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The 'death' and 'rebirth' of museums in colonial Hong Kong: three decades of community endeavours to restore reputation and culture, 1933–1962

Reynold K. W. Tsang

Faculty of History, University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

For nearly three decades, from 1933 to 1962, Hong Kong was deprived of a proper museum. This article explores the prolonged absence of public museum services in the colony and their arduous restoration. It investigates the reasons behind this extended hiatus and scrutinises the efforts made by the Hong Kong colonial government and the local community to reintroduce public museum services. The article argues that the resurgence of museums in Hong Kong was primarily propelled by community initiatives. While the colonial administration displayed indifference towards museum provision, Hong Kong's civil society considered it essential for enhancing the colony's reputation and cultural landscape. Through a public campaign for cultural democratisation, they compelled the government to establish a new museum. Their lobbying and preparatory efforts showcased the significant determination and agency of the local community in shaping the cultural outlook of the colony despite their limited political representation.

KEYWORDS

City Hall Museum; Lei Cheng Uk Han Tomb Museum; colonial museums; Hong Kong; cultural democratisation; British colonialism

1. Introduction

During the early 1930s, the Museums Association conducted a series of surveys on over a thousand museums across the British Empire.[1] Apart from museums in Britain and the larger Dominions, it also examined those in smaller colonies and isolated possessions, such as Hong Kong. The following was the Museum's Association's assessment of the museum situation in Hong Kong, as published in the *Reports on the Museums of Ceylon, British Malaya, the West Indies, Etc.*:

> Hong Kong represents the low-water mark in museum provision throughout the whole of the Empire, excepting only the smaller islands of the Pacific and some of the more backward African territories, but this statement, sweeping as it is, is not sufficient to give a general idea of the museum backwardness of this Colony. It is true there was a small museum in the City Hall building which existed precariously from 1874 [*sic*] to 1933, but even this has now disappeared … [2]

CONTACT Reynold K. W. Tsang kaiwontsang@yahoo.com.hk

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

The above statement may sound hyperbolic, but the museum situation in Hong Kong was undeniably grim then. In 1933, the closure of the City Hall Museum (Old City Hall Museum), the sole public museum in the colony, marked the 'death' of museums in Hong Kong. Over the next thirty years, the colony remained largely devoid of museums.[3] It was not until 1962 that Hong Kong witnessed the 'rebirth' of museums with the re-establishment of a proper public museum—the City Hall Museum and Art Gallery.

This paper sheds light on the prolonged absence of public museums in Hong Kong from 1933 to 1962 and delves into the factors that propelled and impeded their restoration. It scrutinises the museum and cultural policies of the Hong Kong colonial government, alongside the responses and initiatives of the Hong Kong community, including academics, political and cultural groups, and the broader civil society. Together they reveal the intricate dynamics of discord, neglect, collaboration, and reliance between the colonial government and the public on cultural development. This paper argues that the eventual 'rebirth' of museums in Hong Kong was largely achieved by community endeavours rather than official efforts. The sluggish progress in restoring public museum services stemmed from the colonial government's indifference and disorientation towards cultural provision. In contrast, the public considered the museum a signifier of modernity and development, as well as an essential cultural amenity. A new dawn for Hong Kong's museums finally unfolded in the early 1950s when the local civil society united and demanded cultural democratisation, compelling the government to build a new City Hall with a new museum. The public also actively participated in the museum's planning. In the end, public enthusiasm and determination overcame official apathy, spearheading museum and cultural development in the colony.

Few studies have looked into the museum history of Hong Kong predating the 1970s. One important piece of research is Daphné Sterk's article on the Old City Hall Museum, which examines its sixty-year development and failure.[4] This paper essentially continues from where Sterk's article left off. A handful of local curators have also written short essays on the general development of Hong Kong's museums from the late nineteenth century to the present time. However, these contributions primarily offer a timeline of events and personal recollections.[5] Thus, this paper builds on a wealth of primary sources from multiple archives, including The National Archives (UK), Hong Kong Public Records Office, Legislative Council (HKSAR) Library, Special Collections of the University of Hong Kong Libraries, and Hong Kong Public Libraries. These sources ranged from internal government documents, such as memorandums, proceedings, and working papers, to official reports, to published materials such as newspapers.

2. 'The low-water mark in museum provision'

The Old City Hall Museum had long been in poor condition before its closure in 1933. As mentioned above, the Museums Association considered its sixty-year existence 'precarious.'[6] Since its establishment, the museum faced relentless criticism, including empty display cases, substandard taxidermy, and inaccurate labelling.[7] By the 1920s, the Old City Hall Museum was often regarded as the 'disgrace' of Hong Kong. On 25 August 1921, the *South China Morning Post* articulated its disdain for the museum:

> As for the condition of the [City Hall] Museum and the Library it is only necessary to visit the rooms to feel thoroughly ashamed that these institutions are supposed to be

> representative of British enterprise in the Far East. We would prefer to see them closed altogether rather than that they should continue in their existing unsatisfactory state.[8]

On 5 May 1923, *Hong Kong Telegraph* columnist 'zoologist' called the museum 'an unspeakable disgrace to the community that tolerates its existence.'[9] These comments indicate that the Old City Hall Museum was so undesirable that the public would rather be deprived of it. They foreshadowed the Museums Association's assessment of Hong Kong being the 'low-water mark in museum provision' throughout the British Empire.[10] In 1932, the serious disrepair of the old City Hall building led to its closure to the public, along with the museum.

