LANDSCAPE TRANSFORMATIONS AND DISCOURSES IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY COLONIAL HONG KONG

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Based on a holistic definition of landscapes, this article explores descriptions of Hong Kong's natural environment by early colonists and travellers as a way to convey the history of its environmental transformations. Contrasting landscape descriptions and debated understandings of nature cast a new light on the process of colonization, revealing a symbolic and territorial mechanism of simultaneous dispossession and appropriation. After discovering the vernacular landscapes of Hong Kong, colonists perceived natural features as either threatening to the colonial project or offering opportunities to justify it. Following the famous formula of 'a barren rock', which refers to the island's noticeable absence of forest, this historical investigation reveals the role that scientific, aesthetic, and moral discourses played in the complex mechanism of colonial domination. They serve as a foundation for the construction of colonial narratives, some of which are still in use today. Nuancing the tale of simple domination, the study of Chinese landscape aesthetics and geomantic principles offers a point of cultural encounter between colonized and colonizer.

INTRODUCTION

Hong Kong appears in contemporary popular culture and mass media as the archetype of the Asian financial centre. The view of the island's sharp skyline against the backdrop of a luxuriant tropical forest from across the tranquil waters of Victoria Harbour is repeatedly employed to illustrate this stereotype (Fig. 1). Such images emphasize the striking contrast between the city's artifi-



Fig. 1.
View of the Central District of Hong
Kong island seen from across the
harbour.
Photograph by Leon Xu, 2018

cial architecture and seemingly untouched natural surroundings. Although the achievement celebrated in these views remains open to interpretation — the victory of modernity over the hardships of nature, or the balance between urbanization and conservation — the depicted landscape is historically constructed, both physically and symbolically, and results from a long process of British colonization. For instance, the piece of greenery backing the city is the consequence of 150 years of urban development and was never part of the precolonial landscape. Many scholars have already investigated the history of Hong Kong's environmental transformations: changes in agricultural and forestry practices, the development of engineering solutions, the construction of colonial infrastructure, as well as the planning and regulations that have shaped the city's urban landscapes. Others have addressed the larger strategies deployed by the British to rule the colony until 1997, revealing complex economic, political, and social dynamics between numerous stakeholders: colonial administrators, interested businessmen, and collaborative Chinese elites.1 But few have considered the role of nature in the process of colonization. Focusing on English descriptions of Hong Kong landscapes by nineteenthcentury travellers, visitors, and settlers, this article investigates the scientific, aesthetic, and ultimately moral discourses on nature as a way to convey the

1 See for example: John M. Carroll, Edge of Empires: Chinese Elites and British Colonials in Hong Kong (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007); Wing-sang Law, Collaborative Colonial Power: The Making of the Hong Kong Chinese (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009); Christopher Munn, Anglo-China: Chinese People and British Rule in Hong Kong, 1841–1880 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009).

2 Tony Fu-Lai Yu, From a "Barren Rock" to the Financial Hub of East Asia: Hong Kong's Economic Transformation in the Coordinating Perspective (London: Routledge, 2005); Huaide Ye, From a Barren Rock to a Little Dragon: The Evolution of Hong Kong Society, University of Texas MA thesis, 1992; Kam-Wing Fung, T. Y. W. Lau, C. M. Chan, Upon the Plinth of a Barren Rock: 130 Years of Engineering Development in Hong Kong (Hong Kong: Chung Hwa, 2015); Peiran He, Water for a Barren Rock: 150 Years of Water Supply in Hong Kong (Hong Kong: Commercial, 2001); Donald Wise, Above the Barren Rock: Spectacular Hong Kong from the Air, 4th edn (Hong Kong: FormAsia, 1996); The Astounding Beauty of a Barren Rock (Hong Kong: Geotechnical Engineering Office, Civil Engineering Dept., 1990).

3 Such as, for instance: Ernest John Eitel, Europe in China: The History of Hong Kong from the Beginning to the Year 1882 (London: Luzac & Co., 1895; Hong Kong: Kelly & Walsh, 1895); Arnold Wright and H. A. Cartwright, Twentieth Century Impressions of Hong Kong: History, People, Commerce, Industries, and Resources (Singapore: Graham Brash, 1990).

4 See the first iteration of the "barren rock" quoted from Capt. Elliot's correspondence in the section of this article titled "Colonial Anxieties: Miasma, Ravines, and Floods". history of environmental changes. In other words, what can be learnt from the colonists' depictions and understanding of nature within a context of dramatic landscape transformations? Is there a link between Hong Kong's natural features, such as geology, vegetation, and climate, the practices and beliefs behind the production of precolonial landscapes, and the colonial narratives that supported its extensive transfiguration, from topographic changes and agricultural and botanical manipulations, to waterways diversion and coastal alteration?

As a guiding theme, this investigation follows the historical development of a famous expression still commonly employed to describe Hong Kong: a barren rock. Over the past thirty years, several publications concerning the history of local economic, social, and technical accomplishments have been referring to this formula in their titles.² While contemporary landscape iconography seeks to accentuate the contrast between nature and the city, these studies stress environmental transformations as indicators of progress. The celebrated transformation of a 'barren island' into a 'colonial miracle' was first developed by early historians and has been conveniently revived recently in the context of postcolonial government.³ Finding its origin with the taking of Hong Kong Island by the British in 1841,⁴ this phrase has been progressively incorporated into historical narratives to ultimately become a powerful instrument in the process of colonization.

This article is divided into five parts. To better understand the foundation of the 'barren rock' myth, the first part of this article traces its origins. After retrieving the earliest observations of the lack of vegetation by sailors and travellers, descriptions of Hong Kong's vernacular landscapes are discussed in order to identify the reasons behind this particular feature. The following two parts narrate the first encounters between British settlers and the natural environment. The main body of historical sources is composed of numerous published landscape descriptions, written by European men serving in the imperial army

or as experts for the colonial government. The second part focuses on natural features that were described as threats to the colonial enterprise while paying particular attention to environmental and infrastructural improvements justified and ultimately caused by the understanding of this natural menace. The third part examines how natural advantages, such as a convenient harbour, provided opportunities to naturalize British presence while delegitimizing the local Chinese. As a result, poetic celebrations of Hong Kong's natural beauties in various nineteenth- and early twentieth-century texts are examined to better understand their role in the process of familiarization with a rather foreign and somewhat inhospitable landscape. Through scientific objectivity, moral imperative for improvement, and aesthetic appreciation for picturesque sceneries, colonial discourses around nature play an important role in the complex mechanism of appropriation and dispossession that supports colonial legitimacy. The fourth part attempts to theorize on these observations by studying the formation of colonial myths, especially through early twentieth-century



Fig. 2.

Typical vernacular landscape setting of Hong Kong with rice fields in the valley, a village is situated at the foot of hills and backed by a sacred woodland. Note the effects of colonization on this 1950s' photograph: the roads carved into the mountains and passing through the fields, the police station built on a promontory adjacent to the village and the numerous topographic changes they generate.

Ng Bar Ling
Sha Tin c. 1950s – 1960s
Special Collections, University
Libraries, The University of Hong Kong

historical narratives. Finally, in the fifth part, cases of cultural encounters and hybrid landscape interpretations will help refine the reductive view of European culture simply imposed onto the Chinese landscapes of Hong Kong.

Throughout this article, specific attention is given to early decades of British colonization, but overall, sources from the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century will be discussed. The period spanning from 1841 to the 1920s is crucial to understanding Hong Kong's colonial history for two reasons. Firstly, the expansion of Hong Kong's territory was the most extensive in these years. Taken during the First Opium War (1839–1842) by Captain Charles Elliot, the island quickly became too small to accommodate British military and commercial ambitions in the region. The initial enclave extended its boundaries northward twice during the subsequent fifty years through unequal treaties imposed by the British on Qing China. At the end of the Second Opium War (1856–1860), the Kowloon peninsula, located in the immediate vicinity of Hong Kong Island, was added to the colony. Again, in 1898 after the signing of the Convention of Peking, a territory of almost 100 km2 was leased for ninety-nine years to the British authorities, which resulted in a twelve-fold increase of the size of the colony. Secondly, radical landscape transformations were carried out during this period. Unquestionably, the post-war urban development on the hillsides of Kowloon and Hong Kong Island, and the subsequent New Town scheme taking place in the New Territories from the 1970s onward, display landscape transformations at much larger scales when it comes to the number of buildings and the scale of infrastructure built, as well as in terms of displaced population. However, and despite their smaller sizes, Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon peninsula are prominent examples of colonial landscapes. Shaped by the complex mechanisms of cultural and scientific appropriation, they are largely the product of nineteenth-century environmental transformations, best symbolizing colonial domination. The same cannot be said of the New Territories which from the early 1900s constituted an exception in many respects.5

5 James Hayes, The Great Difference: Hong Kong's New Territories and Its People, 1898–2004 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006), 22–27.

