

## Book Review

### Social Movements and Civil Governance in Hong Kong

Michael H. K. Ng & John D. Wong, *Civil Unrest and Governance in Hong Kong: Law and Order from Historical and Cultural Perspectives* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017) pp 230. Hardcover: \$119.00.

This book consists of a wide range of essays that develop a counter-narrative to the prevailing narrative of Hong Kong's political and legal past. Hong Kong is today officially a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China (PRC), though the region has a long history of oppressive, colonial rule under the British. It was ceded to the British following the First Opium War in 1842 and officially declared a Crown Colony of the British Empire in 1843. British rule continued an established trend: Macau, today another SAR, effectively became a Portuguese colony in 1557. The UK ruled Hong Kong until the transfer of sovereignty to the PRC in 1997. According to the prevailing historical narrative, Hong Kong has long enjoyed relatively high levels of political stability, especially in contrast to mainland China, because the long era of British colonial rule established a legacy of legal and cultural frameworks rooted in liberalism. Hong Kong's apparent embracing of the English rule of law has come to mean that this "city-state" enjoys widespread support for the principles of individual liberty, the freedom of expression, and judicial independence. Challenging such narratives is crucial, the authors assert, because social movements often make use of stories about the city's past: how history is constructed is itself a terrain of the struggle.

Another prevailing narrative about Hong Kong is that its citizens are politically apathetic. In contrast to the communist revolutions that swept mainland China after World War II and subsequent political unrest, Hong Kong has witnessed little protest activity aimed at structural transformation. Yet, this volume draws attention to a wide range of social movements and periods of civil unrest in Hong Kong's history that call this narrative into question. Chapter 1, for example, analyzes a 1919 court case involving schoolboys who resisted the Japanese occupation of Qingdao—an occupation that was made possible by the support of Western powers, demonstrating how Britain's rule of law was instrumental in upholding the system of colonial domination. The law was used to suppress political dissidents, specifically by expanding legal definitions to neutralize nationalist movements in Hong Kong. In Chapter 2, the author shows that the Hong Kong government has regularly deported political dissidents to quell revolt and revolution, and that deportations were typically carried out without trial. Chapter 4 examines "Leftist Riots" that were carried out in Hong Kong in 1967. The author asserts that these riots developed in response to Mao's Cultural Revolution in mainland China, in contrast to other accounts that locate the trigger of the riots in a labour dispute. As a result of the riots, communist support in Hong Kong waned, while British colonial authorities implemented restrictions on individual freedoms. Not only did the 1967 riots challenge the widespread claim that Hong Kong was and has been politically apathetic,

but they also showed how the rule of law was manipulated by colonial authorities to maintain and solidify their social and political control.

Chapter 5 shows that the prevailing historical narrative was born out of the 1967 riots and fears of the spread of the Cultural Revolution in Hong Kong. The British colonial regime remained intact with hardly any structural, constitutional change enacted after the riots, but the colonial regime's response to the riots in part solidified the idea that Hong Kong preferred political stability and the rule of law to social and political change. Indeed, the colonial regime's reforms that were enacted in the 1980s were more a response to concerns and imperialist manoeuvring in London than to the demands of protesters. Chapter 6 draws connections to the 1967 riots and the more recent 2014 Umbrella Movement (or the Occupy Central Movement), in which both movements were prefigured by intensive labour strikes. The 2014 Umbrella movement began in response to a 2014 mandate from Beijing that Hong Kong hold elections in which contenders are pre-selected from Beijing. In Chapter 8, the author examines the ways that civil disobedience is interpreted and practised, contrasting the 2014 Umbrella Movement with government officials in the legal system. In both 1967 and 2014, protesters raised demands against a ruling authority, calling into the question the city's supposed political apathy.

This volume also emphasizes an interpretive lens centred on historical and cultural processes. Chapter 3 examines how cultural ideas surrounding the practice of medicine were also a terrain of colonial rule and anti-colonial struggle. In Hong Kong, such suppression was inherently linked with the establishment of a Western legal order. The author demonstrates the ways in which British colonial law was developed from the 1840s onward to exclude indigenous medical practices from medical care that was legally sanctioned and protected. Such actions were predicated on Orientalist perspectives of Chinese medicine as backward and tainted with mysticism rather than Western rationality and science. Chapter 10 further develops an interpretive framework focused on historical and cultural practices by examining artwork made during the Umbrella Movement in 2014. The author asserts that the Umbrella Movement can only be understood in relation to the broader social forces that helped produce it. By examining artwork that protesters produced during the movement, we can better grasp how these broader social forces influenced and helped produce the impetus behind the movement. Indeed, the production of art and images was central to the Umbrella Movement, as protesters mobilized a highly diverse and varied array of images, such as coloured ribbons, images of police brutality, yellow umbrellas, and more. One contribution of this volume is thus a focus on how cultural meanings and political imaginaries interact with understandings of how the law is negotiated and understood by social movements.

The volume focuses heavily on legal and cultural processes, but would have benefited from a discussion of how Hong Kong is implicated in the global, capitalist system and how it is shaped by political-economic forces more broadly. While the authors draw attention to political protest aimed at the state, there is little discussion of how economic actors shape the situation. Indeed, it is well known that Hong Kong is mired by extreme wealth inequality and has the highest cost of housing in the entire world. It would be interesting to explore how changing economic and material conditions influence understandings of Hong Kong's political and legal history.

This is a much-needed volume that calls into question the prevailing myths surrounding Hong Kong's political past. It will appeal to scholars from a wide range of backgrounds,

including Asian studies, critical legal studies, social movement studies, and more. Although the volume focuses exclusively on Hong Kong's past and its relationship with colonial Britain, it illuminates much beyond Hong Kong by challenging our understanding of how law is practised, for whom it is practised, and why. These interventions are more important than ever, given the contemporary political situation in Hong Kong. Today, social movements in Hong Kong struggle for basic rights and liberties against an oppressive regime. Indeed, in 2015, the Chinese government kidnapped staff members of a Hong Kong-based bookseller that sold materials not available in mainland China. The lesson of this volume is thus clear: Hong Kong has never been free, and looking to the past helps us to chart a course for the future.

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