

From Isolated Fishing Village to Cosmopolitan City: Geographical Changes of Hong Kong in Modern Times

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Abstract. In recent years, the economic and social development and urbanisation of the Hong Kong region have shown a vigorous development under the implementation of one country, two systems. Historical studies of Hong Kong have also gradually received attention from the society and the academia, but the existing studies are relatively weak on the geographic location change of Hong Kong's social development in modern times. This paper examines the process of geographic location change in Hong Kong in the modern era, in order to provide ideas on historical geography for the study of Hong Kong history. Although colonial rule brought Hong Kong deep sufferings and humiliation, making full use of its geographical advantages and actively seizing every opportunity for development, Hong Kong gradually arose from a small fishing village to a cosmopolitan city. Its diversified economy, prosperous industries and active financial market have attracted investors and talents from all over the world. Hong Kong had gradually realized the transformation and development of modernization, and had become a shining pearl in the South China Sea.

Keywords: Hong Kong, geographical location, urban development.

1. Introduction

It has been more than 180 years since the opening of Hong Kong in 1842, and Hong Kong society has undergone radical changes. In recent years, with the return of Hong Kong to China and the implementation of the great policy of “one country, two systems”, the study of Hong Kong's history has received more and more public and academic attention. Existing research on Hong Kong's political, economic, cultural and social development can be described as intricate and complex, and can be generally divided into two categories: general history and specialised history. However, studies on geographical changes in Hong Kong's modern development are still relatively weak. From the forced occupation of Hong Kong by the British colonialists in 1841 to the eve of the First World War in 1914, this period was the beginning and critical period of Hong Kong's social and urban development and construction.

Based on these studies, this paper examines the changes in Hong Kong's geographical location in modern times. It explores why the early British colonisers insisted on ceding the small fishing village at the edge of the South China Sea, and how Hong Kong developed from an isolated fishing village into an international city. Provides historical and geographical insights into the development of modern Hong Kong society.

Geographic location is a comprehensive concept that first belonged to the study of geography, and with the rise of the discipline of historical geography, scholars of history began to involve themselves in related research. The earliest was Professor Hou Renzhi of Peking University. He points out in *Ruminations on Historical Geography* that “historical geography is an integral part of modern geography” [1]. He explains that the reason or basis for historical geography being an integral part of modern geography is that “its main object of study is the change of geographic environment in the historical period of mankind”. “The main work of historical geography is not only to ‘recover’ the geographic environment of the past era, but also to search for the laws of its development and evolution, and to elucidate the formation and characteristics of the current geographic environment”. The study of geographic location is, in essence, a concrete manifestation of the organic combination of natural, economic, and transport geographic locations in the spatial-territorial context.

2. Geographical Location and Early Development (1841-1852)

Hong Kong, as a territory of China, possesses a profound historical and cultural heritage. Since ancient times, Hong Kong has been closely connected with the mainland. Its historical and cultural roots is deeply rooted in the soil of the Chinese land. Any attempt to categorise Hong Kong's history and culture as "southern" or "western" is not supported by sufficient evidence. In modern Hong Kong, with the occupation of Hong Kong by the British colonialists and the commencement of a century and a half of colonial rule, Hong Kong also began to undergo a transformation of its geographical location from an isolated fishing village.

The early historical and geographical history of Hong Kong was attributed to the mainland of Guangdong. About 129,000 years ago, the Lingnan region saw the emergence of early Ancient people (Maba Man) [2]. During the Pre-Qin period, Lingnan area, including today's Hong Kong, was known as the land of Baiyue. In 214 BC, the Qin army occupied Lingnan. Immediately afterwards, Emperor Qin Shihuang set up three counties, namely Guilin, Xiang and Nanhai, in the captured Lingnan area. The areas around Hong Kong was incorporated into his territory under the Panyu County under the jurisdiction of Panyu County [3].

