

Display Wan Chai 1841 - 1997

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Introduction

Wan Chai no doubt is one of the oldest, most interesting and vibrant districts in Hong Kong where one finds the true combination of the old and the new, the East and the West.

Wan Chai survives wars and disturbance, floods and droughts. It lives and prospers and is continuously transforming not only its landscape but also its history.

This exhibition on Wan Chai captures major happenings as well as the everyday life of the district from 1840s to Hong Kong's reunification with China in 1997. The exhibition is arranged in a chronological sequence with an Image Gallery and an abstract of Major Events. It is based on an exhibition which the Public Records Office co-organized with the Hong Kong Art Centre in 2001.

[View Major Incidents](#)

[View Image Gallery](#)

1841 - 1859

- 1841 | First Wan Chai land sale which sold 50 marine lots each with a frontage of 100 feet along the main road (named Queen's Road a year later).
- Protestant Burial Ground (near present Sun and Moon Street) and Roman Catholic Burial Ground (near present St. Francis Street and Sau Wa Fong) in use.
- 1843 | Morrison Anglo-Chinese School opened by Morrison Education Society on Morrison Hill.
- Seamen's Hospital (site of present Ruttonjee TB Sanatorium) opened by Medical Missionary Society of Canton and Macau.
- 1844 | Eastern Market (site of present Arsenal Street) opened.
- 1845 | Cemeteries in Wan Chai ceased to use.
- 1847 | No. 3 Police Station at Queen's Road East completed.
- 1848 | Governor Bonham rented Blenkin Rawson House in Spring Gardens as his temporary residence.
- French Sisters (Sisters of Chartres of St. Paul) established Asile de la Sainte Enfance at Praya East.
- 1849 | Morrison Anglo-Chinese School closed.
- 1851 | A road (later named Wan Chai Road) from Albany Godowns to Wong Nei Cheong was built.
- 1855 | McGregor Street, Tai Yuen Street, Stone Nullah Lane, Tai Wo Street, Cross Street and Triangle Street laid out.
- Construction of St. Francis Hospital completed.
- 1857 | Government Gazette set off 9 districts of Hong Kong. Sub-district 5 of Victoria (District 1) was Ha Wan where Wan Chai belonged to, extending from the Murray Barracks to Observation Point (now Tin Lok Lane).
- Roman Catholic Church opened the St. Francis Hospital off St. Francis Street.
- 1858 | Eastern Slaughter House opened at Bullock Lane.
- Wan Chai Market at the junction of Wan Chai Road and Queen's Road East completed.
- 1859 | Bowring Praya Bill which proposed reclamation in Wan Chai was opposed by private marine lot-holders.
- St. Francis Hospital closed.

1860 - 1919

- 1860 | Canossian sisters opened a day school and foundling home at St. Francis Street.
Restoration of Tai Wong (Hung Shing) Temple at Queen's Road East completed.
Home for blind girls founded by the Italian Canossian Sisters at St. Francis Street.
- 1864 | Bowrington Canal (present Canal Road) completed.
St. Francis Xavier Chapel founded at St. Francis Street.
- 1865 | Yuk Hui Kung (Pak Tai) Temple at Lung On Street completed.
- 1868 | No. 2 Police Station at Wan Chai Road completed.
- 1869 | St. Francis Girls' School opened by the Canossian Sisters and St. Francis Hospital re-opened by the Canossian Sisters.
- 1871 | Opening of Tai Wong Kung Government School at Queen's Road East.
- 1872 | Wan Chai School at Queen's Road East completed.
- 1873 | Seaman Hospital renamed Royal Naval Hospital.
- 1878 | Oriental Sugar Co. at Amoy Lane and Swatow Lane opened in March but closed in November.
- 1889 | Removal of cemetery remains from St. Francis Yard to Happy Valley.
First electric plant opened at Star Street.
- 1900 | Sir Paul Chater suggested Praya East Reclamation Scheme.
- 1903 | First public bathhouse (40 baths) opened at Wan Chai.
- 1904 | Tram service started between Arsenal Street and Bowrington canal.
No. 3 Police Station on Queen's Road East closed.
- 1908 | Wan Chai School extended.
- 1910 | Sampan Street laid out.
- 1912 | Lun Fat Street laid out.
- 1913 | No. 3 Police Station ceased to be used as Sanitary Inspectors' Office and Quarters.
- 1915 | Sanitary Inspectors' Office and Quarter converted into post office.
Tai Wong Street renamed Tai Wong Street West and Tai Wong Lane renamed Tai Wong Street East. Amoy and Swatow Lane extended to Praya East.
French Sisters moved to Causeway Bay.
- 1916 | Grand Cinema built on Queen's Road East (present site of Hopewell Center).
- 1917 | Mallory Street and Landale Street resumed by Government with Tsui In Lane widened and renamed Anton Street.
- 1919 | Electric plant at Wan Chai ceased to be used.
Queen's Road East widened.

1920 - 1939

- 1920 | Li Chit Street named.
- 1921 | Praya East Reclamation Ordinance passed and reclamation started.
- 1922 | Electric plant at Wan Chai demolished.
- 1924 | Lee Tung Street named.
- 1925 | Holy Infant Lane renamed Kwong Ming Street.
- 1929 | Electric Street named.
Wesleyan Sailors' and Soliders' Home completed.
- 1930 | Praya East Reclamation completed. New roads included Hennessy Road, Gloucester Road, Jaffe Road, Lockhart Road, Fenwick Street, Luard Road, O'Brien Road, Thomson Road and Stewart Road with Fleming Road and Tonnochy Road extended and old Praya East roadway (present Johnston Road) widened.
- 1932 | New No. 2 Police Station at Gloucester Road completed; old station ceased to use.
- 1934 | Opening of Children's Playground (present Southorn Playground) by Colonial Secretary Sir Thomas Southorn.
China Fleet Club on Praya East Reclamation (Gloucester Road) completed.
- 1935 | New Wan Chai Market completed.
Violet Peel Health Centre opened by Lady Peel.
Canal Road Market opened.
- 1936 | Chinese Methodist Church at Hennessy Road completed.
- 1937 | New Wan Chai Market completed and old Market demolished.
- 1939 | Cathay Theatre opened.

Wan Chai

Major Incidents

Home

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1940 - 1949

- 1940-41 | Air-raid shelters constructed along Queen's Road East and Star Street in preparation for war.
- 1941 | Japanese troops advanced on Wan Chai Road and O'Brien Road on Christmas Day, furious fightings occurred at Wan Chai. Governor Mark Young surrendered on the same day.
- 1941-45 | Streets renamed during Japanese occupation period; Violet Peel Health Centre used as Wan Chai District Bureaux; section of Lockhart Road designated 'entertainment area'.
- 1949 | Royal Naval Hospital converted to Ruttonjee TB Sanatorium.

Wan Chai Major Incidents

Home

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1951 - 1969

- 1951 | Reconstruction of Queen's Road East between Hennessy Road and Kennedy Road, work completed a year later.
- 1959 | St. Francis Hospital moved to the Peak.
- 1965 | Wan Chai Reclamation started with Kellet Island connected to Hong Kong Island.
- 1969 | Construction of Cross Harbour Tunnel started and Tang Shiu Kin Hospital opened.

◀ View Image Gallery

Select Year Range for **Major Incidents**

1951-1969



1972 - 1997

- 1972 | Opening of Cross Harbour Tunnel.
Wan Chai Reclamation completed and the first public heated swimming pool opened in Morrison Hill.
- 1977 | Hong Kong Arts Centre completed.
Construction of Queen Elizabeth Stadium started; stadium opened three years later.
- 1979 | Wan Chai Sports Ground Phase I finished with a swimming pool completed five years later.
- 1980 | Sixty four-storey Hopewell Centre completed as the tallest building in Hong Kong.
- 1982 | Construction of Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts started; academy opened four years later.
- 1985 | Fleet House (present Evergo House) completed to replace old China Fleet Club.
- 1988 | Hong Kong Convention and Exhibitions Centre opened.
- 1991 | Seventy eight-storey Central Plaza completed as the tallest building in Hong Kong.
- 1997 | Extension of Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre completed where the handover ceremony took place.

