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British Colonial Rule over Littoral Space and Watercraft in Hong Kong, 1841–1898

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Abstract

Proposing ‘the littoral’ as a subject of historical enquiry, this article centres on British rule over the waters, isles, and shores in nineteenth-century colonial Hong Kong. It argues that similar and connected to its rule over urban space, the British government endeavoured to regulate the colony’s watery fringes out of racial and other concerns. Commensurate with the growth of shipping, colonial rulers demarcated particular littoral spaces as mirrors or even extensions of land spaces. In the late nineteenth century, an emerging hierarchy of delineated navigational, anchorage, and quarantine spaces was discernible in Hong Kong’s littorals. Despite their efforts to structure littoral space, British colonial authorities failed to direct its actual usage. Not only did stakeholders compete and negotiate over using Victoria Harbour, but also, many Chinese watercraft countered official control by venturing across administrative boundaries. More broadly, the case of Hong Kong suggests perspectives for addressing the complexity of the littoral history of colonial port cities in Asia. First is the examination of connections between different areas within littoral space. Second is the inseparability between littoral space and urban space in terms of government policies. Third is the contrast between colonial designs and actual negotiations regarding the use of littoral space.

British rule in Hong Kong extended beyond the shore. During the First Opium War (1839–42), the British expedition to China conquered Hong Kong Island, in South China’s Pearl River Delta, and proclaimed control over its harbours in January 1841.¹ Two decades later, Kowloon Peninsula on the Chinese mainland, its adjoining waters, and Stonecutters Island became part of Hong Kong after the Second Opium War (1856–60). In 1879, a local ordinance defined the ‘Waters of the Colony’ as ‘the waters situate within a radius of one marine league [i.e. three nautical miles] from the shores’ except those ‘within the territorial limits or jurisdiction of the empire of China’.²

This article centres on British rule over the shores, waters, and isles in Hong Kong between 1841 and 1898, from the beginning of its colonial period to the eve of the lease of the New Territories that transformed the colony’s maritime landscape.

¹Canton Press, 13 Feb. 1841.

²‘No. 8 of 1879’, in A. J. Leach, ed., *The ordinances of the Legislative Council of the colony of Hongkong* (4 vols., Hong Kong, 1890–1), III, p. 1479.

It argues that similar and connected to its rule over urban space, the British government of nineteenth-century Hong Kong endeavoured to divide and regulate the colony's watery fringes. Such official efforts, however, did not result in the use of the shores, waters, and isles as planned. Not only did stakeholders compete and negotiate over using them, but also, many Chinese watercraft countered official control by venturing across the boundaries of British Hong Kong and Qing China.

More broadly, the case of Hong Kong illustrates the twofold history of the littorals of colonial port cities in Asia: how colonial authorities brought native littoral space under control and how other parties – native and non-native alike – negotiated and contested with them over its use. In 1841–98, British regulations replaced the Qing ones in the Hong Kong region including its isles and waters. Certainly, many official measures on Hong Kong's watery space were not limited to colonial possessions but were applicable to ports across the globe. These measures were colonial because they aligned with British interests in governing Hong Kong and stemmed from how the British authorities saw its people and ships, Chinese and non-Chinese alike. Nonetheless, British colonial control largely failed to limit Chinese maritime activities within the much larger waterworld of South China where state presence – either Qing or British – was often tenuous.

Echoing the colonial narrative, scholarship on the port development of Hong Kong has generally accepted the positive non-interventionist roles of the British government in the entrepôt's economic success.³ This obscures challenges to British rule over Hong Kong's watery fringes. Some scholarship on nineteenth-century Hong Kong has partially addressed these challenges. Christopher Munn has examined the problems of British colonial governance caused by the migratory Chinese 'boat-dwelling communities', and Carol Tsang has explained the colonial perceptions of the Chinese 'waterworld' as one beset with venereal disease, piracy, and other crimes.⁴ Both stress the British rulers' inability to penetrate into the Chinese 'floating world'. While true, this emphasis veils the persistence of official efforts to keep the colony's waters in order from 1841 – particularly after the cession of Kowloon and the beginning of British control over both shores of Victoria Harbour in 1860.

Filling this lacuna, this article proposes 'the littoral' as a subject of historical enquiry of Hong Kong. Use of this concept shifts focus on its colonial relationship from the sedentary settlement to the watercraft. Moreover, it helps connect British Hong Kong with other colonial port cities where water plays a defining function. Michael Pearson defines 'the littoral' as 'the coastal sea zone, the beach, and some indeterminate frontier on land' distinct yet inseparable from the inland regions and

³Pui-yin Ho, *Challenges for an evolving city: 160 years of port and land development in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong, 2004); Chi-pang Lau, 'History of the Hong Kong maritime industry before World War II', in Okan Duru, ed., *Maritime business and economics: Asian perspectives* (London, 2018), pp. 203–17. See also Tak-Wing Ngo, 'Industrial history and the artifice of laissez-faire colonialism', in Tak-Wing Ngo, ed., *Hong Kong's history: state and society under colonial rule* (London, 1999), pp. 119–40.

⁴Christopher Munn, *Anglo-China: Chinese people and British rule in Hong Kong, 1841–1880* (Richmond, 2001); Carol C. L. Tsang, 'Hong Kong's floating world: disease and crime at the edge of empire', in Robert Peckham, ed., *Disease and crime: a history of social pathologies and the new politics of health* (New York, NY, 2013), pp. 21–39.

deep water.⁵ Generally speaking, the evolving littoral space of Hong Kong in 1841–98 comprises Victoria Harbour and its isles; the harbour's edges along the colonial city of Victoria and (from 1861) Kowloon Peninsula dotted with wharves, piers, and beaches; and the shores, waters, and islets beyond Victoria Harbour under colonial jurisdiction. In this littoral space, Victoria Harbour was the pivot of the colony's maritime connections with the world and thus a locus of British control.

In colonial Hong Kong, British rule over urban space and British rule over littoral space were comparable and connected. Scholars have illustrated how British authorities planned and divided the colony's land space before the Second World War with residential segregation, brothel regulations, and other aspects of urban planning.⁶ As in other colonial cities in Asia, race played important roles in Hong Kong's urban spatial policies.⁷ Other factors included geographical settings; class and economic considerations; health and disease; architectural style and social customs; technological developments; and the military. Some of these factors justified, disguised, and even reinforced racial segregation, hierarchy, and discrimination.

Similar to the case of the urban space, the factors listed above propelled colonial authorities in Hong Kong to delimit Victoria Harbour and other littoral fringes for the use of different watercraft. Commensurate with the growth of shipping, the British demarcation of Victoria Harbour by beacons, buoys, and moorings – offshore signs of government control – became increasingly elaborate. This transformed particular harbour spaces into mirrors or even extensions of land spaces. Moreover, by the late nineteenth century, an emerging hierarchy of the littoral spaces was discernible. This spatial differentiation reflects bifurcated official attitudes towards the watery fringes of Hong Kong. While the government integrated 'prime' harbour spaces with their adjacent developed land areas, it segregated peripheral isles and waters that served as isolated spaces for 'unwanted' elements.

Despite their efforts to regulate and structure the littoral space, British colonial authorities failed to direct its actual usage in nineteenth-century Hong Kong. As shown by previous scholars, Hong Kong was one of the many colonial cities where local practices often compromised urban planning.⁸ Similarly, the littoral space of

⁵Michael N. Pearson, 'Littoral society: the concept and the problems', *Journal of World History*, 17 (2006), pp. 353–73, at p. 354.

⁶John M. Carroll, *Edge of empires: Chinese elites and British colonials in Hong Kong* (Cambridge, MA, 2005), pp. 90–7; John M. Carroll, 'The Peak: residential segregation in colonial Hong Kong', in Bryna Goodman and David S. G. Goodman, eds., *Twentieth-century colonialism and China: localities, the everyday, and the world* (Abingdon, 2012), pp. 81–91; Philip Howell, 'Race, space and the regulation of prostitution in colonial Hong Kong', *Urban History*, 31 (2004), pp. 229–48; Cecilia L. Chu, *Building colonial Hong Kong: speculative development and segregation in the city* (Abingdon, 2022); Christopher Cowell, *Form follows fever: malaria and the construction of Hong Kong, 1841–1849* (Hong Kong, 2024).

⁷Scholarship on colonial urbanism in Asia has examined spatial differentiation as an ideal and practice. See Anthony D. King, *Colonial urban development: culture, social power and environment* (London, 1976); Robert Home, *Of planting and planning: the making of British colonial cities* (London, 1997); Thomas R. Metcalf, 'Colonial cities', in Peter Clark, ed., *The Oxford handbook of cities in world history* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 753–69; Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *Contesting space: power relations and the urban built environment in colonial Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur, 1996).

⁸Carroll, *Edge of empires*, pp. 27–8; Chu, *Building colonial Hong Kong*.

British Hong Kong was 'an arena of social conflict'.⁹ Defying administrative demarcation of the harbour space, Chinese and non-Chinese craft and persons frequently competed over using the busy Victoria Harbour and its isles. Also, colonial authorities lacked sufficient power to supervise and enumerate the Chinese watercraft required to remain in designated anchorage areas. More importantly, the transborder ventures of many Chinese watercraft such as piracy and smuggling transcended administrative boundaries. In terms of the connectedness between the littoral and the open sea within the fluid maritime world of South China, the British Hong Kong government encountered immense challenges when attempting to incorporate the littoral space into the colonial realm.

