

Yasminah Beebeejaun

Europe and the people without planning: reconsidering British interventions in colonial Hong Kong

The commissioning of a plan by Patrick Abercrombie for British Hong Kong in 1947 is the entry point to explore claims of ‘benevolent colonialism’. Through an engagement with British colonial attitudes towards the majority Chinese population, we can critically re-evaluate claims that British planning brought a more enlightened form of urbanism. Instead, we find colonial inaction and a marked difference in housing and development standards based largely on racial distinctions between the perceived needs of European and Chinese inhabitants. By situating planning efforts in Hong Kong within the racial hierarchies of empire, we can examine how imperial power bolstered British planning.

Keywords: Hong Kong, Patrick Abercrombie, postcolonial theory, planning theory, planning historiography, British colonial planning

Introduction

Locating the role of empire within the historiography of British town planning reveals an ongoing lack of engagement with its imperial legacy. The British Empire enabled British planners to undertake colonial commissions to further the development of their own planning ideas. However, we continue to find positive evaluations of their planning legacy, with only limited consideration of the wider colonial context (see Hein, 2017, for a discussion). Through a fuller engagement with the complex and often conflicting dimensions to urban development and planning in colonial settings we can enrich the historiography of the discipline (Hein, 2017; Njoh, 2010; Porter, 2010). The focus of this article is Hong Kong, a British colony until 1997, which I argue offers an important case through which we can consider not only British planning histories but also continuing claims that certain territories experienced forms of ‘benevolent colonialism’. I suggest that the discussion of British colonial Hong Kong has hitherto replicated a belief that British imperial planning was guided by forms of ‘neutral’ expertise in which colonialism serves as a separate sphere of political activity (see Bristow, 1984; Lai, 1999; Xue et al., 2012). Through a closer examination of the urban development of Hong Kong under British rule we can reflect more carefully upon the complex motivations of planners and colonial officials and how they were framed through the particular conjuncture of imperial planning.

The article starts by engaging with the continuing critique of planning historiographies and the need for a more critical engagement with the legacy of colonialism. I then turn to Hong Kong to examine successive evaluations of the (lack of) planning in Hong Kong from the British Treaty of 1842 to the period following the Second World War. I show how the appointment of Patrick Abercrombie to prepare a plan for the colony of Hong Kong following the end of the Second World War has played a pivotal role in the presentation of British planning as a progressive field of expertise. I argue that the Abercrombie plan forms part of a narrative that subsumes the uneven urban development of Hong Kong within a wider discourse of progressive British values despite the vastly different living standards experienced by the Chinese majority.

Re-evaluating colonial planning histories

There remains a strong narrative within British planning histories that planning contributions within colonial territories provide examples of British planning's compelling expertise (see, for example, Amati and Freestone, 2009; Lai, 1999; Xue et al., 2012). Positioning planning as primarily a form of technical knowledge that has the capacity to move from metropole to colony insufficiently engages with British imperial history (Trumpf, 2021). Thus planning becomes separated from its role in the exercise of power within the empire, with the violence of colonial oppression emerging as a relatively unproblematised backdrop (see, for example, Freestone and James, 2018).

Despite a growing number of evaluations of the entanglements of planning in colonial expansion, the British discipline's legacy is insufficiently problematised as part of a project of imperial expansion within UK-focused historiographies (see Hein, 2017, for a discussion). Colonial endeavours in turn often appear as backdrops to accounts of planning's development rather than being understood as fundamental to the dominance of the European discipline (see, for example, Amati and Freestone, 2009; Hall, 2002). Two recent papers published in this journal have given critical attention to the urgent need to integrate postcolonial and decolonial perspectives within the discipline's British pedagogy (Adams et al., 2020; Wood, 2020). The geographer Astrid Wood (2020), for instance, emphasises the importance of a renewed consideration of how southern theory enables us to rethink our understandings and accounts of urbanism in the global North within a decolonial agenda. Indeed, the uneven development of colonial cities and the denigration and erasure of Indigenous people and forms of knowledge have been the subject of sustained critical scholarship, particularly within examinations of settler colonial societies (Barry and Porter, 2012; Porter, 2010; Roy, 2006). However, as the planning historian Carola Hein notes, there has been uneven engagement by planning scholars themselves with critical planning history. Hein (2017, 7) proposes that one of the

limitations is that histories have become framed around particular individuals' endeavours in ways that oversimplify context:

When planning historians narrate the past, they risk creating heroic histories. The actors of planning and thus the heroes of planning history were often elite white males who followed their 'interest' or 'genius.' Emphasizing these stories – not necessarily historians' conscious goals but rather the result of a specific cultural moment – ensured that other plans and planners would be ignored and that a celebratory track record emerged. The resulting planning history can be read as a listing of their achievements without acknowledging the specific political, social, economic, or cultural context.