The broad definition of landscape embraces both physical realities of a given territory as well as values and meanings attributed to natural elements through symbolic representations. Drawing from this concept, the present investigation proposes to distinguish two components that concomitantly perform any landscape transformations. First, physical transformations are the result of very specific practices within a specific geological, hydrological, ecological, and climatic context. Operating within cultural realms but relying on technical and objective knowledge, these practices include, for instance, agricultural methods, water and forestry management, land reclamation, terracing, and levelling hills. Second, these practices are guided, justified, or opposed by many discourses. Mixing scientific production of objectivity with cultural references and representations, discourses vary between historical periods, among stakeholders, and depending on expertise. This methodological approach aims at bypassing the opposition between scientific objectivity and cultural subjectivity. It allows, furthermore, for a juxtaposition of both British and Chinese landscape practices and discourses, as equally legitimate understandings of the environment, which is particularly important in a colonial context.



Fig. 3.
The Tanka and Hokklo communities lived on their boats their entire lives.
Colonial Office
Chekwan Deep Bay Kowloon
1898
The National Archives, Kew, U.K.

6 Alexander Dalrymple, *Observations on the South Coast of China and Island of Hainan* (London: William Ballintine, 1806), 17.

7 Believed to refer to what is known today as the Aberdeen Harbour.

8 In Chinese: 香港仔.

9 Dalrymple, Observations on the South Coast of China and Island of Hainan, 21.

10 John Macleod, Narrative of a Voyage, in His Majesty's Late Ship Alceste, to the Yellow Sea, along the Coast of Corea, and through Its Numerous Hitherto Undiscovered Islands, to the Island of Lewchew; with an Account of Her Shipwreck in the Straits of Gaspar. (London: John Murray, 1817), 20.

11 Along with Basil Hill and Henry Ellis, both were members of the diplomatic mission led by Earl Amherst who "was chosen to proceed to Peking as British envoy, to represent to the Emperor Kea K'ing [Jiaqing] the wrongs which British subjects were suffering under his rule". This extraordinary embassy eventually failed because Lord Ahmerst refused to perform the 'kowtow', or 'ko-tou', which he considered degrading. Robert Kennaway Douglas, "Amherst William Pitt," ed. Sidney Lee, Dictionary of National Biography, 1885–1900 (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1904), Wikisource.

THE ORIGIN OF THE BARREN ROCK: DISCOVERING HONG KONG'S VERNACULAR LANDSCAPES

The earliest published descriptions of Hong Kong in English date to 12, 13, and 14 February 1764 when Captain Walter Alves of the ship London "hauled to the ESE, to go to the Northward of the Island of Heong-kong, and At 6 PM, the Tide being done, anchored in 6 Fath. mud, distant from Heong-kong about a mile".6 Not many details are given regarding natural features, but the presence of a fresh water source on the south side of the island is mentioned in later travellers' logbooks. This particularity seems to have first appeared in a letter from Mr Howel to Mr Gordon dated 10 September 1793 and titled "Harbour of He-ong-kong": "Opposite to this Place, the Tide flows up a low Valley on the Island Ching-fang-Chow [former name of Hong Kong island on the charts], into which a large Stream of fresh water descends, which may be approached with any sized Boat at high water." In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the island was famous to sailors for its supply of fresh water and its friendly inhabitants, eager to sell their products to foreigners. Ships regularly visited the Pokfulam waterfall and replenished their stocks at the nearby town of 'little Hong Kong',8 later renamed Aberdeen (Fig. 8). Ironically, the same letter indicates that the British might not have been the first to rename this place as it "appears to have been unknown until Capt. Kendrick (an American) entered it in September 1792; he revisited it in February 1793, and named it Port Independence". 9 The lack of vegetation was recorded for the first time when naval surgeon John Macleod "passed on to an anchorage among the Hong Kong islands" in 1816 and noted how "few places present a more barren aspect than these islands."10 Another member aboard H. M. S. Alceste, 11 botanist Clark Abel offered a relatively more detailed description:

The general surface of the mountain, and indeed of every part of the island of Hong-kong that I was able to visit, is remarkably barren, although in the distance it appears fertile, from a fern which I believe to be the *Polypodium trichotomum* of Kaempfer, which supplies the place of other plants.¹²

The absence of trees is found in many precolonial descriptions of the island and was later confirmed by early 1860s photographs of the colony (Figs 3, 4, 5, and 9). If there is no doubt that Hong Kong was effectively stripped of mature vegetation, it is relevant to investigate the reasons behind such particularity. Why was the island, and in fact most of the coast, clear of any forest? Which livelihood and beliefs justified such environmental management?

During the late eighteenth century and for most of the nineteenth century, the territory was largely shaped by local livelihood and managed according to the geomantic principles of fengshui.13 Part of a long scholarly tradition and divided into several schools of thought across China, fengshui can be understood as "a system for the placement of either the dead or the living to ensure good fortune".14 It relies on two distinctly Chinese principles: the imperative of "the nourishment of the spirit of the dead" 15 which arises from a Confucian society, 16 and the correlative cosmology 17 or analogous ontology 18 of traditional Chinese philosophy. Fengshui can be defined as a "cosmology applied to the study of landforms and the art of sitting buildings and burials"19 which is based on the relationship between astrological principles and specific landscape features, such as the shape of hills or the curvature of rivers. Often regarded as mere superstition by mid-nineteenth-century Western scholars, local inhabitants of precolonial Hong Kong took great pride in consulting fengshui specialists and thoroughly followed their recommendations for generations when setting out their houses, fields, and sacred woodlands.²⁰

Sometimes surrounded by walls, villages were generally composed of several parallel rows of brick houses and were ideally located at the foot of hills, backed by sacred woodlands.²¹ Facing winding waterways running through the valleys, they were separated from rice paddy fields by large open terraces for

12 Clarke Abel, Narrative of a Journey in the Interior of China, and of a Voyage to and from That Country, in the Years 1816 and 1817; Containing an Account of the Most Interesting Transactions of Lord Amherst's Embassy to the Court of Pekin and Observations on the Countries Which It Visited (London: Longman et al., 1818), 61.

13 Xiaoxin He and Jun Luo, "Fengshui and the Environment of Southeast China," Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture and Ecology 4.3 (2000), 213–34.

14 Michael John Paton, Five Classics of Fengshui: Chinese Spiritual Geography in Historical and Environmental Perspective, Sinica Leidensia 110 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 3.

15 Ibid., 90.

16 Michel Strickmann and Bernard Faure, *Chinese Magical Medicine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 21–23.

17 Paton, Five Classics of Fengshui, 93.

18 Philippe Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 287–88.

19 John B. Henderson, *The Development and Decline of Chinese Cosmology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 39.

20 Patrick H. Hase and Man Yip Lee, "Sheung Wo Hang Village, Hong Kong: A Village Shaped by Fengshui," in *Chinese Landscapes: The Village as Place*, by Ronald G. Knapp (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), 79–94.

21 Richard Webb, "The Use of Hill Land for Village Forestry and Fuel Gathering in the New Territories of Hong Kong," *Journal of the Hong* Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society 35 (1995), 144.

22 Stephen F. Balfour, "Hong Kong before the British: Being a Local History of the Region of Hong Kong and the New Territories before the British Occupation," Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society 10 (1970), 137.

23 Patrick H. Hase, *Custom, Land* and *Livelihood in Rural South China:* The Traditional Land Law of Hong Kong's New Territories, 1750–1950 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 11–12.

24 Balfour, "Hong Kong before the British," 138.

25 John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 151.

26 Ibid., 152.

rice drying and processing (Fig. 2). Less fertile land on low hillsides was used for other forms of agriculture. The local population was divided into several ethnic groups according to their places of origin and dialects. The best land was often farmed by Cantonese-speaking Punti — literally meaning local people — who mostly immigrated from the neighbouring province of Guangzhou during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). Less desirable grounds were left to the Hakka who came from various other maritime provinces such as Fujian or Shandong and did not speak Cantonese.²² The rest of the landscape — mostly steep hills and mountaintops — was bare of any mature vegetation as grass and shrubs were regularly collected for fuel.²³ Bays provided natural shelters for the Tanka and the Hokklo communities, which remained on boats their entire lives (Fig. 3).²⁴ They lived off trade and fishing as they were not allowed to farm. Beaches provided a point of encounter where markets and temples were often erected. The resulting landscape was an agricultural one, shaped by traditional Chinese values and the daily practices of local inhabitants (Fig. 4).

In a 1984 publication, geographer J. B. Jackson defines the vernacular land-scape as "a scattering of hamlets and clusters of fields, islands in a sea of waste or wilderness changing from generation to generation, [...] an impressive display of devotion to common custom and of an inexhaustible ingenuity in finding short-term solutions". Based on his study of European and American landscapes, this description also applies to the environment encountered by nineteenth-century travellers and early British colonists. What Jackson calls "waste or wilderness" in Western cultural terms corresponds to the unproductive grassland that formed most of the territory. Furthermore, since fengshui was a respected field of study practised by regional experts, much of the local folklore and superstition characterized Hong Kong's rural life. In that sense, its landscapes can be described as vernacular. "Land [...] meant being a member of a working community; it was a temporary symbol of relationships". Today, the ruins of these past landscapes are still found in some parts of the New Territories and are commonly referred to as 'vernacular' by activists and intel-

lectuals advocating for their preservation from the constant threat of urban and infrastructural development.