In a wider historical perspective, official control over littoral space comparable to that of British Hong Kong took place in the treaty ports of modern China such as Shanghai and in other colonial port cities in Asia such as Singapore, Bombay, and Calcutta. Existing discussions on the topic focus on reclamation and harbour facilities as part of the port cities' prosperity and 'modernization'.¹⁰ While the littoral varies in local historical contexts, the case of Hong Kong proposes several angles for fully addressing the complexity of the littoral history of colonial port cities in Asia. The first entails examining littoral space as a whole and explaining connections between different areas within the space. The second is recognizing the inseparability between littoral space and urban space in terms of government policies. The third concerns the contrast between colonial plans and actual negotiations regarding the use of littoral space. Last but not least, the case of Hong Kong illustrates the dynamic historical process of how urban development, security issues, and other ruling concerns propelled authorities to differentiate littoral space from but gradually incorporate it into colonial urban space in Asia.¹¹

This article analyses various official and unofficial sources concerning both British rule over littoral space and its actual use in Hong Kong. It draws extensively on Colonial Office records (CO 129 files) in the UK's National Archives, *The Hongkong Government Gazette*, and collections of local ordinances.¹² Many historical maps and

⁹I borrow the term from Philip E. Steinburg. See Philip E. Steinburg, *The social construction of the ocean* (Cambridge, 2001), p. 6.

¹⁰On foreign control over China's treaty ports, see Hans van de Ven, *Breaking with the past: the Maritime Customs Service and the global origins of modernity in China* (New York, NY, 2013), pp. 82–92; Catherine Ladds, *Empire careers: working for the Chinese Customs Service, 1854–1949* (Manchester, 2013), pp. 83–92; Robert Bickers, 'Infrastructural globalization: lighting the China coast, 1860s–1930s', *Historical Journal*, 56 (2013), pp. 431–58; Chen Shiqi, *Zhongguo jindai haiguan shi wenti chutan* (Preliminary examination of issues about the history of customs in modern China) (Beijing, 1987), pp. 104–8, 130–45. On British rule over the ports of Singapore, Bombay, and Calcutta, see Chor Boon Goh, *Technology and entrepôt colonialism in Singapore, 1819–1940* (Singapore, 2013), pp. 68–83; Laure Lau, 'Shipping and port development, 1860s–1940s', in Aileen Lau and Laure Lau, eds., *Maritime heritage of Singapore* (Singapore, 2005), pp. 136–59; M. V. Kamath, *Tides of time: history of Mumbai port* (Mumbai, 2000); Megan Maruschke, *Portals of globalization: repositioning Mumbai's ports and zones, 1833–2014* (Oldenbourg, 2019); Aniruddha Bose, *Class conflict and modernization in India: the Raj and the Calcutta waterfront (1860–1910)* (London, 2018).

¹¹Debjani Bhattacharyya has shown how the British colonial regime constructed littoral space in the lower Bengal Delta and transformed it into part of Calcutta's urban space. See Debjani Bhattacharyya, *Empire and ecology in the Bengal Delta: the making of Calcutta* (Cambridge, 2018).

¹²Databases useful for this study include Gale's 'China and the modern world', which comprises digitized CO 129 files; 'Hong Kong government reports online' developed by the University of Hong Kong Libraries (HKUL); and HKUL's 'Historical laws of Hong Kong online'.

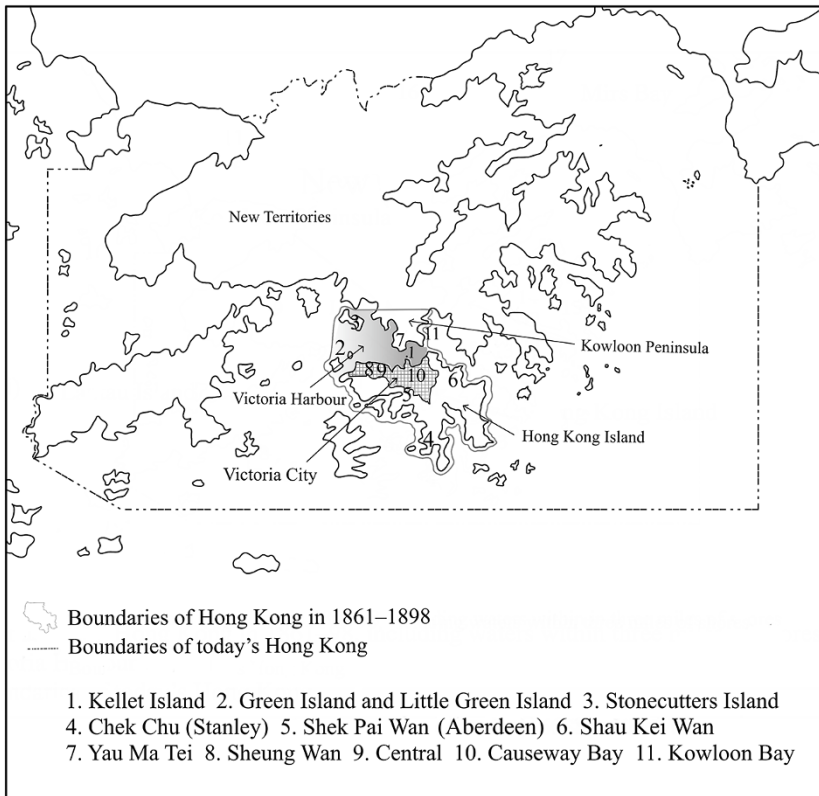


Figure 1. Map of Hong Kong.

photographs of Hong Kong visualize the official demarcation and actual status of the harbour. To understand how colonial regulations operated and how watercraft and their owners (particularly Chinese ones) resisted against or negotiated with British rule, this article consults criminal records, newspapers published in Hong Kong, and early petitions from the Chinese.¹³ Figure 1 below shows the spheres of Hong Kong, Victoria Harbour, Victoria City, and the major places discussed in the article.

I

The British transformed nineteenth-century Hong Kong from a cluster of fishing and farming villages previously under Qing rule into an entrepôt. In June 1841, Hong Kong became a free port where trading ships of all nationalities were exempt from import or export charges.¹⁴ Despite intervals of recession and social unrest, the number and tonnage of merchant ships arriving in and leaving Hong Kong

¹³FO 233 series of the UK's National Archives include Chinese-language decrees and petitions in early colonial Hong Kong. Wing Kin Puk has edited and published them in three articles in volumes 63–5 of *Tianye yu wenxian* (Field and documents) in 2011.

¹⁴Canton Press, 12 June 1841.

continued to increase during the second half of the nineteenth century. This commercial growth included both Western merchantmen and Chinese 'junks' (more on the term below).¹⁵ Visiting Hong Kong in 1875, E. Warren Clark, an American educator, recalled that 'the number of [trading] vessels daily arriving and departing from this port is surprising'.¹⁶ Most of them anchored in Victoria Harbour, which lay off Victoria City between Hong Kong Island and Kowloon Peninsula. In 1891, nearly 40,000 merchant vessels reportedly used the harbour.¹⁷ 'By the end of the century Victoria Harbour registered one of the largest annual turnovers in tonnage of any port in the world.'¹⁸

Shipping in the busy Victoria Harbour was not limited to trading vessels. Like other colonial port cities in Asia, Hong Kong was a transit point, destination, or home of international, regional, and local watercraft of different nationalities and types. Hong Kong was an Asia-Pacific hub of oceanic transport and Chinese emigration where many passengers embarked.¹⁹ Apart from merchant vessels, regional watercraft carrying provisions, local cargo boats, and Chinese fishing craft frequented the harbour and other waters in Hong Kong. Militarily, many British and foreign ships of war visited Hong Kong, from 1844 onwards the headquarters of the Royal Navy's China Station.²⁰

Technologically, the global popularization of steam navigation transformed the appearance of Victoria Harbour in the second half of the nineteenth century. According to a government report dated 1888,

Twenty-seven years ago steamers were the exception, and sailing ships the rule...The average tonnage of a steamer then was very little over one thousand tons, whereas now it is no uncommon thing to see three or four steam-ships in Port at one time each measuring from 3 to 4000 tons and upwards.²¹

One major factor for the rise of steam shipping was the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. According to a local administrative report of 1871, the opening 'has already had a great effect in increasing the numbers of Steamers'.²² Many historical photographs show a mixture of steamers and sailing craft in various sizes occupying the bustling harbour.²³

¹⁵G. B. Endacott, *An Eastern entrepôt: a collection of documents illustrating the history of Hong Kong* (London, 1964), pp. ix–xvi, 132–3; David R. Meyer, *Hong Kong as a global metropolis* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 115.

¹⁶E. Warren Clark, *From Hong-Kong to the Himalayas* (New York, NY, 1880), p. 11.

¹⁷*Hongkong Government Gazette* (HKGG), 22 Aug. 1891, p. 758.

¹⁸Munn, *Anglo-China*, p. 49.

¹⁹Elizabeth Sinn, *Pacific crossing: California gold, Chinese migration, and the making of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong, 2013).

²⁰Gerald S. Graham, *The China Station: war and diplomacy, 1830–1860* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 254–75; Chi Man Kwong and Yiu Lun Tsoi, *Eastern fortress: a military history of Hong Kong, 1840–1970* (Hong Kong, 2015), pp. 12–14.

²¹*Supplement to the Hongkong Government Gazette* (SHKGG), 21 July 1888, p. 774.

²²Report by Thomsett, 24 Mar. 1871, London, The National Archives (TNA), CO 129/150, p. 51a.

²³E.g. Joseph S. P. Ting et al., eds., *City of Victoria: a selection of the museum's historical photographs* (Hong Kong, 1999), pp. 14, 38, 59, 79, 88.

