

Life and Death of Kowloon Walled City

Antonín Brinda

The text you are about to read speaks about the island of Hong Kong which is by itself an exceptional place with a very specific history. There is (or maybe better to say was) nevertheless an arguably even more interesting island located within the territory of Hong Kong: Chinese enclave called Kowloon Walled City (KWC). What surrounded this 'island' was not water but „larger territory whose inhabitants are culturally or ethnically distinct“ (Oxford Dictionary's definition of enclave). Though in this case, the situation is somewhat more complicated, as KWC – officially part of China – was at the time surrounded by another piece of land formerly also belonging to China – British Hong Kong. Therefore one might say that a part of China was surrounded by another part of China, but that would be a quite a simplification. Decades of British domination had a significant impact on Hong Kong as well as unexpected juridical implications strongly influenced the nature of KWC. It is then legitimate to talk about KWC and Hong Kong as two entities, quite distinct from both each other and Mainland China, the smaller one strangely inserted into the body of its bigger neighbor.

Let us explore together this unique 'island' and its 'waters'.

The paper aims to shortly introduce the history of an urbanistic phenomenon of Kowloon Walled City (KWC) which until 1993 had been located in the territory currently known as Hong Kong (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China). In the four parts of the article, I will look upon (1) the establishment and development of Kowloon City (Sung Dynasty - 1847), (2) the birth of the Walled City within the Kowloon City area (1847-1945), (3) the post-Second World War period during which the City received its reputation and the nickname 'City of Darkness' (1945-1993), and (4) the concurrent afterlife following the City's demolition in 1993 (1993-now).

The paper intends to serve as a brief introduction to the topic of KWC for the reader unknowledgeable of the phenomenon. The Ariadne's thread through this essay is the symbol of *the wall* physically appearing and disappearing throughout the history of Kowloon Walled City.

Establishment and development of Kowloon City (Sung Dynasty [960-1297] – 1847)

It was during the Sung Dynasty (960-1297) when the salt-field town named Kuan-fu Ch'ang was established on what is nowadays known as the Kowloon peninsula. To secure the salt business, an erection of a small fort followed shortly. In the year 1668 a signal station was built and a garrison of 30 men was installed. The wheels of history started to turn more significantly for Kuan-fu Ch'ang (or as it was locally and since 1840 also officially called Kau Lung Shing [Kowloon City]) and its surroundings in 1841 when, during the First Opium War, the British began their occupation of the island of Hong Kong. As a result, the Chinese decided to strengthen their defence in Kowloon City neighbouring the island. In 1843 the City began its era as a „war machine“ (Liau: 157). A significantly larger number of soldiers were transferred there and an important deputy magistrate (*yamen*) was established. Even more importantly, in 1847 the newly built wall around the City gave birth to the name Kowloon *Walled City*.

To fortify the strategically located settlement was not only a logical decision from a military point of view but also a continuation of a way in which Chinese cities were traditionally built for centuries. Just to show two small examples: historian Stephen Turnbull begins his book on Chinese fortified cities with the sentence: „China possesses the world's longest tradition of fortified buildings and settlements...“ (Turnbull: 4). Similarly the very beginning of researcher Sen-Dou Chang's article on the morphology of Chinese walled cities states, „Historically the Chinese seem to have been a wall-building people“ (Chang: 63). Not only capitals and major cities but almost every small village had its protective wall built around it (Turnbull: 6). In Chinese the word *cheng* means both the city and the wall (Turnbull: 5).

In other words – surrounding the settlement of Kowloon City with the wall meant to, in a way, legitimize it as a proper city, even though the size of 'the city' was very small. According to the *Hongkong Guide* article from 1893, as quoted by Wilkinson, one could walk around the whole city in five minutes (Wilkinson: 61). Indeed the whole area was not bigger than 6,5 acres (or 0,026km²).

Birth of Kowloon Walled City (1847-1945)

As a result of the Second Opium War in 1860, the southern part of the Kowloon peninsula was ceded to Britain with Boundary Street set as the borderline. As KWC was located north from this border, it stayed within the Chinese territory and under the Chinese jurisdiction.

