

# THE GREAT CITIES / **HONG KONG**

TIME-LIFE





# HONG KONG

By Robert Elegant  
and the Editors of Time-Life Books

Photographs by Brian Brake

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*Cover:* Sampans moored alongside each other create a pattern of graceful arcs in the seawall-shielded harbour at Yaumati, on the west coast of the Kowloon Peninsula.

*First end paper:* The swirling floral design of a Ming Dynasty lacquer box, on sale at an antique store in Hong Kong, has been created from layers of lacquer built up on the wooden base.

*Last end paper:* Lavishly attired images of mythological figures crowd part of an eight-foot-high paper-and-cloth tableau for the festival of Tin Hau, patron goddess of Hong Kong's fisherfolk.



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## Place of Passage

The sloop *Roland Sathya* settles sweetly into the white-capped waves, fitting herself to the oily waters. Her sheets loose and sails spread to catch the following wind, she surges westwards out of Hong Kong harbour. Directly to port, in the shadow of 1,805-foot-high Victoria Peak, I can see old warehouses rimming Possession Point, where, in 1841, a British naval force first raised the Union Jack over what is today Britain's largest remaining colony. To starboard lies the quarter-of-a-mile square rock called Stonecutters Island, a 19th-Century Alcatraz.

But it is the view over the stern that draws my eyes from their proper task of watching the sails. In that direction multi-coloured apartment blocks spring from the precipitous green-and-brown hillsides, while beneath them a mile-wide strip of silver-and-green water is plied by an extraordinary variety of vessels—an incongruous medley of bright-varnished company launches, cargo ships of a score of nations, police and customs patrol boats, grimy motorized water-taxis called *walla-wallas*, high-pooped fishing junks, smaller sampans poled by women with babies nodding in slings on their backs, and self-important ferries dodging among the moored freighters and American warships.

The audacious natural beauty of this harbour scene overwhelms me still, even though I have viewed it a thousand times. Some partisans talk of Sydney, Naples or San Francisco, but this to me is far away the world's most spectacular city-port. It is a landfall made all the more dramatic because Hong Kong's New York-style skyline rises steeply on either side of a strait varying in width from one to six miles. The two sides of the densely packed metropolis—hemmed in by their backdrops of hills—are joined by a mile-long underwater road tunnel, the longest in Asia.

The northern side is called Kowloon (Nine Dragons) because it was built on nine hills at the tip of a minuscule peninsula jutting out from the south-east mainland of China. It occupies only 3.25 square miles, but immediately to its north (starting at Boundary Street) lie the New Territories, 370.5 square miles of mountainous land that the Colony of Hong Kong holds on a 99-year lease from China. On the opposite side of the harbour is Victoria (originally named Queen's Town), an intensely developed administrative and commercial centre clinging to the northern shore of Hong Kong Island. The island's rumpled topography assures that Victoria's "satellite" communities, like the port of Aberdeen on the south side, enjoy an insularity of their own, while remaining within easy driving distance of the metropolitan area.

A Jumbo jetliner swoops over Victoria Harbour and the high-rise apartment buildings of Kowloon on its approach to Hong Kong's Kai Tak Airport. Hong Kong's intercourse with the outside world is conducted almost entirely by air or sea: a single railway connects the Colony to the People's Republic.

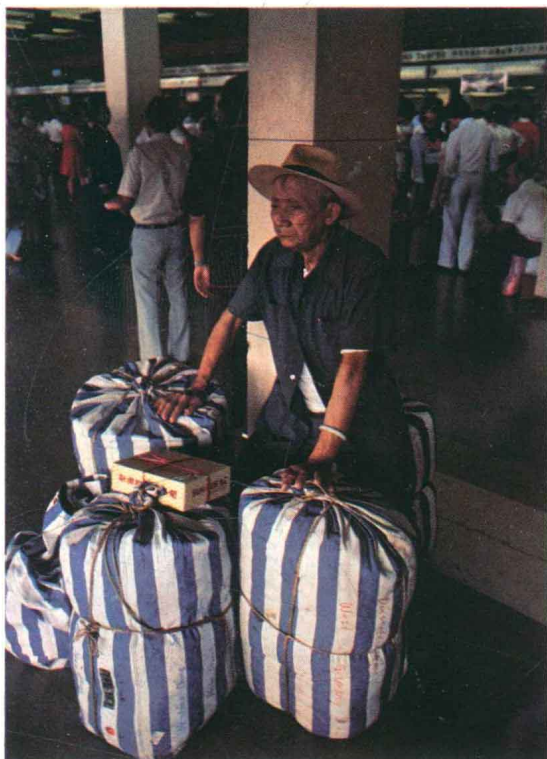
Beyond the dividing strait, to the east and the west, the Colony also has 235 islands, mostly too small or too barren for habitation. They are strewn like mottled jade carvings on the silky surface of the South China Sea, but not one can compare with this view of Hong Kong. No human habitation, I say to myself, has the right to be so unabashedly gorgeous.

