How did Hong Kong’s transition from a largely free, semi-independent city to a full-blown Communist Party dictatorship affect its academic life? A watershed moment was Beijing’s imposition, in June 2020, of a National Security Law. The author examines the impact of that law on the conduct of university senior managements, on local and expatriate faculty, and on students. Senior management responded to the new law by disciplining students, monitoring faculty, and cleansing universities of anything deemed hostile to the new order. Faculty rapidly capitulated to government and management edicts, though locals showed more grit than expatriates did. Students were the most defiant actors of all until university managements severed ties with their students’ unions, effectively defunding them. A case of surveillance in Lingnan University, the author’s former place of employment, is related and its implications considered. The author describes how, and explains why, journalists in Hong Kong acted with greater defiance than professors did. He suggests that Identity Politics, a Western import, is congenial to Chinese Communist Party rule in Hong Kong.

**Keywords** “Administrative Ecstasy” · Chinese Communist Party (CCP) · “Compliance spread” · Dictatorship · Expatriate faculty · Identity Politics · Lingnan University · National Security Law (NSL) · Professors and journalists

**Abbreviations**

HKU University of Hong Kong
CUHK Chinese University of Hong Kong
HKUST Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

When we hear the word *dictatorship*, scenes of brutality are never far from our imaginings: secret police, late at night or in early morning, forcing entry into apartment buildings to arrest dazed occupants; a terrified victim, suffering his third round of interrogation in 24 hours; hectoring leaders, impotent parliaments, prostrate law courts, and a populace minding its every word, fearful that a neighbour or colleague will turn informer. In these remarks, however, I propose to consider not the fist of dictatorship but its ambient spirits: opportunism, servility, and acquiescence. My example is a profession, the academic profession, about which I can claim to know something. I write about what I witnessed during the last eighteen months that I taught in Hong Kong, a period that climaxed in the near total subordination of the city’s universities to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

**An Expatriate Professor in Hong Kong**

Until mid-August 2021, I was a Research Professor in Social Theory at Lingnan University, one of the eight publicly funded universities in Hong Kong. I taught in the Department of Sociology and Social Policy. With roughly 2800 undergraduates, and 880 mostly fee-paying graduate students, Lingnan is the smallest public university in Hong Kong and aims to offer a...
residential, liberal arts education. I worked at Lingnan for twenty-one years, arriving in August 2000 as an associate professor in sociology and departing in June 2021.

The following remarks reference Lingnan University disproportionately, and focus mainly on the last eighteen months I lived in Hong Kong. I thought then, and still think, that more could have been done to prepare for the impending crackdown on universities. The issue was never that universities could prevail against the Communist Party; that was unthinkable. The issue was to defend, and to defend in public, the independence of universities, the dignity of the academic calling, until they were prised from our hands. After that, follow the ancient maxim “do no harm”.

Today, the situation for academics in Hong Kong is far worse, and more dangerous, than it was when I worked there, and I am no longer able to appraise competently my ex-colleagues’ condition. Ta Kung Pao and Wen Wei Po—media outlets funded by the Central Government’s Liaison Office—are intensifying a terror campaign against academics they accuse of harbouring pro-independence sympathies, and against Hong Kong’s principal research funding body, the Research Grants Council, for having funded research on the democracy and localist movement. Even acquiring accurate information about my former colleagues’ plights is difficult. Despotic states impose a communicative chill not just on those who live under them, but also on those who live outside of them, at least if those who live outside seek to act responsibly. Surveilled emails, monitored phone calls, and scrutinized internet traffic invariably produce their intended effect: a reticent self-consciousness that impedes all serious political exchanges with friends and former colleagues.

**Background: The Policing of Hong Kong Universities**

Alarmed by mass protests that erupted in Hong Kong during the summer and autumn of 2019, and incredulous at the city government’s failure to restore order, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) moved to crush the democratic movement once and for all. The crackdown came in the least expected way. Recalling the Tiananmen massacre in 1989, some writers anticipated a military strike against Hong Kong protesters by PLA regulars stationed in the city or, from across the border in Shenzhen, by massed units of the People’s Armed Police. As it happened, Beijing had no need of its myrmidons; a battalion of paragraphs would do nicely. At the end of June 2020, the Communist Party imposed a national security law on Hong Kong that, within a few months, eliminated almost all traces of protest. I shall say more about it presently. As of this writing (March 2022), all the pro-democrat principals are either behind bars or in self-exile. More than fifty civic and political associations have disbanded under duress.

No university, anywhere in the world, is entirely free of regulation. Since 1965, Hong Kong public universities have been constrained by rules set out by the University Grants Committee and Research Grants Council, government-appointed bodies that establish the priorities and funding of higher education. Even so, academic life in Hong Kong, until recently, was free of ideological pressure on what professors could teach, research, write, and publish. I can attest to that not just as a professor but as a former head of department, Academic Dean of Social Sciences, and, for five years, a member of the Research Grants Council. Since June 2020, however, Hong Kong universities have witnessed a sea change in governance. The turning point was the National Security Law, which established the crimes of subversion, secession, terrorism, and collusion with hostile foreign entities. The phrasing of these crimes is deliberately ambiguous; it acts as both a dragnet and a deterrent. The law is moulding all the city’s institutions—its government and parties, its civil service, its schools, its media, its entertainment industry, its

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2 https://ln.edu.hk/about-lu/facts-and-figures/statistics-of-students and, for comparison, https://cdec.ugc.edu.hk/cdec/searchUniv.action?lang=EN&fbclid=IwAR0oyH2SUR1GFDP8WOXtDStaYUM3yVMAuvJww76ezD1_E46nWdtsFZ49I

