

Penalties of Empire: Capital Trials in Colonial Hong Kong

‘Dr Munn is a distinguished scholar in the legal history of Hong Kong. This impressive work focuses on the administration of justice in capital cases in the context of the conditions of the society at the time. His account of events and people is lively and masterly. His observations and insights are illuminating and perceptive. This outstanding book deserves to be widely read.’

—**The Honourable Andrew Li Kwok Nang**, First Chief Justice of the Hong Kong SAR (1997–2010)

‘This book is an extraordinary attempt to approach European colonial culture from a fresh perspective by scrutinising the work that courts did. By excavating the judicial archives, Chris Munn gives us an entirely new account of how colonial justice both worked and failed to achieve its aims.’

—**Timothy Brook**, author of *The Price of Collapse: The Little Ice Age and the Fall of Ming China*

‘In this richly detailed exploration of nine capital trials chosen from among the hundreds that took place in Hong Kong between 1844 and 1993, Chris Munn provides a stimulating exploration of British colonial rule. Authoritative and engagingly written, *Penalties of Empire* takes the reader into the heart of some of the most controversial episodes in Hong Kong’s modern history.’

—**Robert Bickers**, University of Bristol

‘We must have a procedure – if we are going to hang anyone – that is just,’ said Chief Justice Sir Francis Piggott in 1909, on discovering that Chinese accused of murder were being denied interpretation in Hong Kong’s courts. Due process, no matter how costly or inconvenient, was ‘one of the penalties of empire,’ he declared.

Penalties of Empire explores how judges, juries, and lawyers strove to deliver justice during the 150 years when the death penalty was in force in Hong Kong. Nine main chapters focus on key capital trials in the first century of British rule. Among the cases are piracies, assassinations, and crimes of passion and desperation. These chapters describe the proceedings in court and the participants involved. They also explore the debates surrounding each case and the exercise or denial of mercy by governors. Two final chapters discuss the decline of the death penalty after World War II, its suspension after 1966, and the controversies leading to its formal abolition in 1993. *Penalties of Empire* traces the evolution of criminal justice at its highest levels. It also offers a prism for understanding some of the broader forces at work in Hong Kong’s history.

Penalties of Empire

Capital Trials in Colonial Hong Kong

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I

Introduction

'Penalties of Empire'

On 22 October 1908 an altercation took place on the Peak Tram, the funicular railway linking urban Hong Kong to the Hill District reserved for Europeans and their servants. Koo Tung (a 'shop coolie') and a friend were on their way to collect a debt. A man in white livery sitting behind them stretched his legs and muddied Koo's clothes. Words were exchanged, and when the tram reached the Peak the man challenged Koo to a fight. Koo declined and he and his friend hurried on their way. Half a mile on, near the Peak Church, they joined some of Koo's clansmen and again encountered the man in white. He called out other men from houses nearby and they beat Koo to death with bamboo poles. Three of them, 'sedan chair coolies' employed by Europeans, were charged with his murder. They were tried a few weeks later by the Chief Justice, Sir Francis Piggott, and a jury of seven Europeans; a Japanese juror with poor English was excused. Two of the accused, Li Shek-pang and Hung Loi, were found guilty of the lesser offence of manslaughter. The third, Kwok Leung, was acquitted.¹

The verdict was typical enough for a case the newspapers described as a 'clan fight', a 'tribal row', a 'coolie affray'. The accused were Hoklo from north-eastern Guangdong, reputedly a 'rougher, wilder set of men than the Cantonese' and speaking a different dialect.² The witnesses against them were Cantonese from nearby Xiangshan County. The jury struggled to make sense of confusing prosecution evidence but took only fourteen minutes to return verdicts of manslaughter. This avoided the risk of sending innocent men to their deaths and

1. SCMP, 30 October and 6, 18, 20, and 26 November 1908 and 6–8 January 1909; HKT, 23 October 1908; HKWP, 9 January 1909.

2. James Dyer Ball, *Things Chinese, or Notes Connected with China* (Hong Kong: Kelly & Walsh Ltd, 1903), 346.

saved time on a case in which they probably had little interest. Murder carried the death penalty and required a unanimous verdict. Manslaughter needed only a majority, and the punishment could be anything from life imprisonment to a fine. It was now the judge's task to hand down sentences.

Just as Chief Justice Piggott was about to sentence Li and Hung, their counsel, Horace Calthrop, rose to apply for a point of law to be referred to the Full Court – a sitting of both judges of the Supreme Court. None of the evidence had been interpreted to the accused, he said. The Hoklo dialect was so different from Cantonese they could barely understand the Chinese witnesses, let alone those who testified in English. No one, said Calthrop, should be convicted without hearing the evidence. The prosecutor, the Attorney General, William Rees-Davies, interjected that in Cyprus (where he had recently served) the courts heard evidence in Greek and Turkish, and it was not interpreted to the accused if he was represented by counsel. A similar practice had taken root in Hong Kong, where those on trial for murder were assisted by a barrister at public expense. Providing an interpreter as well would, said Rees-Davies, be 'opening up a tremendous precedent'. If, for example, 'you have three prisoners all speaking different dialects the evidence of each witness would have to be interpreted into all three dialects.'