Yet so much more than its location makes Hong Kong breathtaking. Almost half of its four-and-half million inhabitants have come from elsewhere seeking economic or political freedom, and many do not consider themselves permanent residents—with good reason. Hong Kong is the only major metropolis with a built-in time-fuse, a self-destruct mechanism set to explode in 1997 when the lease of the ceded New Territories expires and nine-tenths of the Colony reverts to China. In this unique city-port, East and West are intermixed to an unrivalled degree; here, two disparate ideologies co-exist in a burgeoning cosmopolis that combines the magic and mystery and colour of the Orient with the wonders of the technological age. It is, at one and the same time, the city of Suzy Wong and supersonic jets, of sampans and hydrofoils, fortune-tellers and fortune-hunters.

That there is a Hong Kong at all is a miracle. There are 404 square miles of land in the Colony, but because of the hills and mountains 80 per cent of it is not suitable for either farming or building. There are hardly any natural resources, not even sufficient food and water. Only dogged perseverance could enable four-and-a-half million persons to live and prosper here. Their greatest achievement has been the transformation of Hong Kong from a vast shopping centre—probably the biggest and most garish in the world, selling primarily other people's goods—into a booming manufacturing complex.

A century-and-a-half ago Hong Kong was no more than a sleepy harbour: "Fragrant Harbour" as the Chinese called it—a part of the Chinese province of Kwangtung. But Royal Navy Captain Charles Elliot, Great Britain's Superintendent of Trade for China, saw its potential and had the foresight to choose Hong Kong as the British commercial and naval base when the Chinese were pressed to cede land to Britain at the close of the Opium War of 1839-42. (Kowloon and Stonecutters Island were ceded in 1860 after another armed confrontation between the British and the Chinese.) Elliot's sound judgment earned him the sack. Lord Palmerston, then British Foreign Secretary, censured Elliot for his stupidity in allowing the Manchu government to fob off "a barren island with hardly a house upon it". Young Queen Victoria, just four years on the throne, recorded how husband Albert was "so much amused" by this utterly trivial addition to her overseas possessions.

It was a natural enough reaction, I suppose. Why should anyone in London, 7,852 miles away, be impressed by the addition to the vast British Empire of 29 square miles of irregularly shaped rock, 10 miles in length and varying from two to five miles in width? At that time the island



**All his possessions packed into canvas bags, an emigrant at Kai Tak Airport awaits the call for his flight to West Germany. More than 45,000 Chinese leave Hong Kong annually, mostly destined for Western countries; in turn a nearly equal number of people arrive in the metropolis each year from mainland China.**

was primarily a haven for pirates and opium smugglers, and it had fewer than 6,000 inhabitants. The rock was virtually devoid of agricultural land and of level areas on which to erect dwellings. Moreover, it lacked sufficient drinking water to support a population of more than a few tens of thousands. And even when typhoons delivered desperately needed additional water into the reservoirs, there was, of course, a heavy price to pay in terms of death and destruction. With the exception of three months of the year, the climate was either drenchingly hot and humid or dankly cold. Worst of all, malaria was endemic and cholera, typhoid and bubonic plague regularly visited the poor fishermen who lived there.

Today the climate is the same, with typhoons still roaring out of the South China Sea on freak days between June and September; but disease has been conquered, level areas for housing have been created by land reclamation projects, and gigantic new reservoirs have been constructed to provide adequate drinking water. More than a million people now live on Palmerston's "barren island", and another 2.4 million cram Kowloon—a noisy hive of toiling workers and pleasure-peddling touts that bursts with shops, bars, brothels, clubs, factories, skyscrapers and shabby tenements festooned with laundry. Sections of Kowloon have the dubious distinction of being among the most densely populated areas in the world, with more than 388,000 inhabitants per square mile.