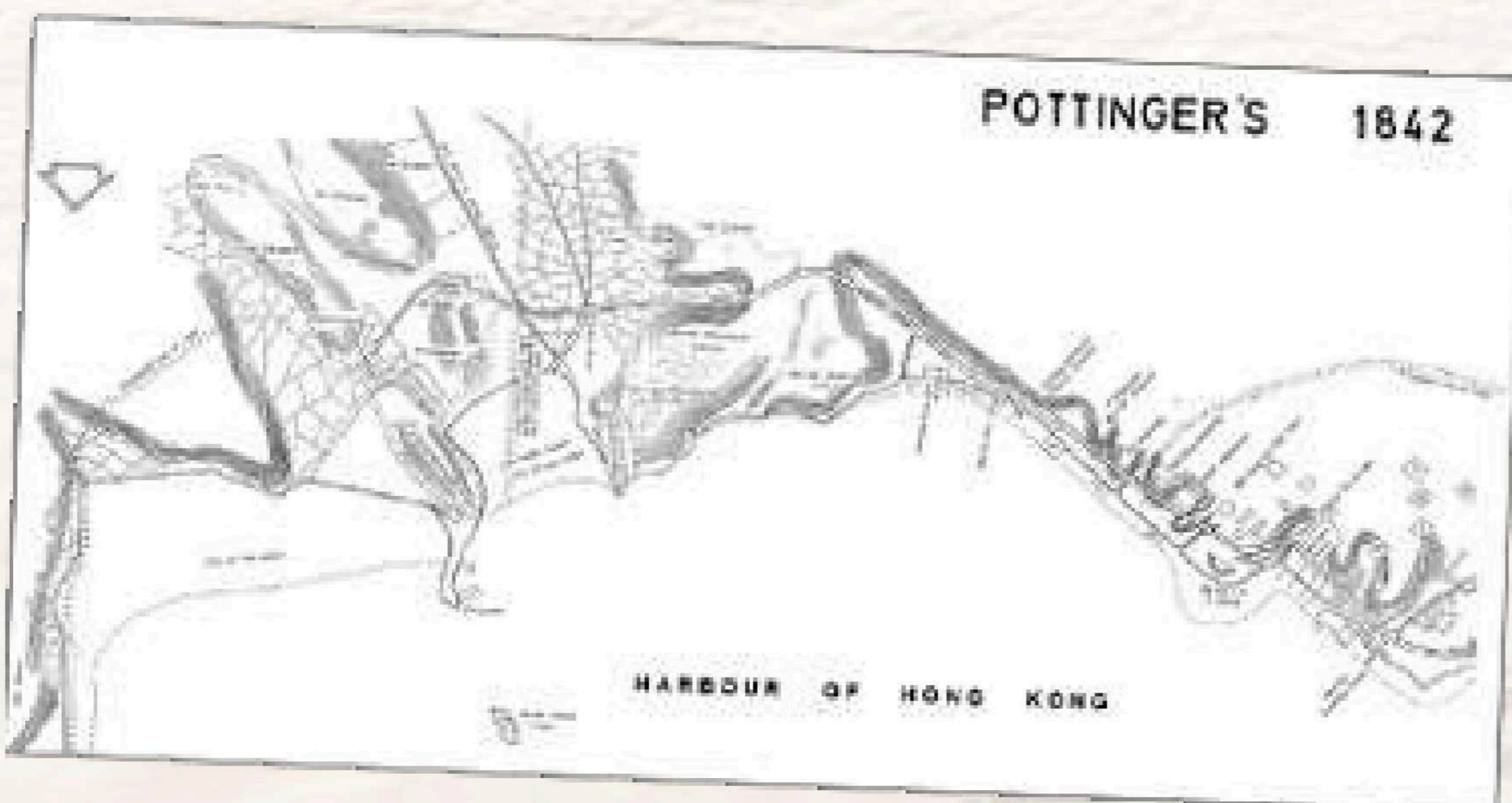
1840s - 1850s

The first population survey conducted by the British following their arrival in Hong Kong recorded no villages or any one living in the present area of Wan Chai. This is not to say that Wan Chai was totally uninhabited before that time. In fact, some scholars suggested that there might have been a small fishing community near the present site of Hung Shing (Tai Wong) Temple prior to the British settlement.

Wan Chai was one of the earliest districts developed after the 1840s. In the early days, the Government once intended to turn the coastal section of Wan Chai into a plush residential area. As early as 1842, Charles Van Megan Gillespie, an American merchant, built a substantial six-room brick house surrounded by a big verandah on the present site of Environmental Resource Centre. Several of the earliest elegant houses in Hong Kong were found at 'Spring Gardens' (near present Spring Garden Lane) with the stream from the hills behind diverted into their beautiful gardens. This perhaps explains the origin of the name, 'Spring Gardens'. Even Hong Kong's third Governor, Samuel George Bonham, who took office in 1848 rented the Blenkin Rawson House at Spring Gardens from a private company as his temporary residence before the Government House was constructed. Botanist Robert Fortune, who had a brief stay in Hong Kong then, had this observation, "Some of the houses have really beautiful gardens. I may instance those of His Excellency at Spring Gardens."

The first Protestant and Roman Catholic Cemeteries were located west of Spring Gardens, where many Europeans who died of tropical diseases were buried. The Church also founded orphanages and medical institutions in vicinity. On the other side of Wan Chai at Morrison Hill, the Morrison Education Society opened a school in 1843. Six years later, the school was closed down because of shortage of fund.

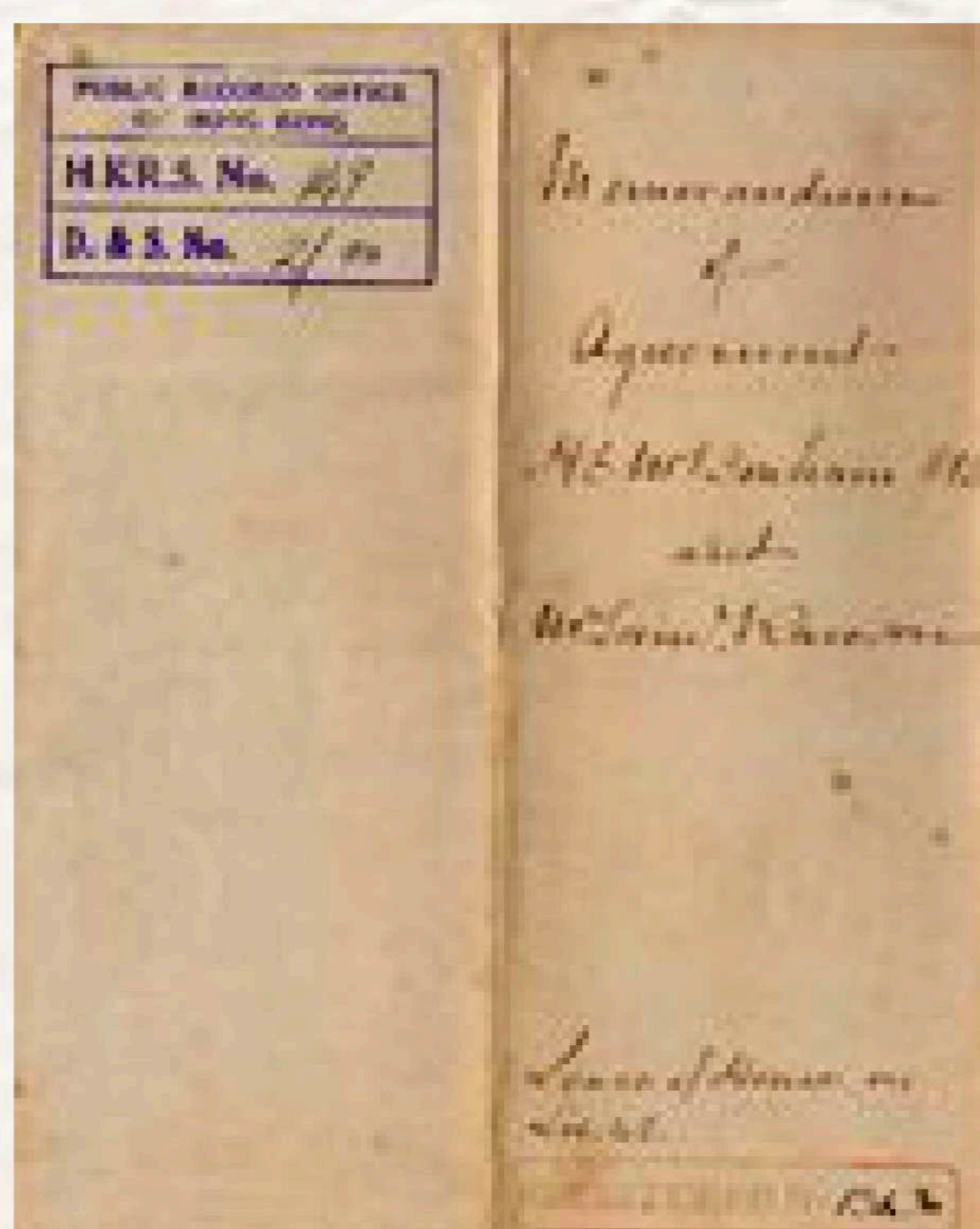
With the increase in commercial activities, the foothill of Hospital Hill (area around present Ruttonjee Hospital) on the east of Spring Gardens gradually evolved into a warehouse area by the 1850s. Between the 1850s and 1860s, the population of Hong Kong grew rapidly. The present area of Stone Nullah Lane was gradually developed into a residential area. This also marked the beginning of the Chinese people settling in Wan Chai. Two imposing temples, Hung Shing (Tai Wong) Temple and Yuk Hui (Pak Tai) Temple, were subsequently erected in the 1860s.



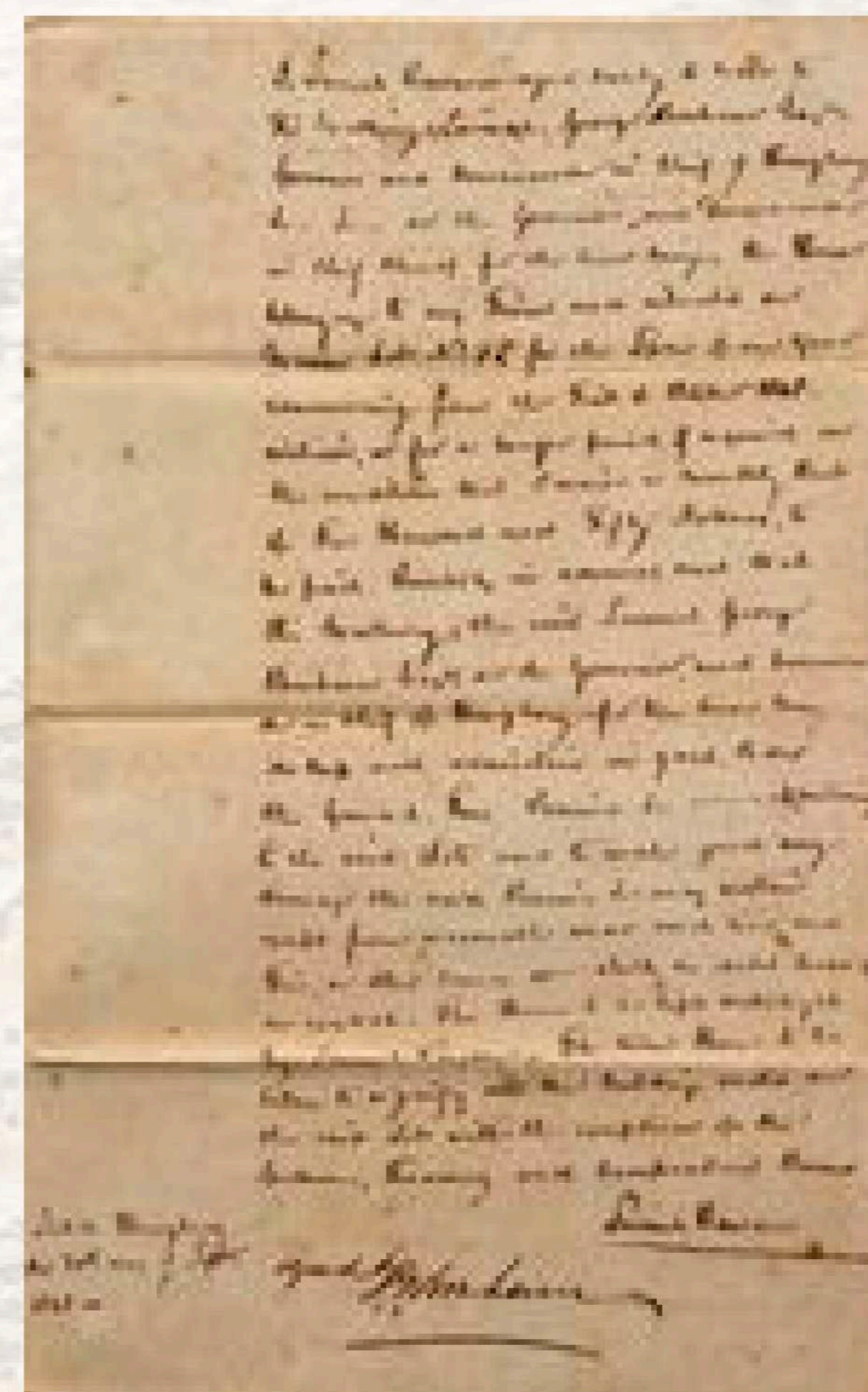
Maps of Harbour of Hong Kong, 1842



Spring Gardens (1946)



Page 1



Page 2

Memorandum of Agreement on Lease of House by Governor Samuel George Bonham, 1848.

