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How Hong Kong developed a world-leading port from the ashes of war, and factories, and its maritime future

A new exhibition at Hong Kong Maritime Museum looks at how Hong Kong developed as an international port after Japanese occupation of the city ended in 1945

Through historical artefacts including a Second World War-era bomb, fishermen's tales and virtual reality, it describes the 'miracle' of Hong Kong's rebirth



Sarah Vega

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The Kwai Chung Container Terminal, part of Hong Kong's international port built from the ashes of the second world war - a story told in a new Hong Kong Maritime Museum exhibition. Photo: Winson Wong

The Hong Kong Maritime Museum has just unveiled an exhibition about how the city developed as an international port after the Japanese occupation, during the second world war, ended in August 1945.

Called "Hong Kong's Maritime Miracle: The Story of Our City since 1945", it shows how the development of the city's maritime industry was crucial to the rebuilding and the rebirth of Hong Kong after the war (1939-1945), says Libby Chan Lai-pik, chief curator of the museum.

The exhibition uses historical artefacts, fishermen's tales, re-enactment of movie scenes and other lively displays to tell the story, and is split into five parts: "Regeneration (1945-1948)", "Back in Business (1949-1970)", "The High Growth Years (1960s-1980s)", "Container Rules (1972-present)", and "The Future".

The section "Regeneration" starts with an immediate symbol of war and destruction: [a bomb that was recovered from a construction site only a few years ago.](#)



A World War II-era bomb on display at the Hong Kong Maritime Museum. Photo: Hong Kong Maritime Museum

The 500lb (227kg) deactivated second world war bomb packs quite a punch – visually – but the museum has further enhanced the experience with the use of virtual reality (VR).

“This is not like a traditional exhibition of only objects,” says Chan. Visitors can wear VR goggles and experience what it would have been like when aircraft were dropping bombs of this size around the Taikoo Dockyard, she explains.



A fishing junk model on display at the Hong Kong Maritime Museum. Photo: Hong Kong Maritime Museum

The second section centres around Hong Kong's most crucial time for maritime expansion – the “Back to Business” years, which laid the foundation for the city we see today.

The end in 1949 of the Chinese civil war between the Communists and the Nationalist Kuomintang saw Hong Kong receive plenty of migrants, both poor and rich, which secured the workforce and the investment for future trading companies.

During the Korean war, fought between North Korea and South Korea from 1950 to 1953, restrictions on trade with China increased and Hong Kong became the best access point from which to get Chinese products.



A Camel vacuum flask, made in Hong Kong, on display at the Hong Kong Maritime Museum. Photo: Hong Kong Maritime Museum



Various made in Hong Kong toys on display. Photo: Hong Kong Maritime Museum

The increased trade meant Hong Kong had the ability to create on an industrial level thanks to the high traffic of incoming and outgoing goods, and it was during this time that “Made in Hong Kong” products became popular across the world.

The third section focuses on Hong Kong as it tried to respond to Japan’s growing oil demands, and how much of the city’s manufacturing industry moved to southern China.

Hong Kong rapidly became the largest overseas investor in China during this time period and the collection has a mix of eclectic artefacts, including a Star Ferry turnstile from before the Cross-Harbour Tunnel ([opened in 1972 to link Kowloon with Hong Kong Island](#)) was completed.



A Star Ferry turnstile from before the Cross-Harbour Tunnel was completed. Photo: Hong Kong Maritime Museum

“Container Rules” covers the transformational impact that containerisation had on shipping. This time period, which goes from the 1970s to the present day, saw growth in trade surge and boosted the city’s prosperity. This exhibit features a twist lock used to connect and secure shipping containers together.

The fifth theme is the future of maritime Hong Kong. The exhibition dwells on the importance of environmental issues, naval architecture and the development of Hong Kong’s harbourfront.



An aerial view of Japanese shipping in Hong Kong under attack by US naval aircraft in 1945, on display at the Hong Kong Maritime Museum. Photo: Hong Kong Maritime Museum

It features prominent [Hong Kong athlete Siobhan Haughey's 2020 Olympic silver medals](#) to showcase both her achievements and the extraordinary spirit of Hong Kong people that created the city's Maritime Miracle.

"These exhibits have so many stories to tell," says Chan. "I hope the audience will really know more about their own stories, that they're highly connected to maritime history and that these are shared stories for all Hong Kong people."



A woman makes electric fans in a factory in Hong Kong, an image on display at the Hong Kong Maritime Museum.
Photo: Hong Kong Maritime Museum

Within a year of the surrender of Imperial Japan to the Allied forces in 1945, the city's population grew exponentially, employment shot up and many buildings were rebuilt, says Chan.

Today, thanks to Covid-19, [the global supply chain suffers from heavy delays](#), crew members are harder to employ and borders between countries are not as open as they once were. The Suez Canal incident – [when the man-made waterway was blocked for six days by a container ship](#) – is something discussed in relation to this "new norm".



Siobhan Haughey's 2020 Olympic silver medal. Photo: Hong Kong Maritime Museum/Siobhan Haughey

“This is one of the challenges we need to face,” Chan says, stressing the importance of maritime trade as an economic pillar of Hong Kong.

“Hong Kong’s Maritime Miracle” highlights the historical resilience of Hongkongers and how they can overcome challenges like Covid-19 going forward. For the 25th anniversary of the city’s handover from Britain to China, Chan says: “We wanted to tell a maritime story that really related to Hong Kong people.”

“Hong Kong’s Maritime Miracle: The Story of Our City since 1945”, Hong Kong Maritime Museum, Central Pier No. 8, Central, June 24 – October 30, Mon-Fri, 9:30am-5:30pm, Sat, Sun and public holidays, 10am-7pm, adults: HK\$30 (US\$3.82), seniors (aged 60 or above), students, children and people with disabilities (accompanied by a carer): HK\$15.