

ORDER AND DISORDER: THE GOVERNANCE OF THE KOWLOON WALLED CITY IN HONG KONG DURING THE LATE 20TH CENTURY

SOPHIE LIU

B.A. Candidate in History and Asian Studies
Cornell University, Class of 2025

Abstract

Due to the historical legal disputes over the sovereignty between China and Britain and the resulting high crime rates, the Kowloon Walled City in Hong Kong was often regarded as a place without law and governance. This perception was reinforced by the active gangster activities conducted by the triad groups, mainly the Sun Yee On. However, during the 20th century and before the establishment of the Hong Kong Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC), areas under the control of the British Hong Kong government were undergoing the same situation. The Kowloon Walled City also had the Neighborhood Welfare Association serving as the bridge for communication with the British Hong Kong government, providing basic support and sanitation services. In this sense, with self-governance from the local Neighborhood Welfare Association, a certain level of intervention from the Hong Kong government, and the widespread gangster activities, the reality of Kowloon Walled City was not according to the popular imagination. This paper seeks to discover the nature of the governance mechanism of the Kowloon Walled City while dismantling the above claim.

Representation

33,000 people, 8,800 homes, and 1,000 businesses, all in 2.8 hectares.¹ This was the population density of the Kowloon Walled City at its height. Such a high density of population not only made the Kowloon Walled City a tourist destination for exotic exploration, but also the subject of study from perspectives such as architecture, urban planning, and cultural studies. Some of these works, including Adolfo Arranz's visual infographic (Figure 1), aimed at analyzing the daily life of the residents and presenting them to the public.² The straightforward and linear narration found commonly in architectural and cultural studies built a popular imagination of the Walled City as a place that bred prostitution, gambling, drug deals, and other crimes.

The Walled City has always been a popular subject of investigation in the field of Architecture and Urban Studies. Even though the architectural complex itself

¹ Diana Jou, dir., *City of Imagination: Kowloon Walled City*. (The Wall Street Journal Documentary, 2014).

² James Saywell, "The Architecture of a Mini City," *City of Darkness: Life in Kowloon Walled City*, (Zhonghua Book Company, 2014), 230.

was demolished, it remained a mythology that enabled people to glance back at the past. Figures 2 to 4 were selected by Lambot and Girard's photobook *City of Darkness: Life in Kowloon Walled City*. In Figure 2, the city of darkness reveals itself under the sunlight and people's eyesight. The sharp contrast between the blue sky and the yellowing surface of the building complex suggests its living conditions are concerning. Yet, the colorful clothes and quilts hanging on the windows and balconies indicate the residents' traces. Compared with the image taken inside (such as Figure 3), the Walled City seems to be less dangerous and filthy with the photography's brightness. Certainly, Lambot and Girard produced very successful architectural photographs with their sophisticated use of natural light and their architectural expertise, but they failed to deliver their messages successfully.

Figure 4 presents the building complex from an omnipotent outsider's perspective, allowing the audience to see through the structure and its residents. The wires and sticks on the upper floor are exposed, contrary to Figure 1, where they easily blend with the background. The windows are dark and impenetrable, invoking a sense of emptiness and solitude, which contradicts the interviews conducted with the residents throughout the photobook. This scene, without any background context, could be easily interpreted as an abandoned site. At this point, the colorful clothes and quilts hanging on the windows and balconies are not an indication of livelihood but rather a sign of a perhaps sudden departure, that they forgot some of their property. Similar to the entire building complex of the Walled City, they too, were forgotten in the course of history.

Photography is a useful primary source in historical research because of its ability to document precisely and vicariously. At the same time, photography cannot provide a straightforward argument, as it can be open to multiple interpretations due to various reasons, including geographical locations, cultural backgrounds, and historical context.

The Kowloon Walled City remained a nostalgic icon, reminiscent of the darkness behind the economic prosperity of Hong Kong during the 20th century. Contemporary-inspired works include a game launched in 2020, *Paranormal HK (Gang Gui Shi Lu)*, which drew connections between supernatural urban legends and unspeakable crimes present within the city. The Walled City was also regarded as the foundation of the cyberpunk genre, influencing William Gibson's *Idoru*, Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins*, Robert Ludlum's *The Bourne Supremacy*, etc.³ In this sense, the Walled City became much more than an architectural space, but a cultural brand.

