

Harmony and Duality: The British-Chinese Dialogue in 19th Century Hong Kong Visual Culture and Urban Spaces

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Author Biography

Eileen Li is currently a junior at the Dalton School in New York City. In her free time, she finds herself immersed in creating and analyzing art of all kinds, whether that be playing classical percussion at Juilliard Pre-College and drumming in a band with friends or examining the history of medicine under an artistic lens. Her interests lie at the intersection of art, history, and culture, particularly in exploring how art has influenced historical narratives in East Asia and shaped national identities.

Abstract

This paper explores the rise of a novel class of wealthy Chinese collaborators with the British deemed the *comprador bourgeoisie* and their role in shaping Hong Kong identity in the 19th century through the process of collaborative colonialism. Following China's economic loss and turmoil caused by the Opium War, Hong Kong was ceded to the Queen as a British colony. However, unlike other British colonies, the people of Hong Kong did not stay under absolute control of British rule. Members of the Chinese community instead collaborated with the British as a means to gain political representation and influence among both the Chinese and British, in the end becoming the 'middle-men' between the two communities. These middle-men created a new class termed the Chinese *comprador bourgeoisie*, as they used their knowledge and influence among the Chinese community as natives to Hong Kong when working with the British, becoming an agent to foreigners. Their collaboration helped them become even wealthier and more influential, hence the term "bourgeoisie." Specifically, my paper examines the visual culture and urban landscape of Hong Kong, dissecting the key buildings and paintings created in 19th century Hong Kong in order to further understand the complex dynamics of the Chinese and British collaborative relationship.

Keywords: colonial architecture, architecture, collaborative colonialism, Hong Kong, British colonialism, East Asian art, comprador bourgeoisie, 19th century Asia, national identity

Introduction

Hong Kong's remarkable transformation from a small fishing village in the 1840's to a vibrant multicultural settlement by the end of the 19th century was not a reflection on the transformative power of British colonialism, as some historians may argue. Rather, it was the result of a collaborative effort between members of the British colonists and a Chinese population deemed the *comprador bourgeoisie*. Hong Kong was first declared a British colony in 1842 under Article III of the Treaty of Nanjing (Gentzler, 1842). This treaty followed China's defeat in the Opium Wars, which caused major disruption to the empire's economic and political stability (Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, n.d.). As a result, some Chinese decided to immigrate to Hong Kong, where they lived under the rule of the British colonial government.

However, through the course of the 19th century, a collaborative relationship formed between the Chinese and British. This partnership gave rise to the Chinese *comprador bourgeoisie*, a class composed of wealthy Chinese merchants who worked with and garnered influence among both the British and Chinese. The visual culture and physical spaces of 19th century Hong Kong illustrate the phenomenon of collaborative colonialism. Both the British and Chinese used their partnership to advance their own political and economic interests, which inevitably resulted in collaboration and conflict that became a hallmark of a unique Hong Kong identity.

During Hong Kong's early years as a British colony, colonial artists promoted the belief that 'civilized' British traditions were superior to 'primitive' Chinese culture through colonial paintings and architecture. Colonial artist Murdoch Bruce's 1846 painting, *Flagstaff House*, depicts the official residence of a General Officer Commanding in Hong Kong.

Figure 1
Flagstaff House (1846) by Murdoch Bruce



Note. Adapted from Bremner, A., & Lung, D. (2003). Spaces of exclusion: The significance of cultural identity in the formation of European residential districts in British Hong Kong, 1877–1904. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 21(2), 223–252. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d310>

Bruce chose to use a powerful linear perspective to depict the House as geometric and orderly, standing in front of mountains and irregular, barren, and undeveloped land. This reinforced the concept perpetrated by the British that pre-colonial Hong Kong was a “barren rock” and a worthless piece of land before it was “discovered” by Britain, a foreign civilized empire (Bremner & Lung, 2003, pp. 223–224). Additionally, the utilization of light further highlights European superiority and civilization. For example, the dramatic light source in the upper left corner emphasizes the straight angular side of *Flagstaff House*. Additionally, the light is cast on the soldiers and wealthy upper-class Europeans, drawing the viewer's attention to this civilized, elaborately-dressed group. Contrasting this, the “barren land” in the background is left in darkness and painted with minimal shadows. This lack of contrast gives the land a two-dimensional and unfinished quality, which portrays it as unconquered land that is free to be colonized by the British. *View of Wyndham Street*, another painting by Murdoch Bruce, depicts the Hong Kong Club, a club exclusive to Europeans designed by British architect George Strachan (Bremner & Lung, 2003, p. 232).