The shabby state of the Old City Hall Museum could be attributed to the lack of official support. Unlike its counterparts in neighbouring British colonies, such as the Raffles Museum in Singapore and the Federated Malay States Museums, the Old City Hall Museum remained a non-government institution. Since its establishment, the old City Hall relied on sparse public donations and a modest annual grant of $1,200 from the government.[11] Despite inflation, the government handout stayed the same for more than sixty years.[12] As a result, the Old City Hall Museum fell short of money for maintenance and professional staff.[13] According to the Museums Association, by the early 1930s, Hong Kong's annual museum expenditure stood at around £100, which was one of the smallest among the British colonies in Southeast Asia, the Caribbean, and the isolated islands.[14] In terms of per capita expenditure, Hong Kong ranked at the very bottom, allocating a meagre 0.03d (penny) per person to a single museum. This amount was twelve times smaller than British North Borneo's (0.4d), fifteen times smaller than British Malaya's (0.44d), and twenty-five times smaller than Fiji's (0.8d).[15] The extremely lean official subsidy for the Old City Hall Museum reflects the colonial government's long-term indifference towards museum development.

The Old City Hall Museum met its definitive end in June 1933 when the government demolished the old City Hall building and sold part of the site to the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation for its new headquarters. Upon the museum's clearance, a substantial portion of its exhibits were burnt owing to their dilapidated condition.[16] The demolishment of the Old City Hall signifies the official preference for commerce over culture. Notably, there were few public objections to this decision, which can be attributed to the sojourner mentality prevalent among the Hong Kong population at the time. Before 1950, the majority of Hong Kong residents were Chinese immigrants who sought refuge or a livelihood in the colony during times of crisis on the mainland. Most of them saw their stay as temporary and intended to return to the mainland eventually.[17] Thus, they showed little interest in cultural development and had little concern for civic pride. Under this context, the loss of the Old City Hall Museum did not elicit significant public outcry.

Nonetheless, the government soon formulated plans for a new City Hall. In August 1933, the government already planned to rebuild the City Hall and incorporated it into the development scheme for a new Government House and new government offices.[18] The proposal garnered the support of the Legislative Council, whose members were all government appointees. On 27 September 1934, the lawmakers passed the 'Government House and City Development Scheme Ordinance,' officially endorsing the construction of a new City Hall.[19] The government planned to place $100,000 from the $1.25 million sale of the old City Hall site to finance the new City Hall project.[20]

Despite a promising beginning, the prospect of building a new City Hall and a new museum soon faded. In the mid-1930s, Hong Kong went through a trade depression, which prompted the government to adopt a conservative fiscal policy.[21] On 28 November 1935, the Legislative Council enquired about the whereabouts of the Chater Collection, a collection of pictures and porcelains bequeathed to the government by the late businessman Paul Chater. In response, the Colonial Secretary confirmed that the new City Hall project fell victim to budget cuts:

> The Government … intends to house the Porcelain and Picture Collections … in the proposed new City Hall. It is hoped that they will ultimately be housed in a Museum but the finances of the Colony do not permit of the expectation that an adequate museum can be built in the near future.[22]

Although the government hesitated to tap into its treasury, it tried to find external funds. In July 1936, Governor Andrew Caldecott requested the Secretary of State for the Colonies William Ormsby-Gore to consider applying to the Carnegie Corporation Grants for the provision of a public library and museum in Hong Kong. Caldecott frankly remarked that the matter was not of immediate urgency.[23] After nearly a year of consideration, Ormsby-Gore rejected Caldecott's request, citing the overall uncertainty surrounding the city development scheme.[24]

While the Colonial Office and the Hong Kong colonial government avoided committing to establishing a new museum, some local British scholars pushed for it. Despite the indefinite postponement of the new City Hall project, in 1937, Governor Geoffry Northcote appointed a committee 'to advise upon the nature of the collections which the Colonial Museum of Hong Kong should contain and upon the accommodations which those collections are likely to require.'[25] The committee was chaired by botanist Geoffrey A. C. Herklots, who held a Readership in Biology at the University of Hong Kong (HKU). Other members included Archie D. Brankston, a sinologist who later became the curator of the Department of Oriental Antiquities in the British Museum, and Walter Schofield, a pioneer in Hong Kong archaeology. In January 1938, the committee submitted the *Report on a New Museum in Hong Kong* to the government. The report covered every aspect of the proposed museum, including the curator, the board of directors, the building, the collection, and the site.[26]

In the report, Herklots' committee asserted that a new museum was 'highly desirable' in Hong Kong and recommended the government to endorse it.[27] The prime reasons were to repair the colony's tarnished reputation and to facilitate academic research. First, the committee sought to remove the stigma of Hong Kong as an underdeveloped colony. The new museum proposal was a direct response to the Museums Association's 'low-water mark' verdict.

