

Tourism, Hong Kong, and the American Geographical Imagination: A View from the Peninsula Hotel

By: Zane McGill, Supervised by Dr. Nick Quinton

Introduction:

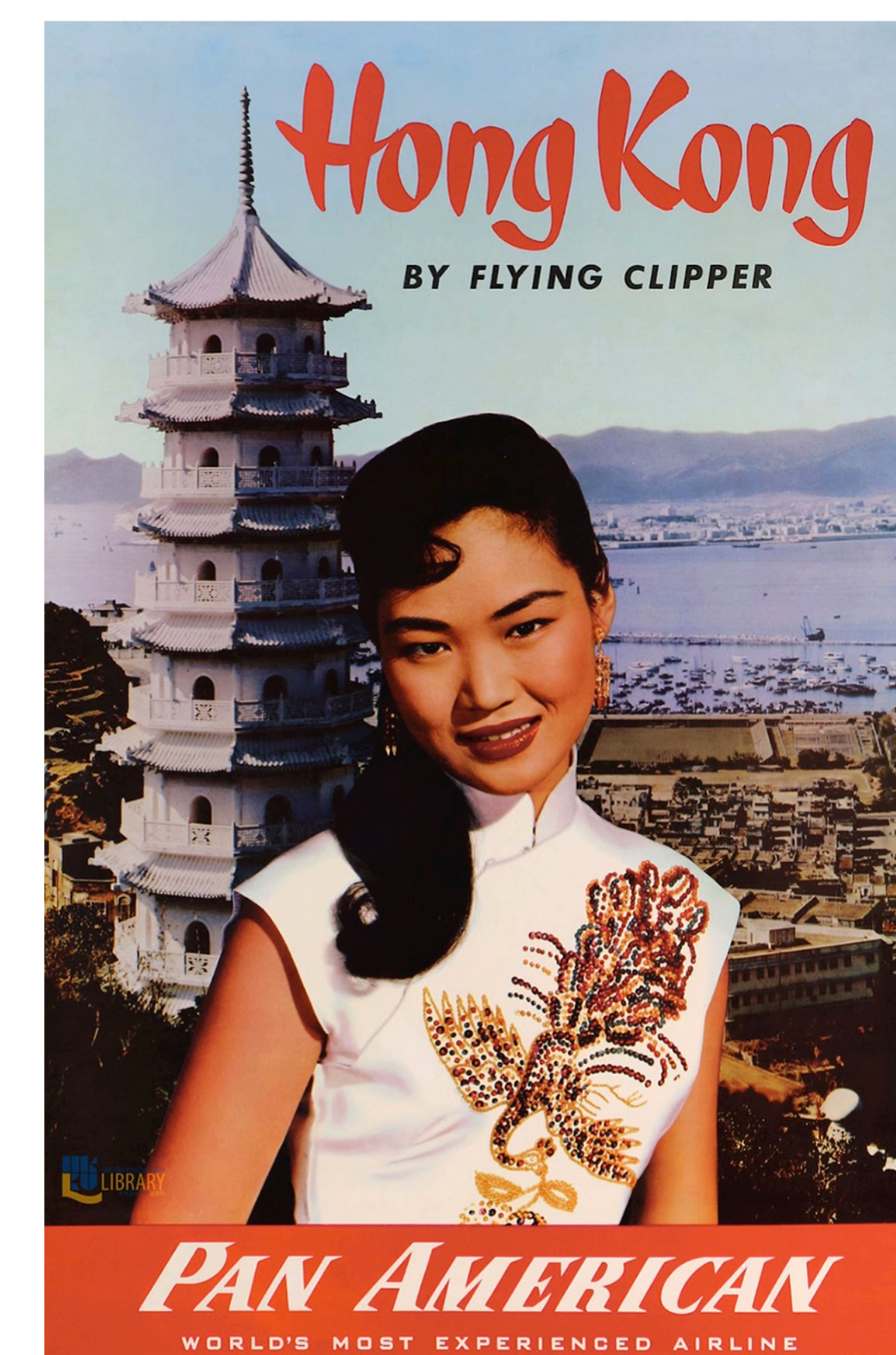
