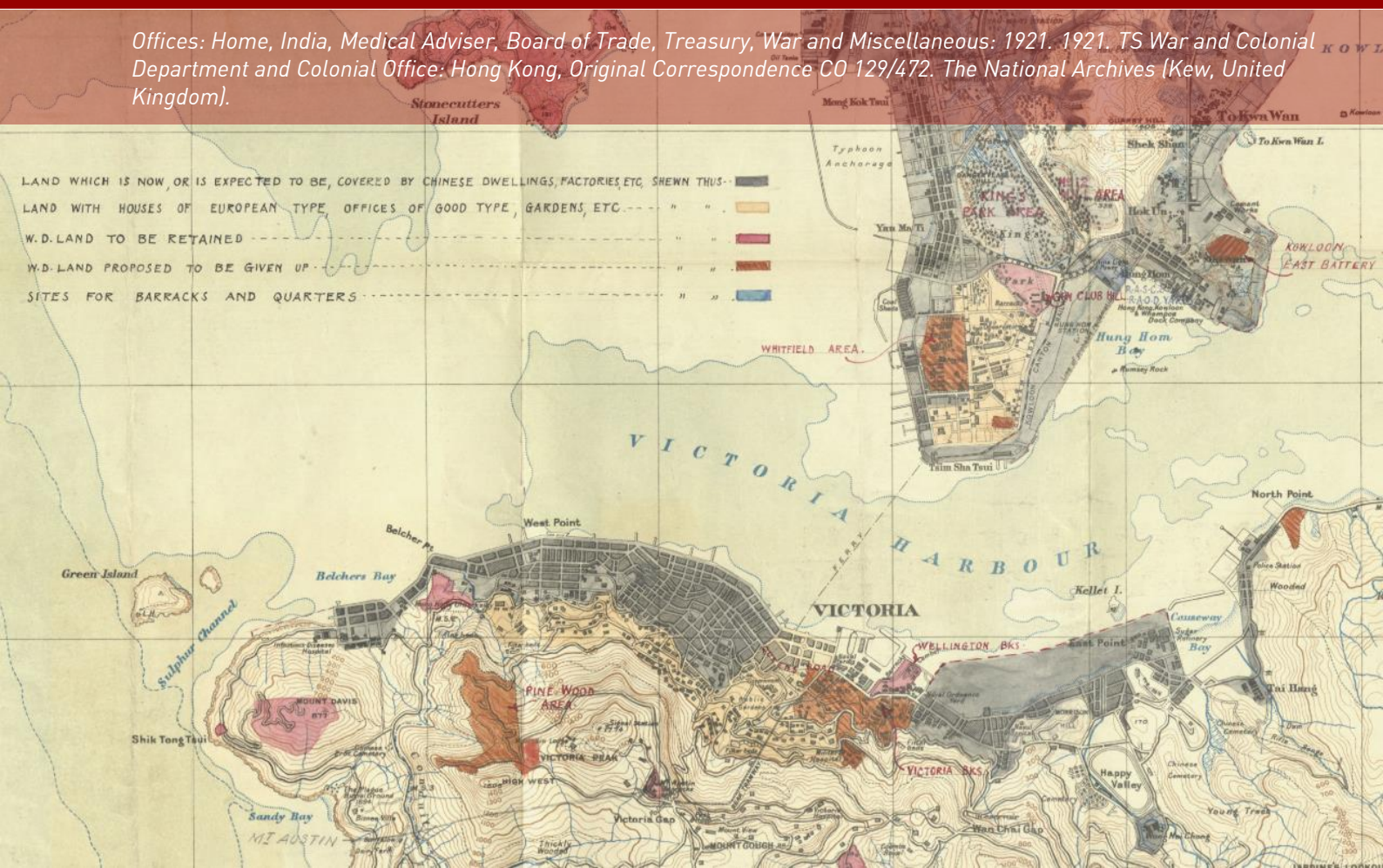


C0129 and Hong Kong's History

John M. Carroll

Professor of History,
Department of History, the University of Hong Kong

Offices: Home, India, Medical Adviser, Board of Trade, Treasury, War and Miscellaneous: 1921. 1921. TS War and Colonial Department and Colonial Office: Hong Kong, Original Correspondence CO 129/472. The National Archives (Kew, United Kingdom).



