

The Hong Kong History Centre at the University of Bristol

Robert Bickers, Vivian Kong, and Ray Yep

We are historians with a capacious understanding of what the discipline can and should do. Outside the histories of health, it would be fair to say that Hong Kong was little incorporated into wider historical discussions until the 2000s. China historians resisted seeing it as a real Chinese city; and British imperial historians concerned themselves with bigger fry. The oncoming handover of sovereignty in 1997 prompted some wider interest, but mostly Hong Kong's histories were insular, and very often administratively shaped: one British governor following another.

As with the Hong Kong History Project that preceded it, the Centre at Bristol has no specific thematic research agenda. We support excellent work brought to us



Fig. 1: Book stall, pedlar, and shoppers, Hong Kong, c.1938 (Photo courtesy of Historical Photographs of China Project, Hutchinson Family Collection, reference Hn-d044)

by PhD applicants, postdoctoral and visiting scholars, or those joining our workshops or conferences – projects that use Hong Kong case studies to intervene within, contribute to, and reshape wider debates. Our funded projects have included ones on British citizenship, migration and mobility, histories of US imperialism, and histories of refugees and occupation.¹ We have projects in progress on youth, elite networks, Kai Tak Airport, working class mobilities, and British subjecthood in the great era of Asian migration, as well as projects exploring colonial governance, Chinese medicine, and Cantonese music in the diaspora.

Certainly, the ten years of this project have coincided with ten years of unwelcome and disheartening changes in Hong Kong, which have led to a significant break with its past. More than ever that past needs better understanding, and at Bristol we are doing just that, and training and nurturing emerging scholars to take their work into mainstream debates and departments.

We are also working actively with communities internationally, in person in Hong Kong and in Bristol, and online through video profiles of practitioners in and outside the academy. Bristol's Faculty of Arts has a sustained record of engagement and co-creation with publics, and the Centre builds on that with its History Day events, community forums, and work supporting family historians.

The Hong Kong History Centre was formally launched in September 2022, evolving out of an eight-year Hong Kong History Project that had supported seven PhD projects, MA work, two international conferences, workshops, exhibitions, and related activities. The tagline was 'Rethinking a City's History', and this is what we continue to do, now with a better-resourced platform, a larger team, and busy collaborations with partners in Hong Kong, North America, Southeast Asia, and further afield. It is the first centre globally dedicated specifically to the history of Hong Kong.

We are also building an archive. Despite a nearly 200-year history of connectivity with its former colony, no institutional repository in the UK explicitly identifies Hong Kong as a collection development priority. HKHC has a team working within the University Library Special Collections who are cataloguing significant donations of material. Building on the Historical Photographs of China project,² we are building a Historical Photographs of Hong Kong platform. This strand of visual work already bore fruit with a collaboration with HK-based arts platform WMA and the Royal Photographic Society on an exhibition at the Bristol Photo Festival in 2024. The exhibition 'Realms of Memory' showcased new work by Hong Kong artists Billy H.C. Kwok, Jay Lau, and Lau Wai, inspired by historic photographs we hold.

We understand 'Hong Kong' as a subject providing a wide range of opportunities, as a city and a territory with a distinctive past that is entangled globally, and that has never been more alive than it is today. The accompanying essays showcase the work of some of our community of scholars that encapsulates this. Kelvin Chan looks at psychiatry and late colonialism, Hoi Ching Tracy Leung at government and youth after the Second World War, and Thomas M. Larkin shows how emerging digital humanities methods can map out novel understandings of the city. All chart new contributions in their fields, drawing on the richness and complexities of Hong Kong's history.



Centre website: www.hkhistory.net

Robert Bickers, FBA, is Professor of History and Co-Director of the Hong Kong History Centre. His most recent book is *China Bound: John Swire & Sons and its World, 1816-1980* (2020). He is preparing a new history of Hong Kong.

Vivian Kong is senior lecturer in modern Chinese history and Co-Director of the Hong Kong History Centre. Vivian is a social historian of colonial Hong Kong, and her work has focused largely on the city and its global connections. She is the author of *Multiracial Britishness: Global Networks in Hong Kong 1910-45* (2023).

Ray Yep is Research Professor and Research Director at the Hong Kong History Centre. He was formerly Professor of Politics and Associate Head of the Department of Public and International Affairs at City University of Hong Kong. His recent publications include *Man in a Hurry: Murray MacLehose and Colonial Autonomy in Hong Kong* (2024).