> Hong Kong, as a Colony, is also unique in the British Empire in not possessing a museum or art gallery. Reference to this fact is made in no uncertain terms by the Museums Association in their Empire survey … We consider that the present time is appropriate for the removal of this stigma.[28]

Apart from the British Empire, the committee also worried that Hong Kong would represent the 'low-water mark' in China. They pointed out that the Chinese government had spent large sums on establishing museums and libraries in major cities and argued that this situation 'provides an ample reason for the establishment of a museum which at the

least should be on a level with the standard attained in China.'[29] Museums were often seen as markers of modernity and civilisation.[30] In the view of the committee, the absence of museums in Hong Kong not only indicated a deficiency in cultural provision but also highlighted the backwardness of the colony. When compared to other Chinese cities, such deficiency would further dwarf Hong Kong's status and hint at the incompetence of the colonial government.

Second, the all-scholar committee envisioned the proposed museum as a research centre for studying China and Asia. This adhered to the research focus of many colonial museums in Asia.[31] Regarding natural history, the committee stressed that Hong Kong's location 'at the extreme S.E. corner of Asia and just within the tropics' was of exceptional research interest. The same applies to anthropology and archaeology, as the committee underlined Hong Kong's unique location 'in the track of racial migrations in proto-historic times,' which offered an edge in studying the origins and development of Chinese culture.[32] In addition, the committee anticipated the proposed museum to serve as a hub that links between universities and museums of the British Empire and those of China.[33] The committee also mentioned the educational role of the proposed museum, but it was not listed as a major justification for the institution.

Notwithstanding the strong recommendation of Herklots's committee, the government chose not to support the proposed museum project. In March 1938, the *Report on a New Museum in Hong Kong* was presented to the Legislative Council. However, both officials and lawmakers displayed a general disinterest and did not bring up the report for discussion.[34] In October, Governor Northcote decided to remove the new City Hall from the Government House and City Development Scheme. In his memorandum to the Legislative Council, Northcote explained:

> There is the further conception that the City Hall and the Colonial Museum should form part of such a scheme … But this is a question which raises many issues and cannot be settled immediately. The decision whether or not a new Government House should be built should be taken independently of it.[35]

A few months later, the government introduced the 'Government House and City Development Fund Winding Up Bill' and formally put off the new City Hall project.[36] The governor prioritised his residence over a civic centre or museum for the entire community. The outbreak of the Pacific War in 1941 dashed any remaining hopes for establishing a new museum in the colony.

3. 'Evidently the matter is not urgent!'

After the Second World War, the colonial government remained largely indifferent towards museum provision. Once again, a local British scholar raised the prospect of reinstating a public museum in the colony. In July 1946, Duncan J. Sloss, the Vice-Chancellor of HKU, urged Governor Mark Young to create a public museum. Sloss emphasised that Hong Kong possessed an abundance of artefacts, but they were neglected and dispersed without a museum. 'Such an institution would be invaluable to the University, especially on its Chinese side,' Sloss stated, 'but a general public museum is far beyond the University's resources.'[37] Governor Young gave a favourable response to Sloss: 'I fully agree that the establishment of a museum in the Colony is desirable and

would be justified by the material likely to be available.'[38] However, the government took no action without offering a clear explanation.

It took nearly two years for the new museum proposal to see the light again. In March 1948, the *Final Report of the Education and Cultural Sub-Committee of the Hong Kong Colonial Development and Welfare Committee* (HKCD&W Committee) caught the government's attention on the matter. Established in 1946, the HKCD&W Committee was tasked to advise the government in spending a £1 million special grant from the Colonial Office.[39] In the report, the Education and Cultural Sub-Committee suggested the construction of a new civic centre with a museum and art gallery.[40] When following up on this recommendation, the Colonial Secretariat discovered that Governor Young's agreement to establish a new museum was supposed to refer to Geoffrey Herklots for further consideration, but 'this appears never have been done.'[41] The officials' inattention to the new museum proposal shows that museum provision was of little importance to the government.

Meanwhile, the former proponent of the new museum proposal decided not to press for it amid the post-war situation in Hong Kong. After almost a two-year delay, the Colonial Secretariat finally requested Geoffrey Herklots to offer his advice. At this time, Herklots had joined the government as the Secretary for Development. In response, Herklots recollected a few suggestions from the *Report on a New Museum in Hong Kong* but admitted that 'much of the material presented will now be out of date.'[42] Moreover, in a twist of events, Herklots pointed out that the formation of a new museum should be a lesser concern:

> At this stage I do not propose to record my views on the establishment of a museum in Hong Kong … and I should prefer first to have the White Paper [*Report on a New Museum in Hong Kong*] for reference … Evidently the matter is not urgent![43]

Herklots did not oppose the establishment of a new public museum, but he deprioritised it. His change in attitude was probably brought about by the colony's post-war hardship, which also likely contributed to the government's neglect of Sloss's call for a public museum. In the late 1940s, Hong Kong was plagued by various problems, one of which was food shortage.[44] To relieve this crisis, the government sought the scientific expertise of Herklots. In late 1945, Herklots devised and implemented a fishery cooperative scheme and an agricultural cooperative scheme to improve food supplies in the colony.[45] In 1946, Governor Young broke with convention by appointing Herklots, an academic, as the Secretary for Development, aiming to extend his work in rehabilitating local fisheries and agriculture.[46] The need for food was clearly more pressing than the need for museums. As a government official, Herklots naturally prioritised addressing the former over the latter. Due to Herklots' lukewarm response to the new museum proposal, the government, already indifferent towards it, opted not to proceed with it.

