

BOOK REVIEW

## Political Censorship in British Hong Kong: Freedom of Expression and the Law (1842–1997)

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For some historians of the British empire, one of the key justifications for imperial expansion was its legacy of civil and economic liberty and the rule of law. According to this interpretation, British colonial rule might have been authoritarian, but it nevertheless laid the groundwork for subsequent democratization and individual and market freedoms. Yet, this has always been a difficult story to swallow. Often, ideas about promoting Westminster-style democracy in the colonies only became a feature of British imperial rhetoric very late in the day. They generally emerged on the eve of constitutional decolonization, as a response to growing nationalist political mobilization, and as a means of promoting the sorts of successor states that the British wanted to see established during the transfer of power. Sometimes they were only deployed in hindsight, as a post-facto justification for British rule.

The idea of press freedom and freedom of expression more generally always sat uncomfortably with the authoritarian nature of British colonial rule. How was it possible to sustain liberal ideas about free speech, in essentially illiberal political settings? One organization to grapple with this dilemma was the Empire (later Commonwealth) Press Union, an industry body that among other things sought to persuade colonial governments that they had to abide by UK standards of press freedom. Sometimes these demands succeeded, backed up by the threat that otherwise newspapers in the UK would expose and denounce the treatment of their fellow journalists in the colonies. However, when the colonial press voiced nationalist opposition to the imperial connection, British newspapers might be less likely to come to their aid.

In his fascinating study of free expression in colonial-era Hong Kong, Michael Ng shows how this worked on the ground. Today, some argue that the British legacy in Hong Kong was one of democratization and freedom of expression, in contrast to the censorship and repression of the current regime. Ng shows a very different historical reality. Freedom of expression was only prioritized by the colonial state as the handover to China became imminent. Press freedom had but shallow roots in the colony, and frequently the British colonial state sought to harass and prosecute those who criticized it in the public sphere. Today's activists who imagine a lost era of colonial freedom are, Ng rightly argues, indulging in "nostalgic fantasies of a former golden age" (p. 3)

Ng traces restrictions on freedom of expression back to the earliest days of the British colonial state. These restrictions clearly paralleled British attempts to restrict press freedom and public debate in many other parts of the empire during the early decades of the 19th century. As ideas about press freedom became a key element of the reformed UK state of the mid-19th century, so in some parts of the empire colonial governments also conceded greater freedom of expression. But not in Hong Kong, where legislation designed to restrict public debate remained in force. Moreover, unlike in Britain, pre-publication censorship was put into practice. Colonial administrators had the power to excise unfavourable news and comment from the page before it went to print,

leaving readers to puzzle over prominent gaps or placeholder markings. These powers were strengthened in the 1920s, in response to growing local labour activism, and as a means to suppress the expression of anti-Japanese sentiment. After the Second World War, the threat posed to British rule in Hong Kong by the spread of communism from China was used to justify continued censorship and restrictions on freedom of expression, including in the education system. The colonial state also kept a tight rein on discussion on Hong Kong radio and (later) television services. The BBC model of public broadcasting was not deemed exportable to Hong Kong.

So where does the idea come from that the British promoted democratic freedom of expression in Hong Kong? In the later chapters of his book, Ng shows how, as the British prepared for the hand-over to China, they rapidly tried to build up a framework that would allow freedom of expression, which they hoped would endure after 1997. Even then, they failed to repeal all the colonial-era legislation that imposed restrictions. These moves dated back to the 1970s, as Governor MacLehose sought to present an image of Hong Kong as an attractive, liberal society in contrast to communist China. However, real change was slow to come. It was only after the UK–China Joint Declaration on the future of Hong Kong that repressive laws restraining freedom of expression began to be dismantled. The pace of reform accelerated in the 1990s, in the wake of Tiananmen Square.

To support these arguments, Ng deploys a wide range of new evidence drawn from archives in the UK and Hong Kong and from a number of contemporary newspapers. These primary source materials tell a convincing story. The resulting study should be of interest to scholars of the history and politics of Hong Kong, to those working on British imperial history, and to all those interested in histories of press freedom and freedom of expression.