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## Hong Kong's Maritime Miracle

HK Presents



The Maritime Museum has put together Hong Kong's Maritime Miracle: The Story of Our City Since 1945 as a reminder of the city's rapid rebirth from the consequences of World War II and the role played by the maritime industry.

August 1945 saw the end of the Japanese Occupation and WWII. Four years of heavy bombing from Allied Powers virtually destroyed the city's industrial infrastructure, especially ships and port facilities. During that time, forced repatriation to China among other reasons saw the population shrink from a pre-war figure of 1.64 million to 600,000. The exhibition begins with a solemn reminder, an American-made 500-pound bomb found at a construction site in 2020.

After WWII, Hong Kong recovered spectacularly. The first step was to remove the 230 shipwrecks from the bottom of the harbour. These wrecks not only presented a shipping hazard but also an opportunity in the form of steel, which was in short supply during the war. Salvaging it allowed for repurposing the steel into rebar for use in concrete construction. This operation was so successful that for a few years Hong Kong was exporting steel.

A short three months later, by November 1945, Hong Kong's economy had already recovered to the point that most government controls were lifted, and private trade resumed. The international shipping industry was back in operation in a mere ten months.

By the end of 1947, the population had rebounded to 1.8 million, owing to the return of pre-war residents and the arrival of huge numbers of migrants from China in search of new opportunities. Businessmen, entrepreneurs, intellectuals, and many manual workers made their homes in Hong Kong, bringing with them new skills, capital and labour, along with the fervent desire to rebuild their lives.

Hong Kong's sheltered deep harbour was its main attraction for shipping, but the territory's hilly terrain and high urban density made land for building wharves and godowns very expensive. With few wharfs available for cargo ships to dock, most were secured to buoys or anchored in the western harbour. Cargo work happened with a flurry of junks, barges, coolies, foremen, tally clerks and agents ready to account for the arriving cargo and to load new cargo for departure. For some, it was dangerous and poorly paid, and theft was rampant, as was gang violence. Despite this, export trade expanded rapidly throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

Everything changed with the container revolution that reached Hong Kong in the late 1960s. Containerisation facilitated the seamless movement of large volumes of goods from ship to shore in standard-sized steel containers at a fraction of the previous cost of handling each parcel of goods individually.

Containerships needed a port, with berths equipped with large shore-side cranes to load and unload containers and large adjacent flat areas to receive and store them. By 1987 Hong Kong overtook Rotterdam as the world's busiest container port, largely due to the transshipment of cargo to and from China.

The fall of Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) on 30 April 1975 finally brought an end to the long-running Vietnam War (1955–1975). Thousands of refugees fled to neighbouring countries to escape the Viet Cong government. Hong Kong was one of the main points of refuge. The first 3,743 refugees were brought in on the Danish freighter Clara Maersk on 4 May 1975.

The number of incoming refugees between 1975 and 1978 was moderate relative to the much bigger wave of refugees that arrived after the deterioration of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship in 1978 and the Vietnamese government's decision to expel ethnic Chinese and confiscate their properties. These ethnic Chinese in Vietnam were forced to leave the country.

From 1975 onwards, over 220,000 Vietnamese migrants arrived in Hong Kong. More than 143,000 of them were resettled overseas, about 75,000 were repatriated, and about 16,000 were permitted to stay.

In recent years, the Government has been opening access to the harbour to the public. This is expected to continue as commercial wharves, dockyards and other old coastal industrial sites are closed or relocated. When considering coastal development, the Government takes note of the environment, with controls over building heights to allow better integration between the ridgeline and the waterfront.

This exhibition successfully raises awareness of the vital importance of shipping in our daily lives and the connectivity between the maritime community and Hong Kongers.