3 In 2018, at the age of 65, and having reached the mandatory age of retirement, I was offered a further three-year contract to help buttress Lingnan’s performance in an impending, pan-university Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) organized by the University Grants Committee. As that term reached its third year, I was ambivalent about leaving Hong Kong: happy at the prospect of returning to Canada and joining my family, reluctant to depart without witnessing the next phase of the city’s trajectory. With the RAE completed, the city’s public universities had no incentive to hire an elderly professor. Thus, I approached the only private university in Hong Kong with a sociology post—just as a professor but as a former head of department, for five years, a member of the Research Grants Council. Since June 2020, however, Hong Kong universities have witnessed a sea change in governance. The turning point was the National Security Law, which established the crimes of subversion, secession, terrorism, and collusion with hostile foreign entities. The phrasing of these crimes is deliberately ambiguous; it acts as both a dragnet and a deterrent. The law is moulding all the city’s institutions—its government and parties, its civil service, its schools, its media, its entertainment industry, its

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5 https://thediplomat.com/2022/01/hong-kongs-contested-academic-freedom/

6 The political scientist Brian Fong, from the Education University of Hong Kong, and an expert on nations and nationalism, is among more recent casualties of “investigations” by Ta Kung Pao. Other investigated scholars include Fu Hualing, dean of the Faculty of Law at the University of Hong Kong, and Eliza Lee Wai-Yee, a member of the Department of Politics and Public Administration of the University of Hong Kong. Professor Lee was a witness for the defence of Tong Ying-kit, the first person to be sentenced to prison under the national security law. For the pillorying of these scholars, see the three-part investigation here: http://www.takungpao.com.hk/news/232109/2022/0207/683713.html.  

7 Some writers include the author: https://quillette.com/2019/09/03/a-letter-from-hong-kong/

8 https://hongkongfp.com/2021/11/28/explainer-over-50-groups-gone-in-11-months-how-hong-kongs-pro-democracy-forces-crumbled/?utm_medium=email

9 For a history of state involvement in Hong Kong’s higher education since 1911, see John P. Burns, “The State and Higher Education in Hong Kong,” China Quarterly, 244, December 2020: 1031–1055.

10 For the text of the law in English, see https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202007/01/W5efbd6f5a310834817256495.html.
police and security forces—to the shape of the Mainland’s. The same process is affecting the universities.

Before the UK renounced sovereignty over Hong Kong in July 1997 and transferred the crown colony to the People’s Republic of China (PRC), it sought to entrench a raft of liberties and rights that Hongkongers enjoyed under British rule. Under the terms of the Sino-British Declaration (1984) and the articles of the Basic Law (adopted by the National People’s Congress in 1990), Hong Kong was entitled to retain its civil and political freedoms, and its free-market economy, till July 2047. “One country, two systems”, “Hong Kong people’s governing Hong Kong”, and “high degree of autonomy” were the slogans that defined the city’s special status in the PRC.

Article 137 of the Basic Law states expressly that “Educational institutions of all kinds may retain their autonomy and enjoy academic freedom.”11 But Articles 9 and 10 of the National Security Law (hereafter NSL) require that the government promote national security education in general and, specifically, ensure that universities are properly regulated and supervised on all matters concerning national security. Since the NSL trumps the Basic Law, Article 137 is effectively null and void.

The CCP has over seventy years’ experience of marginalizing, terrorizing, and liquidating persons and organizations deemed threatening to national security or, much the same thing, to the CCP’s monopoly on power. It dreams of global, not just continental, domination. As academic freedom and autonomy are fugitive concepts in China, they could not be allowed to survive in the new Hong Kong. However, the debasement of Hong Kong’s universities was not carried out directly by the government and its agencies, such as the Departments of Justice and Security, and the Education Bureau, or by Beijing’s Liaison Office in Hong Kong. It was and is executed by functionaries within the universities themselves, albeit nudged and egged on by Beijing’s media proxies. University senior managements are the chief drivers of repression.

**Administrative Ecstasy: University Senior Managements**

Hong Kong’s university managers share one obvious attribute: crypsis, that is, “the ability of an organism to meld with its immediate environments”.

They are opportunists and weathervanes, rather than militants and pioneers. It is ambition more than ideology that motivates them. Their conduct approximates not the missionary zeal of early Bolshevism or Maoism but what the nineteenth century Russian satirist, M. E. Saltykov-Shchedrin, called “administrative ecstasy” (administrativniy vostorg).13 The term evokes managers intoxicated by power whose characteristic mien is “unction and flattery to those above, and ruthless bullying to those below”.14

Self-awareness is not their strong suit. During Covid, a university president demands that faculty come to campus to show their faces in empty classrooms, even though no one has seen the boss in months. Entombed in his official residence, the president has delegated powers to a zealous deputy who hopes to replace him soon. An associate vice president, who thinks nothing of dumping his own work into the laps of overburdened junior colleagues, tasks himself loftily with directing “due diligence”. It is not uncommon, either, for employees of the ecstatic to be treated like cattle yet enjoined, in official memoranda, to work together as one “warm and strong family”. Yet this is a family of troubling dysfunction. Its patriarch has been known suddenly to turn nasty, wave the big stick, and threaten to expel adult offspring from the family bosom if they do not do what they are told—and do it immediately.

In Hong Kong, as in much of the world, university management is no different in kind from the faculty it governs. Only a small minority of managers hail from commerce and industry, or have degrees in management. Unlike administrators, proper—registrars, directors of human resources, comptrollers, and so forth—members of the Office of the President are typically senior academics who have decided to take up an executive function, notably, as vice president or associate vice president. The same is true for deans, who straddle faculty and the presidential group. An innocent might assume that professors-turned-managers, some of whom still publish and direct research centres, would be eager to guard academic freedom or, at least, be disinclined to forsake it for the “unbounded advantages of disgrace.”15 The reality in Hong Kong is quite different. The same abdication is common in Western universities as well, but in Hong Kong, the speed of abandonment, and its carceral implications, are astonishing.