However, archaeologists have revealed that agricultural landscapes are relatively new in the history of Hong Kong's human occupation. Recent progress in paleo-environmental sciences allows the partial reconstruction of prehistoric landscapes. Archaeologists believe that the first inhabitants most likely arrived in Hong Kong approximately 5000 years ago following the displacement of the coast, which was located 200 km south by the end of the last Ice Age.²⁷ Prehistoric communities settled systematically on sandy back beaches above shallow lagoons fed from small streams. Although no known remains of prehistoric boats have been unearthed, they might have lived off fishing and hunted game in surrounding forests. Palms, bamboo, bananas, fresh water roots, and tubers constituted main sources of starch.²⁸ It is even believed that agriculture was not practised until the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127),²⁹ and that coastal settlements might have been occupied only seasonally as "no definite house structures or settled village sites have been found in Hong Kong".³⁰

The island entered Chinese history after it was conquered by the Han Dynasty in 111 BCE, with little impact on local livelihood. Despite remaining largely uninfluenced by Chinese culture, progressive integration into the empire encouraged economic development of coastal industries such as pearl-fishing³¹ and salt and lime production.³² It is only after approximately 900³³ that clans from Guangdong province — later identified as Punti — were rewarded with land by the authorities, and introduced rice farming and features of Chinese culture such as language and geomancy.³⁴ Only a series of immigration waves, from prehistoric hunter-gatherers to Cantonese-speaking Han, is found when searching for the vernacular throughout the history of human occupation in Hong Kong. Each group developed specific technological and cultural practices in order to manipulate the existing environment and to adapt it to their cosmological and physiological needs, from seasonal fishing to rice agriculture, and

27 William Meacham, *The Archaeology of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), 77, 81–85.

28 Mick Atha and Kennis Yip, *Piecing Together Sha Po Archaeological Investigations and Landscape Reconstruction* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2017), 42–44.

29 "Some indications of prehistoric manipulation of certain local plants were found at Sha Ha (AMO 2005), but the first convincing evidence for the establishment of rice-farming communities in Hong Kong still dates to the Northern Song." Ibid., 39.

30 Meacham, *The Archaeology of Hong Kong*, 115.

31 Xianglin Luo, Hong Kong and Its External Communications before 1842: The History of Hong Kong Prior to British Arrival (Hong Kong: Institute of Chinese Culture, 1963), 7.

32 Ancient kilns have been unearthed all over Hong Kong by archaeologists but there is no consensus as to which industry they served. See: Hugh Cameron, "Discussion of Tang Lime Kilns at Sham Wan Tsuen," in Archaeological Investigations on Chek Lap Kok Island, ed. William Meacham, Hong Kong Archaeological Society Journal Monograph 4 (Hong Kong: HKAS, 1994), 223–30.

33 Ken M. A. Barnett, "Hong Kong

from Bronze Age petroglyphs to fengshui woodlands.

Similarly, the profound transformations caused by British colonization could be understood as yet another immigration wave, and they likewise adapted the existing landscape to their needs. However, following Jackson's definition again, the political, legal, and scientific rationalizations behind these alterations are radically opposed to processes of vernacular landscape production. Colonization and its environmental transformations are more appropriately associated with what Jackson calls "Landscape Two", or "the political landscape": "those spaces and structures are designed to impose or preserve a unity and order on the land"35 and "to be self-contained and shapely and beautiful. [...] Landscape Two insists on spaces which are homogeneous and devoted to a single purpose". 36 Indeed, and contrary to vernacular practices, scientific discourse, experts' prescriptions, and progressive views on improvement played key roles in the production of colonial landscapes. A key feature noted by Jackson that fits the colonial context of nineteenth-century Hong Kong is that Landscape Two "makes distinctions between city and country, between forest and field, between public and private, rich and poor, work and play; it prefers the linear frontier between nations rather than the medieval patchwork of intermingled territories".37

before the Chinese," Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch 4 (1964), 43.

34 Balfour, "Hong Kong before the British," 136.

35 Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, 150.

36 Ibid., 152.

37 Ibid., 152.

38 Susanna Hoe and Derek Roebuck, The Taking of Hong Kong: Charles and Clara Elliot in China Waters (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), 158.

COLONIAL ANXIETIES: MIASMA, RAVINES, AND FLOODS

The earliest record of the expression 'a barren rock' is found in a letter dated 21 April 1841 addressed to Captain Charles Elliot, her Majesty's plenipotentiary to China responsible for the taking of Hong Kong. Lord Palmerston, then Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, "borrowing from the letter in the Times, coined the immortal words about Hong Kong 'a barren island with hardly a House upon it'". 38 This formula later became, by contrast, a symbol of colonial success. But in the 1840s and 1850s, much uncertainty surrounded the future of the newly acquired island. Firstly, this was the result of unstable political

and economic relationships with Imperial China. This was partially mitigated by the signing of the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, which officially recognized British sovereignty over Hong Kong. Secondly, the considerable number of deaths that tropical diseases inflicted on settlers and soldiers was a major source of anxiety: "Numerous were the intimate friends and companions who were cut off, during the sickness and mortality which occurred in the summer of 1843 at Hong-Kong; scarcely a house that was not visited by death, none in which sickness was unknown". 39 Influenced by the variety of medical theories that existed simultaneously in the second half of the nineteenth century, experts relentlessly speculated on the causes of this unusually high mortality rate. For botanists, such as Robert Fortune, the lack of vegetation emerged as the main source of miasma — believed to be the prevailing cause of contagious disease before microbes were discovered — converting the vernacular landscapes into a threat to the colony: "I have always thought that, although various causes may operate to render Hong-kong unhealthy, yet one of the principal reasons is the absence of trees and of the shade which they afford".40 Many other

39 Arthur Augustus Thurlow Cunynghame, An Aide-de-Camp's Recollections of Service in China, a Residence in Hong Kong, and Visits to Other Islands in the Chinese Seas (London: Saunders and Otely, 1844), vol. 2, 84.

40 Robert Fortune, A Journey to the Tea Countries of China Including Sung-Lo and the Bohea Hills; with a Short Notice of the East India Company's Tea Plantations in the Himalaya Mountains (London: John Murray, 1852), 5.



Fig. 4. View of a typical vernacular landscape of Hong Kong with its barren hilltops, Fengshui woodland in the forefront and village facing fields and a bay Colonial Office, *Panorama Kowloon*, 1898, The National Archives, Kew, U.K.

natural features of the island were also held responsible for its insalubrity. For instance, in his report to Prime Minister Lord Stanley, Hong Kong's first Treasurer, surgeon, and amateur geologist, R. M. Martin, identified the nature of the rocks as the ultimate source of the problem:

Gneiss and felspar are found in fragments; that the granite is rotten and passing, like dead animal and vegetable substances, into a putrescent state, is evidenced from the crumbling of the apparently solid rock beneath the touch, and from the noisome vapour which it yields when the sun strikes fervidly on it after rain. On examining the sites of houses in Victoria, whose foundations were being excavated in the sides of the hills, the strata appeared like a richly prepared compost, emitting a fetid odour of the most sickening nature, and which at night must prove a deadly poison.⁴¹

The hardships of the climate, such as heat, harsh sunlight, and heavy rains, also contributed to these detrimental effects: "When it was not blowing or raining, the heat was intolerable; and we all suffered more or less in health from its evil effects." Martin saw an insurmountable obstacle in the combination of both:

This strata quickly absorbs any quantity of rain, which in it returns to the surface in the nature of a pestiferous mineral gas. The position of the town of Victoria [...] prevents the dissipation of this gas, while the geological formation favours the retention of a morbific poison on the surface, to be occasionally called into deadly activity. There is no extent of marsh on the island capable of generating miasm; but the heavy rains are annually washing large portions of the mountains through deep ravines into the Bay, and thus continually exposing a fresh rotten surface to the sun's rays, and preserving a focus of disease which will finally become endemic.⁴³

- 41 Robert Montgomery Martin,
 "Report on the Island of Hong
 Kong," Papers relating to the Colony
 of Hong Kong, Reports, Minutes and
 Despatches, on the British Position
 and Prospects in China (Hong Kong,
 24 July 1844), 4.
- 42 Laurence Oliphant, *Narrative of* the Earl of Elgin's Mission to China and Japan in the Years 1857, '58, '59 (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood, 1860), 64.
- 43 Robert Montgomery Martin,
 "Section V Hong Kong," in The
 British Colonies: Their History, Extent,
 Condition, and Resources, Vol. 6,
 Ceylan, East India and Mediterranean
 Settlements, 6 vols (London: London
 Printing and Publishing Co., 1851).

The choice of site for the new city of Victoria, located on the north-western coast of Hong Kong Island, was also suspected of participating in the deleterious air quality. The hills immediately behind the settlement "[screen] it during the summer from the prevailing winds, the south-west, they cause it to be very hot, not allowing a breath of air to circulate freely through the streets."