That, remarked Piggott, was 'one of the penalties of Empire'.

The Full Court – Piggott and Henry Gompertz, the Puisne (or ordinary) Judge – heard the point of law four weeks later. Calthrop argued that defendants must understand the evidence against them. Otherwise, they could not challenge it or assist counsel in cross-examination. He cited English cases in which judges had ordered the acquittal of deaf defendants unable to follow proceedings. Rees-Davies replied that it was a matter of practice, not law. He produced an affidavit by the interpreter, Li Hong-mi. 'I have read it,' said Piggott. 'Its effect is that in murder cases, the most serious cases, the rule of translation is to be the slightest.' The law required the accused to be present at trial, he said. But if they did not understand the evidence they might as well be absent. Rees-Davies again raised the practice in Cyprus.

Piggott — If we decide against you in this case, I may say that the Courts in the other Colony will follow our practice.

Rees-Davies — I doubt it.

Piggott — If we have an empire of many nationalities we must have a procedure – if we are going to hang anyone – that is just.³

Piggott and Gompertz quashed the convictions. 'In the trial of human beings for crimes, the law of England requires the utmost consideration for the accused, and the most scrupulous exactness in the conduct of the proceedings,' said Piggott: 'time and money

3. *HKDP*, 4 February 1909.

are nothing compared with liberty and life.' The judgment, *R v Kwok Leung*, has since been cited around the world as an authority on the right of the accused to interpretation.⁴ Even so, Piggott had to remind the interpreter to tell Li and Hung they were discharged and could leave the court. Against protests by Calthrop, Rees-Davies then announced that he would file fresh indictments for murder against them. They were rearrested on leaving the court and committed for trial the following week. The case was, however, abandoned because material witnesses were absent.⁵

By 'penalties of Empire' Chief Justice Piggott did not mean the punishments imposed by the courts but rather the duty to dispense justice to the millions of people who lived under British imperial rule, whatever inconveniences that might entail. It was part of what Rudyard Kipling described as the 'white man's burden.' Piggott thought he was carrying more than his fair share of that burden. He grumbled about his unbearable workload and the strain of Hong Kong's sultry climate: a day in court left him 'dripping with perspiration and absolutely exhausted.'⁶ He upset European businessmen by finding for their Chinese counterparties. He received no thanks for championing the rights of the accused at a time when governors wanted tough justice. His strident criticisms of officials in open court, said one governor, were 'calculated to lower the dignity of the Government in the eyes of the Chinese who do not appreciate our ideas of the mutual relations between the judiciary and the Executive.' Piggott infuriated officials with his incessant complaints. 'The root fact is that the man is a cad and is unable to conceal his nature,' wrote Reginald Stubbs, then a Colonial Office clerk, later a Governor of Hong Kong.⁷

The last straw was Piggott's opposition to reforms to the Full Court intended to rectify the anomaly whereby the Chief Justice, who had a casting vote, effectively decided appeals from his own judgments. The government proposed adding a temporary third judge, the Judge of the British Supreme Court in Shanghai, who would visit Hong Kong twice a year to sit on the court when it heard appeals in civil cases. That, protested Piggott, would do

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4. SCMP, 4 and 26 February 1909; HKWP, 1 March 1909; *R v Kwok Leung and Others* (1909) 4 HKLR 161. Anna Koo, 'Truth through Court Interpreters,' *International Journal of Evidence and Proof* 13 (2009): 212–224. Celia Brown-Blake, 'Fair Trial, Language and the Right to Interpretation,' *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 13 (2006): 391–412.
 5. Rees-Davies cited *R v Drury* (1849) 3 Car & K. 193, which held that, if a verdict was reversed because of a procedural error, the accused could not plead *autrefois acquit* (double jeopardy). Calthrop wrote to Members of Parliament and the Colonial Office objecting to the fresh indictment as 'absolutely illegal'. As a result of an accident in November 1909 Calthrop died near the site of the Peak Murder. After dinner at a friend's house, he set off on foot to his house on Conduit Road after missing the last Peak tram. He tripped into a water channel, falling to his death. He had arrived in Hong Kong in 1904 after practice in the Gold Coast, a British colony in West Africa. Calthrop to Cox, 28 February and 4 March 1909, CO 129/364, 171–178; Lugard to Secretary of State, 25 March 1909, TNA CO 129/355, 428–434; SCMP, 8 November 1909.
 6. SCMP, 7 June 1907; Piggott to Lugard, 14 April 1908, CO 129/347, 167. See Peter Wesley-Smith, 'Sir Francis Piggott: Chief Justice in His Own Cause,' *HKLJ*, Vol. 12 (1982): 260–292.
 7. Lugard to Crewe, 15 July 1909, CO 129/357, 120–143.

nothing to relieve the Supreme Court's growing caseload, which required a *permanent* third judge. Worse still for him, the Shanghai judge, who had seniority over Piggott, would now preside over the expanded Full Court. Piggott publicly criticized the reforms. In response, the government enacted legislation in 1910 empowering the Governor to require a judge to retire after the age of sixty (Piggott was fifty-eight). When Piggott balked at being 'discharged like a Chinese coolie' the Governor pulled out an order by the King stating that it was his pleasure that Piggott should cease to hold office on 30 April 1912.⁸ Piggott was replaced by Rees-Davies, who proved to be a more compliant Chief Justice.

