; (right) Chinese language version of the same.

Future of Hong Kong: Kowloon Walled City. January-December 31, 1987. FCO 40/2253, images 4 and 21. The National Archives (Kew, United Kingdom). *China and the Modern World: Hong Kong, Britain, and China, Part II: 1965–1993*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/WQQJMF753797963/CFER?u=asiademo&sid=bookmark-CFER&xid=74a50d11&pg=4.

A compensation scheme was drawn up for residents, and for those who continued to resist it, forced evictions began in 1991. Some of the residents fought till the very end. A contemporary article from the *Daily Telegraph* features a melancholy photograph of a middle-aged resident shouting protests from behind an iron window grill:



Sharma, Yojana. "Walled City dwellers defy approach of bulldozers." *Daily Telegraph*, 29 Nov. 1991, p. 15. *The Telegraph Historical Archive*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/IO0701909105/TGRH?u=asiademo&sid=bookmark-TGRH&xid=56006aa9.

Another article from the *Times* shows a little girl, among one of the last residents to be evicted, resisting the police.

Last squatters evicted in Kowloon

FROM JONATHAN BRAUDE
IN HONG KONG

THE Kowloon Walled City, Hong Kong's once thriving den of drug addicts, prostitutes and criminals, stands empty this morning, for the second time in its 44-year history.

Enclosed by a newly erected fence where the famous wall once stood, its derelict buildings await the demolition teams. Eventually the site will be turned into a park.

Scores of riot police yesterday moved in with shields and clubs to evict the last remaining squatters from a hastily-evicted encampment on the perimeter. They occupied a small Buddhist temple at the entrance and surrounded about 20 former Walled City residents who had made their homes on the government since being evicted from the interior six months ago. Ten people had to be dragged from their makeshift dwellings, many of them struggling, and one woman was arrested for assaulting a government worker.

They were the last to go. On Wednesday, in a nine-hour operation, six households were forcibly removed from their homes in the final section of the city to be cleared while others left peacefully, though with obvious reluctance.

Under the original lease, China refused to allow its garrison from the old Qing dynasty fort on the site and the seaward Walled City remained beyond British jurisdiction. But when the garrison was finally ejected a few years later, Britain chose not to develop or police the area for fear of offending Peking. For more than 80 years, the labyrinthine streets of the city were a no-man's land beyond the control of either government.

Soon squatters — escapees from Chinese or British jails and law — moved in. They received no services or rights, but lived in squalor until they were driven out by the Japanese. But after the surrender of the Japanese empire, the squatters came back in force.

In another milestone today Lord Wilson of Tisbury, the outgoing governor, flies out of the British colony for the last time this evening leaving his successor, Chris Patten, to take over the reins of power at one of the most difficult and sensitive periods in the territory's 150-year history. Lord Wilson will leave with full ceremonial honours but the wonder on his five years in power is still open.

Undoubtedly an efficient administrator, with a detailed grasp of every aspect of policy, he presided over boom years interrupted only briefly by the 1987 stock market crash and the consequences of the 1989 uprisings in China. But for



Strongarm tactics: a young girl grapples with a policeman trying to evict her yesterday from Hong Kong's Walled City. The site will be turned into a park.

many his tenure was a disaster, which allowed China to extend its power over Hong Kong and crush all hope of democratic reform in a colony Britain has ruled as a benevolent dictatorship.

His detractors say he failed to stand up for the development of parliamentary democracy, and his constant fear of pushing China too far soon taught the authorities in Peking that Hong Kong could be intimidated and

brought to heel. He was, in the words of a retired senior civil servant John Walker, "the best governor of Hong Kong China ever had".

He won friends in the colony with his pressure in London for full United Kingdom passports for all 3.2 million Hong Kong British citizens, his support for the environment and his ambitious proposal for a new airport, conceived as a move to boost morale in Hong Kong

after China's suppression in Tiananmen square. However the airport backfired seriously, leaving Peking with the power to veto the project by the simple expedient of scaring away international investors. China could then blackmail Britain into conceding valuable bargaining points and sending John Major on an official visit to Peking at a time when China had barely come in from the diplomatic cold.

Braude, Jonathan. "Last squatters evicted in Kowloon." *Times*, 3 July 1992, p. 13. *The Times Digital Archive*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/IF0503327275/TTDA?u=asiademo&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=f53be0ec.

The angry comments of Ma Chong-chung, chairman of the Kowloon Walled City Residents' Association, quoted in the *Telegraph* article, repeat the well-worn line of the territory belonging to the Chinese. But this time, changing geopolitics had drained all power from the once magic spell:

"We believe the Walled City belongs to the Chinese government. The colonial British government has no right to do anything on this piece of land. Most residents have lived here for decades, and we have not enjoyed even a single item of welfare from the Hong Kong government. And now they say it's their land. It is nonsense."

Sharma, Yojana. "Walled City dwellers defy approach of bulldozers." *Daily Telegraph*, 29 Nov. 1991, p. 15. *The Telegraph Historical Archive*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/IO0701909105/TGRH?u=asiademo&sid=bookmark-TGRH&xid=56006aa9.

Eventually, all former residents were forcefully removed, and demolitions began in 1993, ending in April 1994. The following year the site was converted into a [park](#), and visitors today may take a stroll in a scenic Chinese garden and view exhibits of the City's past. In a sense, Britain's unsuccessful proposal in 1948 of a "Garden of Remembrance" did come true. What is being memorized, however, is the livelihood of many nameless people who, although at the mercy of powers far greater than their own, made the most of their limited circumstances and boldly carried on with their lives—at Kowloon Walled City, a microcosm of Hong Kong itself.