Fig. 5.
John Thomson
Praya or Des Voeux Road,
Hong Kong
c. 1868
Wellcome Collection. CC BY

The difficulties met by the British and the anxiety over the success of the colonial project supported arguments in favour of the island's abandonment. The taking of Hong Kong by Captain Charles Elliot was highly controversial and created much uncertainty about the colony's future, chiefly owing to diplomatic tensions with China and severe health issues suffered by the colonizers. Many considered his request to the Qing Emperor a worthless retribution for the First Opium War and would have much preferred to demand the opening of more trading ports along the Chinese coast, or the concession of land in strategically located cities such as Amoy or Shanghai. This position was supported by R. M. Martin, who, after listing all possible natural disadvantages, summarized

44 Cunynghame, An Aide-de-Camp's Recollections of Service in China, 75.

his argument in these words:

Hong Kong is a barren rock producing nothing, not leading to any place [...]. The limited size, and rocky nature of the island; the absence of agriculture, manufactures or commerce, and the fluctuating and predatory character of the population, forbid the hope of an income being raised.⁴⁵

However, many early colonists did not share the treasurer's views and saw Hong Kong as an opportunity. In his introduction letter to Martin's report, Governor J. F. Davis "regret[s] the strength of expression which Mr. Martin has made use of in this paper" and concludes: "I cannot give the sanction of my opinion on its general tenor". 46 Indeed, most experts expressed optimistic views regarding the future of the colony and called for perseverance. According to botanist Robert Fortune: "Already a great improvement has taken place in the houses of the merchants, and in the barracks of the soldiers, and the results have been most satisfactory. But the colonists must not stop at this stage in their improvements". 47

Several opium merchants, such as the famous company Jardine Matheson & Co., had supported Elliot in his decision to seize the island and make it the centre of British trade with China. In order to develop commercial opportunities and ensure military success to this profitable enterprise, a natural obstacle had to be overcome: topography. The steepness of the terrain restricted the amount of land available for construction and effectively inhibited the growth of the city: "the island is small; but moreover, unfortunately, it is very mountainous, rendering thereby sites for buildings exceedingly difficult to obtain". The lack of flat land after the first auction of 1841 encouraged harbour-side lessees to extend their properties by reclaiming linear strips over the sea. This practice was soon made illegal and, to encourage land speculation, reclamation quickly

became a government monopoly. Similar to today, collecting rent from land lea-

ses and sales was already the principal source of revenue for the government.⁴⁹

45 Martin, "Report on the Island of Hong Kong," 11, 12.

46 Ibid., 3.

47 Robert Fortune, Three Years' Wanderings in the Northern Provinces of China, Including a Visit to the Tea, Silk, and Cotton Countries; with an Account of the Agriculture and Horticulture of the Chinese, New Plants, Etc. (London: J. Murray, 1847), 16.

48 Cunynghame, An Aide-de-Camp's Recollections of Service in China, 73.

49 Roger Nissim, Land Administration and Practice in Hong Kong, 4th edn (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016), 11.

In 1851, the first reclamation scheme consisted of filling a small creek in the Bonham Strand area. It was followed by smaller interventions where shallow bathymetry was found and filling material was readily available. By 1886, the City of Victoria exhibited nearly 8 km of reclaimed land along its north coast averaging a width of 100 m.⁵⁰ Protected by sea walls, these so-called *Prayas* allowed public loading and unloading of ships, thus attracting many commercial activities (Fig. 5). Land reclamation over the harbour culminated with the

50 Michael C. Guilford, "A Look Back: Civil Engineering in Hong Kong 1841– 1941," Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society 37 (1998), 86.

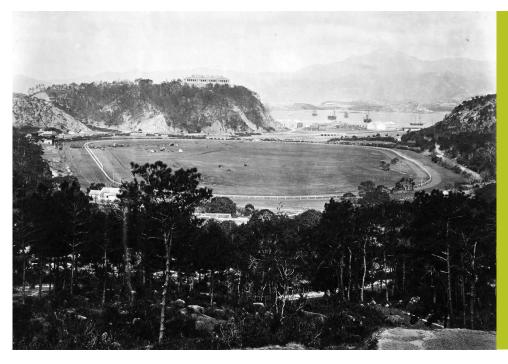


Fig. 6.

Morrison Hill seen from across
Happy Valley and the Race course
Colonial Office
Race Course Hong Kong
c.1869
The National Archives, Kew, U.K.

adoption of the Praya Reclamation Ordinance in 1904 and eventually lead to the Praya East Reclamation Scheme. Proposed by interested businessman and Executive Council member Paul Chater, the scheme created 36 ha of flat land in the district of Wanchai. Initiated in 1921 and completed in 1929, filling the shallow bay eventually required the blasting and levelling of nearby Morrison Hill, which has completely disappeared today (Figs 6 and 7).⁵¹ Besides the steep topography and lack of flat land, health remained the main obstacle to colonial

51 Adam Anderson and Harnold T. Creasy, "Praya East Reclamation Scheme Final Report," Special Report 1931 (Hong Kong: Public Works Department, 13 June 1930), 3–11.

progress for much of nineteenth-century Hong Kong. Sensitive to the severe mortality rate experienced by colonists and soldiers, debates around environmental transformations relentlessly focused on the improvement of public health. After 1880 the "growing consensus in medicine that most diseasegerms were 'bacteria'", and the definition of "the germ theory of disease" in 1881, changed the recommendations made by the Colonial Surgeon regarding water management:

It is possible that the existence of a large amount of subsoil water [...] may have something to do with the development of malarious fevers,

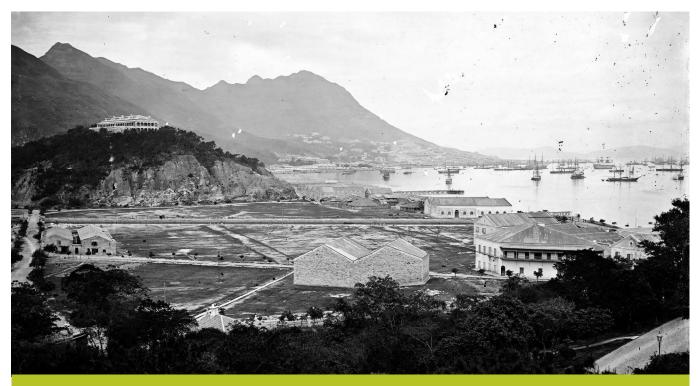


Fig. 7. From East Point, Bowrington canal surrounded by newly reclaimed land with Morrison Hill in the background John Thomson *The harbour, Hong Kong,* 1868 25.5 x 30.5 cm, glass photonegative, wet collodion Wellcome Collection. CC BY

which, according to universal popular repute, invariably prevail whenever the surface is disturbed by excavation.⁵²

In 1843 drainage works began as one of the responses to prevent destruction caused by flash floods during heavy rainfalls. Drains originally consisted of large open channels called nullahs, such as Stone Nullah Lane in Wanchai or the Bowrington Canal in Causeway Bay planned in 1842 (Fig. 7).53 Drainage eventually became compulsory for homes in 1896 with the implementation of building regulations⁵⁴ as a consequence of the major plague outbreak of 1894.⁵⁵ With steep slopes and a granitic geology, the island of Hong Kong lacks rivers, lakes, or any major subterranean water source. Traditionally, local inhabitants depended on stream run-off and wells, sometimes supplying water to their homes and fields through bamboo aqueducts. 56 In 1848 the government only spent a negligible part of its budget to supply water, and in 1851 the drilling of five wells was planned, but only four were reported the following year.⁵⁷ At the time of Governor John Bowring (1854–1859), many private companies started to invest in public utilities, such as electricity supply or public transport. However, due to high construction costs and long-term investments, the government had to take on the task of supplying water. Consequently, on 14 October 1859, the Colonial Secretary announced the prize of \$1000 "for the best and most practicable Scheme for providing the City of Victoria with constant and sufficient supply of pure water."58 It was awarded in 1860 to British engineer S. B. Rawling, who proposed to build a thirty-million-gallon reservoir and dam in the Pokfulam Valley, located immediately above the previously mentioned waterfall (Fig. 8). The project was completed in 1863, when the population of Victoria reached 86,000 and the reservoir could supply only four days of water to the community, making it highly inadequate. 59 To increase storage capacity, the first dam was raised in 1877 and a second reservoir was built in the Tai Tam Valley between 1883 and 1888.

The improvement of health was not only reserved for medical professionals,

52 Osbert Chadwick, "Report on the Sanitary Condition of Hong Kong," Further Correspondence on Sanitary Condition of Hong Kong (House of Commons Sessional Papers, 1 January 1882), sec. 1, para. 5.

53 Guilford, "A Look Back," 91.

54 Cecilia Chu, "Combating Nuisance: Sanitation, Regulation, and the Politics of Property in Colonial Hong Kong," in *Imperial Contagions: Medicine, Hygiene, and Cultures of Planning in Asia*, ed. Robert Peckham and David M. Pomfret (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 17–36.

55 Guilford, "A Look Back," 92.

56 Auguste Borget and Eugène Ciceri, *La Chine et les Chinois: dessins exécutés d'après nature* (Paris: Goupil & Vibert, 1842), fig. 3.

