

# ИСТОРИЧЕСКИЕ РАКУРСЫ

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## GHOSTS OF AN EMPIRE: BRITISH LEGACIES IN ASIA

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**Summary.** One hundred years ago, the British Empire controlled a quarter of the world's area and population. Today only a dozen tiny islands remain of this once great empire. However, the British left a huge and permanent legacy behind in terms of the English language, a rule of law, banking, Protestantism, team sports, and parliamentary institutions. While some historians, notably Niall Ferguson, hold that the British legacy was a positive one, most historians believe the legacy was a negative one. Instead of being liberal and democratic, the British Empire was anti-democratic. Instead of fostering free trade, the Empire was protectionist toward the outside world. Notions of class and hierarchy were crucial. This article examines the British legacy in two former colonies in Asia--one huge and one tiny: India and Hong Kong. While in Hong Kong, Britain's legacy has been fairly positive, in India it is quite negative. The British Empire was not a prelude to a modern 21st century Western world of democracy, multiculturalism, and liberal economics. The British Empire was something different--snobbery, hierarchy, and individualism, and must be understood on its own terms.

**Keywords:** British Empire, colonialism, Asia.

### I. INTRODUCTION

*Take up the White Man's Burden  
Send forth the best ye breed  
Go bind your sons to exile  
To serve your captives' need  
To wait in heavy harness  
On fluttered folk and wild –  
Your new-caught sullen peoples,  
Half-devil and half-child.* (Rudyard Kipling *White Man's Burden*)

Colonialism has led to racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance, and.... People of African descent and indigenous peoples were victims of Colonialism and continue to be victims

of its consequences (*Durban Declaration of the World Conference against Racism, 2001. [South Africa]*) [3, p. ix]<sup>1</sup>.

One hundred years ago as World War I moved toward a close, the British Empire emerged from the war one of the world's great superpowers. While the British Isles was small and located on the northwest margins of Europe, its Empire covered roughly a quarter of the world's population, nearly the same proportion of the earth's surface, and dominated all of its oceans through its huge navy. The British Empire rested on British sea-power. For decades, Britain was the financial and commercial center of the world. The Empire varied greatly. It included settler colonies, where large numbers of British and Irish peoples migrated to during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa. All became self-governing dominions by the early twentieth century, and are today, among the world's wealthiest nations. India was its largest, most important, and most prestigious component, as authoritarian Viceroy ruled through local aristocratic Maharajas. Today, India has one of the world's fastest growing economies. In Africa, the British ruled in a similar fashion as authoritarian British Governors provided broad direction to local tribal chiefs, who, in turn, provided the day-to-day administering to the indigenous peoples. Locals manned much of the bureaucracy and security forces, allowing for the need for relatively few British troops to keep order. For example, the British had 66,000 troops in the vast subcontinent of India and 5 000 troops in Hong Kong [9, p. 23–24].

In Asia, Britain's colonial dependencies stretched from Aden to Fiji. The most important, besides India, were Ceylon (today Sri Lanka), Malaya (Malaysia), and the two ports, Singapore and Hong Kong [2, p. 29–30]. Most British colonies became independent in the thirty years that followed the end of World War II. Today, Britain retains sovereignty over 14 territories outside the British Isles. They include Bermuda, Gibraltar, and the Falkland Islands. Some are too small to become independent, such as St. Helena (where Napoleon was interned following the Battle of Waterloo) and Pitcairn Island (where the mutineers from the ship *Bounty* landed). Others lie next to a hostile great power, and fear a takeover, such as Gibraltar and the Falklands, wishing to remain under the British umbrella [2, p. 307–310]. This article focuses on the legacies of British Colonialism in Asia, in other words, what the British left behind as a result of colonialism. In particular, the article will look at the legacies of Britain in the Indian subcontinent, including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma, Sri Lanka, and then Hong Kong, where the author has lived and worked for almost thirty years. When the author first arrived at the University of Hong Kong in August 1990, some seven years before the handover to China, the University's Senior Common Room, which serves drinks to faculty, still had numerous professors drinking gin and tonics, and toasting to the Empire!

