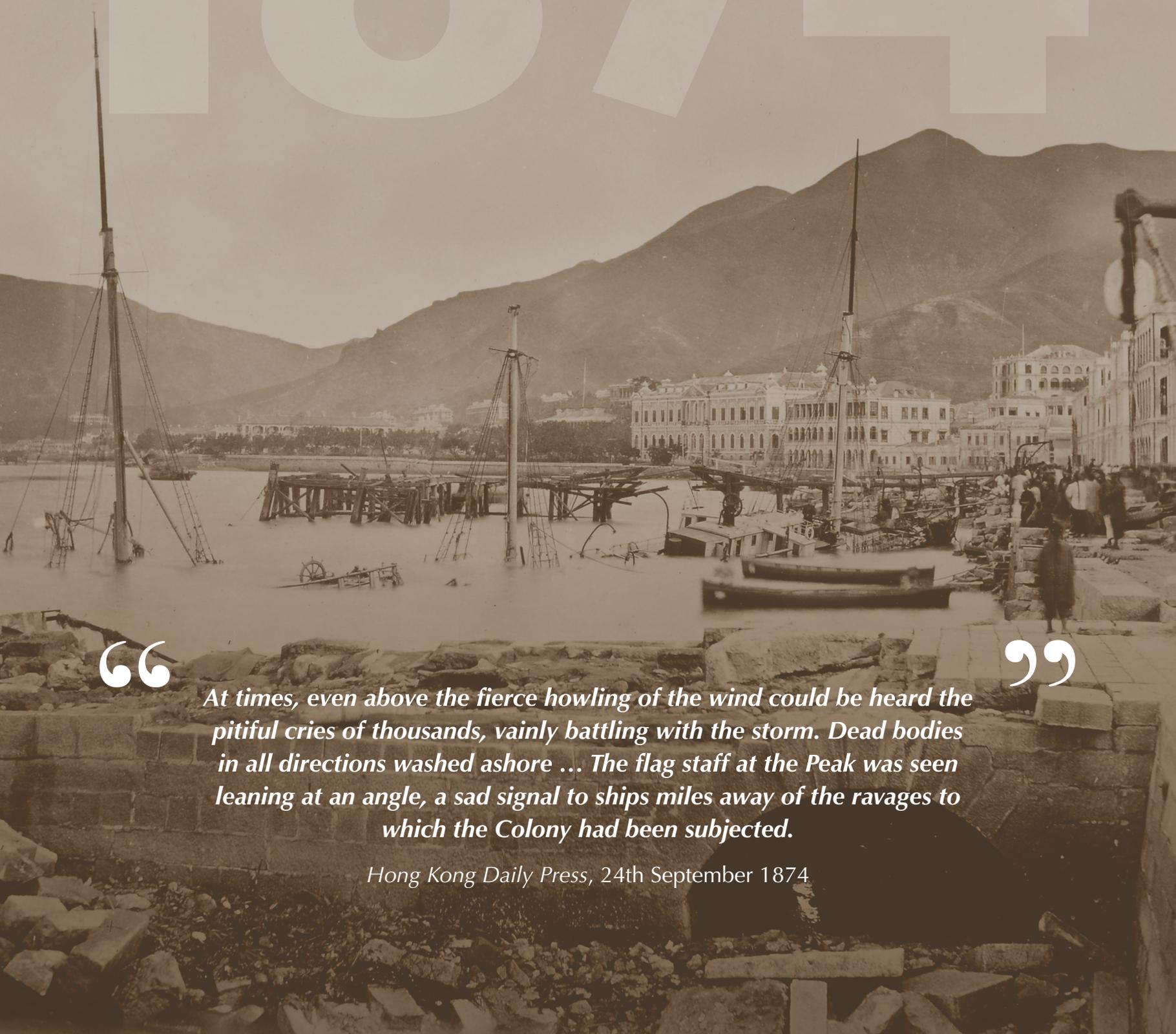


1874

23RD SEPTEMBER 1874 TYPHOON



“

At times, even above the fierce howling of the wind could be heard the pitiful cries of thousands, vainly battling with the storm. Dead bodies in all directions washed ashore ... The flag staff at the Peak was seen leaning at an angle, a sad signal to ships miles away of the ravages to which the Colony had been subjected.

