

HONG KONG IN DEEP TIME

Staging Geohistory in the Geopark

Marcus Yee

The University of Hong Kong

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Supervisor: Dr. Devika Shankar

Abstract

At the start of the 21st century, the global metropolis, Hong Kong began to anchor its 'floating identity' on rocks, geological formations that tell the territory's geological history ('geohistory') across hundreds of millions of years. This research looks at the contested meanings behind the state's consolidation and display of deep time as a Hong Kong identity project, placing state efforts—such as the establishment of a Geopark in 2009—within broader historical and geographical scales that shape the city. Beyond the sanitizing proclivities of the state's approach to geohistory, this research considers stories of other Geopark stakeholders, including villagers, scientists, and conservationists. These politically ambivalent narratives reveal the limits of state attempts at transforming deep time as a depoliticized and commodified identity discourse, while pointing towards an urgency for Hong Kong to formulate a coherent planetary politics in its own terms.

Methods

Oral history: interviewing stakeholders of the Geopark

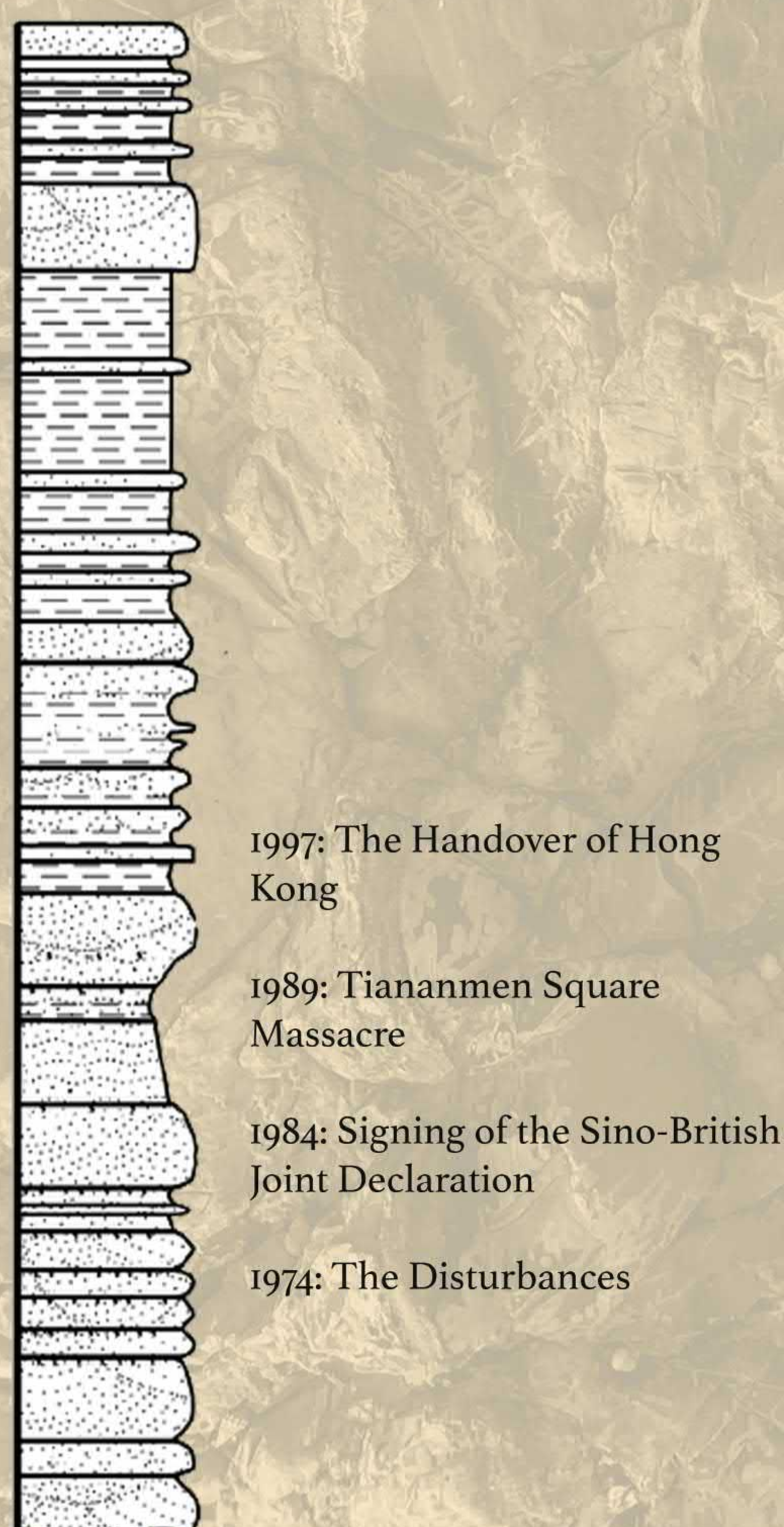
Archival research: finding, assessing, and employing sources such as newspapers, NGO websites, and governmental records