While order and cleanliness ruled inside the fort, the opposite was to be found in the settlement surrounding KWC where the population was increasing. The poorly developed neighborhood/slum of Kowloon City outside of the KWC walls became famous for its „brothels, opium parlours, and gambling dens“ (Wilkinson: 61) and other crime. During 1890s the situation culminated and became a thorn in the eye of the British due to its proximity to the colonized territory.

Another breakthrough year was 1898 when the so-called New Territories – the areas north of Boundary Street - were leased to Britain by the Chinese for 99 years. Even though the British had succeeded in taking over the infamous piece of land surrounding KWC, due to series of errors and confusions during the negotiations over KWC (Wilkinson: 63-66), the Walled City itself has never officially become part of the British territory. The conflict over the City escalated when the British attacked the fort in 1899 only to find it abandoned: „Fata morgana – invasion of a phantom entity.“ (Liauw: 157).

After over a year of arguing, both sides somehow lost interest in the City inside the walls. The emptied City with unclear jurisdiction began to deteriorate and became a tourist attraction – „a little bit of Old China“ (Wilkinson: 66). Schools and churches were built inside the City, though the squatters outside stayed and even increased in numbers to the annoyance of the British. Some of them also began to dwell within the ruins of the City itself.

By the 1933 decision of British Hong Kong, 436 squatters inside the City were removed, and in subsequent years most of the City itself was destroyed by the British „apart from the Lung School, the *yamen* and one private house“ (Wilkinson: 67). Interestingly enough, during the clearance of the squatters, the Chinese officials 'remembered' that the Walled City is a Chinese sovereign enclave and encouraged its habitants to continue living inside, though unsuccessfully.

The final blow came in 1940 with the Japanese occupation when the wall, the *cheng* of Kowloon Walled City itself, was dismantled and used for the construction of an airport runway. The village-sized Kowloon Walled City was not lucky enough to have its *cheng* built hundreds of years ago as other (bigger) settlements. During its relatively short life span, the most important function of KWC's wall was arguably its role of demarcation – a solid physical border clearly distinguishing the limits of the two cities/countries.

Before 1898 the walls of the City behind the bamboo fence on Boundary Street signified another national entity. After the 1898 Second Convention of Peking, the walls became to stand for an urban international anomaly. A miniature Chinese enclave within Hong Kong – the Chinese territory occupied by Britain – that was not fully acknowledged as such by the British, had become an unclear no-man's land.

Let us also keep in mind the difference between the inside and the outside of the fort. While the army morale within the Walled City withstood - at least until 1899 when the City's garrison left – the squatting areas around were infamously dirty, both in literal and metaphorical sense. This changed with the beginning of the century after the fuzzy agreement between the British and the Chinese, decline of the City and even the partial collapse of some of its fortification. The City had become significantly more permeable. In a sense, the Japanese destruction of the wall in 1940 only confirmed what had been in the air for the last couple of decades. The city lost its status as an honourous fort, and the loss of the *cheng* was only a logical conclusion of that deterioration.

City of Darkness (1945-1993)

It might seem that, with no inhabitants and its walls teared down, the days of the Walled City were numbered after the Second World War, yet the opposite was true. Backed by the Chinese government once again claiming the Walled City as its legitimate enclave, an unprecedented amount of refugees escaping the Chinese Civil War (1945-1949) started to fill the City. The empty territory was quickly inhabited with new dwellers/squatters, who did not need the physical protection of the city walls but the legal right for dwelling in the territory outside Mainland China. It was the invisible wall created by the law which gave birth to the 'City of Darkness'.

In the end of the 1940s, British Hong Kong failed to remove the squatters from the city like it had succeeded in 1934. In order to keep up a good relationship with China, Britain took a more „hands-off“ approach (Wilkinson: 67). The strenght of the Chinese crime syndicates (triads), which had already been operating in the area of Kowloon for decades increased by the beginning of 1950s. KWC was left without the protection of official law (despite the official proclamations of the Chinese government at the time they in fact did not care about the City that much). The crime - such as prostitution, gambling, and dealing of opium, heroin and other drugs - flourished with the development of a rather anarchic construction of buildings. It was also a booming time for unlicensed shops and businesses such as food producers or doctors – especially dentists.

