

Hong Kong's Contested Academic Freedom

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Since the imposition of a “national security” law on Hong Kong in June 2020, views of academic freedom in Hong Kong have diverged widely. For some, “[China Is Killing Academic Freedom in Hong Kong](#)” and they describe “[How Academic Freedom Ends](#),” while others argue that “[Hong Kong's Academic Freedom Is Safe](#).”

Two scholars of higher education [attested](#) in August 2021 that thus far there had been no government clampdown on anything from lectures to research, and no indication of a significant exodus of university academics. As a faculty member of the Hong Kong University of Science & Technology (HKUST), I see academic freedom in the humanities and social sciences under threat, and colleagues are leaving.

The main threat to academia originates with the central (Chinese) government. For example, the newspapers Ta Kung Pao and Wen Wei Po—[owned by the Liaison Office](#) of the “Chinese Central People’s Government in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region”—launch 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” today? In a [survey](#) last conducted in 2019 at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Ta Kung Pao and Wen Wei Po ranked lowest in credibility among Hong Kong’s eleven paid newspapers, at 10th and 11th place, but their attacks have real consequences.

For example, in 2015 Ta Kung Pao and Wen Wei Po targeted a specific academic with a total of [350 attacks](#) and the academic was eventually denied appointment as pro-vice-chancellor of Hong Kong University despite having been unanimously recommended to the post by the selection committee. In summer 2021, following a spate of such attacks on two colleagues in HKUST’s Division of Social Science, both [suddenly departed](#) or, perhaps more accurately, *fled*.

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 a colleague’s newly published research on student participation in police-approved demonstrations in Hong Kong. Wen Wei Po identified “three major crimes of incitement.” Under the “National Security Law,” this suggests arrest and prison terms. Carrie Lam, Hong Kong’s “Chief Executive” and thereby also chancellor of HKUST, chimed in that [Hong Kong universities have been “penetrated by foreign forces”](#) intent on “brainwashing” students.

The diatribe had a prelude. According to Wen Wei Po, back in October 2019 HKUST’s Human Research Ethics Committee had “received an enquiry” about the research project. The committee then revoked its project approval, stating that the methodology used differed from the proposal.

Thus, somebody is keeping tab on Hong Kong academics’ ongoing research and intervenes in certain types of research. Collaboration between a HKUST scholar (an ethnic Chinese

professor) with co-authors at Harvard, Chicago, Munich and the London School of Economics is now considered penetration of Hong Kong universities by foreign forces. Finally, with the attacked colleague having resigned from HKUST before the enquiry in October 2019, the Ta Kung Pao and Wen Wei Po diatribe can have had only one purpose: To scare university administrators and the remaining academics in Hong Kong into submission.

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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). Two decades ago, Perry Link, then at Princeton University, for the case of China studies emphasized the importance of vagueness for [instilling fear](#): “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.

University administrators say it’s all about not crossing “red lines.” The fact that nobody is able to identify the “red lines” exposes the invisible “red lines” for what they are: tools of state terror to induce self-censorship.

In today’s Hong Kong, having researched perfectly legal demonstrations two years before enactment of the “National Security Law” endangers national security, as does [smuggling lobsters](#) or wearing shorts with a [Hong Kong logo](#) that reminds police officers of the 2019 protests. Displaying a [banner saying “I want real universal suffrage”](#) constitutes “seditious intent” and leads to arrest. More than [200,000 potential violations](#) of the “National Security Law” have been reported to Hong Kong’s [Gestapo](#) hotline within the first year of its operation. At Hong Kong University, the specter of the “National Security Law” is enough for its council to [break the university’s statutory procedures](#). At HKUST, an anonymous email sent from [hkuststakeholders@gmail.com](#) to HKUST’s leadership and select faculty members denounces a colleague and requests disciplinary measures against this colleague.

Colleagues with family or research collaborators on the mainland have little choice but to quietly self-censor. Many of the colleagues who grew up on the mainland will also be members of 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 “Chinese Communist Party” (CCP) decisions, strictly observe Party discipline, and never betray the Party. They have never sworn an oath to professional, academic norms.

Students are already highly attuned to the new regime. Not a few students will have had first-hand encounters with the new regime in 2019 and 2020, and since then student unions across Hong Kong campuses have been shut down or neutered. Inclusion of current economic events in a Chinese economy class—which can hardly ignore Xi Jinping’s *leitmotif* “Government, the military, society and schools, North, South, East and West, the Party leads them all”—appears welcomed by students but yields only the most hesitant class participation. What no longer happens in the 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. The major

source of research funding in Hong Kong is the Research Grants Council's General Research Fund. Five external referees evaluate one's application, fully cognizant of the name and curriculum vitae of the applicant. One negative review is typically enough to sink an application, and unsubstantiated, negative reviews are a common occurrence. Surely at least one in five referees will evaluate an applicant and their proposal along "Party" lines. In order to avoid HKUST administrators' sanctions (i.e., receive a grant), a faculty member does well to avoid "sensitive" research and establish a record of regime conformance. One could, of course, apply for overseas grants but might then quickly run the danger of falling foul of the "National Security Law" by "colluding with foreign forces."