This book explores how the British authorities struggled to administer justice to the inhabitants of a small colony in a region of political turmoil, widespread poverty, and high crime rates – in short, how they tried to discharge, and occasionally evade, Piggott's 'penalties of Empire'. The book examines nine capital trials in early British Hong Kong, the first in 1857, and the last in 1934. After discussing the decline in capital punishment after World War II, it concludes with an account of the events leading to its abolition in the final years of British rule.

The death penalty in colonial Hong Kong

The death penalty was in force in Hong Kong from 1844 until its formal abolition in 1993. The last execution took place in 1966, a year after the suspension of the death penalty for murder in Great Britain. Some 750 capital cases involving an estimated 1,500 defendants were tried by the civilian courts in the 122 years while the death penalty was in use. During that time the courts pronounced sentence of death on 573.⁹ Of these, 375 persons (373 men and 2 women) were executed by hanging: the cases are summarized in **Table 1**. Most of the remaining 198 had their sentences reduced by the Governor in Council to penalties ranging from probation to life imprisonment. In the early years of British rule a further 185 or so men were sentenced to 'death recorded', mostly for non-fatal piracies: this invariably

8. After a spell in Peking as constitutional adviser to Yuan Shikai, Piggott, short of money, returned to Hong Kong in 1913 to practise law: at this time there was no ban on former judges practising at the Bar. In May 1914 a coughing fit drove a blood clot to his brain. His doctor advised him to return to England. He was now so indebted that the government provided £50 out of a charitable fund for his passage. In 1922 he was adjudged bankrupt in England, with debts of £15,000. He died in 1925. Lugard to Harcourt, 4 October and 29 December 1911, CO 129/380, 221–232 and 381, 522–549; Piggott to Crown Agents, 23 March 1912, CO 129/394, 282; *HKH*, 15 April 1912; May to Harcourt, 15 June 1914, CO 129/411, 353–357; Official Receiver to Colonial Office, 3 August 1922, CO 129/478, 141–149.

9. These figures exclude twenty-four men sentenced to death (twenty-one of whom were executed) in War Crimes trials held in Hong Kong in 1946–1949, and the unknown numbers executed during the Japanese occupation in 1941–1945.

Table 1: Death Sentences by the British Hong Kong Civilian Courts, 1841–1966

Years	Death sentences		Hanged	Remarks
	Murder	Other Crimes		
1844–1845	4	4	4	1 murder sentence by the Court of Justice with Criminal and Admiralty Jurisdiction; 1 shooting with intent to murder; 3 robbery with violence
1846–1850	10	30	22	30 aggravated piracy (13 hanged)
1851–1855	15	0	10	
1856–1860	20	4	11	3 aggravated piracy (1 hanged); 1 burglary with violence
1861–1865	52	5	45	5 aggravated piracy (4 hanged); 36 murders were piracies
1866–1870	14	17	21	17 aggravated piracy (11 hanged)
1871–1875	18	0	6	
1876–1880	10	0	7	
1881–1885	2	0	1	
1886–1890	2	0	0	
1891–1895	4	0	4	
1896–1900	16	0	12	
1901–1905	17	0	11	
1906–1910	22	0	9	
1911–1915	10	0	6	
1916–1920	27	0	22	
1921–1925	22	0	16	1 woman hanged (1923)
1926–1930	17	19	33	16 aggravated piracy (16 hanged); 6 murders were piracies
1931–1935	10	0	7	
1936–1940	41	1	24	1 aggravated piracy (1 hanged); 1 woman hanged (1940)
1941	15	0	4	
1946–1950	41	7	36	5 treason (5 hanged); 2 aggravated piracy; 2 (1 treason, 1 murder) convicted by the British Military Administration's General Military Court
1951–1955	34	2	31	2 unlawful use of firearms (2 hanged)
1956–1960	33	0	24	
1961–1965	26	0	8	
1966	2	0	1	
Totals	484	89	375	

Notes:

1. 'Death recorded' judgments (leading to automatic commutation) are not included.
2. Those not hanged fell into four categories: (1) sentence commuted (the majority); (2) free pardon; (3) the 3 men convicted of robbery with violence in 1845 who committed suicide in their cell.
3. The hangings for 1936–1940 exclude a probable hanging for 1 murder conviction in 1940, of Li Hung-fui for the murder of a European during the robbery of a jewellery shop, likely to have taken place in 1941 after an unsuccessful petition to the Privy Council; his hanging cannot be confirmed from sources.
4. The fate of 6 sentenced to death for murder in 1941, one of them a woman, cannot be verified from Executive Council minutes or official statistics, which are no longer extant. It is probable, from the mercy recommendations from juries reported in the press, and from the absence of the usual press reports of hangings, that at least 5 of the sentences, including that of the woman, were commuted.

