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Modern History Research-British Colonial Culture in Shanghai

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Abstract. This study examines British colonial behavior and its cultural impact in Shanghai and Hong Kong from 1843 to 1941. It compares the semi-autonomous Shanghailanders' community in Shanghai with the British Crown Colony in Hong Kong, showing how different institutional structures shaped colonizers' practices, cultural identities, and urban spaces. In Shanghai, the concession system fostered a hybrid "colonial self," combining imperial loyalty with local belonging through the Municipal Council, chambers of commerce, clubs, and schools. In contrast, Hong Kong's centralized colonial administration emphasized bureaucratic control, cultural segregation, and a singular "imperial loyalty." The analysis highlights how daily practices of colonizers influenced urban cultural formation under divergent colonial regimes, providing insight into the micro-mechanisms of colonial identity and local adaptation.

Keywords: Shanghai International Settlement, Shanghailanders, colonial psychology, urban culture, institutional comparison

1. Introduction

The mid-nineteenth century marked a decisive turning point in East Asia. With the Opium War and the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, Shanghai was opened as a treaty port, and Hong Kong was ceded to Britain. From 1843 onward, these two cities became crucial nodes in Britain's colonial network in East Asia, embodying both the commercial ambitions of the empire and the local transformations that followed.

This paper compares the cultural formation of Shanghai and Hong Kong under British colonial rule, focusing on how British policies and behaviors shaped each city's spatial organization, social order, and cultural identity. By emphasizing the agency of the British authorities and merchants, it argues that the divergent colonial policies in the two ports produced distinctive yet interconnected urban cultures.

The research draws on municipal archives, missionary records, and previous scholarship on treaty-port history, aiming to contribute to a deeper understanding of Britain's colonial strategies in East Asia and their cultural consequences.

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2. Literature review

Early scholarship on the British presence in Shanghai and Hong Kong was largely framed within the "empire–periphery" paradigm. In Spoilt Children of Empire, Clifford examined the Western community in 1920s Shanghai, highlighting their sense of alienation and superiority against the backdrop of the Chinese revolution [1]. Yet his analysis remained embedded in the discourse of empire and center–periphery narratives, with little attention paid to the everyday practices and cultural psychology of the colonizers themselves. This "macro-perspective" laid an important foundation but overlooked the interactional mechanisms between colonial behavior and local culture.

Subsequent studies shifted toward the themes of negotiation and collaboration. John M. Carroll, in works culminating in Edge of Empires: Chinese Elites and British Colonials in Hong Kong, argued that the colonial order was not merely oppressive but built upon "institutional collusion," involving exchanges of interests, identity adjustments, and spatial negotiations [2]. Similarly, Steve Tsang's A Modern History of Hong Kong provided a systematic account of law, education, and identity policies under the colonial regime, underscoring the logic of "normative governance" that shaped colonial behavior [3]. These studies collectively moved the field beyond the notion of unilateral imperial domination toward a framework of power negotiation and institutional interaction.

Research on Shanghai since the early twenty-first century has increasingly turned to institutions and space. Isabella Jackson's Shaping Modern Shanghai: Colonialism in China's Global City argued that the British, through the reproduction of institutions and urban space, transformed Shanghai into a "quasi-colonial city," with everyday practices of colonizers playing a key role [4]. Wang Xueyan, in a comparative study of Shanghai and Hong Kong, highlighted how Shanghai's "institutional patchwork" differed from Hong Kong's "unitary governance" in shaping spatial configurations, though the social practices of colonizers remained underexplored [5]. Wan Yong provided a macro framework of Shanghai's urban morphological evolution, but his study concentrated on structural changes rather than on the nexus between colonial power and cultural identity [6].

The cultural psychology of the expatriate colonial community has been less studied but remains particularly illuminating. Robert Bickers, in Shanghailanders: The Formation and Identity of the British Community in Shanghai, 1843–1937, argued that Britons in Shanghai were not merely "outsiders" but "localized colonizers." Through social habits, spatial exclusions, and institutional constructions, they sustained racial, class, and cultural boundaries, thereby shaping the city's order and local identity [7]. Jonathan Parry's The Politics of Patriotism, though addressing a broader British context, emphasized the dual psychology of "imperial loyalty" and "local priority," offering useful theoretical insights into the complex identities of expatriate colonizers in both Shanghai and Hong Kong [8].