Beneath the surface lurks a threat to one's livelihood. [China researchers in Europe](#) have been formally sanctioned by the CCP, which is accompanied by asset freezes in China. In Hong Kong, the assets of any individual deemed a security threat can be [frozen](#) at any moment, without even the need for court approval. 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 from Hong Kong. Few non-conforming academics will be willing to risk their pension and assets when they can still leave and are not yet on the [watch list to be arrested if they flee](#).

The sooner non-conforming academics leave, the easier to complete the process of [Gleichschaltung](#) of Hong Kong's institutions of higher education (a process that had [begun well before the imposition](#) of the "National Security Law"). City-wide, in the first half of 2021 almost [90,000 Hong Kongers emigrated](#). Any exodus is easily compensated for by the daily arrival of up to 150 [immigrants from the mainland](#), following the CCP's time-proven strategy in Tibet and Xinjiang of native depopulation (flight induced through state terrorism) and immigration of regime conformists. Hong Kong universities enjoy a near-infinite supply of excellent and well-conditioned scholars from the mainland, or returnees from overseas who wish to support China's "Great Rejuvenation." Newly minted PhDs, yet without tenure, will be particularly obedient. Hong Kong universities' positions in the global rankings could even rise as university rankings [do not consider academic freedom](#).

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Are the remaining non-conforming academics 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, 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 to systematically orchestrate a takeover without mass murder, without tanks crushing people, and even without mass arrests.

What the regime is after in the first place is civil society and the media, institutions which pose a more immediate threat to a totalitarian regime than a few academics in the ivory tower. In Hong Kong, everything from democratic parties to the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions and Hong Kong's section of Amnesty International have disappeared. 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 [public broadcaster RTHK](#)

[\(Radio Television Hong Kong\) has been thoroughly cleansed.](#) Individual journalists are [threatened until they leave Hong Kong](#), or are [denied work visas](#). The *South China Morning Post* (owned by Jack Ma of Alibaba) in its choice of coverage, presentation and terminology increasingly resembles *China Daily* (owned by the CCP). The regime-critical newspaper *Apple Daily*, the [most widely read, second-most credible](#) paid newspaper in Hong Kong, has been shut down, as has been Stand News, [ranked highest in credibility](#) among Hong Kong's ten online news media.

So far, the arrests of [academics](#), the [removal of academics](#) and the terrorizing of specific academics into flight all have in common their earlier engagement in civil society. The next step is to deny non-conforming academics access to society. Self-censorship does its part. A critical academic has [stopped writing opeds](#) for Hong Kong's, in terms of credibility highest ranked, paid newspaper Ming Pao. With much of the independent media gone, many channels of engagement for academics have simply disappeared altogether. Publishing in media abroad could quickly lead to accusations of "collusion with foreign forces" and subversion under the "National Security Law."

In the longer term, the *narrative about the regime* cannot be left to academics (or the public) to tell. Academics who recount the regime's 50 million murder history or analyze Hong Kong society, including what has come to be known as "democracy movement," endanger the regime's Truth. Academics may not be the first ones targeted but eventually [their turn will come](#). The CCP has unleashed a coordinated, all-out war to subdue democratically-minded Hong Kong once and for all. Clearing out any remaining disobedient academics would appear a trifling matter that can be taken care of in due time, and then perhaps quite elegantly through discriminatory measures by university administrators who, under an exceedingly executive, managerial system control every aspects of an academic's career from promotion to annual performance reviews, salary advancement, teaching duties, and sabbatical leave.

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In contrast 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, 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](#).

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. But in today's Hong Kong, open resistance, whether by university administrators or faculty members, is futile. 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, such as when the central government's media outlets in Hong Kong go on a rampage. The only choice is to exit or to lie low and collaborate. The presidents of three of Hong Kong's eight universities have chosen to exit, HKUST's president even before his contract ends. In the case of City University's president, a [council member reportedly said](#) that the next president would have to be a Chinese national deemed "loyal to Beijing;" foreigners or those with ties to Taiwan or the United States would not be considered.

Within HKUST, the new reality is not openly acknowledged. To the contrary, HKUST's president wrote in his September 2020 welcome email to staff and students that "We remain steadfast in our support for academic freedom," and in March 2021 that "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.'" All the while, a project approval is discreetly withdrawn and the departing colleague's remaining links to the university are abruptly severed, while other faculty members in the social sciences quietly disappear and are replaced by new PhDs with Mandarin names.

HKUST's [mission](#) to, among others, "assist in the economic and social development of Hong Kong" does not get the much needed overhaul to reflect the reality on the ground. Mainland companies listed in Hong Kong, whether private or public, include the central role of the CCP in their articles of association. HKUST's mission fails to recognize that today's HKUST serves the CCP, just as [HKUST's new campus on the mainland](#) does.

Equally ignored by HKUST administrators (but not the departing faculty members) is the fact that there is no place for nonpartisan China and Hong Kong studies under the new regime. In his September 2020 email, HKUST's president referred to a prominent [definition](#) of academic freedom that starts with "Academic freedom means that both faculty members and students can engage in intellectual debate without fear of censorship or retaliation." That simply no longer holds for China and Hong Kong studies in Hong Kong.