However, what was the context behind such a generalized narrative? Were the claims suggested by the residents following or contradictory to the aforementioned popular imagination?

³ Jon Resnick, "Popular Culture and the Walled City", *City of Darkness: Life in Kowloon Walled City*, (Zhonghua Book Company, 2014), 350-379.

Historical Legal Disputes

The Kowloon Walled City's historical significance can be traced back to the reign of Kang Xi, the Qing Dynasty emperor from 1661 to 1722. From the first to the sixth year of his reign (1661-1667), coastal inhabitants of Kowloon Village were forcibly relocated to the Mainland. In the twenty-third year (1684), the Kowloon Village garrisoned troops for defense.⁴ This was due to Kowloon Village's geographical location, which made it an important strategic spot to oversee coastal activities. Following Britain's occupation of Hong Kong after the Opium War, two issues appeared: Chinese sailing ships smuggling foreign goods into the mainland through Hong Kong and the presence of pirates nearby.⁵ As a result, the Koon Fu Inspection Division, which was originally to supervise the Koon Fu salty yard, was moved to the Kowloon Walled City and relocated and promoted to the Kowloon Inspection Division in 1843.⁶ At this point, the Kowloon Walled City already functioned as a special administrative region, bridging between the Chinese Qing government and the British Hong Kong government.

Following the "Convention Between Great Britain and China Respecting an Extension of Hong Kong Territory" in June 1898, in which Britain leased New Territories and Northern Kowloon for 99 years, despite the majority of the territory being under Britain's control, the sovereignty of this area was still under the Qing court. The Convention recognized its status, "It is at the same time agreed that within the city of Kowloon the Chinese officials now stationed there shall continue to exercise jurisdiction except so far as may be inconsistent with the military requirements for the defense of Hong Kong. Within the remainder of the newly-leased territory, Great Britain shall have sole jurisdiction."⁷ For the Qing government, Kowloon City symbolized its representation of power in the region and a legitimization of the future return of the concession. On the other hand, Britain agreed with this demand due to the sharing of profits among different parties ("Yi Ti Jun Zhan"). "The Convention for the Lease of the Liaotung Peninsula" between Russia and Qing in March 1898 confirmed Qing officials' jurisdiction in Jinzhou.⁸

Since the British Hong Kong government had no authority within the law enforcement of Kowloon City, it became known as "San Bu Guan" without regulation from the former Qing Dynasty, British Hong Kong, and the Republic of China. However, this did not mean that Britain fully gave up jurisdiction over the Kowloon Walled City. The Chief Justice of Hong Kong commented that "[the Chinese jurisdiction was]... merely the jurisdiction appertaining to those officials

⁴ Jin Lu, *Jin Long Cheng Zhai Shi Hua* (San Lian Shu Xiang Gang Fen Dian, 1989), 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 26-30.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷ "The Convention Between Great Britain and China Respecting an Extension of Hong Kong Territory," <https://web.archive.org/web/20140308194043/http://ebook.lib.hku.hk/HKG/B36227845.pdf>

⁸ Jin Lu, 84.

stationed within the City at the time, and the use of the word ‘now’ seems to contemplate the authority appertaining to an individual rather than to an office of a continuing nature; [the parties to the Convention] were concerned not with the reservation of some measure of sovereignty, but simply with the safeguarding of the rights of the existing officials.”⁹ In another case regarding murder in the Kowloon Walled City, the court held that the Chinese jurisdiction was temporary under the Convention.¹⁰

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, a large number of people sought refuge in the Kowloon Walled City, resulting in an increase in crime. This contributed to Walled City being perceived as a place that bred prostitution, gambling, drug deals, and other crimes. According to a report drafted by the chief of the Police Department of the Hong Kong government, “In November 1954 a police reconnaissance of buildings in the area showed 648 stone buildings and 152 wooden nuts. Within these buildings were:- (i) 120 Narcotic Divans, (ii) Brothels, (iii) 5 Gambling Houses... the population of the Walled City increased rapidly with an accompanying increase of narcotic traders who have now made their headquarters in this area.”¹¹ The high density of criminal organizations caused the Hong Kong government to cite security as the key motivation for intervention. For instance, in 1948, the Hong Kong government sent armed police with the intention of forcibly demolishing the Walled City; however, the Nationalist (Republic of China) government strongly condemned the action, alleging that it was a violation of international law.¹² This event, also known as the Kowloon Incident, reflected the longstanding conflict over sovereignty between the British Hong Kong government and the Chinese government, not just the Qing court but also the more legally modernized Nationalist government.

