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Un-forgetting walls by lines on maps: A case study on property rights, cadastral mapping, and the landscape of the Kowloon Walled City

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ABSTRACT

This paper demonstrates that the framing of post-war Kowloon Walled City through photos has been dominated by the maps commonly used to represent this Chinese enclave in colonial Hong Kong as a place. Inspired by and extending Wylie's (2009) argument that emptiness and presence are equally important, this paper uses basic GIS techniques and hitherto unpublished archival materials to help (a) argues that the colonial government's mindset of clearly defining the spatial boundary of the city, which is a subtle admission of an officially and diplomatically denied otherness in ownership, created the city as a quasi-cadastral unit; and (b) explains how this shaped the framing of the landscape of the city by promoting investment and trade in high-rise housing development units. The government did not destroy its walls. When these were physically destroyed, it did not ignore the walls' original alignments but treated the city as a planning unit, as if they still existed.

> One city (Sector A) built of stones, a perimeter defensive wall of 1800 feet in total length, 18 feet in height, 14 feet in width along the east, west and south, 7 feet in width along the north side. On the hill (Pak Hok Shan) "behind built" a coarse stone wall of 1700 feet in length, 8 feet tall and 3 feet wide. One martial god temple, one deputy general's office, one inspectorate office, one martial arts shelter, one armament factory, one gunpowder factory, 14 shelters for soldiers, 4 guardhouses on the wall, 6 store rooms, one water pond, two water wells, signal house for Tiger Head Pass, signal house for Kowloon Pass, 2 smoke signal stations (Chiu and Chung, 2001, p. 56; translated with author's brackets and italics).

Preamble

The definition of landscape in the European Landscape Convention is clear and broad: "Landscape means an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors" (Council of Europe, 2000) As an area has a boundary, its mapping is part of landscape study. Therefore, "In many countries new landscape classifications are developed and mapping of character areas of landscapes is considered as a basis for landscape assessment." (Antrop, 2005, p. 30) Mapping is in this light seen as a record of landscape. In this paper, mapping produced a landscape by defining property rights of the state vis-à-vis what she considered as squatters.

1. Introduction

Built with a garden in the style of a traditional Chinese landscaped enclave, the Kowloon Walled City Park is now a peaceful oasis in a high-rise urban jungle near an international ocean liner pier (the Kai Tak Cruise Terminal) built on the former runway of the old Kai Tak Airport. Shortly before this public garden was built the place, Kowloon Walled City (KWC), built in the mid 19th century as described above in Chiu and Chung (2001), had condescendingly been called "sin city" by the *China Mail* (Wesley-Smith, 1973) and nicknamed the "City of Darkness," (Popham, 1993; Girard et al., 1999; Carney, 2015). Although the walls had been demolished by the Japanese during World War II using forced labour, what was built spontaneously within their virtual confines was seen as a high-rise slum built on land governed by neither the ousted British colonial regime, which claimed complete jurisdiction over it, nor the Chinese Nationalist Government, which held such a claim to be illegal.

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The KWC was located in the New Territories, which, along with the Shantung (Shandong) port of Weihaiwei,[1] were leased to Britain in 1898 under the Peking Convention in the so-called "Scramble for Concessions" after the first Sino-Japanese War and before the Boxer Uprising in 1900. The Convention was signed in the context of the Franco-Russian Alliance much feared by Britain as a tilt in the balance of power against her interest in Europe and elsewhere (Endacott, 1982). The Convention provided that the Chinese Government could station officials inside the KWC provided that their presence would not adversely affect the defence of Hong Kong. The leasing of the New Territories was due to British fears of a Russian threat to their interests in the Far East. The saga of the KWC began when the Hong Kong Government expelled all Chinese officials from it on 16 May 1899 and refused to withdraw on the grounds that they were threatening the defence of the colony[2] (Wesley-Smith 1973; Sinn, 1987). The government employed British Indian surveyors to conduct a full scale cadastral survey of the New Territories in 1899–1904, including the KWC, and then allocated the land within the KWC to Chinese civilians on very short term leases. Militarily weak, the Manchu Government[3] acquiesced in this incursion, but the succeeding Republican government insisted that the KWC was Chinese territory.

The image of the landscape of the KWC as a high-rise jungle with the Concorde and Boeing 747 planes' landing gears lowered above its silhouette, which confounds the common mind, according to western commentators, is, in retrospect, highly mysterious. Many think that the KWC was the result of anarchy due to uncertainty over sovereignty rights. The anarcho-liberal economist may consider KWC a classic case of complete private planning. The freedom of contracts operated there, but unlike Houston and Milwaukee in the U.S. (Lai, 2014), there was no restrictive covenant to private environmental planning, as no common law court would entertain any civil lawsuit against land property within the KWC. Upon closer analysis, as this paper explains, the landscape of the KWC was a product of choices under constraints, which are best interpreted as a three-dimensional spatial outcome with mapping playing a significant role.