Sources: ExCo Minutes; annual Supreme Court Statistics and Gaol Returns (*Hong Kong Blue Books, HKGG*); newspapers; notebook of capitally convicted prisoners, 1956–1971, HKPRO HKRS519-1.

resulted in commutation. From 1967 to 1993, judges handed down 264 death sentences: all of them were commuted to imprisonment.¹⁰

Hong Kong largely followed English law on capital crimes. Unlike some British colonies in Asia, including the Straits Settlements and Ceylon, Hong Kong did not adopt the Indian Penal Code of 1860, a simplified codification of English criminal law which differed from English law in its treatment of homicide.¹¹ Under local enactments, the law of England in effect on 5 April 1843 was in full force in Hong Kong except where ‘inapplicable to the local circumstances of the said Colony, or of its inhabitants.’¹² This was the date on which Hong Kong obtained its own legislature. From then on, the Hong Kong government enacted its own laws, known as ‘ordinances.’ They were passed by a Legislative Council made up of appointed members, most of them officials, and consented to by the Governor. The imperial government could disallow ordinances or legislate for the colony, though it did so rarely.¹³ The Governor took advice from an Executive Council, which, from 1896, had a minority of appointed unofficial members. The functions of the councils were set out in Letters Patent and Royal Instructions first issued by the Crown in 1843. These instruments defined the powers of the Governor and required him to review all capital convictions in consultation with his Executive Council (‘the Governor in Council’).

In the early nineteenth century England was in the process of dismantling the ‘Bloody Code’, which prescribed capital punishment for some 200 crimes, many of them offences against property. Under this regime, the landed elite maintained authority through a mixture of terror and mercy: more people were sentenced to death in England than in any other European country, but over half of them received pardons and a lesser punishment.¹⁴

10. Mark S. Gaylord and John F. Galliher, ‘Death Penalty Politics and Symbolic Law in Hong Kong’, *International Journal of the Sociology of Law*, Vol. 22 (1994), Table 3; Commissioner of Correctional Services, *Annual Review* 1993, 14.

11. For example, the Indian Penal Code placed the burden on the prosecution to prove that the accused had intended to kill or inflict serious bodily harm in order for the offence to constitute murder, whereas English law assumed malice aforethought. The doctrine of felony murder, under which in England until 1957 (Hong Kong, 1963) a homicide accidentally committed during the commission of a felony was treated as murder, was not part of the code. The code also allowed a court to impose either death or life transportation (from 1955, life imprisonment) and a fine as a punishment for murder, an option not adopted in the Straits Settlements or Ceylon. Indian Penal Code 1860 s. 300–302. I am indebted to Mitra Sharafi for her guidance on these points.

12. Reformulated by the Application of English Law Ordinance 1966, which, while providing for the common law and the rules of equity to be in force in Hong Kong, ‘so far as they may be applicable’, specified which pre-1843 English statutes were in force. Ordinances Nos. 15 of 1844, 6 of 1845, 2 of 1846, 12 of 1873, and 2 of 1966.

13. See Norman Miners, ‘Disallowance and the Administrative Review of Hong Kong Legislation by the Colonial Office, 1844–1947’, *HKLJ*, Vol. 18 (1988): 218–248.

14. See Douglas Hay, ‘Property, Authority and the Criminal Law’, in Douglas Hay, Peter Linebaugh, John G. Rule, E. P. Thompson, and Cal Winslow, *Albion’s Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1977); Simon Devereaux, *Execution, State & Society in England, 1660–1900* (Cambridge University Press, 2023); Leon Radzinowicz, *A History of English Criminal Law and Its Administration from 1750*, Vol. 1, *The Movement for Reform* (London: Stevens & Sons, 1948); House of

By 1843, the number of capital offences had been reduced to about a dozen: murder; attempted murder causing injury; sodomy; bestiality; burglary with violence; robbery with cutting and wounding; piracy with endangering life; arson of houses with people therein or of ships with intent to murder; hanging false lights to cause shipwreck; setting fire to HM ships of war, arsenals, or dockyards; and high treason.¹⁵ By the 1840s usually only murderers were hanged in England; the last hangings for piracy (the first since 1830) took place in 1864 and the last for attempted murder in 1861.