Individual Perspective

It was undeniable that the Kowloon Walled City remained in a legally ambiguous situation. The lack of governance at the top level contributed to the temporary self-governance seen inside the walled city. However, the Walled City was not completely cut off by the Hong Kong government. The narration of Chan Hip Ping, the former vice president of the Neighborhood Welfare Association of the Walled City, and the Blue Hat, an anonymous Hong Kong police, revealed its relationship and communication with the government, not only their cooperation in maintaining stability within the community but also the corruption activities of the

⁹ Peter Wesley-Smith, “The Walled City of Kowloon: Historical and Legal Aspects,” *Hong Kong Law Journal* 3, no. 67 (1973): 67-96, 94.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “The Kowloon Wall City Today: 1955,” in *City of Darkness: Life in Kowloon Walled City*. (Zhonghua Book Company, 2014), 12-13.

¹² Xinfu Han and Kefu Jiang, *Zhong Hua Min Guo Shi: Da Shi Ji*. (Zhonghua Book Company, 2011), 8486.

police department throughout Hong Kong, not just in the Walled City, before the 1970s.

Chan Hip Ping

“In the past, we had little to do with the police, but in recent years our contact has increased, mainly over burglary prevention. We have also provided the police with information on street layouts and so on... We have had increasing contact with the District Boards in recent years. We have talked to them about our environmental problems and they have relaid some streets and installed some public lights for us. We also have frequent contact with the Urban Services Department.”¹³

The origin of the Neighborhood Welfare Association and similar organizations can be traced to the Lijia system or the Baojia system in pre-modern China. Referencing Timothy Brook’s book *The Chinese State in Ming Society*, The Baojia system was for community-based law and also a “mutual surety and village defense system built on the same decimal logic as the Lijia... Regulations were issued centrally in 1548, but implementation was not mandatory: they were issued to guide local officials who chose to install Baojia in their counties, whether to deal with such problems as coastal piracy along the southeast coast or banditry in the interior.”¹⁴ In this case, the Baojia system was not under the central government. Yet, it was still within the bureaucratic structure since the foundation comprised local government officials. In the mainland PRC, the local Neighborhood Welfare Association acted as a way for residents to participate in the bureaucratic procedure. Just like the Baojia system, however, this was also not entirely based on a mechanism with a spontaneous nature, rather it was “pre-determined by elite policymakers, the approach of ‘community development’ in China is a ‘top-down’ process which tries to obtain maximum grassroots support.”¹⁵ This encouraged grassroots participation in the governance process. The government, at the same time, could benefit through mobilizing at the grassroots level due to people’s attempts to participate in the bureaucratic system.

Undoubtedly, the government structure would be different in Hong Kong in the 20th century since it was legally governed by Britain. However, a similar local association was present. The first Kaifong Welfare Association (Kaifong in Cantonese also means neighborhood or community) started in Shamshuipo in 1949 with the objective of blending “two sets of ideas, the one springing from the best traditions of the old kaifong and the other drawn from broad and constructive Western interpretations of social welfare.”, intending to increase resident participation through practical interest, and this idea soon spread throughout Hong

¹³ Greg Girard and Lambot Ian, *City of Darkness: Life in Kowloon Walled City* (Zhonghua Book Company, 2014), 326.

¹⁴ Timothy Brook, *The Chinese State in Ming Society* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), 6.

¹⁵ Joe Leung, “The Community-based Welfare System in China,” *Community Development Journal* 25, no. 3 (July 1990): 195-205, 203.