Notes

- 1 All now published: Vivian Kong, *Multiracial Britishness: Global Networks in Hong Kong, 1910-45* (Cambridge University Press, 2023); Catherine S. Chan, *The Macanese Diaspora in British Hong Kong: A Century of Transimperial Drifting* (Amsterdam University Press, 2021); Thomas M. Larkin, *The China Firm: Elite Americans and the Making of British Colonial Society* (Columbia University Press, 2023); Helena F. S. Lopes, *Neutrality and Collaboration in South China: Macau during the Second World War* (Cambridge University Press, 2023)
- 2 The Newsletter previously featured the Historical Photographs of China project in issue #46 (<https://www.iasiasia/the-newsletter/article/historical-photographs-china-collections>) and issue #76 (<https://www.iasiasia/the-newsletter/article/historical-photographs-china>).

Madness, Medicine, and Empire: Rethinking Colonial Psychiatry in Asia through Hong Kong

Kelvin Chan

What if colonial governments presented themselves not through overt repression, but through promises of care and rehabilitation? This question first struck me when I began researching post-war Hong Kong. At first glance, Hong Kong may appear peripheral in the global history of psychiatry – a small, bustling city shaped by Cold War politics and British colonialism. But Hong Kong was deeply entangled in broader regional and imperial transformations, including urbanization, developmentalism,

and decolonization. By focusing on this site, I explore questions that resonate across colonial and post-colonial Asia: How was psychiatry adapted to colonial and decolonial contexts? How did it intersect with local knowledge systems such as traditional Chinese medicine?

My research focuses on the transformation of colonial psychiatry in Hong Kong from the 1940s to the 1980s. Drawing on hundreds of patient case files and government records from local archives, I examine how

psychological knowledge became central to welfare and legal reforms in the age of decolonization.

One of the clearest examples is the colonial government's campaign against heroin addiction. If opium symbolized the height of British colonialism, then addiction treatment marked the empire's decline. Pressured by the United States, colonial and postcolonial states across Asia were compelled to ban opium. Heroin quickly filled the gap. Beginning in 1959, Hong Kong – like many places in Southeast Asia – declared a "war on drugs." Addicts were sent to rehabilitation camps and psychiatric hospitals. American medical experts were invited to oversee experimental treatment programs. Methadone maintenance, then a controversial practice in the US, was trialed in Hong Kong through randomized clinical experiments, turning the city into a laboratory for international drug policy [Fig. 1].

These efforts were widely promoted as a model of modern addiction treatment. But a closer reading of the archives reveals a more



Fig. 1: The image of a "typical" addict from *The Problem of Narcotic Drugs in Hong Kong, 1965*. (Photo: author's collection)

complicated picture. Patients frequently relapsed, treatment centers struggled with violence and overcrowding, and staff found themselves caught between ideals of care and the realities of control. The goal was not simply to cure addiction but to reshape addicts into moral, productive citizens – able to work, conform, and reintegrate into society. These institutions blurred the line between welfare and discipline, highlighting the uneasy role of medicine in the final decades of colonial rule.

Alongside the expansion of psychiatry, another story unfolded – not in official reports, but in newspapers, street-level pharmacies, and the clinics of traditional healers. During this period, the diagnosis of “neurasthenia” – once popular in 19th-century Euro-American psychiatry – found a second life in Hong Kong. Though Western-trained psychiatrists had largely abandoned the term by the 1950s, it remained widely used by Chinese medicine practitioners and patients themselves. Neurasthenia, with its broad symptoms of fatigue, irritability, and bodily weakness, offered a culturally familiar way to express emotional distress without the stigma of mental illness.

My second strand of research explores how neurasthenia was commercialized in postwar Hong Kong [Fig. 2]. Advertisements for proprietary medicines promised to “restore nerves,” while popular self-help manuals framed the condition using a mix of Chinese medical idioms and biomedical vocabulary. Neurasthenia was described as a disease of modern life, brought on by fast-paced living, crowded housing, and social pressures. In this context, traditional Chinese medicine practitioners positioned themselves as experts in mental health, even as official psychiatry viewed them as unscientific or obsolete.

These dynamics were not unique to Hong Kong. Across Asia, neurasthenia has persisted as a common diagnosis – especially in Taiwan, mainland China, and among overseas Chinese communities – long after it disappeared from Western psychiatric classifications. Its continued use raises broader questions about how mental illness is understood in non-Western contexts: how symptoms are framed, which institutions people trust, and how medical categories travel and adapt across cultural and political borders.

