

independence and self-determination as well as so-called returnism, the return of Hong Kong to UK sovereignty. The author successfully conveys the radicalness and unorthodoxy of Chin's Nietzschean thinking (p. 61) which gives Hong Kong "real power and agency" in its relationship with China (p. 64). Through Carrico's vivid prose we relive how Brian Leung from the Hong Kong University Student Union journal *Undergrad* ponders the question of membership in the Hong Kong community (p. 78). We follow the writers of the Hong Kong National Party's *Comitium* journal towards "the boundaries of politically acceptable speech" which "built a new foundation for reimagining Hong Kong" (p. 97). He concludes by arguing that returnism's "recolonization would in fact be an express train to independence" (p. 108) finally allowing "proper decolonization" (p. 109). The thinkers, politicians and publications covered in the chapter are not only nationalists but also self-described localists. Here a deeper discussion on the complex relationship between nationalism and localism would be helpful.

The third and final chapter "critically examines the official Chinese research on Hong Kong independence" (p. 114). Carrico begins with a fundamental challenge to Edward Said's approach to post-colonial analysis and the Orientalist understanding of identity and repression. He questions the simple Orientalist East–West binary and "Said's geographically bound approach" (p. 116). Gerd Baumann's structuralist framework provides him with the tools to analyse China's "deployments of orientalizing knowledge/power to rationalize its domination of others" (p. 118). Carrico subsequently examines "four core discourses on Hong Kong in official Chinese narratives" that explain Hong Kong independence: "Hong Kong as a child," as "underdeveloped hysteric," as uncivilized outlaw" and as "virus or cancer" (p. 119). He demonstrates the striking deficiencies of the Chinese take on the political situation and its sole purpose to justify Beijing's colonial rule over Hong Kong. We are thus reminded that "there was never any chance of maintaining Hong Kong's freedoms under One Country, Two Systems. Everything that they [Hong Kong's independent activists] predicted has come true" (p. 10).

Two Systems, Two Countries is written in a clear and captivating style that makes it attractive far beyond the academic community. We learn about the fascinating ways a Hong Kong nation is imaged, the extraordinary transformation of Hong Kong identity and politics since 1997, and why this happened particularly after 2011. We are also informed about Beijing's self-perception and the counternarratives to justify its treatment of dissenting voices. Carrico's book is thus essential reading for anyone interested in recent Hong Kong events and in China's global role.

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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 handover 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.

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Accidental Holy Land: The Communist Revolution in Northwest China

Joseph W. Esherick. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022. 314 pp. Open Access. ISBN 9780520385337

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Xi Jinping's decision to lead the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) newly elected Politburo Standing Committee on a highly publicized pilgrimage to Yan'an at the conclusion the 20th Party Congress this year cannot but underscore the contemporary relevance of Esherick's latest monograph. As the author points out, Xi's personal story and claim to legitimacy are inextricably bound to Yan'an, as "the first true 'princeling' to rule China and the son of a Shaanxi man who rose to power in Shaan-Gan-Ning" (xxiii); his triumphant return to Yan'an to celebrate his re-election was all but pre-ordained, allowing him to highlight historic parallels. Touring Yangjialing, Xi proclaimed that the Seventh Party Congress had served to "point out just the right direction and opened up exactly the correct path that saw the Party traverse from victory to victory" (*Renmin ribao*, 28 October 2022, p.1). At the Yan'an Revolutionary Memorial site the next day, Xi asserted to his entourage that "in Yan'an, our Party not only gained a firm foothold, but also ushered in a major development, starting on the irreversible historical trajectory of development and growth" (*Renmin ribao*, 29 October 2022, p.1).

Xi would not be at all pleased with *Accidental Holy Land*, not least because of the author's injunction that "we must remind ourselves that Mao never wanted to be in Yan'an and that the Yan'an era was itself an accident of history" (p. 208). Esherick is insistent that "even an event as momentous as the Chinese Revolution must be understood as the result of a long process of multiple contingent events" (xxiv). In contrast to the Party's "determinism and notions of historical inevitability," he offers us an intriguing excursus on the "accidental" nature of "the world apart" that Yan'an became for Mao and early Party activists (p. 206) and trains our attention on the unexpected concatenation of developments that led them to find their footing in northern Shaanxi.

To be clear, "accidental" for Esherick means neither "coincidental" nor "random": unlike completely haphazard events, "accidents have causes" that can be investigated (p. 208). Yet one key assumption that he contests is that momentous events must "necessarily have big causes" (p. 208). Broader societal movements and intellectual trends may shed helpful light on major developments, "but they are insufficient to unravel the complex fabric of history" (p. 208). For example, Esherick notes, the fact that most Chinese political elites of the early 20th century, whether aligned with the Kuomintang or the CCP, believed in the likelihood of revolutionary transformation in no way foreordained the eventual outcome. "In this sense, the inevitability of *some* Chinese Revolution is plausible. But the form that *the* revolution took was the product of a vast array of local, national, and historical contingencies that can be unraveled only through precise attention to the details and