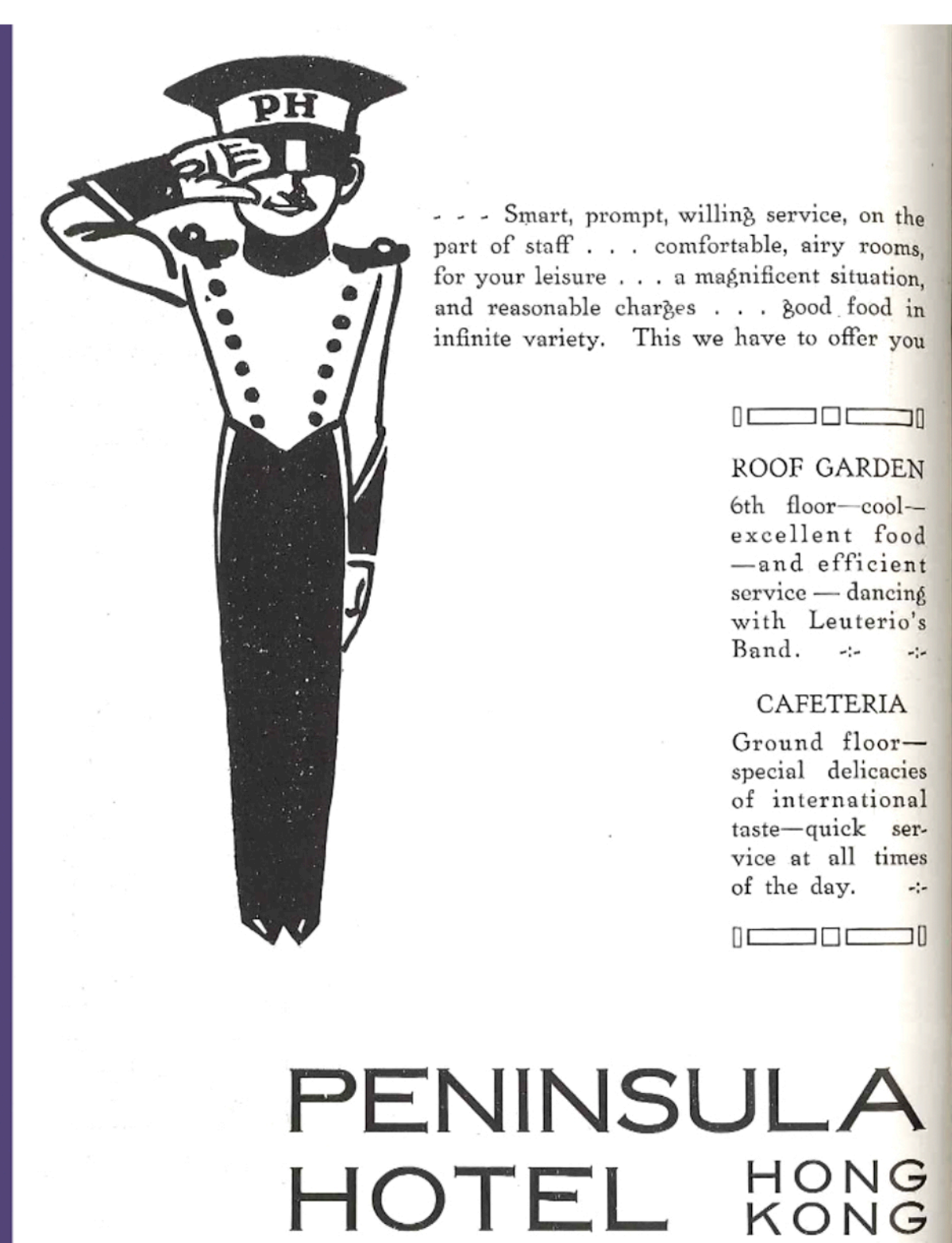
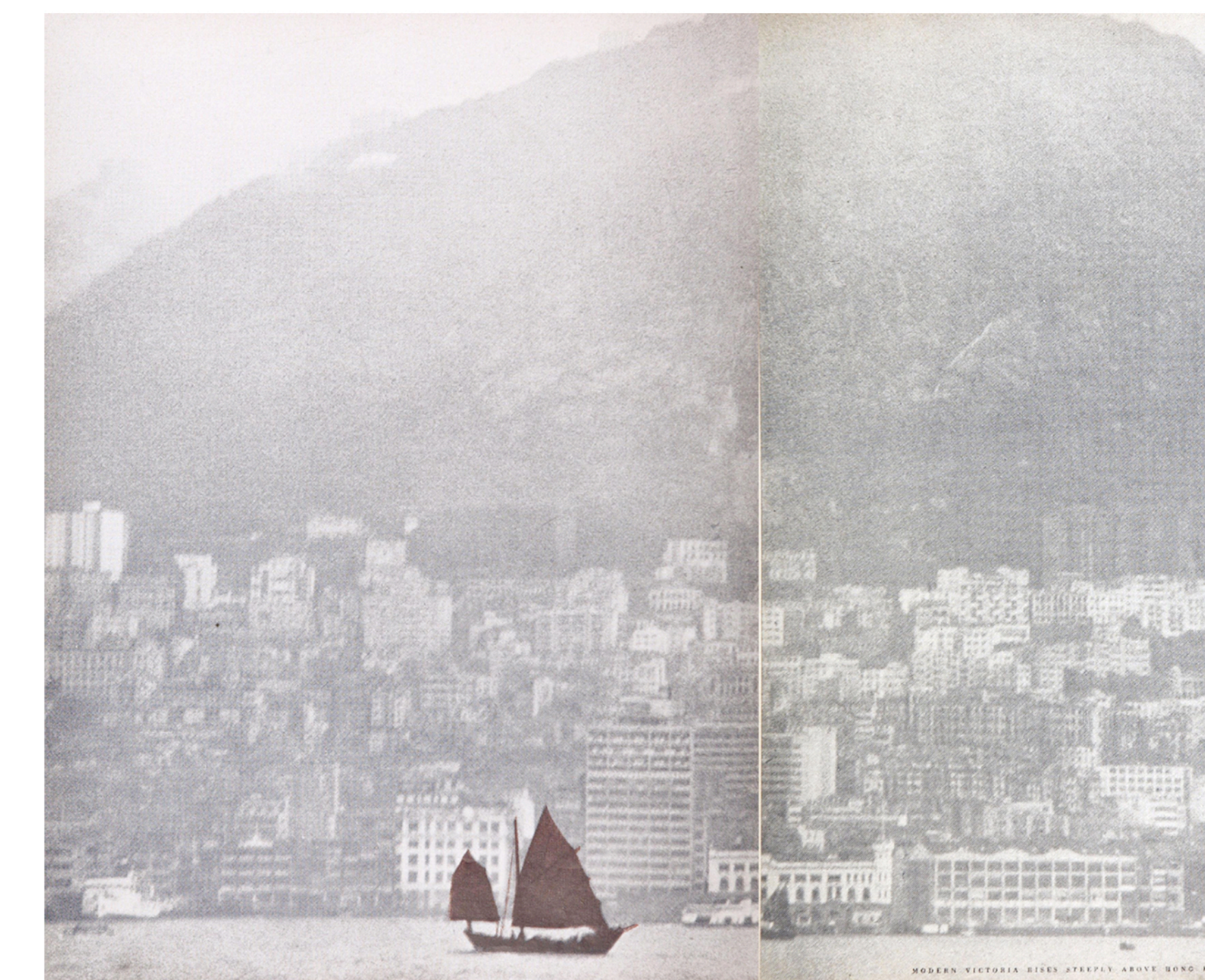
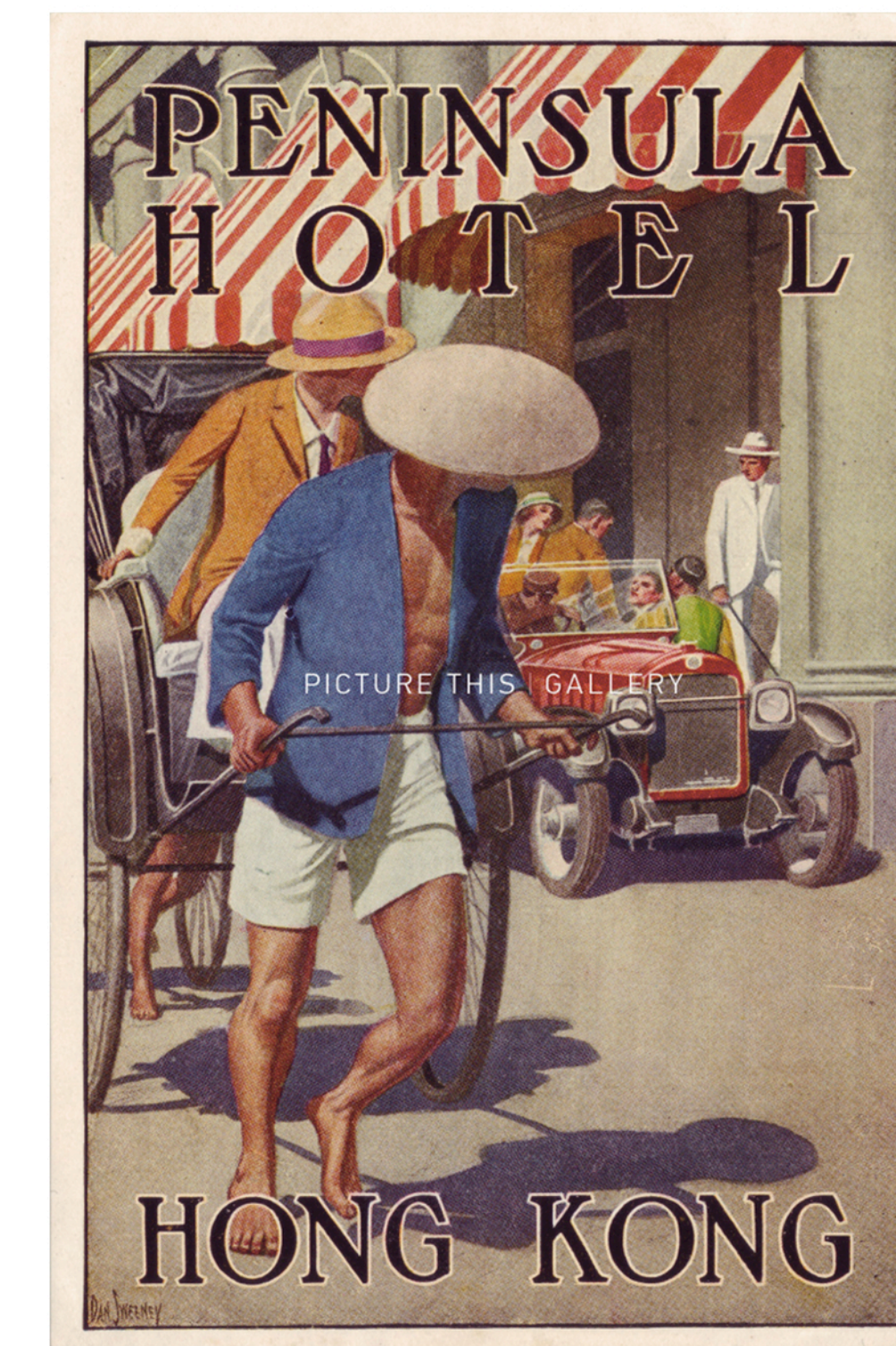
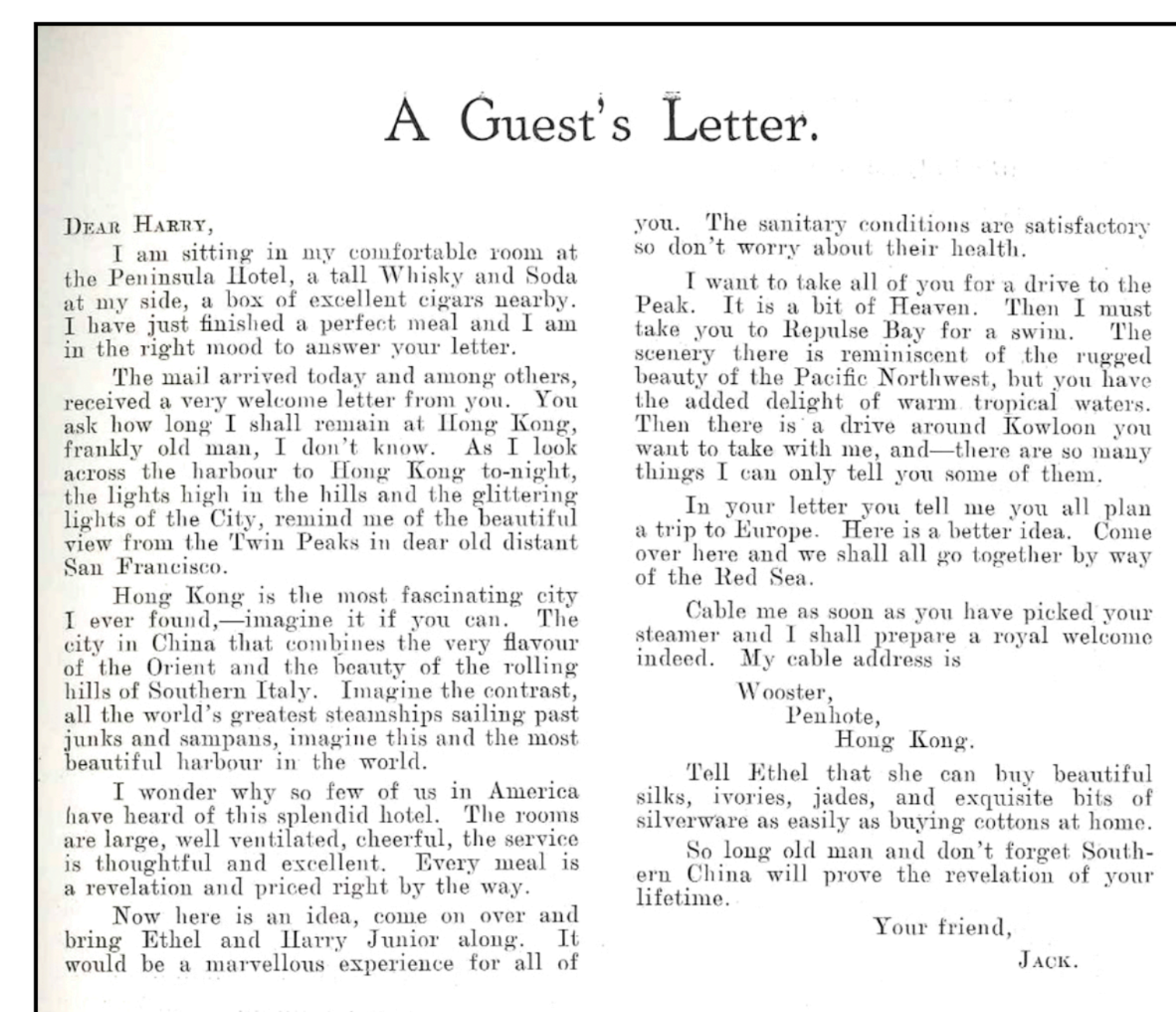
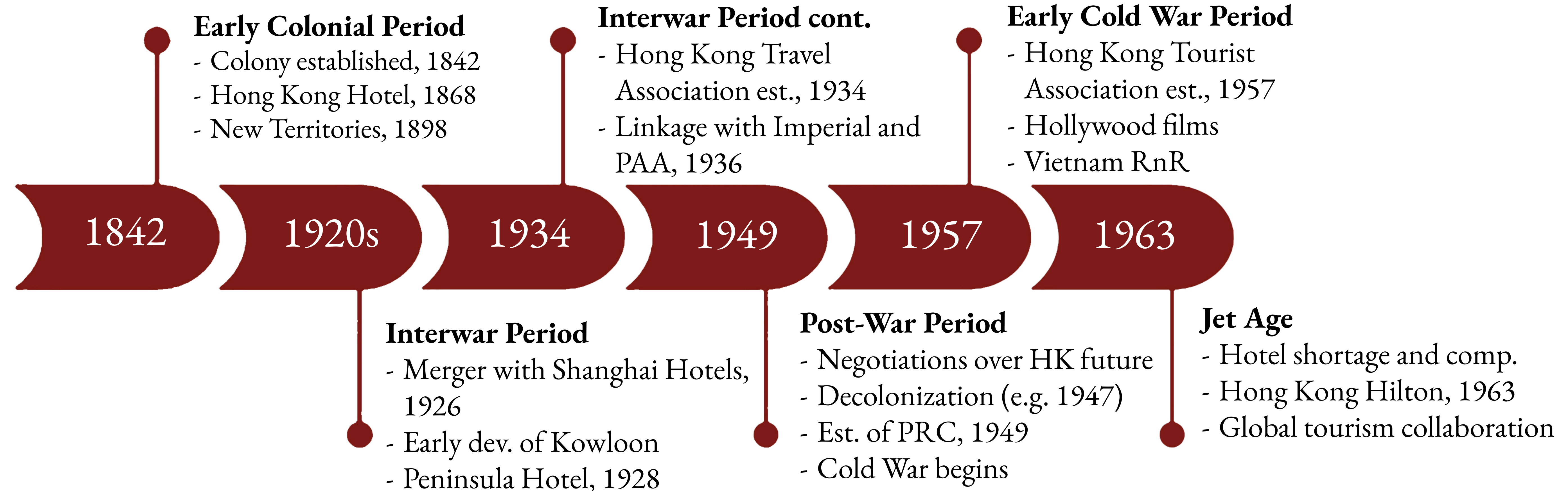
After World War II, Hong Kong's economy rapidly industrialized, its population mushroomed, it took on pivotal geopolitical significance, and, less remembered, it became "one of the greatest travel adventures of our time" (Town & Country, 1961). Tourism was pivotal to Hong Kong's larger transitions, material and cultural. Tourism reconciled irreconcilables through advertising, consumption, and the power of interpretation, creating ontological categories of recognition. This project investigates, using the Peninsula Hotel as a through line and case study, the reconstruction of Hong Kong's identity within and against the Post-war American geographical imagination.