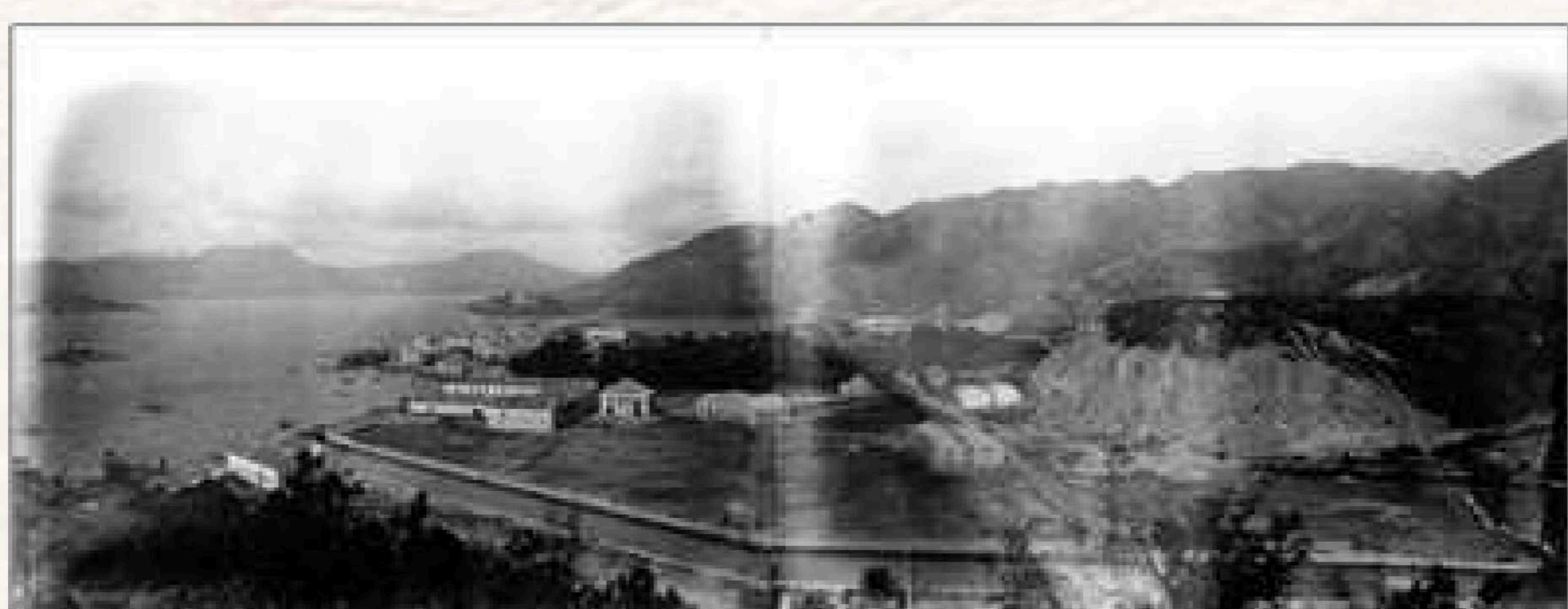
1860s - 1920s

For more than half a century after Hong Kong became a port, commerce began to boom with the development of entrepot trade. Most of the business activities, however, concentrated mainly between Central and Sai Ying Poon. From the 1840s onwards, the military authorities started to establish themselves at the present area near Admiralty. With the construction of a large number of military facilities and structures including several barracks, a naval yard and a military hospital, Wan Chai was separated from Central and Sheung Wan, which impeded its commercial development. Although a number of industries such as a sugar refinery, several shipyards, timber yards and some metal workshops were set up, they remained small in scale. With piers and jetties built along the waterfront for loading and unloading goods, Wan Chai gradually became a warehouse district mingled with residential blocks.

On the other hand, the presence of the Church attracted a number of Europeans to live in Wan Chai. They were mainly policemen, guards and government clerks belonging to the lower social strata of the European community in Hong Kong. A substantial number of these early Wan Chai residents were Portuguese (including those born in Macau). There were also some Philipinos, Indians (including Goans) and Africans, whose ancestors had commercial relationship with the Portuguese in the past few centuries.

In the early 20th Century, many Europeans began to move from Wan Chai to Kowloon when the latter was developed for residential purpose. According to the 1921 Census, the majority of Wan Chai residents were Chinese. They numbered at 51,908 as compared with 2,695 non-Chinese. It was around this period that the Japanese began to move in. By the time when the Second World War broke out, Wan Chai, dotted by Japanese-owned shops, hotels and drinking places, was literally the 'Little Tokyo' of Hong Kong.

This period also saw the development of the hillside of Wan Chai, particularly the area along Kennedy Road where a number of mansions gracefully stood. Many of the owners (mostly Europeans) of these grandiose mansions were originally the well off residents of Wan Chai.



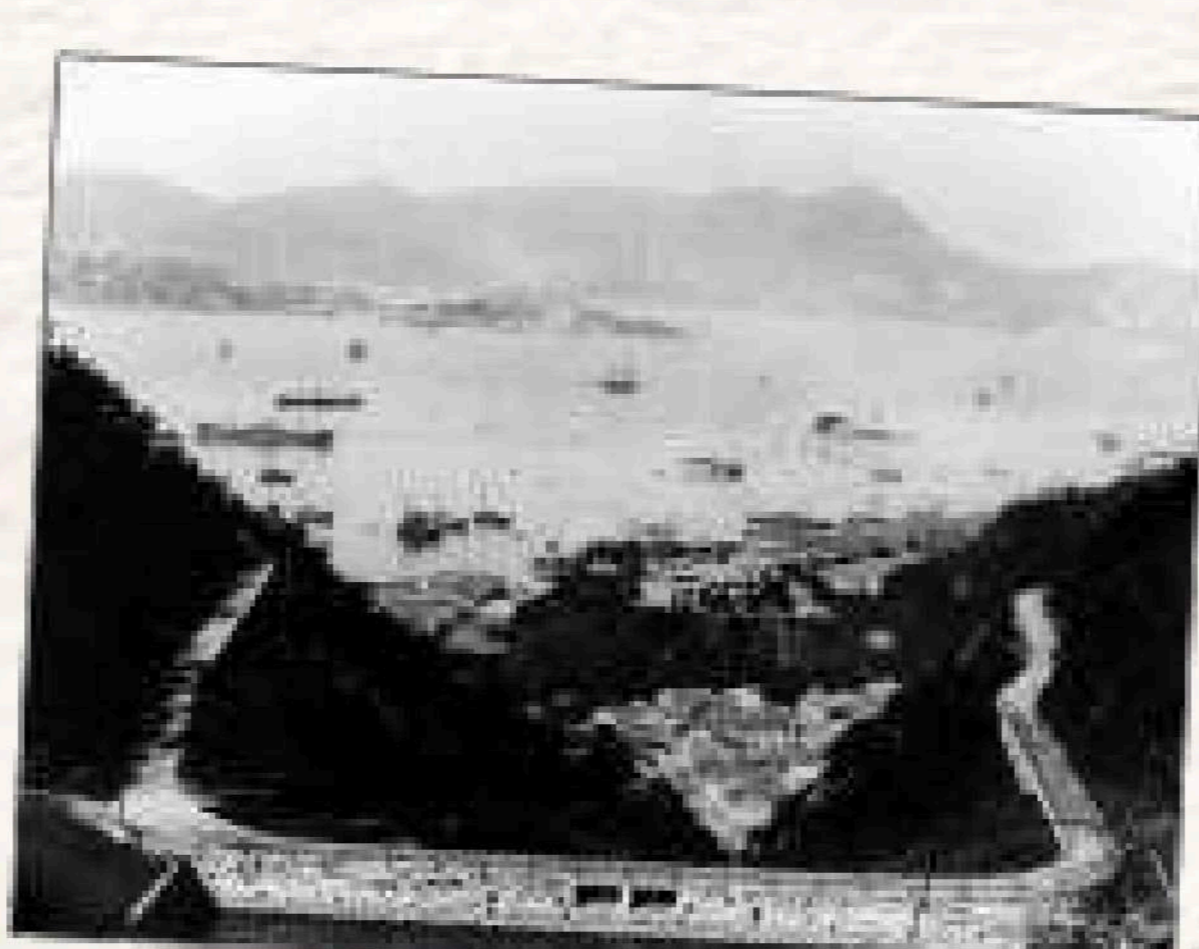
East Point, with Bowrington Canal in the foreground and Leighton Hill on the right (c.1868)



Bowrington Canal (centre) and Morrison Hill (left) viewed from East Point (c.1870)