Recently, in the West, upon assigning some accidental heretic to Dante’s sixth circle of hell, a member of the Office of

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13 I rely on Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Devis. Translated, with an introduction and notes, by Michael R. Katz. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992 (orig. 1871–2), pp. 58–9, 760, n. 58.
14 Isaiah Berlin, “Four Weeks in the Soviet Union” (orig. 1956) in Berlin’s The Soviet Mind: Russian Culture Under Communism. Edited by Henry Hardy, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2011, pp. 119–129, at 128. A more benign view of the quality of Hong Kong’s senior management is offered here: https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20210831131547216. An estimation closer to my own is here: https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20211116093655287.
15 The expression appears in Thomas Mann, The Magic Mountain (orig. 1924). Translated by John E. Woods. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995, pp. 79, 90, 522.
the President will recite in sombre tones a standard homily. “The university is deeply committed to academic freedom and respects the right of faculty and students to voice different opinions … But, of course, free expression must be sensitive to the community in which it is embedded; never should it be hurtful or disrespectful.” Delivered with all the subtlety of a hammer blow, that caveat authorizes corpuses of militant students, faculty, and administrators to cast all expressions they dislike as hurtful or disrespectful. The upshot is well known. In an inversion of reality as bizarre as it is sinister, those who excel at intimidating others claim to be the ones who feel “unsafe”. That is how we do things in the liberal West.

Hong Kong does things differently. There, the rhetoric of repression is colder, more economical, as befits the ethos of an international financial hub: voices are silenced to prevent “legal risk”. Cloaked in this euphemism, the presidential corps humiliatingly facultify and students (see below), undermines rules it only recently articulated to great fanfare, and abridges previous channels of consultation. Senates are short circuited. Robotic head nodding, punctuated by abundant rubber stamping, replaces substantive input into matters of principle and policy. Aware that all decisions of importance were made long before the president entered the chamber, senate members sit impassively, the utterances of the presidential corps consigned to background noise. Eyes lowered, as if in deference, attendees furtively text friends, correct page proofs, and check Facebook before stampeding to the door when agenda items are at last exhausted.

Managerial conduct in Hong Kong universities replicates a well-known reflex of officials in all dictatorships: working towards the Führer. Rather than wait for instructions to be delivered from on high, university authorities anticipate them, or invent them, hoping thereby to curry favour with the new boss. Lingnan University now requires that teachers record their lectures; CCTV cameras are likely to appear soon in the university’s classrooms. Naturally, such surveillance is pleasing to government; it intimidates faculty, anxious that their words may come back to haunt them in a national security trial, while deterring students from airing politically heterodox views in class or even conventional views. For who knows how one’s remarks will be interpreted?

The University of Hong Kong fired the legal scholar and democracy activist, Benny Tai, on the grounds that he had been arrested several times for public order offences. Lingnan University needed no such excuse; working towards the Führer, it simply refused to renew the contracts of two pro-democracy professors, neither of whom were charged with criminal behaviour. Before that, in 2016, Lingnan applied the same expedient to Chin Wan, a professor of Chinese, a localist mystic, and an author of a series of books on Hong Kong as a city state.

To be sure, it was not always easy in Hong Kong to distinguish grovelling from panic. Consider the case of Baptist University, a school boasting keen expertise in visual culture and digital ethics. Condemned in February 2021 by a pro-Beijing media organ, DotDot News, for hosting the World Press Photo exhibition, Baptist pulled out; the exhibits included a few photos and a short film about the anti-government protests of 2019. Instead of standing firm, Baptist’s rattled management first cowered, then caved, incentivizing further attacks on universities by pro-Beijing media mouthpieces. Their victims included Johannes Chan, a former dean of law

16 At the same time, Western universities have become willing conduits for CCP propaganda. The quid pro quo is simple: cash in exchange for status and influence. The University of Cambridge is a prominent beneficiary of Chinese money: https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/how-china-bought-cambridge and https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-ccp-training-programme-at-the-heart-of-cambridge.

17 While for good measure parroting the dissembling rhetoric of Western university officials. Thus, Hong Kong’s Secretary for Education, Kevin Yeung, affirms, against all evidence to the contrary, that: “The HKU government treasures the important social values of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, which are the cornerstone of our higher education sector. In particular, Article 137 of the Basic Law of the HKSAR specifically and clearly states that educational institutions of all kinds may retain their autonomy and enjoy academic freedom. These safeguards have not been altered in any way and remain in full force”, https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20211117074428747.

18 The language used by Lingnan University and HKU: https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/3160744/university-hong-kong-covers-pillar-shame-sculpture-marking-tiananmen and https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/society/article/3160915/goddess-democracy-statue-tiananmen-square-memorial-removed.

Specifically, HKU claimed that the Pillar of Shame posed “legal risks” to the university under a still-extant Crimes Ordinance provision originally enacted by the British. Aside from the fatuity of this claim—the sculpture had existed for two decades on HKU premises without triggering this ordinance—is the implication that Hong Kong is still a colony, albeit one transferred from Britain to the PRC.

19 The expression, attributed to historian Ian Kershaw, adapts a phrase, uttered in 1934, by Werner Willikens, a state secretary in the Prussian Agriculture Ministry. See Ian Kershaw “‘Working Towards the Führer’: Reflections on the Nature of the Hitler Dictatorship”, in Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin (eds). Stalinism and Nazism. Dictatorships in Comparison. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 88–106.

20 https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3150955/hong-kongs-lingnan-university-terminates-2-professors-who. Professors Law Wing-sang and Hui Po-keung were adjuncts and both are local Hongkongers. As of this writing, it is still harder to fire tenured professors, especially expatriates; I return to the expats below.