The colonial government not only lacked interest in museum provision but also neglected broader cultural services. In the late 1940s, Hong Kong's cultural scene appeared rather hollow, suffering from a dearth of cultural amenities. In the *Annual Report on Hong Kong for the Year 1948*, the government made a self-deprecating remark:

> The casual visitor to Hong Kong may easily believe that the citizens of Hong Kong are not devotees of the Arts, since he finds in the Colony no art gallery, no English-language theatre, no public concert-hall, no museum, no public library and few ways therefore in which

> during his stay in the Colony he can engage in that particular artistic activity in which he is most interested.[47]

It also admitted that 'there is little public patronage of the Arts.'[48] Indeed, the government avoided taking responsibility for cultural provision and instead relied on non-governmental bodies to deliver cultural services. A prominent example is the British Council, which arrived in Hong Kong in 1948 and regularly sponsored various cultural events, including lectures, exhibitions, and concerts.[49] During the 1950s and 1960s, the government depended on the council to offer library services to the public.[50]

4. 'We should see that Hongkong was not a cultural dark patch'

In 1952, Hong Kong finally witnessed a turning point in the revival of public museum services following the colonial government's undertaking of the new City Hall project. The establishment of the new City Hall marked the beginning of cultural democratisation in Hong Kong, as it provided the general populace with easy access to cultural works and amenities, including a museum.[51] As discussed in the previous section, the government was apathetic towards cultural provision. Although it undertook the construction of the new City Hall, the government did not initiate the new City Hall project or plan for cultural democratisation in the first place. Hong Kong's civil society emerged as the primary catalyst behind these initiatives. The 'rebirth' of museums in Hong Kong owed much to public insistence.

Approaching the 1950s, the cultural and political groups in Hong Kong began to voice their dissatisfaction with the local cultural landscape and demanded the democratisation of culture. In December 1948, the British Council representative in Hong Kong highlighted the lack of cultural amenities in the colony and expressed their will to improve the situation:

> Hongkong was well developed administratively. Here were efficient business enterprises and the place was clean and tidy. But there were things in the Colony lacked. It lacked, for instance, a public library, and for another, there was no concert hall, no theatre, no museum and no public reading room. And in each of these matters the Council was trying desperately to find a place where these cultural things could be carried on.[52]

Meanwhile, the Reform Club of Hong Kong called for a civic centre. The Reform Club was one of the oldest political organisations in Hong Kong. In April 1949, during the inaugural dinner of the club's Kowloon Branch, club members raised concerns about the impoverished cultural scene in Hong Kong. 'We should see that Hongkong was not a cultural dark patch on the world,' member H. L. Dekker said, 'a philanthropist should offer a prize for architects to submit designs for a civic centre which would include a theatre, concert hall, museum, debating and committee rooms.'[53] In November, the Reform Club included the demand for 'Civic Centre (Public Library; Art Gallery; Museum; Auditorium)' in its latest manifesto.[54]

Lacking representation in the government and the legislature, these cultural and political groups engaged in public advocacy and lobbying.[55] In May 1950, the Sino-British Club initiated the City Hall campaign and rallied community-wide support for the cause. Established in 1946, the Sino-British Club aimed to promote harmony and exchange among British and Chinese residents in Hong Kong through cultural activities. The

club resolved that 'Hong Kong should and must have a City Hall as soon as possible' and appointed a committee to lobby for and consider the requirements of the new City Hall.[56] Father Thomas Ryan, a Jesuit priest and educator, served as the chairperson of the City Hall Committee. Father Ryan had sat on the Education and Cultural Sub-Committee under the HKCD&W Committee, which first re-proposed the establishment of a civic centre after the Second World War. In July, almost forty local organisations accepted the Sino-British Club's invitation to form the City Hall Committee. Apart from cultural and political groups, the committee comprised business chambers, professional associations, trade unions, religious groups, charitable groups etc.[57] (Table 1) By November, the membership of the City Hall Committee rose to fifty-three.[58] These local organisations represented almost all major sectors of Hong Kong society, including those which had no direct interest in the arts and culture. The committee's diverse composition demonstrates a general public desire for the construction of a new City Hall. This contradicts with the relative silence of the local community during the demolition of the Old City Hall two decades ago. Although a strong sense of local identity only became widespread among Hong Kong residents in the 1960s, the high level of community involvement in the City Hall campaign points to its gradual rise after the Second World War.[59] This growing civic spirit and public demand brought about the restoration of public museums in Hong Kong.

The colonial government initially showed clear reluctance in answering the call of the City Hall Committee. Unlike Herklot's committee and the HKCD&W Committee, the City Hall Committee was not appointed or endorsed by the government. In brief, the committee had no official status. In August 1950, the City Hall Committee invited the government to designate a representative to sit on the committee. However, the government declined the invitation, citing that 'any representative it might appoint would not have the authority to speak for the government.'[60] This disappointing response did not deter the City Hall Committee from continuing its campaign and gaining official recognition. Later that year, the committee asked the government to appoint a liaison officer

Table 1 . Membership of the City Hall Committee by 18 July 1950.