At first, the death penalty was applied widely in Hong Kong. The first three Chinese sentenced to death, in February 1845, were convicted of robbery with violence; they hanged themselves in their cell, to the dismay of some colonists who felt cheated of a chance to teach the Chinese population a 'salutary lesson.'¹⁶ That lesson came three months later with the hanging in July 1845 of Chun Afoon, who was also convicted of a non-fatal crime: cutting and wounding in an attack on the premises of Jardine, Matheson & Co., the Scottish opium merchants. A dozen or so other men were hanged for non-fatal piracy with violence in the 1840s. Most persons convicted of non-fatal capital crimes, however, were spared execution through sentences of 'death recorded' or commutation. This was the outcome of the very first capital sentence imposed by the Hong Kong Supreme Court,¹⁷ in October 1844 on an Irish soldier.¹⁸

Commons, *Report from the Select Committee on Capital Punishment* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1931), vii–xv; and Brian P. Block and John Hostettler, *Hanging in the Balance: A History of the Abolition of Capital Punishment in Britain* (Winchester: Waterside Press, 1997).

15. *Report of the Capital Punishment Commission* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1866), 660.

16. They left inscriptions on their cell wall recording their names and native places, and the hope that Triad Society brethren would avenge their deaths. *FOC*, 26 February 1845; *CM*, 6 March 1845; *HKR*, 4 March 1845.

17. But not the first capital sentence imposed by a British court in Hong Kong. On 4 March 1844 Salvador Lacrase, a seaman on a British ship, was convicted of murdering the ship's mate by the Court of Justice with Criminal and Admiralty Jurisdiction over British subjects in China. The trial was presided over by the Governor, Sir Henry Pottinger, and Lieutenant-Governor, George D'Aguiar, with a twelve-man jury. Established in 1833 in Canton (though never in session there), the court was transferred to Hong Kong in January 1843. Lacrase's sentence was commuted to transportation. The court had earlier been convened on a ship in Hong Kong harbour in 1839 to try five British sailors for offences relating to the killing of a Tsim Sha Tsui villager, Lin Weixi: the alleged murderer was not tried because the grand jury did not find a true bill. Pottinger to Aberdeen, 27 March 1844, CO 129/8, 172–240; *FOC*, 5 and 9 March 1844; *HKR*, 5 March 1844; Elliot to Palmerston, 27 August 1839, in *Correspondence Relating to China* (London: Harrison, 1840), 433; *Chinese Repository* 8, no. 4 (1839–1840): 180–194; *Canton Press*, 17 August 1839.

18. 'The details are such as cannot appear in a public journal,' observed the *Hongkong Register*. John Brennan was convicted of 'bestiality with a bitch'. The jury recommended mercy and Chief Justice Hulme recorded sentence of death, adding that he had no doubt the Governor would commute it to life transportation. Brennan was sent to Van Diemen's Land with nine other convicts. *HKR*, 8 October 1844; ExCo Minutes, 25 October 1844, TNA CO 131/1, 69; Brennan, John, convict record, 1 April 1844–31 January 1846, Archives Office of Tasmania, CON37-1-2, 447.

From 1861, capital punishment in England was restricted to four offences: murder; high treason; piracy with violence; and arson of HM ships, arsenals, or dockyards. This was the last stage in the dismantling of the 'Bloody Code.' Hong Kong followed in 1865 with ordinances limiting the death penalty to the same four offences. The provisions were almost identical to those in the English acts of 1861, except they omitted the power to try murders by British subjects in foreign territories.¹⁹ By coincidence, imperial legislation in 1865 ended Hong Kong's extraterritorial jurisdiction over British subjects in China and Japan by creating a British Supreme Court for China based in Shanghai.²⁰ Hong Kong's courts nevertheless retained jurisdiction over offences on British ships and piracies on the high seas.

Hong Kong largely continued to follow English reforms on capital punishment, usually with delays. In the troubled conditions of the late 1940s and 1950s the death penalty was also extended to offences against the armed forces under the British Military Administration (1945–1946), and to possession of explosives (1950–1956). The key changes are set out in **Table 2**.

Table 2: Legislation on Capital Punishment in England and Wales and Hong Kong, 1866–1993

Year	England and Wales	Hong Kong	References and Observations
1866		Governor in Council empowered, when commuting a death sentence, to order that the prisoner be publicly flogged.	Suppression of Piracy Ordinances Nos. 9 of 1866 and 1 of 1868: not used; repealed 1901. <i>See Chapter 3.</i>
1868	Abolition of public executions: hangings to take place only within prisons.	From 1893 all hangings take place within Victoria Gaol or, from 1937, Stanley Prison.	Capital Punishment Amendment Act 1868. By administrative measures in Hong Kong until incorporated in the Prisons Ordinance, No. 17 of 1954. <i>See Chapter 4.</i>
1908	Capital punishment of children under 16 years of age prohibited; children convicted of murder to be detained at HM's pleasure.	Adopted in 1909.	Children's Act 1908. Ordinance No. 6 of 1909.

(continued on p. 9)

19. Offences Against the Person Act 1861; Ordinances Nos. 3–10 of 1865.

20. Hong Kong retained extraterritorial jurisdiction over offences committed by British subjects in Macao and, from 1868, offences committed on land by British subjects within six miles of Hong Kong (other than on the mainland of China), extended in 1877 to ten miles. Orders in Council, 9 March 1865, 28 March 1868, and 23 October 1877, *HKGG*, 17 June 1865, 6 June 1868, and 29 December 1877.