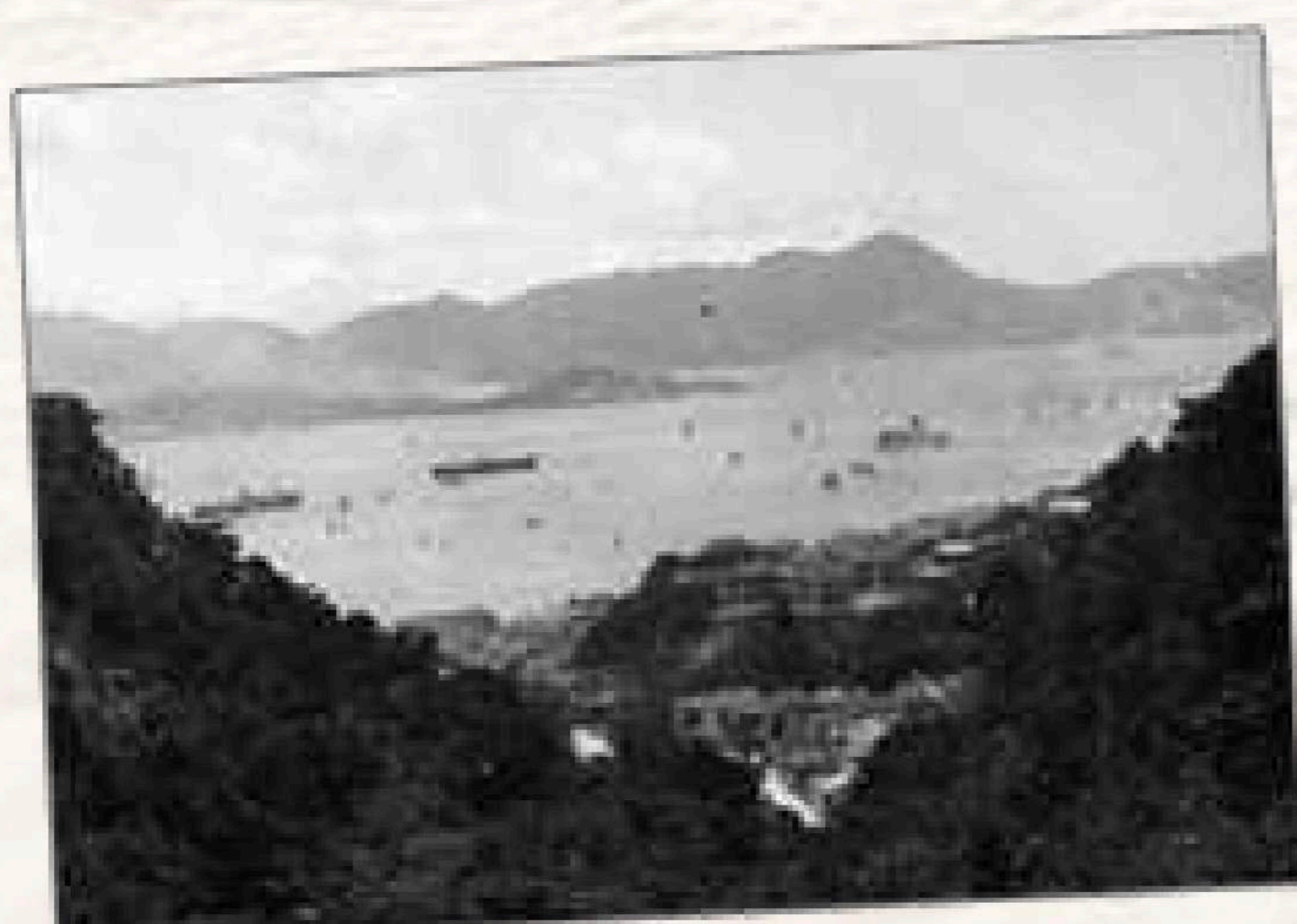
Wan Chai waterfront and godowns (c. 1880)



Hospital Hill viewed from the Wan Chai Gap. In the foreground is Bowen Road (c.1880)



Queen's Road East (c.1885)



Hospital Hill and the harbour viewed from Bowen Road (c.1900)



View of the newly-completed naval dockyard, Wan Chai and Causeway Bay (c.1910)



Landale Street (1918)



Decorated arch at the junction of Queen's Road East and Arsenal Street. On the left is 'Daibutsu' Company (1919)



View of Wan Chai and East Point (c.1920)

- 172 -
Table I.
CENSUS OF HONGKONG, 1921.
FINAL FIGURES OF THE POPULATION.
I.- ISLAND OF HONGKONG.

	NON-CHINESE.			CHINESE.			TOTAL.
	Males.	Females.	Total.	Males.	Females.	Total.	
(a.) CITY OF VICTORIA BY HEALTH DISTRICTS.							
North Point.....	53	28	81	2,251	776	3,027	3,108
District No. 1, Causeway Bay, Bowrington & Wongneichong	414	379	793	9,563	7,783	17,346	18,139
District No. 1A & 2A, Wanchai,	840	764	1,604	15,803	9,549	25,352	26,956
District No. 2, Wanchai	643	448	1,091	15,648	10,908	26,556	27,647
District No. 3, Upper Levels	1,707	1,499	3,206	6,609	5,468	12,077	15,273

The population of the Wan Chai District in 1921, extracted from the Report on the Census of the Colony for 1921. (1921)

1920s - 1930s

To relieve the shortage of land in Central and Western Districts and to redevelop the older area of Wan Chai, the Government invited bids for the reclamation of Praya East (the road along the sea wall as it was called then) in 1921. The areas to be reclaimed lay between Arsenal Street to the east of the Naval Dockyard and the godowns of Jardines Matheson & Co. in Causeway Bay. The scale of reclamation was immense and comparable to the Central District reclamation scheme launched in the late 19th Century. The contract was subsequently awarded to Sang Lee & Co. at an offer of \$3,308,500.

To ease the transport of sand and soil, the reclamation tender specified that the fill should come from Morrison Hill. Rail tracks were thus laid from Morrison Hill to the waterfront. It was, however, discovered later that the lower part of Morrison Hill was composed mostly of granite. This did not only delay the reclamation, but also led to a sharp rise in costs (Morrison Hill was finally leveled after the war). After repeated considerations, the Government finally agreed to the contractor's request for an increase in payment. Sand and soil were brought from other parts of Kowloon for the remaining part of the project. The 1925-26 General Strike also had an adverse effect on the reclamation work. The costs of the whole scheme subsequently rose to over \$5,400,000.

The Praya East Reclamation was completed in 1929, which added 90 acres (36 hectares) of reclaimed land to Wan Chai. Construction of wider roads and better quality buildings were made possible. A number of new roads were laid out or extended. They included Hennessy Road, Gloucester Road, Jaffe Road, Lockhart Road, Fenwick Street, Luard Road, O'Brien Road, Thomson Road, Stewart Road, Fleming Road, and Tonnochy Road. Praya East (later renamed Johnston Road) was also rebuilt.

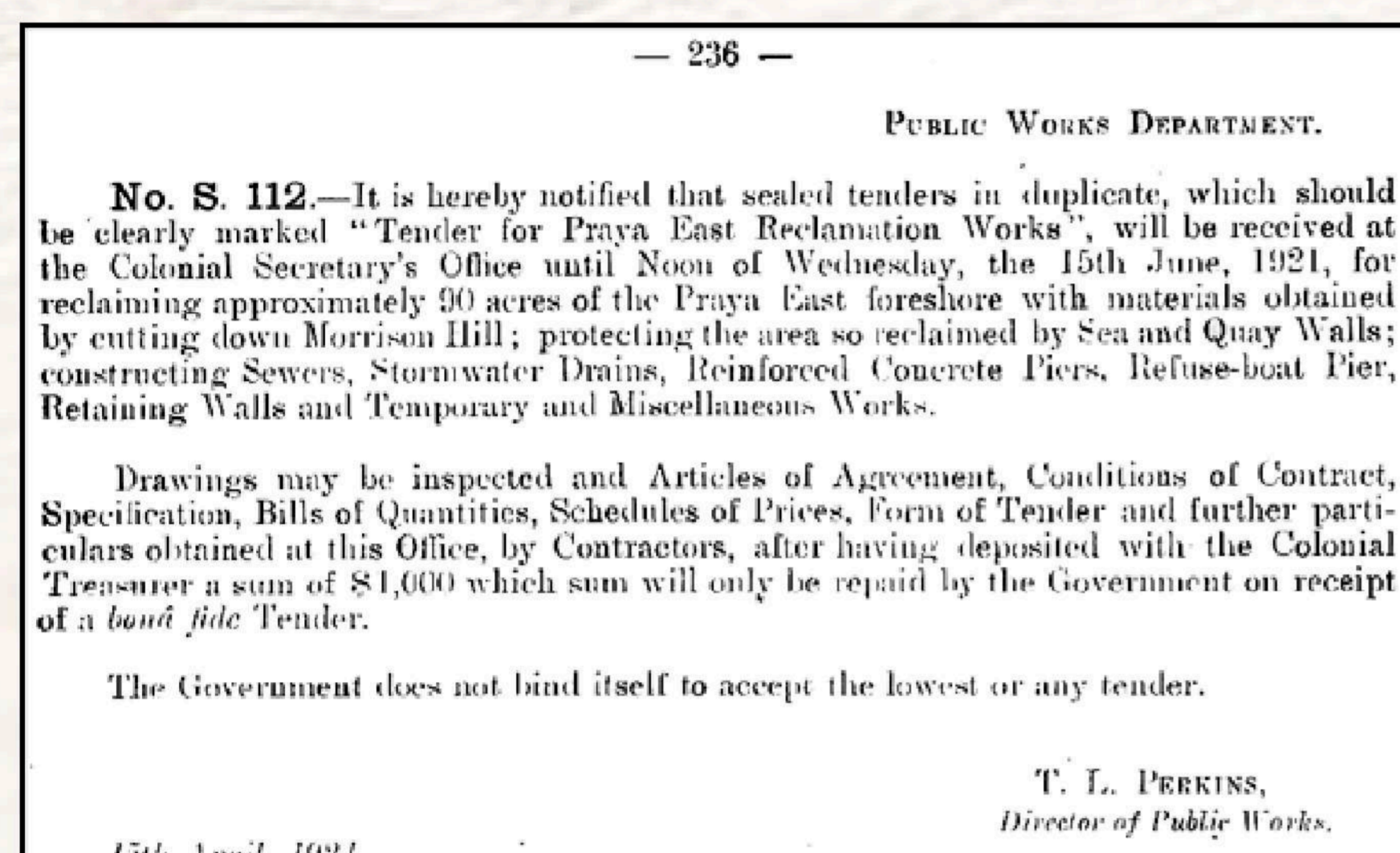
The Great Depression of the 1930s attracted capital from the overseas Chinese who bought property in Wan Chai, particularly along Lockhart Road. In the following years, Wan Chai's newly reclaimed land accommodated a large number of Chinese who fled to Hong Kong because of political turmoil in the mainland. The development of the new reclaimed area began to take shape. Within a few years, the China Fleet Club Building and Luk Kwok Hotel were added to the skyline and they quickly became the new landmarks in Wan Chai.