Figure 2
View of Wyndham Street (1846) by Murdoch Bruce



Note: Adapted from Bruce, M. (1846). *View of Wyndham Street*. Hong Kong Museum of History, Hong Kong. Retrieved from <https://gwulo.com/media/13214>

European-only institutions further divided Europeans and the Chinese and reinforced ideas of European cultural superiority through ethnic separation and class division (Bremner & Lung, 2003, pp. 232–233). Bruce proudly showcases the elite nature of the Hong Kong Club by presenting it as brightly lit with pristine linearity. Drawing the viewers' attention to characters in the foreground, Bruce depicts Europeans entering the Club with tailcoat jackets and frilly dresses, while Chinese workers are shown wearing simple clothing and bamboo fishing hats. The depiction of Chinese workers' clothing—made of modest linen and cloth, unadorned and baggy—emphasizes its purpose of functionality, much unlike the clothing of the British. The clothing highlights British perception of the Chinese as a colonized working class rather than a respected population with a legitimate culture. Additionally, Bruce places the Chinese workers in the midground and background, behind the Europeans in the foreground, perhaps depicting the respectable British elites as the main subject of the painting with the Chinese being an afterthought. Furthermore, the workers are depicted facing the back and walking away from the artist's point of view. This may be Bruce's effort to further place the spotlight on the British subjects, while also being a way for the artist to avoid painting the faces of the Chinese, leaving them nondescript. The juxtaposition of these two groups, shown by their attire

as well as placement and movement in the painting, highlights the divide between the two peoples. The colonist mentality of the British that believed the Chinese to be an 'inferior' local population highlights one of the areas of conflict that arose in the relationship between British officials and Chinese elites despite their collaboration.

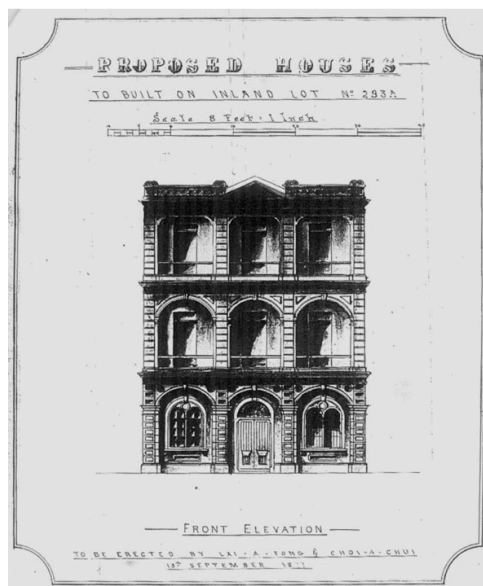
Members of the Chinese *comprador bourgeoisie* acted as political representatives for the local Chinese community and as intermediaries or 'middle-men' for the British. In *Edge of Empires: Chinese Elites and British Colonials in Hong Kong*, historian John Carroll defines the members of the *comprador bourgeoisie* as wealthy compradors and merchants who increased foreign domination of China's economy (Carroll, 2005, pp. 109–110). One of the most influential members of the Chinese bourgeoisie was Ho Kai, who is described by John Carroll as a "barrister, financier, physician, and community leader." Ho Kai's British education, wealth, and overall influence placed him on many of Hong Kong's major boards and committees, one of which was the Sanitary Committee (Carroll, 2005, pp. 108, 122–123). When a bill was proposed in 1886 to improve the sanitation standards in Chinese houses, Ho Kai wrote a complaint, arguing that the British should not impose their way of living on the local Chinese. Specifically, he advised the British to "govern them with as much as possible in accordance with their manners and customs, and to respect their religion and prejudices" (Kai et al., 1887). Through this complaint, Ho Kai advocated for the preservation of local Chinese heritage against British efforts to colonize and erase authentic Chinese traditions. As the only Chinese member of the Sanitary Committee, it was crucial that he spoke for the underrepresented Chinese community in British-dominated spaces.