21 Chin Wan’s impact on Hong Kong’s political culture is extensively discussed in Kevin Carrico’s Two Systems, Two Countries: A Nationalist Guide to Hong Kong. Oakland, Calif.: University of California Press, 2022. See also Tommy Cheung, “Father of Hong Kong Nationalism? A Critical Review of Wan Chín’s City-State Theory”, Asian Education and Development Studies, 4 (4) 2015: 460–470. None of Chin’s many books has been translated into English. A political sociological approach to localism is Samson Yuen and Sanho Chung, “Explaining Localism in Post-handover Hong Kong: An Eventful Approach”, China Perspectives, 2018(13): 19–29.

22 https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3123337/hong-kong-baptist-university-calls-exhibition-featuring.https://hongkongfp.com/ 2021/02/26/breaking-hong-kong-baptist-university-cancels-world-press-photo-exhibition-citing-safety-and-security-concerns/
of the University of Hong Kong, and a candidate for a pro-vice chancellor position, and Professor C.K. Lee, a prominent sociologist at the University of Science and Technology.

In the late winter of 2021, a former chief executive of Hong Kong, C.Y. Leung, called for Professor Lee’s arrest by the national security police on account of her pre-NSL support for the democracy movement. She has since decamped to UCLA. Little wonder that a Berlin-based university global survey, released in March 2021, assigned Hong Kong a D grade in its international academic freedom index. The city now ranks below Algeria and Cambodia.

Not all university presidents imitated Lingnan’s Professor Leonard Cheng Kwok-hon, and the presidents of the University of Hong Kong, the Polytechnic University of Hong Kong, the Education University of Hong Kong, and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, in publicly endorsing the national security law in advance of its promulgation.

Three heads never endorsed it: the presidents of Baptist University (Roland Chin, who retired before the DotDot news incident, related above), City University (Way Kuo), and the University of Science and Technology (Wei Shyy). Tellingly, the latter two presidents are of Taiwanese origin; both recently announced they are stepping down early from their positions.

And if heads of departments and of programmes count as junior management, they have never had a more thankless job. Several fight for their colleagues unobtrusively. The same applies more rarely at higher tiers. I know of one case (not at Lingnan) where a professor, defamed in the pro-government Chinese press, received assurance from senior managers of their continued support. Characteristically, however, these executives lent their support in private, issuing no university-wide public defence of the principles of academic freedom. Similarly, a dean from another university told me that it is better to work quietly in the interstices of the organization than it is to be conspicuous.

One sees the sense of working in the shadows. But one surely sees its peril. It provides no visible leadership, no public example of integrity and responsibility for the faculty and the staff to look to, no palpable rallying point of encouragement to defend academic freedom, indeed, no articulation of what academic freedom is. Nor did the University Grants Committee (UGC) and Research Grants Council (RGC) offer guidance or solidarity. More serious agencies might have anticipated the crackdown on Hong Kong academic life and taken it with the gravity it deserved. They might have established a Charter of Academic Freedom or an Ombudsman for Academic Freedom. They might have issued press releases, or held press conferences, to clarify the scientific and disciplinary criteria of research funding. They might have convoked forums at each university to receive faculty views and submissions. They did none of these things. It bears noting as well that the RGC routinely invites foreign academics—typically from democratic countries—to serve as members on its panels; several foreigners chair RGC sub-committees. How have these foreigners weighed in publicly to defend the independence of their Hong Kong colleagues? So far as I know, they have not.

It was only a matter of time before Beijing’s proxies attacked the RGC’s own independence, meaning the liberty of its research committees to award grants based on merit rather than on political credentials. An “investigation” by Ta Kung Pao, published in early February 2022, characterized the RGC as little more than a “cash machine for ‘Hong Kong independence’ and anti-China scholars”. Less than a month earlier, Carsten Holz, a professor of economics at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST), drew attention to the dysfunctional symbiosis of Hong Kong’s universities, the RGC, and the government:

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 through the lens of ‘patriotism’ and CCP loyalty. In order to avoid HKUST administrators’ sanctions and receive a grant, a faculty member would do well to avoid ‘sensitive’ research and establish a record of regime conformance. One could, of course, apply for overseas grants but that brings the danger of

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23 https://app.hongkongfp.com/2021/05/15/test-balloon-warming-shot-attack-dog-is-hong-kong-witnessing-a-rebirth-of-the-mainland-mouthpiece/.

24 The attack on Chan goes back at least to 2015: https://archive.discover society.org/2016/04/05/hong-kongs-umbrella-movement-one-year-on-the-university-of-hong-kong-as-the-new-battleground/.

25 https://www.wenweipo.com/a/202103/22/AP6057f425e4b04e1918cca4f1.html

26 https://www.gppi.net/media/KinzelbachEtAl_2021_Free_Universities_AFi-2020.pdf

27 On this kowtowing, see my letter to the South China Morning Post (SCMP), published on June 4, 2020, https://www.scmp.com/comment/letters/article/3087153/hong-kongs-national-security-law-university-presidents-statement.

28 https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education/article/3155379/hong-kong-university-science-and-technology-president-wei

29 http://www.takungpao.com.hk/news/232109/2022/0208/684110.html
falling afoul of the National Security Law by ‘colluding with foreign forces’.

Managers and Students

During the uprising of 2019, it was university students or, more often, recent alumni—young lions such as Edward Leung Tin-kei, Andy Chan Ho Tin, Agnes Chow Ting, and Nathan Law Kwun-chung (a past Lingnan University Cultural Studies student)—who voiced the most radical ideas about Hong Kong nationalism, localism, independence, and self-determination, concepts that were by no means identical in meaning. Similarly, it was to universities that militant protesters, not always students themselves, flocked. In November 2019, occupations of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), over a five-day period and lasting twelve days, at the Polytechnic University of Hong Kong, turned both campuses into battlegrounds. When a pro-government critic of CUHK students referred disparagingly to “Rioters’ University” (暴大), students wore the insult as a badge of pride, inscribing the motto onto newly made T-shirts. Onto riot police they rained concrete slabs, Molotov cocktails, and even flaming arrows. The forces of law responded with water cannons, tear gas canisters, sponge grenades, and rubber bullets. The most violent scenes occurred at the Polytechnic University. It was as if the furies of the Paris Commune, rhymed by Marx, had descended on Hong Kong to unleash their manic wrath.