”

Hong Kong Daily Press, 24th September 1874

The Typhoon of 1874

There have been hundreds of typhoons over the centuries that have affected Hong Kong. However, the typhoon of 22nd/23rd September 1874 was the first in Hong Kong to be fully documented in the *Hong Kong Government Gazette*. Prior to 1874, records on typhoons affecting Hong Kong were unavailable or, at best, incomplete, so it is difficult to have a clear picture of events. This of course changed in the following decade with the establishment of the Hong Kong Observatory in 1883.

A reference to a typhoon in historical Chinese texts dates back as far as the fifth century AD. An official Chinese document in the ninth century AD records a typhoon making landfall in Shandong and is the earliest known record of its kind. Most of the early Chinese documentation on weather patterns was recorded on a regional or district basis in China, so there is virtually no data specific to Hong Kong. However, author Ho

Pui-yin in the book *Weathering the Storm: Hong Kong Observatory and Social Development*, provides some interesting records on Hong Kong's climate as depicted in historical Chinese texts.

Information that may not be so widely known is that Jesuit missionaries, who travelled to Asia in the late 1500s to 1700s, were sending reports to their offices in Europe detailing the destruction caused by typhoons. It was the Jesuits who founded the Manila Observatory in 1865 and the Zikawei Observatory in Shanghai in 1872.

The typhoon of 1874 was the first to be reported on by international telegraph (the first submarine telegraph cable was laid in Hong Kong in 1871 and messages were sent by Morse code). Within two or three days of the 1874 typhoon striking Hong Kong, newspapers around the world were carrying reports of its impact. This was also the first time a typhoon's destruction had been captured quite extensively in photographs. They were mainly taken



The recent typhoon is without doubt the severest that has ever visited this Colony, whether we judge by the losses afloat or on shore.

– H.G. Thomsett, R.N., harbour master (*Hong Kong Government Gazette*, 17th October 1874)



Self-portrait of photographer Lai Fong (Afong)
c.1870 (Scottish National Portrait Gallery)

by Hong Kong-based photographer Lai Fong, also known as "Afong" – one of the most successful 19th-century Chinese commercial photographers. Until this time, the rest of the world knew very little about typhoons and the destructive forces they unleashed.

As there was no observatory in Hong Kong in 1874, it was the responsibility of the harbour master and his staff to handle weather-related matters. At that time, there were no typhoon signals or effective ways to alert the community of impending typhoons. The harbour master had noticed the barometer falling steadily in the afternoon of 22nd September and was certain a typhoon was approaching, so he sent a launch around the harbour to warn ships and junks that they should seek shelter. By 10:00 pm, gale force winds were gathering pace, with the full force of the typhoon being felt by the territory at 1:00 am on 23rd September. The sudden shift of the wind



Mountain Lodge – the Hong Kong Governor's summer residence on the Peak – after the typhoon (source unknown);
Chapter cover page: Pustan's & Douglas wharves destroyed by the typhoon (The National Archives UK/photographer Lai Fong)

direction and the simultaneous rise of tide was a major contributing factor to losses at sea, as well as on land. By 2:00 am, the water had risen 1.5-1.8 m (5 to 6 feet) above its high-water level in some areas and was flooding the lower parts of the city. Before 3:00 am, the typhoon caused damage to the gas pipes and the city was plunged into darkness.

There was extensive damage to the Praya – wharves were destroyed, the buildings housing many of the major merchants and businesses in Central were flooded, and the embankment was littered with debris and the wrecks of boats. The roofs were blown off many private residences throughout the territory. St. Joseph's Chapel on Garden Road fared badly, as did the signal station on Victoria Peak and the Aberdeen dockyard.

However, it was the local villagers who suffered the most devastation. Many of them lived in matchsheds that were completely destroyed by the strong winds and heavy rain.

Almost 90 percent of the ocean-going ships were sailing ships, albeit with auxiliary engines. They mostly had wooden hulls. The main reason they broke adrift, sunk or went aground was that their windlasses, anchors and

cables were just not strong enough. Another problem was that many of the captains had no experience of typhoons and did not lower their yardarms and spars, with the result that the masts broke in half.