Since then, Hong Kong had been under the jurisdiction of the Central Government, names changing from Panyu County, Bao'an County and then to Dongguan County. Until the Qing Dynasty, as the civilisation of the Central Plains migrated southwards, Hong Kong was gradually developed. In the early years, the British saw the potential of Hong Kong as an excellent port in the Far East with its many islands, winding coastline and natural deep-water harbour conditions. After the defeat of the Qing government, the territory of Hong Kong was ceded or leased by the British in batches.

The settlement and utilisation of the Hong Kong area in the early years after the opening of the port was still dominated by the pre-civil war inhabitants and their productive lifestyles. In the early days of the opening of the port, most of the indigenous inhabitants of Hong Kong before the opening of the port consisted of immigrants from the mainland during the historical period. Foreign immigrants in Hong Kong appeared from the earliest written records of the Eastern Jin Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty before the Opium War.

However, historical records show that the larger-scale immigration took place during the Song and Qing Dynasties. Among them, the migration of the five major families into the New Territories during the Song Dynasty and the southward migration of the Hakka people during the Kangxi period of the Qing Dynasty are well documented [4, 5]. As most of Hong Kong is adjacent to the sea, the early survival and economic development of the Hong Kong people were based on fishing, salt production and pearl mining. The New Territories, which was close to the Pearl River Delta, was fertile and developed a small amount of agricultural farming.

The initial construction of Hong Kong began under the British colonial rule with the consequent shift in geographical location, and on 26 January 1841, a representative of the British government, Charles Eliot, was appointed to the post of Governor of Hong Kong. Charles Elliot landed on Hong Kong Island and declared his rule over the island, marking the official opening of Hong Kong. In June of the same year, Hong Kong was declared a free port [6].

The shipping industry began to flourish in Hong Kong based on its geographical location. British merchants built dockyards in Hung Hom and Aberdeen to manufacture ships and built Warehouses and wharves and other harbour facilities. They also established foreign banks to equip with economic trades. At the beginning of the opening of Hong Kong, the environment was poor, mainly engaged in opium smuggling and labour trade. According to statistics, in 1858, China's opium up to more than 70,000 boxes, of which 3/4 is imported through Hong Kong. Hong Kong became the largest drug den in the world. A large number of Chinese workers were resold to North and South America through Hong Kong, and many of them died on the way, the social environment was not optimistic [7].

Hong Kong's early historical and geographical evolution was closely related to its geographical location as part of mainland Guangdong. During the initial development phase from 1841 to 1852, the settlement and utilisation of the area basically maintained the traditional lifestyle and production patterns of the pre-existing inhabitants, despite the fact that it had already come under British colonial

rule. However, with the establishment of British colonial rule, Hong Kong began to undergo initial construction and development, and the strategic significance of its geographical location changed significantly. Thus, the early construction of Hong Kong not only marked the beginning of its transformation from a relatively marginal fishing village to a colonial port city, but also foreshadowed its future importance as a centre of international trade and finance.

3. Rapidly Changing Geographic Location and Trade Growth (1852-1898)

Hong Kong evolved from an ancient fishing village with a traditional smallholder economy into a cosmopolitan city. Because of its land and water surroundings, Hong Kong became a harbour unrivalled in the world. This made the British colonial invaders set their eyes on Hong Kong. With the decay and incompetence of the Qing government after the two Opium Wars and the advances of the powers, the scope of British occupation of Hong Kong continued to expand. The British Hong Kong Government also started the development and construction of urbanisation in Hong Kong. More importantly, a large number of new immigrants moved into Hong Kong, injecting new vigour into its development. Hong Kong's geographical location changed rapidly and its economy and trade grew substantially.

The topography of Hong Kong changed and the city began to expand as a result of British occupation and land reclamation. The signing of the Treaty of Nanjing after the First Opium War ceded Hong Kong Island to Britain. After the Second Opium War, the Treaty of Beijing ceded the Kowloon Peninsula to Britain. The scope of British occupation of Hong Kong was further expanded with the commencement of the Wenham Reclamation Scheme in 1852. The scheme was the first formal reclamation project in Hong Kong and marked the beginning of large-scale urban planning and construction in Hong Kong by the British Government. With the continuous reclamation, the topography of Hong Kong changed and the city began to expand. Road planning and urban construction were carried out, enabling Hong Kong's urban development to take shape.

