

UC Berkeley

Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review

Title

Consistency in an Ever-Changing City: An Old Clock Tower in Contemporary Hong Kong

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/93b533tj>

Journal

Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review, 1(15)

Author

Chan, Catherine S.

Publication Date

2015-06-01

Supplemental Material

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/93b533tj#supplemental>

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

An Old Object in a Futuristic World: Re-Imagining Hong Kong through Its Clock Tower in the Eyes of Western Settlers and Local Citizens

Catherine S. Chan, Hong Kong Baptist University

In postcards, on government websites, and in the pages of travel guides, Hong Kong is commonly presented as a sophisticated, cosmopolitan city, marked by a skyline defined by skyscrapers and blinding lights. Millions of tourists visit the city each year to be awed by the highly modern spectacle of Asia's financial hub. Walking through the streets of Hong Kong, another story emerges: the city celebrates hybridity like no other, incorporating East and West as colonial buildings coexist with the aroma of dried mushrooms from a nearby shop and folk statues are seen on street corners dominated by modern commercial and administrative buildings. However, such multiplicity does not come without a price, especially in a city that struggles to house seven million residents while facing a land shortage and being on the receiving end of a continuous explosion of people from mainland China since the 1990s.

In this context, soaring land prices and pressure to make ends meet have long resulted in a neglect of the past. Historical buildings and familiar streetscapes come and go as quickly as trends sweep the city. The clock tower at Tsim Sha Tsui is one example of Hong Kong's many forgotten legacies: although it has stood at its current location for a century, few have found meaning in its presence. This essay hopes to bring forth the life and times of this architectural structure, highlighting both change and continuity in order to unearth the clock tower's history from under the city's countless transformations over the course of one century under British administration.

A New Hong Kong in European Hands (1862–1913)

Tracing the history of the clock tower takes us on an interesting journey that is far more complex than might be expected. Built in 1862, Hong Kong's first clock tower was undoubtedly European in appearance and essence, but it was not the intentional product of British colonial authority. Due to insufficient subscription, the clock tower was ultimately funded by Scottish watchmaker and businessman Douglas Lapraik, making it one of many European attempts to bring Victorian culture right into the heart of the Central District and further transforming an area whose streets were "precarious with rutted mud and littered with matsheds" into a European creation equipped with "proper Victorian thoroughfares, gaslit and paved" (Cavaliero 1998). For forty years, the clock tower served the European-dominated community as a town clock and fire bell, at a time when many people relied on its accurate electric mechanism to set their watches ("After the Clock Tower---?" 1913, 4).

Eventually, though, as the European population grew and motorcars were introduced to Hong Kong in the early 1900s, the presence of an aging clock tower in the middle of a bustling street became a traffic nuisance. A local newspaper made a striking comparison between Hong Kong's clock tower and another British clock tower: "The largest Town Clock in the world is in the tower of Glasgow University. . . . [T]he ugliest and most useless Town Clock in the world is in Pedder's St, Hong Kong" ("The Clock Tower" 1909, 7). A 1911 handbook for travelers describes the clock tower in this way:

Although at the present day absolutely useless owing to the high buildings since constructed around it, the Clock Tower remains as an obstruction to the traffic. During the past ten years the public have off and on agitated for its removal, but, as only to be expected in a Crown Colony, the community's wishes have been over-ridden by the views of the officials, who seem unable to see eye to eye with the people as to the obsolescence of a structure that has long since out-lived its usefulness. (*Picturesque Hong Kong* 1911, 65)

Significantly, this description reveals that the clock tower positioned the European community in two opposing blocs. Within the legislative council, politicians debated far and wide on the future of the clock tower and the possibilities of constructing a new symbol of colonial authority in another location that would benefit a larger portion of Hong Kong's population (Hong Kong Legislative Council 1905, 39). Eventually, it was decided that the new clock tower would be

rebuilt by the harbor next to the Kowloon-Canton Railway (KCR) terminal, where it would help travelers set their watches to Hong Kong's time zone. Finally, in 1913, the original clock tower was demolished and sold at public auction for HKD 662.50.

An Old Hong Kong in a Transitional Age (1919–1990)

In 1919, after the First World War, the new clock tower was constructed by Victoria Harbor and installed next to the former KCR terminus. It evolved to become a colonial icon symbolizing Hong Kong's past. The KCR terminus, built by the British administration and designed by A. B. Hubback, government architect of the Federated Malay States, was a significant marker of British Hong Kong, often identified as the Far East train terminus of the British Empire. Located next to the terminus and visible from the harbor, the new clock tower was, according to the online travel guide *Next Stop Hong Kong*, "one of the first things to see in Hong Kong (similar to the Statue of Liberty or Ellis Island in New York)." Furthermore, being in close proximity to other landmarks, such as the Star Ferry terminal and the Peninsula Hotel, the clock tower was visible not only to approaching ships, buses, and train commuters, but also to newcomers and travelers arriving in and departing from the busy colony each day. At this point the clock tower had officially become an intended symbol of European administration in an Eastern city.

