

Hong Kong: How to Transition to a Regime-Conforming Academia

Carsten A. Holz

Professor, Social Science Division, Hong Kong University of Science & Technology

carstenholz@gmail.com

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Academic freedom in Hong Kong has received much attention since the arrival of the “National Security Law,” imposed on Hong Kong by mainland China’s rubberstamp “National People’s Congress” on 30 June 2020. For some, “[China is killing academic freedom in Hong Kong](#)” and they describe “[How Academic Freedom Ends](#)” in Hong Kong, while others report that “[Hong Kong’s Academic Freedom Is Safe](#).” A brief evaluation of Hong Kong academia by two renowned scholars of higher education, Professors Gerard Postiglione of Hong Kong University and Philip Altbach of Boston College in an article titled “[Hong Kong higher education reaches an inflection point](#),” ends in a prudent “there is a ‘wait and see’ atmosphere about the full extent of the political changes to come and how they will affect academic life.”

On academic freedom, Professors Postiglione and Altbach write: “Thus far, however, there has been no government clampdown on lectures, classroom discussion, seminars, academic conferences, research or scholarship – but the kind of academic freedom protected in the past is very much in question.” They also find “no indication of a significant exodus of university academics.” The reality at the Hong Kong University of Science & Technology (HKUST), where this author is a faculty member, is that academic freedom in the humanities and social sciences is in danger, and academics are leaving.

The way this works in Hong Kong is that one or both of the two “newspapers” Ta Kung Pao and Wen Wei Po launches an attack on an academic of their choice: [Professor A participated in event X several years ago\(!\)](#) and wouldn’t that justify investigation under the “National Security Law?” Ta Kung Pao and Wen Wei Po are [owned by the Liaison Office](#) of the “Chinese Central People’s Government in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.” They rank lowest in credibility out of Hong Kong’s eleven paid newspapers in a [survey](#) last conducted in 2019 at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, at 10th and 11th place.

In 2015, Ta Kung Pao and Wen Wei Po targeted a specific academic with a total of [350 attacks](#) and the academic was subsequently denied appointment as pro-vice-chancellor of Hong Kong University despite having been unanimously recommended to the post by the selection committee. Today, when Ta Kung Pao and Wen Wei Po identify a target, Hong Kong government ministers [jump into action](#). When the target is an academic, the academic knows their time in Hong Kong academia, if not Hong Kong, is limited. [Two of my colleagues](#) in HKUST’s Division of Social Science—both repeatedly targeted—just left or, perhaps more accurately, just *fled*. (More colleagues, for various stated reasons, have suddenly left or are in the process of leaving.)

Support for academic freedom by university administrators remains substantial. In his September 2000 welcome email to all staff and students, HKUST’s president wrote: “We remain steadfast in our support for academic freedom (see, e.g., [web links to definitions of academic freedom]) and scholarly endeavors.” And in March 2021, in an email to all staff and students on “Our Position Regarding Teaching, Research and Individual Conduct,” the president included “Underpinning our activities as members of the University is academic

freedom, a principle so fundamental that it is enshrined in Hong Kong’s Basic Law Article 137: ‘Educational institutions of all kinds may retain their autonomy and enjoy academic freedom.’”

But when put to the test, academic freedom crumbles. In June 2021, Ta Kung Pao and Wen Wei Po ran articles with titles such as [“Exposé of criminal evidence of the U.S. employing a thousand university students in Hong Kong to participate in demonstration as riot ‘white rats’”](#) and [“American research incites protests, brainwashes university students,”](#) attacking research into student participation in perfectly legal, police-approved demonstrations in Hong Kong by a (ethnic Chinese) HKUST colleague and the fellow researchers from Harvard, Chicago, Munich, and the London School of Economics for their.

Wen Wei Po identified “three major crimes of incitement.” Under the “National Security Law”—rather more of a full-blown [Ermächtigungsgesetz](#)—this is code for arrest. Carrie Lam, Hong Kong’s “Chief Executive” and thereby chancellor of HKUST chimed in with [Hong Kong universities](#) are “penetrated by foreign forces” intent on “brainwashing” students.