C0129 and Hong Kong's History

No collection of official documents is more useful than C0129 for understanding Hong Kong's history from January 1841, when Britain acquired the so-called "barren island" of Hong Kong Island during the Opium War, to 1951, not long after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in October 1949. Comprising mainly correspondence between the governor of Hong Kong and the Colonial Office in London, these documents cover more than a century of Hong Kong's history. They can be divided into four main periods, each crucial to the development of Britain's only Chinese colony, and of the evolving relationship between Britain and China: foundations (early 1840s-late 1800s); Hong Kong's role in the Chinese reform and revolutionary movements (late 1800s-early 1900s); the interwar years (1920s-late 1930s); and the Japanese occupation (1941-1945) and the post-war era that began with the British recovery of Hong Kong in the summer of 1945. This overview focuses on the first three of these four periods.

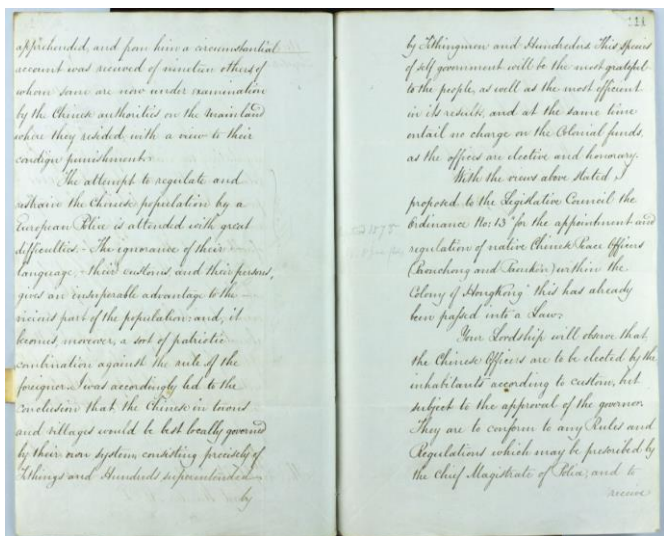
Foundations

These were uncertain times, and many C0129 files reveal how early-colonial Hong Kong worked – and just as often did not.ⁱ Despite its fine harbour and abundant supply of cheap Chinese labour, Hong Kong was slow to become the great "mart" or "emporium" envisioned by its colonial founders. Disease and crime were rampant. Governor Samuel George Bonham complained in June 1853 that piracy had become so widespread that his government could not suppress it alone, though he also noted that the colony's commercial prospects were "slowly but certainly extending and assuming a

character of greater permanency."ⁱⁱ To the consternation of the Qing authorities in Guangzhou, collaboration from Chinese people of all walks of life was instrumental in the building of the young colony. In April 1846, Governor John Francis Davis explained to Colonial Secretary William Gladstone that the construction of private and public works in Hong Kong "could not have taken place except for the ready command of the cheap and efficient labour of the Chinese."ⁱⁱⁱ Collaboration also assumed other forms, not always to the pleasure of the colonial government. The leaders of the Chinese and European communities learned to join forces occasionally, as they did in February 1848 to petition the government about the payment of ground rents.^{iv}