For the students, no state actor aroused greater abhorrence than the police. With Carrie Lam’s government paralyzed, unable to meet the protesters’ demands, and unwilling to open lines of communication, only the forces of coercion remained to keep order in Hong Kong. In a closed circuit of conflict, the police became more violent and the protesters more pitiless. Curses against “PoPo” held nothing back. “Black cops, hope your whole family dies and not one member less” (黑警死全家), spat one vilification. “Cockroaches”, the police screamed back.

And beyond the police, beyond even the city government, stood the ultimate target of the students’ rage, the People’s Republic of China. “ChiNazi” was a common designation for it on university big character posters and defaced billboards. Superficially, the expression was odd. Why associate the CCP with National Socialism rather than with Bolshevism, its original DNA? The answer is that students knew more about Hitler than Stalin, more about Polish death camps than Gulags, and that they equated the treatment of Uighurs in Xinjiang and Buddhists in Tibet as forms of ethnic cleansing—without realizing that the Bolsheviks were ethnic cleansers too. An ex-student whom I questioned about the terms “赤納粹” (Red Nazism) and “納粹中國” (Nazi China) added:

There was a popular online post (which has now been deleted) in September [2020] urging people to publicize the term ‘ChiNazi’ to arouse westerners’ awareness—just as the way the term ‘Brexit’ is popularized. Another possible reason for the popularity of such a term in Hong Kong is because of its pronunciation. The English pronunciation of ‘ChiNazi’ actually sounds like a Cantonese swear word meaning ‘lunatic’. However, the term appears to be replaced by the term ‘anti-totalitarianism’ recently due to many Hong Kong people’s concern that Nazism is a ‘trauma trigger’ for westerners. They are afraid that this would potentially lose westerners’ support if they keep making a parody on Nazism.

For its part, the government nursed a burning hatred for the students. They were the modern equivalent of those vermin lambasted by the ancient legalist writer, Han Feizi: rebels who defy the sovereign and appropriate his authority, speechifiers who “propound false schemes, and borrow doctrines from abroad … forgetting the welfare of the state and the grain”.

Once the National Security Law was passed, it was time for payback. And, once again, the job was to be done by university senior managements.

Student dissent was quashed in a two-pronged assault. First, Hong Kong universities severed ties with their students’ unions, depriving them of funding (through the collection of union fees), office space, and representation on university committees. The Chinese University of Hong Kong was the first to apply this sanction, in February 2021. Soon after, a fire-breathing editorial in CCP megaphone, People’s Daily.

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29 https://thediplomat.com/2022/01/hong-kongs-contested-academic-freedoms/

Professor Holz is not exaggerating. Lau Siu-kai, vice president of the Chinese Association of Hong Kong and Macau Studies, has argued that the UGC needs to re-examine its understanding of Hong Kong, and establish its own set of academic standards and related curriculum based on Chinese culture and history. If the higher education sector is not diversified and developed, he says, Hong Kong academia will continue to be a “colony” of the West.

30 Good accounts of the mayhem at Chinese U and PolyU are Zuraidah Ibrahim and Jeffie Lam, (2020), Rebel City. Hong Kong’s Year of Water and Fire. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, pp. 100–119, and Antony Dapiran (2020), City on Fire. The Fight for Hong Kong. Melbourne and London: Scribe, pp. 250–263.

31 By citing these and other terms, I do not mean to say that the students coined them, only that they employed them, a fact that was evident to all who strolled through Hong Kong’s university campuses. Often the terms would first appear on Likhg, a forum website akin to Reddit, or on other social media.

32 Han Feizi, “The Five Vermin” (circa. 233 B.C.). In Han Feizi, Basic Writings. Translated by Burton Watson. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, pp. 98–118, at 117.
The universities removed all salient political artworks from their premises. The first and most famous one to go was the “Pillar of Shame”, an iconic statue that paid tribute to the Tiananmen fallen. Housed on the University of Hong Kong campus, it was officially the property of the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China. Founded immediately after Tiananmen, and the organizer of the annual commemoration in Hong Kong of the June 4 victims, the Alliance dissolved on September 25, 2021, following the arrest of its standing committee members. Chinese University and Lingnan University followed suit in cleansing their own campuses of any mural, painting, or sculpture deemed subversive of the new order.

Controlling a population requires more than policing and harsh discipline. It requires erasing memories of a former epoch, of former freedoms, of former solidarities. Such memories are encoded in books, museums, public commemoration, and political artwork such as the Pillar of Shame and the Goddess of Democracy. As the French liberal writer, Benjamin Constant, noted:

> Each generation inherits from its ancestors a treasure of moral riches, an invisible and precious legacy that it bequeaths to its descendants. The loss of this treasure is an incalculable evil for a people. … The interests and memories that arise from local customs contain a germ of resistance that authority is reluctant to tolerate and that it is anxious to eradicate. It can deal more successfully with individuals; it rolls its heavy body effortlessly over them as if they were sand.

Memory requires remembrance to keep it vibrant, and commemorative ceremonies, bodily performances, to renew it for each generation.

Today, books on the 2019 uprising and on the Umbrella Movement are no longer accessible in Hong Kong’s public libraries. The museum commemorating the Tiananmen
crackdown is shuttered.\textsuperscript{43} The June 4th commemoration is prohibited.