## II. LEGACIES OF BRITISH RULE: MYTH AND REALITY

Was the British Empire a good thing? Did British rule largely benefit, or was British rule largely negative on the local, indigenous peoples, who lived in Asia? The leading proponent of a positive view of British rule is Niall Ferguson, a British historian who teaches at Harvard University today. In his book, *Empire: the Rise and Demise of the British World Order* (2002), Ferguson wrote that the British Empire acted as an agency imposing free markets, the rule of law, investor protection, had relatively incorrupt, representative and democratic governments. He further wrote “no organization in history has done more to promote the free movement of goods, capital, and labor than the British Empire...There is reason to doubt the world would have been the same or even similar in the absence of the empire”. According to Ferguson, the British gave its colonies: the English language, English forms of land tenure and property rights, English and Scottish banking, Common law, Protestantism, team sports, the limited state, representative assemblies, and the idea of liberty. Thus, the results of British rule were the triumph of capitalism, the internationalization of the English language, the enduring influence of the Protestant version of Christianity, and the survival of parliamentary institutions. Therefore, while the British Empire is dead today, its legacy is huge and permanent. Christianity is stronger in many of her former colonies than in Britain itself. Liberal

<sup>1</sup> (В русском переводе, сделанном с британского издания, — с. 13. Здесь и далее автор ссылается на американское издание, вышедшее в том же 2003 г. под несколько иным названием. — Прим. ред.). The author wishes to thank Dr. Kirill Barsky, Ambassador from the Russian Federation, for inviting him to give a version to an intellectual tea at the Russian Embassy in Bangkok on March 30, 2018. The author wishes to thank the following for their assistance in preparing for this talk and subsequent article: Dr. John M. Carroll, Department of History, the University of Hong Kong; Dr. Barry Crosbie, Department of Literature and Cultural Studies Education University of Hong Kong; Dr. Jonathan Chow, Department of Political Science, University of Macau; and Dr. Mark Hampton, Department of History, Lingnan University, Hong Kong.

capitalism was successfully established in many different economies and states. Parliamentary democracy has been adopted by a majority of the states in the world today. The Empire pioneered free trade, free capital movement, and free labor. Thus, British style institutions have enhanced a country's economic and democratic prospects. According to Ferguson, the world is a better place due to British Imperialism [3, p. ix–xxvi] (в русском переводе – с. 11–30).

On the other hand, most historians differ from Ferguson, and write that British rule was largely negative—toward the colonies, and toward Britain itself. Marxists and Nationalists historians hold that British imperialism was economically exploitative, writing that every facet of colonial rule was designed to “maximize the surplus value that could be extracted from subject peoples” [3, p. xvii–xviii] (в русском переводе – с. 22–23). The cost of defending the empire was a burden on British taxpayers. That money could have been spent on consumer goods, and better and more social services. Instead of providing political stability, the opposite was often the case. Richard Gott in his recent account of British conquest and occupation *Britain's Empire: Resistance, Repression, and Revolt* concludes with this question: “If Britain made such a success of its colonies, why are so many of them still major sources of violence and unrest?” [4, p. 475].