It is a cliché that "the landlord of all land in Hong Kong except St. John's Cathedral" is the Hong Kong government. In reality, the power of the government over the KWC was far weaker than its authority over the freehold granted to the Church of England to build that church because China denied that the government could do anything in the city without her permission: indeed, before and after 1933 China always insisted that the KWC was Chinese territory.

Approaching the landscape of the KWC from the dimensions of the Euclidian space containing it, this paper submits that the 3D shape of the KWC was actually defined by Hong Kong's colonial administration in its diligence into clearly delineate its boundaries and restrict its heights in pursuit of specific planning as a manifestation of its authority. This failed where it both acknowledged and re-created the KWC as a cadastral entity, even although the KWC's defining characteristics were long gone. In so failing, the colonial government produced a 3D landscape that demarcated the limits of its effective authority over development within that space. This planimetric focus reflected the mentality and function of a modern state that serves, among many things, a modern property market enabled by land surveying techniques. While forces of international relations mattered, this paper holds that the landscape product of the KWC would not have looked the way it did from the "outside" without the lines the government drew on its maps and plans "for" the KWC. If "critical visualization is to make the invisible visible" (Kwan, 2015), this paper is reverse engineering, which translates the (once) visible KWC built forms back to the invisible property boundaries stubbornly retained in maps. Such maps underlie Lefebvre's 'conceptual triad' of conceived or planned space, representational or lived space and spatial practices, applied by Cartier (2002) to frame landscape formation in modern China.

2. Gazing at the Kowloon Walled City

The imaging and framing of the KWC's landscape in books were mainly by means of photos and sketch maps of the settlement as it existed during the 1980s, when its fate was sealed. The photos typically show images of the buildings along either its northern perimeter on Tung Tau Tsuen Road or eastern one on Tung Tsing Road. The sketch maps are generally tracings of the Survey and Mapping Office's survey maps. Had this office not charged a huge royalty, these authors would have reproduced the large scale survey maps and/or aerial photos. An exception is Lai (1996), who used both two survey sheets and a helicopter photos.[4] In any case, the KWC was defined and presented as a cube with its base defined by a survey map and its outermost facades framed by site photos. An excellent example of this was the architectural work by Ho (1993). Within this cube, images of the KWC were represented by photos taken of the inside of flats or its narrow lanes. The only attempt to show a cross-sectional view of the buildings of the KWC was made by a Japanese team of researchers (Kani, 1997) shortly before it was demolished. The team presented views of the KWC during its demolition. In the KWC Garden, a to-scale 3-D model made of metal is exhibited near the location of the KWC's old southern gate. This physical model validates the cubical imagery of the KWC's landscape as a high-rise housing area (see Fig. 5).

It could be said that it is natural for writers to take pictures of the KWC from public roads and trace its boundaries according to government maps in their efforts to present an image of the settlement. Upon further reflection, these exercises in 'gazing' were conditioned by the public works of the government in building roads along or close to the actual walls of the KWC and government maps that retained the alignment of the walls. Therefore, the more profound question is why the government preserved on its maps the alignments of the walls, while the official position of the colonial administration was that it was just another piece of Crown land in Hong Kong, in which case it would have ceased to be a place formally demarcated on the map. The idea is that the persistence of the boundary of the KWC in maps may reflect the government's apparent uncertainty over its ownership rights. The boundaries of the KWC thus set the spatial limits of its effective, as opposed to its claimed sovereignty. In other words, the government defined the KWC as a special zone within which its rights differed from those outside it.

[1] This referred to the modern city of Weihai in Shandong Province, China, the former British Colony of "Weihaiwei" (1898–1930). It guarded the maritime approach to the capital of China.

[2] "The facts are that after the conclusion of the Convention, steps were taken by the Hong Kong Government to assume British control over the new territory. In April 1899. The British party met with armed resistance in the village of Kowloon and a certain amount of fighting and violence took place before the British position was established. We were satisfied that this resistance was attributable to the Chinese authorities in Canton and we decided not to permit the resumption of Chinese civil authority in Kowloon." **CO129/544/14,** 1933 file disclosed to the public in 1984.

[3] Manchu is the name of the ethnic group. The name of the Dynasty he established was Ching (in Cantonese) or Qing (Mandarin).

[4] Girard et al. (1999) used a similar 1972 helicopter photo of the Government Information Service on p.71. Neither used aerial photos taken for mapping purposes.