Kong.¹⁶ The Sham Shui Po Kaifong Welfare Association even established its own constitution detailing the specific guidelines.¹⁷ At this point, the neighborhood associations were independent and spontaneously organized. They later also cooperated with the British Hong Kong government, providing the government with opinions on “concubinate, hawkers, etc., and spread propaganda on water-saving, blood donation, etc.”¹⁸ In this case, the Kaifong associations across Hong Kong (and Kowloon) served as a tool for information gathering. The “spread of propaganda” indicated the similar to the style of governance discussed above with the Baojia system and the Neighborhood Welfare Association under the CCP. The above description of the Kaifong Welfare Associations was drawn from “The Kaifong Welfare Association”, a document drafted in 1955 by two social welfare officers, McDouall and Keen. They briefly discussed the influence of the Kowloon Kaifong (or Neighborhood) Welfare Association, for instance, “during the coronation celebrations, on June 2nd and 3rd, 1953, the Kaifong Associations helped the Social Welfare Office and the Standing Conference of Youth Organisations to organise parties for over 30,000 under-privileged children at 16 centres in Hong Kong and Kowloon.”¹⁹ Although Kowloon was not classified as a part of Hong Kong New Territory, the geographical closeness still allowed the influence to permeate this area as well.

The Neighborhood Welfare Association of Kowloon Walled City was not that different from the Kaifong Welfare Association in other communities in Hong Kong. Chan Hip Ping mentioned that the association was established at the beginning of the 1960s, yet there were night watch teams and fire brigades started by the residents spontaneously during the 1940s. The two other important tasks of the association were mediation and acting as witnesses of house sales, and surveillance of the sanitary conditions inside the Walled City.²⁰ This part of Chan Hip Ping’s account demonstrated that the original foundation of the Neighborhood Welfare Association was spontaneous and independent in the sense that it had no government interaction. Additionally, since the Kowloon Walled City was a political enclave, its connection with other residential communities outside was also relatively low. Therefore, it lacked inter-community affairs with other associations.

Given the increased organized crime in the Walled City, the Hong Kong government decided to intervene gradually, with the ultimate goal of demoralization. As a result, the Neighborhood Welfare Association of the Kowloon Walled City became seen as a formal form of representation for the residents. Chan Hip Ping’s account at the beginning of this section explained that there was increasing contact

¹⁶ J.C. McDouall and K Keen, “The Kaifong Welfare Association,” *Community Development Bulletin* 7, no. 1 (December, 1955): 2-9, 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁰ Greg Girard and Lambot Ian, 327-328.

with the government which offered some basic services for the well-being of the residents inside. However, when it came to issues that threatened the fundamental problem of survival, the association did not make reconciliation; when the British Hong Kong government still demanded demolition after many previous attempts, the Association's stance was to fight for better compensation (rather than persisting on anti-demolition similar to the actions taken in the 1960s due to the approval of the CCP).²¹ This indicated that the Neighborhood Welfare Association of the Kowloon Walled City was acting according to the will of its residents. Partial reason should be attributed to the nature of the Walled City as a close-knit community that had very limited resident mobility.

The Blue Hat

“Things used to operate differently in those days. When a problem needed sorting out, we asked for the ‘big brother’ and he would promise to do something to fix the matter... You could say that some Triad groups had their origins inside Walled City - groups like the Sun Yee On and 14K. It's true also that some policemen were on the take, but since the setting up of the ICAC [Independent Commission Against Corruption], that's pretty much stopped. The City had a fabulous piece of what we call ‘fat pork’ and, in the past, the police did things very differently. They had their own groups and factions that were responsible for the area. There might still be a little of it going on. I can't tell for sure.”²²

As mentioned above, despite the lack of total legitimacy in governing the Kowloon Walled City, the Hong Kong government still persisted in making multiple attempts to intervene in local disputes and security conditions within the Walled City. The groups mentioned by the Blue Hat, the Sun Yee On and the 14K, were the subdivisions of the triad gangs. The foundation of the triad group originated in the 17th century with the aim of overthrowing the Qing Dynasty and restoring the Ming Dynasty; after the establishment of the People's Republic of China under the CCP, the triad group split and fled to places including Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, etc.²³ In this case, the triad group's activities in Hong Kong were concentrated in the Kowloon Walled City due to its lack of official governance and surveillance. While during the late 19th century and early 20th century, multiple triad groups specialized in human trafficking, smuggling, and other criminal activities, in the 1970s, also roughly around the time the interview was conducted, the illegal activities started ceasing and the triad groups shifted their business due to the establishment of the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) in 1974.²⁴ However, before 1974, the local police force cooperated with the triad groups in the illegal

²¹ Ibid, 329.

