

## Hong Kong's New World of Academia

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In a recent article in University World News titled "[Hong Kong higher education reaches an inflection point](#)" Professors Gerard Postiglione at Hong Kong University and Philip Altbach reported on the current state of Hong Kong academia. The view from across town, where this author is a faculty member at the Hong Kong University of Science & Technology (HKUST), differs. Hong Kong academia is not as professional as Professors Postiglione and Altbach make it out to be, and would appear to be well past any inflection point.<sup>1</sup>

Professors Postiglione and Altbach's (hereafter "PA") observe that in 2012 "shared governance seemed to work reasonably well in Hong Kong, with considerable authority vested in the faculty but with strong administrative leadership as well" and the "organisational equilibrium has [since] not significantly shifted." But at HKUST, there *never* has been any shared governance.

The Senate is not a faculty senate but an [administrators' committee](#) with two-thirds of its members being members by virtue of their administrative appointments. Every administrator from president to department head is chosen top-down. Faculty members do not determine the hiring of new colleagues. Department faculty meetings and school board meetings serve the distribution of administrative information and directives. Faculty members have no formal voice in decision-making. I cannot recall a single instance in which a (rare) "consultation" has had any impact on administrators' decisions. There is no labor union or other organization representing faculty members' interests. Governance is simply not shared, and never has been; institutions have been copied from Western universities and filled with new meaning. The fortunes of academia at HKUST depends on less than a handful of people reporting to a university council whose members are political appointees.

Under the heading "academic freedom" PA write that "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 do not specify what "the kind of academic freedom protected in the past" consists of, nor what makes them think it is now in question.) As to the "academic profession," they find that "there is no indication of a significant exodus of university academics." The reality at HKUST is that academic freedom may not be an issue in the natural sciences, engineering, or business studies, but in the School of Humanities and Social Science it is, 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" (imposed on Hong Kong by the mainland's rubberstamp "National People's Congress" on 30 June 2020)? The attack may then be picked up and broadcast across the

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Gerard Postiglione for his detailed feedback on a first draft of this article and thought-provoking communications.

mainland by the *Global Times*, while the *South China Morning Post* updates an English-language readership.

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” and thus controlled by the CCP (the “Chinese Communist Party,” a misnomer to a scientist used to carefully defined terminology); 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 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> place. The *Global Times* is owned by the Central Committee of the CCP (via the *People’s Daily*), while the *South China Morning Post* is owned by Jack Ma of Alibaba, currently in the regime’s crosshairs.

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 is limited. [Two of my colleagues](#) in the 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 President Wei Shyy wrote: “We remain steadfast in our support for academic freedom (see, e.g., [web links to definitions of academic freedom]) and scholarly endeavors. If there are any concerns that our values are being put to the test, it is up to us to show, first ourselves, and then the rest of the world, that HKUST, consistent with our established standing, can and will rise to the challenge.” And in March 2021, in an email to all staff and students titled “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 titled [“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 a (ethnic Chinese) colleague who had left HKUST in September 2019 and the fellow researchers from the University of Munich, the University of Chicago, Harvard University, and the London School of Economics for their research into student participation in perfectly legal, police-approved demonstrations in Hong Kong. The research was funded as part of a larger European Union research grant and published in the *American Economic Review Insights* in June 2021.

Wen Wei Po identified “three major crimes of incitement.” Under the “National Security Law”—another misnomer to a scientist, and 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.

HKUST leadership’s response consisted of a spokesperson declaring 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 tabs on Hong Kong academics’ research, including their working papers (dated June 2019). Somebody is also sifting through messages that the authors posted on social media in the past. Who is doing this and who lodged the enquiry? (2) An “enquiry” was sufficient to make HKUST “revoke” the project approval; the decision-makers hid behind the university label. The American, English, and German institutions saw no reason to act, nor did the European Union as grant provider. (3) There was no formal 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 formal publication in *June 2021* with a diatribe in the same month.

In comparison to the stand on academic freedom that presidents of the University of Chicago have taken [for over a century](#),<sup>2</sup> culminating in the [Chicago Principles](#) now adopted and adapted by a hundred universities, HKUST leadership’s behavior is testimony to the overriding authority of an all-powerful regime. PA write that “These individuals [top academic talent], and their institutions, risk a great deal if they appear to accommodate any academic suppression.” Perhaps a more accurate phrasing would run the other way round: These individuals risk a great deal if they do *not* suppress academic freedom. 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.

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).<sup>3</sup> Inciting ‘fear’ is a key tool in the CCP’s fight 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. Within just six months, more than [one hundred thousand](#) formal accusations of “violating the National Security Law” have been raised with Hong Kong’s [Gestapo](#). Have the students in my classes reported on me?