A HKUST spokesperson stated that the research was originally approved by its Human Research Ethics Committee but the approval was revoked after the panel found out in October 2019 that the methodology used differed from the proposal; the “university” then asked the authors in late 2019 to remove all references to its approval; and the colleague had left the university in September 2019.

The incident shows the following. (1) According to Wen Wei Po, HKUST’s Human Research Ethics Committee “received an enquiry about a research project in October 2019.” Somebody keeps tab on Hong Kong academics’ working papers (dated June 2019) and, as Wen Wei Po reveals, their past social media posts. Who is doing this and who lodged the enquiry? (2) An “enquiry” was sufficient for HKUST’s project approval to be revoked. Those who made this decision hide behind the university label. The American, German, and English institutions saw no reason to act, nor did the European Union as grant provider. (3) There was no formal and transparent investigation within HKUST of potential wrong-doing by the researchers. (The colleague was criticized in an internal WeChat group for conducting the research, and reportedly forced out of their continuing research projects at HKUST by administrators.) (4) Surveillance now happens in real time. Ta Kung Pao and Wen Wei Po latched on to the article’s June 2021 publication in *American Economic Review Insights* with a diatribe in the same month.

In comparison to the successful stand on academic freedom that presidents of the University of Chicago have taken [for over a century](#), culminating in the [Chicago Principles](#) now adopted and adapted by a hundred universities, the experience at HKUST is testimony to the overriding authority of an all-powerful regime. The institution simply has no means to protect academic freedom and faculty members. Rather, university leaders risk their own livelihood and the remaining degree of a university’s institutional autonomy if they do not *suppress* academic freedom in critical moments. For faculty members in HKUST’s School of Humanities and Social Science, the message is clear. Some have exited. Most of the remaining colleagues in the School of Humanities and Social Science are frightened.

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Creating a climate of fear is strategically opportune. As Niccolo Machiavelli wrote in *The Prince* five hundred years ago: “fear preserves you by a dread of punishment which never fails” (Chapter 17).¹ Inciting fear is a key tool in a dictatorship’s endeavor to subdue and silence. Two decades ago, Perry Link, then at Princeton University, identified the advantages of vague language in [inducing self-censorship](#) in China studies: “A vague accusation frightens more people. [...] Clarity serves the purpose of the censoring state only when it wants to curb a very specific kind of behavior; when it wants to intimidate a large group, vagueness works much better.” The “National Security Law” is extraordinarily vague.

Everything from analyzing police-approved, perfectly legal demonstrations two years before enactment of the “National Security Law” to [smuggling lobsters](#) endangers today’s national security. Wearing shorts with a [Hong Kong logo](#) (that reminds police officers of the 2019 protests) at a marathon endangers national security. More than [one hundred thousand](#) formal accusations of “violating the National Security Law” have been raised with Hong Kong’s [Gestapo](#) within just six months. The extent to which everything in Hong Kong today is a matter of national security might appear Hong Kongers’ way to mock a seemingly loony dictatorship, except that the dictatorship makes daily use of a vast apparatus of coercion ranging from harassment to arrest and prison time.

One doesn’t have to be in Hong Kong to be affected: China scholars are reluctant to set foot in Hong Kong and China. In a June 2021 [Chinafile survey](#) of U.S.-based, China-focused scholars, journalists, former diplomats and civil society workers—some are citizens of the People’s Republic of China—only 44% responded that they would “definitely” or “probably” travel to China once COVID restrictions are lifted; 40% opted for “definitely not” or “probably not,” while the remainder was unsure.

Within universities, fear leads to self-censorship. It may come naturally to the majority of HKUST faculty members who grew up on the mainland where obedience to a totalitarian regime and self-censorship constitute the norm. And colleagues with family on the mainland have little choice but to quietly self-censor: If the offspring abroad does not behave, the family on the mainland will suffer. HKUST colleagues also have mainland research collaborators who they do not wish to endanger. My former colleague and their co-authors have good reasons not to publicize their version of events at HKUST triggered by the above detailed “enquiry” and the attacks in Ta Kung Pao and Wen Wei Po.