57 He, Water for a Barren Rock, 11.

58 William Thomas Mercer, "Government Notification No. 98," *The Hong Kong Government Gazette* 5.230 (15 October 1859), 60.

59 He, Water for a Barren Rock, 20.

Founding the Barren Rock





60 Fortune, *Three Years' Wanderings* in the Northern Provinces of China, 15–16.

61 Ibid., 16.

62 Matthew Pryor, "Street Tree Planting in Hong Kong in the Early Colonial Period (1842–98)," Journal of Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society 55 (September 2015), 34. such as the colonial surgeon or hospital staff; its severity also required the involvement of many other experts. Among them were botanists such as Robert Fortune, who identified the lack of "trees or bushes" 60 as a potential source of harm. He thus recommended, when first visiting Hong Kong in 1843, "to clothe the hill-sides in and around the town with a healthy vegetation; let them plant trees and shrubs [...] in every place available for such purposes". 61 Until the 1860s, planting was mostly limited to roadsides and "was undertaken using local Chinese labour, with eleven-foot-high tree specimens bought from horticultural nurseries in Canton".62 In 1864, Hong Kong Botanical Gardens opened under Governor Hercules Robinson (Fig. 9). In 1871, Governor Richard McDonnell named British botanist Charles Ford as Superintendent of the Botanical and Afforestation Department. He collected seeds, developed nurseries, experimented with different sowing methods, and performed acclimation tests for imported species such as the Australian eucalyptus. Ford exchanged with botanical gardens and experts from all over the British Empire, and sent many specimens to the Royal Botanic Gardens of Kew in England. He was instrumental in the afforestation of the colony, planting millions of trees over the hillsides surrounding the city of Victoria. Overall, indigenous plants resulted most effectively in afforesting the colony, as banyans were systematically planted alongside roads, and an indigenous pine, Pinus sinensis, thrived on most steep slopes.

NATURE'S BIAS: WASTELAND, PRODUCTIVITY, AND APPROPRIATION

These largescale physical transformations of the landscape characterized the early development of the colony and were designed to facilitate colonization against a series of natural disadvantages: the tropical climate, deadly fevers, insufficient fresh water sources, and an absence of forests. On a more discursive level, however, these improvements participated in the enforcement of colonial power and set the basis for the construction of a colonial society. For instance, traditional landscape practices carried out by local inhabitants were regularly associated with natural calamities. Again, based on miasma theories,

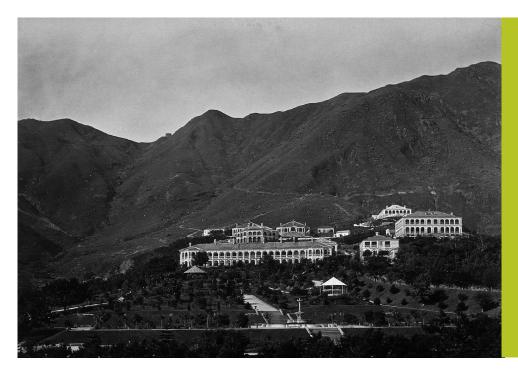


Fig. 9.
William Pryor Floyd
Hong Kong: Botanical Gardens
and Albany, looking south from
Government House
c. 1873
20 x 25 cm, photoprint, albumen

Wellcome Collection. CC BY

rice cultivation and its extensive use of stagnant water was perceived as a threat even before the role of mosquitoes in malarial fever was discovered:

[I]n a valley called by the Chinese, Wang-ni-chong, or the 'Valley of the Winding Shore'; most of them [the houses] have as yet proved very unhealthy, and in consequence been little inhabited. This I believe to be chiefly owing to two causes, [...] partly by reason of the paddy cultivation which still exists in the valleys in their vicinity, and secondly from the neighbouring hills being encumbered with shrubs and tangled woods, miasma from the paddy-fields and decayed vegetation being extremely prejudicial to health.⁶³

The Wong Nai Chung valley, ironically named Happy Valley, "proved to be very unhealthy; and the Government, supposing that the malaria might proceed from the water necessary to bring the crops to maturity, prohibited the natives from cultivating them, and set about draining the land".⁶⁴ Regardless of the scientific accuracy behind this decision, most of the fields were drained and replaced by a horse race course which still remains in the same location today (Fig. 6). This large environmental transformation of the vernacular landscape was an economic tragedy, as by 1845 "villagers were complaining that, with the prohibition on rice cultivation, they were forced to make a living from cutting grass on the hills nearby and were entirely unable to pay the high rent now demanded by the government".⁶⁵ It was, moreover, also a major symbol of colonial power; horse racing was not part of the local tradition. Even more than agricultural practices, the lack of vegetation was systematically blamed on the locals and they rapidly became the largest threat to afforestation. In 1848 Robert Fortune also commented on this local practice:

63 Cunynghame, An Aide-de-Camp's Recollections of Service in China, 76–77.

64 Fortune, Three Years' Wanderings in the Northern Provinces of China, 7.

65 Munn, Anglo-China, 94.

In a communication which I had the honour to make to the Government here in 1844 I pointed out this circumstance [the absence of trees and the shade which they afford], and strongly recommended them to preserve the wood then growing upon the island from the Chinese, who were in a habit of cutting it down annually, and at the same time to plant extensively particularly on the sides of the roads and on the lower hills. [...] The Pinus sinensis, which is met with on the sides of every barren hill, both in the south and north of China, and which is generally badly used by the natives, who lop off its under branches for fuel, is here [Dent's Garden] growing as it ought to do. The Chinese have been prevented, not without some difficulty, from cutting off the under branches, and the tree now shows itself in its natural beauty.⁶⁶

According to Fortune, the Chinese were to be held responsible for the desolation of the land, and consequently for aggravating the spread of epidemics. As Robert Peckham established in his historical analysis of colonial afforestation, "the destruction of the forests is attributed to the negligent Chinese", 67 instituting a natural divide between colonizer and colonized. Early botanical experts claimed the primeval forest that ought to be covering the land of this tropical coast had been prevented for centuries by Chinese misconduct. "There is a moral dimension to this landscape; efforts to surmount physical impediments with assiduous labour acquire an ethical tinge". 68 The "task of afforesting the colony was conceived as an attempt to surmount the 'deficiencies' of Hong Kong's 'waste lands'". 69 In fact, the concept of wasteland cited here from John Pope Hennessy's *The Governor's Report on the Blue Book* 70 plays a central role in the production of colonial legitimacy. In her historical investigation, Vittoria Di Palma explains the significance of this notion for seventeenth-century England and its political importance during the Enclosure Movement:

Because improvement was framed as both an economic and moral imperative, wasteland was not merely lands that had not yet been improved, but was in fact understood as land that was in need of — and even calling out for — improvement. Thus, England's barren and mountainous tracts and the un-colonised areas of the globe were equally

66 Fortune, A Journey to the Tea Countries of China, 5, 7.

67 Robert Peckham, "Hygienic Nature: Afforestation and the Greening of Colonial Hong Kong," *Modern Asian Studies* 49.4 (2014), 17.

68 Ibid., 17.

69 Ibid., 8.

70 John Pope Hennessy, "Governor's Report on Blue Book," *Hong Kong Administrative Reports*, 29 April 1881, para. 128.

identified as wastelands — a formulation that ultimately was used to legitimise both enclosure and the colonial enterprise. 71

Reproducing the English model, the barren aspect of the landscape was progressively, and quite automatically, perceived as a wasteland and therefore demanded improvement. The local Chinese farmers, often blamed for their ignorance and superstitions, had neglected the potential offered by Hong Kong's natural assets. The British then stood on the side of nature, equipped with scientific knowledge as heirs to a long tradition of landscape improvement from the Enclosure Movement in England. This particular form of colonial legitimization is clearly evidenced by George Newenham Wright in his description of Hong Kong Island:

The maximum length of the isle is about eight miles, its breadth seldom exceeding five; its mountains of trap-rock, are conical, precipitous, and sterile in aspect, but the valleys that intervene are sheltered and fertile, and the genial climate that prevails gives luxuriance and productiveness to every spot, which, by its natural position, is susceptible of agricultural improvement.⁷²

Interestingly, in this extract the annexation of the island ceases to be a bitter miscalculation or strategic mistake, as R. M. Martin lamented in his pamphlet against the keeping of Hong Kong; the island is instead naturally fertile and productive, making it a suitable addition to the imperial dominions and naturalizing it as a British possession:

A rugged ridge of lofty granite hills, rising almost sheer out of the waters of the estuary of the Canton River [...] Hongkong is well fashioned by Nature to serve as an outpost of the British Empire in the Far East.⁷³

71 Vittoria Di Palma, *Wasteland: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 39.

72 Thomas Allom and George Newenham Wright, *China in a Series* of Views, Displaying the Scenery, Architecture and Social Habits, of That Ancient Empire (London: Fisher, Son, & Co., 1843), 17.