²² Ibid, 298.

²³ Rachel Blundy, “Brief History of Hong Kong's Triad Gangs,” *South China Morning Post*, February 4, 2017.

²⁴ Natalie Wong, “Dragons Smell Blood Again,” *The Standard*, January 21, 2011.

activities, especially running brothels. According to a resident of the Yuen Long district of Hong Kong (outside of the Kowloon Walled City), “The police and the triads now rule Yuen Long together... The police allowed the triads to make plans, to prolong the attack and to beat up civilians. The police allowed these mobsters sufficient time to leave the scene.”²⁵ Despite the intense triad activities within the Kowloon Walled City, according to this account, violence also appeared throughout the entire Hong Kong.

In fact, many historians argued that one of the motivations for the establishment of the ICAC was due to gangster activities. Peter Fitzroy Godber, the Deputy District Police Commander of Kowloon (where the enclave Kowloon Walled City was located) in 1971, was found to have HK\$4.4 million in his foreign bank account.²⁶ The corruption issue extended beyond the Kowloon region. For example, ICAC’s predecessor, the Advisory Committee on Corruption, established in 1969 aimed at “establishing an independent anti-commission body, separate from the Police Force” yet eventually abandoned this goal to the Police Force’s public reputation.²⁷ In this sense, the origin of Hong Kong’s anti-corruption campaign could be traced prior to Peter Godber’s incident.

In the article “Triad Society in Hong Kong: The Hierarchical Approach and Criminal’s Collaborations,” Sharon Kowk records a triad officer of Sun Yee On’s account, “Under the dragonhead, the middle level of triad society is managed by different area bosses. In our triad society, we have many Tor Dei (territories), including Tuen Mun, Lam Tin, Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon City, Causeway Bay, Wan Chai, and Tai Wan Shan.”²⁸ While Sun Yee On’s force spread to Kowloon Walled City, other regions also were also experiencing the same difficulty. As illustrated by the previous account of the Yuen Long area, with the support of the local police force, the gangsters would not choose to hide or disguise themselves. The same triad officer continued stating that “[e]ach of the territories has one territorial boss who controls all of the Sun Yee On members, the businesses and manpower management... Basically, each of the territorial bosses is independent and autonomous. All territorial bosses share equal power, so no other territorial bosses can influence the management of other territories.”²⁹ In sum, since the territorial bosses had autonomy, the triad group’s “bureaucratic system” radiated throughout Hong Kong, the “administrative level” of the Kowloon Walled City was just like other areas. Therefore, simply using the crimes and gangster activities inside the Walled City to argue its specialty as lawless would be a fallacy.

²⁵ Austin Ramzy, “What Are the Triads, and What Is Their History of Violence?”, *New York Times*, July 24, 2019.

²⁶ Mark Hampton, “British Legal Culture and Colonial Governance: The Attack on Corruption in Hong Kong 1968–1974,” *Britain and the World* 5.2 (2012): 223–239, 234 DOI:10.3366/brw.2012.0055.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 233.

²⁸ Sharon Ingrid Kowk, “Triad Society in Hong Kong: The Hierarchical Approach and Criminal’s Collaborations,” *City University of Hong Kong* (January 2017): 154.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 155.

Conclusion

Historical legal disputes, stemming from the Qing Dynasty to the establishment of the People's Republic of China, contributed to the ambiguous jurisdiction and sovereignty over the Kowloon Walled City. The absence of clear legal authority led to the Walled City's existence in a state of legal limbo, where it was officially designated as “San Bu Guan” and without regulation.