Royal Naval Canteen, also called 'Blue Buildings' (1920s)



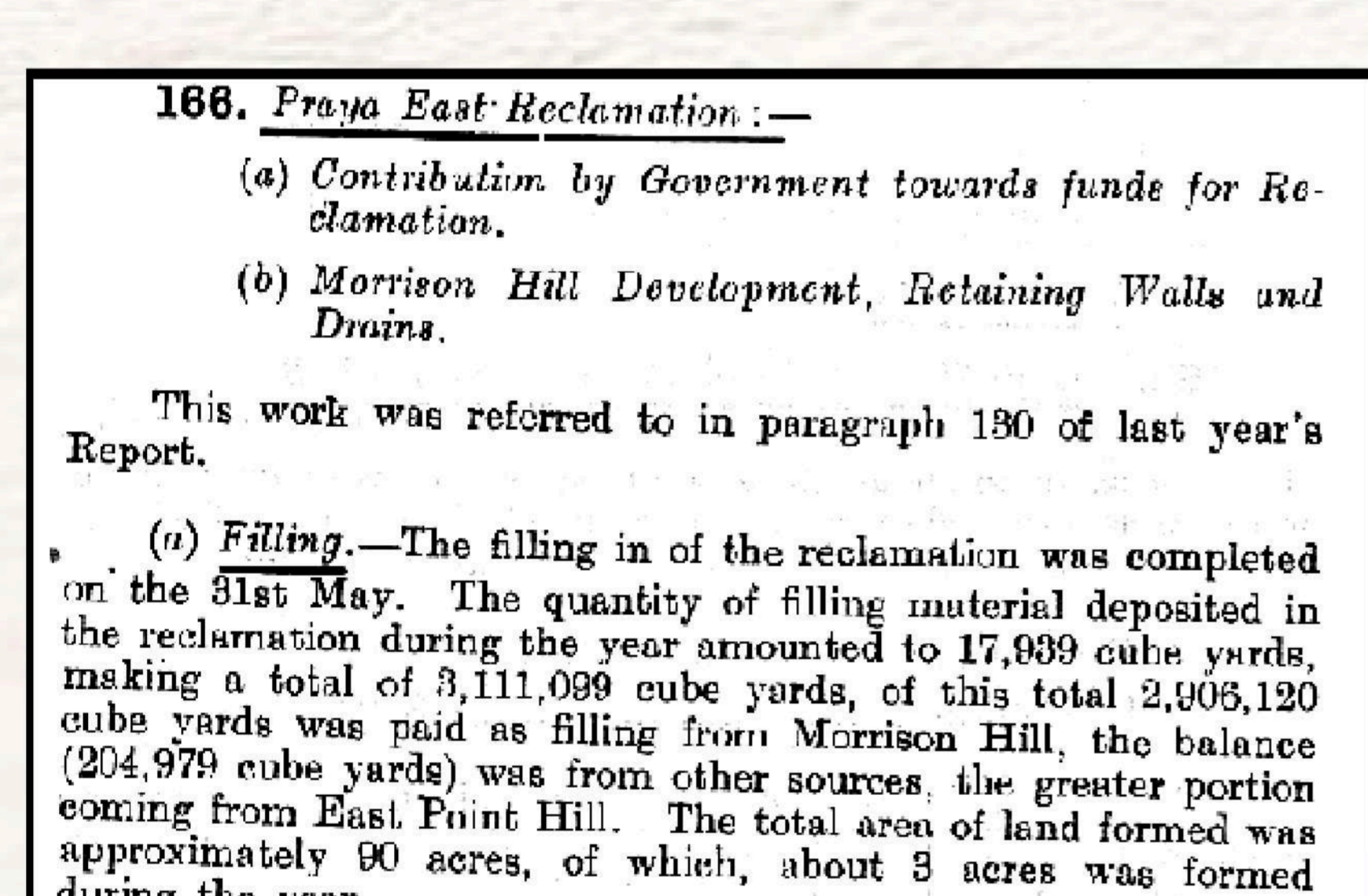
Junction of Queen's Road East and Arsenal Street (c.1920)



Government notice about "Tender for Praya East Reclamation Works" on Hong Kong Government Gazette issue no. 15 of 1921. (1921)



St. Francis Street after a heavy rainstorm (1926)



Review on the completed Praya East Reclamation Work, extracted from the Administrative Report 1929. (1929)



Queen's Road East (c. 1930)



Pier 01 in Gloucester Road (c. 1930)



Hennessy Road (1930)



Junction of Johnston Road and Wan Chai Road (1930s)



Hennessy Road. Note the Japanese shop 'Maruyama & Co' (c.1934)



Boys' & Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong in Wan Chai (1936)



Looking east at the junction of Morrison Hill Road and Wan Chai Road (1937)



Chinese Methodist Church at the junction of Hennessy Road and Johnston Road, Wan Chai (c.1940)

1941 - 1945

The impact of the Second World War on Wan Chai was felt a year before the actual invasion. In 1940, the Government began to construct a large number of air-raid shelters along Queen's Road East, Kennedy Road and the hill behind Star Street to prepare for war. Air-raid trenches were also dug near the Children's Playground (present Southorn Playground).

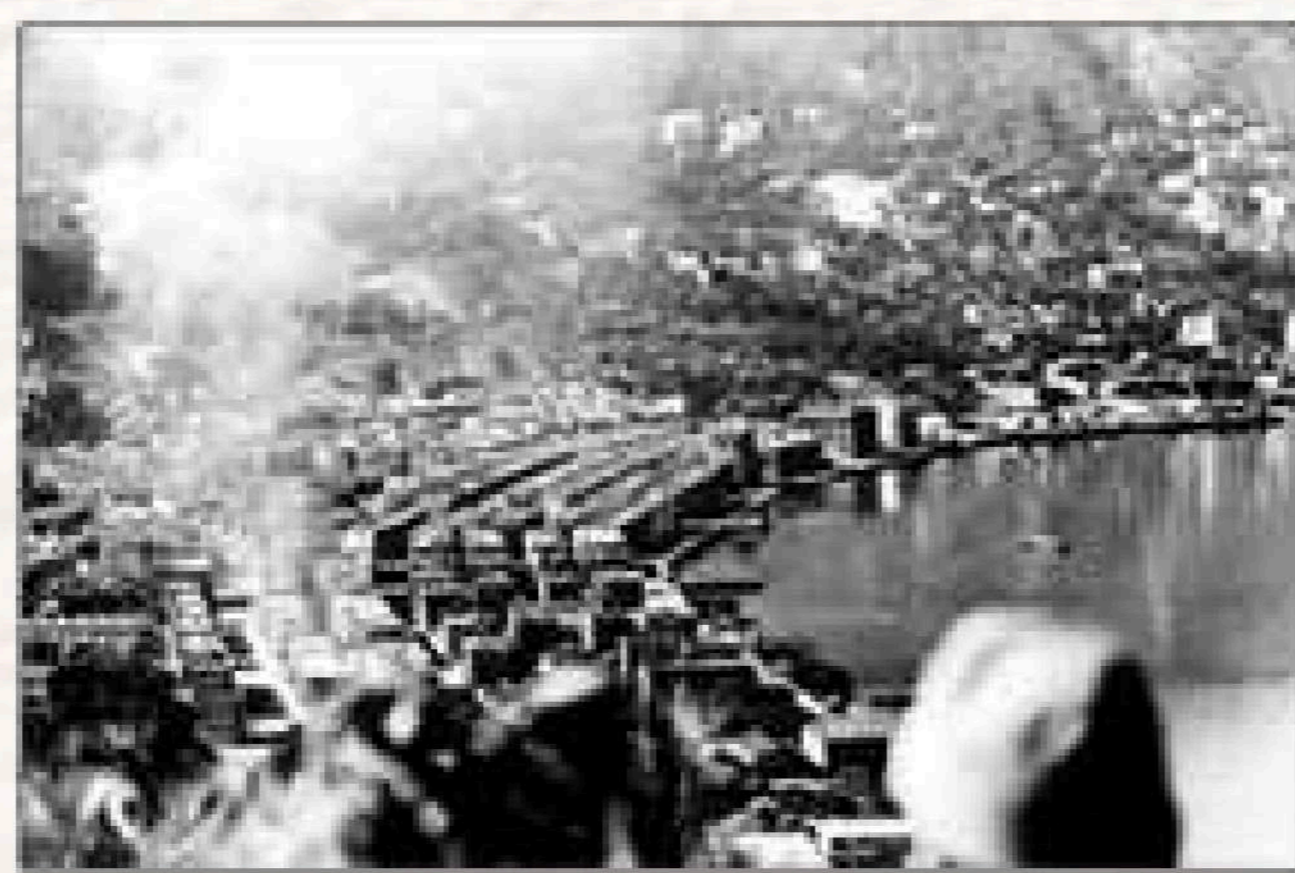
The invasion finally came on December 8, 1941. Following the capture of Kowloon on December 13, the Japanese began to bombard Hong Kong Island. As Wan Chai was close to the Naval Dockyard and the barracks at Admiralty, it was constantly shelled which led to numerous civilian casualties. On December 24, the Japanese advanced as far as to Morrison Hill where it met stubborn resistance of the defenders. On Christmas Day, Wan Chai experienced intense street-to-street fighting. In the same afternoon the Governor, Mark Young finally took the decision to surrender. O'Brien Road and Wan Chai Road were the front line when the cease-fire order came.

Shortly after the Japanese Governor's Office was established, Japanese street names began to replace British ones in April 1942. Wan Chai was certainly no exception: Queen's Road East became Higashimeiji-dori, Gloucester Road was renamed Higashisumiyoshi-dori and Johnston Road was changed to Yahata-dori. In July the same year, district offices were established in Hong Kong. Violet Peel Health Centre was used as Wan Chai District Bureaux Office. Many public buildings and Church premises were acquired by the Japanese for other uses. Two months later, Wan Chai was designated the official 'entertainment area' for the Japanese nationals. Meanwhile, the Japanese decided to build a war memorial at Mount Cameron using the granite of Morrison Hill for construction. Numerous Wan Chai residents were forced to work for the memorial, which debilitated their health and caused the lives of many.

During the Allies' Offensive between 1944-45, the Naval Dockyard and barracks at Admiralty were constantly attacked by American warplanes. Lockhard Road and Wan Chai Road were mistakenly bombed on several occasions. Hundreds of Wan Chai residents became victims of these air-raids. Wan Chai had indeed paid a high price in the war against Japan.