In 1874, there were no typhoon shelters. Many of the vessels went to places such as Aberdeen, Stonecutters Island, Kowloon Bay and other sheltered bays around the territory. Those places may have provided protection from the initial wind, but when the wind changed direction later, what was a protected place to start with then became a death trap. Nearly 40 ocean-going ships went aground or sank. Junks and sampans ended up as matchwood.

It is more difficult to estimate the number of lives lost. As there were no real border controls, it was almost impossible to know how many people lived in Hong Kong at this time. This was especially true for the farmers and fishermen. Also, it is important to remember that the New Territories was not part of Hong Kong until 1898.

The total estimated death toll from the 1874 typhoon was believed to be at least 2,000.

26th September 1874, *Hong Kong Daily Press* (and *The New York Times*)

1874 HONG KONG TYPHOON

Though this typhoon lasted a comparatively short time – about four hours – it was the most violent and destructive within living memory. It is estimated that the loss of life in the city of Victoria, in the island and villages of the immediate neighbourhood, and the adjacent waters amounted to several thousands. Six steamers and 27 European large vessels in the harbour were either sunk, driven on shore, dismasted, or more or less damaged, whilst the destruction of property on shore was wholesale.

A typhoon had been for some time expected; and as on Tuesday evening the falling barometer indicated considerable atmospheric disturbance, careful preparations were made. Large vessels and junks went over to the northern side of the roads, so as to gain the protection of the Kowloon peninsula; sampans (a kind of small family boat) went into creeks, behind breakwaters, or to other protected places, and houseboats were brought on to the shore. The lowest reading of the barometer, as taken by the harbour master (Captain Thomsett, R.N.) was 28.88, at 2 o'clock on Wednesday morning, the storm being then at its highest. The European houses in the colony, though most substantially built, suffered great damage. The roofs of many were blown off, and there being a heavy rain, the rooms were saturated, and furniture was destroyed. The Catholic church of St. Joseph was demolished, only portions of the end walls being left standing. The destruction in the Chinese part of the city was, however, greatest. The native dwellings are but slight erections. Many of these were blown completely to the ground, the inmates in some cases being buried beneath the ruins; the roofs of others were carried quite away,

or so damaged as to render them untenable. Thousands of the beautiful trees that adorned the streets and promenades – obtained at much expense and tended with great care – were uprooted. But the greatest devastation and destruction were to be seen on the front of the city. The sight was sad and terrible in the extreme. Strongly built wharfs were washed entirely away; several vessels were lying aground, some having dashed into each other, whilst others only showed the tops of their masts; and the wreckage of junks and boats was floating about in all directions. The Praya wall, consisting of huge blocks of granite, bound together with iron links, was broken and dashed away; the road was in some parts washed up, or here and there rendered impassable from the piled-up debris.

The Chinese villages in other parts of the island, or across the harbour on the mainland – notwithstanding their sheltered positions – suffered terribly, both in loss of life and damage to property. The full extent of the damage caused by the typhoon, which extended far beyond Hong Kong, will probably never be known. Many Chinese villages were wholly destroyed. Macao – a small peninsula belonging to Portugal – suffered even worse than Hong Kong, being left literally a colossal ruin. The loss of life there was enormous. The labour of grave-digging becoming too great, the dead bodies, as washed up by the sea or disinterred from fallen houses, were heaped together and burned; more than a thousand being thus destroyed in one day.

At least 10,000 persons perished in the Kwangtung province only, and some accounts put the number at 100,000.



Residence of the late Judge Ball destroyed by the typhoon (The National Archives UK/photographer Lai Fong)



Impact of the typhoon on the Basel Mission House (Basel Mission Archives/Basel Mission Holdings, ref no. A-30.01.004)

The Typhoon of 1874



St. Joseph's Chapel destroyed by the typhoon (The National Archives UK/photographer Lai Fong)



Junk and sampan damage in Yau Ma Tei (photographer Lai Fong)



Wreck of the steamers *Leonor* and *Albay* (The National Archives UK/photographer Lai Fong)



Paddle steamer *Alaska* aground at Aberdeen (The National Archives UK/photographer Lai Fong)

The Typhoon of 1874



The Aberdeen dock destroyed by the typhoon (The National Archives UK/photographer Lai Fong)