In this sense, Hong Kong offers a useful lens to revisit larger themes in the study of Asia: colonial legacies, medical pluralism, and the politics of health. It sits at a crossroads between Chinese cultural traditions and British administrative structures, between regional migration and global medicine. The city’s psychiatric history is not only shaped by local conditions, but also by the Cold War, developmentalism, and decolonization. Its story reflects how global ideas of mental health were interpreted, contested, and reconfigured in specific Asian contexts.

As I continue this research, I find myself returning to questions that extend beyond the archive. How do people navigate systems that claim to heal, yet also surveil? And how might the history of psychiatry help us understand the present – not only in Hong Kong, but in other postcolonial societies still grappling with the inherited infrastructures of empire? These histories of medicine and madness, I believe, are not only about the past – they offer insights into the current global mental health crisis.

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Fig. 2: Deer antler pill that claimed to treat neurasthenia, Wah Kiu Yat Po 華僑日報, 1 February 1960. (Photo: author's collection)

Guiding the Youth of the Colony: The Girl Guide Movement in Hong Kong, 1916-1997

Hoi Ching Tracy Leung

The use of ‘youth’ as an analytical lens in historical research on Hong Kong remains relatively underdeveloped. This approach offers a productive framework for re-examining state-society relations under colonial rules. Examining how ‘age’ intersected with other social categories, such as race and gender, allows historians to develop a more nuanced understanding of how young people were influenced by and responded to colonial policies and institutions. Following the Second World War, Hong Kong was a ‘young’ city. By the 1960s, nearly half of its population was under fifteen years old due to the significant influx of immigrants from mainland China and the post-war baby boom. This drastic increase in the youthful population and their dire socio-economic conditions ensured youth became a concern of the colonial state as never before. Nevertheless, historians of Hong Kong have not fully explored the topic of governance of youth and youth experience in the postwar colony. Likewise, Hong Kong is absent in the existing scholarship on the global history of youth. My research seizes the opportunity presented by this gap and aims to investigate the relationship between youth and colonial governance through different case studies. My MPhil research focused on the Girl Guide movement in colonial Hong Kong, and my ongoing PhD project examines a broader scope of governance of youth in postwar Hong Kong. The following section provides an overview of each project in more detail.

My MPhil thesis, “Guiding the Youth of the Colony: The Girl Guide Movement in Hong Kong, 1916-1997,” traced the transformation of the Girl Guide movement in colonial Hong Kong from a British middle-class youth activity to a popular youth movement that engaged Chinese girls of different social backgrounds. Drawing on underexamined official Girl Guide publications and documents, it argued that the Hong Kong Girl Guide

movement was significant to colonial governance as it provided a platform for colonial collaboration across different generations and races. To break the traditional top-down narrative in imperial history that often overlooks the historical experience of women and girls, I examined memoirs and collected and conducted oral history interviews to uncover girls’ motivation in participating in the Girl Guide movement and its impacts on their lives. Their accounts revealed that girls were able to gain a sense of achievement through the movement, and this further motivated them to organize Girl Guide training voluntarily for the younger generation.

One significant finding was the connection between the Hong Kong Girl Guide movement and Cold War politics in Asia. I argued that both the colonial government and the United States supported Girl Guiding in Hong Kong as a preferable youth leisure activity that shaped law-abiding citizens and countered communist influence. American funding played a key role in bridging local girls with the ‘free world’ while also making Hong Kong a strategic site for propagating the movement to Southeast Asia. As such, this study not only highlighted the importance of the movement in facilitating local governance in Hong Kong but also contributed to the broader scholarship on Girl Guiding within and beyond the British Empire.

My PhD project expands the discussion from one single youth organization to the broader area of colonial youth welfare from 1945 to the 1970s. The central research question is: how were young people in Hong Kong governed against a backdrop of local unrest, decolonization, and Cold War tensions in Asia? To answer this, my project explores three key areas: the construction and management of juvenile delinquency, the regulation of youth leisure through the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups and the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award scheme, and



the international representation of Hong Kong youth. Specifically, I examine how the colonial state worked in partnership with voluntary associations and international actors, and also how the influence of the United States and Communist China shaped the development of youth welfare in Hong Kong. My initial research findings suggest that there was a transnational network of training for youth workers, highlighting how Hong Kong was interconnected with Britain, the United States, and Southeast Asia in shaping its governance of youth. Thus, my research situates the case study of Hong Kong in conversation with three major strands in the historical writing of youth, including literatures on juvenile delinquency in the colonial context, youth leisure in relation to governance, and the global politics of youth in the Cold War era.