PA think the “institutional autonomy” of universities in Hong Kong is still in place, except that “government representation on university councils has become more activist in institutional management.” Autonomy is of little relevance when university leadership and faculty have been “[gleichgeschaltet](#)”—fearful enough to “fall into line”—while the last vestiges of *student* activism have been cleared off campus by police or [student suspensions](#).

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<sup>2</sup> For a longer write-up see [https://news.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/Academic\\_Freedom\\_V1.pdf](https://news.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/Academic_Freedom_V1.pdf), accessed 25 September 2021.

<sup>3</sup> 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).

It is probably true, as PA write for the “academic profession,” that “Terms and conditions of academic work – including salaries, teaching responsibilities, administrative support and research funding available on a competitive basis from local sources – still align with global norms.” The abolition of sabbatical leave (as we understand the term in academia) at HKUST, for example, suggests that the “terms and conditions of academic work” no longer fully “align with global norms.” But even if they did, what does that matter when there is no academic freedom, when “university” means a factory designed to churn out talent of the type desired by a totalitarian regime?

PA note the high degree of “internationalism” in Hong Kong. What does “internationalism” mean? Yes, faculty passports have been issued by a wide range of countries. But at HKUST, to judge by faculty members’ names, more than half of faculty members have a mainland background,<sup>4</sup> and one quarter appear to be of non-mainland Chinese ethnicity. Fewer than one quarter of faculty members are not ethnic Chinese (Korean, Japanese, or some other ethnicity). Hong Kong universities may come out top in university rankings by “internationalism,” but (at least HKUST) will likely also come out top in terms of ethnic homogeneity.

The HKUST campus currently could not feel less “international.” Hong Kong’s quarantine restrictions are among the most extreme in the world with 2-3 weeks of mandatory hotel quarantine for vaccinated, returning Hong Kong residents. The quarantine experience borders the traumatic and as long as it lasts can only lead to further deterioration in “internationalism.”

What is known reliably for the post-pandemic period is that China scholars are reluctant to set foot in Hong Kong and China, many because of Hong Kong’s “National Security Law,” others because of the CCP now taking foreigners hostage. 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.

It is true that “English dominates” (another one of PA’s points) but only in the classroom and in research publications. What one hears outside the lecture theatres, in the offices and in the corridors, whether with faculty or students, is increasingly (mainland) Mandarin, apart from the local Cantonese.

PA’s view that “Hong Kong also provides a Chinese cultural environment for overseas returnees, without many of the complications of the mainland, with less bureaucracy, more participation and transparency” contrasts with the fact that one will hardly find an institution of higher education with less (empowered) participation and transparency than HKUST. A variation on PA’s point would be that for those who grew up in a world where obedience to a totalitarian regime and self-censorship are the norm, the current situation in Hong Kong may not register as abnormal.

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<sup>4</sup> At least the last name is spelled in *pinyin*, the English transcription system for Chinese character names used on the mainland. (In most cases, both last and first names are in *pinyin*.)

Even if they desired otherwise, mainland 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 be made to suffer. HKUST colleagues also have collaborators in research projects who they do not want to endanger. Thus, my former colleague and their co-authors have good reasons not to go public with 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—“Chinese Communist Party.”<sup>5</sup> These colleagues have sworn an oath to, among others, carry out CCP decisions, strictly observe Party discipline, and never betray the Party. Contrast this with a professional, academic ethic of a “search for truth.” On the order of half of HKUST faculty members face a severe conflict of interest. Perhaps it is to the benefit of academia that HKUST has no shared governance?

Yes, we currently still have *relatively* free internet access, though the number of specific (political) websites being systematically blocked is gradually increasing. The university library still stocks books on “sensitive topics” (including George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*), books reported to have been removed from [school and public libraries](#) and not to be found in the largely regime-controlled bookshops around town while independent [booksellers are packing up shop](#). But who will dare to cover “sensitive topics” in class? And will students dare to leave a record of having borrowed certain books? The library’s video collection currently appears intact but critical new films will not be added as Hong Kong’s “Board of Review (Film Censorship)” is [prohibiting their distribution](#). The censorship office [is working its way backward through already released films](#) and eventually the university library will have little choice but to start censoring.

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. 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,” one containing staff information that would only be accessible to the tax authorities or the Mandatory Provident Fund. The [public broadcaster RTHK \(Radio Television Hong Kong\) has undergone](#) a thorough process of “[Gleichschaltung](#).” The *South China Morning Post* 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.). 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.

