

Hong Kong Universities and Marxism¹

Michael O'Sullivan

Hong Kong universities are often regarded as embodying a unique academic space for bringing together East and West traditions of learning. While Hong Kong universities may have considered themselves more advanced and more “Westernized” than their Chinese counterparts throughout the twentieth century, the situation has changed dramatically in this century as Chinese universities continue their rise up the different ranking tables. Considering the neoliberal econometrics underpinning university ranking rubrics, Hong Kong’s capitalist ethos has served its ranking push very well. However, today mainland China’s Marxist–Leninist economics and its Xi Jinping Thought is just as capable of responding to what ranking rubrics require of its universities.

President Xi Jinping gave a talk at a two-day meeting in Beijing in late 2016 on ideological work in China’s universities where he described how all universities in China (which for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) includes Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan) are “under the leadership of the Communist Party, and are socialist colleges with Chinese characteristics, so higher education must be guided by Marxism” (“China”). As Hong Kong moves ever closer to the end of the “One Country, Two Systems” era, its universities must therefore begin to respond to a national dictate where “higher education must be guided by Marxism.” The following short section aims to begin the discussion on this topic by bringing together the views of two international experts on Marx. Many of Hong Kong’s oldest universities have traditionally followed a British or American liberal arts college model complete with College system in the case of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and governance structure (in the case of the University of Hong Kong). The research assessment exercise conducted every six years at all Hong Kong universities is also modelled on the British Research Assessment Exercise system (RAE; now Research Excellence Framework (REF)) with all research from Hong Kong academics being assessed by panels overseen for the most part by UK academics (O’Sullivan, “Hong Kong’s”). Hong Kong is the only former British colony still adopting this British RAE model for research

¹ Part of this introduction is taken from O’Sullivan, “Are Hong Kong Universities Ready for Xi Jinping Thought?”, first published in the online journal *global-e* 11.42 (August 2018). <https://www.21global.ucsb.edu/global-e/august-2018/are-hong-kong-universities-ready-xi-jinping-thought>. Reprinted with permission.

assessment. However, even though university traditions and expectations are very different north of the border, China's recent decision to fund research at labs in Hong Kong in an effort to boost cross-border collaboration is evidence of a desire for greater harmonization between the two university systems (see "Xi").

This short section therefore examines how a university education conducted in the true spirit of Marxism might look today. We feel it is timely to examine how a university guided by Marxism might operate and whether it would resemble the universities in China that are today, for the Chinese Communist Party, to be "guided by Marxism." In this short section, **Terry Eagleton's** "few words" respond to our call for pieces on this topic. **Kieran Allen's** article also responds to our call with a piece that asks "[w]hy, it might be asked, is a call for a greater effort to promote Marxist ideology in universities associated with new forms of repression?" Allen responds to what he calls the "uproar" in the "Western media" about "President Xi Jinping's request for more Marxism in Chinese universities," by arguing that both Western and Chinese universities now serve capitalism, the former to the needs of neoliberalism, the latter to Chinese capitalism.

Of course, it must be acknowledged that CCP Marxism is only one living form of Marxism today. Sinophone scholars recognize that Party philosophy has increasingly become a "heterogenous mixture of nationalist, socialist, and capitalist strands, played to the tune of outworn socialist soundbites" even though the party still bases its legitimacy and power on its traditionalist communist identity, which, however, is becoming progressively removed from "commonly held social norms" of the society. Without class struggle and its coterminous systems of exploitation and class oppression, and without class consciousness and its underlying potential for social mobility, economic stasis can become ever more apparent in the minds of "the people." Critics argue that ideology in China has lost its "social moorings" as a result of the downplaying of "class struggle"—"class consciousness has become a no-word" (Bakken 833). Bakken argues that what we see today is more a "revolt of the elites" than a dictatorship of the proletariat (Bakken 828). However, any "revolt of the elites" brings with it various social inequalities that, for some scholars, are more extreme in China today than they are in the US.² Efforts to rephrase the Marxist two-tier nomenclature of society in China with a five-tier hierarchical system have also been unsuccessful. No historically communist society likes to have the comfortable fictions of the bourgeoisie-proletariat system, where exploitations and antagonisms are so easy to assign,

² Teresa Wright argues in *Accepting Authoritarianism* that "the wealthiest 20 per cent of Chinese citizens earned more than 59 per cent of China's income' with the bottom 20 per cent getting only 3 per cent of the country's wealth, a difference of 18 to 1 compared to the US, where the difference is 15 to 1" (qtd. in Brown 812).

replaced with a more complicated and seemingly rigid model of societal hierarchies.