Wan Chai under fire during the Battle of Hong Kong, Mount Gough in the distance (1941)



Wan Chai under fire during the Battle of Hong Kong. A Japanese soldier can be seen in front of the camera (1941)



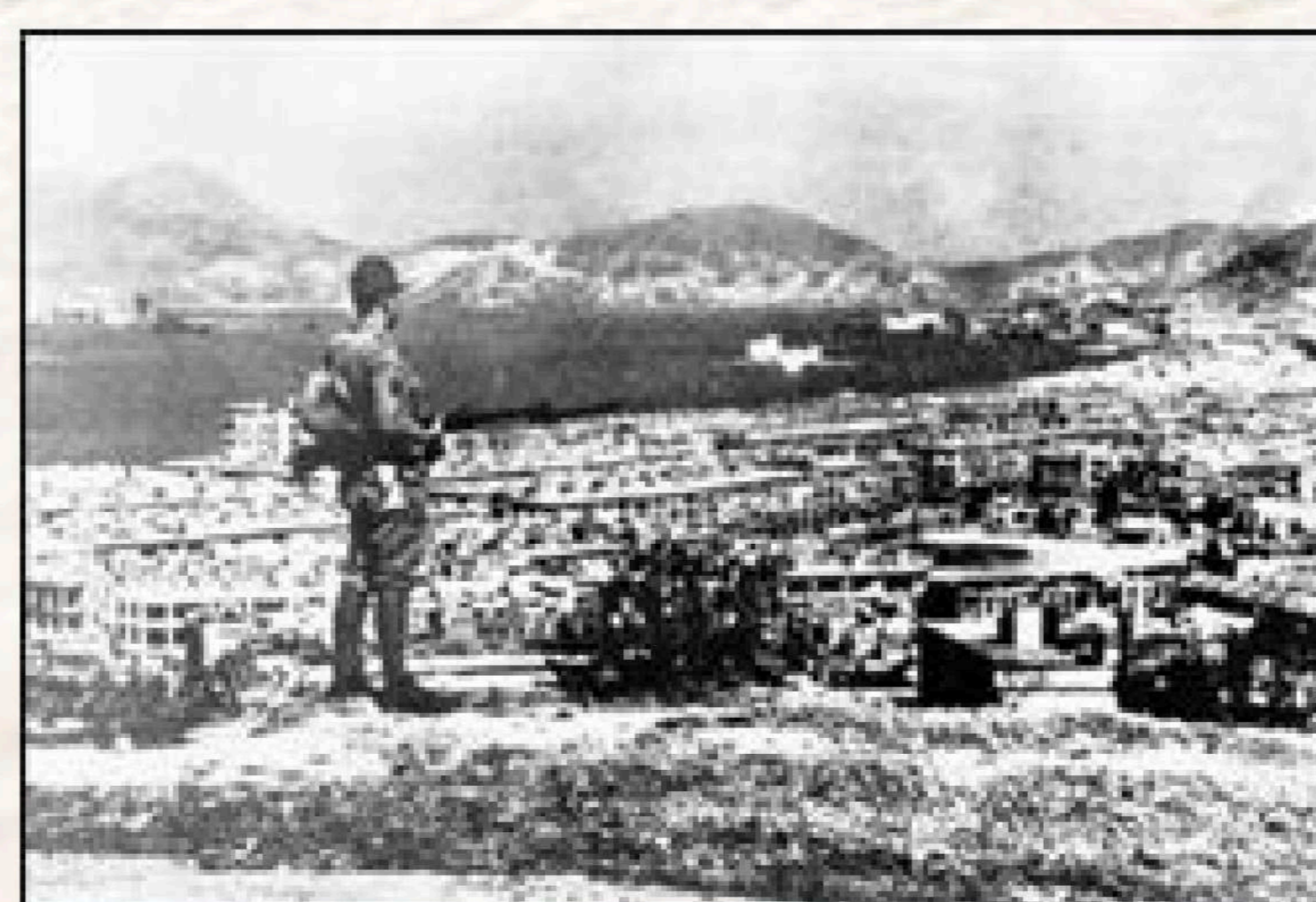
Japanese Victory Parade at Hennessy Road after the fall of Hong Kong (1941)



Japanese troops at Gloucester Road after Japan's surrender. The China Fleet Club can be seen in the background (1945)



A Japanese officer arrived at Gloucester Road after Japan's surrender (1945)



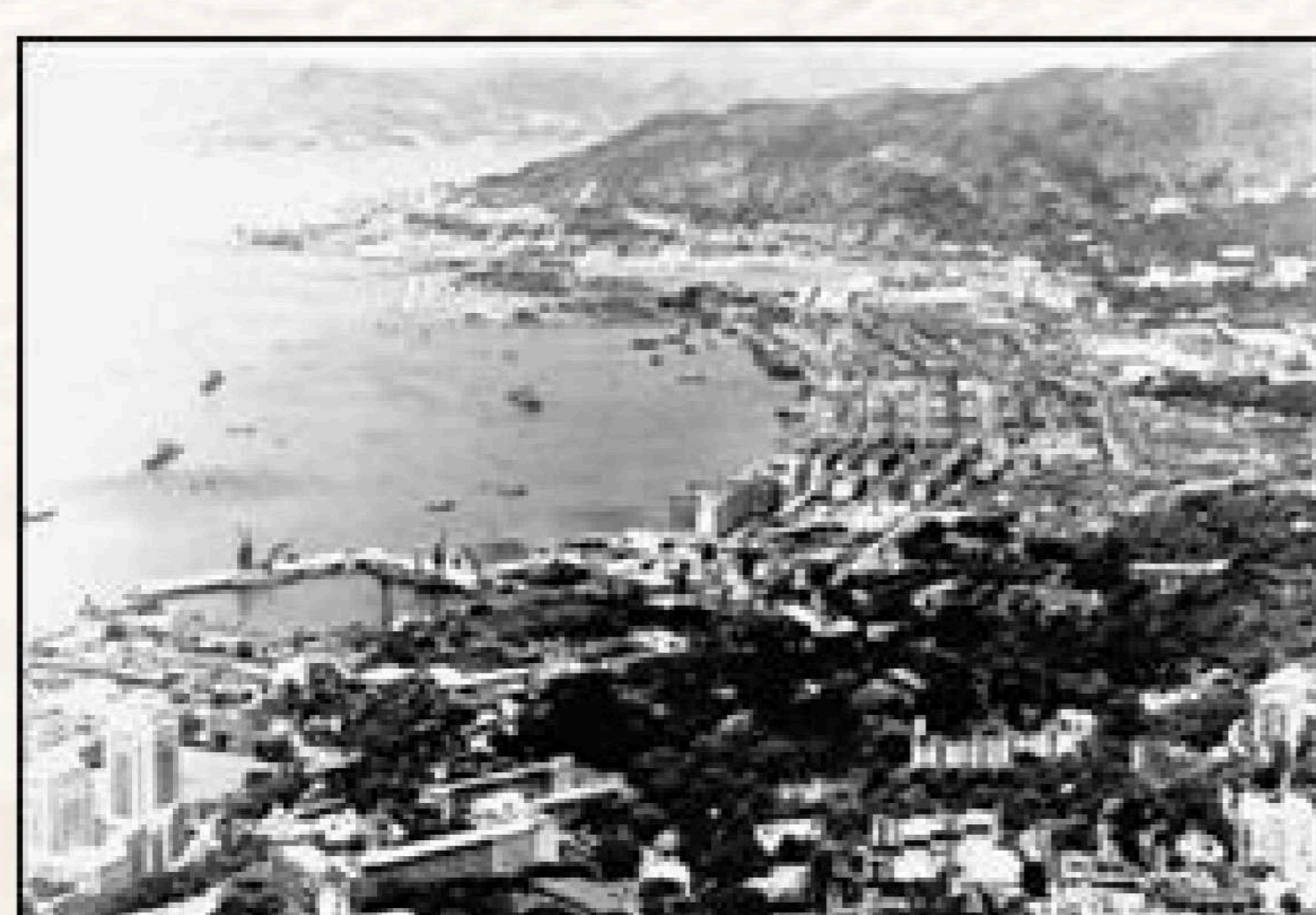
Japanese soldier on the Kennedy Road viewing down to Wan Chai. The right flat land is Southorn Playground (1940s)

1950s - 1960s

In 1957, Richard Mason's classic story, 'The World of Suzie Wong' made its debut to the literary world. The book, which portrayed the life of a bar girl in Wan Chai, was followed by a hugely successful stage play shown in Broadway and the West End of London. In 1960 the release of its film version starring Nancy Kwan and William Holden was an instant hit. Wan Chai was made the most famed place in Hong Kong with its legendary image of an entertainment galaxy of nightclubs and bar girls lingered on for years.

Indeed the root of the vice establishments in Wan Chai could at least be traced back to the Japanese Occupation period when it was a designated 'entertainment area'. During the Korean War (1950-1953), Hong Kong began to receive servicemen, mostly Americans, on leave from the United Nations Forces. The bars and nightclubs in Wan Chai prospered when servicemen landed on the small pier at Fenwick Street romped into these shops. Richard Mason was said to have his novel written after staying in and out of the bars in Wan Chai for several months. That was three years after the Korean War ended.

The flourishing nightclub and bar business in Wan Chai reached its climax during the Vietnam War (1965-75). The huge number of servicemen on Rest and Recreation leaves also brought business to tailors, laundries, tattoo parlours, restaurants, cinemas, etc. During that period, the number of cinemas in Wai Chai was among the highest in Hong Kong. These cinemas included Oriental Theatre, Cathy Theatre, Tung Shing Cinema, Hong Kong Theatre, National Theatre and Rialto Theatre, etc.