The planning historian Stephen Ward (2010, 50) emphasises a specific tension in the way that planning histories have been recounted as part of the discipline's progressive self-image. Such beliefs have led to accounts of 'imperialism itself as an enlightened project of modernisation when deployed in a colonial context'. However, British planning's corpus of work has benefited from a vastly uneven set of colonial power relations that facilitated the development of the discipline: 'What made the colonies such important test beds for planning innovation was the opportunity they presented for planners to act ambitiously, facing little opposition or pressure to compromise their proposals.' More situated accounts that locate British planning's history as facilitated in dialogue with colonialism offer an opportunity to reflect on how understandings of planning as formed through the actions of historical individuals remain partial and incomplete. In an era where increasing attention is being paid to decolonisation, how might a more critical reflection challenge the discipline's historiography?

Drawing on archival research I explore the construction of expert town planning within colonial Hong Kong as a contingent and contested process marked by civil servants attempting to piece together legitimacy through an imperfect notion of expertise and planning. I specifically draw on the National Archives and the Wellcome Collection, London; the Liverpool University Archives; the Hong Kong Public Records Office; and the Hong Kong Heritage Project. Through an examination of the considerations for replanning the colony following Japanese occupation, insights into the colonial worlds of planning challenge expert narratives that continue to promote post-war planning's normative credentials as a means of invigorating British governance.

Race, segregation and property in pre-war Hong Kong

The positioning of Hong Kong's British rule (1842–1997) within wider planning historiographies draws on the now disputed assertion that it represents a benign, even progressive, form of colonialism (see Chun, 2000, for a discussion). The former British colony is unique in the sense that British control lasted long after many British territories successfully won decolonisation in the post-war period. Hong Kong, in contrast,

never achieved independence, being transferred to the People's Republic of China. An evaluation of Hong Kong's development written less than ten years ago makes the claim that British rule was overwhelmingly positive, praising colonial rule in contrast to pro-Chinese nationalism:

The British expatriates ... not only provided Hong Kong with their insights about the city's future, but also established land policies, building codes, urban development and new town visions. Their contribution to Hong Kong's prosperity and stability should never be taken for granted, nor eroded by growing Chinese sentiment. It was altogether the British colonial government, officers, professionals and the local Chinese people, with their wisdom, experience, perseverance and passion, who have been shaping the present and future of this 'Pearl of the Orient'. (Xue et al., 2012, 565)

The island of Hong Kong was ceded to the British in the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842, and apart from Japanese occupation during the Second World War remained under British control until 1997. The Kowloon Peninsula came under British control in 1860 when it was home to less than 8,000 inhabitants (Hampton, 2015). In 1898, the New Territories, the principal landmass of the enlarged colony, was leased for a period of 100 years until 1997, when the People's Republic of China assumed control. Here around 100,000 Indigenous residents holding family land rights were granted a continuation of those rights along patrilineal lines (Yu and Hui, 2018). Hong Kong's population expanded rapidly in the century that followed the initial treaty, and when the British handed sovereignty to the People's Republic of China in 1997 its inhabitants numbered 6.5 million (HKSAR, 2017), but the area was certainly not *terra nullius* before colonial rule. Historical accounts of Hong Kong's colonial past have often sought to downplay political tensions and simplify the colonial narrative. In contrast, these positive planning narratives of British colonial rule in Hong Kong are challenged through a burgeoning field of work from a series of scholars within the fields of geography and history (see, for example, Chu, 2012; 2020; Smart, 2006; Tang, 2017).

Colonial rule required an elaborate administrative structure. As the critical planning historian Robert Home (2013, 39) elucidates:

If (as has been claimed) the British Empire operated as a vast system of outdoor relief for the English middle classes, then the new professions were an effective job creation scheme, diffusing new technologies and ideas around the colonies ... offering them wider scope and opportunity than they might have had at home.

Both talented and mediocre British professionals were able to develop their careers through the colonial civil service and overseas commissions, thereby constructing European professionalism and expertise.

Almost from the moment the British were ceded Hong Kong island and the Kowloon Peninsula their colonial reports note the dire housing and sanitation conditions facing

Chinese inhabitants. Land restrictions and availability were controlled by the Crown, and land scarcity, partially produced by the topography of the island, contributed to a high-income stream for the British administration (Chu, 2012; Tang, 2017). The deleterious housing conditions can be directly linked to the speculative land and property system developed by the British whereby the Crown initially sold lots of land under a 75-year leasehold. Land was strictly controlled with land auctions, rent and property taxes giving the Crown a strong revenue stream, and it was therefore in their interests to limit the supply of land. The architectural historian Cecilia Chu (2012, 29) explains that a principal impact was that ‘the policy led to a chronic housing shortage which led to high land values and in turn drove rents up to an exorbitant level’. Overcrowding and public-health concerns emerged from the early days of British control.