Increasing shipping brought not only profits but also threats to Hong Kong. Colonial authorities were anxious about Chinese criminal elements coming by the open sea.²⁴ Economically, piracy, smuggling, and other clandestine activities on water could jeopardize trade and other sectors. Socially, there were recurrent worries of the spread of epidemics from different parts of the world to the colony via vessels entering Victoria Harbour. In the late nineteenth century, a governor of Hong Kong, the highest authority in the colony, wrote: 'Cholera, small-pox, and other infections and contagious diseases are frequently rife in China, India, Japan, Manila, Saigon, Singapore, and in the other neighbouring ports and countries, between which and Hongkong there is constant communication.'²⁵ Epidemic cases did occur on merchant steamers, during, for example, the bubonic plague of the 1890s.²⁶ Colonial attitudes towards the harbour were mixed with hopes, worries, and fears.

Given Victoria Harbour's importance and concomitant threats, how to bring its myriad shipping under control remained a major governing task for colonial rulers in Hong Kong. British regulations on Victoria Harbour are traceable to April 1841, when Victoria City started to emerge. Administratively, the harbour master's office oversaw the harbour affairs. Its head was the harbour master, who was also the marine magistrate responsible for trying offenders who breached harbour regulations.²⁷ Following the cession of Kowloon in 1861, more laws were proclaimed to regulate the harbour. In 1862, for example, the legislature passed the 'ordinance for the regulation and control of the Harbour of Victoria, Hongkong'.²⁸ An array of executive orders supplemented the harbour-related legislation.

Taken as a whole, the myriad harbour regulations demonstrate British efforts to create an orderly environment in Victoria Harbour. They imposed progressively detailed requirements on watercraft throughout the period of their arrival in and departure from the harbour. These entailed a 'littoral version' of the ordinances that regulated the urban population.²⁹ Merchantmen of all nationalities had to apply for registers, clearances, licences, or special permits. Specific stipulations described what flag and numbers had to be hoisted, what lights and signals had to be used, and how ships had to be anchored on different occasions. Regulations restricted the nocturnal usage of the harbour such as prohibiting gong beating, fireworks, and unauthorized movements after sunset.³⁰ They also constrained activities on board ships such as gunpowder storage and seamen's behaviour.³¹

²⁴Munn, *Anglo-China*, p. 340.

²⁵Bowen to Derby, 19 July 1883, TNA, CO 129/210, p. 381b.

²⁶Ka-che Yip, 'Segregation, isolation, and quarantine: protecting Hong Kong from disease in the pre-war period', *Journal of Comparative Asian Development*, 11 (2012), pp. 93–116; SHKGG, 14 Aug. 1897, p. 20.

²⁷'No. 1 of 1862', in Leach, ed., *Ordinances*, I, pp. 494–8.

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹Examples of these ordinances include the order and cleanliness ordinance of 1866. See 'No. 8 of 1866', in Leach, ed., *Ordinances*, II, pp. 913–16.

³⁰No. 20, 1845, in Bu Yongjian (Puk Wing Kin), ed., 'Xianggang zaoqi wenshu: Yingguo guojia dang'an guan cang F.O.233/185 hao dang'an shiwen (shang)' (Hong Kong's early documents: FO 233/185 files at the UK's National Archives [I]), *Tianye yu wenxian*, 63 (2011), p. 34; 'Regulations for the shipping and boats in the port of Victoria', 8 Jan. 1845, TNA, CO 129/11, p. 84b; HKGG, 14 Feb. 1857, p. 1, 15 June 1867, p. 210, 1 Aug. 1891, pp. 704–5.

³¹HKGG, 7 Sept. 1872, pp. 390–1; 'No. 6 of 1852', in Leach, ed., *Ordinances*, I, pp. 272–6.

Apart from the harbour regulations, many local laws regulated Victoria Harbour and its shipping. For example, the anti-piracy legislation permitted searching and disarming Chinese vessels.³² The rules on ships with Chinese emigrants aboard served to confine the ‘coolie’ trade criticized as inhumane.³³ Moreover, many local laws were ‘amphibious’. For example, the 1867 contagious disease ordinance regulated both brothel houses and prostitution found on any craft in the colonial waters.³⁴

British control over Victoria Harbour extended to its isles. Between Hong Kong Island and Kowloon Peninsula, Kellet Island had been the site of a battery since 1841. After the 1861 cession of Kowloon, Kellet Island became a military magazine. Other isles within the harbour included Green Island and the adjoining Little Green Island off the north-western tip of Hong Kong Island. In 1875, colonial authorities built a lighthouse on Green Island.³⁵ At the harbour’s north-western corner, Stonecutters Island enjoyed a secluded position. As discussed below, this proved useful for the colony’s administrative, medical, and military purposes.³⁶

Colonial authorities never lost sight of the shores, waters, and isles beyond Victoria Harbour. Many harbour regulations concerned the entire littoral fringes of the colony. Aided by naval gunboats, flotillas of the harbour master’s office and water police patrolled the shores – similar to policing on land.³⁷ While the harbour master’s office was in Victoria City facing Victoria Harbour, its branches called ‘harbour master’s stations’ presided over Shau Kei Wan east of the city, and Chek Chu (Stanley) and Shek Pai Wan (Aberdeen) in southern Hong Kong Island.³⁸ Police stations also guarded Chek Chu and Shek Pai Wan. Moreover, the harbour master managed lighthouses around Hong Kong. As ‘technologies of colonial governance’ (Eric Tagliacozzo’s term), these lighthouses guided vessels entering the waters of Hong Kong.³⁹ By the late nineteenth century, the British colonial government had established control over the isles and waters surrounding Hong Kong Island and Kowloon Peninsula.

II

Before 1841, Qing authorities applied the relational concepts of ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ to conceptualize China’s maritime regions and organize administrative responsibilities accordingly. Under this binary framework, some parts of the Hong Kong region (e.g. the waters off Kowloon) lay within the ‘inner waters’ (*neiyang*) and others (e.g. Shek Pai Wan) within the ‘outer waters’ (*waiyang*). Generally speaking, inner-water

³²‘No. 3 of 1847’, in Leach, ed., *Ordinances*, I, pp. 221–2; HKGG, 19 Sept. 1868, p. 342, 18 Nov. 1876, pp. 497–8.

³³Sinn, *Pacific crossing*, pp. 70–80.

³⁴‘No. 10 of 1867’, in Leach, ed., *Ordinances*, II, p. 960.

³⁵HKGG, 18 Mar. 1876, p. 125.

³⁶On the eve of British rule, Stonecutters Island was the site of ‘a few Squatters engaged in quarrying’. See Robinson to Newcastle, 25 June 1862, TNA, CO 129/86, p. 494a.

³⁷HKGG, 20 Mar. 1869, p. 131; Ian Ward, *Sui geng: the Hong Kong marine police, 1841–1950* (Hong Kong, 1991), pp. 20–1, 33–4.

³⁸‘No. 6 of 1866’, in Leach, ed., *Ordinances*, I, p. 901; HKGG, 22 Dec. 1866, p. 492, 31 Mar. 1888, p. 329; ‘Plan of the city of Victoria’, 1899, TNA, CO 129/290, p. 285.

³⁹Eric Tagliacozzo, *In Asian waters: oceanic worlds from Yemen to Yokohama* (Princeton, NJ, 2022), pp. 38–43.

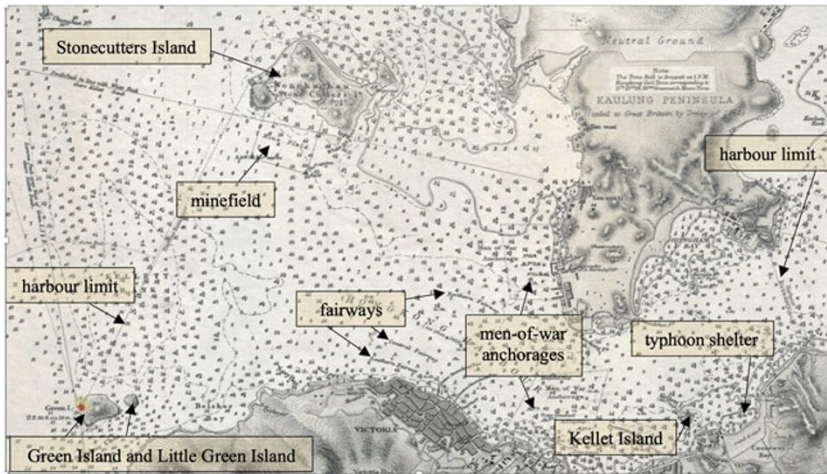


Figure 2. Victoria Harbour, 1889.

Source: '1890 Belcher Nautical Map of Hong Kong Island' (last access: 8 June 2025), Geographicus: rare antique maps, www.geographicus.com/P/AntiqueMap/hongkong-belcher-1889.

regions were subject to a tighter administrative and military grip of the Qing than outer-water regions. In 1841, however, all the waters surrounding British Hong Kong became 'foreign sea space' (to borrow Ronald Po's term) upon which Qing authorities no longer exerted any kind of effective control.⁴⁰ As shown below, British regulations classified and divided the Hong Kong waters not in terms of administrative and military responsibilities but in terms of functions.

British colonial rulers imposed on Hong Kong a different set of concepts and measures to divide and rule its littoral space and watercraft. First, in 1845, they delineated Victoria Harbour. In 1861, the incorporation of Kowloon Peninsula into the colony propelled the government to redefine the harbour sphere. Compared with the 1845 limits, the 1862 revision (see Figure 2) included Green Island but excluded the waters north of the boundary of Kowloon.⁴¹ This demonstrates that administrative concerns rather than natural features defined the harbour space.