Are those academics who value academic freedom and who have not yet left/fled going to be arrested soon? Probably not. The regime can’t arrest everyone. Using arrests 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

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<sup>5</sup> Early on in the reform period, CCP membership furthered the chances of being able / allowed to go to the U.S. for graduate studies.

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](mailto:hkuststakeholders@gmail.com)" to HKUST's leadership and selected colleagues (the list of addressees in itself being informative) denounces a colleague 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), the unpredictability of attacks (they can come any moment), and its persistence (with no end in sight).

What the regime is after in the first place is civil society, not academia. 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. Independent civil society (and independent media) pose an immediate danger to a totalitarian regime and therefore are eradicated first. Everything from the Professional Teachers' Union (the closest to a city-wide labor union for employees of educational institutions that Hong Kong has had) to the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions is now gone. The Civil Human Rights Front that has organized pro-democracy demonstrations is gone (and its leaders have been arrested).

In the longer run, the *narrative about the regime* cannot be left to academics (or the public). 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 with its potential for large-scale challenges 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 this pesky, democratically-minded Hong Kong once and for all, no matter what the cost. Clearing out any remaining disobedient academics is a trifling matter that can be taken care of in due time.

Students are highly attuned to the regime, perhaps not a few of them having had first-hand encounters: Inclusion of current economic events—invariably linked to policies and socio-political arrangements—in my Chinese economy class appears welcomed by students but yields no, or only the most hesitant participation. What is no longer possible in the classroom cannot be measured quantitatively. Research questions that are not being asked cannot be tabulated. In a school that is focused on China studies and Hong Kong studies, how long can an honest academic who wishes to fulfill their academic duties in teaching and research survive? How long before constant anxiety, the dread of harassment and stalking, and fear of the consequences of overstepping much trumpeted, unspecified, and (realistically) non-existent "red lines"—a tool of terror and in itself evidence that there is no 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 an academic being [deprived of their pension](#). Those who flee Hong Kong on a British National Overseas passport are [denied their legally guaranteed early access to their accumulated Mandatory Pension Fund](#) when they move permanently overseas. 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 those in charge of leading regime-funded institutions of higher education in 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]” must have been a most convenient way out. Just as Hong Kong citizens leaving Hong Kong provides an easy solution to the regime: In the first half of 2020, [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 in-migration of regime conformists. A departing academic can easily be replaced by an army of—mostly, but not exclusively mainland—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 already been preempted by the installation of mainland administrators in university leadership positions, [with their CCP membership not always successfully hidden](#). Each university is left to fend on its own in the face of an overwhelming power, and the “Chinese cultural environment” that PA note does not favor taking a personal stand. Hong Kong University's Council went as far as to [break the university's statutory procedures](#) when it comes to showing allegiance to the regime. The specter alone of the “National Security Law” takes precedence over 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)) when administrators scamper to curry favor with the regime.<sup>6</sup>

What is not happening is that the School of Humanities and Social Science, with its focus on China studies and Hong Kong studies, is formally closed when academic freedom in China and Hong Kong studies no longer exists. [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.

What is not happening is an open acknowledgment that academia in Hong Kong is not what it used to be. HKUST's [mission](#) to, among others “assist in the economic and social development of Hong Kong” urgently needs an overhaul when Hong Kong academics doing just that are jailed or terrorized into fleeing. 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 honest update to make explicit that it serves the CCP.

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<sup>6</sup> And Hong Kong academics, as William G. Tierney, author of *Higher Education for Democracy: The Role of the University in Civil Society* [notes](#), do not go on a general strike when two of their colleagues are arrested for exercising their free speech rights.

Paradoxically, academia in Hong Kong is both thriving and dead. It is thriving under a regime that is willing to pay for the research and development that it needs in order to stay in power, relying on a faculty that buys into the “China’s rejuvenation” story or is conditioned to obedience. It is dead in that what is left is a regime-directed factory of higher education. (Which is why, as this author has [argued before](#), university rankings should never mix institutions in free societies with institutions under totalitarian regimes.)

On the surface, as PA note, Hong Kong universities enjoy autonomy, governance is shared (though not at HKUST), English dominates in the classroom, internationalism in passport numbers runs high, the academic profession looks professional, university leadership makes the appropriate statements, and academic freedom is constitutionally guaranteed.

Then there is this tiny catch: As in the West, academic freedom does not mean one can violate the law. A [spokesperson for the Hong Kong University](#) summarized the situation of Hong Kong academia as: "There are no boundaries to research and studies provided that they are within the law." Conveniently, today’s “laws” can easily be found in the complementary copies of Ta Kung Pao and Wen Wei Po distributed to HKUST’s School of Humanities and Social Sciences. They’ll even tell you when you are next in the firing line.