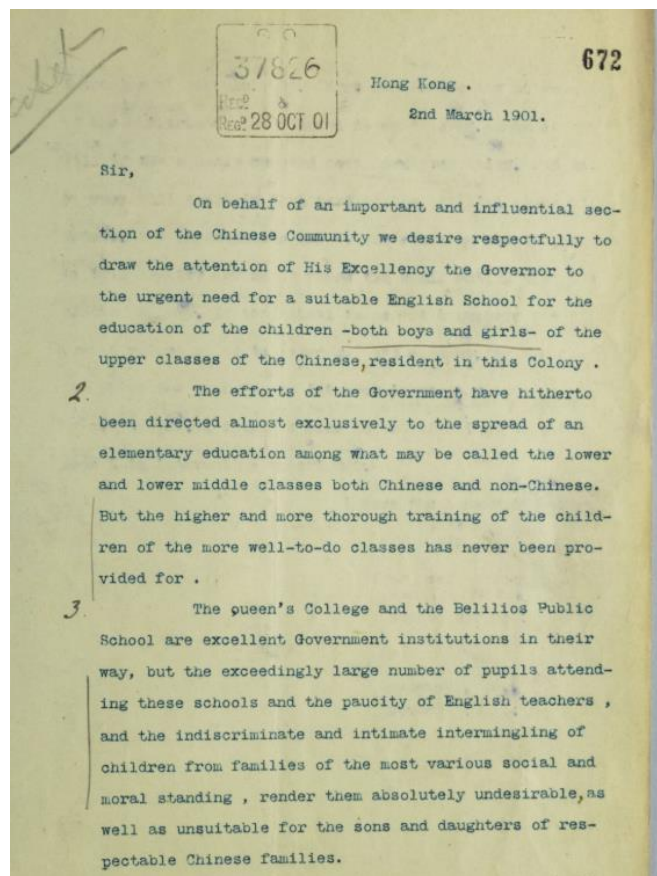
The two pillars of Hong Kong's economy during this period were the opium and "coolie" trades. We learn how monopolies for opium and other commodities were acquired and how land lots were allocated, at public auctions and sometimes as rewards to Chinese who had collaborated with the British during the Opium War and in building the infant colony. One such beneficiary was a man named Loo Aqi, who rose to prominence through piracy and provisioning foreign vessels and was later rewarded with a large plot of valuable land in the Lower Bazaar, where much of the Chinese population would eventually settle.^v These files contain important details about governance and the administration of justice, including Governor Davis's short-lived "native Chinese Peace Officers" scheme from the mid-1840s to the early 1860s, Governor Richard MacDonnell's draconian "great experiment" in the mid-1860s to lower the crime rate and reduce the number of prisoners, and his successor John Pope Hennessy's efforts to modernize Hong Kong's penal system and to reduce racial discrimination and

segregation – including the appointment in 1880 of the first Chinese to the Legislative Council, Ng Choy (Wu Tingfang).



1: Governor Davis to Lord Stanley, 1 June 1844. CO129/6.

These documents also help us understand the rise of a local Chinese elite, who established voluntary associations such as the Man Mo Temple, District Watch Force, Tung Wah Hospital, and Po Leung Kuk, and social organizations such as the Chinese Club and the Chinese Recreation Club.^v They increasingly saw themselves as “an important and influential section” of Hong Kong’s Chinese community. In March 1901, for example, they asked Governor Henry Blake to establish a special school exclusively for their own children.^{vi} Many of these wealthy Chinese came to consider Hong Kong as their permanent home, which became evident in December 1911 when they petitioned Governor Frederick Lugard for a cemetery for Chinese “permanently residing” in Hong Kong. Lugard’s successor, Henry May, was happy to approve the request: “it would tend to create a colonial feeling and to specialize a class who desire to identify themselves with the Colony.”^{viii}



2: Petition to Colonial Secretary Stewart Lockhart, 2 March 1901. CO129/306.

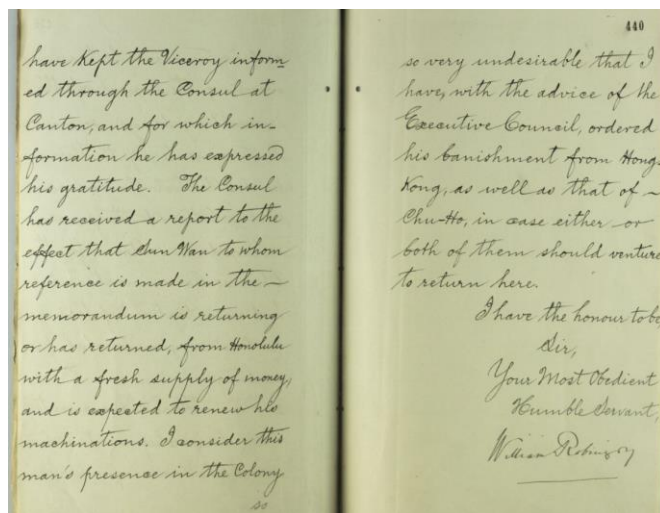
Wealth and power did not, however, bring equality, and the CO129 correspondence reveals the racial discrimination and segregation in Hong Kong, including the residential ordinances of the late 1800s and early 1900s. In May 1904, European property owners on the exclusive hill district called the Peak petitioned the government to preserve the area for “the exclusive residence of non-Chinese inhabitants.”^{ix} Their petition resulted in a new ordinance stipulating that no owner or tenant could lease a property or building “to any but non-Chinese or permit any but Non-Chinese to reside on or in such land or building.” But in September 1917 Governor Francis Henry May explained to Colonial Secretary Walter Long that the ordinance had failed to define “Chinese,” thus enabling wealthy Eurasians such

as the comprador Robert Ho Tung to slip through.^x A new bill was passed in 1918, and the Peak was again reserved for Europeans, a restriction that lasted until after World War Two.^{xi}