The government is busy substituting its own rituals for those of Old Hong Kong. Some of them are pedagogic—national security education is now mandated for all Hong Kong universities and schools. Others are designed to arouse new passions, a love for the Motherland. Explaining the obligatory flag-raising ceremonies on university campuses, Secretary for Education Kevin Yeung Yun-hung told lawmakers that the innovation would "help students develop a sense of belonging to the country, an affection for the Chinese people and enhance their sense of national identity".\textsuperscript{44}

To these bald facts about the students, and the universities’ treatment of them, let me add a personal recollection. In early February 2021, Quillette published an article of mine on Dictatorship and Responsibility in Hong Kong.\textsuperscript{45} The piece was heavily derivative. It discussed the experiences of previous subjects of totalitarian regimes—Jaspers, Solzhenitsyn, Havel, among others—but this was well-tilled ground. I wrote the article for two reasons: First, to offer encouragement to all who wondered how they would survive the new regime with a shred of their integrity intact, and secondly, to test my conjecture that the authorities would be hesitant to reprimand a foreign scholar for the crime of "seditious words", a crime the Department of Justice was then in the process of reviving.\textsuperscript{46}

One day, a student approached me on campus. The article was OK, he said, but it did not speak to him and would not speak to other students either. It addressed people already with authority, people who had jobs and responsibilities, people already ensconced in the established world. But students were not. What students and other young people are looking for, he said, was an analysis of how the system might crack—for instance, following the death of Xi Jinping. "What prospects are there for getting rid of this government? How can we still make democracy a reality?"

The students who came of age between 2014 (the year of the Umbrella Movement) and 2019 (the year of the uprising) belong to a cleft generation, their lives irrevocably split by a stark Before and After. An unbridgeable rift of feeling and consciousness separates them from the new regime. Who will tell the story of this cohort with the nuance and pathos it deserves? Only the students may be able to tell it, years from now, looking back, when they are no longer students.

Faculty

"Writers are always selling somebody out", says Joan Didion.\textsuperscript{47} That is the vice, parading as virtue, that hangs menacingly over every memoir.

To this point, I have focused my remarks on the role played by senior managements in the debasement of Hong Kong’s universities. I have presented the faculty as victims of managerial highhandedness. That emphasis is warranted, but it fails to present a complete and honest picture. Unless one assumes that faculty are mere automatons or ciphers of higher powers, it is appropriate to ask about their own conduct during this transition. How did we do? With only a few exceptions, professors failed to act to at least slow down the erosion of academic freedom in their universities; no concerted action to protect it materialized when a window for action was still open, in my estimation, from some weeks before and up to roughly a year after the imposition of the National Security Law. Faculty and staff unions, to the extent that they still existed, and many did not, were neutered or in hibernation even before the NSL was passed. The professors who did push back against the CCP were almost all locals, in other words, the most vulnerable to harassment and punishment. Expatriates, who risked far less—I shall explain why later—ducked for cover.

Compliance spread was ubiquitous.\textsuperscript{48} Because academics were afraid of the National Security Law, they became afraid of other things not expressly mentioned in the law, which is to say that they became afraid of authority in general. For instance, nothing in the NSL mandates the surveillance of faculty computers. Yet, in the winter term of 2021, Lingnan University’s management insisted on it all the same and at a time when no other public university was doing likewise. How did the Lingnan faculty respond to this initiative? Let us pause to look closely at this episode as a case study of compliance spread.

In the winter term of 2021, during Covid, Lingnan operated a hybrid system of teaching in which students were given the choice of whether to attend class in person or attend remotely. The faculty were given no choice. They were instructed to teach from their classrooms and, from there, relay their lessons to students remotely via computer terminal. Internal Lingnan

43 https://dailystandard.com/world_news/2558/hong-kongs-tiananmen-museum-shuts-down-amid-investigation
44 https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education/article/3152785/hong-kong-universities-must-also-hold-weekly-flag-raising
45 https://quilllete.com/2021/02/01/how-should-the-citizens-of-hong-kong-prepare-for-dictatorship/
46 “Reviving” because sedition was a crime first introduced by the British and survived under the Crimes Ordinance: https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/hong-kongs-sedition-law-is-back/. The first person, after 1997 (the year of the handover), to be convicted under this ordinance for seditious words was the radio presenter and activist Tam Tak-chi, https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/law-and-crime/article/3168913/hong-kong-protests-judge-rules-insulting-hong-kong. The conviction occurred as I was revising these reflections.
47 Slouching Towards Bethlehem. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1968, p. xiv.
48 On compliance spread, see https://quillette.com/2021/05/14/podcast-149-lingnan-university-scholar-peter-baehr-on-academic-life-within-hong-kongs-increasingly-repressive-political-atmosphere/.
surveys showed that, by large majorities, students were against attending class in person, preferring to learn remotely from student residence or from home. This antipathy may seem surprising. It was conditioned partly by nervousness about the coronavirus pathogen—the experience of SARS in 2003 is seared into local consciousness—partly by erratic government policies regarding the number of individuals permitted to assemble in any one place, and partly, I conjecture, by alienation: students composed a plurality of the 2019 antigovernment protests and were exhausted and disheartened by their defeat. The post-protest ecology of Lingnan was also dismal. I lived on campus for the last six months of employment. With its check-posts, ubiquitous security guards, and unremitting demands for ID, Lingnan resembled a small, gloomy garrison, a microcosm of what Hong Kong outside the campus was fast becoming.