Kwasi Kwarteng in his book *Ghosts of Empire: Britain's Legacies in the Modern World* rebuts Ferguson in numerous areas. Instead of being liberal and democratic, the Empire openly repudiated ideas of human equality, and put power and responsibility in the hands of chosen elite. Far from being democratic, the Empire was in fact anti-democratic [5, p. 2]. Notions of class and hierarchy were crucial. An imperial arrogance, a high degree of status consciousness, and the self-assuredness of the administrative class were distinctive features of British rule [5, p. 6]. Powerful individuals directed imperial policy with little supervision from London. They came from a very similar background, which led inevitably to class-money and education-public schools, university, army, and then on to the colonies. Colonial administrations were highly elitist, stratified, and snobbish. The heads of these administrators were filled with ideas of class, intellectual superiority, and paternalism. British rule was really quite anarchic, as autocratic governors reversed predecessors' policies with little hesitation as to its consequences. Thus, Kwarteng concludes that the British Empire had nothing to do with democracy. Instead of an empire fostering global free trade, the Empire fostered protectionism, through its economic policy of imperial preferences, where goods from the British Empire were preferred over goods from anywhere else. Key was the idea of natural hierarchy. Class and status were integral. Notions of class were crucial in forming alliances with local elites. Thus, much of the instability in the world today is a product of Britain's legacy of individualism and haphazard and contradictory policy making [5, p. 391–397]. Gott goes further in his critique, writing: “The British Empire was established, and maintained for more than two centuries, through bloodshed, violence, brutality, conquest, and war. Slavery, famine, prison, battle, murder, extermination were the various fates of the Empire's inhabitants” [4, p. 5].

### III. THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT (INDIA, BURMA, KASHMIR, SRI LANKA, PAKISTAN, AND BANGLADESH)

Indian rule is often depicted as despotism exercised by pompous or bigoted *sahibs* (Europeans) in white shorts and pith helmets. Or was Indian rule a selfish struggle against poverty, indolence, and ignorance among primitive masses? [2, p. 9–12]. The reality was colonial rule over this vast subcontinent relied upon locally recruited subordinates to man the bureaucracy and security forces, and to win the cooperation of indigenous leaders, who remained the main source of order and authority [5, p. 394–396]. India was the largest, and most prestigious of British dependencies. Shashi Tharoor, an Indian politician and author of the recent book *Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India* [9], has no doubts about the British legacy in his country. “British rule deindustrialized India; created landlessness and poverty; drained the country's resources to Britain; exploited, exiled, and oppressed millions, sowed seeds of division and inter-communal hatred, that led to the horrors of Partition (of India into a Hindu India and a Moslem Pakistan); and was directly responsible for the deaths of 35 million peoples in unnecessary famines; as well as thousands in massacres and killings”<sup>2</sup>.

Another author more charitably lists the legacies of Britain in India as:

1. Consolidation of former independent states under one administrative region called India. Led

<sup>2</sup> Tharoor Sh. There's No Debate on what the British did to India // South China Morning Post. This Week in Asia”, January 14–20, 2018, pp. 9–10.

- to one nation called India (*At what cost? For example, Kashmir, a beautiful, rich largely Moslem state, was sold to a very rich Hindu Prince for only 500,000 GBP in 1846, and has remained part of Hindu India today against the wishes of most people for self-determination*). **Legacy mixed.**
2. Introduction of Western Education, including arts, sciences, and medicine) has exposed India to the world. *Indian universities are generally very good.* **Legacy positive.**
  3. Introduction of a non-political and independent Judiciary, Postal Service, Indian penal code, and Indian Civil Service. *Yet, a number of draconian colonial laws remain on the books and used despite their restrictions on freedoms.* **Legacy mixed.**
  4. Introduction of a very complete Railway system, specifically mountain railways. *Today the system is vastly overcrowded.* **Legacy mixed.**
  5. Setting up cities, introduction of new colonial architecture, English street names, and city names. **Legacy mixed.**
  6. Introduction to English language (*Has acted as a unifier for a country with many languages, but only for an elite?*) *India is one of the major centers of English-language fiction.* **Legacy mixed.**
  7. Abolished or made illegal discriminatory traditional practices (*untouchability, burning of widows on funeral piers, and child marriages*). **Legacy largely positive but laws not always enforced.**
  8. Loss to the economy due to export of raw material at cheap prices, instead of finished goods. *Reversed India's Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century. British rule held India back economically. The economic structure was not suited for independence and certainly not for partition.* **Legacy largely negative.**
  9. Unclear border marking (*has led to wars between India and China in 1962 and between India and Pakistan, as well as innumerable disputes*) **Legacy is largely negative.**
  10. Sports: Cricket is very popular in both India and Pakistan.
  11. Democracy and Freedoms. India is often cited as the world's largest representative democracy, a federalist system with power distributed between the center and the states, a Westminster-style Parliament, an independent judiciary, a multi-party system, and guaranteed freedoms in its constitution. *However, during the 1970s Prime Minister Indira Gandhi suspended constitutional rights. India has been wracked with corruption. Democracy has never existed in Kashmir. Pakistan since the partition and independence has faced extensive political unrest, terrorism, civil war that separated the country, and innumerable military coups that have hobbled any democratic development. Throughout most of its independent history since 1948, Burma has faced wars with ethnic minorities, military rule, a stunted civil society, and is only a fragile limited democracy today, committing possible genocide and ethnic cleansing against its Muslim Rohingyas. Much of this instability can be attributed to when the British conquered Burma in 1885; they threw out the Burmese king. They prevented leaders, a civil society, and institutions developing and maturing all contributing to Burmese political instability and poverty today.* **Legacy: freedom largely yes, Democracy largely no<sup>3</sup>.**