Revolution and Reform in China

Colonial Hong Kong played an important role in China's nationalist movement that began in the late 1800s.^{xii}

Hong Kong helped facilitate the activities of Sun Yat-sen and other revolutionaries and reformers in the last decades of the Qing dynasty, when China was still ruled by the Manchus. This correspondence reveals the concerns of the Hong Kong and British governments that the colony not become a base for subversion, even while some local authorities supported the revolutionary movement. Here we find, for example, Governor William Robinson's order of March 1896 banishing Sun from Hong Kong for five years, on the grounds that his presence in Hong Kong was "very undesirable" and would jeopardize relations with the government of China.^{xiii} When Kang Youwei, who preferred reform over revolution, and constitutional monarchy over republicanism, fled to Hong Kong after the aborted Hundred Days of Reform in the summer of 1898, he was protected by the colonial government. But even his case made some officials worry that it might provoke trouble with the Chinese government.^{xiv}



3: *William Robinson to Joseph Chamberlain, 11 March 1896.*
C0129/271.

The local dimensions of the Chinese nationalist movement are particularly evident in the life of Ho Kai, a barrister, financier, physician, legislative councillor, and leader of the Hong Kong Chinese community.^{xv} Part of a group of reformers who lived in Hong Kong and the Chinese treaty ports such as Shanghai at the turn of the century, Ho is often credited with shaping the political ideas of Sun Yat-sen. But unlike Sun, Ho believed that China should be a constitutional monarchy like Britain rather than a republic and that Hong Kong could be a political and commercial model for China. As a long-time friend and fellow legislative councillor once explained, "in all his life," Ho was "in favour of Reformation and not Revolution."^{xvi} His involvement with the revolutionary movement declined after a failed uprising in 1900, though he remained committed to the welfare of China for the rest of his life.

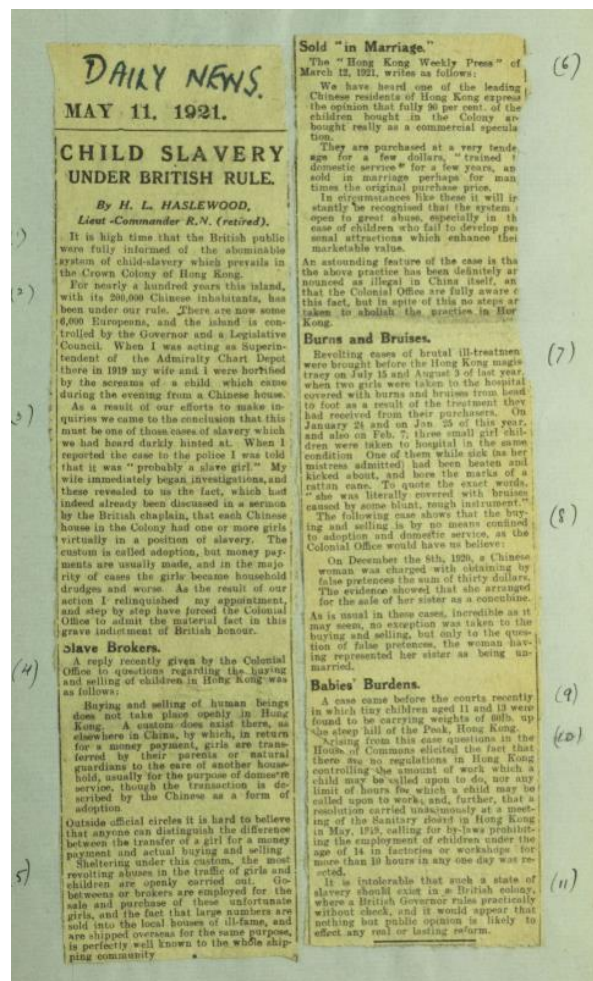
The Interwar Years

Interwar Hong Kong is sometimes characterized as a colonial backwater. But the C0129 files show how during