Besides, the students took a dim view of Lingnan’s leaders. I have already mentioned that President Leonard Cheng, installed in 2013 and now late into his second term, publicly endorsed the National Security Law in early June 2020—before he had read the law’s provisions. Another senior figure is influential Lingnan associate Vice President, Professor Lau Chi-pang. Professor Lau is chairman of an official body charged with revising Hong Kong’s secondary school Liberal Studies curriculum along CCP lines. He also oversees the Hong Kong Chronicles project, a multi-volume endeavour to airbrush the city’s history of any beneficent British colonial influence. This is the same Professor Lau who told Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) that secondary students are not sufficiently advanced or sophisticated to be taught about the coronavirus pathogen—

The absence of students from class meant that teaching remotely from a classroom was redundant. Worse, even if one student did attend class, the professor was compelled to teach masked. And as every experienced educator knows, a face that is fully visible to students, even if projected via Zoom, is a far more expressive and effective medium of instruction than a face semi-covered. The presence in class of one or two students meant that the remote majority were compelled to endure the muffled voices of instructors, witness their oscillating attention (divided between students watching off-campus and the student or students in situ), and have only a partial visual image of the teacher. To avoid this convolution, a few Lingnan professors resolved to give lectures exclusively from their university office, campus residence, or home. Teaching in empty classrooms was not just pointless as pedagogy, they concluded. It was humiliating. That seemed to be the point of the president’s decree. For the highest high of administrative ecstasy is the feeling of control—not self-control but control over other people.

Faced with sporadic resistance, albeit discreet and thus unprovocative, Lingnan’s management acted swiftly. Staff from the Information Technology Services Centre (ITSC) were dispatched to surveil IP range, computer logs, Wi-Fi logs, and Zoom logs of all the faculty. Then, harvesting data extracted from the Banner system, the Chief Information Officer (CIO) identified where and how teachers were teaching; bundled this information into Excel files; and passed it on to heads of departments and deans for action. A memo from the CIO who doubles, with no trace of irony, as the chief librarian, sweats with police jargon: “detect”, “found out”, “comply”, “investigate”, “follow up”. Accompanying emails from the president warned darkly of impending disciplinary action for those foolish enough to disobey orders.

Despite widespread resentment and annoyance occasioned by the management’s policy, Lingnan’s faculty fell into line. Surveillance proceeded with little encumbrance. The policy undermined professorial competence, very high at Lingnan, and pitted one set of colleagues (ITSC) against another (the faculty). Had Lingnan’s teachers organized—say through their departments and faculties—to protest the university’s surveillance policy, and had colleagues shown solidarity in resisting it, then I believe the surveillance may—may—have stalled. For certain, facing no collective pushback, the surveillance continued, creating a climate of impunity and arbitrariness at the top.

The failure of Lingnan’s professors to mobilize to protect their own interests is no isolated case in Hong Kong. I know of several other comparable failures across the city. In one university, a professor introduced a proposal to create a charter of academic freedom only to have a majority of colleagues defeat it. Elsewhere, a professor was instructed by his head of 54 A former chief executive of Hong Kong, C.Y. Leung, who was previously the chairman of Lingnan’s Council, had already advocated snipping on schoolteachers. For my criticisms, see https://www.scmp.com/comment/letters/article/3107209/hong-kong-parents-have-right-be-informed-about-teacher-misconduct
department to trim his webpage of what might now be deemed sensitive content. The same professor told me that since the advent of the National Security Law, a number of his colleagues, several of whom are expats, previously friendly, behaved with an awkwardness bordering on ostracism.

Both these professors are Hong Kong natives—locals—based in faculties of humanities and social sciences in which many of their colleagues are Europeans and North Americans. And their cases show that not all Hong Kong academics were content to lie down for dead once the NSL was in play. Even before the NSL was passed, a group of Hong Kong professors formed a Progressive Scholars’ Group (PSG) to advocate for academic freedom; in February 2020, it issued its findings, since deleted from the internet. Often in the spotlight as commentators on current events, these scholars took seriously the Basic Law’s assurance of academic freedom, less out of conviction than as a rhetorical resource of self-defence. So did others, including Ma Ngok, an associate professor of government and public administration at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) with an expertise in state-society relations and democratization; fellow CUHK academic, Francis Lee, a professor of journalism and communication who was a defence witness in Hong Kong’s first national security trial; and the previously mentioned Johannes Chan, a professor and former dean of law at the University of Hong Kong. And on the fringes of defiance, still other professors challenged the regime by stealth, for instance, by retweeting articles critical of the regime, reviewing books unflattering to the regime, or constructing courses on political thought that discuss thinkers whose primary interest is democracy.

Distinctions

Distinctions matter and two are especially important in our context: that between junior and senior faculty, and that between locals and expatriates. A third distinction, about which I shall say less because I know less, is between Hong Kong locals and their Mainland colleagues.

It is not reasonable to expect that the burden of defending academic life falls on all shoulders equally. Junior faculty, adjuncts, sessional instructors, and so-called research assistant professors are more vulnerable to management arbitrariness than their tenured and senior counterparts. Academics, tenured or not, who have young children to support will understandably prioritize family obligations over any other.

Similarly, the risks for locals are much higher than for expatriates because the costs for them are much greater. If worse comes to worst, expats will return home, whereas locals will flee home, wrested from it, with all the grief that exile brings:

Where are you going
Tender little leaf
So far from your bough?
The wind tore me away
From the beech where I was born.  

We have still to consider the most prominent and senior among Hong Kong’s professoriate, those with prestigious Chairs and international reputations, many of whom advise the UGC and RGC. I am especially sensitive to the conduct of fellow expatriates, people of roughly a similar age to myself, equal or higher in professorial rank, permanent residents of Hong Kong and thus members of its polity, entitled to vote and stand for office. It seems obvious that such expat professors had a duty to defend their more vulnerable colleagues, protect the academic space, and honestly report the truth about deteriorating conditions. With very few exceptions, they did not. More often, it was less senior faculty who pushed back. One of these was a colleague, a native Hongkonger, on Lingnan’s Council, the supreme governing body of the university. Though only an associate professor, she called out each accretion of presidential power including the surveillance mentioned above.