Within the clearly defined Victoria Harbour, colonial authorities designated spaces for the use of different ships. Technological development, racial factors, naval demands, and public health concerns impacted the demarcation. First, they carved out navigational space for steamers when steam navigation became increasingly common. In November 1859, the government established a steamer's fairway through the harbour. An 1863 map labels this fairway as a 'channel for river

⁴⁰Guangdong tongzhi (Guangdong gazetteer) (1822; Shanghai, 1995), 175: 697–8; Ronald C. Po, *The blue frontier: maritime vision and power in the Qing Empire* (Cambridge, 2018), pp. 44–88; Gary Chi-hung Luk, 'Accommodating foreigners in a littoral borderland: the lower Pearl River Delta during the Opium War', *Modern China*, 48 (2022), pp. 197–228, at pp. 199–203.

⁴¹'Regulations for the shipping and boats in the port of Victoria', 8 Jan. 1845, TNA, CO 129/11, p. 84b; 'No. 1 of 1862', p. 497; Robinson to Newcastle, 29 Jan. 1862, TNA, CO 129/85, pp. 81a–b.

steamers'.⁴² Numbered and painted buoys demarcated the fairway. For example, the 'inner line of Five Buoys is at an average distance of 200 yards from the shore, and 450 yards apart, painted Red, and marked with the odd numbers from 1 to 9'.⁴³ Similar to public highways for horses and vehicles in Victoria City, no vessels could block the steamers' fairway in Victoria Harbour. Aligning with the further growth of the harbour's steam navigation, in 1886 colonial authorities divided the fairway into the northern, central, and southern fairways (Figure 2).⁴⁴

Colonial authorities also organized the harbour space by assigning anchorage points for ships. The harbour master held the power of requiring merchant vessels to take up any indicated berth. To fix anchorage points, the authorities constructed piers and wharves and placed moorings, buoys, and beacons.⁴⁵ They assigned specific spots for boats carrying night soil and dust bins, naval hospital ships, and a hulk used by the water police.⁴⁶

After the Second Opium War, with increasing shipping, colonial rulers invented collective anchorage space for different categories of vessels. One of them was the Chinese watercraft classified as 'junks'. When assigning anchorage space for these 'junks', the authorities took racial concerns into consideration.

Before explaining these racial concerns, it is necessary to understand how British authorities in Hong Kong used 'junks' as a colonial category for Chinese watercraft. Generally speaking, in English-language records, the term could mean ships and boats of construction styles originating in China, Japan, or Southeast Asia. Like other nautical terms such as 'sampans', the meaning of 'junks' varied in local contexts.⁴⁷ In nineteenth-century Hong Kong, in British colonial records, the term occasionally included non-Chinese Asian vessels such as 'Siamese junks' and 'Penang vessels'.⁴⁸ In most records, however, the modified term – 'mandarin junks', 'merchant junks', and 'piratical junks', for example – denoted an array of Chinese official and unofficial watercraft from ten-feet-long oared boats to seagoing sailing vessels. Hans Konrad Van Tilburg has insightfully argued that 'vessels are...firmly bound to their culture of origin by use, by design, and by...nationality'.⁴⁹ For many colonial officials, junks were Chinese watercraft with 'indigenous' nautical structures subject to distinct registration vis-à-vis vessels of Western construct.

Although colonial officials in Hong Kong lacked a coherent understanding of the term 'junks', they certainly saw junks along racial lines. The government gazette

⁴²'The 8 inch map of Victoria and Kowloon (reduced)', 1863, in Hal Empson, ed., *Mapping Hong Kong: a historical atlas* (Hong Kong, 1992), pp. 132–3.

⁴³HKGG, 26 Nov. 1859, p. 82.

⁴⁴'No. 20 of 1886', in Leach, ed., *Ordinances*, III, pp. 2019–20; HKGG, 12 June 1886, p. 527, 24 Aug. 1895, p. 981, 31 Aug. 1895, p. 994.

⁴⁵Morrison's order, 30 July 1841, TNA, FO 17/46, pp. 373a–b; HKGG, 18 Nov. 1871, p. 500, 1 Aug. 1891, pp. 680–1, 18 Aug. 1894, p. 688; 'No. 19 of 1884', in Leach, ed., *Ordinances*, III, p. 1821; 'No. 1 of 1862', p. 495.

⁴⁶HKGG, 10 Oct. 1874, p. 562, 25 Oct. 1884, p. 827, 4 Feb. 1860, p. 20, 14 Apr. 1869, p. 210; Ward, *Sui geng*, pp. 24–6.

⁴⁷Hans Konrad Van Tilburg, 'Vessels of exchange: the global shipwright in the Pacific', in Jerry H. Bentley, Renate Bridenthal, and Kären Wigen, eds., *Seascapes: maritime histories, littoral cultures, and transoceanic exchanges* (Honolulu, HI, 2007), pp. 38–52.

⁴⁸Wade, 'Memorandum on the junk trade of Hong Kong', 20 Jan. 1852, TNA, CO 129/39, p. 127a.

⁴⁹Van Tilburg, 'Vessels of exchange', p. 48.

sometimes translated 'junks' into Chinese as *Huachuan*, a frequent term in colonial records for craft of Chinese construct and employed by the Chinese.⁵⁰ In official shipping reports, statistics about the Chinese-dominated 'junk trade' are separate from those about foreign merchant shipping. Many colonial regulations against 'junks' such as the anti-piracy ordinance of 1847 were racially discriminatory as they primarily concerned Chinese ship owners and crew.⁵¹

In 1866, the colonial government promulgated the 'ordinance for the better regulation and control of certain vessels frequenting the waters of Hongkong'. It was another racially driven law targeting Chinese watercraft. This 'junk ordinance', as abbreviated in official correspondence, aimed at suppressing piracy by supervising unlicensed Chinese watercraft that visited the colony.⁵² For Governor Richard MacDonnell, the ordinance served to obtain 'information as to the movements and character of all *Native* craft in these waters [emphasis added]'.⁵³

Under the 1866 junk ordinance, visiting junks had to be registered and berthed within or outside Victoria Harbour in one of the 'anchorages for junks' delineated by the harbour master. The official Chinese name of these 'junk anchorages' demonstrates their racial nature: the government gazette identified them as *Tangchuan wanbo*, that is, 'anchorages for *Tang* ships'.⁵⁴ *Tang* (*Tong* in Cantonese) was – and is still – a common descriptor for Chinese people and things. For example, in British colonial records, *Tangren* and *Tangguan* represent Hong Kong's Chinese subjects and Qing China's officials, respectively.⁵⁵ Another good example is *Tong lau*, a common denomination for Chinese tenements.⁵⁶ In the colonial archives, therefore, the modifier of *Tang* in *Tangchuan* reflects the 'Chinese nature' of junks in Hong Kong. *Tangchuan wanbo* were the anchorages assigned by colonial authorities for Chinese watercraft visiting Hong Kong in increasing numbers.

The locations of the junk anchorages demonstrate how colonial authorities in Hong Kong segregated anchorage space and how race affected its attachment to land space. Considering the growth of Chinese maritime trade, the government designated anchorage areas for Chinese merchant vessels next to the local Chinese settlements. Marked with two red buoys, the 1866 junk anchorage in Victoria Harbour adjoined Sheung Wan district, a major Chinese urban settlement in nineteenth-century Hong Kong. It was home to many Nam Pak Hong (lit. south–north firms) – Chinese firms in trade with coastal China and Southeast Asia.⁵⁷ The categorization of the merchant vessels berthing off Sheung Wan indicates the strong connection

⁵⁰E.g. HKGG, 12 Mar. 1879, p. 120, 21 May 1879, p. 264; No. 44, 1844, in Bu, ed., 'Xianggang zaoqi wenshu...(shang)', p. 15.

⁵¹No. 3 of 1847, p. 221; Munn, *Anglo-China*, p. 157.

⁵²No. 6 of 1866, p. 900; Pauncefote's reports, 27 Aug. 1866, TNA, CO 129/114, pp. 520a–3a.

⁵³MacDonnell to Cardwell, 28 July 1866, TNA, CO 129/114, pp. 185a–b.

⁵⁴No. 6 of 1866, p. 901; HKGG, 22 Dec. 1866, p. 491.

⁵⁵E.g. No. 29, 1844, in Bu, ed., 'Xianggang zaoqi wenshu...(shang)', p. 13; No. 15, 1845, in Bu Yongjian, ed., 'Xianggang zaoqi wenshu: Yingguo guojia dang'anguan cang F.O.233/186–187 hao dang'an shiwen' (Hong Kong's early documents: FO 233/186–187 files at the UK's National Archives), *Tianye yu wenxian*, 65 (2011), p. 5.

⁵⁶Chu, *Building colonial Hong Kong*, pp. 36–7.

