

# Hong Kong Studies thrives and withers in unexpected places

Benjamin Garvey

Hong Kong Studies is emerging as an area studies field in its own right, edging out from the shadows of China Studies after the months-long street-occupation protests in 2014 and violent Mong Kok incident in 2016,<sup>1</sup> and amid a rise in scholarly interest in the territory from outside the confines of the Social Science departments of Hong Kong's establishment universities.



## Go global

The Education University of Hong Kong's Academy of Hong Kong Studies (AHKS), inaugurated in July 2015, claims the position of first Hong Kong Studies centre in a Hong Kong university. The academy sees its mission as driving "interdisciplinary knowledge creation and transfer initiatives on Hong Kong-centric subjects within the context of inter-global city studies"; its motto is "Hong Kong in the World".<sup>2</sup> The academy is headed by Professor Lui Tai-lok, who joined the Education University in 2014, when it was still known as the Hong Kong Institute of Education (Hong Kong's legislature granted the institute university status only in 2016.<sup>3</sup>) Ironically, the establishment of AHKS came as academics in Hong Kong have been under pressure to 'go global', amid government-funding and -assessment systems that valorise frequency of publication in international journals.<sup>4</sup>

The 'go global' mantra could be seen as an oblique injunction to avoid paying much scholarly attention to social and political developments in Hong Kong itself, even in this time of rapid transformation. That would echo the sentiment of a Hong Kong scholar in 2017, who told me that Social Science research at Hong Kong universities was 'Singaporising' (not 'mainlandising'): researchers were being dissuaded from doing research and publishing on Hong Kong, with the same phenomenon observed in semi-authoritarian Singapore. "Before there was someone hired to work on local issues. That's not the case anymore because the incentives, including during the hiring process, are geared towards publishing in international journals".

In an attempt to make comparisons across departments and universities, scholarly research in Hong Kong is "considered valuable only if it is published in internationally-refereed journals, which, despite claims that this does not exclude Chinese and other local journals, has created a strong bias against journals published in Asia", according to adjunct associate professor in the Department of Anthropology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Joseph Bosco, who describes such administrative methods as an "audit culture".<sup>5</sup> Audit culture uses "business metaphors" that stifle "academic creativity by focusing only on process", he writes, adding that one of its side effects, "probably not entirely unintended", is that "more power shifts to administrators, as opposed to academic, especially disciplinary, peers".

As assessment of Hong Kong's establishment universities has been tied to global publishing metrics, it appears that research on local issues has become politically incorrect or taboo, particularly if it touches upon Hong Kong politics, which, generally

speaking, turns upon Hong Kong identity, sometimes framed in opposition to mainland Chinese identity. According to Bosco, from 1987 to 2000 the Hong Kong Anthropological Society published an annual journal, *The Hong Kong Anthropologist*. But with the "increasing pressure for teachers to publish in internationally refereed journals, the journal was discontinued, replaced with *Asian Anthropology*, published initially out of the Chinese University [but] now by Taylor & Francis [a subsidiary of UK-listed Informa]".<sup>6</sup> The fate of *The Hong Kong Anthropologist* may reflect the reluctant turning of the social scientific gaze away from Hong Kong by social scientists in Hong Kong's established universities amid 'go global' pressures and a combination of incentives and deterrents.

## Beyond departments and borders

On the issue of Chinese state control over Hong Kong universities, Bosco says there is no direct interference in teaching or research, but that there is control over funding: "Since over 95 percent of funding for universities comes from the government, universities in Hong Kong are very dependent on government policies." He notes the speculation that Hong Kong "elites who are angry at students becoming involved in [pro-democracy] protests against 'National Education' [in 2012] and in favour of 'Universal Suffrage' [in 2014] are seeking "to reduce the number of students majoring in fundamental social sciences and humanities." If departments are having limits placed on their student intake, limiting their allocated financial resources, or, for example, are not having their offices and facilities refurbished, leaving them decrepit and decaying, it would not be surprising if their research agendas turn cautious and compliant and they reject scholarly proposals that touch on sensitive Hong Kong political issues, as more and more students and faculty are from the Mainland and the political struggle in Hong Kong has intensified in recent years.

When it comes to Hong Kong Studies, it appears that departments' and scholars' pursuit, or mere protection, of their economic and career interests could be conflicting with their scholarly urgings or even conscience. And, if that were indeed the case, it would not be surprising if we were to observe a flourishing of Hong Kong Studies outside the Social Science departments of Hong Kong's established universities, including overseas. In fact, that is what we are now seeing. The inaugural issue of a new academic journal, *Hong Kong Studies*, was published last year by Chinese University

of Hong Kong's Department of English. The semi-annual publication says it is "devoted to original, intersectional and cross-disciplinary research on Hong Kong affairs from multiple fields in the humanities and the social sciences" and "it is the first bilingual academic journal to focus on Hong Kong as a site of debate." In other words, although based in a humanities department, it will publish Hong Kong-focused social-science research. The journal's editors believe that the "timely expansion of the field of Hong Kong Studies warrants a journal of its own, in order to provide a focused platform for facilitating exchange between different disciplines and viewpoints in relation to Hong Kong." One of those editors, Tammy Ho Lai-Ming, is Assistant Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at Hong Kong Baptist University.

