

Making Hong Kong China: the rollback of human rights and the rule of law. By Michael C. Davis. New York: Columbia University Press. 2020. 166pp. £13.09. ISBN 978 1 95263 613 4. Available as e-book.

As China tramples over the autonomy of what used to be one of the great freewheeling cities of the world, Beijing's actions have ramifications transcending the immediate fate of Hong Kong's 7.5 million residents.

Making Hong Kong China is an insider's account by a respected American scholar of constitutional law, who has lived and taught in Hong Kong for over three decades. Michael Davis recounts how authoritarian China is assimilating a spirited but vulnerable Hong Kong. The book raises troubling questions about the precedent that China has set by breaking international laws and commitments and imposing itself through brute force against the will of the territory's residents.

By ramming through a controversial new national security law in June 2020, President Xi Jinping has effectively buried the compromise model—'one country, two systems'—which governed Hong Kong since its handover from British rule to China in 1997. Davis's book offers analytical depth on the rationale and mechanisms through which China replaced Hong Kong's rule-of-law with the mainland's draconian rule-by-law system. He attributes China's hardline stance to 'its political DNA' (p. 7), marked by insecurity, paranoia and a 'culture of control that pervades mainland politics' (p. 8). Beijing is afraid that mainland China might become like Hong Kong. While Beijing already oversaw Hong Kong by co-opting local elites and manipulating its mini-constitution, the frontal assault that President Xi is directing at the territory constitutes what Davis calls a 'tipping point where all trust and all efforts at restraint have been abandoned' (p. 9).

Davis's book offers insights into the student mass movement against mainland Chinese interference, which peaked with millions protesting in the streets in 2019. Even as their cause seems hopelessly lost amid police crackdowns and jails filling with political prisoners, the author leverages his personal rapport with the pro-democracy camp to illustrate the strengths and motivations of the heroic civil society resisters who have garnered global sympathy. One of the book's key arguments is that had Beijing adopted a 'gentler approach' (p. 39) and accommodated demands made in earlier rounds of protests, the total collapse of the legitimacy of Chinese rule we see today could have been avoided. The sense of a separate national identity which has lately emerged in Hong Kong may never have arisen had Beijing understood the uniquely open mindset and history of the territory.

With sheer might, China is trying to subdue Hong Kong and browbeat it into submission. However, Davis reminds readers that the schism between Hong Kong's people and the government in Beijing is widening due to an irreconcilable 'clash of political and legal cultures' (p. 44). No amount of 'patriotic education' or demographic flooding by mainlanders loyal to the Communist Party can convert a society like Hong Kong that was in sync with global norms to one that welcomes authoritarian rule.

As Hong Kong's human rights situation worsens with no ray of hope in sight, Davis argues that local judges and administrators steeped in the tradition of

protecting fundamental freedoms and impartiality must ‘stand their ground’ and engage in ‘resistance, drip by drip’ (p. 111). The author also calls for sustained international scrutiny and pressure on China. The US withdrawal of special trade privileges from Hong Kong, sanctions on mainland Chinese officials and their local collaborators, and the United Kingdom’s offers of asylum and citizenship to fleeing Hong Kong activists, are small but necessary steps for the resistance to survive. If foreign businesses exit Hong Kong and relocate, it may not be sufficient to make Beijing realize the folly of its overbearing policies, but will certainly raise the costs of a crackdown.

What Davis does not say in this passionate and engaging book is that the rest of the world, not just western countries, should pay close attention to the destruction of Hong Kong’s liberties. If China can make mincemeat of its so-called ‘special administrative regions’ and ‘autonomous regions’ like Hong Kong, Tibet and Xinjiang, the next step in Xi’s grand ‘national rejuvenation’ project could be exporting the surveillance-state model to weak developing countries across Asia, Africa and Latin America, where Chinese influence is tremendous. It is not inconceivable that poor nations caught in China’s ‘debt trap’ will be compelled to adopt political and legal frameworks dictated by Beijing.

Sreeram Chaulia, O. P. Jindal Global University, India

North America

Barriers down: how American power and free-flow policies shaped global media. By **Diana Lemberg**. New York: Columbia University Press. 2019. 268pp. £46.19. ISBN 978 0 2311 8216 4. Available as e-book.

In the wake of the US Capitol insurrection, the politics of (mis)information are again front and centre. Recent years have witnessed a frantic US-led campaign against Chinese communications infrastructure providers such as Huawei and ZTE, state-backed information operations aiming to destabilize western democracies, and pitched battles between western allies over digital taxation and the power of big tech. Indeed, between China’s increasingly sophisticated firewall and censorship regime, and Europe’s unilateral embrace of aggressive privacy protections, analysts are now decrying the bifurcation of the internet—once heralded as a world-connecting innovation for the free flow of ideas and information—into regional blocs designed to suit each regime’s ideological bent.

Into today’s policy debates about critical infrastructure and information freedoms enters welcome historical context in the form of Diana Lemberg’s debut book, *Barriers down*, a recounting of how the United States moved to actively shape the nature of global media in its own image in the decades after the Second World War. A remarkably fluid synthesis of political, technological, transnational, intellectual, social–scientific and post-colonial histories, *Barriers down* tells the story of a nation unmatched in media capacity and international leverage.