Comparison: finding institutional analogues to the Geopark in Hong Kong's colonial and environmental history, such as the colonial museum, the mine, or the national park

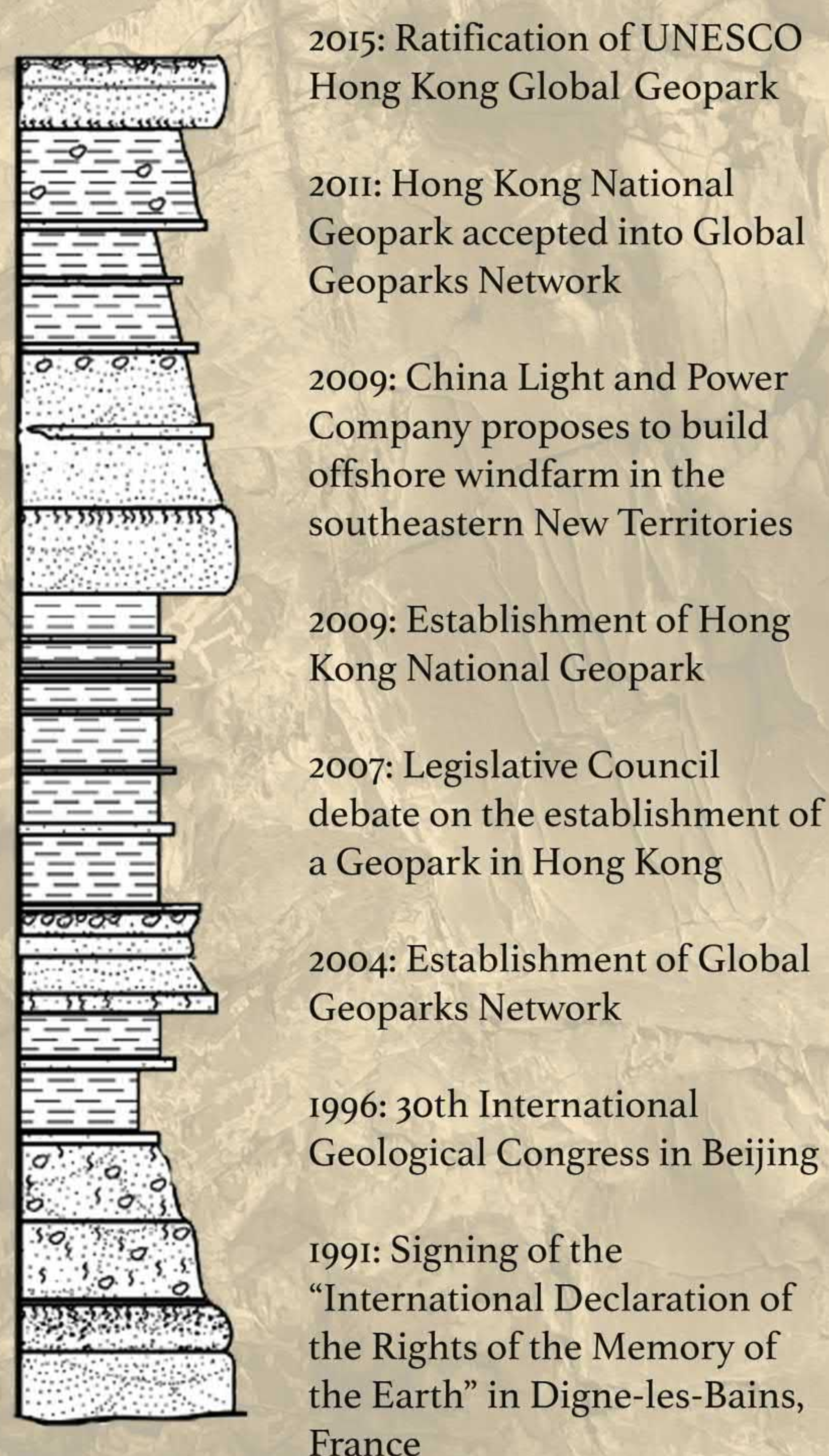
Site visits: making observations in museums and geological sites in the Geopark