Many of the colleagues who grew up on the mainland will also be members of the—in Hong Kong not registered and secretly operating—CCP (the “Chinese Communist Party,” a misnomer to a scientist used to carefully defined terminology). These colleagues have sworn an oath to, among others, carry out CCP decisions, strictly observe Party discipline, and never betray the Party. What happens in case of a conflict of interest between Party objectives and professional, academic norms?

Students are already highly attuned to the new regime, perhaps not a few of them having had first-hand encounters: Inclusion of current economic events—inevitably linked to policies and socio-political arrangements—in a Chinese economy class appears welcomed by students but yields no, or only the most hesitant participation. What no longer happens in the

¹ I came across the passage in John A. Lynn II, *Another Kind of War: The Nature and History of Terrorism*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019 (Chapter 2, p. 49).

classroom cannot be measured quantitatively. Research questions that are not being asked cannot be tabulated.

At HKUST, some of the pressure on faculty to conform is subtle. HKUST administrators sanction faculty members who do not attract outside funding through grants (that increase administrators' resources). The major source of research funding in Hong Kong is the Research Grants Council's General Research Fund. Five external referees evaluate the application, fully cognizant of the name and curriculum vitae of the applicant. One—potentially politically motivated—negative review can be enough to sink an application. In order to avoid HKUST administrators' sanctions, a faculty member is well advised to self-censor and establish a long-time record of regime conformance.

Constraints on academia also arrive in indirect form. Academic oped writers have [stopped writing opeds](#) for Hong Kong's (in terms of credibility) most highly ranked, paid newspaper Ming Pao. Stand News [removed opinion articles and columns](#) published before May 2021 and has taken other risk control measures after receiving “threatening anonymous messages.” The [public broadcaster RTHK \(Radio Television Hong Kong\) has undergone](#) a thorough process of [Gleichschaltung](#). The *South China Morning Post* (the main English language newspaper, owned by Jack Ma of Alibaba, currently in the regime's crosshairs) in its choice of coverage, presentation and terminology increasingly resembles *China Daily* (owned by the CCP). Threats have led [journalists to leave Hong Kong](#) (and a [candidate to withdraw from a Hong Kong Law Society election](#), [Hong Kong Arts Development Council members to quit](#), etc., etc.). The regime-critical newspaper *Apple Daily*, the [most widely read newspaper in Hong Kong in 2019](#) and perceived to be the [second-most credible paid newspaper in Hong Kong in 2019](#), has been shut down. In the U.S., academic freedom derives from the First Amendment, establishing, among others, freedom of the press. When freedom of the press is gone or severely curtailed, so is the foundation of academic freedom.

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Are those academics who value academic freedom and who have not yet left (or fled) going to be arrested soon? Probably not. The regime cannot arrest everyone. Using arrest sparingly will suffice. In 1956, [Mao Zedong](#) put it this way: “They [the counter-revolutionaries] are the mortal and immediate enemies of the people and are deeply hated by them, and therefore a small number should be executed.” A small number sufficed already back then, not only because once on a roll there is no end to finding counterrevolutionaries until everyone is dead, but because murder was only a convenient *tool* to terrorize everyone into submission. A regime with 100 years of oppression under its belt is today well versed in orchestrating a takeover without mass murder, without tanks crushing people, and even without mass arrests.

Smear campaigns in *Ta Kung Pao* and *Wen Wei Po* are a convenient but not the only tool to spread terror. An anonymous email sent from “[hkuststakeholders@gmail.com](#)” to HKUST's leadership and select colleagues denounces a colleague (one of those who have recently left/fled Hong Kong) and requests disciplinary measures against this colleague. An “enquiry” (somehow) arrives at HKUST and HKUST's leadership does the job. There is no escape. The persecution of targeted academics is reminiscent of Nazi Germany in its brutishness (an [example](#) from *Wen Wei Po* can easily be run through google translate) and the unpredictability of the attacks.

What the regime is after in the first place is civil society. Independent civil society (and independent media) pose an immediate threat to a totalitarian regime. The arrests of academics seen so far (such as of [Benny Tai](#)), the [removal of academics](#) and the terrorizing of specific academics into flight all have in common these academics' engagement in civil society. Even the Professional Teachers' Union, the closest to a city-wide labor union for employees of educational institutions that Hong Kong has had, is now gone. (The destruction of civil society has led to the disappearance of everything from democratic parties to the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions and Hong Kong's section of Amnesty International.)