All in all, my projects employ ‘youth’ as an analytical lens to understand colonialism in Hong Kong, while at the same time putting the story of Hong Kong into the global history of youth. Through examining the ways in which Hong Kong’s young people engaged with the government and youth organizations, my work aims to reveal how Hong Kong was deeply interconnected with global networks beyond its metropole.

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Fig. 1 (above): A Government Poster to encourage young people to joined uniformed youth groups. HKSAR.

Fig. 2 (right): Child learns English on a street ferry, 1984, photograph by Nigel Spry. (Image courtesy of University of Bristol Library, Special Collections (DM3263/1/1/13))



Revisiting the Past and Reimagining the Future of Hong Kong History through Digital Methods

Thomas M. Larkin

Whether a meeting place, in-between space, imperial periphery, nexus, node, point-of-transit, 'Gateway to Asia', or since 2001, 'Asia's World City', vocabularies of connectivity and mobility abound in Hong Kong studies. With such a lexicon it is little wonder that the topic of Hong Kong has surged in popularity amongst global and imperial historians, scholars of colonialism and decolonisation, and, in recent years, digital humanists. My own early experiment with digital humanities, the Mapping Sino-Foreign Networks (MSFN), project reflected my attempts to grapple with the transitory, mobile, and integrated nature of Hong Kong society, while my more recent work – more parochial in focus – has in its own way been made possible by Hong Kong's ongoing global entanglements.

My turn to digital humanities evolved from the challenge of conceptualising the scope and scale of the social, commercial, and political networks that 19th-century migrants to Hong Kong cultivated and maintained. Migrants to Colonial Hong Kong found a space divided according to colonial hierarchies.

Such hierarchies were made more explicit due to the colonial society's diversity, as imperial subjects from across the British world and extra-imperial adventurers converged on the port. The contents of the colonial archive often reproduce whitewashed narratives of an idealised segregation, but in reality, a more integrated society reflected pragmatic considerations. Multiracial and multinational networks blossomed through business, domestic services, and social and civic institutions – the exigencies of everyday life. This was also a transitory population. People moved on through the treaty ports, the Nanyang region, to Japan and across the Pacific, and further to Europe and the Americas. Chinese compradors, servants, and cooks followed the expansion of foreign firms, while thousands of labourers from Hong Kong and the surrounding provinces were contracted for infrastructural and agricultural work in India, Africa, the Caribbean, and North America. Foreign merchants and colonial officials returned home following brief and sometimes lucrative tenures. And thousands more reached Hong Kong as part of the colonial project.

Digital humanities helps make sense of this confusion and mitigate the dangers of erasure that traditional archival research struggles to overcome. The experimental MSFN project, for example, uses network analysis and graphing to map how the 19th-century community that emerged in Hong Kong evolved and shifted over time and space. MSFN reinforces the premise that Hong Kong brought together a diverse cast of actors, but also emphasises the weight that the relationships established in the colony held as people relocated and spread these networks globally. The project's hybrid quantitative and qualitative approach to recreating these networks leveraged digital tools to revisit the colonial archive, provide novel insights into network composition, and challenge narratives of colonial segregation. Digital tools are also well positioned to meet the challenges facing the future of Hong Kong studies. The shifting political climate and perennial concerns over archival access and preservation have embedded urban heritage projects, especially, with renewed importance. The Mapping Historical Hong Kong project (MHHK) was developed with such challenges in mind to explore the applications of digital tools for spatial and urban history and to support the global growth of Hong Kong studies and history initiatives [Fig. 1]. Aligned with the Hong Kong-based Spatial History Project, MHHK uses GIS to visualise Hong Kong's urban growth between 1841 and 1997. The project collates and spatially organises historical data and archival resources to provide researchers and the public with a streamlined resource for exploring Hong Kong's history [Fig. 2]. Both a tool

for analysis and a finding aid for a globally diffuse range of archival materials, MHHK represents the collaborative and integrative future of Hong Kong studies. If MSFN was meant to emphasize the ways Hong Kong was integral to the creation of, and then was integrated into, globe-spanning networks, MHHK brings the narrative full circle by capitalising on those very same networks. As these projects demonstrate, digital methods provide the tools for thinking about Hong Kong's global entanglements and reflect the global future of the field, helping scholars the world over find new and robust ways to work together. I write this from my own little island (Prince Edward) nestled in the Gulf of St Lawrence, Canada. The islands and territories of Hong Kong are some 12,379 km distant, but nonetheless present in my research and teaching and accessible through academic partnership. This is in no small part thanks to the ways the digital age and digital humanities have reshaped inter-institutional collaboration. Resource sharing, the emergence of new archives, more flexible forms of funding, and a wealth of unique expertise have made it not just possible but fruitful to work on Hong Kong history from abroad. In its own peculiar but fitting way, Hong Kong once again becomes a conduit for the flow of people, goods, and ideas, facilitating international exchange, the sharing of resources, collaborative research, and transnational scholarly discourse and community.

