

BOOK REVIEW

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

by Michael Ng. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 228 pp.  
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Michael Ng's *Political Censorship in British Hong Kong: Freedom of Expression and the Law (1842–1997)* provides the first comprehensive account of the development and application of repressive measures designed to target and limit speech and publication in Hong Kong over the period of British rule. In doing so, as Ng highlights, the book challenges a narrative that came to be widely held in late twentieth and early twenty-first century Hong Kong: that the long British colonial legacy was one of respect for the 'rule of law' and human rights. In a time in which many of Hong Kong's historic suppressive laws, or their more recently passed analogues and complements, have been put into effect to subdue and penalise participants in protest movements, the book also highlights the similarities between traditional British rule and public order governance in contemporary Hong Kong.

For anyone interested in the history of British colonial approaches to freedom of expression in particular, and civil rights in general, the book is invaluable, tracing as it does a century and a half of developments in the laws and institutions utilised to suppress oppositional or critical sentiment. While willingness to bend principles was similar across time, the tools the authorities had to conduct their censorship increased dramatically at certain periods. Similarly, for anyone interested in the history of Hong Kong, even should one's interest not lie in the area of human rights and freedom of expression specifically, the book is of great value, as following the thread of official concern with public speech provides valuable insights into the mindsets, preoccupations and orientations of colonial governments through the history of British Hong Kong.

The appeal and utility of the book is enhanced by the clear, accessible style in which the relevant developments are presented. *Political Censorship in British Hong Kong* is also meticulously and compellingly researched and documented throughout, and includes several examples of censored publications from different moments in time that help provide a more textured understanding of the process of censorship in practice. While the details will doubtless be new to non-specialists, that press censorship has a long history in Hong Kong won't surprise those familiar with patterns of European colonial governance elsewhere. Perhaps less widely known, as well as more emotive given the tender years of many of those targeted, is the long history of suppression of schools, students and teachers, discussed in some detail at various points in the text. *Political Censorship in British Hong Kong* also provides a very helpful account of the manner in which, as the twentieth century went on, traditional print censorship programmes were complimented by new forms of surveillance and control, including radio, television, film and live performance censorship systems.

As with any strongly sourced, detailed and convincingly argued historical analysis, the primary questions that present themselves concern subjects of investigation outside the book's immediate scope. Two such questions might be raised here. First, *Political Censorship in British Hong Kong* comprehensively demolishes the myth that British governance in Hong Kong was one of respect

for freedom of expression – as Ng notes, ‘[t]he press was suppressed; editors and publishers were prosecuted and imprisoned; journalists, teachers and school principals were deported and detained without trial; and daily newspaper reports appeared with crosses, dots and boxes to replace politically censored words ... all in accordance with the law’ (p 191). This is read as an example of what is often termed ‘the rule of colonial difference’ – as Ng puts it, ‘[t]he English common-law system practiced in colonial Hong Kong was very much uncommon in comparison with the system practiced in England and Wales at the same time’ (p 191). Whether the common law as practiced in the metropole lived up to its narrative of respect for civil rights over the same period might also be seriously questioned, however.

Second, *Political Censorship in British Hong Kong* compellingly argues that government decisions in Hong Kong were constantly shaped by and with reference to British concerns and interests in relation to China. While there is no doubt relations with China were consistently front and centre of the minds of British colonial officials in Hong Kong, the frequency with which the suppressive approaches employed in Hong Kong were employed elsewhere across the British Empire suggests they were not produced by any factors unique to the territory. Rather, the approaches adopted appear to have been common aspects of British colonial governance, applied by the British Empire everywhere it extended its power. While Hong Kong’s complex position in relation to China unquestionably influenced the timing and manner in which those approaches were employed, the similarity of the modes of governance utilised in Hong Kong to those adopted in other parts of the Empire invites further comparative exploration into the chains of transmission, timing of implementation and commonality and/or uniqueness of the relevant techniques.

That *Political Censorship in British Hong Kong* poses these questions testifies to the strength of its contribution to the field. Throughout the book, Ng provides a critical corrective to narratives viewing the British Empire as synonymous with the development of rights-based rule of law, complimenting and constituting an essential part of a rich and rapidly growing global literature on the widespread and systematic human rights violations committed in the context of empire. The construction of a more rights-respecting global order requires open and honest recognition of this history. In addition to essential reading for anyone interested in the history of the British Empire and/or Hong Kong, *Political Censorship in British Hong Kong* should also be essential reading for anyone interested in the history of suppression of freedom of expression and of the construction of freedom of expression-respecting systems in future.