While Kowloon barely offers room to breathe and Victoria is almost as claustrophobic, there are still places in the Colony—thanks to the limitations placed on human settlement by the mountains and hills—where it is possible to get away from the din and crowds. Hong Kong Island itself has a few exquisite bays and peaceful rural walks to offer, but true country—and an older China—can be found on some of the adjacent islands and, most especially, in the New Territories. And then of course there are the ubiquitous waters on which I have spent so many hours relaxing aboard *Roland*, washing away the cares of a cosmopolis that at times can seem absolutely mad.

This sometimes nerve-racking, often enchanting, but always invigorating Crown Colony has been my home for more than a quarter of a century. I am what is known as a "Hong Kong believer", a registered resident of this realm for refugees and transients. But now career interests impel me to leave, and before bidding Hong Kong farewell, I am taking a last cruise. My emotions are as roiled as the choppy waters through which *Roland* sails. Regrets assail me on all sides. I continue to be both fascinated and repelled by the sweeping changes that 25 years have wrought upon Victoria and Kowloon and the surrounding areas. A chief occupation of Hong Kong is destroying old structures and replacing them with higher and more functional buildings, meanwhile spreading macadam tentacles of roads ever farther into the steep, green hills.



With its distinctive sails close-hauled in a light breeze, a junk heads into Hong Kong harbour with cargo from China. Still the workhorse of traders and fishermen of the China Seas, the junk has hardly changed its appearance in more than a thousand years, although nowadays it is often motorized.









Clear of Victoria Harbour, I can see where the old S.S. *Queen Elizabeth*, destroyed by fire in 1972, lay for years while workmen picked her apart, swarming over her immensity like industrious ants dismembering an enormous caterpillar. When gargantuan American aircraft-carriers call at Hong Kong, they anchor in this area. The inner harbour of Hong Kong is too shallow for their great bulk.

I bring in the sheets and *Roland* reaches southwards into the channel formed by Hong Kong Island's western coast and Lamma Island. Dominated by 1,147-foot Mount Stenhouse, Lamma is one of the few places in the Colony where the categorical imperative of industrial expansion has been rejected: public protest prevented the construction of an oil refinery there. Today most of Lamma's 3,000 inhabitants still fish for a living.

The East Lamma Channel is overcast, obscured in part by the black smoke drifting from the high stacks of the electric power-generating plant on the tip of Ap Lei Chau (Duck's Tongue Island), an islet on my port side that shelters busy Aberdeen Harbour. Here the big, seagoing fishing junks are tied up in noisome, filth-encrusted waters beside gaudily painted floating restaurants that are the tourists' delight and the despair of environmentalists who fret over the garbage they disgorge.

My mahogany-hulled sloop passes round Ap Lei Chau and soon, on my left, I can see Deep Water Bay and Repulse Bay glittering in the cold, brilliant winter sunshine. Above the green waters the hills are thick with high-rises, and an 18-storey white slab rears over the old, extravagantly gracious Repulse Bay Hotel. I remember when only two low blocks of flats were tucked among the hills above the sandy beach, and older Hong Kong inhabitants can recall when Repulse Bay was a quiet summer resort for the well-to-do Europeans who came south from Victoria, crossing the island's hill spine in their pony traps to consume enormous curry tiffins in the splendid hotel. Repulse Bay is no longer a secluded retreat. In 1975 some disused buildings were transformed into a complex of restaurants, ranging from a franchised hamburger stand to a superb seafood house. Shopping centres and a highly fashionable residential area have further transformed it into a concrete Riviera for Europeans and Americans drawn to Hong Kong by the lure of quick profits.

Neighbouring Deep Water Bay, once a peaceful haven too, is today clamorous with the outboard motors of its water-skiing club, only one of its several "improvements". Fortunately, *Roland's* distance from the shore obscures the off-putting details of the two bays. New angular structures, assertive in their numbers, merge and partly efface themselves. Since even the ceaseless burrowing and building of industrious Chinese workmen have not totally altered the fundamental contours of the land, the effect is pleasantly misleading, the overall impression startlingly bucolic.