Ho Kai's influence in 19th century Hong Kong extended beyond his role as a political representative for the Chinese community; for the British, Ho Kai acted as a 'middle-man' who aided in translation and negotiation. By advising the British to respect the authentic living styles of the local Chinese, Ho Kai smoothed British-Chinese relations, helping the British rule more effectively. Members of the Chinese *comprador bourgeoisie* also served to aid the British in acquiring and arranging Chinese resources. For example, in a study of British trading firm Jardine Matheson & Co, historian Susumu Mizuta discusses

the construction of the company's headquarters in Victoria City. He notes that the building was designed by Western architects while Chinese workers carried out construction (Mizuta, 2023, p. 3373). For this British company to construct its headquarters using Chinese labor, they needed an intermediary to facilitate translation across language barriers, hire Chinese workers, and manage additional logistical difficulties. This highlights the crucial role members of the Chinese bourgeoisie played in managing relationships between the British and local Chinese by acting as both political representatives for the Chinese and intermediaries for the British.

Despite their collaborative relationship, many British colonists still perceived local traditions and people as 'inferior,' which motivated their desire to protect the "Britishness" of Hong Kong from Chinese identity. This mentality contributed to the spatial segregation in Hong Kong and the replacement of traditional Chinese architecture with Western-style buildings. In 1877, the wealthy businessman C P Chater applied to convert lot 293A on Queen's Road Central into Chinese shops and homes.

Figure 3
Design of Lot 293A, Queen's Road Central



Note: Adapted from Bremner, A., & Lung, D. (2003). Spaces of exclusion: The significance of cultural identity in the formation of European residential

districts in British Hong Kong, 1877–1904. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 21(2), 223–252. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d310>

Although initially cautious, surveyor general James M Price accepted the request under the agreement that the building would adhere to British aesthetics (Bremner & Lung, 2003, p. 238). The building's design reflects efforts to emphasize its "Britishness" and showcase European wealth. For example, the arch windows were utilized to maximize the size of the window while ensuring structural integrity. Considering the high costs of glass and its fragility when used in large amounts, it is clear that the eight large arch windows were used as an expression of European wealth. Moreover, officials became wary specifically because this request was for Chinese residential housing. They feared that if Chinese people lived in this area, the property value would decrease as a result of the Chinese's dirtiness and dishonesty, which would make the land less desirable for Europeans (Bremner & Lung, 2003, p. 239). In the memoir of Hong Kong detective Kenneth Andrews, he recalls, "I have actually seen a European ricksha passenger throw his fare money to the ground rather than risk touching the ricksha coolie" (Klein, 1995, p. 259). Andrews' quote reflects the genuine fear that the British had of Chinese people, to the extent that they became wary of physically interacting with them. This spurred the belief of spatial segregation as necessary for the coexistence between the British and Chinese; the Chinese *comprador bourgeoisie* assisted in implementing this divide.

The Chinese *comprador bourgeoisie* garnered influence among both the British colonial government and local Chinese community by owning and selling buildings that were significant in the daily activities of both communities. For example, Tam Achoy, a member of the *comprador bourgeoisie*, built the P&O Building and the exchange building for Dent & Co (Carroll, 2005, p. 26). Both companies were important British establishments; the P&O, or Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation, transported passengers and cargo to and from Hong Kong, and Dent & Co. was one of the wealthiest British merchants firms. In 1847, the colonial government bought these buildings and converted them into Hong Kong's first colonial Supreme Court (Carroll, 2005, pp. 31–32). During this transaction, Tam Achoy served as an intermediary between colonists and Chinese collaborators and

workers. Without an indigenous collaborator like Tam who possessed knowledge of Chinese land and customs, British firms like P&O and Dent & Co. would have faced multiple challenges in the construction process of their buildings: communication and coordination with construction companies, suppliers of construction materials, and workers would have been difficult, causing overall management issues and difficulties. Consequently, Tam played a pivotal role in the creation of Hong Kong's first Supreme Court and its growing influence, thus strengthening his prominence and impact within the British community.

However, Tam Achoy's land extended beyond British establishments, as he also owned multiple Chinese temples, communal spaces used in the daily lives of the local Chinese community. As historian John Carroll writes, temples in 19th century Hong Kong were often used as an "informal courtroom, [for] resolving legal disputes and [for] generally managing the affairs of the Chinese community" (Carroll, 2005, p. 26). Additionally, the communal function of temples can be seen in the lithograph *Chinese Temple, Hong Kong, 1855* by German artist Wilhelm Joseph Heine.

