

KOWLOON

Unknown Territory

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BLACKSMITH BOOKS

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Introduction

In Cantonese, Kowloon means ‘nine dragons’, which indicates that, like so many of Hong Kong’s place names, there’s more to the place than meets the ear. Legend has it that the name of the peninsula is derived from eight mountain peaks and a ninth – the ‘*kau*’ – said to represent Emperor Bing, the last Chinese emperor of the southern Song dynasty in the 13th century.

Kowloon is relatively small. It covers 47 sq km of Hong Kong’s 1,104 sq km. To its south is Hong Kong Island and north, beyond a mountain range including Lion Rock, are the New Territories. Victoria Harbour is to the south, with the Lei Yue Mun strait in the east and Stonecutter’s Island in the west.

Small in size, Kowloon is, nonetheless, big in personality. It’s home to 2.1 million of Hong Kong’s total 7 million population, and consists of five of

Hong Kong’s 18 districts: Yau Tsim Mong, and, then clockwise, Sham Shui Po, Kowloon City, Wong Tai Sin, and Kwun Tong. Like Kowloon, the names of many of these districts are evocative. As its name hints, Yau Tsim Mong is a combination of three areas: Yau Ma Tei, Tsim Sha Tsui and Mong Kok – respectively meaning ‘oil-sesame field’ or ‘oil and jute ground’, ‘sharp sandy point’ and ‘busy corner’. Meanwhile, Sham Shui Po means ‘deep water pier’ and Wong Tai Sin is ‘Great Immortal Wong’, a Taoist deity. Last, but not least, Kwun Tong translates as ‘mandarin pond’.

To many foreigners, Kowloon is unknown territory. This may be due to language – only about 85,400 of Kowloon’s population usually speak English or a non-Chinese dialect. But, it’s not just to non-locals that Kowloon is uncharted. The psychological gap between Kowlooners and Hong Kong-islanders is well known. Meanwhile, the five Kowloon districts, while sharing similarities, each have their own flavour, and those who live in one

district may be unfamiliar with the goings-on in the other four.

Kowloon is changing. Since the 1998 relocation of the airport from Kai Tak in eastern Kowloon to Chek Lap Kok, new multi-storey buildings have punctuated the Kowloon skyline as if in exultation – on the part of Hong Kong’s land developers – for being allowed to be erected, and the Urban Renewal Authority has a number of projects underway which some say put at risk the cultural heritage of the peninsula.

Of course, change is nothing new to the peninsula. Large-scale development of Kowloon began in the early 20th century, with the construction of the Kowloon-Canton Railway and the Kowloon Wharf, though the brick tomb at Lei Cheng Uk in the district of Sham Shui Po, discovered in 1955, indicates that the peninsula had been settled by the Chinese as far back as the Eastern Han dynasty (AD25-220).

While once there was ‘Kowloon’ and ‘New Kowloon’ demarcated by Boundary Street, the division is now largely obsolete. Instead, the terms Kowloon East and Kowloon West are commonly used when referring to the peninsula. These are two of the five geographical constituencies for the Legislative Council of Hong Kong. The others are

Hong Kong Island, New Territories East and New Territories West. Kowloon East includes Wong Tai Sin and Kwun Tong, while Kowloon West covers Yau Tsim Mong, Sham Shui Po and Kowloon City.

This book is a socio-cultural perspective on Kowloon. It looks at facets of the five districts of the peninsula from the viewpoints of community, consumerism, art, food, and fashion and sex; and is designed to provoke the reader to think about the environment of Kowloon – and, by extension – Hong Kong, in new ways.

Those wishing to shine a light on Hong Kong’s ‘dark side’ and dispel some of the myths about Kowloon can use this book to do so, and once read, continue with their own explorations.

I know I will.

Nicole Chabot
October, 2012
Hong Kong.