Sails bellying, *Roland* reaches farther south-east, towards the jutting promontory called Stanley where the enormous twin steel-tracery cups of a

**Midday shoppers—combing the stalls for fresh food, off-the-peg clothes and cheap goods—swarm the length of a street market in Victoria. Open-air marts, an integral part of Chinese life, are found in all the communities that make up the Hong Kong conurbation.**







communications satellite earth-station rise from the green hills like surrealistic white mushrooms. One antenna is cocked east against the cloud-hung sky to receive and transmit across the broad reaches of the Pacific Ocean. The other antenna points westwards towards the fragrant, indolent lands of South-East Asia, the turmoil of the Indian subcontinent and the oil-sands of the Middle East.

I prefer not to draw too close to Stanley, which the Chinese, stubbornly clinging to old names, call Red Pillars, presumably because of the russet colour of the headland soil. It holds for me too many joyous memories. Eastwards, just across the narrow neck of the promontory, is Tai Tam village and the minute house that my family and I occupied for two years. When we moved into that house in 1957, Stanley itself was primarily a fishing community, although it was dominated by the Lai Cheung brewery, producer of pungent Chinese rice-wine which, in spite of its name, is a sort of non-fizzy beer. Now, soaring blocks of flats have mushroomed in the area, and the four-room house we rented for \$84 (United States) a month fetches at least five times that amount—still comparatively cheap when the rent for many commonplace flats in Hong Kong is as much as \$2,500 a month. (Although the Colony has its own currency, the Hong Kong dollar, I shall express all sums in this book in U.S. dollars for easier understanding.)

In 1959 I was offered the leasehold of that little house standing on less than a tenth of an acre for \$8,000. About 15 years later its estimated worth was at least \$80,000! Thus does inflation and, more important, Hong Kong's relentless growth make all except the most canny residents regret lost economic opportunities. But my own regrets this day are not financial, although I might bemoan the fact that, unlike many others, I have not grown rich here.

I was originally drawn to Hong Kong in 1951 not by a dream of wealth, but by the romantic lure of Asia and by the Colony's proximity to China. Hong Kong richly fulfilled its promise to open new political and intellectual frontiers to me and to serve as a base for adventures throughout Asia as an American news-magazine correspondent. Moreover, its people were generous in their affection and their tutelage—but then I was lucky to have the stubborn persistence and enough command of the Chinese language to penetrate behind their sometimes abrasive exteriors.

Ah Yick, a burly Cantonese with bristling black hair, found us that house in Tai Tam village when it was still a shell gutted by a typhoon that swept out of the South China Sea in the summer of 1957. Ah Yick has been dead these many years. When he flourished as Stanley's unofficial town crier and mayor, his general store served a community hardly larger than a small village—a few dozen foreigners, if one does not count the British troops stationed at Stanley Fort, and perhaps a thousand or so Chinese, mostly fishermen. It was quite isolated, some 14 miles over the narrow

roads that wind through hills and along the precipices to Victoria, a long way in a cosmopolis as compact as Hong Kong.

Ah Yick, I remember, sold me a bottle of Chateau Lafite-Rothschild for \$1.50 because he wanted to clear out old stock. My wife and I savoured the velvety wine and, since we were young and naïve, saved half the bottle for the next day. When we sipped the remaining wine, it had undergone a revolting transformation into rough Beaujolais. Our cook volunteered cheerfully that he had brought about the transformation to save us money; needing a large bottle to hold soya-sauce, he thought better of buying one and emptied a half-bottle of Beaujolais into the Lafite-Rothschild.

The small house precisely suited us after alterations by the ingenious master-builder, M. K. Law; my work was exciting; our friends were stimulating; my Volkswagen convertible was ideal for the island; and the junk I then sailed was both fast and comfortable. I have changed within myself since those days; dissatisfaction is, after all, a human trait. Besides, Hong Kong's arrogant display of great wealth, amid millions who toil simply to survive, breeds contentment in neither those who possess that wealth nor the less fortunate.