#### IV. HONG KONG “THE LAST JEWEL OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE”

Britain received the rich city-state of Hong Kong as a result of three “unequal” treaties with China: in 1842, in 1860, and in 1898. As a result, Hong Kong consists of Hong Kong Island, Kowloon Peninsula, and the New Territories. The cession of the New Territories was for a period of 99 years, hence Britain was required to return the New Territories in 1997; therefore, colonial Hong Kong always had a time limit. Hong Kong has been China's most critical link to the rest of the world: sheltering revolutionaries and refugees, a transit point for emigrants, exporting Chinese products to the west, importing western products into China, banking and finance, etc. [1, p. 1–4].

The author arrived in Hong Kong in August 1989, and witnessed the last eight years of British Colonial Hong Kong, and the first 20 years of Chinese rule. The changes in Hong Kong-political, economic, and social-since the handover on June 30, 1997, have been major. At the same time, the author, most historians and observers of Hong Kong, would conclude the British legacy has been lasting and significant. Every

<sup>3</sup> *Prasad R.* What are the Legacies and Remnants of British Colonialism as Evident in Today's India? URL: <https://www.quora.com/What-are-the-legacies-and-remnants-of-British-colonialism-as-evident-in-todays-India>.

year when the author asked his students at the University of Hong Kong, whether they considered the British legacy to be positive or negative, most replied quite emphatically, positive. Certainly colonialism transformed Hong Kong's historical development. Its legacies are:

1. Sports: Horse racing is very popular. Hong Kong is also the host of the international tournament the Rugby Sevens. *Otherwise little or no professional sports league.* [1, p. 6]. **Legacy mixed.**
2. Personal political freedom. While freedom of Speech, Assembly, press and religion are all guaranteed under the Basic Law, Hong Kong's Constitution, there are some curbs. *There is an atmosphere, and an increasing one of self-censorship in the press, television, and radio. Candidates for the Hong Kong legislation have been recently excluded from running due to their espousing independence or self-determination for Hong Kong.* **Freedom declining, particularly true since 2014. Still one of the best in Asia.** [1, p. 224].
3. **No Democracy.** Until virtually the end of British colonial rule, Hong Kong had no political representation and political parties. The first election in Hong Kong was only in 1985. After World War II, Governor Mark Young attempted to introduce elections and a limited representative democracy to Hong Kong. Yet, successive governors never enacted his proposals depriving Hong Kong of an effective development of political parties, mature leaders, and a political culture. The results are a dysfunctional government in Hong Kong today [5, p. 348–359]. **Legacy poor.**
4. Another legacy of the British is Hong Kong's failure to produce political leadership. Under British rule, London appointed the Governors with little or no say from Hong Kong people. Today a small select group, largely pro-Beijing business elite, chooses the Chief Executive (CE), who consequently lacks legitimacy. The results have been: the first post-handover CE was forced to resign early in disgrace; his successor is sitting in jail following convictions for corruption charges; and the third CE was reviled by most Hong Kong people for not standing up for Hong Kong interests. The current Chief Executive, Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor, has only been in office for a few months, and so, it is too early to judge her performance. **Legacy poor.**
5. Hong Kong is arguably the most cosmopolitan and westernized city in Asia—streets named for British royalty, British law, Christianity, modern westernized medicine, familiar customs, etc. We still come across pre-handover coins with a portrait of Queen Elizabeth on its front. **Legacy positive.**
6. Development of a Hong Kong identity, distinct from Mainland China. That identity has caused extensive tension with the Central Government's officials and ordinary Chinese people. More and more Hong Kong people see themselves as culturally and politically distinct [1, p. 234–236]. **Legacy depends on who you are, either positive or negative.**
7. English continues to be the language of success in business, government, and the professions. It remains an official language. Yet, the weak command of English in Hong Kong is also a legacy of colonial rule. The level of English has always been low, much lower than Singapore [1, p. 32]. **Legacy positive and separates Hong Kong from other Chinese cities.**
8. Hong Kong's judicial system remains separate from the administration and independent, operating under British Common Law. **Legacy positive for the local population and business community.**
9. Rule of Law and political stability encouraged both Chinese and foreign investment. Hong Kong has a generally efficient and non-political civil service. But until the last years, Europeans dominated the senior ranks in the civil service; forcing Hong Kong Chinese to play catch up after the handover [1, c. 229]. The rule of law in Hong Kong has declined in recent years after the Umbrella Movement in 2014. Its leaders have been imprisoned and banned from running for higher office. **Legacy mixed.**
10. Economic Freedom. Consistently the Conservative American think tank the *Heritage Foundation* has ranked Hong Kong to be one of the most economically free places in the world. The state's role in the economy has been minimal—keeping taxes low, maintaining open markets, no restrictions on the movement of capital, the ease of opening a new business [5, p. 360–361]. *Yet, that came at great cost, and is only partly true. Hong Kong has always had an inordinate income distribution, and a lack of compassion for the poor. There are few social provisions. Hong Kong's economy has always depended on political patronage and discriminatory*

*monopolies that favored British firms. Free trade and free enterprise did not always mean fair trade and equal opportunity. Until the 1970s corruption was rife among the police, government officials, and the business community. That limited development and caused resentments. Paternalism governed Hong Kong for over 100 years. Legacy again mixed.*

11. Excellent educational system. Its universities are ranked among the best in the world, most established by the British. British missionaries and church groups established excellent primary and secondary schools, which are still among the best in Hong Kong. *Yet, free and compulsory education was introduced only very late. The best universities remain closed to most Hong Kong young people. Legacy mixed.*
12. Christianity. Hong Kong remains about 10 % Christian, one of the higher percentages in Asia, and the main form is the Anglican or Church of England denomination. Church organizations and Christian missionaries have contributed to education, medical services, and other social services to Hong Kong's poor since the founding of the ex-colony back in the middle of the nineteenth century. **Legacy generally positive.**

## V. CONCLUSIONS

The British Empire is dead. Only bits now remain. The great movement of people that once drove British imperial expansion changed their direction in the 1950s. Emigration from Britain gave way to immigration into Britain, changing the demographic character of the British Isles [3, p. 303–308]. A majority of the states in the world have adopted the institutions of Westminster styled parliamentary democracy. Elite schools, universities, the civil service, and press are often modeled on Britain. The English language has become the world's international language in business, commerce, diplomacy, and the academic world. British Common Law provides strong legal protection for investors, secure rights for property owners, personal liberties, secure rights of contracts, and stable and responsible governments.