Table 2 (continued)

Year	England and Wales	Hong Kong	References and Observations
1922	Infanticide of their new-born babies by mothers with disturbed minds punishable as manslaughter.	Adopted in 1934 on instructions from Secretary of State.	Infanticide Acts 1922, 1938. Ordinances Nos. 37 of 1934 and 2 of 1939.
1931	Capital punishment replaced by life penal servitude for pregnant women convicted of capital offences. (Formerly, sentence of death was arrested until delivery of child.)	Adopted in 1934 on instructions from Secretary of State.	Sentence of Death (Expectant Mothers) Act 1931. Ordinances Nos. 37 of 1934 and 2 of 1939.
1933	Capital punishment of persons under 18 years of age prohibited.	Adopted in 1952.	Children and Young Persons Act 1933. Ordinance No. 29 of 1952.
1947		Death penalty temporarily in force for all participants in armed robberies resulting in death, without the need to prove common intention.	Suppression of Robbery Ordinance, No. 13 of 1947 (not used, expired March 1948). <i>See Chapter 11.</i>
1950		Death penalty for possession of explosives or using arms or explosives without lawful authority, whether or not resulting in death.	Regulation 116-A of the Emergency Regulations, revoked in 1956. <i>See Chapter 11.</i>
1957	Death penalty only for murders in furtherance of theft; by shooting or explosion; to avoid arrest; of police or prison officers, or for repeated murders. New defences of diminished responsibility and loss of self-control under provocation, reducing murder to manslaughter. Killings in furtherance of other offences no longer murder. Suicide pacts reduced from murder to manslaughter.	Partly adopted in 1963, without the restrictions on the use of the death penalty.	Homicide Act 1957. Homicide Ordinance, No. 16 of 1963. <i>See Chapter 11.</i>
1965	Death penalty for murder suspended for five years.		Murder (Abolition of Death Penalty) Act 1965.
1969	Death penalty for murder abolished.		Death penalty abolished in UK for arson in HM dockyards etc. in 1971; for treason and piracy with violence in 1998.
1993		Capital punishment for all offences abolished.	Crimes (Amendment) Ordinance, No. 24 of 1993. <i>See Chapter 12.</i>

The capital trial in Hong Kong

The courts in Hong Kong similarly followed the practice of English courts in existence in 1843, except where inapplicable or modified by legislation.²¹ Changing procedures in England were usually adopted in legislation or by reference to rulings by the higher English courts, as in the Peak Murder trial: this came naturally to Hong Kong's judges and lawyers, most of whom had been trained in London. The key legislation, the Criminal Procedure Ordinance 1899, drafted by Chief Justice Sir John Carrington, drew on English practice and the Indictable Offences (Procedure) Ordinance 1891 of British Guiana, which he had also drafted.²² Hong Kong departed from English practice in some key areas, notably in the composition of juries, the provision of legal aid, and the system of criminal appeals. The courts also relied heavily on interpreters.

Investigations and arrests

If a victim in a capital case was killed and the body found, a post-mortem examination was carried out by a government medical officer, who sent a report to the Coroner. The Coroner, usually a magistrate,²³ decided whether to order an autopsy. If the death was sudden, violent, or suspicious, he had the option of conducting an inquest or 'death enquiry',²⁴ with or without a jury of three, to find out how the deceased died. If the verdict was death by murder or manslaughter and the suspect was known, the Coroner would issue an arrest warrant; usually, however, such verdicts referred to 'a person or persons unknown'. Where bodies were dumped in the streets or the harbour, the identity of the victim was often also a mystery.

Many culprits escaped justice. Up to the 1950s, people could move freely in and out of Hong Kong by land or sea. The treaties between the UK and China did not provide for the extradition of Chinese fugitives to face trial in Hong Kong.²⁵ The government got around this by offering rewards or sending gunboats to capture suspects, particularly if the victims were European. In some other cases suspects were tried by Chinese courts for crimes committed in Hong Kong. Within Hong Kong, suspects in domestic homicides or deaths

21. Ordinances Nos. 15 of 1844 s.3, 6 of 1845 s.4, 2 of 1846 s.3, 12 of 1873 s.8, 13 of 1899 s. 10.

22. The British Guiana legislation incorporated existing English statute law and some of the procedural clauses in the Criminal Code (Indictable Offences) Bill in England, which, among other provisions, codified and clarified common law. The bill was not enacted. Report on Ordinance No. 13 of 1899, CO 129/292, 331–336.

23. The separate position of Coroner was abolished in 1888 and restored in 1967. Ordinances Nos. 17 of 1888 and 57 of 1967.

24. The term used for inquests in Hong Kong from 1888 to 1997.

25. The Supplementary Treaty or Treaty of the Bogue 1843, article 9, provided for the rendition of Chinese fugitives from Hong Kong to China, and of British fugitives from China to Hong Kong. Its successor, the Treaty of Tientsin 1858, article 21, provided for the former but was silent on the latter.