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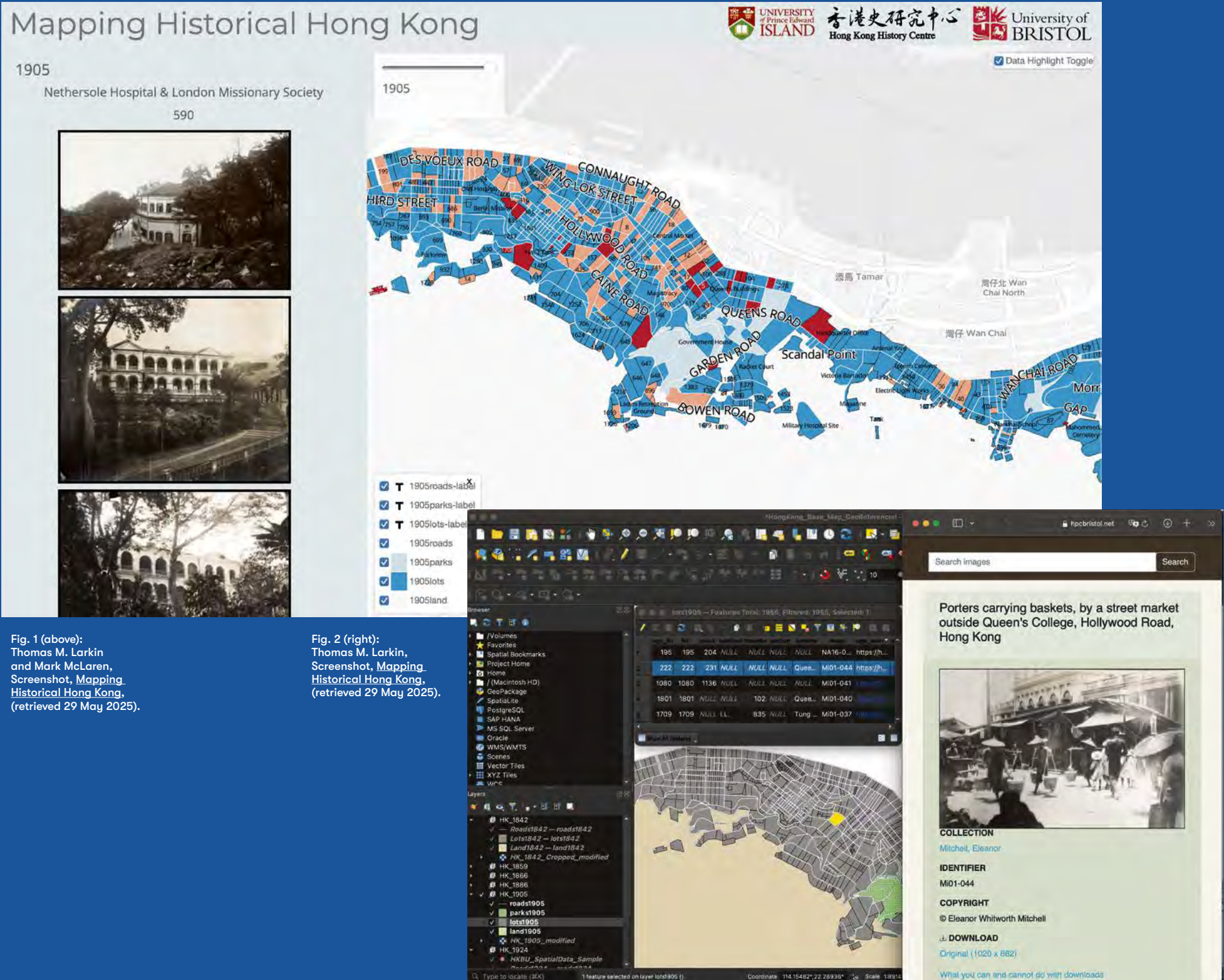


Fig. 1 (above): Thomas M. Larkin and Mark McLaren, Screenshot, Mapping Historical Hong Kong, (retrieved 29 May 2025).

Fig. 2 (right): Thomas M. Larkin, Screenshot, Mapping Historical Hong Kong, (retrieved 29 May 2025).