Separately, Bristol University launched The Hong Kong History Project under the leadership of Professor of History Robert Bickers in January 2015, with funding from the Hatton Trust.<sup>7</sup> The initiative "aims to encourage and facilitate the study of the history of Hong Kong in the UK." The initiative "will support cutting edge research into the history of Hong Kong by funding research studentships, visiting fellowships, conferences and workshops, exploring new and under-researched areas in Hong Kong history". It "aims to serve as a focal point for a programme of events and research initiatives that will provide new perspectives on the history of Hong Kong, both as an object of study in itself, and in comparative and regional perspective". The project's website notes that there is a "growing critical mass of scholars and writers turning their attention to post-Occupy Hong Kong".<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, the University of British Columbia in Canada launched its Hong Kong Studies Initiative within its Asian Studies department in April 2017. The initiative, led by Leo K. Shin, Associate Professor of Chinese History in the Department of History, considers the territory "as both an extraordinary Chinese city and as a spectacular international and transnational hub".<sup>9</sup> In a Youtube video, Shin says the initiative "was founded on the firm belief that there is a genuine need for passionate but also well-informed and fair-minded discussions about the past, present and future of this most-improbable metropolis, both as a spectacular city in its own right and also as an important gateway to Asia". In a newspaper report, Shin was quoted as saying that the centre was designed to create space outside Hong Kong to discuss its politics, history and culture as, in Hong Kong itself, academia was "being squeezed".<sup>10</sup> Incidentally, in 2015, UBC became the only university in Canada to teach Cantonese.<sup>11</sup>

Also, the Society of Hong Kong Studies (SHKS), formed in 2017 and affiliated with the Association of Asian Studies, held its

inaugural forum at City University of Hong Kong in January 2018. Two months later, it sponsored two panel sessions at the AAS annual conference in Washington, D.C. Chaired by UCLA sociology professor Ching Kwan Lee, the society plans to host its first annual conference later this year. Similarly, the newly-established United Kingdom-based Hong Kong Studies Association (HKSA), a "network for scholars in European institutions", will launch its "Hong Kong Insights" blog this year, according to Hong Kong Watch, which, itself launched in December 2017, "investigates the status of human rights, freedoms and rule of law in Hong Kong".<sup>12</sup>

## New generation of activists

Since it arose during World War Two, the term 'area studies' has been criticised as "colourless" and "ambiguous", but also lauded for its "modesty". It came about to describe the American effort to "achieve an encapsulated understanding of the unknown areas of the world" that the United States found itself involved in during the war, and, understandably, the discipline is "extremely vulnerable to the charge of serving 'nonscholarly' political or military interests".<sup>13</sup>

Approximately twenty years after the 1997 handover and thirty years until the expiry of "One Country, Two Systems", a turning point appears to have been reached in Hong Kong's struggle to maintain its political autonomy under Chinese sovereignty. For the original democracy movement, Hong Kong's democratisation was inextricably tied to mainland China's as the movement insisted it was 'patriotically' Chinese. But those ideas are crumbling amid social, economic and technological change and the simple passage of time, as a new generation of activists rise to prominence in the wake of mass street-blockade protests in 2014 and violence in 2016.

Some young democrats seek Hong Kong's independence from China, and others a referendum to determine post-2047 sovereignty. Some openly express Hong Kong nationalism. These historic developments, representing fundamental shifts in the tenets of the territory's democracy movement, contextualise the clear rise in scholarly interest in Hong Kong as an object of study, particularly by academics outside the audit culture that social scientists in establishment Hong Kong universities face, in addition to being bombarded with exhortations to go global.

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## Notes

- 1 The incident is also known as the "Fishball Revolution", "Mong Kok riot" and a "clash between civilians and police".
- 2 <https://tinyurl.com/ahksvision>
- 3 'Hong Kong Institute of Education granted university status after 10 years of campaigning', *Hong Kong Free Press*; <https://tinyurl.com/HKEIstatus>
- 4 'Time for Hong Kong to tackle the big issues a year after Occupy protests ended, scholar says', *South China Morning Post*; <https://perma.cc/K88P-HJNK>
- 5 Bosco, J. 2012. 'The Formula as a Managerial Tool', *Journal of Workplace Rights* 16(3-4):383-403; <https://tinyurl.com/boscotool>
- 6 Bosco, J. 2017. 'The view from Hong Kong anthropology', *Asian Anthropology* 16(3): 190-202.
- 7 'Hong Kong History Project launched', *University of Bristol*; <https://tinyurl.com/hkprojectlaunched>
- 8 'How and Why a Fresh Start to the Study of Hong Kong History Is Being Made', *HK History Project*; <https://tinyurl.com/hkfreshstart>
- 9 <https://youtu.be/8ErFrrVi9Qk>
- 10 'In Vancouver's "Cantosphere", a sense of responsibility and an identity under siege', *South China Morning Post*; <http://archive.li/b0Bzf>
- 11 '[Gifts] Donation to support Cantonese Studies at UBC announced!'; <http://archive.fo/hzpzE>
- 12 <http://archive.fo/MBler>
- 13 Schwartz, B. 1980. 'Presidential Address: Area Studies as a Critical Discipline', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 40(1):15-25; doi:10.2307/2055035, p.15.