Sectors	Organisations
Culture	Choral Group, Garrison Players, Hongkong Art Club, Hongkong Light Orchestra, Hongkong Stage Club, Photographic Society of Hongkong, Sino-British Club of Hongkong, Wah Yan Dramatic Society
Business and Commerce	Chinese General Chamber of Commerce, Chinese Manufacturers' Union, Kowloon Chamber of Commerce
Professional	Association of Chartered Accountants in Hong Kong, Engineering Society of Hong Kong, Hong Kong & China Branch of the British Medical Association, Hong Kong Chinese Medical Association, Hongkong Teachers' Association
Labour	Hongkong Federation of Labour Unions
Charity	Chinese Young Men's Christian Association, Hongkong Council of Social Service, Hongkong Family Welfare Society, Kennedy Town Kai-Fong Welfare Advancement Association, North Point Kai-Fong Welfare Advancement Association, Rotary Club of Hongkong, Rotary Club of Kowloon, Toc H, Tung Wah Hospital, Western District Kai-Fong Welfare Advancement Association, Yong Women's Christian Association, Y's Men's Club of Hongkong
Politics	Hongkong & Kowloon Residents' Association, Hongkong Chinese Reform Association, Kowloon Residents' Association, Reform Club of Hongkong
Recreation and Social Club	Chinese Club, Club Lusitano, India Association, Jewish Recreation Club
Others	Hongkong University Alumni Association, Hongkong University Union, Stanley Sea & Land Citizens' Association

instead, but the government once again shunned the idea and claimed that the appointment would be open to much the same objections as the appointment of a representative. The government was only willing to hold informal meetings with the committee occasionally to discuss points on an off-the-record basis.[61] Thereafter, Father Ryan indeed convened several informal meetings with the Colonial Secretary, gradually gaining official recognition for the committee.[62]

After nearly two years of lobbying and negotiation, at the end of 1951, the colonial government finally agreed to take on the new City Hall project.[63] In February 1952, the Legislative Council passed the motion that 'the construction of the City Hall should be undertaken by the Public Works Department in association with Professor Gordon Brown [the architect].'[64] The government then formed the City Hall Accommodation Committee 'to consider and advise on the accommodation to be provided in the City Hall.'[65] In practice, the official City Hall Accommodation Committee did not fully replace the unofficial City Hall Committee. Instead, it functioned more as a liaison group between the City Hall Committee and the Public Works Department. In brief, the colonial government and the City Hall Committee forged a mutually dependent relationship. The government relied on the committee to assess public opinions and outline the requirements of the new City Hall, while the committee depended on the government's financial and administrative resources to materialise the project. As the Old City Hall Museum was never a government institution, the official assumption of the new City Hall and its museum marked the inception of government-provided public museum services in Hong Kong.

5. 'The prime importance of a museum'

Since the 1930s, almost every proposal and vision for the new City Hall included a museum. The City Hall Committee was no exception. In June 1951, the City Hall Committee issued the 'City Hall Specifications,' which outlined the functions, requirements, construction, and finance of the new City Hall. In the specifications, the committee declared that

> almost all the societies and associations stress the prime importance of a museum, and its support by an endowment fund. The museum would have to be available to students, sometimes in classes, and to visitors, naturalists, historians, and amateurs of "curios" and antiques … In this sense the permanent art gallery is considered as part of the museum.[66]

Immediately after the government officially undertook the City Hall project, the City Hall Committee started to consider the requirements of the museum in the new City Hall, which comprised a museum and an art gallery. In May 1952, the City Hall Committee formed the Museum Sub-Committee and the Art Gallery Sub-Committee. They each produced a two-page report. Although the reports were brief compared to the *Report on a New Museum in Hong Kong*, they still discussed the museum's scope and potential collections, space requirements, and the qualifications of the curators.[67] In July, the City Hall Accommodation Committee agreed that the reports of the two sub-committees 'did not call for any major revision of the accommodation proposals so far made,' except that 'the art gallery and museum should be combined under one curator and limited in size to a total of 10–15 galleries' on the general question of reducing expense.[68]

Apart from drafting the initial requirements, the City Hall Committee continued to exert influence on the design of the new City Hall. In October 1953, Gordon Brown and the Public Works Department completed the first design of the new City Hall. However, the City Hall Committee was disappointed with it. Kenneth A. Watson, the convenor of the Museum Sub-Committee, criticised the draft plans for neglecting the proposed museum and art gallery:

> The Promenades alone, which will be used during the intervals of concerts, say 15 minutes a night, a dozen times a year, a total of three hours a year, occupy more than three times the area of the space allotted to the combined Art Gallery and Museum.[69]

> I ask you to compare this area [the museum] with the Raffles Museum in Singapore, which has twenty galleries, totalling 32000 sq. ft. or the Sarawak Museum in the little town of Kuching, which the Curator has informed me, was to have been increased this year to 61125 sq. ft. Yet it is considered that 7000 sq. ft. is considered sufficient for Hongkong.[70]