⁵⁷Feng Bangyan, *Xianggang Huazi caituan, 1841–2020* (Hong Kong Chinese consortiums, 1841–2020) (Hong Kong, 2021), pp. 21–30.

between the junk anchorage in Victoria Harbour and the 'south-north' business in Victoria City. The classified junks had to anchor from east to west in this order: 'Canton [Guangzhou] and Macao Boats', 'East Coast Boats' (from ports north of Guangzhou), 'West Coast Boats' (from Hainan), and 'Singapore Junks'. These names indicate their 'south-north' trade. In 1886, colonial authorities assigned an additional junk anchorage in Victoria Harbour. The old and new junk anchorages extended across the waters off the Chinese residential and commercial districts from Sheung Wan to the western end of Victoria City.⁵⁸

Junk anchorages outside Victoria Harbour also show that some littoral space became racially segregated and attached to land space in Hong Kong. In 1866, the colonial government established junk anchorages at Chek Chu, Shek Pai Wan, and Shau Kei Wan near their respective harbour masters' stations. Chek Chu was already a coastal Chinese market town and Shek Pai Wan a seaport before British rule whereas Shau Kei Wan saw an emerging Chinese coastal community after 1841.⁵⁹ In 1886, the government assigned a new anchorage for junks at Yau Ma Tei, a burgeoning Chinese market town on the western coast of Kowloon.⁶⁰

British benevolence also contributed to the racial segregation of Chinese shipping, as shown by the case of the typhoon shelter. After a destructive typhoon in 1874, the government established a 'harbour of refuge' in Causeway Bay for small boats and 'slow and unwieldy cargo lighters'.⁶¹ For Governor John Hennessy, the breakwater constructed in 1883 to delimit shelter space (see [Figure 2](#)) in Victoria Harbour aimed 'for the protection of the Junk Population'.⁶² The British naval commander of the China Station, Alfred Ryder, described the refuge from a racial angle more explicitly. For him, it catered for 'native boats at Hongkong'.⁶³

A comparison between the land and littoral regions of Hong Kong reveals the similar logic used by colonial rulers to justify the racial segregation of space across the shore. In the cases of the junk anchorages and typhoon shelter, nautical types constituted a non-racial claim that veiled the actual racial delineation of anchorage space for Chinese watercraft. This is analogous to the pre-war colonial policy on racial-residential segregation on land, which depended on the official requirement of keeping buildings in the same 'type' and 'style' in the same neighbourhood such as Peak District on Hong Kong Island.⁶⁴

Race was not the only factor for the official structuring of anchorage space in Hong Kong. Naval concerns also mattered. Colonial authorities reserved 'men-of-war anchorages' for Royal Navy and foreign naval ships in Victoria Harbour. Their

⁵⁸ HKGG, 22 Dec. 1866, p. 491, 29 May 1886, p. 463.

⁵⁹ 'No. 6 of 1866', p. 901; HKGG, 22 Dec. 1866, pp. 491-2; 'Hongkong, January 1st, 1842', TNA, CO 129/10, pp. 76A-7; SHKGG, 14 Aug. 1897, p. 81; James Hayes, 'Hong Kong Island before 1841', in David Faure, ed., *Hong Kong: a reader in social history* (Hong Kong, 2003), pp. 5-21; James Hayes, 'Visit to old Shau Kei Wan', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch*, 10 (1970), pp. 183-8.

⁶⁰ HKGG, 24 Feb. 1877, p. 81, 29 May 1886, p. 463; SHKGG, 21 July 1888, p. 775; Carl T. Smith and James Hayes, 'Nineteenth century Yau-matei', in The Royal Asiatic Society, Hong Kong Branch, ed., *In the heart of the metropolis: Yau-matei and its people* (Hong Kong, 1999), pp. 96-109.

⁶¹ Price et al., 'Harbour of refuge', 23 Oct. 1877, TNA, CO 129/179, pp. 361a-b.

⁶² Hennessy to Carnarvon, 22 Nov. 1877, TNA, CO 129/179, pp. 352a-b.

⁶³ Ryder to Hennessy, 4 Nov. 1877, TNA, CO 129/179, p. 361b.

⁶⁴ Carroll, 'The Peak'; Chu, *Building colonial Hong Kong*, pp. 34-52.

history is traceable to the Second Opium War, when many British armed vessels concentrated in Hong Kong.⁶⁵ In October 1858, the harbour master delimited a men-of-war anchorage; a buoy in chequered black and white marked the intersection of its western and northern boundaries. No unauthorized civilian vessel could anchor within the designated naval space.

The increase in the size of British and other ships of war resulted in the expansion of designated naval space in Victoria Harbour. The Royal Navy ships of the China Station best reflect the impact of nautical technology on the volume of the harbour's naval shipping. The station's flagship in 1862–3 was the *Euryalus*, a steam-powered yet still wooden-hulled frigate of 3,125 tons and 212 feet long. In 1889–94, the flagship was the *Imperieuse*, a much larger steel-hulled steamship of 8,500 tons and 315 feet long. Such increase in the size and tonnage of the naval shipping led to the addition of another men-of-war anchorage at Kowloon Peninsula in 1891.⁶⁶

The two men-of-war anchorages provide more examples of spatial extension from land areas to the adjacent waters in colonial policies. The first men-of-war anchorage neighboured the Royal Naval Yards in Victoria City, and the second one lay on the western side of Kowloon adjacent to the peninsula's naval depot (see Figure 2).⁶⁷ Many historical maps and photographs indicate their attached status to the coastal naval establishments.⁶⁸

Besides racial concerns and naval demands, colonial rulers considered insulating elements hazardous to Hong Kong when organizing its littoral space. These elements included criminals. To relieve overcrowding in Victoria Gaol, the colony's first prison, the authorities made use of Stonecutters Island, a remote isle on Victoria Harbour's eastern edge, three miles from Victoria City and two miles from Kowloon. In 1863, a local ordinance declared the island a convict station that no unauthorized person or civilian craft could visit. It was also the designated anchorage point of a hulk purchased in 1863 for housing convicts. Meanwhile, the government built a new gaol at the north-eastern end of the island. In 1867, however, the government abandoned it due to high operational cost. The convict hulk ceased operation in the same year.⁶⁹

Colonial authorities also took advantage of remote isles in Victoria Harbour and waters beyond it to isolate gunpowder, submarine mines, and dangerous goods. In 1867, the government required all civilian vessels to remove gunpowder to an official hulk next to Stonecutters Island if the amount exceeded 200 pounds. Later, the hulk's insufficient capacity propelled the authorities to turn the abandoned

⁶⁵ Graham, *China Station*, pp. 386–7.

⁶⁶ HKGG, 2 Oct. 1858, p. 70, 4 Feb. 1860, p. 20, 12 June 1886, p. 527, 1 Aug. 1891, p. 704; 'No. 1 of 1862', p. 497; *China Mail*, 28 Nov. 1898; Jonathan Parkinson, *The Royal Navy, China Station: 1864–1941* (Kibworth Beauchamp, 2018), pp. 9, 163.

⁶⁷ Kathleen Harland, *The Royal Navy in Hong Kong since 1841* (Liskeard, 1980), pp. 11–17.

⁶⁸ E.g. 'Hong Kong: proposed defences', 1886, TNA, MFQ 1/424/1; 'The man-of-war anchorage', 1897, Public Records Office, Hong Kong, HKMS 205-1-8.

⁶⁹ Robinson to Newcastle, 25 June 1862, TNA, CO 129/86, pp. 493b–4a; 'No. 4 of 1863', in Leach, ed., *Ordinances*, I, pp. 546–7; MacDonnell to Buckingham, 29 Oct. 1867, TNA, CO 129/125, pp. 98a–b; James William Norton-Kyshe, *The history of the laws and courts of Hong Kong* (2 vols., Hong Kong, 1971), II, pp. 52–3; May Holdsworth and Christopher Munn, *Crime, justice and punishment in colonial Hong Kong: Central Police Station, Central Magistracy and Victoria Gaol* (Hong Kong, 2020), p. 192.

Stonecutters Island gaol into another site of gunpowder storage.⁷⁰ In the 1870s, the floating gunpowder depot remained in Kowloon Bay just beyond the eastern harbour limit.⁷¹ In 1888, the government set up an experimental submarine minefield (see Figure 2) in the waters south of Stonecutters Island. Beacons upon two buoys painted with red and white vertical stripes defined its southern boundary.⁷² In 1892, the authorities established a 'Dangerous Goods Anchorage' in the waters between Kellet Island and the eastern harbour boundary. Vessels laden with dangerous items such as petroleum had to remain there.⁷³

Public health factors also influenced the official configuration of littoral space in Hong Kong. Cecilia Chu and Christopher Cowell have demonstrated the myriad significance of health concerns and disease to the colonial urban form.⁷⁴ These factors also occurred when colonial rulers in Hong Kong used littoral space to segregate unhealthy elements. For them, the separation of Stonecutters Island, Kowloon Bay, and also Little Green Island from Victoria City made them excellent sites for quarantine and isolation against epidemics such as smallpox and cholera. They served comparable functions as isolation wards and quarantine hospitals in urban Hong Kong.⁷⁵

In the nineteenth century, imposing quarantine on shipping amid epidemic fears was an international practice exported by European imperial powers to different parts of the world such as British India and Australia.⁷⁶ In Hong Kong, the first maritime quarantine regulations are traceable to 1862.⁷⁷ In the 1860s and 1870s, Little Green Island, Kowloon Bay, and Stonecutters Island became ad hoc anchorages for ships in quarantine. Meanwhile, a temporary quarantine station operated on Little Green Island in the 1860s. In 1867, British naval authorities used the abandoned Stonecutters Island prison to isolate patients with smallpox.⁷⁸

In the early 1880s, a cholera epidemic swept through the south-eastern coast of China and the Philippines.⁷⁹ To prevent its spread to Hong Kong by sea, the colonial government fixed quarantine areas around Stonecutters Island for incoming

⁷⁰HKGG, 20 Mar. 1869, p. 132; Kennedy to Carnarvon, 1 May 1876, TNA, CO 129/174, pp. 119a–20b; Des Vœux to Knutsford, 20 Mar. 1891, TNA, CO 129/249, p. 286a; 'Map of Hong Kong with British Kowloon', 1888, in Empson, ed., *Mapping Hong Kong*, p. 135.

⁷¹'Weather tables for the week ending 16th August, 1872', TNA, CO 129/159, p. 252a.

⁷²HKGG, 30 June 1888, p. 662, 27 Oct. 1888, p. 989.