The housing shortage impacted primarily on the Chinese workers in Hong Kong and latterly refugees from the mainland. However, a series of public-health crises affected Chinese and European residents. An outbreak of bubonic plague in 1894 was almost certainly partially due to colonial inaction. Nonetheless, the colonial administration largely ignored how the high land prices and low incomes of workers had created overcrowding, instead focusing upon a racial explanatory force for the conditions (see Chadwick, 1882, for a notable exception). Long-standing anti-Chinese narratives and legislation were in place in the UK and in Hong Kong in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and these racist discourses are important dimensions of British rule (Auerbach, 2009). The contradictions of colonial governmentality meant that whilst there was dissent between officials, a critical distinction between Europeans and others offered a compelling explanatory force for the presumed ungovernable nature of the Chinese.

Given the absence of formal town planning for the first decades of the colony, public-health documents provide not only a detailed account of vital statistics but also, more importantly, further insights into the framing of Chinese populations. A series of medical professionals and engineers are asked to advise on the situation in Hong Kong and how best to prevent further outbreaks. However, what is revealing is the way that Chinese populations are entangled into a discourse of poor living conditions that cannot be meaningfully changed. Professor William Simpson’s (1902, 5) memorandum on plague prevention in Hong Kong states:

Hongkong is peculiar in possessing a greater proportion of these insanitary classes and of housing than on a smaller space than other towns. In the early days, owing to the limitation of available land for building purposes and the rapid increase in population, a system came into vogue, where sanitation was considered of no particular account in the East.

Simpson does emphasise that there was vast opposition to improving circumstances by landlords whose profits would be heavily dented, contributing to overcrowding

within the new urban development in Kowloon. Nevertheless, he continues, ‘the overcrowding of a *dirty class of people* are accentuated by the kind of buildings erected’ (1902, 6, emphasis added).

These deleterious conditions and a strong belief that the British were so distinct from the Chinese continued to underpin official understanding. Up until the interwar years, consecutive health and sanitary reports note the lack of a town planning ordinance and inaction by the colonial authorities. The annual reports from 1929 and 1930 both detail the housing conditions in Victoria, with a residential area of 400 acres for ‘the masses’ a population of half a million (density 1,250 per acre). It is noted that the area had been identified as overcrowded in 1882 when nearly 135,000 lived there and standards continued to decline. However, the failures are framed thus:

Year by year, the Sanitary Department and the Building Authority make efforts to deal with the situation and with a certain amount of success. The task, almost Sisyphean in itself, was rendered more difficult by paucity of water and by opposition put forward both by property owners and the occupiers. (Wellington, 1931, 9)

The Chinese property owners and tenants are identified as a significant barrier to change in the face of the apparent efforts of the colonial authorities. However, the details of the housing conditions that had been allowed to predominate in the colony are important to reflect on. The medical and sanitary report of 1929 describes ‘tiers of bunks’ with ‘rooms divided into cubicles or cabins each measuring perhaps eight feet by eight feet and having partitions 6 feet in height’ (Wellington, 1929, 9). The author considers that there is no hope of solving public-health problems as long as these conditions remain. At the same time the authorities’ proposed solution is to create dwellings that are subdivided into cabins measuring eight feet by eight feet and three-quarters. The view from the officials is, ‘Provided there is sufficient space in front and behind in the way of street and back lane and provided the occupants keep the building clean and free from obstruction to light and ventilation there is no reason why they should not have a healthy life’ (Wellington, 1931, 43). The unconscionable conditions have now become a contingent housing solution given the lack of alternatives without major physical and financial interventions. By 1939 the department is reporting on the construction of refugee camps and contains some photographs of emergency accommodation which includes housing people in former railway carriages. The report approves of the Hong Kong Eugenics League, which considers the reduction of family numbers to be an urgent priority in relieving housing pressure, particularly as infant mortality is six times higher than in Britain (Director of Medical Services, 1940, 113).

These assessments belie processes of racial and income segregation in Hong Kong that allowed the development of reserved neighbourhoods for Europeans. Much more spacious living conditions could be found in Victoria Peak, where the governor’s

house was located. Here the the topography of the island had been overcome and connected to Central (the CBD) via a funicular railway. Racial zoning ordinances operated in Hong Kong between 1904 and 1946, with Chinese inhabitants requiring special approval from the governor to reside in certain high-end neighbourhoods, including Victoria Peak. Low-density and spacious housing had been constructed in suburbs such as Kowloon Tong, originally established as white European enclaves (Coomans and Ho, 2018). Whilst segregation decreased significantly in the second half of the twentieth century, certain settings, such as some private members clubs and sports clubs, remained exclusively white until the 1960s (see Knowles and Harper, 2009).