However, delving into the individual perspectives of the residents reveals a more nuanced angle for analysis. The lack of top-down governance allowed for a form of temporary self-governance within the Walled City. Figures like Chan Hong Ping, representing the neighborhood welfare association, and the Blue Hat, an anonymous Hong Kong police officer, offered a glimpse into the intricate relationships and communication channels between the community and the government. Cooperation between the police force and the Neighborhood Welfare Association demonstrated a certain level of engagement and collaboration that contradicted the notion of complete lawlessness. Moreover, the corruption of the police force with the triad gangster activities was an issue faced by various regions of Hong Kong in general, not solely in the Kowloon Walled City. The Walled City should thus not be viewed as unique and special in this context.

In essence, the Kowloon Walled City was not a simple manifestation of disorder, rather, it was a product of historical circumstances, legal ambiguities, and individual interactions that could not be restrained by a singular narrative. The government's attempts at intervention, the triad groups' historical origins, and the collaborative efforts within the community demonstrated a web of unique governance.

APPENDIX

The Figures below are all from the photobook *City of Darkness: Life in Kowloon Walled City* by Ian Lambot and Greg Girard without title and dates.



Figure 1: Page 230



Figure 2: Page 64-65

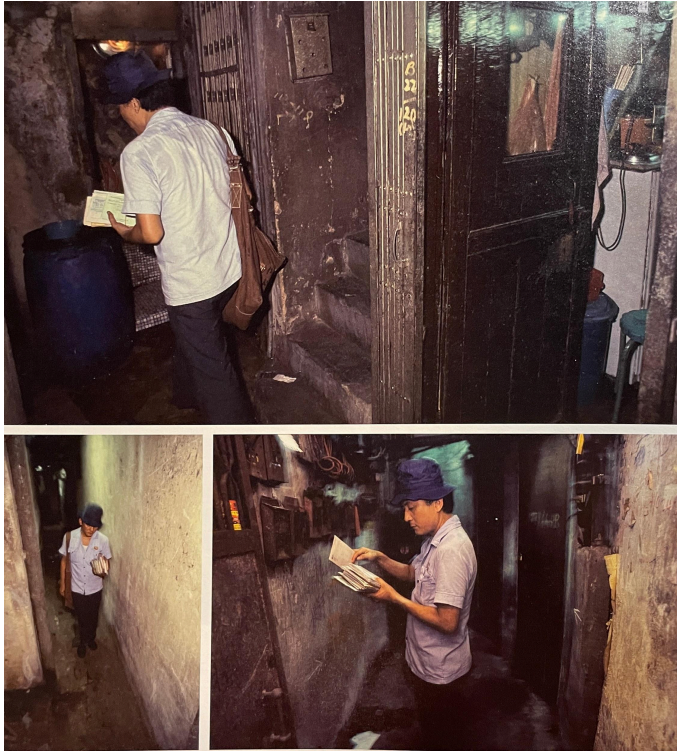


Figure 3: Page 258

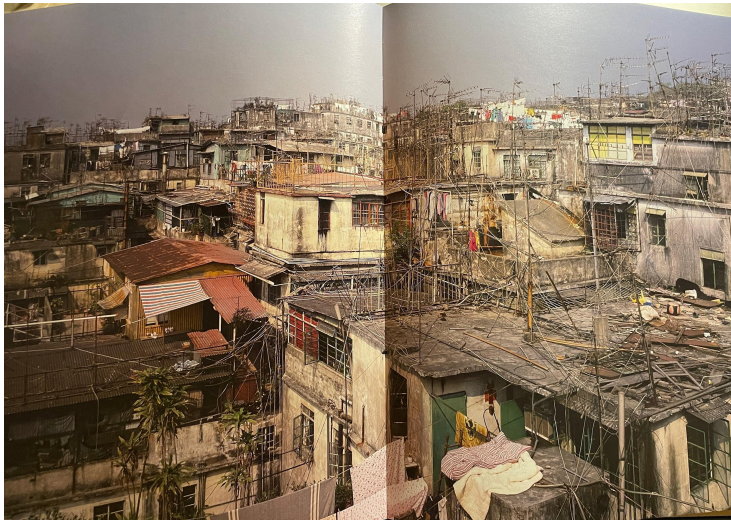


Figure 4: Page 332-333

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