The Aberdeen dock destroyed by the typhoon (The National Archives UK/photographer Lai Fong)



Debris on the Kowloon side of the harbour (reproduced with the permission of the Government of the HKSAR from the collection of the Hong Kong Museum of History)



Debris on the Kowloon side of the harbour (reproduced with the permission of the Government of the HKSAR from the collection of the Hong Kong Museum of History)

The Typhoon of 1874

Marine Casualties

GRT – Gross registered tonnage
AWSB – Awaiting ship-breaking

Sunk

Name of Ship	Country	Type	GRT	Where	Repaired and Resumed Service	Total Loss
<i>Mindanao</i>	British	Barque	426	Victoria Harbour	○	
<i>Malvern</i>	British	Barque	410	Possession Point	○	
<i>Courier</i>	British	Barque	385	Sulphur Channel	○	
<i>Imogen</i>	British	Barque	383	West Point	○	
<i>Maury</i>	Germany	Barque	389	Green Island	○	
<i>Aldebaran</i>	Germany	Barque	305	Green Island	○	
<i>Macao</i>	Peru	Steamer	603	Tsing Yi		○ AWSB
<i>Lowtoe</i>	Siam	Schooner	575	Green Island		○ AWSB
<i>Dudu</i>	Siam	Barque	322	Green Island		○ AWSB
<i>Seaforth</i>	Siam	Barque	311	Green Island		○ AWSB
<i>Amoy</i>	Siam	Brigantine	262	Green Island	○	
<i>Leonor</i>	Spain	Steamer	408	Central Praya	○	
<i>Albay</i>	Spain	Steamer	260	Central Praya	○	
<i>Lizzie H</i>	USA	Barque	806	Victoria Harbour		○ AWSB
<i>Blue Bell</i>	British	Steamer	27	Kennedy Town	○	
<i>Early Bird</i>	British	Steamer	16	Victoria Harbour	○	

Dismasted

Name of Ship	Country	Type	GRT	Where	Repaired and Resumed Service	Total Loss
<i>Morning Light</i>	British	Schooner	2,377	Victoria Harbour	○	
<i>Ardent</i>	British	Barque	358	Victoria Harbour	○	
<i>Charlotte Andrews</i>	British	Barque	355	Stonecutters Island	○	
<i>Courier</i>	British	Barque	320	Kau Yi Chau	○	
<i>Georgina</i>	British	Barque	315	Nine Pins	○	
<i>Radama</i>	France	Steamer	700	Victoria Harbour	○	
<i>Carmalita and Ida</i>	Germany	Barque	421	Stonecutters Island	○	
<i>A.E. Vidal</i>	Germany	Barque	339	Tsing Yi	○	
<i>Ta Lee</i>	Germany	Barque	335	Victoria Harbour	○	
<i>Purra Noorfol</i>	Siam	Barque	360	Sulphur Channel	○	
<i>Pawtuxet</i>	USA	Steamer	280	Victoria Harbour	○	

Damaged

Name of Ship	Country	Type	GRT	Where	Repaired and Resumed Service	Total Loss
<i>Alaska</i>	USA	Paddle Steamer	4,011	Aberdeen	○	
<i>Everhard</i>	Germany	Barque	632	N.E. Lantau		○ AWSB
<i>Lizzie and Rosa</i>	British	Barque	380	West Point	○	
<i>Matilda Atheling</i>	British	Barque	676	Tsing Yi	○	
<i>HMS Flamer</i>	British	Gunboat	232	Central Praya		○ AWSB
<i>Maria Y Vicenta</i>	Spain	Barque	384	Kennedy Town	○	
<i>Amoy</i>	British	Steamer	814	Victoria Harbour	○	
<i>Falcon</i>	British	Barque	793	Victoria Harbour	○	
<i>Sea Bird</i>	British	Schooner	104	Victorial Harbour	○	
<i>Lathley Rich</i>	USA	Schooner	1,327	Victoria Harbour	○	

Note: The above vessels had total crew and passengers amounting to almost 1,000, of which an estimated 200 lives were lost.

Small craft

An estimated 600 junks were sunk or damaged. Hundreds more went missing having been driven out to sea.