73 Wright and Cartwright, *Twentieth Century Impressions of Hong Kong*, 145.

G. N. Wright never visited Hong Kong and his texts are largely based on accounts from other travellers' publications or field notes. Although his writings cannot provide reliable historical accuracy, they present the advantage of best revealing the mechanisms behind the elaboration of colonial legitimacy. Amid a fierce controversy about the annexation of Hong Kong, Wright's romanticized sceneries often praise the merits of the island as a sort of patriotic justification for a British audience. In the following passage selected from among many other examples, the geology, so terribly blamed as the source of all evil by R. M. Martin, evolves into an abundant supply of building material and potential revenue:

[T]here is a valuable export of granite [...] found in huge debris scattered over the level and the lower regions. As there is not necessity for

74 In particular his co-author, the English architect Thomas Allom, who provided the illustrations for this publication.

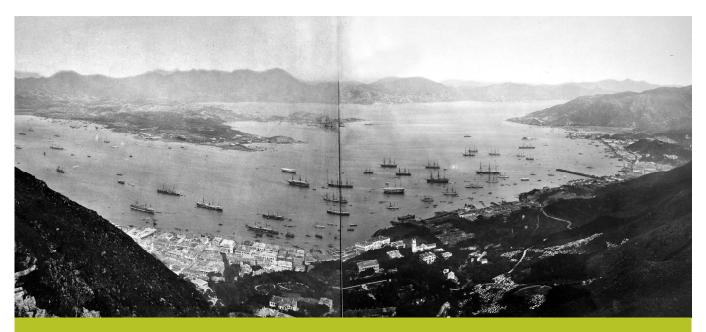


Fig. 10. View of the harbour of Hong Kong from Victoria Peak Colonial Office, *Hong Kong 1890's*, 1890, The National Archives, Kew, U.K.

blasting or quarrying [...] it only remains for the labourer to hew or split each bolder [...] in a manner long practised by the granite hewers on the shores of Dublin bay [...].⁷⁵

Here Wright, relying on his Irish origins, projects his own observation of stone-cutters in Dublin onto this foreign and mysterious island, rendering it recognizable, almost familiar. This cultural familiarization, which finds its scientific equivalent in the universality of natural laws, is part of a mechanism of appropriation, making its occupation a natural fact. With a similar optimism, some descriptions of Hong Kong aimed at depicting a naturally welcoming environment. Favourable natural features were celebrated by enthusiastic colonists in order to legitimize their presence. For example, the morphology of Victoria Harbour, the channel separating Hong Kong Island from the Kowloon Peninsula, announced a prosperous future and was later designated as "the raison d'etre for Hong Kong's foundation" (Fig. 10). The Already recorded in eighteenth-century logbooks as a "safe place to run into the approach of a Ty-foong", The its advantageous nature promised great success to the nascent colony:

75 Allom and Wright, *China in a Series of Views*, vol. 1, 18–19.

76 Guilford, "A Look Back," 86.

77 James Horsburgh, *Directions for Sailing to and from the East Indies, China, New Holland, Cape of Good Hope, and the Interjacent Ports* (London: Black Parbury, 1811), 267.

78 Osmond Tiffany, *The Canton Chinese: Or, The American's Sojourn in the Celestial Empire*, Nineteenth Century Books on China (Boston: J. Munroe and Co., 1849), 261.

Hong Kong for some years to come is likely to be the centre of British trade; it is eligibly situated, and easily defended. Ships can get into harbor, or out again, with almost any wind, and the passages are so narrow that a vessel could be riddled with balls and sunk in the waters at a moment's warning.⁷⁸

Beyond practical trade and military convenience, the harbour was a natural call for imperial aspirations as patriotically emphasized by aide-de-camp Arthur A. Cunynghame in his *Recollections*:

The harbour is one of the best in the world, containing sufficient anchorage ground for all the fleets in the universe, with a depth of water averaging from seven to ten fathoms. This is naturally the cause why

Hong-Kong was chosen as the most appropriate spot for the greatest maritime nation in the world, and a dwelling-place for her most adventurous of children.⁷⁹

Analogous to Wright's exaggerations of Hong Kong's productivity, Cunynghame's taste for conquests finds in its generous harbour the argument to naturalize British presence. Here, it is not the familiarity with the universal qualities of agrarian societies that turn the island into a familiar place but it is the military superiority of a nation that justifies the occupation. The following section investigates further the role played by aesthetic values and cultural projections in the construction of discursive legitimization of colonization.

FEELING AT HOME: ROMANTIC SENSIBILITY AND SCOTTISH GLENS

The rapid transformation of what used to be a quiet and largely unknown harbour, included the rather new and incongruous spectacle of hundreds of ships anchored in its waters. Their presence was the manifestation of Hong Kong's new role within the British imperial commercial and military network. The view of the harbour, appreciated both by visitors from their ships and by residents from the top of Victoria Peak, became a symbol of success and the object of numerous poetic descriptions:

Those who have anchored in the Bay of Hong-kong by moonlight will agree with me that the scene at such a time is one of the grandest and most beautiful which can be imagined. On this evening the land-locked bay was smooth as glass, scarcely a breath of air fanned the water, and as the clear moonbeams played upon its surface it seemed covered with glittering gems. Numerous vessels, from all parts of the world, lay dotted around us, their dark hulls and tall masts looming large in the distance. The view was bounded on all sides by rugged and barren hills, and it required no great stretch of fancy to imagine oneself on a highland lake.⁸⁰

79 Cunynghame, An Aide-de-Camp's Recollections of Service in China, 73.

80 Fortune, A Journey to the Tea Countries of China, 3.

With a similar pride to that of Cunynghame, Fortune's poetic depiction abounds in superlatives: "grandest", "most beautiful", "from all parts", and "on all sides". He highlights the concentration of wealth present in the harbour: "glittering gems" and "vessels from all parts of the world". However, beyond the celebration of grandeur, Fortune emphasizes the vague and illusory character of the scene. He describes the view at night, which by then could only be appreciated under clear moonlight, where the distinction between real and fantastic is blurred. This description starts and ends with the word "imagine", creating an atmosphere much like a dream or a memory. Details are barely perceptible: "smooth", "scarcely", "seemed covered", "dark hulls", "looming [...] in the distance". This particular accentuation of imagination and creativity over the cold facts of reality as a source of poetry is emblematic of the Romantics. If Robert Fortune imagines a highland lake, others have dreamed of a more Mediterranean Hong Kong: "Hong-Kong and its adjacent island reminded me forcibly of the Grecian Archipelago, possessing the same rocky appearance, and springing out of the water in the same fantastic shapes".81

Writers who visited or settled in Hong Kong and eventually published their narratives brought along a very particular literary style and aesthetic taste. Most of them were — if it cannot be ascertained that they had read previous explorers' accounts on China or even Hong Kong — at least aware of the literary aesthetic of their time. In mid-nineteenth-century England, as in many other European countries at that time, authors and artists saw the world through a Romantic lens (c. 1789–1832),⁸² which also became the lens through which they perceived and judged the landscapes of Hong Kong. Romantic poets and painters had a very particular appreciation of nature. While the development of the natural sciences during the Enlightenment had radically transformed the relationship with the natural environment to one determined by universal laws, Romantics longed for the mysticism and powerful imagination of medieval times. Descriptions of nature, both visual and literary, often fell into two categories. The powerful and humbling forces of storms and volcanoes, the

81 Cunynghame, An Aide-de-Camp's Recollections of Service in China, 82.

82 Michael Ferber, *Romanticism: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short
Introductions 245 (Oxford: Oxford
University Press, 2010), 15.

danger of mountains and seas, provoked a sense of sublimation. Associated with terror and vastness, the sublime was often celebrated as a symbol of masculinity and bravery. It was generally opposed to the beauties of the picturesque which displayed more familiar, serene, and gentle landscape views of curved hills, farmed valleys, and well-tended countryside. Despite its inhospitable aspect, the barren island was often described in picturesque terms:

This last [Shek Pai Wan village] is beautifully situated, in a romantic and land-locked deep harbour, towards the south, and contains about 200 houses; on a small island, facing this town, is a joss-house, which spot is the frequent rendezvous of pic-nic parties from Victoria.⁸³

The impression left by Hong Kong's vernacular landscapes on the first British settlers was not one of unexplored wilderness: "What a contrast betwixt this scenery and the hills and valleys of Java, where I had been only a few days before!" Even before colonization, British visitors had recognized the serene beauties of Hong Kong's natural environment. The rocks and their ornamental crown of greenery seemed to have reminded British naturalist George Bennet, who visited the island in 1832, of some eighteenth-century landscape painting:

On the 10th we were off Hong Kong Island. It is lofty, bold, and occasionally its barren appearance is diversified by the verdure of the ferns and other plants, which give some beauty to the huge piles of rocks, towering towards the heavens in gently sloping as well as abrupt declivities.⁸⁵

Nothing in his scientific exploration of the island, while searching for species previously identified by Clark Abel, seems to have inspired the least sense of danger: it was merely "lofty", and "diversified". Even the "bold" appearance and the "abrupt declivities" are nothing but an occasional bareness. More than fifteen years earlier, Ellis made a similar description of a welcoming place. Usually, waterfalls are associated with the sublime forces of nature