Following WWII, Hong Kong transformed from a modestly important British colony into an "Anglo-American colony" and, later, a "global city." Hong Kong's transition relied on an emerging American geographical imagination that split the world in two. In this context, Hong Kong was essentially reinvented as a place; its identity and meaning in this changing global context adapted. Its meaning in the context of Pax Americana had to be readily refashioned, and this occurred, at the micro-level, in the realm of tourism.

Guidebooks and advertising communicated Hong Kong's new significance as the open stomping grounds of Americans, an extension of the American Empire and Global Capitalism. Its position on the border of Red China was paramount to this transformation, against which its characteristics were ineluctably contrasted. While American pressure was forceful, those who lived in Hong Kong did not go along entirely involuntarily. Hong Kong's new identity was educed through real interaction between tourists and locals, who variously contradicted and reinforced the narrative of guidebooks and advertising.

Methodology:

This study was carried out through the analysis of hundreds of primary sources—guidebooks, advertisements, newspapers, government reports, memoirs, and first-hand accounts—and several dozen secondary sources to critically piece together the history of the Peninsula Hotel, as well as its parent company, its surrounding area (Kowloon), and the tourism industry in the colony at-large. Using the concept of the geographical imagination, this study places Hong Kong's tourism industry as an actor in the colony's post-war material and cultural transitions. The primary shortcoming of this project is its failure, despite my efforts, to directly include the perspectives and experiences of the Chinese working class—particularly the staff at the Peninsula—with and against whom ideas of "Hong Kong" were projected and experienced by observers.



"In ten years, Hong Kong has literally pulled herself up by her own bootstraps and has changed her status from a change-of-hands entrepôt into one of the most progressive manufacturing cities of the Orient.."

Although Hong Kong is a seething and pulse-throbbing cauldron of orientalism, it is still one of the cleanest and best-policed cities in the East. and the private life of the Anglo-American colony is not greatly different from that of Bermuda, Nassau, or Jamaica."

"You look for the romantic hallmark of Hong Kong, a chinese junk with bat-wing sails, and it putt-putts past on a diesel engine without a scrap of canvas on the masts.."

A small, slender Chinese beauty in a closely fitted Cheongsam strolls by with a skirt slit to the mid-thighs, and you begin to perceive the reason for the thousands of Caucasian-Chinese intermarriages.."

The association beams its Lorelei serenade to tourists overseas, but in its own yard, it functions as a watchdog. Its warning slogan is brief: Don't bilk the tourists, or you'll kill a £43 million-a-year industry."