

Structure, Sanitation, and Social Engineering: Iron Markets in Hong Kong and Singapore during the late 19th century



In 1895, two iron markets in the colonial port cities of Hong Kong and Singapore opened within months of each other. The opening dates were significant in light of cholera and plague outbreaks in Singapore and Hong Kong in preceding years. The open display of produce and raw meat in a crowded and humid environment throughout the day earmarked markets as a potent hotbed for disease outbreaks. The health and social risks were exacerbated further as expatriates and natives alike were dependent on these municipal markets for their daily needs.

By positioning Town Market and Central Market in Singapore and Hong Kong respectively as public health spaces, this talk will delve into three aspects pertinent in the transplantation of the modern European market into Asian colonial contexts and attempt to answer why iron construction was featured prominently in market construction during this period. Firstly, by understanding the associations of tropical climate and the specificities of geographical locations of the markets to establish a link between environment and building materials. Secondly, by foregrounding the significance of sanitary professionals and municipal engineers as key proponents of the colonial urban environment rather than architects; and lastly, by analysing how changes in sanitary and social theories and the shift from miasmatic and contagion theories to the demonstration of microbial germs translated unevenly into architectural forms and functions. By way of addressing this year's WHD theme, "Complex Pasts: Diverse Futures", I posit how understanding the factors underpinning the construction of these historic markets could generate more robust discussions, interpretations, and conservation approaches.

TIME

18 April 2021 (Sun), 10.00–11.00am

Admission to the lecture is free online with Facebook Live.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

IAN TAN is a PhD candidate at the University of Hong Kong. His thesis examines the transfer and circulation of iron architecture in colonial port cities during the late 19th century. Particularly, he focuses on Calcutta, Singapore, and Hong Kong as representative port cities within an imperial governance and trade network. By examining the agency and agendas behind the introduction of prefabricated iron structures to these cities, such as quarantine centres, reservoirs, markets, grandstands, churches, and departmental stores, he posits iron as a key proponent of modernity that transformed the way people lived, worked, and socialised.