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Are Hong Kong Universities Ready for Xi Jinping Thought?

Series | Hong Kong and Liberty
August 14, 2018 | Volume 11 | Issue 42
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If rankings tables are to be believed, then Hong Kong is a world-leading university hub. Hong Kong is tied for third place, behind only London and Los Angeles which are tied for first in the *Times Higher Education (THE)* best university cities list of 2017 (“The Best University Cities”). Hong Kong is, however—unlike these two university cities above it in the list—a university hub that is uniquely positioned geographically, politically, and institutionally to draw from the important era-defining and obdurately dualist “China-West” cross-cultural research being done in this competitive and ever-evolving Chinese Bay Area region.[1]

However, a more pressing issue for Hong Kong society in terms of its education strategy at the tertiary level is how, over the next two decades, it will institutionally level the playing field between its own universities and their counterpart institutions across the border as we approach the end of the “one country two systems” period. History tells us that universities often embody the collective aspirations and traditions of their societies, and Hong Kong is no exception. In fact, Hong Kong universities may well embody a belief in education as a centerpiece of societal aspiration that is unmatched elsewhere precisely because Hong Kong’s universities very often fill the leadership role that a sovereign parliament plays in other societies; the fact that Hong Kong’s Chief Executive is the Chancellor of all 8 universities in Hong Kong also links academic and executive authority in Hong Kong in a unique way.

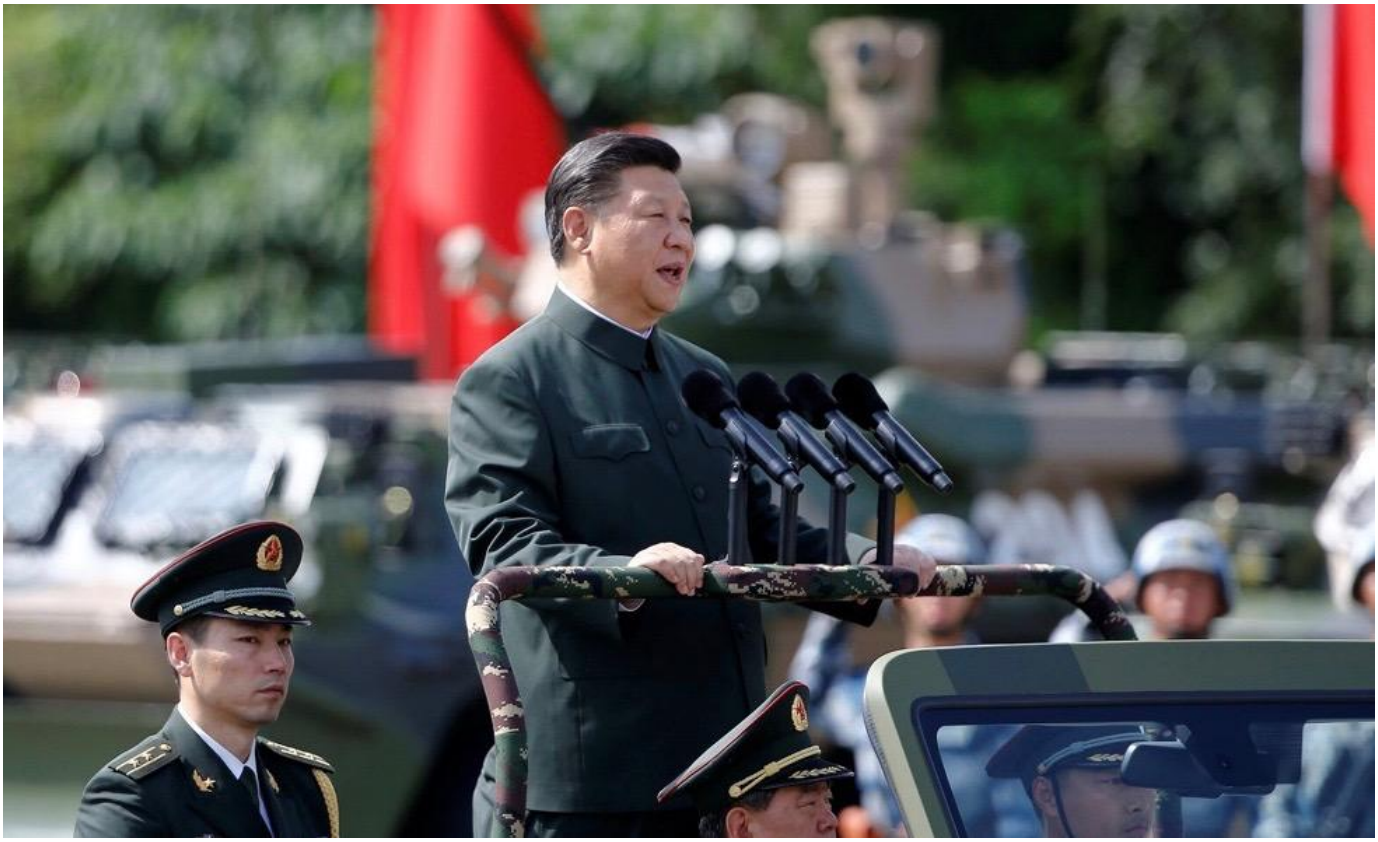
Additionally, Hong Kong universities have traditionally considered themselves more prestigious and forward-thinking than their Chinese counterparts, but the tables are fast turning. Chinese universities are climbing higher in international rankings, landing more patents and attracting more young Chinese researchers from elite US universities. Considering the neoliberal econometrics underpinning university ranking rubrics, one would have imagined that Hong Kong’s capitalist ethos would have bolstered its ranking far better than Mainland China’s Marxist-Leninist