> Turning now to the Urban Council Chamber, Marriage Registry and other offices. These take up about 45% of the total volume of the building … But if these were removed, the area of the Museum and Art Gallery could be doubled.[71]

Due to the severe criticism from Watson and other members of the City Hall Committee, Brown and the Public Works Department scrapped the first design. In June 1954, they presented a new one, which greatly reduced the area allocated to the Urban Council chamber and its offices.[72] The committee welcomed the revisions and passed a resolution to 'express approval and satisfaction that Government with the plans exhibited has met most of the requirements put forward by this Committee.'[73]

6. 'If the tomb is demolished, something of value will leave Hongkong'

While planning for the City Hall Museum and Art Gallery was underway, Hong Kong saw the establishment of the Lei Cheng Uk Han Tomb Museum, which superseded the former as the first government museum founded in Hong Kong. The establishment of this archaeology museum was never part of the government's plan. In fact, akin to the new City Hall, the museum's existence was attributed to public appeals. In August 1955, workers levelling a hill slope at the Lei Cheng Uk Resettlement Area accidentally discovered an ancient tomb dating back to the Eastern Han dynasty. The government invited Frederick S. Drake, the head of Chinese Department at HKU, to supervise its excavation. Due to the absence of any policies and laws on archaeological and heritage conservation, the future of the tomb was uncertain. By early September, the government decided to demolish the tomb following a ten-day public opening.[74] On the first opening day, around 800 visitors literally 'gate-crashed' the tomb, damaging the wood and barbed-wire gate of the barrier surrounding the site. The police officer guarding the site had to wave his baton to maintain order.[75] The government's disregard for the tomb stood in stark contrast to public enthusiasm for it.

In view of the imminent destruction of the tomb, Hong Kong's civil society stepped in. Two major political organisations in the colony demanded the government to stop the demolition. Percy Chen, the chairman of the Hong Kong Chinese Reform Association, called on the Colonial Secretary to 'draw the attention of Government to the anxiety of Chinese intellectual circles in Hongkong' concerning the demolition of the tomb.[76]

Meanwhile, the Hong Kong Civic Association issued a public statement strongly appealing to the government to preserve the tomb.[77] Upon unfavourable discussion with the government, Frederick Drake wrote an open letter to the Hong Kong community to explain why the tomb deserved preservation:

> the tomb is not merely the grave of a dead man, but stands in the minds of all Chinese as a monument of a great period in their national history. Tourists will visit it; scholars will stroll around it thoughtfully; little children will play in front of it; teachers will take their pupils to see it … If the tomb is demolished, something of value will leave Hongkong.[78]

On 21 September, Percy Chen organised a public symposium regarding the Lei Cheng Uk Han Tomb. Chen was joined by several acclaimed scholars, including Drake, Ma Kiam, Chan Kwan-po, Tseung Fat-im, Huang Xin-yan, and Brian Harrison. They all stressed the cultural and historical significance of the tomb and urged the government to reconsider its original plan.[79] A week after the symposium, the government conceded and announced that the tomb would be preserved given the great public interest shown.[80] It proposed 'to lay out a small garden around the outside of the tomb and erect a small museum or exhibition room.'[81]

The formation of the Lei Cheng Uk Han Tomb Museum was complicated by the government's lack of planning for museum provision. In 1956, the Public Works Department handed over the tomb museum project to the Urban Council. D. R. Holmes, the chairman of the Urban Council, was confused and asked the Deputy Colonial Secretary to clarify 'who is to be responsible for the maintenance and running of the proposed museum.'[82] Holmes appeared hesitant to take charge of the tomb museum:

> You will understand that if this is in fact to be the arrangement it represents rather a new departure so far as we are concerned; I must confess however that I cannot think of any other appropriate arrangement unless it should be considered suitable that the care of the tomb and museum should be handed over to the Secretary for Chinese Affairs.[83]

Notwithstanding, the government still placed the tomb museum under the Urban Council. Neither the government nor the Urban Council form a museum-dedicated committee or department to oversee it. Instead, the tomb museum was supervised by the Urban Council's Gardens Division alongside playgrounds and public parks.[84] On 21 June 1957, the Lei Cheng Uk Han Tomb Museum officially opened to the public. The museum served as the entrance to the tomb and exhibited the bronzes and potteries unearthed on the site. Despite the absence of proper museum management, the founding of the tomb museum commenced government provision of public museum services and started the Urban Council's longstanding responsibility for government museums.

