Policing Strangers by Strangers: 
Changing Colonial Policing Strategies and 
the Recruitment of Indians in the Hong Kong Police Force, 
1841-1941

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Abstract

This thesis examines the British colonial policing strategy by studying a hundred years of history of the Indians in the Hong Kong Police Force from 1841 to 1941. The British strategy of policing the colonies was always described as “policing strangers by strangers.” Instead of recruiting local natives, some colonial governments specifically favored using reliable aliens or strangers as policemen. The Indians, especially the Sikhs, were favored by the British for colonial policing. Policing by the Indians was a common practice from Chinese treaty ports to South Africa and within the Empire in Hong Kong. In the case of Hong Kong, the Indians served as one of the pillars and always accounted for a substantial part in the colonial police force until the mid-twentieth century. While considering the practice of “policing strangers by strangers” in Hong Kong, this research focuses on three key issues. It first lays out how the British perception towards the Indians and the Chinese, and how and why the Indians were specifically chosen for colonial policing. Secondly, it argues that there was policing strategy across territorial boundary connecting India with other colonies by considering the Indians and India itself as factors affecting the development of the Hong Kong Police Force. Thirdly, it pays attention to the role of the Chinese as an auxiliary force in policing the colony and how the local circumstances of Hong Kong resulted in unique colonial policing strategy different from other colonies within the Empire. As historical circumstances changed over time, there were changing British perceptions from time to time towards the Indians. Such changes included from trusting them to doubting their reliability, which in turns affected the colonial policing strategy in Hong Kong. This thesis aims to provide an in-depth research on the history of the Indians in policing Hong Kong from historical and political aspects and to explore the interactions between colonies and the Empire, in order to address the salient features of British colonial policing and contribute to fill up such a missing puzzle in the overall picture of the historical development of the Hong Kong Police Force.
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