economics. And it did; the only problem is that the CCP's Marxist-Leninist Xi Jinping Thought has cottoned on and it can safely twist its socialist ideology to fit ranking rubrics any day of the week.

The ideological pressures to conform are strong. Hong Kong's oldest universities have traditionally followed a British or American liberal arts college model complete with College system in the case of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and governance structure (in the case of Hong Kong University). The research assessment exercise conducted every six years at all Hong Kong universities is also modeled on the British RAE (now REF) system with all research from Hong Kong academics being assessed by panels overseen for the most part by UK academics. Hong Kong is the only former British colony still adopting this British RAE model for research assessment. However, university traditions and expectations are very different north of the border. President Xi Jinping gave a talk at a two-day meeting in Beijing in late 2016 on ideological work in China's universities where he described how all universities in China (which for the Communist Party includes Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan) are "under the leadership of the Communist Party, and are socialist colleges with Chinese characteristics, so higher education must be guided by Marxism." China's recent decision to fund research at labs in Hong Kong in an effort to boost cross-border collaboration is evidence of a desire for greater harmonization between the two university systems.

Of course it must be acknowledged that CCP Marxism is Marxism in name only and that, as some scholars note, the "socialist rhetoric is no longer promulgated as a credible ideology."[2] Sinophone scholars recognize that Party ideology has increasingly become a "heterogenous mixture of nationalist, socialist, and capitalist strands, played to the tune of outworn socialist soundbites" even though the party still bases its legitimacy and power on its traditionalist communist identity, which, however, is becoming progressively removed from "commonly held social norms" of the society. Without class struggle and its coterminous systems of exploitation and class oppression, and without class consciousness and its underlying potential for social mobility, economic stasis can become ever more apparent in the minds of "the people." Critics argue that ideology in China has lost its "social moorings" as a result of the downplaying of 'class struggle'—"class consciousness has become a no-word".[3] Efforts to rephrase the Marxist two-tier nomenclature of society in China with a five-tier hierarchical system have also been unsuccessful. No historically communist society likes to have the comfortable fictions of the bourgeoisie-

proletariat system, where exploitations and antagonisms are so easy to assign, replaced with a more complicated and seemingly rigid model of societal hierarchies.



Chinese President Xi Jinping inspects troops at the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Hong Kong Garrison (June 30, 2017). Image Credit: REUTERS/Damir Sagolj

Marxism was never big in Hong Kong, but neither were many of the European philosophical ideas that Marxism emerged out of. Hong Kong has little time for Romantic notions of the spirit of the nation, for expansionist frontier-spirit nationalism, or for the harsh realities of industrial revolutions built on anything like Five Year Plans. Thankfully, it does not do the propaganda of Celtic Revivals, Fascist state-building, or religious imperialism very well either. It also looks to no Human Rights Doctrine that might bolster a New State claim on the grounds of ethnic cleansing as in Kosovo, East Timor, or South Sudan.