In the face of postwar social development and periods of unrest in 1956, 1966, and 1967, the government proposed in 1967 that the KCR terminus be demolished to make way for a cultural complex that would hopefully create a better sense of belonging among Hong Kong locals. Facing another crisis, the clock tower was eventually spared as a concession to Chinese organizations, which had mounted a strong opposition. The Kowloon Residents' Association and Hong Kong Heritage Society wrote to the colonial secretary ("Jianshazui huochezhan" 1966, 1) and the governor of Hong Kong, respectively, to request the conservation of the KCR for the following reason:

The cultural value of the Kowloon-Canton Railway Station is found in its link with the past. The clock tells the time, of time past to remind us of the role of the station as a gateway to China at the beginning of the longest railway journey to Peking; [and] of time present to remind us that the everyday life of today has

perspective from history and better meaning when we develop a sense of identity with the place in which we live in. (“Strong Public Support” 1977, 6)

Together with the train terminus, the clock tower rose to importance in the late 1970s, and it was compared by the Heritage Society to such other landmarks as “Egypt’s pyramids, Peking’s Forbidden City, London’s Big Ben and St. Peter’s in Rome” (Coull 1978, 1). As a compromise, the clock tower was saved from demolition, and the government’s plan for a cultural complex, public entertainment, and land rezoning was proposed around the existing clock tower. Today, the clock tower is an essential feature of the East Promenade, accompanied by the Hong Kong Cultural Centre, the Hong Kong Space Museum, and the Hong Kong Museum of Art, all of which were built at the previous site of the KCR station terminus. In 1991, the clock tower was declared a historical monument under the protection of the local Antiquities and Monuments Office.

Consistency in Spatial Representations of the Clock Tower

Despite its many transformations, the historical clock tower structure nevertheless remained consistent in its spatial representation as a symbol of Western culture within an Asian city, owing to both of its locations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. From its construction in 1862 to its demolition in 1913, the clock tower stood in the Central District, which served as Hong Kong’s capital under the British administration and also as a cultural, economic, and political center dominated by Europeans. A 1911 handbook for travelers describes the Queen’s Road thus:

There is probably no part of Hong Kong in which the traveler will find more fertile field for exploration and sightseeing than Queen’s Road, the principal thoroughfare of the colony. It runs the whole length of the city for nearly five miles. The leading banks, European offices, stores and hotels, occupy the central part. Chinese shops of every description occupy the eastern and western portions. (*Picturesque Hong Kong* 1911, 65)

Built in an urban settlement zoned specifically for Westerners, the clock tower was surrounded by such other important colonial sites as the Government House, St. John’s Cathedral, and the Hong Kong Cricket Club, as well as business buildings run by Dent & Co. and Jardine, Matheson & Co. The clock tower’s location in the heart of Hong Kong’s most

urbanized settlement, surrounded by European communities, commercial activities, and government buildings, naturally made it a splendid exhibition of British imperial ambition.

Upon its relocation to the East Promenade at Tsim Sha Tsui, the Western and colonial nature of the clock tower continued to shine in the twentieth century, despite the changes in space and time. A cape at the tip of the Kowloon Peninsula facing Victoria Harbor, Tsim Sha Tsui was originally known as Tseen Sha-tow and was dominated by native Chinese villagers (Cheung 2003). After the cession of the Kowloon Peninsula to the British in 1860, the government carried out reclamation and urban rezoning initiatives in the area, reconstructing Tsim Sha Tsui as another European-restricted district during the late nineteenth century. By the time the clock tower was rebuilt in 1919, Tsim Sha Tsui had already evolved as an important representation of the city. Next to the clock tower and the KCR were hotels big and small, where travelers from China or London journeying via the Trans-Siberian Express would repose at the Peninsula Hotel, the YMCA, or inexpensive boarding houses. In this new setting, the clock tower retained its unique character as an example of colonial architecture and an icon for bewildered travelers entering a so-called Oriental city under European administration. Even after the KCR terminus was demolished in 1975, Tsim Sha Tsui continued to represent Hong Kong's hybridity as described in an article from *The Times*: "Just around the corner from some of the colony's ritziest hotels in Tsim Sha Tsui on Kowloon-side, a fisherman crouches in the gutter, cracking open oysters the size of frisbees with a metal spike bashed through a crude wooden handle" (Poole and Partington 1985). The clock tower, though by then a displaced piece from another era, was not only the "sole remnant of a rail terminus where it was once possible to purchase a sleeper ticket for the world's longest overland odyssey" (Wiltshire 2012, 201) but also a consistent depiction and reminder of British colonial days in a Chinese-ruled city.