83 Cunynghame, An Aide-de-Camp's Recollections of Service in China, 78.

84 Fortune, Three Years' Wanderings in the Northern Provinces of China, 2.

85 George Bennett, Wanderings in New South Wales, Batavia, Pedir Coast, Singapore and China: Being the Journal of a Naturalist in Those Countries, during 1832, 1833 and 1834 (London: Richard Bentley, 1834), 18.

in explorers' literature, but here the ease of supply and access to water is highlighted: "The situation of the watering place is picturesque. A stream of water falls down the mountains forming the island, and the casks may be filled when the tide serves, close to the beach." "Beach." "picturesque" waterfall is nothing of a danger, and its approach is recommended to future visitors. "Beauty" and "picturesque" are aesthetic categories used to tame and civilize the foreign landscape of Hong Kong. Much later, R. N. Wright further exploited picturesque aesthetics in the context of the controversy over its colonization:

Few areas so limited include so many scenes of sylvan beauty as the sunny island of Hong-kong. The country immediately behind Queentown is peculiarly rich in romantic little glens, or in level tracts, adorned with masses of rocks, in the fissures of which the noblest forest-trees have found sufficient soil for their support.⁸⁷

He makes full use of picturesque qualities and romantic imagination to overstate the natural beauties of the island. This description seems opposed in every point to all the anxieties and difficulties met by early colonists. All the qualities and beauties of a traditional English agrarian landscape are used in Wright's texts as a counter argument to failure and hardship threatening colonial progress, and are intended to render the landscape if not more familiar, at least easier to appreciate. While Cunynghame imagined a Grecian archipelago when navigating the waters of Hong Kong, the analogy with a highland lake made by Fortune is much more commonly found, as many other British have imagined themselves in a Scottish landscape:

The scenery reminded me forcibly of that of the N. W. coast of Scotland; and if, instead of vessels with mat sails, painted bows, and high trelliced sterns, there had been compact boats, with well-set tanned canvas spread to the breeze, the association would have been complete.⁸⁸

86 Henry Ellis, Journal of the Proceedings of the Late Embassy to China; Comprising a Correct Narrative of the Public Translations of the Embassy, of the Voyage to and from China, and of the Journey from the Mouth of the Pei-Ho to the Return to Canton (London: John Murray, 1818), 85.

87 Allom and Wright, *China in a Series of Views*, 33.

88 Granville G. Loch, *The Closing Events of the Campaign in China: The Operations in the Yang-Tze-Kiang and Treaty of Nanking* (London: J. Murray, 1843), 18.

The detailed description of a typical Scottish coastal scenery when travelling to Hong Kong by a member of the military participating in the First Opium War demonstrates the power of imagination. However, the resemblance was already noted by Basil Hall in 1816, before the conflict with China and before Hong Kong had become a British possession. One night, Hall was magically transported to Scotland while describing the harbour; to him, "it seemed as if the ships had been transported by some magical process to the centre of a solitary lake, lying in the bosom of a Highland glen."⁸⁹

The darkness of the night contributes to the "magical" process of imagination. In a lecture delivered on 5 November 1872, Reverend James Legge remembered his first impression of Hong Kong: "[W]hen we had passed Green Island, I contemplated the ranges of hills on the north and the south, embosoming, between them the tranquil waters of the bay. I seemed to feel that I had found at last the home for which I had left Scotland; and here has been my abode, with intervals occupied by visits to the fatherland, for nearly thirty years. ⁹⁰

This allusion to Scotland reveals that, rather than being a literary trope systematically copied from previous readings, the natural resemblance between Hong Kong and some parts of the coast of Scotland favoured a specific visual appreciation of the Chinese vernacular landscape. Similar to Reverend Legge, British settlers, when imagining a Highland glen, probably looked for a sense of familiarity and reassurance, a feeling of aesthetic comfort, an approximation of home. Seeing Hong Kong as Scottish was probably an attempt to create, at least symbolically, a safe haven on the other side of the globe, right at the edge of what had been for centuries a powerful and hostile empire. Similarly, when Laurence Oliphant accompanied Lord Elgin during the Second Opium War, Scottish landscapes appeared on his way to Canton⁹¹ in the midst of diplomatic tensions and constant military threats:

The scenery in the immediate neighbourhood of Hong-Kong, and for

89 Basil Hall, Voyage to Loo-Choo, and Other Places in the Eastern Seas, in the Year 1816: Including an Account of Captain Maxwell's Attack on the Batteries at Canton; and Notes of an Interview with Buonaparte at St. Helena, in August 1817 (London: Constable & Co., 1826), 23.

90 Rev. James Legge, "The Colony of Hong Kong," *Journal of Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 11 (1971), 172–93.

91 Today Guangzhou.

the first eight or ten miles after leaving it [on 6 July 1857], is not unlike that of Western Highlands of Scotland. We dexterously steered between high grassy islands, round sharp corners, past little hamlets at the end of secluded bays, and through narrow devious channels, till at last we might fancy ourselves threading the Kyles of Bute, instead of Capshui-Moon [...].⁹²

FOUNDING THE MYTH: EMPTY LANDS, COLONIAL MIRACLES, AND HYBRIDITY

However effective the natural resemblance between Hong Kong and Scotland was, this cultural projection also participated in the process of colonial appropriation. If the discourse of improvement allowed the alienation of local Chinese farmers from their territories and naturalized the colonial presence, landscape appreciation was also a way to incorporate Hong Kong into Romantic aesthetic categories, make it more British, and therefore less Chinese. Colonial domination, other than through more direct forms of violence, often relies on a series of complex discursive mechanisms that relentlessly strive to produce legitimacy. In this respect, the absence of forest, first observed by sailors and scientists before colonization and then used by Lord Palmerston to disapprove of the possession of the island, offered a solid base for the construction of a powerful colonial myth: the barren rock. During the early decades of colonization, this botanic and ethnographic fact was recurrently used in opposition to colonial success:

Perhaps no place in the history of ages can boast of such a rapid rise as the town of Hong-Kong. In August, 1841, not one single house was yet built, not a portion of the brush-wood had been cleared away from this desolate spot. By June, 1842, the town was considerably more than two miles long, containing store-houses and shops, here called "Godowns," in which almost every article either Eastern or European could be procured,

92 Oliphant, Narrative of the Earl of Elgin's Mission to China, 43.

and most of them, at not very unreasonable prices.93

The inhospitality of the island argued by R. M. Martin in favour of abandoning Hong Kong, increasingly became, by contrast, a marker of prosperity for the optimists:

When it is remembered that six years before Hong-kong was but a barren island, with only a few huts upon it, inhabited by pirates or poor fishermen, it is surprising that in so short a time a large town should have risen upon the shores of the bay containing many houses like palaces, and gardens, too, such as this, which enliven and beautify the whole, and add greatly to the recreation, comfort, and health of the inhabitants.⁹⁴

In his remembrance of early colonial beginnings, Rev. James Legge celebrated the triumph of "human energy and skill" over the "difficulties of natural position". ⁹⁵ Early colonists' emphasis on desolation, infertility, and natural hazards was first used to glorify their victory over challenging beginnings, later developing into more elaborate colonial narratives. Aiming at making Hong Kong better known to British investors and tourists, an early twentieth-century publication provides one of the first iterations of what could be called a foundation myth:

It was in the year 1839 that the British, driven from Canton by the persecution of the Chinese and denied asylum in Macao, were compelled in their adversity to seek refuge in the sheltered haven of Hongkong. At that time the barren inhospitable appearance of the island seemed to preclude any hope of a permanent settlement. ⁹⁶ [...] Upon this Captain Elliot gave orders for the removal of the entire fleet to Hongkong, the splendid harbour of which had in years immediately preceding been frequently used by British vessels. ⁹⁷

93 Cunynghame, An Aide-de-Camp's Recollections of Service in China, 83.

94 Fortune, A Journey to the Tea Countries of China, 9.

95 Rev. James Legge, "The Colony of Hong Kong," 175.

96 Wright and Cartwright, *Twentieth Century Impressions of Hong Kong,* 145.

97 Ibid., 48.

This historical account is particularly powerful in reversing the relationship between England and China regarding the unfair outcomes of both Opium Wars, but more particularly effective at dissimulating what was a hardly justified conquest. Just as Moses crossed the Sinai, Capt. Elliot led homeless British merchants, persecuted in China and rejected in Macau, to the "sheltered haven" of Hong Kong. However inaccurate, this narrative finally stabilizes the myth of the barren rock by attributing a double function to its "inhospitable appearance". It simultaneously emphasizes the tremendous achievements of colonization while making Elliot a sort of biblical saviour, pacifying the debate around its achievements. More than half a century later, this historical interpretation did not, however, completely reverse the public image of Capt. Elliot, who remained largely dishonoured. Even in the last decades of colonial rule, his name was not found in any public square, official building, or on the pedestal of any statue. To effectively erase all traces of illegitimate invasion, this myth transforms Hong Kong into a natural refuge, necessarily empty when found. However, vernacular landscapes were a constant reminder of Chinese affiliations and their foreign practices. In order to delegitimize their claims, it was necessary, if not physically, at least symbolically, to dispossess them.98 While exploring the gendered dimension of colonial dispossession in other contexts, Anne McClintock designates this narrative as the 'myth of empty lands':

98 This was legally achieved by declaring all land property of the Crown and only issuing leases of limited tenure. Nissim, Land Administration and Practice in Hong Kong, 4.