Benevolent planning and post-war intervention

Housing and the overcrowded conditions were placed under increasing pressure following the end of the Second World War as a growing number of economic and political refugees from mainland China crossed into Hong Kong. The publication of Patrick Abercrombie's 1948 plan for Hong Kong has been situated within a narrative of British rule as a form of 'benevolent colonialism'. Abercrombie is considered one of the most important figures in British planning, holding chairs at the two oldest British planning schools, Liverpool and UCL. He prepared plans for many British cities and a series of overseas and colonial territories. His viewpoints on colonialism are difficult to glean from the archives. We can presume that he was not so strongly opposed to empire given that he accepted a colonial commission, something that not all prominent planners were offered (see Ward, 2008, in relation to Thomas Sharp). However, my intention is not to question the veracity of accounts of Abercrombie's values or even to castigate individual decisions to take colonial commissions. I am interested in exploring further how his intervention has been situated as offering an example of British planning expertise and concerned colonial rule in wider planning historiographies (see Bristow, 1984; Lai, 1999; Xue et al., 2012).

The urgent necessity for planning intervention in Hong Kong was communicated to the Colonial Office in London in late 1946 shortly after the resumption of British rule. The reinstated governor of Hong Kong, Sir Mark Young, requested that 'a Town Planning Expert of high repute should be made available as early as possible'. He asks the Secretary of State for the Colonies to recommend an expert 'who should have experience in planning port areas, including reclamation development schemes, as well as ordinary town planning of large cities' (TNA, 1946a).

At the same time, the planner W.H. Owen at the Ministry of Town and Country Planning, who was stationed in the colony prior to the outbreak of war, wrote in January 1947 to Hong Kong via the Colonial Office. He enclosed a number of landmark British planning documents to the Colonial Office to dispatch to Hong Kong alongside a draft

ordinance he had prepared, enclosing a note that such documents may provide ‘a foundation to work on’, stressing the need to make ‘the necessary adaptations for local conditions’ (TNA, 1947a). This confidence in the relevance of European planning knowledge and expertise speaks to an underlying faith in the universal applicability of its overarching principles, and in the superiority of European knowledge for colonial populations as an exemplar for social and spatial intervention.

The Colonial Office set in motion the appointment of a town planner by writing to the Ministry of Town and Country Planning, stating that the governor ‘has asked for a Town Planning expert of high repute’. They are unsure whether Hong Kong requires ‘a Town Planner to work out a detailed plan of Development in which case presumably it would be necessary to make an appointment for at least 18 months or two years, or whether he [Sir Mark Young] is thinking in terms of a short visit by a Consultant’ (TNA, 1947b). The draft letter notes that they had thought of clarifying the governor’s wishes ‘but think it is probably that he does not himself know what would be best and wishes advice from this end’, but this opinion is removed from the version sent to the ministry. However, the deletion is interesting in showing how metropole and colony operated. The Colonial Office considered that their purview of a British planning expert to consult in the colonies holds much greater weight than a specific knowledge of Hong Kong, even when referring to the governor.

The Ministry of Town Planning expresses a viewpoint that there are really only one or two experts in the country and that two of them, William Holford, another prominent planner and scholar, and Patrick Abercrombie, are ‘excessively busy’. They make a further suggestion of James A. Stewart, ‘who worked with Professor Abercrombie on the London Plan and is regarded by us as capable of doing the job if he were willing to go. His long and varied expertise includes that of Chief Engineer to the Calcutta Development Trust’ (TNA, 1947c). The Colonial Office return to the governor outlining their proposal of a consultant followed by the development of a two- to three-year planning post. They note that Abercrombie is on another commission in Cyprus but are uncertain about his willingness to accept this one. However, ‘No other expert of comparable status is available’, and they ask ‘whether you wish approach to be made first to Abercrombie and failing him Stewart’ (TNA, 1947d). The governor, Sir Mark Young, is insistent that Abercrombie is his first choice – ‘I attach great importance to obtaining services of Consultant of this standing’ – but failing this, he indicates that he will consider Maxwell Fry, ‘who headed a mission to the West African Colonies for similar investigation’, or his third choice, their suggestion of James A. Stewart (TNA, 1947e).