Within Chinese scholarship, research has often proceeded through micro-level case studies, embodying a "seeing the big through the small" approach. Zheng Liqun, for example, examined the evolution of public parks to reveal Sino-foreign interaction in urban space, though without fully addressing the institutionalization of colonial power [9]. Wang Qiyuan stressed the pluralistic integration of urban space and cultural hybridity but retained a macro-urban historical orientation [10]. More recently, Wang Hui analyzed Pictorial Daily as a visual medium that reflected and shaped everyday modernity in Shanghai, while Zou Zetao traced citizens' recreational travel along the Yangtze estuary, illustrating the interplay between leisure culture and the natural environment [11, 12]. Although these studies do not directly focus on the colonizers, they enrich our understanding of the diverse backgrounds against which urban culture in Shanghai emerged.

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3. Shanghailanders

3.1. Colonial practices at the institutional and spatial levels

Since Shanghai's opening as a treaty port in 1843, it rapidly grew into China's leading commercial hub. British expatriates shaped a quasi-colonial order through the International Settlement and the Shanghai Municipal Council (SMC), influencing institutions, urban space, and public culture.

Britain established its concession in 1845, merging with the American concession to form the International Settlement. The SMC, founded in 1863, operated as a self-governing expatriate administration responsible for finance, policing, sanitation, and public works, independent from both Qing authorities and the British Colonial Office [4]. By the late 19th century the SMC's revenue, drawn from local real estate and customs taxes, surpassed that of the Shanghai county government, making it a de facto municipal government.

The council controlled police and judicial affairs: a force led by British officers with Indian, Sikh, and Chinese constables enforced order, while consular courts and joint tribunals maintained a semi-colonial judiciary marked by racial hierarchy [13].

British "civilizing input" was visible in public works: roads, waterworks, hospitals, schools, and leisure sites such as the Public Garden on the Bund, which for decades restricted Chinese access. Cultural institutions—including the Museum of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (1874) and the Shanghai Race Club—embodied Western learning and elite recreation, reinforcing a modern yet exclusive colonial space [4].

Education and healthcare furthered this influence. St. John's University and SMC-funded public schools spread Western curricula while remaining under foreign control. Missionary hospitals such as Renji promoted Western medicine yet were administered by foreign boards. Churches like Trinity served both religious and charitable roles.

Despite rhetoric of "Sino-foreign cooperation," SMC regulations institutionalized racial segregation: foreign constables held senior ranks and higher pay than Chinese colleagues, while many public spaces limited Chinese participation. These arrangements combined modern infrastructure with colonial exclusion, leaving a lasting imprint on Shanghai's urban development.

3.2. The cultural psyche of the Shanghailanders

Robert Bickers coined the term "Shanghailanders" for long-term British residents who differed from short-term diplomats or merchants. They retained loyalty to the empire yet developed a partial identification with Shanghai, producing a dual and sometimes ambivalent identity.

Most Shanghailanders displayed strong institutional attachment to the concession. Property-owning residents could vote for SMC councillors, regarding the Settlement as an "overseas home" whose policies they shaped to their own interests [4]. This reinforced their sense of belonging to the colonial enclave.

Influenced by imperial ideology, many saw themselves as "civilizers" bringing advanced governance and culture. Such notions informed spatial and educational exclusion—exemplified by the long-standing park restrictions and SMC-controlled schools that treated Chinese as subordinates. Education thus served to reproduce colonial hierarchies.

Yet Shanghailanders were not homogeneous. Some gradually developed local identification, integrating into Shanghai's economy and society through business partnerships, philanthropy, and occasionally naturalization—such as the 1927 case of a British shipowner adopting Chinese

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citizenship. Cross-cultural cooperation, notably with Chinese compradors, helped drive commerce and urban growth [14].

This identity duality—as "subjects of empire" yet "residents of Shanghai"—produced psychological tension. They upheld British customs in clubs, churches, and horse racing while relying on Chinese elites in trade, education, and law. Institutions like St. John's University illustrated this interdependence, combining Western pedagogy with Chinese support [13].

Living in this "in-between" condition, Shanghailanders balanced segregationist attitudes with pragmatic cooperation. Their cultural ambivalence both reflected and shaped the hybrid colonial modernity of Shanghai [8].

4. Comparison with Hongkong

Compared with the "semi-autonomous and cooperative" Shanghai concessions, Hong Kong was officially incorporated into the British colonial system in 1843 and became a Crown Colony governed directly by Britain, with a centralized administration headed by the governor. This institutional difference profoundly shaped the behavioral patterns, spatial practices, and cultural identities of the British expatriate communities in the two cities.

Unlike the Shanghailanders in Shanghai, who formed through the semi-autonomous institutions of the Shanghai Municipal Council, British residents in Hong Kong were primarily government officials or merchants dispatched by the metropole, whose roles as imperial agents tied them much more closely to Britain and left them with relatively little scope for developing a localized cultural identity.

