

Linking Past to Present: Reconstructing the Historical Geographies of Colonial Hong Kong

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Abstract

A key to understand population dynamics is to identify any patterns and relationships over time and space. The geographies of population, physical environments, socioeconomic entities and their interaction are of vital importance. In historical population studies, however, the effort to reconstruct the multi-faceted landscape over time is limited by data availability, data quality and other technical issues involved in this procedure. This study attempts to reconstruct the historical geographies of Hong Kong during 1900-1940 and observe any spatiotemporal changes.

In the early 20th Century, Hong Kong had just started the transformation from being a part of China to a British colony. The role of law, a notion that is cherished as a core value in nowadays Hong Kong and perceived as a legacy of colonialism by many contemporary historians, began to grow through the influx of people, goods, services, ideologies and systems. There are very few studies, if any, that investigated the historical landscape of colonial Hong Kong and its relationship(s) with how the role of law evolved over space and time. This study employs both the traditional historical-legal approach of examining archived company directories as well as Geographic Information System (GIS) technology to collect and analyze spatial-temporal data. The GIS analyses reveal how the clustering patterns and the inter-relationships of various historical landscapes, such as population, legal services, commerce, etc., had changed over time. The results demonstrate the use of GIS as a tool and associated challenges to study population dynamics of British Hong Kong in the early 20th century.