As the planner and scholar Gerald Dix (1981, 122) notes in his biographical chapter on Abercrombie, overseas commissions, including Hong Kong, provided vital opportunities, as ‘most of the planning work passed from the consultants who had been its mainstay and provided its inspiration in early years to the new statutory local planning

authorities'. Thus colonies and decolonising countries offered opportunities no longer available to such senior planners, and despite Abercrombie's other commitments he accepted the Hong Kong invitation. The Colonial Office set out their view about Hong Kong to Abercrombie in March 1947:

You are no doubt aware that Hong Kong is built on a steep rock, which I imagine, presents problems of considerable interest as well as difficulty. There was need, even before the war, for the replanning and rebuilding of the old part of Victoria where Chinese housing conditions were recognised as bad, and, as in other places the damage caused by the war offers a *notable opportunity*, of which we are anxious to take the fullest advantage, for carrying out improvements. (TNA, 1947f, emphasis added)

Just as bomb damage during the war was sometimes insensitively represented by planners of the 1940s and 1950s as a positive occasion for improvement, the deleterious living conditions of the Chinese inhabitants of Hong Kong are considered an opportunity for the introduction of a comprehensive planning scheme of the type that was already under way in post-war Britain. Their primary concern was Victoria, known now as Central, on Hong Kong island. Housing conditions and public-health concerns had preoccupied civil servants in Hong Kong since the early days of colonial administration but the conditions had only worsened. It was only from the 1950s that the colony embarked on an extensive programme of public-housing construction, although the reasons behind this decision remain contested (see Smart, 2006, for a critical account of the matter).

The notion of British planning expertise and the narrow consideration of who holds it is reiterated on the application for a colonial development grant to fund the visit, where a civil servant notes, 'He [Sir Mark Young] attaches great importance to securing the services of a man of high reputation' (TNA, 1947g). The new governor, Sir Alexander Grantham, writes to the Secretary of State for the Colonies in September 1947 to say that Abercrombie will arrive in October for a visit of several weeks. 'In this short time he cannot be expected to produce a final plan for the cities of Hong Kong and Kowloon and for the port, but he will outline a general plan and indicate what preliminary work is necessary' (TNA, 1947h).

Abercrombie arrived in Hong Kong in the autumn of 1947 and during his trip he met numerous individuals, including Sir Alexander Graham, the incumbent governor, and the Colonial Secretary, finding everyone helpful in his work. It is important to note that a great deal of work was conducted by Hong Kong administrators, including surveys, in anticipation of his visit (see Ho, 2018). Eight months after departing, colonial administrators became agitated about the completion of the draft they had been promised within three months but were reticent to hurry him. The Colonial Office in London wrote to Abercrombie in September 1948 asking for an update, noting that 'Hong Kong are, of course, holding up their urban development plans until your

report can be taken into consideration' (TNA, 1948a). Abercrombie responded that he had hoped to complete the report by the Christmas of 1947 but trips to Ceylon and Switzerland, on other planning commissions, had delayed matters. In his covering note with the draft report he asks for any changes to be conveyed either on the basis of factual matters or 'on matters of high policy where an omission (but not necessarily a change of my views) may be desirable' (TNA, 1948b). A draft is received in London on 29 September 1948 and dispatched with a covering letter to Hong Kong officials, who are told to settle factual matters with Abercrombie directly. Abercrombie had little expectation that serious amendments would be required, noting that only one minor change was requested to his Cyprus report. On its receipt by the Colonial Secretariat in Hong Kong, it was scrutinised in detail. A detailed written report was compiled with comments on each of the 108 paragraphs. Three pages of factual issues were returned by Hong Kong officials and are mostly points of grammar and spelling. Despite amendments from Hong Kong, Abercrombie himself was pleased that the report seemed to be generally well received.

Detailed assessments of the important influence and context of the Abercrombie report, along with his planning vision, have been offered by others (see, for example, Lai, 1999). The report itself focuses on Hong Kong Island and Kowloon rather than the New Territories, but is wide ranging in its discussion. However, the two inter-related dimensions of housing and density provide insights into pre-existing colonial perspectives on the colony. Rather than a radical break with British colonial viewpoints about Hong Kong, how does the report draw upon pre-existing colonial narratives? Abercrombie considers the colony's overcrowding to be a sign of the popularity and success of British colonial governance. In the introductory section of the report Abercrombie (1948, para. 5) notes:

As a recent writer has said 'the prosperity of this tiny British Colony stands out like a beacon. This is mainly due to the fact that the stability of the British administration has afforded a refuge to commercial interests which have fled from the chaos prevailing elsewhere.'

Here the notion of stable and desirable British governance is presented as a steadying force. Hong Kong's Chinese population were living in dire circumstances with densities far higher than most other cities in many parts of the world. Overcrowding is presented as a price worth paying for British rule. Abercrombie demonstrated a great deal of concern about the high densities of people in Hong Kong and concluded from his visit that Hong Kong simply had too little space for too many people. The small areas of available land identified for housing offered few solutions to this problem. 'The housing conditions of Hong Kong present the most serious problem in the Colony', he wrote. 'Density to the extent of 2,000 persons to the acre, and not confined to small patches ... but which under present powers cannot be condemned, is

something unknown in European countries' (Abercrombie, 1948, para. 19). However, a contradiction emerges between British rule and the conditions that are framed as non-European. Abercrombie focuses upon two significant constraints to planning action. The first was ongoing population expansion spurred by political unrest and the second was the limited available sites for building. Abercrombie proposes that 'the population has *become used to densities* which, over large areas (not in small black spots) must be some of the highest in the world' (Abercrombie, 1948, para. 5, emphasis added). Yet whilst he articulates comparisons with various cities, the discussion turns to what kind of density is appropriate for this *particular* population.