Education and ideological control represented one of the most important arenas of colonial behavior in Hong Kong. The colonial government used the education system to cultivate among the Chinese population an attitude of loyal subjection. From primary school textbooks to university curricula, the emphasis was placed on loyalty to the British Crown and obedience to colonial authority. As Anthony Sweeting has noted, education under the colonial regime was designed above all as an instrument of political control and social stability, rather than as a means of fostering academic freedom. In contrast with Shanghai, where Sino-British joint schools and cross-cultural education offered more opportunities for interaction, Hong Kong's education system was highly institutionalized and reinforced cultural boundaries between colonizers and the colonized.

With regard to urban space, the principle of racial segregation was more strictly enforced in Hong Kong than in Shanghai. The colonial government explicitly demarcated residential zones according to race. The central districts of Hong Kong Island and the Peak were reserved for Europeans, while the Chinese population was largely confined to Kowloon and the northern parts of the island, thereby creating a visible cultural and physical divide. The Peak District Reservation Ordinance of 1904 stipulated that the Peak area was for the exclusive use of Europeans; even wealthy Chinese elites were barred from residence there. This legal codification of spatial segregation stood in sharp contrast to Shanghai, where, despite restrictions, cross-cultural interaction within the concessions remained more common.

As in Shanghai, British colonizers in Hong Kong reinforced elite boundaries through institutions such as clubs and schools. For instance, the Civil Service Club admitted only British members, excluding all other ethnic groups, including even the wealthiest and most influential Chinese elites, who continued to be treated as "subjects" rather than peers.

Unlike the Shanghailanders of Shanghai, whose hybrid local identity reflected a degree of adaptation, the British in Hong Kong were more typically imperial bureaucrats, invested in law, administration, and the projection of state authority. Culturally, they emphasized adherence to

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imperial norms, racial superiority, and administrative efficiency, seldom developing a sense of local belonging. As a result, their cultural psychology was characterized by a stronger and more singular "imperial loyalty," and their behavior remained relatively uniform and hierarchical, sustaining a colonial order premised on the principle of "British above Chinese."

Nevertheless, scholars have noted that the colonial administration in Hong Kong occasionally forged a "collaborative colonial relationship" with Chinese merchants and gentry in order to maintain stability. As John M. Carroll observes, the colonial order in Hong Kong was grounded in an institutional compromise: the British retained ultimate control of governance, while Chinese elites participated in grassroots management and economic affairs. This cooperation, however, always rested on an unequal foundation. Steve Tsang further emphasizes that the British community in Hong Kong was highly bureaucratized and institutionalized, and that the governing logic of the colonial state produced behavioral patterns that were more unified and hierarchical, leaving little room for localized adaptation.

In this sense, the behavioral logic of British colonizers in Hong Kong, in contrast with Shanghai, was more strongly characterized by a state-directed model of normative colonial governance. This model not only reinforced cultural segregation but also contributed to the formation of a colonial urban culture marked by bureaucratic efficiency and an emphasis on stability. By contrast, the urban culture of modern Shanghai reflected a more interactive and ambiguous path of colonial governance, shaped by the hybridity and localizing tendencies of the Shanghailanders.

5. Conclusion

This study explored how British colonial behavior shaped Shanghai's cultural landscape in contrast with Hong Kong. Focusing on the Shanghailanders (1843–1941), it examined their institutional roles, cultural psyche, and everyday practices, revealing how different colonial frameworks generated distinct urban cultures.

In Shanghai, the semi-autonomous concession system enabled Shanghailanders—through the Municipal Council, chambers of commerce, schools, clubs, and charities—to forge a hybrid identity that blended imperial loyalty with local attachment. Their practices created a unique colonial modernity: cosmopolitan yet racially stratified, foreign in governance yet rooted in local life.

By contrast, in Crown-Colony Hong Kong, British officials acted strictly as imperial agents. Administrative hierarchy and state-centered discipline prevailed, prioritizing political control and maintaining cultural distance from the local Chinese population. The resulting colonial order showed limited hybridity and a more uniform imperial loyalty.

This comparison highlights the decisive influence of institutional structure on colonial conduct and identity formation. The concession's relative autonomy encouraged localized colonial consciousness, while Hong Kong's centralized rule reinforced state-driven cultural discipline.

By analyzing the cultural psychology and social practices of Shanghailanders, this paper contributes to understanding the micro-mechanisms of colonial behavior and its impact on urban space. Future research should further investigate personal narratives and local archives to enrich our knowledge of colonial communities and their long-term legacies.

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