In the light of the Chai Wan case, Pottinger proposed assimilating justice for Chinese in Hong Kong to that of China: a magistrate or judge would dispense summary justice; sentences above a certain level would be confirmed by the Governor.¹⁷⁶ ‘The utter inapplicability of any form resembling “Trial by Jury” to Her Majesty’s Chinese Subjects’ was, in his view, ‘too obvious to require any comment’. Trial by jury was, however, established in Hong Kong and used widely in the early years. Officials soon came to regret this. ‘The unfitness of our criminal procedure to the circumstances of this Colony has long since passed almost into a proverb,’ remarked a commission of enquiry in 1872.¹⁷⁷ With ‘its myths allied to the jury system’, British justice ‘is seen by the untutored masses as essentially a gamble, with the cards dealt in favour of the most persuasive liar and/or the cleverest attorney or advocate’, wrote a senior official a hundred years later.¹⁷⁸ The history of criminal justice in Hong Kong is in part a series of attempts to shift trials away from juries into the summary courts. This process did not, however, affect capital offences, all of which were tried by juries or, in 1945–1946, by a panel of judges. Combined with the protections given to defendants and scrupulous observance of procedural rules, reliance on juries reflected the ‘considerable anxiety’ that such cases gave to judges and prosecutors.¹⁷⁹ For this reason, capital trials tended to be recorded and discussed in detail in official reports and the press. They therefore offer opportunities to examine the workings of justice at the highest levels.

The organization and themes of this book

The next nine chapters of this book examine capital cases from the first hundred years of British rule. Two final chapters trace the events leading to the suspension of the death penalty in 1966 and its formal abolition in 1993. Each of the main chapters presents one key trial, or a cluster of related trials, setting it in historical context and explaining its significance in the development of criminal justice. Other comparable cases are briefly described. The cases are mostly murders but also include a mass poisoning and several piracies. The murders arose variously from jealousy, revenge, political acts, and killings incidental to other offences. The discussion highlights the colonial relationship, ranging from attempts to accommodate Chinese custom to outright confrontations between government and people. Particular attention is given to proceedings after trial, where governors and their

57–63, and Timothy Brook, Jérôme Bourgon, and Gregory Blue, *Death by a Thousand Cuts* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008), Chapters 1 and 2. Some bodies in Hong Kong may not have been left intact: a report in 1868 refers to a collection of heads from executed bodies kept at the Civil Hospital, probably for craniological research: *HKDP*, 3 November 1868.

176. Pottinger briefly implemented a system along these lines: see Christopher Munn, ““Scratching with a Rattan”: William Caine and the Hong Kong Magistracy, 1841–1844”, *HKLJ*, Vol. 25 (1995): 213–238.

177. Report of the Police Commission, 27 June 1872, CO 129/158, 302.

178. A.T. Clark to Secretary for Home Affairs, 22 December 1971, HKPRO HKRS260-1-22, encl. 25.

179. Goodman, *Reminiscences*, 168.

councils determined the fate of those convicted, often amid public controversy. The cases have been chosen partly for the availability of sources able to throw light from different perspectives. Some also illustrate turning points in the administration of justice, such as the provision of legal aid in murder trials or the creation of the Court of Criminal Appeal. They are therefore not a scientific sample. Nor are they representative of the majority of capital trials in colonial Hong Kong: if they were, the book would consist mainly of murders resulting from robberies or quarrels over resources. Few of the cases here set legal precedents or raised difficult questions of law. They are nevertheless important for what they say about relations between courts, people, and government in Hong Kong's history.

Chapter 2 explores Hong Kong's most famous early case: the mass poisoning of colonists by agents of the Qing government in 1857, shortly after the outbreak of the Second Opium War. The ten men were tried by an all-British jury at a time when many colonists, including the Attorney General, were demanding their summary execution.

Chapter 3 examines piracy trials, taking as examples three connected trials resulting in no fewer than eleven executions in 1866. Piracy trials presented special difficulties with evidence, giving rise both to miscarriages of justice and to suspicions that well-resourced defendants were evading justice by manipulating witnesses. The chapter examines attempts to reduce reliance on the Supreme Court in such cases by more summary forms of justice and by channelling cases to the Chinese courts, where punishment was harsher and more certain.

Chapter 4 describes the part played by a murder in 1878 in the movement to provide lawyers at public expense for defendants in murder trials. The case brings into focus the approaches to justice by two progressive yet controversial figures in nineteenth-century Hong Kong: the Governor, Sir John Hennessy, and the Chief Justice, Sir John Smale. An examination of other murder cases from the late nineteenth century suggests that the introduction of legal aid markedly improved chances of acquittal. At the same time, the dearth of capital convictions prompted concerns that murderers were not being brought to justice.

Chapter 5 deals with the cross-border legal consequences of the assassination in Hong Kong of the revolutionary Yeung Ku-wan by agents of the Qing government in 1900, after attempts to have him extradited for trial in China proved unsuccessful. The chapter focuses on attempts by the Governor, Sir Henry Blake, to secure justice. It also examines the evolution of extradition policy and Hong Kong's precarious role as a refuge and base for revolutionaries.