⁷³HKGG, 18 June 1892, p. 600.

⁷⁴Chu, *Building colonial Hong Kong*; Cowell, *Form follows fever*.

⁷⁵On the isolation wards and quarantine hospitals, see Yip, 'Segregation, isolation, and quarantine', pp. 102–8.

⁷⁶Mark Harrison, *Public health in British India: Anglo-Indian preventive medicine, 1859–1914* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 117–38; Alex Chase-Levenson, *The yellow flag: quarantine and the British Mediterranean world, 1780–1860* (Cambridge, 2020); Alison Bashford, *Imperial hygiene: a critical history of colonialism, nationalism and public health* (New York, NY, 2004).

⁷⁷No. 1 of 1862', p. 496.

⁷⁸Murray's report, 6 Feb. 1863, TNA, CO 129/93, p. 38a; MacDonnell to Carnarvon, 24 Jan. 1867, TNA, CO 129/120, pp. 159a–70a; MacDonnell to Buckingham, 26 Apr. 1867, TNA, CO 129/121, p. 365a; Norton-Kyshe, *History of the laws*, II, p. 102; Holdsworth and Munn, *Crime, justice and punishment*, p. 192; *China Mail*, 3 Dec. 1879.

⁷⁹Yip, 'Segregation, isolation, and quarantine', p. 103; Kerrie L. MacPherson, 'Cholera in China, 1820–1930: an aspect of the internationalization of infectious disease', in Mark Elvin and Liu Ts'ui-jung, eds., *Sediments of time: environment and society in Chinese history* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 512–14.

ships and their crew. In July 1883, a proclamation stipulated that all vessels from Shantou, a cholera-infected port in China's Guangdong Province, had to fly the proper quarantine flag – the 'yellow flag' – and proceed to the delineated waters between Stonecutters Island and Green Island. They had to remain in this 'quarantine anchorage' – as named in a later ordinance – pending the health officer's release order. During the detention, no person or craft could approach them. The first ships subject to the quarantine order were the *Douglas* and *Dale*, steamers with 438 Chinese passengers and several cases of cholera. The then governor of Hong Kong, George Bowen, confidently concluded that thanks to the quarantine measure, no case of cholera was found in Victoria City. In September 1883, the quarantine regulations extended to ships from all places where any infectious disease prevailed.⁸⁰

Colonial rulers also designated quarantine space on Stonecutters Island itself. Under the 1883 quarantine regulations, a line of yellow flags marked off a quarantine ground in the island's western part near the quarantine anchorage. The passengers and crew removed from incoming vessels by the health officer had to remain there.⁸¹ At the beginning, temporary tents were pitched on the quarantine ground. Governor Bowen was surprised that although cholera, smallpox, and other infectious diseases were rife in China and other parts of Asia, Hong Kong was 'probably the only dependency of the British Empire in which there is no Lazaretto', that is, a quarantine station-cum-isolation hospital for maritime travellers. Accordingly, he proposed in 1883 to establish a permanent lazaretto on Stonecutters Island, 'a small, uninhabited island at the Northwestern extremity of the harbour of Hongkong...which would almost appear to have been created by Nature for a Lazaretto'.⁸² Completed in 1886, the lazaretto was located within the quarantine ground.⁸³ The lazaretto and navigation, anchorage, and quarantine spaces described above show how different concerns about local governance propelled colonial authorities to impose administrative grids on the littoral space of nineteenth-century Hong Kong.

III

Beyond colonial Hong Kong, British regulations over littoral space also took place in the treaty ports of China. In the treaty ports, the chief agent managing harbours and coastal navigation was the Chinese Maritime Customs Service, a sophisticated foreign institution in the Qing government dominated by British staff whose jurisdiction included much more than customs affairs. Its marine department issued harbour regulations and included harbour masters, like their counterparts in Hong Kong.⁸⁴ Other British colonial cities in Asia also had port authorities parallel to the

⁸⁰HKGG, 6 July 1883, pp. 572–3, 15 Sept. 1883, pp. 747–9, 1 Aug. 1891, p. 702; Bowen to Derby, 19 July 1883, TNA, CO 129/210, pp. 382b–3a.

⁸¹HKGG, 6 July 1883, pp. 572–3.

⁸²Bowen to Derby, 19 July 1883, TNA, CO 129/210, pp. 381a–2a.

⁸³'Map of Hong Kong with British Kowloon', p. 135; Plan of Stonecutters Island, 1883, Bowen to Derby, 20 Nov. 1883, TNA, CO 129/212, pp. 235a–41a; Legislative Council minutes, 17 Mar. 1886, TNA, CO 129/226, p. 141b.

⁸⁴Van de Ven, *Breaking with the past*, pp. 84–90; Ladds, *Empire careers*, pp. 84–5; Bickers, 'Infrastructural globalization'.

harbour master in Hong Kong. In Singapore, Bombay, and Calcutta, for example, master attendants oversaw port development and the control of shipping for much of the nineteenth century.⁸⁵

As in Hong Kong, imperial or colonial authorities delineated different kinds of navigational, anchorage, and quarantine spaces in China's treaty ports and other British port cities in Asia. In these ports, fairways for steam navigation were common. In Shanghai and Tianjin, harbour masters managed anchorages and maintained lighthouses, beacons, and buoys that assisted navigation. They also enforced quarantine regulations and assigned quarantine spaces for ships of different nationalities.⁸⁶ Singapore, Bombay, and Calcutta also had anchorage spaces designed for ships of war, merchant vessels, and 'native' vessels of different kinds. In Bombay, for example, buoys marked the fairway at the harbour's entrance and the men-of-war anchorage. There were also moorings for vessels of different tonnage.⁸⁷

Previous scholarship often examines demarcated littoral spaces – anchorage areas and quarantine stations, for example – in colonial port cities in Asia separately. Yet, if we consider them together and their geographical relevance with colonial land space, a rough hierarchy of the delineated littoral spaces is discernible. It reflects how colonial rulers understood the relative importance and roles of different watercraft. In the case of Hong Kong, the fairways for steamers and the first anchorage for the British men-of-war lay within prime harbour space – the deep waters next to Victoria City's Central district. The second men-of-war anchorage occupied a huge area of waters on the lee of Kowloon, another superior harbour section. In contrast, the junk anchorages and typhoon shelter demarcated for Chinese shipping were on either two sides of the prime harbour areas (off Sheung Wan district, Yau Ma Tei, and Causeway Way) or outside Victoria Harbour (off Shau Kei Wan, Chek Chu, and Shek Pai Wan). The harbour's eastern edge housed the military depot of Kellet Island and its adjoining dangerous goods anchorage. The berths of the gunpowder hulk and ships in quarantine lay in Kowloon Bay outside the eastern harbour limit. On the harbour's western edge, Green Island, Stonecutters Island, and their waters functioned as isolated spaces for 'undesirable elements' including prisoners, explosives, ships and crew in quarantine, and contagious persons.

Rather than a carefully designed colonial plan, the emerging hierarchy of demarcated littoral spaces in Hong Kong resulted from an accumulation of government measures that utilized the waters and isles within Victoria Harbour and beyond. In addition to the technological, racial, naval, and health factors discussed above, class mattered in the organization of littoral space. While British authorities in Hong Kong considered Western merchant shipping the basis of the colony's entrepôt trade, they

⁸⁵C. A. Gibson-Hill, 'The master attendants at Singapore, 1819–67', *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 33 (1960), pp. 1–64; Stephen Dobbs, *The Singapore River: a social history, 1819–2002* (Singapore, 2003), pp. 47–50; Aniruddha Bose, 'The port of Calcutta (1860–1910): state power, technology and labor' (Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge, MA, 2013), p. 25; Alfred Dundas Taylor, *The India directory, for the guidance of commanders of steamers and sailing vessels* (London, 1874), pp. 383–4.

⁸⁶*Rosenstock's directory of China and Manila*, XIV (Manila, 1909), Shanghai section, pp. 34–5, Tientsin section, pp. 14–15; Bickers, 'Infrastructural globalization', pp. 454–5; Van de Ven, *Breaking with the past*, pp. 84–90.

⁸⁷*The China Sea pilot* (3 vols., London, 1916), I, pp. 470–2; Taylor, *India directory*, pp. 377–84; Kamath, *Tides of time*, pp. 49–68.

believed the junk trade would inevitably decline in competition with the former. In fact, the ratio of junk shipping to Western shipping continued to decrease.⁸⁸ This explains why predominantly Western-owned merchant steamers were privileged over junks in terms of the allocation of littoral space. In short, the colonial perception of the economic roles of Chinese and Western-styled ships influenced the division of littoral space.

Moreover, the hierarchy reveals the British official bifurcation of littorals in Hong Kong. Many designated littoral spaces were mirrors and even extensions of developed land spaces. As shown above, fairways and quarantine anchorages and stations served comparable functions as urban thoroughfares and isolation hospitals. Junk anchorages neighboured the local Chinese settlements, and men-of-war anchorages adjoined the coastal naval establishments. These littoral spaces were for watercraft that colonial authorities found crucial for the economy and security of Hong Kong. Along with reclamation, the government strove to incorporate these littoral areas into their adjacent developed land regions. At the same time, isles and waters remote from developed areas – Stonecutters Island and Kowloon Bay, for example – functioned as the ‘spatial others’ that segregated elements considered undesirable or menacing. By the end of the nineteenth century, colonial rulers lacked any interest in incorporating such spaces into the urban areas of Hong Kong.