7. 'I really do not know where to begin'

The final stretch towards the restoration of public museum services in Hong Kong was fraught with challenges. To begin with, the colonial government's low priority on cultural provision delayed the building of the new City Hall and its museum. Construction of the new City Hall was initially set to begin in 1957, but it was postponed for three more years.[85] Back in 1955, Financial Secretary Arthur G. Clarke already informed the Legislative Council that the new City Hall placed a heavy strain on the government treasury.[86] However, financial constraints alone could not explain the delay. In 1958, the

government's revenue topped $500 million, yielding a surplus of $40.1 million, but the government still seemed to harbour reservations about financing the new City Hall. During the Legislative Council meeting on 6 March 1958, Clarke gave a faint promise that 'it is also probable that a start may be made on the long delayed City Hall.'[87] In the end, the foundation stone for the new City Hall was laid only in February 1960.[88]

Furthermore, public museum services remained unsupervised and directionless. Although the Museum Sub-Committee and the Art Gallery Sub-Committee of the City Hall Committee had made suggestions for the City Hall Museum and Art Gallery, the two sub-committees became defunct after drafting their reports in 1952. Neither the government nor the official City Hall Accommodation Committee assumed their role and followed up on the sub-committees' recommendations. Meanwhile, as mentioned in the previous section, there was no agency dedicated to planning and managing public museum services. In brief, the government gave scant attention to the City Hall Museum and Art Gallery even if it was not an unexpected undertaking like the Lei Cheng Uk Han Tomb Museum. Hence, little preparation was made for the establishment of the museum and art gallery.

This situation began to change in 1958 when the Urban Council took charge of planning the City Hall Museum and Art Gallery. The Urban Council initially had no idea how to lay out the museum and art gallery. In October 1959, C. G. M. Morrison, the chairman of the Urban Council, sent a memo to the Colonial Secretary for guidance. Morrison was profoundly confused about the direction of the museum and art gallery:

> I do not appear to have received any guidance from you on the form that the above [City Hall Museum and Art Gallery] should take or any indication of the treasures of Government, which will be transferred to the City Hall … I really do not know where to begin.[89]

A month later, the Colonial Secretariat replied to Morrison: 'It is not easy to decide what general principles should govern the art gallery and museum … Subject to this, our aim should be to build up collections illustrating local rather than world themes.'[90] The secretariat then provided several general principles for the museum and art gallery. These principles were crucial as they represented the first official museum policies of Hong Kong. They demanded a locally oriented museum and went so far as to state that local elements mattered more than quality when selecting exhibits for the museum.[91] This policy adhered to the local focus suggested by both Herklots' committee and the Museum Sub-Committee.[92] It is unclear whether the government drafted the general principles with reference to the reports of the two committees. However, ultimately, the scope of the new museum in Hong Kong aligned with the public's recommendations.

The absence of a clear scope for the City Hall Museum and Art Gallery until late 1959 meant the institution had virtually no acquisition policy in place. Its founding collections were sourced from the existing Government Collections, which were primarily built upon the generous gifts and offers of several local residents. The core of the Government Collections comprised around 700 historical pictures illustrating the Chinese coastal area and Hong Kong during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[93] These included the aforementioned Chater Collection, the Hotung Collection presented by business tycoon Robert Hotung in 1955, and the Law and Sayer Collections, which were offered for sale to the government in 1951 by Wyndham O. Law and Geoffrey Robley Sayer, a former colonial official in Hong Kong.[94] The Government Collections also featured a

collection of Chinese antiquities from local art collector Henry Yeung and the archaeological findings of Father Raphael Maglioni in Guangdong and Fujian provinces. The government purchased Yeung's collection based on his proposal in 1950, while the Catholic Church of Hong Kong donated Maglioni's collection after his death in 1953.[95] None of these acquisitions were initiated by the government. One notable exception was the purchase of a dozen 'modern pictures by local artists' in the late 1950s. They were specifically bought by the government for the museum and art gallery to balance the vast historical picture collections.[96]

In January 1961, the first official agency dedicated to public museum services was finally established in Hong Kong. The Urban Council formed the City Hall Museum and Art Gallery Sub-Committee to govern the City Hall Museum and Art Gallery.[97] Kenneth A. Watson was elected the chairman of the sub-committee, taking a role akin to his previous position as the convenor of the defunct Museum Sub-Committee.[98] In September, the City Hall Museum and Art Gallery Sub-Committee appointed John Warner, a college art teacher, as the first curator.[99] By this time, the management of the City Hall Museum and Art Gallery finally took shape. However, both events occurred rather late, and the hiring of Warner was only settled six months before the scheduled opening of the museum and art gallery. Warner recalled feeling apprehensive when asked to be the curator because he had played no part in its planning. In Warner's own words, 'arriving back two months before the opening date the situation was grim.'[100] The final preparation for the museum and art gallery was hasty and messy.

On 2 March 1962, Governor Robert Black officially opened the new City Hall. In his opening speech, he stressed the civic pride and cultural recreation offered by the institution, which were the key reasons prompting the local community to campaign for a new museum:

> Hongkong, like all large communities in the modern world, has many problems all pressing for attention and solution … but it must surely be a matter for pride that this city, while facing its material problems, can yet, without relaxing its energy to find their solutions, have the vision to carry through to completion a project of this kind intended not for commerce, not for the daily business of government administration, not for the healing of body, but for the development of what philosophers call the 'good life.'
>
> Here, in this new City Hall … our citizens will be able to draw on the treasury that is the heritage of all free men, they will enjoy the fruitful engagement of leisure in the Library, in the Museum, in the Art Gallery and Exhibition Rooms, in the Concert Hall. In the Theatre, and in the Lecture Rooms.[101]

Nonetheless, Black's statement sounded ironic as it attempted to signify the colonial government's commitment to cultural democratisation, in which the government showed little interest from the very beginning.

