

**From Tung Tau to Shek Kip Mei:
Squatter fires, geopolitics and housing interventions in Hong Kong in the 1950s**

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Abstract

The governmental response to the disastrous fire in Shek Kip Mei squatter area on December 25, 1953 has become seen, particularly in official accounts, as the reason for the beginning of the squatter resettlement programme and ultimately public housing in Hong Kong. A major problem with this as an explanation is that other serious fires that left tens of thousands of squatters homeless had occurred in previous years, without producing the same kind of response. In order to explain the shifts (and continuities) in government squatter and housing policy in the 1950s, I argue that we need to carefully revisit the effects of and responses to a whole series of squatter fires during the period. Based on government documents, particularly confidential and secret correspondence files between officials in the Colonial Secretariat, I discuss three of these forgotten fires. In doing so, I argue that issues of the geopolitics of the early Cold War era that placed Hong Kong in a diplomatically vulnerable position interacted in such a way with the risk of protest and even violent resistance from the squatters and fire victims as to make the eventual adoption of squatter resettlement a logical response. I also argue that the response to the Shek Kip Mei fire itself must be re-examined, that initially governmental initiatives were seen as only slightly intensified variations on previous practices. It only became clear at a later date what exactly was being launched after the Shek Kip Mei fire.