Abercrombie's planning efforts try to take into account the health and social implications of dense living, with his extensive knowledge enabling him to make a series of comparisons with other cities. He proposes that Hong Kong necessitates higher density standards than cities such as London:

After considering many alternative suggestions both as to numbers of the average family, floor area per person and number of building units per net acre ... 504 persons per net acre has been adopted ... This is a considerably lower density than has been adopted for certain post-war rebuilding in Kowloon. (Abercrombie, 1948, para. 20)

A note of disquiet creeps into the tone of his writing when he considers the reaction to a much lower density recommendation for London:

It is, however, very high [proposed density] compared with European standards when it is remembered that 200 persons per acre recommended by a very limited area in the London Plan, came in for very serious criticism from housing and town planning reformers. (Abercrombie, 1948, para. 20)

Whilst Abercrombie seeks to articulate the problem and engage with solutions, the possibilities available to him are limited. Although keen to see a great improvement in living conditions, the contention that a population could 'become used' returns to the colonial representation of the Chinese population as other than European. He acknowledges that densities of two hundred people per acre are considered too high within his London report but considers 504 acceptable in Hong Kong. These may be lower densities than existing conditions but the distinctions create tensions with the argument that planning expertise draws upon standard or universal baselines and readily transfers from metropole to colony. Indeed, we find that Abercrombie's recommendations intersect with a colonial discourse that considers accommodating Hong Kong's Chinese population an impossible task.

An air of resignation emerges in relation to the conditions and the increasing density given the porous border and political unrest in China. However, the argument that the outcomes of Hong Kong's high levels of overcrowding and highly unequal housing market are primary based on a 'lack of land' offers a simplistic and reductionist

account of British rule given the Crown control of the land market as the main source of revenue (see Tang, 2017, for a critique). Such contentions fail to engage with how the long-standing British colonial control of freehold created an ever more costly land market that exacerbated conditions. The development of these inequalities was further compounded through a racialised discourse that sought to suggest that the Chinese residents preferred overcrowding and insanitary conditions. The idea that these standards were deemed appropriate undermines the claims of a universality of planning or the expansion of 'good' British planning. The first wave of public housing allows 2.2 square metres (23.7 square feet) per adult and half for children, with 'apartments' of 11 square metres (118.4 square feet). These housing standards are far below British standards or even sections of the squatter housing they sought to replace. The abandonment of standards or their severe degradation occurs in parallel with sustained work in British planning to create higher living standards, including addressing housing and density. The transmission of planning ideas is thus not a frictionless activity from metropole to colony. We can see now that the narrative that these reduced standards are appropriate for the Chinese and that British planning is adaptable for different racial groups is not a marked difference from that of the colonial administration.

Challenging British planning benevolence

Alternative readings of the UK post-war planning movement propose that the 'momentous changes in British planning during the 1940s were transmitted internationally through various channels, notably by the propagandising efforts of planning advisors, many of whom had been instrumental in bringing them about' (Amati and Freestone, 2009, 597). The notion of 'transmitting' British planning to other locations reinforces the idea that imperial planning represented a superior knowledge than other forms currently available to different countries, reinforcing the imperial ideology of a civilising mission to colonised people who are always waiting to catch up (see Chakrabarty, 2000, for a critique). The idea of transmission is also often presumed to be associated with progressive values that belie critiques of the Eurocentricity of modernity (Bhambra, 2007). Whilst colonial ordering was less evident in Hong Kong, there were nonetheless a series of measures that sought to keep areas for Europeans, distinguishing between them as part of imperial racial distinctions (Bremner and Lung, 2003).

An understanding of British colonial planning in Hong Kong requires movement from progressive narratives of planning to a greater consideration of how colonial racism towards the Chinese population facilitated particular planning conditions. Despite the initial enthusiasm regarding the Abercrombie report, poor living conditions intensified. The dire public-health situation and the overcrowding of the majority Chinese population, as well as the high densities, had a major impact on housing and

planning narratives. The 1950 Medical and Sanitary Report devotes attention to the rising levels of tuberculosis linked to overcrowding as refugee numbers increase and the removal of squatter housing drives people to tenement blocks. ‘The degree of this overcrowding is almost impossible to imagine. One case of pulmonary tuberculosis was recently found to be living on a floor, legally capable of housing 10–12 people, but occupied by 23 families’ (Director of Medical Services, 1950, 61). Tuberculosis rates had been high since the turn of the century and severe overcrowding was a major contributory factor. As the historian Pui Yin Ho (2018, 13) notes in relation to the settlement of Hong Kong, ‘Using respect for the Chinese traditional culture as an excuse, the government neglected the management of public hygiene in Sheung Wan as the district gradually became a densely populated Chinese area’. Cultural difference which emerged as a justification for demarcating Chinese spaces lingered despite attempts to address housing shortages (see also Jones, 2003).