Timelines

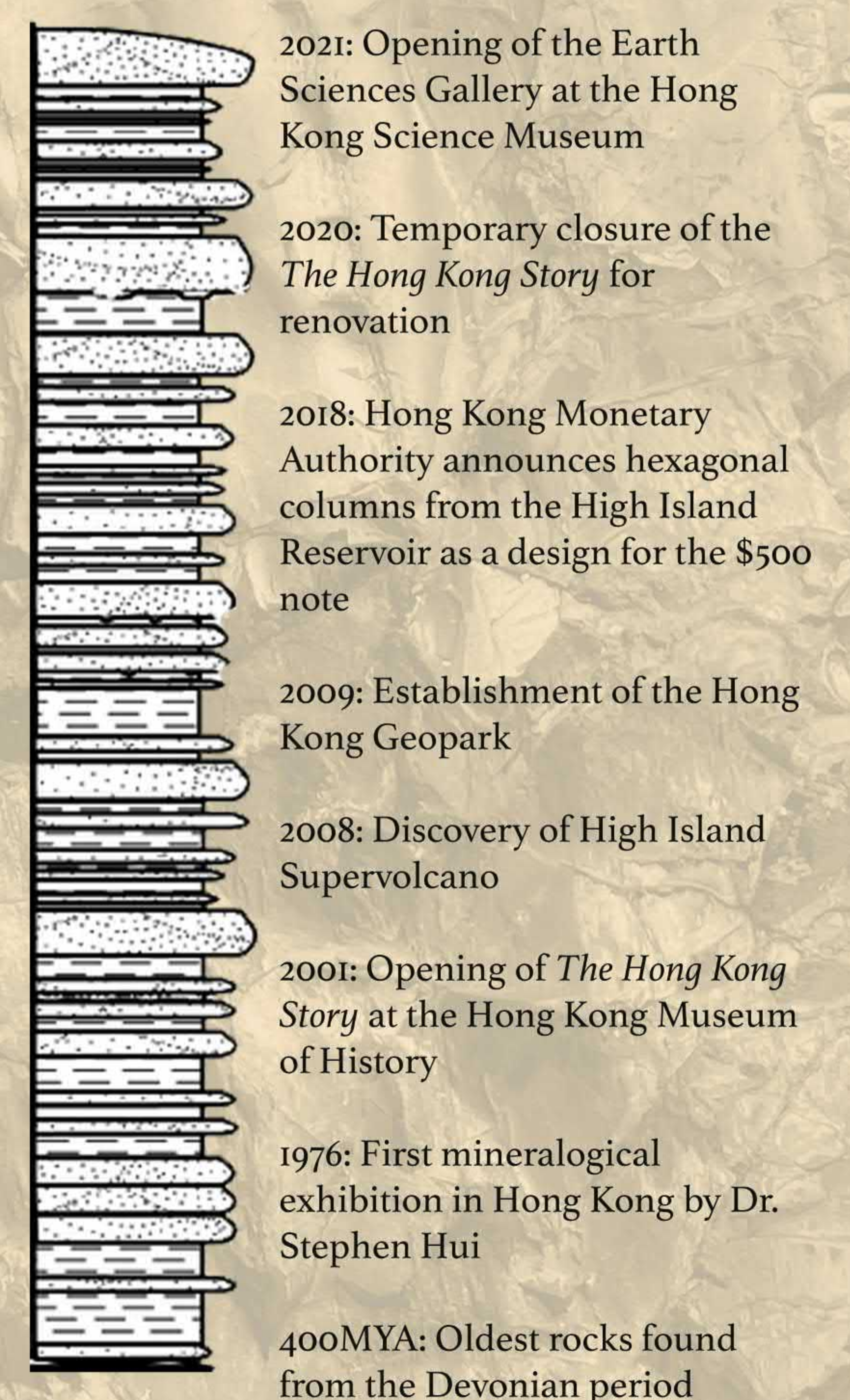
Hong Kong histories



Geopark histories



Display histories of Hong Kong geohistory



Research questions

1. As a city defined by countdowns, what are the historical implications of producing, displaying, and formalizing geohistory in Hong Kong?
2. How does deep time connect Hong Kong across different geographical and temporal scales?
3. What are some of the state's strategies in controlling the representation of deep time?
4. Have there been alternative and contesting visions of geohistory in Hong Kong?

Findings

- After the establishment of the Geopark, deep time became a more deliberate state project to create a depoliticized identity discourse in Hong Kong for city branding, global tourism, diplomacy, and environmental management.
- The politics of deep time in Hong Kong is also a politics of scale, as the local emerges in engagement with the national, global, and planetary. However, the city's geohistory, with the state's emphasis on manufacturing local identity, obscures political connections with the planetary scale, a missed opportunity in an age of climate crises.
- Stakeholders of the Geopark—Geopark managers, Earth scientists, conservationists, and villagers within the Geopark— operationalize the politics of scale towards their interests, foiling state attempts at carving out geohistory as a depolitical space. Different examples show that Hong Kong needs to envision a coherent politics of deep time, as opposed to resting on merely consolidating Hong Kong's place in deep time for consumption.

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