Marxism was never big in Hong Kong. In fact, many of the European philosophical ideas Marxism emerged out of were never big here either. Hong Kong has little time for Enlightenment notions of the spirit of the nation, for expansionist frontier-spirit nationalism, or for the harsh realities of industrial revolutions built on anything like Five Year Plans. Thankfully, it does not do the propaganda of Celtic Revivals, Fascist state-building, or religious imperialism very well either. It also looks to no Human Rights Doctrine that might bolster a New State claim on the grounds of ethnic cleansing as in Kosovo, East Timor, or South Sudan. There is not even a Hong Kong grassroots movement and discourse seeking a State apology for persecution on ethnic and religious grounds as with the Rohingya in Myanmar or the aboriginal peoples in Australia.

How then might a Marxist University Vision under CCP-style Communism emerge in Hong Kong and how might its universities take to it? How are Hong Kong universities to catch up and embody being “guided by Marxism” in a little over two decades? How will the “socialist spiritual civilization” (*shehuizhuyi de jingshen wenming*) that the Party posits ever become embedded in the neoliberal structures of Hong Kong, a society that prides itself on its capitalist savvy and neoliberal liquidity (Shambaugh 720)? If Xi Jinping Marxist Thought and its “socialist spiritual civilization” means doing something about Hong Kong’s world-leading inequality, described by some as “the most unequal city in the developed world” in terms of wealth distribution (Zhao et al., “Income”), with a Gini coefficient of 0.537 and levels of inequality that, for Joseph Stiglitz, are consistent with levels of inequality in “dysfunctional societies,” then it might bring some benefits to Hong Kong (Stiglitz, *Price*). However, if Xi Jinping Marxist Thought simply means university heads paying lip-service to Xi Jinping Marxist–Leninism while floating university shares on bear markets or university professors offering absent students token courses in Xi Jinping Marxism, then Hong Kong resourcefulness suggests it may well get by.

But, of course, it is naive to even suggest today that the “socialist spiritual civilization” is about State ownership of land and greater equality. However, in recognizing this, one must recall that universities have traditionally been breeding grounds for leftist revolutionaries. They incubate anarchism as well as entrepreneurialism, altruism as well as “global enterprisingness.” Some groups of students may be so industrious and passionate as to read Marx’s early writings for themselves. They might read him on “The Jewish Question” or on the exploitation of the body in labor and they might not only see the “Party Line.” They might look at their society around them, at the work their parents do, and they might be inspired to work for greater social

equality. Perhaps then, in giving them more Marx and Lenin, the universities might foster a real socialist spiritual civilization that is truly “guided by Marxism.” When that day comes, it might not be good for rankings or for the lease and rent mentality, but it may build towards a more compassionate and less competitive “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui*). Hong Kong might then provide the perfect training ground and model for examining how the “socialist spiritual civilization” can survive in a time of change north of the border where, as David Shambaugh suggests, the “shift from propaganda to profit” has become more evident (“China’s”). Hong Kong society is well-equipped to offer life lessons in such shifts. Hong Kong society has survived colonialism, postcolonialism (however brief), and neo-colonialism because its resolve and resourcefulness means it knows well not to take the ideologies of larger nations too seriously. This lightness of touch and resourcefulness suggests Hong Kong could one day survive pretty well even with Marxist–Leninist Xi Jinping Thought on its books; hasn’t it already survived the various “isms” thrown at it both from East and West?

References

- “China: Xi Calls for Stricter Ideological Control of Universities”. *BBC*. 9 Dec. 2016. Web. 20 Mar. 2019.
- Bakken, Børge. “Norms, Values, and Cynical Games with Party Ideology”. *Critical Readings on the Chinese Communist Party*. 4 vols. Ed. Kjeld Erik Brodsgaard. Leiden: Brill, 2017. 816–48. Print.
- Brown, Kerry. “The Communist Party of China and Ideology”. *Critical Readings on the Chinese Communist Party*. 4 vols. Ed. Kjeld Erik Brodsgaard. Leiden: Brill, 2017. 797–815. Print.
- O’Sullivan, Michael. “Are Hong Kong Universities Ready for Xi Jinping Thought?” *global-e* 11.42 (2018): n.p. *global-e*. Web. 20 Mar. 2019.
- . “Hong Kong’s RAE is a Colonial Throwback”. *Times Higher Education*. 7 June 2018. Web. 20 Mar. 2019.
- Shambaugh, David. “China’s Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy”. *Critical Readings on the Chinese Community Party*. Ed. Kjeld Erik Brodsgaard. Leiden: Brill, 2017. 715–51. Print.
- Stiglitz, Joseph. *The Price of Inequality*. London: Penguin, 2013. Print.
- “Xi Jinping Opens Chinese Research Funding up to Hong Kong.” *Times Higher Education Supplement*. 15 May 2018. Web. 20 Mar. 2019.
- Zhao Xiaobin, Li Zhang, and Tak O Kelvin Sit. “Income Inequalities under Economic Restructuring in Hong Kong.” *Asian Survey* 44.3 (2004): 442–73. Print.