Foreword

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Hong Kong is geographically a tiny territory, yet it is strategically situated in relation to southern China and Pacific Asia. In the past 174 years since the British landed in Hong Kong, Hong Kong has metamorphosed from a minuscule fishing village to a thriving world city, ranking at present among the best in Asia and the world. This Hong Kong story of how it has evolved to become a sparkling city is told in this scholarly and monumental book full of historical and official documentation, objective interpretation, and insightful analysis.

Despite the many challenges Hong Kong has faced from the outset as a colonial outpost to a throbbing modern city, the literature is surprisingly sparse on any attempt to tackle the intriguing Hong Kong chronicle from the standpoint of town planning. It is full of life-and-death struggles, absorbing turning points and dashing decisions. What makes this book unique is its ambitious and comprehensive treatment of town planning in Hong Kong in its full stretch from the beginning to the present. It takes a scholar with history training and meticulous care to handle source materials and data, plus Ho Pui-yin's earlier pioneering research on Hong Kong's water supply, land and harbour development, and transport to produce this impressive and breath-taking volume.

The main body of the book consists of six stages but is grouped into seven chapters (with two chapters for the last stage) devoted to major periods of development with vital implications on how and why Hong Kong was developed in the ways it was. Details of dates, personalities and debates surrounding some key decisions are given in ample reference to sources, tables and figures. The reference in Chapter 1 to the construction of water reservoirs, typhoons, conflagrations and plagues is especially poignant to someone who is familiar with early Hong Kong history and how these calamities caused massive loss of lives and heartrending grief among the community at that time.

Chapter 2 traces the territorial expansion of Hong Kong, in particular the planning of New Kowloon. Large-scale development of the Kowloon Canton Railway and Kai Tak Airport laid the foundation for later development. The regularisation of town planning began in this half-century before the Second World War.

Chapter 3 details the war experience in Hong Kong under the Japanese Occupation. Hong Kong became a resource port for the Japanese war efforts, and development vastly departed from that of the previous period under the British.

The remaining chapters deal with the next three stages, starting with Hong Kong in its rapid evolution after the war, with the early influence of Abercrombie's plan to guide town development. The debate on building the subway system is revealing. China's opening had much influence on Hong Kong development, which capitalised on new opportunities. The Ten Core Projects in the wake of the decision to build the new airport at Chek Lap Kok in the 1990s laid the foundation for Hong Kong's rapid development in the subsequent decades. It is revealing to find that Chek Lap Kok was one of 13 sites recommended by the consultants. The return of Hong Kong to China in 1997 marked the beginning of urban governance leaning towards transparency and sustainable development.

As is clear from reading this volume, Hong Kong has successfully thrived against all odds to develop into a world city of fame and substance. Town planning certainly has its role, and major political turning points have been capitalised on to the city's benefit. The main lesson from reading the Hong Kong story is that it has thrived on new thinking to develop its urban identity and future. The evolving identity echoes well with the world around Hong Kong and beyond. This book will equip scholars and planners alike with a solid foundation to take Hong Kong to its next stage of urban development and modernisation.