From 1959 onward the British police finally started to pay closer attention to what was happening 'inside' after a precedential case of murder which was said to have happened within the limits of the Walled City. It was an important breakthrough as the conditions in the ungoverned City were becoming unbearable. From the side of China there were no objections against the increased presence of the British in the City during the 1960s and 1970s.

In 1984 the end of the lease to the British for the New Territories was approaching. The Sino-British Jointed Declaration signed that year resulted in the return of not only the New Territories but the whole of Hong Kong to China in 1997. In relation to this shift in power, a decision was also being made about the 'dark spot' of Hong Kong – Kowloon Walled City. Both the British and the Chinese governments simultaneously announced in January 1987 the decision to demolish the whole area. They carried out and finished the destruction in the year 1993. Citizens of KWC were provided with new subsidized dwellings.

Though the wall disappeared, the specific juridical situation of the City led people not to expand outside its limits. A new unofficial wall was made out of high-rise buildings enclosing the City and leaving only several narrow pathways leading inside. There were no border patrols or anything the like, and it was easy to enter this strangely walled city through one of its 'gates'. On the contrary, to leave the newly built labyrinth was much more difficult, especially for the outside visitors.

With the self-built houses reaching 14 storeys (which did not go higher only because of the height regulations required by the nearby Hong Kong Kai Tak Airport) jammed into one another. The 'City of Darkness' was the most densely populated place on the planet, far denser than any of its competitors. Compare for example the data provided by Liauw:

„KWC average	13,000 persons per hectare
New York City	91 persons per hectare
KWC average	3,75m ² per person
Corbusier's biological unit	14m ² per person“ (Liauw: 154)

Challenging living conditions of the City were not caused only by its hyperdensity. Narrow alleys filled with garbage (and even dead bodies: „Some days there would be so many bodies you could hardly walk through.“ [Wilkinson: 68]), the smell, the constant dripping of water, and the often absolute lack of sunlight, together with criminal activities, gave the city its new nickname.

When searching for sources about KWC, especially while browsing the internet, one bumps into a myriad of articles romanticizing and celebrating the 'City of Darkness' and its aesthetics, futuristic/dystopic feel, and anarchic nature. The uncritical approach towards the hyperdense KWC

seems fallacious to me. Often the argument goes that there were not only criminals living in the City but also 'normal' people, as if the presence of non-criminals would wipe off the existence of crime.

As noticed by Alistair Fraser and Eva Cheuk-Yin Li, the authors of the essay *The second life of Kowloon Walled City: Crime, media and cultural memory* (Fraser – Cheuk-Yin Li), there is a big difference between how KWC was perceived during its existence and after its demolition. Giving an example from cinema history, Fraser and Cheuk-Yin Li note that, while before its destruction, movies referencing KWC presented it as a „backdrop for crime and lawlessness“ (Fraser – Cheuk-Yin Li: 225), those made after 1993 tend to represent the City „as a symbol of nostalgic communality“ (Ibid.). Indeed there is a difference between being confronted with a ghetto with more than 30,000 habitants and the memory of it.

Present day (1993-present)

After the uncompromising wipe off of the area, the former City was used to build a new „Kowloon Walled City Park“ (finished in 1995) which since then has offered its visitors „a chance to appreciate the beauty of nature in a place where the darker side of human nature once flourished“ (Hong Kong Tourism Board) as it reads in the promotional website *Discoverhongkong.com*. A rather insensitive (but in terms of hygiene, very effective) solution to demolish the City and to replace it with a park area follows the current trend of „greening“ (Gandy: 152) the cities. Without searching for other, potentially more valuable, solutions urban areas are often being turned into parks or otherwise „greened“.