Chapter 6 discusses the murder in 1903 of a boatwoman and her daughter by three unemployed European sailors in a reckless plan to sail to Singapore in search of work. This highly charged case was a rare instance of Europeans tried for the murder of Chinese, and an illustration of how social status was sometimes as important as ethnicity in the treatment of offenders. The case prompted new policies to deal with the growing number of

destitute Europeans, who were a practical problem and an embarrassment to the colonial community.

Chapter 7 recounts the murder of two warders during an escape from Victoria Gaol by four prisoners in 1919. All four were captured and brought to trial. Two of them used their trials to raise grievances about the treatment of prisoners, which then became the subject of an official enquiry. The chapter discusses the evolution of penal policies in the light of this case and other confrontations in Victoria Gaol during the early twentieth century.

Chapter 8 focuses on the assassination of the manager of a firm bringing in blackleg crews from northern ports during the seamen's strike of 1922, one of a series of disputes between workers and employers that prompted draconian responses from the government. The trial of the alleged assassin, conducted in an atmosphere of extreme animosity between people and government, raises questions about the quality of justice in political cases.

Chapter 9 recounts the sensational trial in 1932 of a son of one of Hong Kong's wealthiest families for the murder of a rival in love. The trial broke all records in Hong Kong for its length and for the enormous resources devoted to the defence. After conviction, the family launched an intensive campaign for mercy. The chapter explores male jealousy as a motive for murder, and as a justification for leniency in the context of Qing law and Chinese custom.

Chapter 10 explores the trial and retrial of an unemployed Chinese man convicted of murdering a European child in 1934, allegedly for political motives. The case led to the first murder appeal heard in Hong Kong. It also raised concerns about racial prejudice in the administration of justice and fed into an emerging debate on the death penalty. This case gave rise to another large-scale campaign for mercy.

Chapter 11 examines the surge in capital crimes and capital punishment in the decade after World War II and the decline in capital convictions and hangings in the early 1960s. The decline, the chapter suggests, was attributable to declining crime rates, more effective policing and detection, changes in the law, and a growing disinclination among juries to convict capitally.

Chapter 12 discusses the debates and controversies leading to de facto abolition of capital punishment in Hong Kong in 1975 and its formal abolition in 1993.

The trials in this book underline themes and patterns uncovered by research into criminal justice in other colonies: the sudden, large-scale imposition of laws, legal institutions and legal culture by one society on another; the emphasis on control and protection of trade and property; the reliance on violent punishments; the difficulties with trial by jury in a mixed population; and the privileging of respectable Europeans and persons of

wealth and high status.¹⁸⁰ They illustrate the uses, and sometimes abuses, of the courts by what might loosely be described as the colonized population – loosely, because for the first hundred years of British rule Hong Kong was a city mainly of sojourners whose roots and allegiances lay elsewhere. The narratives and controversies described here also highlight the tensions between those – mostly judges and lawyers – who insisted on equality before the law and due process and those – mostly officials – who advocated different treatment for Chinese, particularly in Hong Kong's early decades.

Five connected themes stand out in the special case of Hong Kong. The **first** is the crucial importance of language, the essence of any legal system but particularly of the common law practised in Hong Kong. The gulf in understanding between those who controlled the courts and the majority who appeared before them took many decades to bridge. The **second** is the rapidly growing, yet largely mobile, population, which deepened this gulf. The **third** is the continual pattern of war, rebellion, and banditry in the neighbouring region, which brought weapons and violence into Hong Kong. Connected with these is a **fourth** theme: the complex question of cross-border justice, involving the handling of demands for extradition by the Chinese authorities, the trial of some suspects by Chinese courts for crimes committed within Hong Kong's jurisdiction, and the seizure in Chinese territory of Chinese suspects wanted by the Hong Kong authorities in the absence of a reciprocal extradition agreement. A **fifth** theme is the role of public opinion in shaping criminal justice through petitions and other direct action, or mediated through the press, politics, and religion: at first, this reflected mainly the views of colonists and to a lesser extent the Chinese elite; over the years it became more broadly based and could not be ignored by governors.

Above all, the trials highlight the variety of legal processes and outcomes within the British Empire, where every jurisdiction had its own unique set of circumstances and responded in different ways.¹⁸¹ Hong Kong adopted some changes in English law, borrowed selectively from other colonies, and developed its own practices and traditions. The complex configuration of judges, juries, lawyers, witnesses, and defendants in any given trial often produced unexpected outcomes, even for crimes that struck at the very heart of British rule. Perhaps no trial anywhere in the British Empire demonstrates this more strongly than the first case in this book: the attempt to extirpate the British presence in Hong Kong by poisoning the colonists' breakfast.

180. See Sally Engle Merry's seminal essay 'Law and Colonialism', *Law and Society Review* Vol. 25, No. 4 (1991): 889–922.

181. See Martin J. Wiener, *An Empire on Trial: Race, Murder, and Justice under British Rule, 1870–1935* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 230.

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