While scant scholarship has examined the relations between different littoral spaces in a particular colonial port city, a brief comparison of Hong Kong with Singapore suggests that the hierarchical and bifurcated use of littoral spaces was common in colonial ports in Asia. Like Hong Kong, the fairway and the men-of-war anchorage were located in prime harbour spaces in Singapore. Meanwhile, anchorages for ships laden with dangerous items lay far away from the colonial city. Moreover, some remote isles of Singapore served parallel functions as Stonecutters Island for public health concerns; quarantine stations and a lazaretto operated on isles about three miles south of Singapore’s colonial city.⁸⁹ The lazarettos on St John’s Island in Singapore and Stonecutters Island in Hong Kong were among their nineteenth-century counterparts built on islands far away from urban and residential areas across the globe.⁹⁰

IV

Various parties challenged colonial efforts to regulate littoral space in Hong Kong. Criminal records attest to this. In 1876 alone, 64 court cases concerned the breach of harbour regulations. In 1881, the figure rose to 125.⁹¹ In 1897, 670 cases in 34 categories of crime concerned violating the harbour ordinance. The largest categories included ‘Boats – Mooring in shore between the hours of 9 o’clock at night and gun-fire in the morning’, ‘neglecting to exhibit lights at night’, and ‘nuisances in harbour’. Other cases included onboard larceny, beating drums during prohibited hours,

⁸⁸ HKGG, 20 Mar. 1869, p. 131.

⁸⁹ *China Sea pilot*, I, pp. 470–2; Lau, ‘Shipping and port development’, p. 117.

⁹⁰ Chase-Levenson, *Yellow flag*, p. 62; Harrison, *Public health in British India*, p. 123.

⁹¹ Cases of the police magistrates’ court for 1876, TNA, CO 129/178, pp. 161b–2a; ‘Return of miscellaneous offences...’, 30 Jan. 1882, TNA, CO 129/202, p. 381a.

and discharging fireworks.⁹² Throughout the late nineteenth century, local newspapers published magisterial cases in which the police and the harbour master's office staff captured culprits who violated the harbour regulations. In these cases, most offenders were Chinese. For example, in 1873, an officer of the harbour master's office witnessed and charged two Chinese boatmen for throwing coal ash into Victoria Harbour. On another occasion, a policeman arrested a Chinese boatman in 1896 for having dangerous items on board his watercraft without any proper flag.⁹³ These cases indicate the difficulties of colonial authorities in regulating littoral space in the thriving port city of Hong Kong.⁹⁴

The contested nature of littoral space certainly magnified these challenges. With increasing numbers of watercraft in various types and sizes, Victoria Harbour became the frequent site of clashes of ships, other traffic accidents, and incidents of spatial infringement. Government and private wharves and piers were major arenas of spatial conflicts; the magisterial report for 1880 listed 129 instances of 'Obstruction of Wharves by Boat People'.⁹⁵ In 1883, the local newspaper *Hongkong Telegraph* bemoaned 'the miserable insufficiency' of Peddar's Wharf, the oldest government wharf: 'In size it is not one half large enough for the traffic of this fair and flourishing city. From morning to night the flight of wooden steps...are crowded with steam launches, men-of-war gigs and cutters, ship's and house boats, and native craft of every description'.⁹⁶ Excessive usage of Peddar's Wharf lessened only when the government rebuilt Murray Pier and Blake Pier and erected Queen's Statue Wharf (Queen's Pier) at the turn of the twentieth century.⁹⁷

Recurrent incidents of obstructing the navigational and anchorage spaces of Victoria Harbour also compromised official demarcation of littoral space. Parallel to the persistent obstructions of thoroughfares and streets in Victoria City, instances of boats blocking the harbour's fairways abound in magisterial records.⁹⁸ In November 1873, for example, an officer of the harbour master's office charged seven Chinese individuals with anchoring their boats in the fairway, reportedly 'a continual nuisance'.⁹⁹ Many cargo boats obstructed the navigation of steamers laden with goods when rushing to approach them. Rubbish also silted the fairways.¹⁰⁰ Concerning anchorage spaces, mooring within the men-of-war anchorages and dredging their ground persisted. Also, the police often caught craft laden with hazardous items and berthed outside the dangerous goods anchorage.¹⁰¹ Shortly after the typhoon

⁹²Cases of the police magistrates' court for 1897, TNA, CO 129/281, pp. 343a-b.

⁹³*Hong Kong Daily Press (HKDP)*, 13 Sept. 1873; *Huazi ribao*, 8 Jan. 1896.

⁹⁴Certainly, the cases might involve many problems of injustice in colonial Hong Kong such as the questionable performance of the police, the court's and the police's racial and class-based biases against the ordinary Chinese, and other deficiencies during police arrests and in court trials. See Munn, *Anglo-China*, pp. 109–203.

⁹⁵Cases of the police magistrates' court for 1880, TNA, CO 129/192, p. 348b.

⁹⁶*Hongkong Telegraph*, 3 Sept. 1883.

⁹⁷Pui-yin Ho, *Making Hong Kong: a history of its urban development* (Cheltenham, 2018), pp. 19–20.

⁹⁸Munn, *Anglo-China*, pp. 147–8.

⁹⁹*HKDP*, 29 Nov. 1873.

¹⁰⁰E.g. *China Mail*, 13 June 1877, 20 July 1887.

¹⁰¹*HKDP*, 3 May 1875; *Hongkong Telegraph*, 29 Nov. 1897; cases of the police magistrates' court for 1897, pp. 343a-b.

shelter was open, refuse thrown overboard created 'a layer of putrid offal which emits a deadly effluvium' on the shelter's seabed.¹⁰² In the late nineteenth century, many Chinese craft unlawfully moored in the seasonal typhoon shelter.¹⁰³

Similar to the case of urban Hong Kong, where bargains between different constituencies shaped its landscape, the colonial government negotiated with other parties over the use of littoral space in Hong Kong.¹⁰⁴ Stonecutters Island is an excellent example. Initially, British military authorities – independent of the local administration – had no objection to erecting a lazaretto on Stonecutters Island even though they held land on the island.¹⁰⁵ Later, their health concerns increased when they constructed batteries there. In the late 1880s, the military's protest against the lazaretto propelled the government to close it, surrender it to the military, and reluctantly choose the costly option of building a hulk as 'a combined epidemic and quarantine hospital' and keeping it in an inlet north of Stonecutters Island.¹⁰⁶ Finally, the Stonecutters Island ordinance of 1889 converted the whole isle and its surrounding waters into a military zone.¹⁰⁷ Eventually, the military authorities acquired the island's exclusive use. This is one of the many instances of civil-military conflicts over the use of space in British Hong Kong.¹⁰⁸

Besides the military authorities, unofficial parties competed for access to Stonecutters Island. Despite its status first as a convict establishment and later as a quarantine and military zone, private hunters and swimmers crossed the strait from the mainland to the island. In 1875, five men and women (nationality unknown) illegally landed and stole fruit on the island. In 1895, several Chinese fishermen even tried to steal the two buoys and cable chain that demarcated the charged submarine mines.¹⁰⁹ Besides private economic interests, meteorological factors contributed to the contested use of Stonecutters Island. Its northern inlet, where the epidemic-quarantine hulk anchored, was a major 'unofficial' shelter for Chinese watercraft during typhoon seasons in the late nineteenth century.¹¹⁰

As explained above, to eradicate piracy around the Hong Kong waters, the 1866 junk ordinance assigned anchorages for Chinese craft. However, piratical acts connected with the colony persisted. On the surface, piracy became a less serious problem after 1866. From 1872 to 1881, on average, the local judiciary annually tried less than five cases of piracy.¹¹¹ Yet, the police chief admitted that the apparent lack of such reports was 'due to the junk people who suffer being aware that no assistance is given by the British authorities to trace pirate boats beyond their jurisdiction'.¹¹²

¹⁰²Price's report, 20 Mar. 1883, TNA, CO 129/209, pp. 44a–b.

¹⁰³Cases of the police magistrates' court for 1897, p. 343b.

¹⁰⁴For the case of urban Hong Kong, see Chu, *Building colonial Hong Kong*, pp. 5–6.

¹⁰⁵Thompson to Herbert, 31 Jan. 1884, TNA, CO 129/218, p. 400a.

¹⁰⁶Fleming to Knutsford, 15 Oct. 1890, TNA, CO 129/247, pp. 140a–3b; Des Vœux to Knutsford, 20 Mar. 1891, TNA, CO 129/249, pp. 284a–6b.

¹⁰⁷HKGG, 19 Jan. 1889, p. 21.

¹⁰⁸Cowell, *Form follows fever*, pp. 88, 156–64, 218.

¹⁰⁹Ma Yuan, *Xianggang fazhi shishi huibian* (Historical facts about the Hong Kong legislature) (Hong Kong, 1936), p. 85; HKDP, 6 Sept. 1875, 11 July 1895.

¹¹⁰Price et al., 'Harbour of refuge', p. 361a; *Hongkong Telegraph*, 10 Sept. 1894.

¹¹¹'Return of serious offences...', 1882, TNA, CO 129/202, p. 383a.

¹¹²HKGG, 17 Apr. 1869, p. 210.