this period the colony was drawn ever-more tightly into British imperial history and Chinese history. For example, the *mui tsai* (female bondservant) controversy of the 1920s and 1930s became one of the most intense and protracted disputes in British colonial policy.^{xvii} The question of whether the *mui tsai* system constituted slavery had been raised in 1879, when Chief Justice John Smale demanded the creation of a commission to investigate the practice of buying and selling children as servants.^{xviii} However, “China experts” such as the missionary and civil servant Ernest J. Eitel refuted Smale’s allegation that such servants were slaves.^{xix} Although some critics considered the system a form of slavery that encouraged sexual abuse, leaders of the Chinese community argued that it saved girls from prostitution and that they were treated as family members.^{xx} Governor Hennessy eventually agreed, and this view became the official one, both in Hong Kong and in London. In August 1918, Governor May insisted that bond servitude was “governed by a different vocabulary” than slavery.^{xxi}

A new view of the *mui tsai* emerged in the 1920s, however, thanks partly to the efforts of Lieutenant-Commander Hugh Haslewood of the Royal Navy and his wife Clara. After learning about the practice in a church sermon, the Haslewoods wrote a barrage of letters to local newspapers criticizing colonial authorities for tolerating “child slavery” in a British colony.^{xxii} We learn how the Hong Kong government tried to discredit both Clara (“well-known to be a person of unbalanced mind,” Stubbs claimed) and Chinese critics of the *mui tsai*.^{xxiii} Governor Edward Reginald Stubbs explained to Colonial Secretary Alfred Milner in July 1920 that there was no proof that *mui tsai* were mistreated and that it was “a

matter of common knowledge” that “the Chinese as a race are remarkably fond of and kind to children.”^{xxiv} Milner concluded that many colonial officials felt it was neither possible “nor indeed desirable” to “enforce Western ideas upon the family life of the Chinese.”^{xxv} Stubbs even worried that abolishing or reforming the *mui tsai* system might weaken support for colonial rule by alienating “one of the most loyal and law-abiding communities in the British Empire.”^{xxvi}



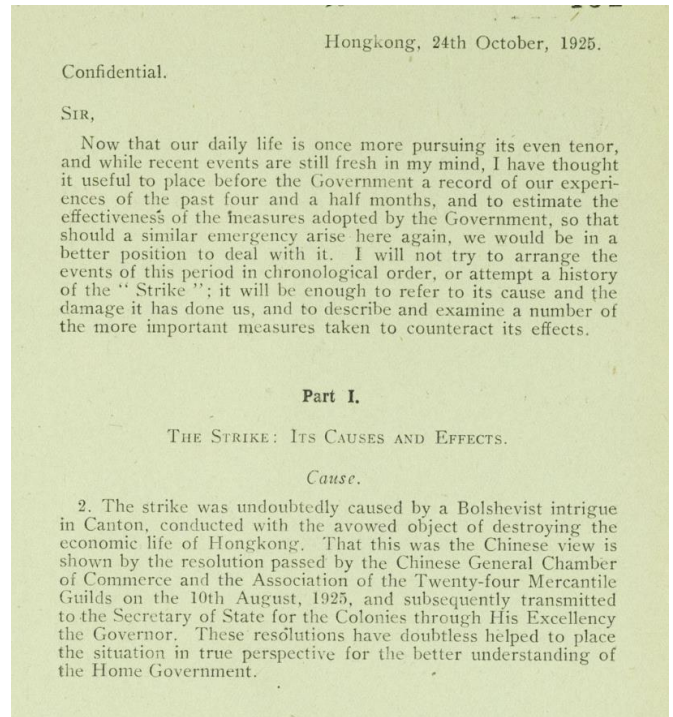
4: “Child Slavery: Under British Rule,” *Hong Kong Daily News*, 11 May 1921, CO 129/473

The Haslewoods pursued their anti-*mui-tsai* campaign even more actively and effectively in Britain after the

Hong Kong government asked the Admiralty to transfer Commander Haslewood. Although local Chinese elites such as the legislative councillors Lau Chu Pak and Ho Fook tried to preserve the *mui tsai*, they faced opposition from the Anti-Mui Tsai Society, supported mainly by Chinese Christian groups and by labour unions.^{xxvii} Under pressure from members of Parliament in Britain, religious leaders there and in Hong Kong, international women's and workers' groups, and even the League of Nations, Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill (who had previously defended the system) declared in February 1922 that he was "not prepared to go on defending this thing" and that "I do not care a rap what the local consequences are."^{xxviii} The Legislative Council eventually passed several ordinances to control the *mui tsai*, though the practice lasted well after World War Two.