The influx of immigrants injected new vigour into Hong Kong's economic development and urban construction. The second wave of immigrants in Hong Kong in the 19th century occurred in the 1950s after the opening of the port (as shown in Table 1 below) [8].

Table 1. Population Statistics of Hong Kong, 1850-1900 (Persons)

age	Foreign population	Chinese population	aggregate
1850	1305	31987	33292
1854	1643	54072	55715
1855	1956	70651	72607
1860	2476	92441	94917
1861	2986	116335	119321
1870	8754	115444	124198
1881	9712	150696	160402
1890	10942	187770	198742
1900	14778	247900	262678

These Chinese immigrants who moved into Hong Kong were mainly due to the influx of large numbers of refugees into Hong Kong as a result of the dramatic upheavals in southern China such as the Taiping Rebellion. In addition, there were some officials and businessmen who had awakened to bourgeois consciousness earlier and came to Hong Kong with a certain amount of capital. They made full use of their capital and the favourable conditions of Hong Kong as a free port to set up various kinds of shops and businesses. A large number of Chinese labourers, through their hard work, built urban buildings on Hong Kong Island and improved the appearance of urban development. The middle class, including merchants, who arrived later, brought with them capital that laid the foundation for Hong Kong's economic development.

Relying on its special geographical location, Hong Kong's trade grew substantially. After the opening of Hong Kong, it was announced that all Chinese merchants and Chinese ships trading in

Hong Kong would be exempted from paying any fees and taxes. From then on, goods and capital travelling to and from East Asia and Europe began to gather in Hong Kong, and the import and export trade began to become the pillar industry of Hong Kong's economy. Many Chinese engaged in trade-related businesses, such as stevedoring and transport. Chinese merchants began to set up North and South Hong Kong to do business. Port trade related shipping and shipbuilding also grew rapidly. The influx of immigrants and large amounts of Chinese capital into Hong Kong brought vitality to the local economy. With its favourable geographical location and liberal economic policies, Hong Kong soon became a relay port for North-South freight and trade.

Through compulsory cession and land reclamation, the British colonial rulers carried out large-scale urban planning and construction in Hong Kong, resulting in significant changes in the topography of the territory and further expansion of the city. With the influx of foreign immigrants, Hong Kong's economic development and urban construction gained new impetus. By virtue of its unique geographical location, Hong Kong gradually arose as an important trade hub connecting China and European countries. Import and export trade became the core industry of its economy, and trade achieved remarkable growth, accumulating capital for the diversification of economy and industrial development and promoting the transformation and upgrading to an international city.

4. Geographical Transition to a Cosmopolitan City (1898-1914)

After four decades of urban development, Hong Kong gradually emerged as an international city. Its diversified economy, thriving industries, vibrant financial market and unique geographical location made Hong Kong an important transport hub. Businessmen and capital from all over the world converged here. Hong Kong's urban planning and construction during this period also shaped the overall environment for future development. This further promoted the internationalisation of Hong Kong.

Hong Kong's urban planning and geographic restructuring laid the foundation for a complete environment for future development. After the defeat in the Sino-Japanese War the British colonialists leased the New Territories from the Qing Government and forcibly occupied the Kowloon Walled City, the scope of British occupation of Hong Kong was further expanded. From the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing, which ceded Hong Kong Island, the Treaty of Beijing, which ceded the Kowloon area, and the lease of the New Territories, including the Kowloon Walled City, the British occupied a total of 1,061.826 square kilometres of Chinese territory, and then reclaimed 9.2 square kilometres of land to form the present-day territorial extent of Hong Kong's land area [9]. In 1904, the planning and construction of Kowloon began, and after the completion of the new reclamation in the central harbour front area, a pattern of "four rings and nine rings" was formed. The completion of the territory-wide cadastral survey also marked the two expansions of Hong Kong's territory, with Hong Kong Island, the Kowloon Peninsula and the New Territories forming the overall environment for Hong Kong's future development.