Although Stanley still looks like a Chinese village, more than a thousand foreigners now live in flats in the area and the Chinese population has increased several fold. Materially, life is much more convenient and comfortable. TV aerials sprout from the little houses and all the fishing junks are powered by diesel engines. A supermarket has opened, and Ah Yick's Store, itself greatly enlarged, now stocks food unobtainable in the 1950s. But no one will ever again buy Lafite-Rothschild—or even Beaujolais—for \$1.50. Adolescent British soldiers still drink themselves sodden on beer in shops fronting on the footpath that meanders through Stanley Market. The market, however, has become a hectic shopping centre for both foreigners and Chinese, attracted by cheap handicrafts from the People's Republic. Fishermen still peddle fresh-caught shrimps and crabs in open pails, but a few yards away an art gallery offers works of imagination that far transcend the routine tourist trade paintings of coolies and junks with sails aglow against the purple dusk.

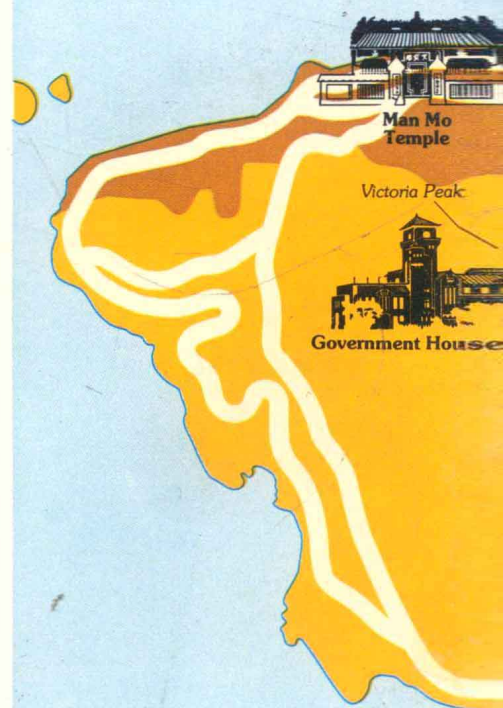
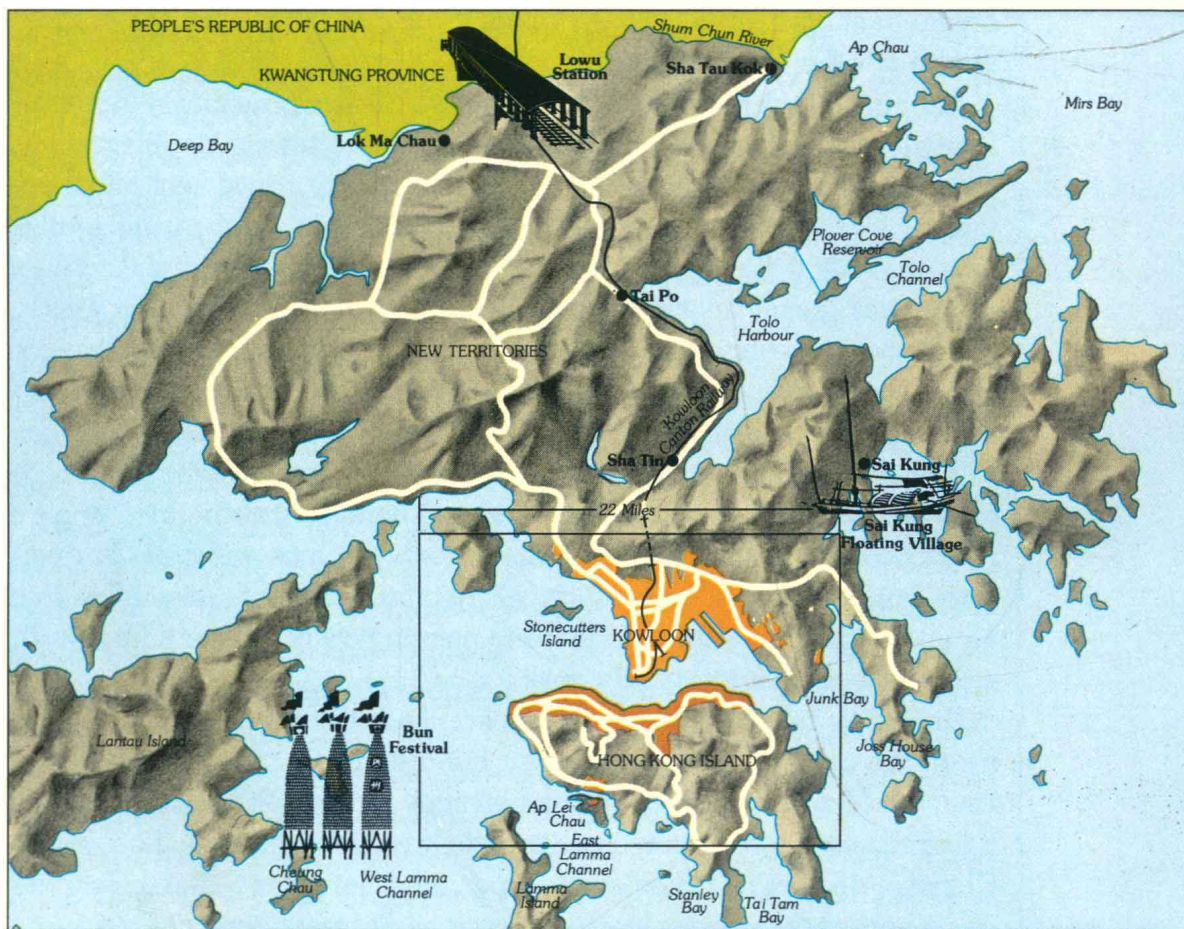
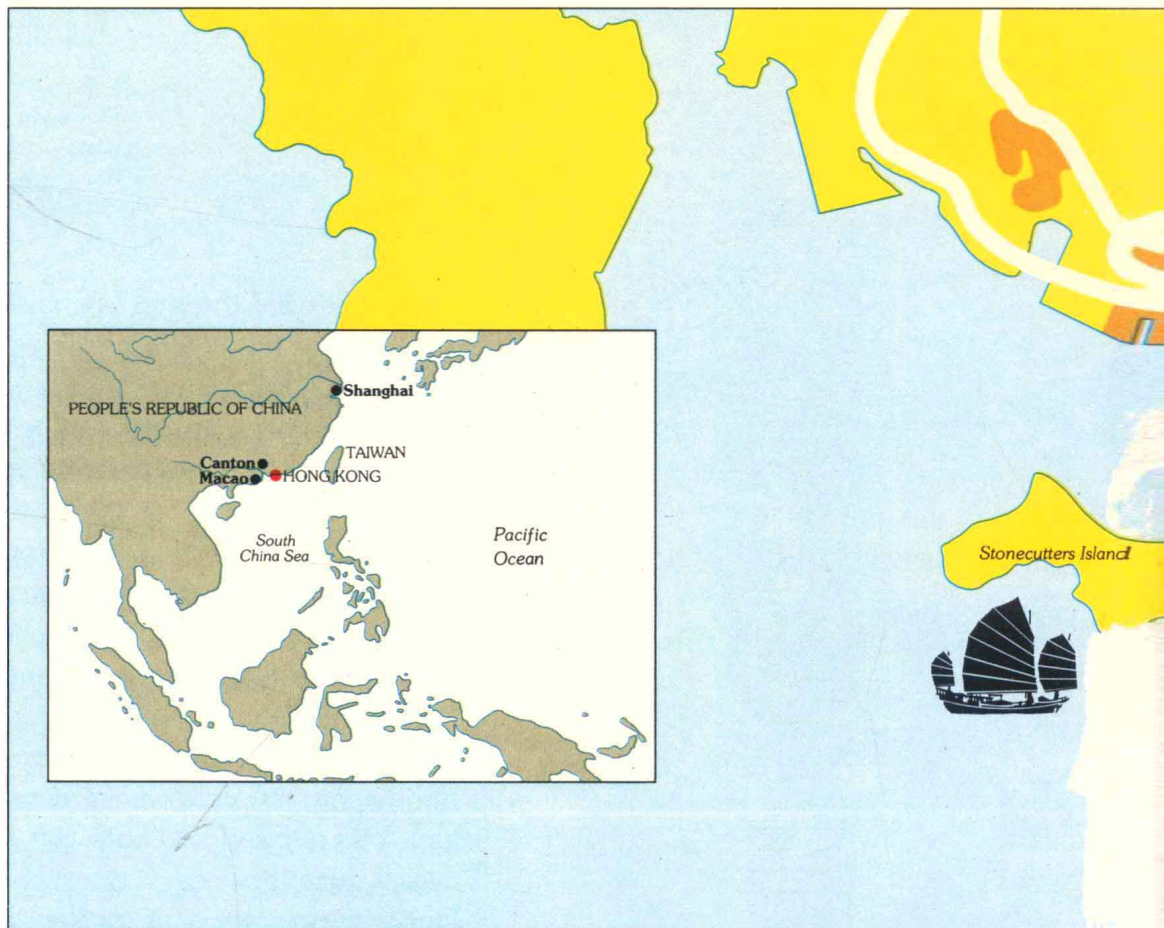
Behind its refurbished façade Stanley clings to its old ways. Along the foreshore of Stanley Bay, just a few hundred yards from new blocks of flats, a fishing and farming village functions as it did 20 or 50 or even a hundred years ago. Children continue to practise laboriously the intricate Chinese ideographs on squared paper; and the great Chinese festivals go on here as they always have with feasts and presentations of Cantonese operas financed by the Kaifong associations, the local community councils, whose name literally means "neighbourhood societies".