In the context of Hong Kong's postcolonial identity reconstruction, the clock tower serves as a symbol of British Hong Kong, fixed as an icon of time and, simultaneously, a tourist attraction that is part of the Kowloon skyline and the historical representation of the city. In both the 2004 Athens Olympics and the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the monument was featured as a stopover during the torch relay, and today, thousands of tourists pass by the clock tower each day on their way to the Ocean Terminal shopping mall or the Avenue of Stars, or while strolling

along the East Promenade. In a CNN interview, local critic Bono Lee stressed the importance of historical heritage: “Hong Kong is still searching for its identity and old buildings are a means to express its identity” (Lau 2007). Hopefully, understanding the clock tower’s role in fulfilling the city’s imagination of the meeting of East and West across two different eras will help us reconceptualize old monuments as forms of discursive practice in the construction of collective identity and social memory (Hall 1999, 5). Moreover, this essay suggests that landmarks may be better appreciated not as fixed and complete, but as constantly subject to reinterpretation as public spaces where collective movements and social experiences are witnessed and created. This idea, applied to the clock tower, affirms the past’s vigorous presence in Hong Kong: the monument’s construction helped complete the imagination of a West in an Oriental world for European settlers in the nineteenth century, and in the twentieth century, its reemergence became a lifeline for the identity creation of Hong Kong locals as the city struggled to grasp on to bits and pieces of its colonial heyday. In this sense, the clock tower today continues to transform and be transformed by its surroundings in a city that more often than not ignores the importance of history and tangible heritage.

Catherine S. Chan received her MPhil in History at the Hong Kong Baptist University, where she is currently a lecturer at the College of International Education. Her research interests include urban and heritage studies, transnational representations of popular culture, and Hong Kong cultural history.

References

- “After the Clock Tower---?” 1913. *The Hong Kong Telegraph*, May 23, 4.
- Cavaliero, Eric. 1998. “Pedder Street Was Where It All Happened.” *The Standard*, August 13. Available at http://www.thestandard.com.hk/news_detail.asp?art_id=40111&con_type=1&sear_year=1998, accessed February 3, 2015.
- Cheung, Wai Kwok. 2003. “Zhong ying yapien zhanzheng de yinfadian—jian shazui cun kaoshi” [The origin of the Opium Wars: A study of the Tseen Sha-tow Village]. In *Ya Pian Zhanzheng de Zai Renshi* [Recomprehending the Opium Wars], edited by Kai Yin Lam and Cindy Yik Yi Chu, 99–113. Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press.
- “The Clock Tower.” 1909. *South China Morning Post*, July 22, 6.

- “Clock Tower Hong Kong.” *Next Stop Hong Kong*. Available at <http://www.nextstophongkong.com/attractions/top-attractions/clock-tower/>, accessed February 15, 2015.
- Coull, Gary. 1978. “Save Railway Station Plea to Queen.” *South China Morning Post*, February 9, 1.
- Hall, Stuart. 1999. “Un-settling ‘the Heritage,’ Re-imagining the Post-nation: Whose Heritage?” *Third Text* 13 (49): 3–13.
- Hong Kong Legislative Council. 1905. “13th October, 1905.” Hong Kong Legislative Council Official Record of Proceedings. October 13. Available at <http://www.legco.gov.hk/1905/h051013.pdf>, accessed February 5, 2015.
- “Jianshazui huochezhan yao shefa baocun: Da zhonglou xiangzheng jiulong naiyi yixiu jianzhu qiwei lishixing jilu chezhan ji weifeilu bingfang yishe youshua defang” [The Tsim Sha Tsui terminus must be preserved: The Clock Tower represents an outstanding and historical architecture in Kowloon; The terminus and Whitfield Barracks to become a leisure area]. 1966. *Overseas Chinese Daily News*, March 15, Section 2, 1.
- Lau, Shirley. 2007. “A New Debate Focuses on Hong Kong’s Identity.” *CNN.com International*, June 14. Available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/asiapcf/01/05/hk.preservation/>, accessed February 15, 2015.
- Picturesque Hong Kong: A Handbook for Travelers*. 1911. London: Tillotson.
- Poole, Shona Crawford, and Tony Partington. 1985. “Hong Kong: A Package Bursting at the Seams.” *The Times*, January 5, 12.
- “Strong Public Support to Keep KCR Buildings.” 1977. *South China Morning Post*, August 3, 6.
- Wiltshire, Trea. 2012. *A Stroll through Colonial Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: FormAsia Books.