„Traces of the walled city“ (Hong Kong Tourism Board) – such as the old magistrate, *yamen* – can be found in Kowloon Walled City Park. It is nevertheless significant that what has been preserved were not the 20th century buildings, though architectonically very unique. Remnants of the original south gate, which were unearthed after 1993, represents the history of KWC together with the *yamen*. And indeed those are historical sights, but in the same way the 'City of Darkness' is part of the past. It seems as if not only the physical remnants but even the memory of the self-governed City had to be eradicated from the face of concurrent highly efficient Hong Kong.

The name of Kowloon Walled City has symbolically persevered unlike most of the City itself, including its wall. The walls of KWC were always defining it as a unique urban entity. Be it the old walls of the KWC fort built in 1847 and destroyed by Japanese, the walls created unintentionally by the mass of high-rises in the second half of the 20th century, or the invisible boundaries enforced by the law. Even those immaterial juridical walls disappeared in 1997 when Hong Kong was established as a special administrative region of China. Kowloon Walled City was gone.

Nevertheless its legacy is still very much alive – be it in memories, movies, literature, manga, fanfiction, cosplay, and even in a form of its own Kowloon Walled City amusement park built near Tokyo, Japan (Fraser – Cheuk-Yin Li). With the final disappearance of its walls, KWC became intangible. Similarly to the hero in *Ghost in the Shell* – manga and a series of subsequent anime movies set in a milieu strongly inspired by KWC – the City has entered the realm of omnipresence. Lacking the physical body, it lives in memories and endless cultural references finally free from the boundaries which have always defined it.

Bibliography

Ackbar, Abbas. 1997. *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Chang, Sen-Dou. 1970. „Some observations on the morphology of Chinese walled cities.“ *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 60(1): 63-91.

Fraser, Alistair – Cheuk-Yin Li, Eva. 2017. „The second life of Kowloon Walled City: Crime, media and cultural memory.“ *Crime Media Culture* 13(2): 217-234.

Gandy, Matthew. 2014. „From urban ecology to ecological urbanism: an ambiguous trajectory.“

Area 47(2): 150-154.

Girard, Greg – Lambot, Ian (eds). 1993. *City of Darkness: Life in Kowloon Walled City*. Hong Kong: Watermark Publications Limited.

Hong Kong Tourism Board. 2017. „Kowloon Walled City Park.“ *Discoverhongkong*. Accessed 2 December 2017. <http://www.discoverhongkong.com/ca/see-do/culture-heritage/historical-sites/chinese/kowloon-walled-city-park.jsp>

Leisure and Cultural Services Department. 2014. *Kowloon Walled City Park*. *Leisure and Cultural Services Department*. Accessed 2 December 2017. <http://www.lcsd.gov.hk/en/parks/kwcp/index.html>

Liauw, Laurence. 1995. „KWC FAR 12: Kowloon Walled City density study.“ In: *FARMAX: Excursions on density*, Winy Maas – Jacobs van Rijs – Richard Koek (eds.), 152-173. Rotterdam: 010 publishers.

Li Ho Yin, Leo. 2011. „Presence of Absence: Memory of the Kowloon Walled City.“ MA thesis in Architecture, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong.

Turnbull, Stephen. 2009. *Chinese Walled Cities 221 BC-AD 1644*. Oxford: Osprey Publishing.

Wilkinson, Julia. 1993. „A Chinese Magistrate's Fort.“ In: *City of Darkness: Life in Kowloon Walled City*, Greg Girard – Ian Lambot (eds.), 60-71. Hong Kong: Watermark Publications Limited.

List of figures



Figure 1: Map of Hong Kong in 1845 (Wilkinson: 62)



Figure 2: Kowloon Walled City in 1875 (Wilkinson: 61)



Figure 3: Kowloon Walled City during 1980s (<http://www.themysteryworld.com/2013/08/amazing-kowloon-city-13-pics.html>, Accessed 2 December 2017)



*Figure 4: still image from the anime Ghost in the Shell (Mamoru Oshii; 1995),
(<https://twolongfourtwitlonger.wordpress.com/2015/05/27/ghost-in-the-shell-1995/>)*