The scope of re-export trade has expanded, and port construction has become a key foundation for economic transformation and upgrading. Along the north and south sides of the Victoria Harbour, the economy has developed rapidly. A city pattern was formed with Victoria Harbour as the centre, forming the military and commercial ports as the two wings [10]. Hong Kong developed into an international trading port from the late 19th century to the early 20th century. Co-developed with shipping was the corresponding ship-repairing, hotel and food service industries. As the city's economy developed, so did the lives of Hong Kong residents. Industries providing food for the local population, such as flour milling and sugar milling, as well as industries for daily necessities, such as soap and match processing factories, were established one after another. At the same time, communications, property and gaming industries also emerged. The socio-economic landscape of Hong Kong was greatly improved, laying the foundation for further development.

The favourable geographical location has given Hong Kong a prominent role in the regional political economy. Hong Kong is a city where East and West cultures co-exist. The fusion and

collision of Chinese and Western cultures have resulted in the formation of a unique Hong Kong culture. The expansion of the economic centre of gravity area has expanded new development space for Hong Kong's economic development. Hong Kong brings together enormous wealth, cutting-edge equipment and high-tech products. Dense with information, it possesses a strong cultural edge and energy that can influence the world.

With the second industrial revolution, more western capitalist countries rose, which contributed to the political and economic development of the Hong Kong region and compensated for the negative impact of the weakening and retreat of British capital power on the eve of the First World War. More importantly, the development of Chinese capital broke the monopoly of foreign businessmen. The opening of the Guangzhou-Kowloon Railway further promoted the political and economic ties between Hong Kong, the Pearl River Delta, and the Lingnan region. As part of the Lingnan culture, Hong Kong's origins are still in Chinese culture. However, Hong Kong's culture is also mostly influenced by Western culture, showing strong Western cultural characteristics and styles. Special cultural style determined the special historical status and role of Hong Kong culture, which occupied an important position on the historical and cultural map of China.

After two territorial expansions, Hong Kong's territory now covered Hong Kong Island, the Kowloon Peninsula and the New Territories. In the process of urbanisation, the overall environment for Hong Kong's future development has been gradually built up. With the continuous expansion of the re-export trade, the economy has been able to rise rapidly. With Victoria Harbour as the core, it formed the pattern of urban development. From the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, Hong Kong developed into an international trading port. It brought together enormous wealth, sophisticated equipment, high-tech products, intensive information resources, as well as strong cultural advantages and energy sources, and its influence reaches across the globe. In the process of mingling, collision and integration of Chinese and Western cultures, Hong Kong has continued to develop in an eclectic manner.

5. Conclusion

In ancient times, Hong Kong, because of its favourable geographical location, became a major hub of oar traffic and a place where the fishing and salt industries flourished. Its unique geographical advantages and rich natural resources brought prosperity and vigour to the land. However, after the Opium War, the fate of Hong Kong took a dramatic turn. Through a series of unequal treaties, the British colonialists forcibly occupied Hong Kong and reduced it to the scope of British colonial rule. The series of policy regimes and governance of the British Hong Kong Government in Hong Kong were all aimed at maximising the interests of its British colonial rule. The success of Hong Kong was not a victory of British colonialism, but a result of the joint efforts and hard work of all Chinese people, including our compatriots in Hong Kong.

In short, colonial rule brought Hong Kong deep sufferings and humiliation. Making full use of its geographical advantages and actively seizing every opportunity for development, Hong Kong gradually rose from a small fishing village to an international city. Its diversified economy, prosperous industries and active financial market have attracted investors and talents from all over the world. At the same time, Hong Kong has also demonstrated its irreplaceable status and role in history, politics and culture.

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