Figure 4
Chinese Temple, Hong Kong, 1855 by Wilhelm Joseph Heine



Note: Adapted from Heine, W. J. (1855). *Chinese Temple, Hong Kong, 1855* [Lithograph]. Retrieved from <https://www.meisterdrucke.us/fine-art-prints/Wilhelm-Joseph-Heine/311559/Chinese-Temple%2C-Hong-Kong%2C-1855-.html>

Heine depicts pairs of Chinese men resting and walking around the temple and its surrounding area. They are portrayed with distinctly Chinese features, wearing queue hairstyles and changshan, traditional Chinese robes. The environment of these temples is distinguished from other spaces in colonial Hong Kong – such as the P&O Building – that are strongly influenced by European culture (Tsai, 1993, p. 48). Chinese temples thus remained a distinctly Chinese communal area, perhaps even acting as a haven, for the local Chinese community to exist without British influence. Consequently, Tam's donations, ownership, or management of the Tai Wong Temple in Spring Gardens, Man Mo Temple, and Kwong Fook I-ts'z made him a valued member of the Chinese community, as he succeeded in providing a place that became crucial to the workings of this community (Smith, 1973, p. 136; Tsai, 1993, pp. 44, 49). It is thus apparent that members of the Chinese bourgeoisie became influential among the Chinese community because of the positions they held in the construction and management of communal areas such as temples.

Tam's influence over the British community, as demonstrated by his ownership of significant buildings for the British colony, helped him garner influence over the colonists, just as his ownership of Chinese temples aided him in gaining the respect and trust of the Chinese community. Through his control of the urban environment, Achoy could be considered a representative of both parties, allowing him to facilitate communication of ideas and cultures between both parties. Tam Achoy thus became a middle-man for the British and Chinese through his control of the urban environment of Hong Kong.

In order for members of the Chinese bourgeoisie to maintain their influence in both British and Chinese communities, it became necessary to balance the "Britishness" and "Chineseness" of their social appearance. The painting *Chinam's Hong, residence built for a Chinaman at Hong Kong* by Edward Ashworth, a British colonial artist presents the residential home of Chun Chinam, a wealthy opium trader, tea merchant, and founder of trading company Tun Wo (Ashworth, 1844, p. 16).

Figure 5
Chinam's Hong, residence built for a Chinaman at Hong Kong (1844) by Edward Ashworth



Note: Adapted from Ashworth, E. (1844). *Chinam's Hong, residence built for a Chinaman at Hong Kong*. In Edward Ashworth, artist & architect: fourteen original watercolour studies of Hong Kong & Macau, 1844-46. Retrieved March 14, 2024, from https://www.hordern.com/images/upload/cat407_2.pdf

From these jobs, it is clear that Chun Chinam was an active participant in the British-dominated opium and trade industries, and thus a collaborator with the British. The British viewed Chun as the only reputable Cantonese capitalist investing in the early colony, and Ashworth even describes Chinam's hong as "the only good Chinese mansion existing at Victoria, Hong Kong, in 1845" (Ashworth, 1844, p. 16). These descriptions imply that the respect that Chinam earned from the British was a special case - the British still deemed members of the Chinese *comprador bourgeoisie* as inferior due to their Chinese identity. The design of Chinam's hong resembles that of a Chinese temple, as it boasts clay tile roofs and bright traditional colors such as jade green. This design was intentional: Chun Chinam purchased this lot for \$8,000, but specifically chose to rebuild it in a Chinese style, which cost him \$10,000 (Ashworth, 1844, p. 16). His choice to rebuild the hong in a Chinese style suggests the Chinese bourgeoisie's desire not only to collaborate with the British, but also to preserve their connections with the Chinese community. Thus, the collaboration between the British and Chinese was complex under the lens of the Chinese bourgeoisie. It was necessary for them to uphold their relationship with the Chinese community while maintaining a

strong connection with the British, despite the latter often regarding them as inferior.

Through case studies of the Chinese bourgeoisie and visual analysis of paintings, floor plans, and 19th century Hong Kong's urban environment, it is evident that the British colonial officials and Chinese elites engaged in a collaborative relationship that was complex. In past research, the birth of Hong Kong's unique identity has been studied through the British and Chinese lens separately. Arguably, this has contributed to the rise of the Eurocentric "barren rock" myth. However, comprehending the significance of colonial collaboration in the history of Hong Kong is crucial to dispelling the notion that Hong Kong's success should be solely attributed to the British. In reality, without the help of the Chinese bourgeoisie as intermediaries with the local Chinese community, Hong Kong's drastic financial growth and success would not have been possible. It is thus crucial for academic discussion to broaden to include the relationship between British and Chinese bourgeoisie in order to break the Eurocentric myth that attributes all of Hong Kong's success - past, present and future - to British superiority.

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