Admiralty and Wan Chai in the mid 1950s



Celebration for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II at Hennessy Road (1953)



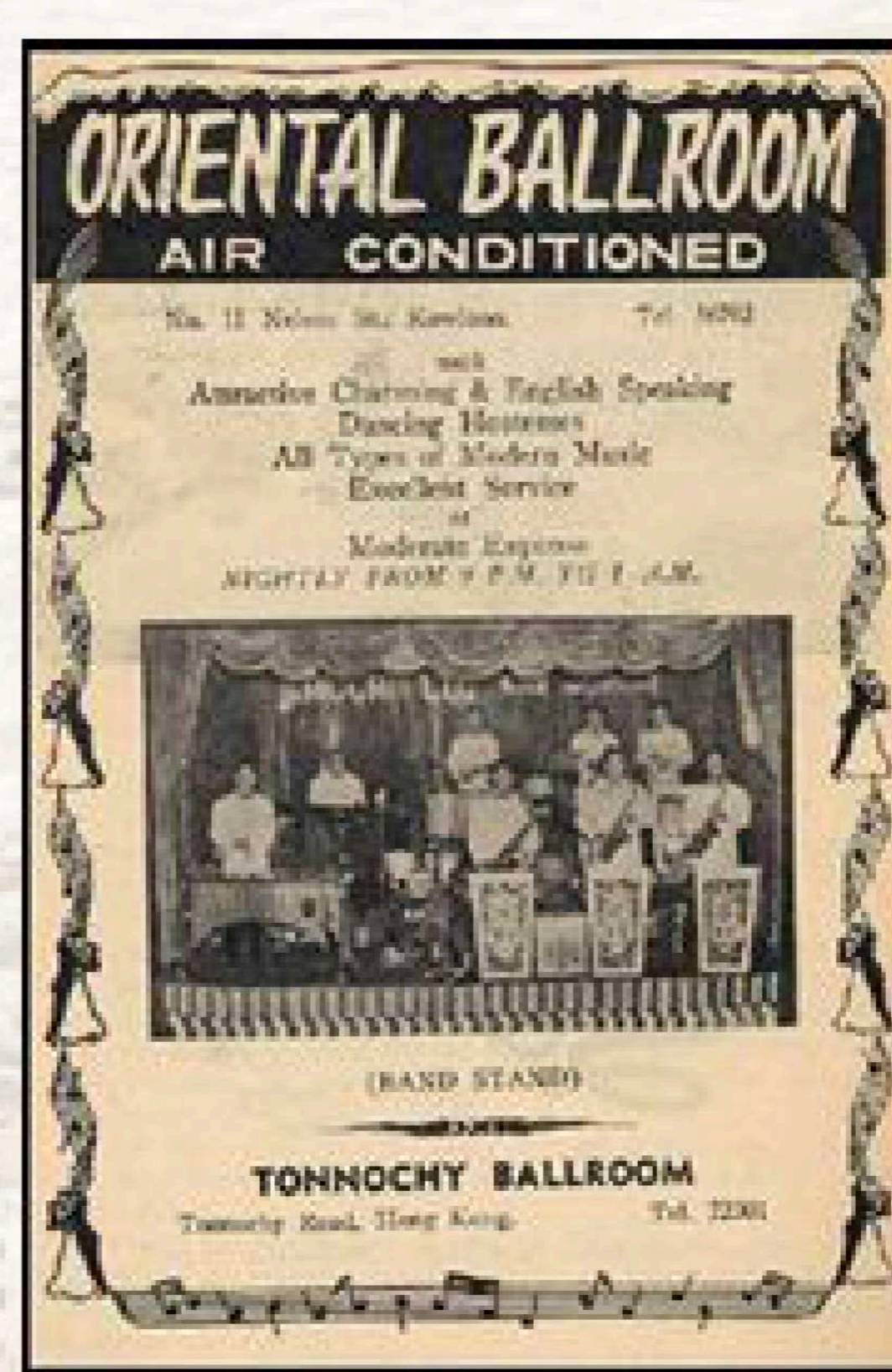
Tramway Map (1954)



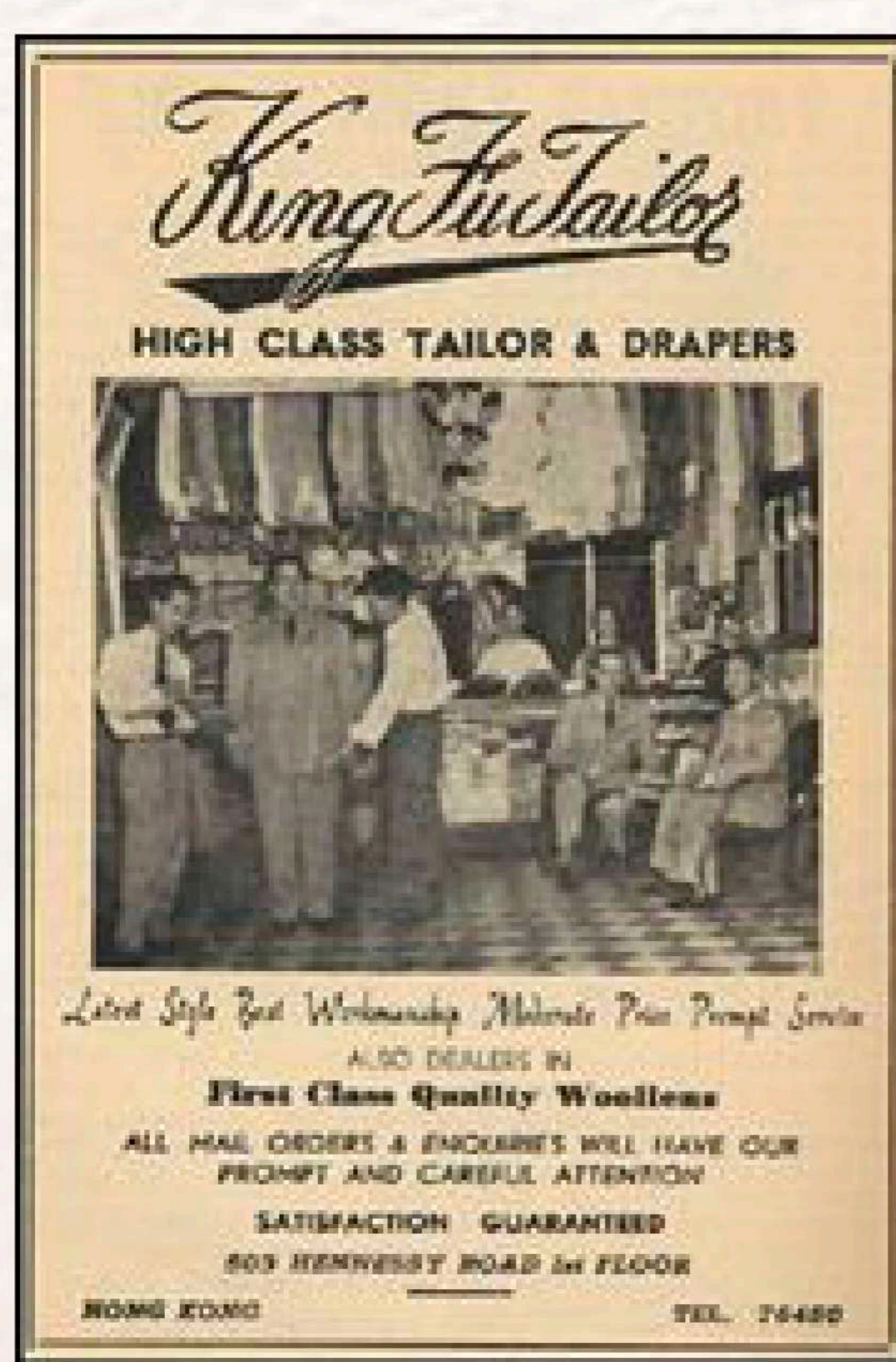
Ticket for Tea Dance (1950s)



Interior of Hennessy Ballroom (1950s)



Advertising the Tonnochy Ballroom in a Hong Kong Tourist Guidebook (1955)



Advertising high class tailor and drapers in a Hong Kong Tourist Guidebook (1955)



Government dental clinic in Wan Chai (1958)



Violet Peel Clinic at the junction of Johnston Road and O'Brien Road (1960s)



Radio Hong Kong's broadcast van in Johnston Road (1960)



New building under construction at the junction of Johnston Road and Wan Chai Road (1963)



A rainy day at Tai Yuen Street, Wan Chai (1963)



Tenements along Hennessy Road near Causeway Bay (1964)



Cantonese opera show held in Southern Playground (1966)

1970 - 1997

In the first half of the 20th Century, the inconvenience of land transport hampered Wan Chai's commercial development. Since 1958, with the removal of some of the military facilities such as the Naval Dockyard and several barracks, traffic between Central and Wan Chai was greatly improved. In 1961, Harcourt Road was completed and with the widening of a section of Queen's Road East (present Queensway), Wan Chai was on its way to a new facelift.

Between 1965-72, another major reclamation scheme was carried out in Wan Chai. Upon the completion of the scheme, Wan Chai's boundary was further extended to the present Convention Avenue, which resulted in a complete alteration of the northern shoreline of Hong Kong Island. In 1968, an urban renewal plan of Wan Chai was passed by the Executive Council. Within two decades, many old buildings on both sides of Queen's Road East were demolished and replaced by new high-rises. The 'Economic Take-off' experienced by Hong Kong at the time was accompanied by a great demand for office buildings. The change of Wan Chai was a timely response to meet the needs of the circumstances. On the other hand, the period also saw Hong Kong's departure from the 'Cultural Desert' era to a new journey of prismatic cultural activities. The long established night entertainment cum residential image of Wan Chai was soon to falter and fade.

Wan Chai embarked on a new stage of vibrant development with the completion of the New Mercury House on the newly reclaimed land (later known as 'Wan Chai North'). In 1977, the first Arts Centre in Hong Kong was founded. In the late 1980's, glittering tower blocks of commercial buildings, government offices and five-star hotels began to line up near the new Wan Chai waterfront. Also constructed were the Academy for Performing Arts and several sports grounds. When the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre and the Central Plaza were unveiled in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the two distinctive buildings quickly became part of the symbols of Hong Kong. In 1997, under the watchful eyes of the world, the historic Handover Ceremony took place in the new Extension of the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, where the impressive new Wan Chai was shown to the world.