During the late nineteenth century, recurrent newspaper reports of crimes indicate that Hong Kong – to use the words of a contemporary governor – was ‘a depot for the equipment of Piratical craft, the reception of booty, and the transmission of information to parties engaged in those nefarious pursuits’.¹¹³ The junk anchorages at Shau Kei Wan, Yau Ma Tei, and other places became pirates’ haunts. The police often found plunder on ships at these anchorages.¹¹⁴

The designated junk anchorages failed to eliminate piratical crimes partly due to limitations of the official capacity. The internal instructions of the harbour master’s office specified the duties of the heads of the harbour master’s stations next to the junk anchorages: ‘To board all Junks arriving at the Station and twice during each day, and twice during the night in each week at uncertain times to visit the “Junk Anchorage” demanding to see the “Anchorage Passes” of at least Ten Vessels on each occasion’.¹¹⁵ However, given the sheer number of junks, it is doubtful whether this instruction was enforceable.¹¹⁶ On one occasion, at the Chek Chu anchorage, the harbour master saw ‘as many as 300 of these boats arrive in the evening and all leave the following morning’, and complained that ‘it is impossible to visit the whole of them in so short a time’.¹¹⁷ Moreover, the lack of an efficient patrol force and incoordination between the harbour master’s office and the water police limited their ability to check illegal shipping at the junk anchorages and beyond.¹¹⁸

Chinese cargo boats, ferries, and many other locally licensed ‘native’ watercraft also used the junk anchorages in Hong Kong. However, colonial rulers were far from acquiring an accurate understanding of their number and distribution through registration and census taking. Registering and counting boats in British Hong Kong began in the mid-1840s but proved ineffective in checking piracy and other crimes in the early colonial period.¹¹⁹ Registration and census regimes had become more established from the late 1850s onward, but the issue of unlicensed cargo boats, ferries, and fishing boats persisted in the late nineteenth century.¹²⁰ Between 1870 and 1900, censuses took place in 1872, 1877, 1881, and 1897 only. These irregular censuses failed to provide a reliable number of Chinese watercraft.

Moreover, the mobility of Chinese watercraft limited the quality of the census. For example, at the time of the census taking in January 1897, the registrar-general, who oversaw the census, stated that ‘a number of fishing boats had gone, as is their

¹¹³MacDonnell to Buckingham, 29 Oct. 1867, TNA, CO 129/125, pp. 104a–b. On piracy around late nineteenth-century Hong Kong, see Nathan C. Kwan, “‘Designs against a common foe’: the Anglo-Qing suppression of piracy in South China” (Ph.D. thesis, Hong Kong, 2020), pp. 215–44; Robert J. Antony, ‘Piracy on the South China coast through modern times’, in Bruce A. Elleman, Andrew Forbes, and David Rosenberg, eds., *Piracy and maritime crime: historical and modern case studies* (Newport, 2010), pp. 44–5.

¹¹⁴E.g. HKDP, 14 July 1871; *China Mail*, 23 Nov. 1887.

¹¹⁵Thomsett, ‘... Regulations and instructions...of the harbor master’s department’, 9 Dec. 1866, TNA, CO 129/116, p. 413a.

¹¹⁶In 1868, nearly 31,500 junks entered the junk anchorages. In 1897, the figure reached over 57,000. See HKGG, 7 Mar. 1868, p. 88, 30 Apr. 1898, p. 374.

¹¹⁷HKGG, 7 Mar. 1868, p. 88.

¹¹⁸HKGG, 7 Mar. 1868, p. 88, 20 Mar. 1869, p. 131, 20 Apr. 1872, p. 229, 4 Apr. 1895, pp. 343–4.

¹¹⁹Munn, *Anglo-China*, pp. 67–8, 127–30.

¹²⁰‘No. 6 of 1857’ and ‘No. 8 of 1858’, in Leach, ed., *Ordinances*, I, pp. 372–3, 414; HKGG, 1 Aug. 1891, pp. 684–8.

custom, to Macao' for the upcoming Chinese new year. Also, 'the position of the boats is largely affected by the weather, and cannot be depended upon'. On board six boats, the enumerators of the watercraft failed to perform the task in just one night. When they continued the counting on the following day, the boats had already moved, and it 'was naturally more difficult in discovering those which had not been numbered'.¹²¹

The mobility of Chinese watercraft also countered colonial efforts to restrict their movements. The case of piracy exemplifies this. Qing efforts to suppress piracy existed in the Hong Kong region long before 1841. The British, rulers of the region from 1841, brought with them new sets of rules, the colonial police, and the Royal Navy to combat piratical activities. Also, from the late 1840s, they co-operated with Qing officials and forces in piracy suppression in South China. Still, piracy persisted in Hong Kong and its surrounding Pearl River Delta region. This is because piratical assaults mostly took place in regions that transcended administrative boundaries separating the waters of British Hong Kong and Qing China. They frequently happened just beyond the colonial waters, in places such as the waters off Stonecutters Island and Green Island.¹²² In these regions, the colony's police had no power to act. Moreover, in the late nineteenth century, the Royal Navy became uninterested in piratical cases that involved only the Chinese.¹²³ As for Qing China, its maritime power was generally tenuous in the regions within the 'outer waters', where piratical attacks usually took place. British and Qing forces were equally incompetent in suppressing piracy around Hong Kong in the late nineteenth century.

Aside from piracy, there were other situations where owners of Chinese watercraft took advantage of the administrative boundaries between the waters of British Hong Kong and Qing China to pursue socio-economic activities. Existing early petitions from the Chinese to the colonial government show that Chinese owners of merchantmen, fishing boats, and ferries would complain to the authorities against harassment by Qing agents within the colonial waters and beyond.¹²⁴ Moreover, many Chinese traders registered their own vessels in Hong Kong and hoisted a foreign flag to enjoy customs exemption in mainland China.¹²⁵ Smuggling was another transborder activity of the maritime population. For example, after disposing of salt in the Chinese mainland by land or sea, crews of smuggling junks engaged in piracy on their home runs to Yau Ma Tei, the location of a junk anchorage. In so doing, they circumvented the Qing customs regime.¹²⁶

¹²¹ SHKGG, 14 Aug. 1897, pp. 75–9.

¹²² E.g. HKDP, 21 May 1878; *China Mail*, 18 Apr. 1884, 7 Jan. 1895; *Hongkong Telegraph*, 7 Jan. 1895; *Hongkong Weekly Press*, 19 Nov. 1898; *Xunhuan ribao*, 9 June 1874, 29 Dec. 1884; *Huazi ribao*, 7 June 1897.

¹²³ Kwan, 'Designs against a common foe', pp. 215–16; Grace Fox, *British admirals and Chinese pirates, 1832–1869* (London, 1940), pp. 185–6.

¹²⁴ E.g. No. 2, 1846, No. 9, 1846, No. 30, 1847, No. 7, 1846, in Bu, ed., 'Xianggang zaoqi wen-shu...F.O.233/186–187', pp. 16–18, 25, 41.

¹²⁵ Henry Sze Hang Choi, *The remarkable hybrid maritime world of Hong Kong and the West River region in the late Qing period* (Leiden, 2017).

¹²⁶ HKGG, 23 Apr. 1878, p. 151; Smith and Hayes, 'Nineteenth century Yaumatei', p. 109.

Thus, operators of Chinese watercraft were not passive subjects of government control. Many Chinese ships and boats were so mobile that their activities transcended the administrative grids imposed by colonial authorities over the littoral space of Hong Kong. In the wider, fluid watery world of South China, Chinese piracy, smuggling, and other maritime ventures compromised the British colonial efforts to bring Victoria Harbour and other littoral regions under control by racial-spatial segregation and other kinds of division. The hierarchy of the demarcated littoral spaces in nineteenth-century Hong Kong meant little to Chinese watercraft. Their long history of sailing across extensive regions of South China predated the coming of the British. To sum up, the case of Hong Kong shows that official endeavours on regulating space in colonial port cities in Asia often ran contrary to its actual use. This happened across the shores, in both land and littoral regions.

V

In conclusion, with the case of nineteenth-century Hong Kong, this article has illustrated how colonial authorities in Asian port cities sought to maintain orderly and well-defined littoral space. They structured native littoral space and regulated its numerous ships – native and non-native alike – based on race and other considerations concerning their ruling interests and perceptions of their subjects. In many ways, the colonial organization of littoral space was similar and connected to that of urban space. However, contests and negotiations over using the littoral space by various parties – particularly ventures of watercraft across administrative boundaries – countered colonial efforts to regulate littorals, where native watercraft were active before and after the beginning of colonial rule.

Nowadays, one could observe few cross-harbour ferries and tourist cruisers as the primary exploiters of Victoria Harbour. The harbour's contemporary quietness veils the legacy of the nineteenth-century demarcation of littoral space and contests over its use. In 1927, commensurate with the arrival of ships in growing numbers and sizes, colonial authorities expanded the harbour sphere. They also delineated more anchorage spaces such as the foreign men-of-war anchorage and typhoon shelter.¹²⁷ In the post-Second World War period, however, littoral space became incorporated into urban regions on an unprecedented scale. Reclamation greatly reduced the size of Victoria Harbour and turned Kellet Island into part of Hong Kong Island. The construction of telegraphs, cross-harbour tunnels, and viaducts further diminished the littoral space, and the harbour lost its prosperity to air travel.¹²⁸ In short, the rise of post-war Hong Kong as a metropolis and an aviation hub overshadows the early history of Victoria Harbour, where British colonial authorities endeavoured to divide the bustling space and control its numerous watercraft.

¹²⁷J. P. Hewitt, *Annual departmental reports by the director of marine* (Hong Kong, 1963), p. 10; T. N. Chiu, *The port of Hong Kong: a survey of its development* (Hong Kong, 1973), pp. 38–9, 44; Eddie Sham Wai-chi, chapter 4.4., in Chi-pang Lau et al., 'History of the port of Hong Kong and marine development', Marine Department, HKSAR (last access: 23 June 2024), www.mardep.gov.hk/theme/port_hk/hk/index.html; HKGG, 28 Feb. 1941, p. 254.

¹²⁸John D. Wong, *Hong Kong takes flight: commercial aviation and the making of a global hub, 1930s–1998* (Cambridge, MA, 2022).

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