The interwar years were characterized by Britain's commitment to expanding public works, including not only road works and reservoirs but hospitals and teacher-training colleges. This was all part of the new imperial ideal of building "trusteeship," but it was also aimed at preventing the growth of Chinese nationalism and labour consciousness in the wake of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the May Fourth Movement of 1919. These were powerful forces that could not be easily suppressed, however, and they helped cause several strikes in the 1920s. The C0129 files include invaluable information on these strikes, especially the general strike-boycott of 1925-26.^{xxix} They also reveal that although Hong Kong officials were adamant from the beginning that the strike-boycott was directed by radical agitators in Guangzhou and had nothing to do with economic or political conditions in the colony, the strike-boycott derived part of its force from popular feelings

against the privileged status of Europeans in Hong Kong.



5: Memorandum by Robert Kotewall on the Hong Kong Strike and Boycott, 24 October 1925. C0129/489.

The strike-boycott did not seriously affect Hong Kong's long-term political or economic stability, showing how outside influences were never able to transform Chinese nationalism into overt or sustainable anti-colonialism. The colonial government was able to stem the growth of communism and labour unionism. As they would many decades later during the 1967 disturbances, which occurred during the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution that engulfed China, many people in Hong Kong appreciated the political and economic stability there, especially in contrast to the chaos and violence across the border. The C0129 files reveal the efforts of local Chinese and Eurasian elites such as Chow Shouson and Robert Kotewall to fight the strike-boycott. In a telegram to Colonial Secretary Leo Amery in late June

1925, Governor Stubbs noted how the “responsible Chinese” had been of “great assistance.”^{xxx}

Still, the strike-boycott demonstrates how the history of colonial Hong Kong was always intertwined with the rest of China’s. It also exacerbated tensions among the Foreign Office, the Colonial Office, and the Hong Kong government regarding British policy towards China. The Colonial Office and the Hong Kong government sometimes worried that the Foreign Office was more concerned about relations with China than about tiny Hong Kong. When the strike-boycott and other expressions of Chinese nationalism convinced the Foreign Office to surrender Weihaiwei (leased to Britain in 1898) in Shandong province and the British concessions at Hankou in Hubei and Jiujiang in Jiangxi, some Hong Kong officials worried that their colony might be next.^{xxxi} This would of course not happen until many decades later, in July 1997. But as they had been almost one century earlier, these were uncertain times.

Citation

John M. Carroll, ‘C0129 and Hong Kong’s History’, China and the Modern World: Hong Kong, Britain and China (1841–1951), Cengage Learning (EMEA) Ltd, 2019

