

## Hong Kong Academia Is Well Past Its Inflection Point

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In a recent article in University World News titled [“Hong Kong higher education reaches an inflection point”](#) 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>

Postiglione and Altbach write 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.” At HKUST, there is no 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 are venues to distribute administrative information and directives. Faculty members have no formal voice in decision-making. There is no labor union or other organization representing faculty members’ interests. At HKUST, institutions have been copied from Western universities and filled with new meaning.

The fortunes of academia at HKUST depend on a handful of administrators under a university council whose members are political appointees. This might even be beneficial to academia. More than half of HKUST faculty members likely grew up in mainland China and many will be members of the CCP (the “Chinese Communist Party,” a misnomer to a scientist used to carefully defined terminology). Having sworn an oath to carry out CCP decisions, strictly observe Party discipline and never betray the Party, a significant number of HKUST’s faculty members could well face a conflict of interest between CCP vs. academic objectives. Authority concentrated in the hands of university administrators would then be a blessing in disguise.

On “academic freedom,” Postiglione and Altbach 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.) They also find “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.

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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.

The way this works in Hong Kong is that one or both of the two “newspapers” Ta Kung Pao and Wen Wei Po—both controlled by the CCP—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)?

When Ta Kung Pao and Wen Wei Po zero in on 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 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 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.” And in March 2021, in an email to all staff and students on “Our Position Regarding Teaching, Research and Individual Conduct,” the president wrote “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.

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 June 2021 publication in *American Economic Review Insights* with a diatribe in the same month.

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.

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. HKUST administrators are still searching for the much proclaimed "red lines," invisible, never publicly specified, probably non-existent imaginary red lines that stand testimony to the new state of affairs under which Hong Kong academia now operates: Rule of law is replaced by state terror designed to have everyone second-guess the emperor's wishes (or, easier, shut up).

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?

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.

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.)

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.