Tenements and roof-top huts along Lockhart Road. Wan Chai Reclamation (top) is almost completed (1970)



The old Wan Chai Post Office (c.1970)



Public Enquiry Service Centre in Wan Chai (c.1970)



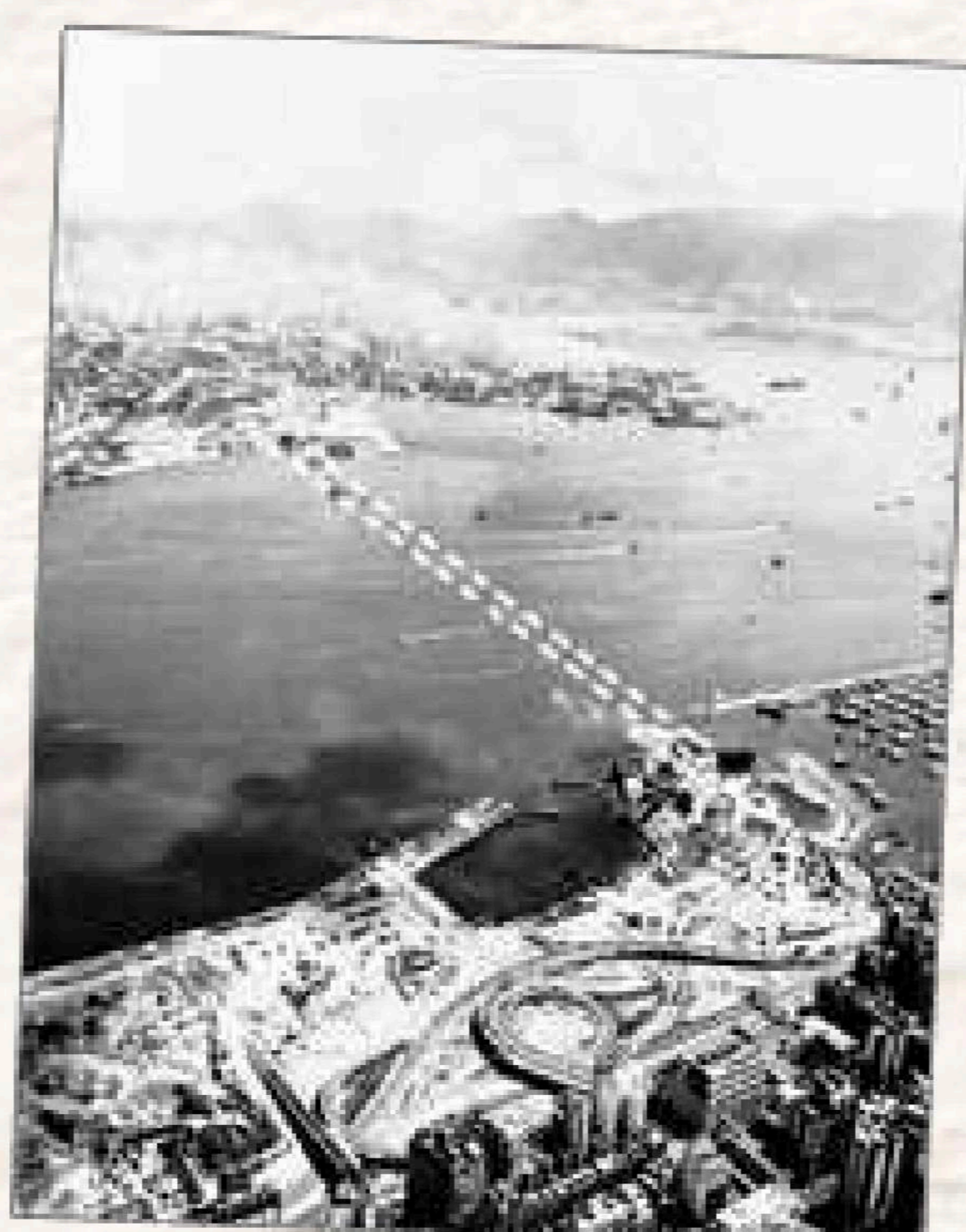
City District Officer Lily Kwan at Southorn Playground (c. 1970-71)



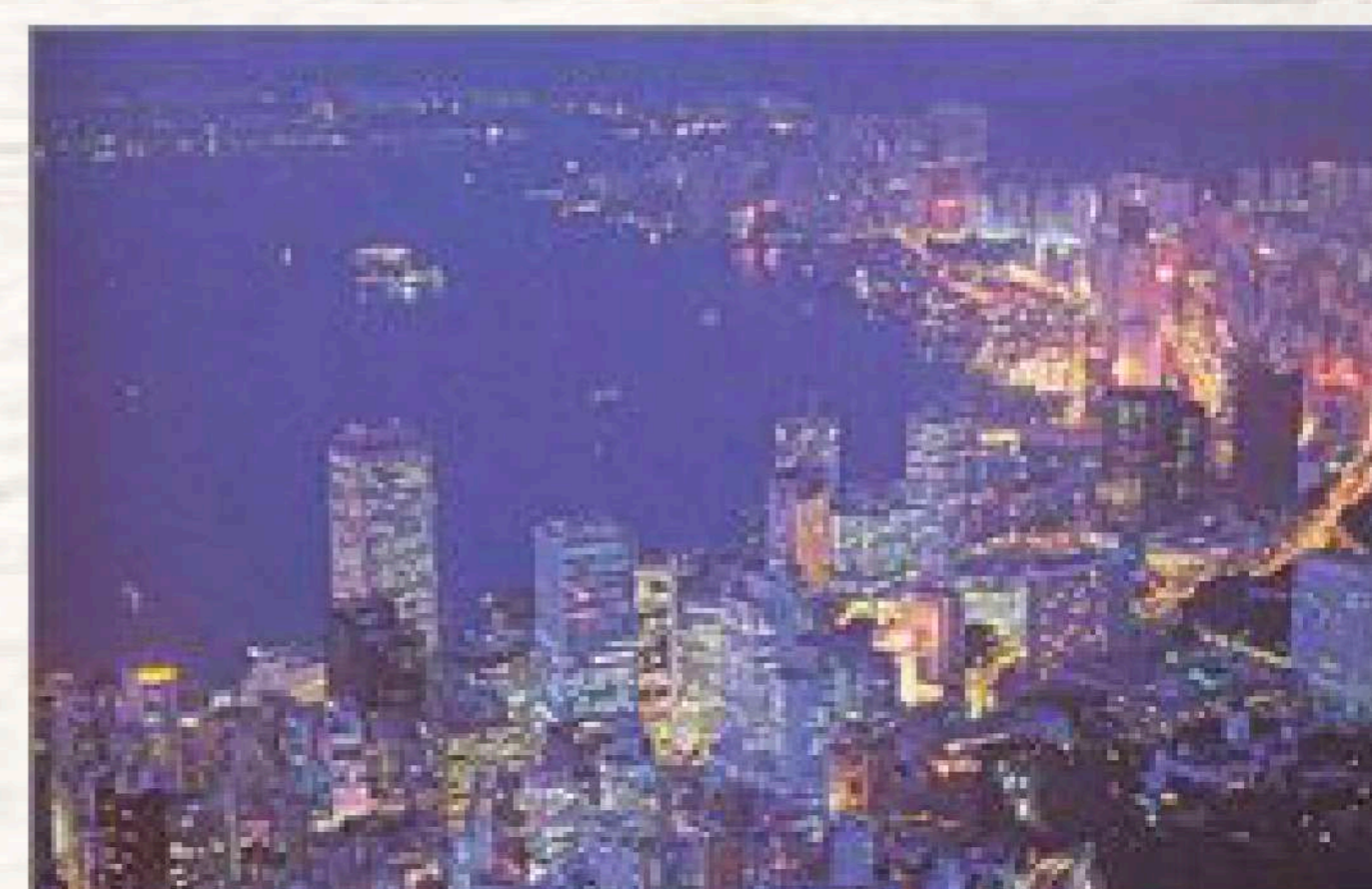
Reclamation of the Wan Chai waterfront and adjoining commercial high-rise development (1971)



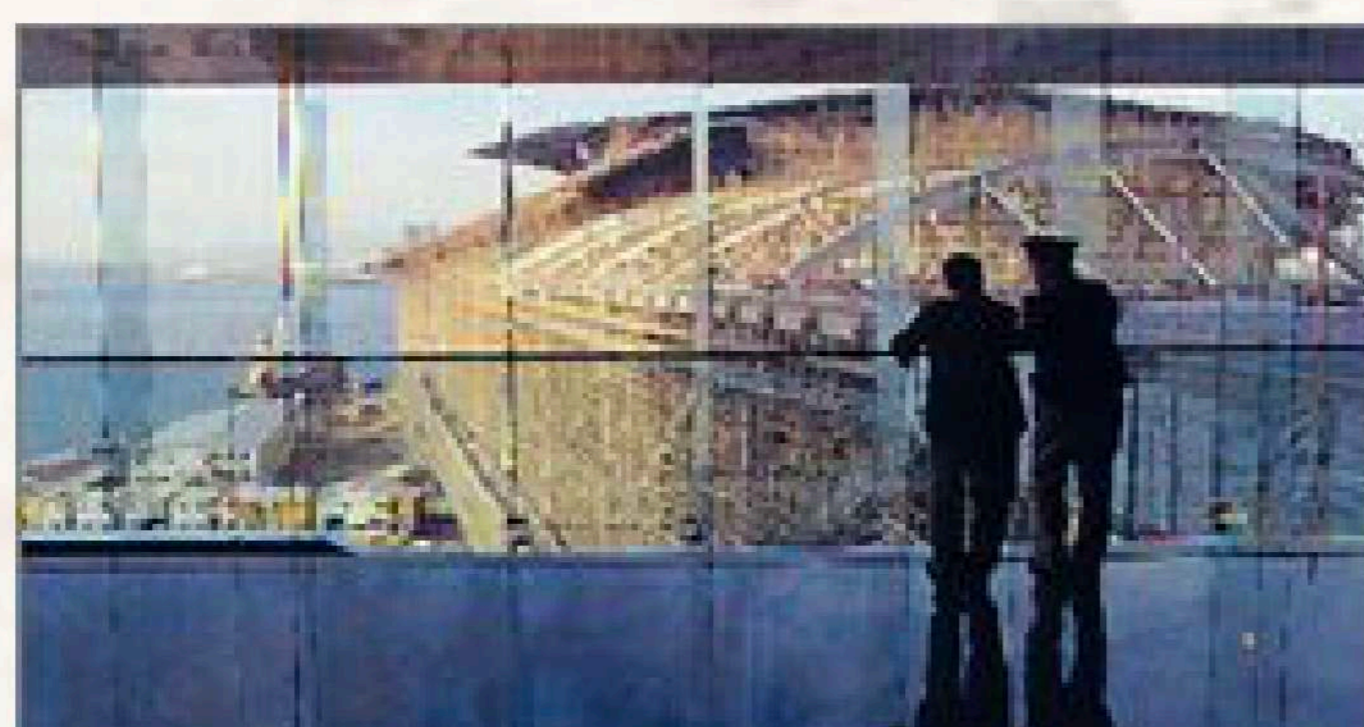
Opening ceremony of the Cross Harbour Tunnel at the Kowloon entrance (1972)



Aerial view showing the Cross-Harbour Tunnel Causeway Bay section near completion. The tunnel is represented by the dot-line. (1972)



Wan Chai at night (1981)



Extension of the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Center under Construction (c. 1996-1997)