Abercrombie’s report had been intended to provide an outline for a chief planner, who would be appointed for at least two to three years to begin its execution. However, on receipt of the final document, colonial officials almost immediately revealed reservations about the costs and benefits as well as the practicability of the plan. As the planning historian Roger Bristow (1984) has explored, efforts to undertake planning in light of the report soon stalled as differing interests failed to agree on how best to undertake town planning. A key factor was the financial costs of implementing such major changes. A senior colonial official complains,

In order to make it possible for any progress to be made it would be necessary to spend a great number of millions on resumptions and the Colony clearly cannot afford to do that. Even then, any progress would be very slow for in practice large-scale town planning of a big city which has been allowed to grow up anyhow has always proved to be impracticable. Hitler tried it in Berlin and failed even with his immense resources. (TNA, 1951)

The juxtaposition of Hitler’s planning with colonial Hong Kong is startling, not least given that it is written just a few years after the war. The official recognises the constraints of Hong Kong as a financially straitened colony and thus considers that the cost of resumptions in this particular geographical location is simply too high to make the plan viable. At the same time, they unblinkingly make the comparison with Hitler’s ambitions for the metropolitan seat of German imperial power as an object lesson in the difficulties of planning even when one has totalitarian power.

Whilst there have been several discussions regarding the prescience of the plan (Bristow, 1984; Lai, 1999), the reflections of Abercrombie’s friend and colleague Gerald Dix (1997) remind us of the need for caution in how we evaluate the plan:

In PA’s [Abercrombie’s] time there was no verb as master planning and I doubt he would have used it, or the idea that it implies, had there been ... He would be surprised

if more than 10% of a part of a plan were to be realised in the form he had put forward. This particular report [Abercrombie's 1948 Hong Kong plan] involved departmental jealousies, and the apportionment of the £1million available; it was bound to meet with some opposition which no doubt today seems to indicate apathy. But some credit must go to the Governor for having PA appointed to prepare the report. And having invited him it was important that PA should do more.

Dix's reflections situate Abercrombie's desire to engage in practice but also his awareness of the departmental politics operating within Hong Kong. Any assumption that Abercrombie's arrival could negate decades of planning inaction reflects a vast oversimplification of the technical capabilities of planning, the political context in which the commission was awarded and the racial narrative that justified overcrowding of the majority population. Such an assertion detaches those concerns for planning expertise from the record of British rule in Hong Kong and the lack of significant planning interventions until the late 1930s. Poor health, outbreaks of disease, high infant mortality rates and a lack of sanitation were all experienced within the colony under British rule. Whilst there were significant land constraints, the racialised discourses of colonialism are entangled within the justifications for inaction. However, the framing of the housing and living conditions as arising from the manners and habits of the Chinese population, as well as the increasing number of immigrants and people seeking refuge, underlies a wider racial ambivalence emblematic of British colonial rule (see Chu, 2012; Tang, 2017, for a critique)

The planning history of Hong Kong belies arguments of neutral forms of planning or universal standards. Whilst the high-rise buildings of Hong Kong are considered emblematic of the global city of the modern period, the extreme overcrowding of Hong Kong interweaves physical conditions with a racialised narrative. Early proponents of planning are often recounted as visionary figures whose models of planning offer universal insights that brought great benefits to human populations at large. They point to the moral and social concerns shared by early reformers underpinning town planning as a set of practices concerned with social improvement and moral uplift. Of course, these reformers had no control over the ways in which their ideas were used or transformed within planning practice. The forms of planning that took place in colonial settings draw on a disputed Eurocentric hierarchy of knowledge placing Europe at the forefront of political and technical modernity. Nonetheless, the planning of Hong Kong reveals a series of assumptions about the impossibility of the task based on racial stereotypes of the population. The historical geographer Hannah Fitzpatrick (2019, 87) has argued in relation to the partition of India that the mapping of colonial territories 'frequently betrayed political expediency rather than ... geographical expertise and rationality'. The production of reports and plans in Hong Kong reveals a racially framed rationale that undermines claims of neutral or progressive public-health and planning expertise.