99 Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York:
Routledge, 1995), 30.

The myth of the virgin land is also the myth of the empty land, involving both a gender and a racial dispossession. [...] Within colonial narratives, the eroticizing of "virgin" space also effects a territorial appropriation, for if the land is virgin, colonized peoples cannot claim aboriginal territorial rights, and white male patrimony is violently assured as the sexual and military insemination of an interior void.⁹⁹

Hong Kong landscapes were only occasionally identified with a specific gender in British travellers' and colonists' literature: "It was provoking that a place

possessing so many scenic attractions should have been so entirely devoid of other charms. Like a beautiful woman, with a bad temper, Hong Kong claimed our admiration while it repelled our advances". However, in Romantic aesthetic categories, the picturesque landscapes of the island and its numerous scenic beauties were considered traits inherently feminine. Together with scientific objectification and moral imperative for improvements, they participated in a discursive process of dispossession. McClintock's explanation helps to understand how the symbolic emptying of the land worked in tandem with delegitimizing the natives:

Since indigenous peoples are not supposed to be spatially there — for the lands are "empty"—[...] [they] do not inhabit history proper but exist in a permanently anterior time within the geographic space of the modern empire as anachronistic humans, atavistic, irrational, bereft of human agency — the living embodiment of the archaic "primitive". 101

This was not only true for cutting trees or farming rice in 'malarious' paddy fields, but also applies to local superstitions and practices such as fengshui, which were often ridiculed or reprobated. For indigenous inhabitants, the observation of geomantic principles was related to their ancestry and guided their fate. Disturbances to the local fengshui seemed detrimental to them and numerous confrontations resulted from the authorities' disregard. Its importance is such that even today its principles are integrated into contemporary planning and architectural projects. Ernest Eitel, a preeminent German sinologist who served the colonial government in the last decades of the nineteenth century, recalls the case of Gap Road:

When the Hongkong Government cut a road, now known as the Gap, to the Happy Valley, the Chinese community was thrown into a state of abject terror and fright, on account of the disturbance which this amputation of the dragon's limbs would cause to the Feng-shui of Hongkong;

100 Oliphant, Narrative of the Earl of Elgin's Mission to China, 65.

101 Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 30-31.

and when many of the engineers, employed at the cutting, died of Hongkong fever, and the foreign houses already built in the Happy Valley had to be deserted on account of malaria, the Chinese triumphantly declared, it was an act of retributory justice on the part of Feng-shui. 102

Several accounts depicted the Chinese belief as a sign of backwardness, hindering colonial progress. During the construction of the Beacon Hill tunnel "it proved very difficult to persuade local workers to work underground inside the tunnel because of fung shui [sic] objections". However, advised by experts such as Eitel, the colonial government saw the respect of *fengshui* as an opportunity to better legitimize its actions:

When foreign residents of Hongkong began to build villages in Pok-foollum (which Feng-shui declares to be the best site of the island), when the Government began to build a reservoir there, when tanks were built on the north side of Hongkong, and the hill-side studded with trees, when the cutting of the earth was forbidden in places where there is much decomposed rock, the Chinese in all of these cases supposed foreigners to know more about Feng-shui than they would tell, and the Surveyor General was put down as a profound adept in Feng-shui. 104

102 Ernest John Eitel, Feng Shui, or, The Rudiments of Natural Science in China (London: Trübner, 1873), 2.

103 Kowloon-Canton Railway Corporation & MTR Corporation Limited,
"One Hundred Years of Railway
Operations in Hong Kong" (Hong
Kong, 2010), 11.

104 Eitel, Feng Shui, or, The Rudiments of Natural Science in China, 3.

Among the various discursive strategies employed by the British to legitimize their power, the partial — as it did not constrain development — adoption of fengshui principles by the colonial authorities offers an interesting case of cultural hybridization. Indeed, not only did environmental transformations and their justifications involve the cultural imposition of European scientific, aesthetic, and moral imperatives, but Hong Kong was also a point of cultural encounter where hybrid discourses formed. For instance, Robert Peckham notes in his study of afforestation how colonial officials discussed the possibility of exploiting the cultural significance of Chinese garden aesthetics to prevent the locals from cutting newly planted trees:

Ford's suggested creation of a 'Japanese or Chinese tea garden' as a focal point to attract visitors [...] is to create a colonial picnic ground made safe from marauding Chinese woodcutters by the construction of idealized Asian topographic features (Chinese or Japanese), and the presence of patrolling forest guards.¹⁰⁵

Furthermore, the case of the quarrying industry in the nineteenth century exemplifies a sort of non-interventionist approach. Quarrying was a traditional activity that mainly remained in the hands of the Chinese after colonization. ¹⁰⁶ The district of The Four Hills was regionally famous for its quarries where "it appears that for ten years the French had been permitted to quarry stone [...] for the Roman Catholic cathedral in Canton, apparently ending in 1885". ¹⁰⁷ As "an early British report of 1844 states: 'The stone cutters have been working here for many years before our arrival'". ¹⁰⁸ For this reason, and probably because they benefitted from the growing construction boom, little was done by the authorities to alter this practice.

CONCLUSION

After investigating the livelihoods behind the precolonial landscapes of Hong Kong and discussing their categorization as vernacular, this article explored encounters between British visitors and settlers during the first few decades of colonization. Recurrently, they considered natural features — topography, geology, and climate — as obstacles to the colonial endeavour which in part justified large environmental transformations such as reclamation, afforestation, and the construction of reservoirs for water supply. However, nature also played an important role in the construction of colonial narratives and its advantages — such as a generous harbour — were praised by optimistic colonists, who saw Hong Kong as a natural certainty. Furthermore, the framework of Romantic aesthetic categories when describing nature, and in particular the

105 Peckham, "Hygienic Nature," 1200.

106 "The quarrying business was dominated by local Chinese and there were few occasions of exception in the industry. Chinese customs were fused into the British administration and technology in the practice of quarrying during the first hundred years"; Sun Wah Poon and Koon Yiu Ma, "Report on The History of Quarrying in Hong Kong 1840-1940" (Hong Kong: The Lord Wilson Heritage Trust, August 2012), 20.

107 James Hayes, Hong Kong Region, 1850-1911: Institutions and Leadership in Town and Countryside; with a New Introduction (Hamden: Archon Books, 2012), 153.

108 Ibid., 154.

frequent allusion to the picturesque beauties of the island, indicate the need of familiarity with the foreign landscapes of Hong Kong, often associating them with the Scottish coast. Finally, through scientific objectification, moral imperative for improvement, and aesthetic considerations, the nature of Hong Kong, and in particular the lack of vegetation, offered a solid foundation to colonial narratives. First celebrating the success of the British enterprise in contrast with an assumed original sterility, the formula later supported a powerful foundation myth. The latter simultaneously provided a justification for British presence while delegitimizing the local Chinese. This simplistic opposition of the British and Chinese needs to be nuanced through the exploration of several cases of cultural encounters, in which European landscape culture was not one-sidedly imposed onto the locals. As a matter of fact, in many cases, hybrid discourses were produced by colonial authorities.

This historical enquiry into the formation of Hong Kong's landscape identity is particularly relevant today. As noted by several scholars, the decades after 1997 are characterized by a collective search for cultural identity and uniqueness. ¹⁰⁹ This is particularly evident through the multiple social movements advocating for the conservation of buildings and intangible heritage. From colonial architecture to the specificity of the Cantonese dialect, conservation claims have recently been associated with debates around Hong Kong's cultural uniqueness and, to some extent, its independence from the rest of China. ¹¹⁰ Introduced by international activists and experts in the 1980s, the protection of local ecology has been brought to the attention of the government and is now a public concern. Over the past fifteen years, the preservation of natural assets, and more interestingly the conservation of landscape heritage primarily in the New Territories, appeared in various protests as a form of resistance against speculative or infrastructural development, sometimes associated with political contestations. ¹¹¹

109 Ackbar Abbas, Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997), 4.

110 Sebastian Veg, "Cultural Heritage in Hong Kong, the Rise of Activism and the Contradictions of Identity," *China Perspectives*, 15 April 2007.

111 Images purchased with the support from the Centre André Chastel.

Maxime Decaudin analyses the role of nature in the process of colonization in Hong Kong through descriptions of landscapes produced by nineteenth-century visitors, travellers, and settlers. The author traces the origin of the expression "barren rock", which was used to refer to the island's supposed lack of vegetation, discusses its implications and uses it as the starting point for his contribution to the history of environmental changes in Hong Kong. From a viewpoint that avoids simplistic oppositions between nature and culture, the article explores the first encounters between colonists and natural environment and how landscape depictions could play distinct roles in the construction of colonial narratives, working as a mechanism of legitimization for the British colonial project and with implications for land appropriation and dispossession. Decaudin also presents cases of cultural encounters that provide hybrid landscape interpretations, and questions simplistic assumptions of European cultural imposition in Hong Kong.