Yet, most former British colonies have retained draconian colonial-era laws that curb personal freedom, and give governments wide latitude to detain people indefinitely without charge. Democracy is not a legacy of the British as Pakistan and Bangladesh have faced several military coups and unstable immature political parties; India suspended democracy in 1985 and has been mired by corruption; Sri Lanka has faced communal tensions, civil war, and authoritarian rule; Myanmar (Burma) has had little or no democracy since independence in 1948. Hong Kong had a series of autocratic British governors, who never allowed for elections until Hong Kong's final decade of colonial rule. Both Malaysia and Singapore are at best very flawed democratic states, as one political party has maintained control of the government since independence in 1958. Neither has held fair and free elections [6, 389–399]. Yet, the British Empire did bring justice and order to often, anarchic parts of the world. Thus, the British Empire has a mixed legacy, not wholly good or bad [Carroll J.M. Good Empire, Bad Empire // South China Morning Post. This Week in Asia. January 14, 2018, pp. 8–9; Keane, J. Age of Empires // South China Morning Post. This Week in Asia. March 18, 2018, pp. 10–11.].

Perhaps one of the greatest legacies of the British is the Commonwealth of Nations, which helped assure colonies they were not making too violent a departure. The Commonwealth replaced the Empire. The post-World War II colonial revolution transformed the character of the Commonwealth from a largely white-man's club into a genuinely multi-racial, ethnic, and religious association. It provides economic assistance, educational programs, professional associations, and culture to member-states. The guiding principles of the Commonwealth are autonomy, equality, common allegiance, and free association among members [9, p. 693–696]. The Commonwealth Games and other events provide sporting opportunities in football, cricket, rugby, and hockey for large and small states alike [9, p. 45]. The British monarch, Queen Elizabeth, remains a symbol of the Commonwealth, linking Britain with its former colonies. The Commonwealth provides a forum for international deliberations, and a web of connections. Particularly for small states, Commonwealth membership gives them status and a voice [9, p. 707].

In conclusion, in the wake of the Brexit vote in the UK in June 2016 when Britain voted to leave the European Union, one can say: "Britain has lost an empire, and not yet found a role" [2, c. 329]. Some British politicians, who favored leaving the European Union, declared that Commonwealth trade could replace European Union trade. In this way, the Commonwealth can perhaps become a new Empire, in another form. The British Empire was not some prelude to a modern 21st century Western world of democracy, multi-culturalism, and liberal economics. The British Empire was something different-

snobbery, hierarchy, individualism, etc. It was not the precursor of the world today. The British Empire was completely unlike any system of government the world has known. The British Empire must be understood on its own terms [5, p. 397].

МАЙКЛ ШЭР

## Призраки империи: британское наследие в Азии

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**Аннотация.** Сто лет назад Британская империя контролировала четверть территории и четверть населения мира. Сегодня от некогда великой империи осталась дюжина маленьких островков. Однако от британцев осталось также огромное и непреходящее наследие в виде английского языка, верховенства закона, банковского дела, протестантизма, командных видов спорта и парламентских институтов. При том что некоторые историки, особенно Ниал Фергюсон, настаивают на том, что британское наследие было позитивным, большинство придерживаются противоположной точки зрения. Вместо того чтобы быть либеральной и демократической, Британская империя была антидемократической. Вместо того чтобы способствовать свободной торговле, империя была протекционистской по отношению к окружающему миру, а понятия класса и иерархии играли в ней ключевую роль.

Статья рассматривает британское наследие в двух бывших колониях в Азии: одной огромной и одной крошечной, в Индии и в Гонконге. В то время как в Гонконге наследие Британии оказалось довольно позитивным, в Индии оно весьма негативно. Британская империя не была прелюдией к современному западному миру XXI в. – миру демократии, мультикультурализма и либеральной экономики. Британская империя была иной – снобистской, иерархической и индивидуалистической, и понимать ее нужно в ее собственных терминах.

**Ключевые слова:** Британская империя, колониализм, Азия.

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