The cultural theorist Homi Bhabha (2012, 282, emphasis added) expands on how European modernity distinguishes between the progressive ‘West’ and its extension through processes of colonialisation:

The dehistoricized authority of ‘man and his doubles’ produces in the same historical period, those forces of normalization and naturalization that create a modern Western disciplinary society. The invisible power that is invested in this dehistoricized figure of Man is gained at the cost of those ‘others’ – women, natives, the colonized, the indentured and enslaved – who at the same time but in other spaces, were becoming *the peoples without history*.

Decolonisation demands attentiveness to these continuing claims that colonialism has progressive or beneficial components (see Gopal, 2020). Such assertions are based within the framing of European and colonial superiority. Such a duality is central to critiquing the modernising narrative that harnesses the notion of differing temporalities between colonisers and those who have been colonised. The European figure is situated within a modern civilisation and culture that the racialised inhabitants could not be presumed to benefit from (Chakrabarty, 2000). Such sets of thinking underpin British imperial government and planning (in)action. The plan for Hong Kong promised intervention with little engagement with the previous hundred years of relative neglect of these issues. There were many colonial administrators who had called for government intervention in urban planning and public health and infrastructure improvements. However, the uneven response to the significant planning issues facing Hong Kong was not resolved through superior planning expertise, although planning experts may have visited. The significant challenges of overcrowding and density were, of course, difficult to address due to land capacity as well as increasing immigration and people seeking refuge in Hong Kong. But this offers only a partial insight into the lack of colonial action and the unresolved housing and density issues becoming ingrained within a narrative of cultural difference based on a Eurocentric racist discourse. The history of public health and public housing in Hong Kong points to a contingent and fragmented approach and ‘experimentation’ in planning given the lack of democratic accountability (see Lai, 1999).

Conclusions

Hong Kong’s identification as a global city of trade and finance and as a colony made prosperous through British colonial rule has often obscured the significant wealth inequalities and lack of democracy that have intensified since the handover to the People’s Republic of China. The geographer Brenda Yeoh (2001, 457) argues that Hong Kong is unlike many other colonial cities in that the end of British rule was ‘not so much marked by emancipatory promise but locked into uncertainty’. Hong

Kong's history does not offer an account of how British colonial rule can be successful or benevolent.

A reconsideration of aspects of Hong Kong's urban planning under colonial rule challenges accounts that present British interventions as largely benign. However, the notion that there are better and worse variants of colonialism confuses the outcomes and brutality of colonialism in different contexts. Whilst there were numerous atrocities committed under British colonialism, their relative absence in Hong Kong should not be confused with a lack of racial ordering and discrimination. In this instance post-war planning is offered as evidence of 'concerned rule', with colonial control enabling experimentation through planning to facilitate the urban conditions necessary for an economically active and politically inactive population.

The focus on specific experts such as Patrick Abercrombie and their interventions problematises a simplified narrative that obscures the many decades of inaction or ambivalence displayed within British colonial rule (Hein, 2017). Abercrombie's appointment forms part of the interwoven networks of imperial power that facilitated British planning experts' work within colonial territories to bolster legitimacy for the wider colonial project. The imperial history of British planning is downplayed through a discussion that positions planning as primarily a form of technical knowledge that can move from metropole to colony without significant critical engagement with its own history. Planning is separated from its role in the exercise of power within the empire, with the violence of colonial oppression emerging as a relatively unproblematised backdrop (see, for example, Freestone and James, 2018).

Hong Kong's British planning must be more closely considered within the *longue durée* of imperial rule based upon the racial hierarchies that allowed Europeans to claim advanced expertise as part of the colonial mission (see Njoh, 2010; Tilley, 2010, for a discussion). Such narratives of Hong Kong Chinese peoples' lack of political concern erases significant political unrest under British rule and does not stand scrutiny given the intensifying political activism in recent years. The experience of Hong Kong does not represent a less problematic variant of colonial enterprise but enables us to recognise that the parameters for colonial activity differed and that a coherent project of empire was absent (see Stoler, 2010). Hong Kong did not face the brutal violence of other British colonies, but to suggest that this supports claims for a beneficial dimension to imperialism is to misunderstand the colonial project. A mode of thinking that conceives of planning as a series of beneficial experimentations to improve the living conditions of 'the people' continues to replicate ideas of imperial expertise. Continuing efforts must be made to situate the planning discipline within a wider narrative of colonial expansion that facilitated European modernity as part of a racialised narrative of knowledge, expertise and essentialised forms of cultural difference.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Kiera Chapman and Matthew Gandy for their helpful comments on this article and the many archivists who helped me locate materials, as well as the digitisation projects that enabled me to track down further resources. I particularly want to thank Anita Beebeejaun for kindly and generously sharing her own reflections on early life in Hong Kong. Finally, thanks to the editor, editorial manager and three reviewers for their generous comments that helped to improve this article.

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