How then might a Marxist University Vision under CCP-style Communism emerge in Hong Kong and how might its universities take to it? How are Hong Kong universities to catch up and embody being “guided by Marxism” in a little over two decades? How will the “socialist spiritual civilization” (*shehuizhuyi de jingshen wenming*) that the Party posits ever become embedded in the neoliberal structures of Hong Kong, a

society that prides itself on its capitalist savvy and neoliberal liquidity?[4] Obviously, being "guided by Marxism" will only suit the Hong Kong lease and rent mentality if its home-grown econocracy is not affected in the process. If Xi Jinping Marxist Thought and its "socialist spiritual civilization" means doing something about Hong Kong's world-leading inequality—described by some as "the most unequal city in the developed world" in terms of wealth distribution[5] with a Gini coefficient of 0.537 and levels of inequality that, for Joseph Stiglitz, are consistent with levels of inequality in "dysfunctional societies"—then it will also not go down well in Hong Kong.[6] However, if Xi Jinping Marxist Thought simply means university heads paying lip-service to Xi Jinping Marxist-Leninism while floating university shares on bear markets or university professors offering absent students token courses in Xi Jinping Marxism, then Hong Kong resourcefulness suggests it may well get by.

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But, of course, it is naive to even suggest today that the "socialist spiritual civilization" is about State ownership of land and greater equality. However, in recognizing this, one must recall that universities have traditionally been breeding grounds for leftist revolutionaries. They incubate anarchism as well as entrepreneurialism, altruism as well as "global enterprisingness." Some groups of students may be so industrious and passionate as to read Marx's early writings for themselves. They might read him on "The Jewish Question" or on the exploitation of the body in labor and they might not only see the "Party Line." They might look at their society around them, at the work their parents do, and they might be inspired to work for greater social equality. Perhaps then, in giving them more Marx and Lenin, the universities might foster a real socialist spiritual civilization that is truly "guided by Marxism." When that day comes, it might not be good for rankings or for the lease and rent mentality, but it may build towards a more compassionate and less competitive "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui*). Hong Kong might then provide the perfect training ground and model for examining how the "socialist spiritual civilization" can survive in a time of change north of the border where, as David Shambaugh suggests, the "shift from propaganda to profit" has consumed the Chinese Party system.

Since now it is no longer about "being agents of the Party-state" but about being

“commercially viable” (749), Hong Kong society is well-equipped to offer life lessons in such shifts. Hong Kong society has survived colonialism, post-colonialism (however brief), and neo-colonialism because its resolve and resourcefulness means it knows well not to take the ideologies of larger bully nations too seriously. This lightness of touch and resourcefulness suggests Hong Kong could one day survive pretty well even with Marxist-Leninist Xi Jinping Thought on its books; hasn’t it already survived all the various “isms” thrown at it precisely by making them “commercially viable”?

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University campuses work very differently than office blocks, village halls and Party congresses. Whereas the public might grow long in the tooth listening to Marxist spin and cynically adopt its policies for personal gain, students are liable to discern the applicability of the Marxist thought to the social inequalities in their own family lives and societies. Students might disagree with scholars such as Bakken that “one need not look for an internally consistent ideology in post-Mao China” (820).[7] No matter how Xi Jinping Thought packages its Marxist sound bites, there will always be idealists who will run with its undercurrent of truth, a truth that appeared first in western philosophy in response to another era of gross inequalities and seemingly immovable regimes of exploitation riven with ideology. And considering that Hong Hong has been relatively starved of Marxist rhetoric and a socialist conscience, who can imagine, in this society with a Gini Coefficient worse than China’s, how Marxist thought might take hold, catch, and fuel a new ideological conflagration of passionate enquiry as it once did for Marx, Mao and Xi Jinping?

Notes

1. A new journal - *Hong Kong Studies* – recently launched by myself and my fellow editors Tammy Ho Lai-Ming, Eddie Tay and Michael Tsang with the Chinese University of Hong Kong Press aims to capture and nurture some of the new wave of interest in Hong Kong Studies both locally and internationally, a new level of interest evidenced by new programmes in Hong Kong Studies in universities in London and Canada.

2. Børge Bakken, “Norms, Values and Cynical Games with Party Ideology” in *Critical*

Readings on the Chinese Communist Party, Vol. 3. Ed. Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard. Leiden: Brill, 816-48, 820.

3. Bakken, 833.

4. David Shambaugh, “China’s Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy” in *Critical Readings on the Chinese Community Party*, Ed. Kjeld Erik Brodsgaard. Leiden: Brill, 2017, pp. 715-51, p. 720.

5. Zhao, Xiaobin, Li Zhang, and Tak O Kelvin Sit. 2004. “Income Inequalities under Economic Restructuring in Hong Kong.” *Asian Survey* 44 (3): 442–473.

6. Stiglitz, Joseph. 2013. *The Price of Inequality*. London: Penguin.

7. Bakken, 820.

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