In the longer run, the *narrative about the regime* cannot be left to academics (or the public) to tell. China studies and Hong Kong studies are obvious targets. Academics who tell the regime's 50 million murder history or analyze Hong Kong society, including the big part of it that has come to be labeled "democracy movement," endanger the regime's "truth." They may not be the first ones targeted—civil society takes precedence—but eventually, [as already announced](#), their turn will come, just as [websites documenting the history under the CCP are now being blocked](#) in Hong Kong. The CCP has unleashed an all-out war to subdue democratically-minded Hong Kong once and for all, no matter what the cost. Clearing out any remaining disobedient academics would appear a trifling matter that can be taken care of, if necessary, in due time.

In a school that is focused on China and Hong Kong studies, how long can an academic who wishes to fulfill their academic duties in teaching and research survive? How long before anxiety, the dread of harassment, and fear of the consequences of overstepping much trumpeted, unspecified, and (realistically) non-existent "red lines"—a tool of terror and in itself evidence of the absence of academic freedom—take their toll? Who wants to live in such a world, potentially persecuted by randomly assaulting brutes, when one can still leave and isn't yet on the Gestapo's [watch list to be arrested if one tries to flee](#)?

It is not just the possibility of CCP harassment and arrest, it is also a matter of one's livelihood. [China researchers in Europe](#) have been formally sanctioned by the CCP, which comes with asset freezes in China. On the mainland, disobedience has led to academics being [deprived of their pensions](#). Those who flee Hong Kong on a British National Overseas passport are [denied early access to their accumulated Mandatory Pension Fund](#), a supposed legal right in the case of permanent departure. Are a disobedient Hong Kong academic's assets and pension at stake, too?

The stronger the fear and the sooner the potential "troublemakers" among the faculty members disappear, the better for regime-funded institutions of higher education in the new Hong Kong. In the case of the Ta Kung Pao and Wen Wei Po attack on a former colleague, being able to say that the faculty member has "left the university in September that year [2019]" was a most convenient way out. City-wide, in the first half of 2020 almost [90,000 Hong Kongers emigrated](#). Any exodus is easily compensated with the daily arrival of up to 150 [immigrants from the mainland](#), following the CCP's time-proven strategy in Tibet and Xinjiang of depopulation (flight induced through state terrorism) and immigration of regime conformists. A departing academic can easily be replaced by an army of—mostly, but not exclusively ethnic Chinese—new hires willing to conform, especially freshly minted PhDs who, without tenure, will be particularly obedient.

In contrast, what is not happening is that Hong Kong's university leaders gang together and form a coalition that stands up for academic freedom. Any such move has probably already been preempted by the installation of mainland administrators in university leadership positions, [with their CCP membership not always successfully hidden](#). In the face of an overwhelming power and a prevailing culture does not favor taking a personal stand, resistance is futile. William G. Tierney, author of *Higher Education for Democracy: The Role of the University in Civil Society* [notes](#) that Hong Kong academics do not go on a general strike when two of their colleagues are arrested for exercising their free speech rights. In another instance, Hong Kong University's Council went as far as to [break the university's statutory procedures](#). The specter alone of the "National Security Law" trumps university law as well as Hong Kong's Basic Law ('Educational institutions of all kinds may retain their autonomy and enjoy academic freedom,' (Article 137)).

What is not happening is an open acknowledgment that HKUST's [mission](#) to, among others "assist in the economic and social development of Hong Kong" needs an overhaul when Hong Kong academics doing just that are jailed or persecuted. Mainland listed companies, whether private or public, now include the central role of the CCP in their articles of association; HKUST's mission deserves an update to make explicit that it serves the CCP.

What is not happening is that HKUST's School of Humanities and Social Science, with its focus on China and Hong Kong studies, is closed down when academic freedom in China and Hong Kong studies can no longer be guaranteed. [Cary Nelson](#) lists as first tenet of academic freedom: "Academic freedom means that both faculty members and students can engage in intellectual debate without fear of censorship or retaliation." That simply does not hold for China and Hong Kong studies in Hong Kong any more.