On my last visit to Stanley they were celebrating the feast-day of *Kuan Yin*, the Goddess of Mercy. Women bore offerings to her temple. Near by, a great tent seating 500 had been erected for a five-hour operatic perform-



## A Titanic Trading Post

Spilling from the south-eastern border of China into the South China Sea (inset map, right), the cove-scalloped peninsulas and islands of Hong Kong (inset map, below) subsume a land area of 404 square miles. The modern city (main map) centres around Victoria Harbour, where British traders established their base in the 19th Century. On the harbour side of Hong Kong Island are government offices, business headquarters, and entertainment dens. North of the harbour, apartment blocks and factories pack Kowloon Peninsula, and Kai Tak Airport thrusts a two-mile runway into Kowloon Bay.









ance by heavily painted players costumed in the gaudy silks of kings, mandarins, generals and ladies of the imperial court. On another occasion I attended the birthday celebration of the deity Tin Hau, the Motherly Empress of Heaven. Since she is the patroness deity of fishermen, her feast-day is the most important of Stanley's festivals, marked by processions of fishermen who wind through the streets flaunting banners, clashing cymbals and setting off firecrackers. But I have digressed—swept along as I have been by my memories.

It is late afternoon, and so I bring *Roland* about on a course around Lamma Island back to Victoria. *Roland* carries me close to Cheung Chau (Long Island). Looming behind it, to the north-west, is Lantau (Rocky Mount), the Colony's largest island, almost double the size of Hong Kong Island. Lantau was practically without inhabitants until 1951, when a community of Trappist monks, many of them refugees from mainland China, settled there and began attacking the steep hillsides and carving out level fields to grow rice and barley. For years Lantau was ideal for picnics. But in the 1970s, it too fell victim to intensive development. It is now fringed with flossy resort hotels.

Cheung Chau has fared much better. It is still largely untouched by Hong Kong's compulsive growth, being too small to invite agricultural development or to interest entrepreneurs. Its life centres on its fishing fleet, supplier of the sea-food its noisy, informal restaurants serve. There are few motor vehicles to clog its narrow streets and its people are free of the tension that makes most of Hong Kong so stimulating and—at the same time—so irritating.

In May, Cheung Chau is the scene of the *Ta Chiu* (Spirit-placating Festival) which lasts four days and nights and ends with a raucous climax called the Bun Festival. During those four days the islanders eschew meat and seafood in respect for the departed souls of fish and animals. Then, on the fourth night, the community gathers around three bun “mountains”: 60-foot-high bamboo scaffoldings studded with buns and resembling a trio of moon-rockets poised for lift-off (pages 124-5). At a signal, scores of local lads scramble up the “mountains” in a race for the top-most buns that guarantee good fortune. Hoping that the good luck will rub off, everyone consumes at least one of the remaining buns before the night's end. Such festivals are by no means limited to Hong Kong's backwaters. Scores occur in Victoria and Kowloon every year, and provide a measure of gaiety that goes a long way to leaven the lives of Hong Kong's hard-working people. They fulfil a deeper purpose as well; they help keep the inhabitants in touch with their ancient roots.

Beneath their brisk, materialistic exteriors, the international financier and his clerks, the multi-millionaire factory-owner and his workers are bound alike not only by the ties of family, but by universal superstition.