The City Hall Museum and Art Gallery opened its doors to the public the following day. It occupied the top three floors of the High Block of the new City Hall.[102] The museum and art gallery prepared four parallel exhibitions for its opening: a selection of historical paintings from the Government Collections, alongside three loan exhibitions featuring the sculptures by British sculptor Barbara Hepworth, cartoons by Jewish artist Gerard Hoffnung, and lithographs and etchings from the St. George's Gallery in London.[103] The museum and art gallery garnered significant public enthusiasm, drawing about 25,000 visitors in its first week of opening.[104] By January 1963, the

attendance of the museum and art gallery had reached 430,000, which was about one-eighth of Hong Kong's population at that time.[105] The City Hall Museum and Art Gallery was the parent institution of almost all government museums in Hong Kong today. In 1975, it was split into the Hong Kong Museum of History and the Hong Kong Museum of Art. Both institutions have moved out of the City Hall, but they remain the flagship museums of the city. Apart from their main sites, the Hong Kong Museum of History currently manages five branch museums, including the Lei Cheng Uk Han Tomb Museum, while the Hong Kong Museum of Art oversees one extended branch, Flagstaff House Museum of Tea Ware.

8. Conclusion

The 'rebirth' of museums in colonial Hong Kong represents a public triumph, showcasing the determination of the Hong Kong community to improve the gloomy cultural scene of the colony. Throughout the thirty-year 'death' of museums in Hong Kong, the colonial government demonstrated minimal interest in museum and cultural provision. Despite acknowledging the necessity of a new museum, the government relegated it to a lower priority, as indicated by the government's initial reluctance to finance such a project and the subsequent lack of planning and preparation for the City Hall Museum and Art Gallery. Amidst this official neglect, Hong Kong's civil society emerged as the driving force for the revival of public museum services. Encompassing different stakeholders, such as academics and politicians, they shared multiple concerns and objectives, from restoring the colony's reputation as a modern and developed city, to facilitating academic research, to securing adequate cultural amenities. In the early 1950s, the local civil society took the lead and campaigned for a new City Hall, aiming to democratise cultural amenities, including a public museum. The wide community support for the City Hall campaign ultimately pressed the culturally apathetic government to shoulder the project. The discovery of the Lei Cheng Uk Han Tomb also saw the local civil society impelled the government to preserve the archaeological site.

The triumph of the Hong Kong community in revitalising public museum services extended beyond advocacy. Given the absence of democratic representation within the colonial government and the legislature in Hong Kong from the 1930s to the 1960s, the general populace could hardly lobby and influence the government. Thus, the City Hall campaign and the public appeal for preserving the Lei Cheng Uk Han Tomb were bold and remarkable feats. They transcended mere displays of support for cultural development and constituted concerted efforts to challenge the colonial authority's inadequate representation of public interests in cultural affairs. Furthermore, the local civil society had directed the initial planning of the new City Hall and its museum, outlining their basic requirements for the government. The dynamic interplay between public discord and collaboration with the government underscores their mutual dependence in bringing the City Hall Museum and Art Gallery to fruition. The 'death' and 'rebirth' of museums in colonial Hong Kong refutes the perception of a passive citizenry amid the lack of democracy and highlights the significant agency of the Hong Kong citizens in reshaping the cultural landscape of the colony in the mid-twentieth century.

Notes

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2. Ibid, p. 20.
3. Exceptions included a small university museum, the Fung Ping Shan Museum (opened in 1953), and a small archaeology museum, the Lei Cheng Uk Han Tomb Museum (opened in 1957).
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5. See S.P. Ting 丁新豹, 'Gewu zhizhi: xianggang gongong bowuguan banlian fazhan' 格物致知 香港公共博物館百年發展 [Achieving Knowledge: The Hundred-year Development of Hong Kong Public Museums], *Zhongguo wenhua yichan* 中國文化遺產, 4 (2005), 62–6; C. Chu, 'Scattered Memories: A Museum Story,' in *Open Dialogue: A Launching Publication for the "Hong Kong Art: Open Dialogue" Exhibition Series 2008–09*, ed. by Hong Kong Museum of Art (Hong Kong: Leisure and Cultural Services Department, 2008), pp. 48–55.
6. *Reports on the Museums of Ceylon, British Malaya, the West Indies, Etc.*, p. 20.
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9. 'Our Museum,' *Hong Kong Telegraph*, 5 May 1923, p. 1.
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24. Ormsby-Gore to Caldecott, 14 April 1937, CO 129/559/12, TNA.
25. 'Report on a New Museum in Hong Kong,' 11 January 1938, HKRS 41-2-37, Public Records Office of Hong Kong (HKPRO).
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31. See MacKenzie, Chapter 10.
32. 'Report on a New Museum in Hong Kong,' 11 January 1938, HKRS 41-2-37, HKHKPRO.
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Notes on contributor

Reynold K. W. Tsang is a DPhil student in History at the University of Oxford. His DPhil research looks at the origin and development of museums in British Colonial East and Southeast Asia during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His academic interests extend to British imperialism in Asia, museums and material culture, modern China and Hong Kong. Reynold received his BA and MPhil in History from the University of Hong Kong.

ORCID

Reynold K. W. Tsang http://orcid.org/0009-0007-4797-2703