Endnotes

- ⁱ On the early colonial period, see: Jung-fang Tsai, *Hong Kong in Chinese History: Community and Social Unrest in the British Colony, 1842-1913* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), chapters 1 and 2; Christopher Munn, *Anglo-China: Chinese People and British Rule in Hong Kong, 1841-1880* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001; reprint, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008); and John M. Carroll, *Edge of Empires: Chinese Elites and British Colonials in Hong Kong* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005; reprint, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), chapters 1 and 2.
- ⁱⁱ Bonham to Newcastle, 13 June 1853, CO 129/42.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Davis to Gladstone, 15 April 1846, CO 129/16.
- ^{iv} "Memorial from the European and Chinese Inhabitants in Hong Kong Relative to the Payment of Ground Rents," 26 February 1848, CO 129/23.
- ^v Fearon's report, June 24, 1845, CO 129/12.
- ^{vi} On these voluntary associations, see: Henry J. Lethbridge, *Hong Kong: Stability and Change: A Collection of Essays* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1978), chapters 3-5; Elizabeth Sinn, *Power and Charity: The Early History of the Tung Wah Hospital, Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1989); and W. K. Chan, *The Making of Hong Society: Three Studies of Class Formation in Early Hong Kong* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), chapter 3.
- ^{vii} Blake to Chamberlain, 24 September 1901, CO 129/306.
- ^{viii} May to Harcourt, 20 July 1912, CO 129/391.
- ^{ix} Enclosed in May to Lyttleton, 4 May 1904, CO 129/322.
- ^x May to Long, 5 September 1917, CO 129/433.
- ^{xi} John M. Carroll, "The Peak: Residential Segregation in Colonial Hong Kong," in Bryna Goodman and David Goodman, eds., *Twentieth-Century Colonialism and China: Localities, the Everyday, and the World* (London: Routledge, 2012), 81-91.
- ^{xii} On Hong Kong and Chinese nationalism, see: Chan Lau Kit-ching, *China, Britain and Hong Kong, 1895-1945* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1990), chapters 1 and 2; Ts'ai, *Hong Kong in Chinese History*, chapters 6-9; and K. C. Fok, *Lectures on Hong Kong History: Hong Kong's Role in Modern Chinese History* (Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1990).
- ^{xiii} Robinson to Chamberlain, 11 March 1896, CO 129/271.
- ^{xiv} See, for example: Blake to Chamberlain, 18 May 1898, CO 129/283; 9 October 1898, CO 129/285; and 17 and 25 December 1899, CO 129/294.
- ^{xv} For differing perspectives on Ho Kai, see: G. H. Choa, *The Life and Times of Sir Kai Ho Kai* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1981; Ts'ai, *Hong Kong in Chinese History*, chapters 9 and 10; and Carroll, *Edge of Empires*, chapter 5.
- ^{xvi} Wei Yuk to Henry May, 20 August 1914, enclosed in May to Harcourt, 11 September 1914, CO 129/413.
- ^{xvii} On the *mui-tsai* controversy, see: Susan Pedersen, "The Maternalist Moment in British Colonial Policy: The Controversy over 'Child Slavery' in Hong Kong 1917-1941," *Past and Present* 171 (2001): 161-202; and David M. Pomfret, "'Child Slavery' in British and French Far Eastern Colonies 1880-1945," *Past and Present* 201 (2008): 175-213.
- ^{xviii} "Public Statement of Governor on the So-Called Slavery and Domestic Servitude Question," 21 February 1880, CO 129/187. xix Eitel's report, 25 October 1879, CO 129/194.
- ^{xx} John M. Carroll, "A National Custom: Debating Female Servitude in Late Nineteenth-Century Hong Kong," *Modern Asian Studies* 43.6 (November 2009): 1463-93.
- ^{xxi} May to Long, 9 August 1918, CO 129/449.
- ^{xxii} "Child Slavery in Hong Kong," *Hong Kong Daily Press*, 10 March 1920, CO 129/461; "Child Slavery: Under British Rule," *Hong Kong Daily News*, 11 May 1921, CO 129/473.
- ^{xxiii} Stubbs to Milner, 10 July 1920, CO 129/461.
- ^{xxiv} Stubbs to Milner, 10 July 1920, CO 129/461.
- ^{xxv} Milner to Stubbs, 28 September 1920, CO 129/461.
- ^{xxvi} Stubbs to Milner, 10 July 1920, CO 129/461.
- ^{xxvii} "Chinese Meeting on 'Mui Tsai' Question," *Hong Kong Daily Press*, 2 August 1921, CO 129/468; Lau and Ho's report to governor, 4 August 1921, CO 129/468.
- ^{xxviii} Churchill to Masterson-Smith, 21 February 1922, CO 129/478.
- ^{xxix} On the strike-boycott, see Chan Lau, *China, Britain and Hong Kong*, chapter 4, and her *From Nothing to Nothing: The Chinese Communist Movement and Hong Kong 1921-1939* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1999), chapter 4; and Carroll, *Edge of Empires*, chapter 6.
- ^{xxx} Stubbs to Amery, 26 June 1925, CO 129/488.
- ^{xxxi} The rendition of Weihaiwei is analysed in Pamela Atwell, *British Mandarins and Chinese Reformers* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1985), chapters 6 and 7. On Weihaiwei and the British "loss" of Hankou and Jiujiang, see Robert Bickers, *Out of China: How the Chinese Ended the Era of Western Domination* (London: Penguin, 2017), chapter 4.