Since the National Security Law was passed in 2021, all residents in Hong Kong face a very real danger to their livelihood, known in the vernacular as digital jail: the prospect of government’s freezing the assets, including bank accounts and pensions, of anyone whose behaviour is considered subversive, seditious, or treasonous. This sword hangs over expatriate and local academics alike, a point that should be borne in mind when, in the following paragraphs, I discuss the peculiarities of expatriate faculty. It also bears noting that university professors and managers who are married to, or partnered with, native Hongkongers or Mainlanders, occupy a more ambiguous, more stressful position than expatriates whose family bond is exclusively to other expatriates. My wife and I are Canadians who have no relatives in Hong Kong, and our exit out of Hong Kong was always to be Canada. But a European or North American professor with a Chinese wife or husband has no obvious

From Giacomo Leopardi, “Imitation” (orig. 1828) in Canti. Bilingual edition translated and annotated by Jonathan Galassi. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2010, p. 311.

Professor Holz, an economist at the University of Science and Technology, has been at the forefront of defending academic freedom and the academic calling more generally in Hong Kong. See, inter alia, https://hongkongfp.com/2020/09/20/hong-kong-academic-freedom-is-it-safe-or-dead-under-the-national-security-law/ and https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=2021116093655287 and https://thediplomat.com/2022/01/hongkongs-contested-academic-freedom/.
place to repair. Leaving Hong Kong would also mean leaving family: parents, grandparents, siblings.

All the same, up to now, most expatriates in Hong Kong universities possess a layer of protection denied locals. This is not only because they played no conspicuous role in the democratic movement. Two other factors are also relevant. First, expatriate academics, typically those that are non-Cantonese speaking and preoccupied with their special subject area, have a history of compliance in Hong Kong; there is simply no need to deter them by punishing a few bad eggs. Besides, all university presidents are aware that the paucity of lucrative jobs, or even decent ones, in the West is a powerful incentive for Westerners to be well behaved in Hong Kong. Most of us had never had it so good; most of us will never have it so good elsewhere or again.

Second, an arrest or repatriation, or, far worse, an imprisonment under the National Security Law, would raise a hue and cry in the international community. Normally, this would not matter—Hong Kong authorities are by now accustomed to Western insults and menaces—except for one consideration. The authorities are proud of the city’s achievements, and among these is the high standing of Hong Kong universities. Of the 65 Asian universities ranked in 2021 by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS, a global higher education analytics company), two Hong Kong institutions were in the top 8, four in the top 20. Or, taking the global rankings for the same year, of 1185 universities surveyed, two from Hong Kong—the University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology—were in the top 30. Comparable results, over the years, are recorded by the Times Higher Education rankings. To be sure, QS and THE have no metric to gauge academic freedom and may feel under no pressure to create one. Western universities, authoritarian themselves, would likely oppose it. Nonetheless, punitive actions bring bad publicity and there must be a compelling reason to provoke it. On the Mainland, the arrest and imprisonment of Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig in December 2018 combined retribution with expulsion and imprisonment of a Hong Kong resident, open to international faculty, a place that respects the Basic Law guarantees of academic freedom. Granted, expatriates are arrogant, provocative, and disrespectful, infuriatingly careless of Chinese “face”. But the barbarians have their uses, not least in university research exercises and in leveraging university rankings.

How were expatriate academics faring in the last year I worked in Hong Kong? How are they likely to behave in the foreseeable future? The answer to both questions is the same. Expatriate academics and the government have come to an understanding. Like locals, expats will keep their heads down and hands clean. Some topics—social, not political—will remain unproblematic, open for teaching, research, discussion, and publication: environmental degradation, demography and health, youth trends, poverty, economic inequality, the glass ceiling, crime and delinquency, pornography, homelessness, patterns of migration, and so forth. I hasten to add that these topics are not trivial and that academics in Hong Kong, locals and expats both, have an impressive track record illuminating them.

The door will also be left ajar to allow a coterie of professors to vaunt their radical credentials. Their focus will, again, not be on politics—elections, constitutional arrangements, civil rights, state censorship, political parties, and political protest—but on social topics such as LGBTQ. Post-colonial studies, a staple of departments of English, Chinese, and cultural studies, will continue its denunciation of Western “Orientalist” prejudices, another harmless area, as the CCP heartily concurs with all anti-occidental sentiment. Likewise, accusations of anti-Asian, and particularly anti-Chinese, racism; White Supremacy; and xenophobia will be warmly welcomed, as will Critical Race Theory; Hong Kong universities can expect a steady stream of experts from Western countries expatiating on the horrors of their homeland before returning to it without fear. An intelligent mechanism, the Party smiles on this activity not just for its impotence but for its clues; it has helped the CCP become a dab hand at taunting Western countries, the USA in particular, with woke commentary, channelling the condemnation of American professors against their own society. “Leave it to Western intellectuals to unmask their civilization, tear down its foundations, interpret its history as one long, dismal series of colonial aggressions and crimes against innocent victims. There really is no need for our Confucian Institutes. Anti-Western propaganda is the specialism, the gift, of their own political class.”

The CCP is aware, of course, that most academics in Hong Kong’s more prestigious universities received their graduate training in the West and that a large number, in the humanities and social sciences, were...

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59 https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/asian-university-rankings/2021
60 https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2021
61 Lau Siu-kai, vice president of the Chinese Association for Hong Kong and Macao Studies, said that the social sciences and humanities in Hong Kong’s higher education sector have long been “colonies” of the West and can no longer blindly follow the “foreign devil’s (gweilo) way”. Hong Kong must establish its own evaluation criteria and publication outlets, http://www.takungpao.com.hk/news/232109/2022/0208/684110.html.
62 https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-woke-chinese-communist-party-11615153494?st=6ezsladj7eqph4h&reflink=article_email_share
exposed to Identity Politics by their professors and fellow students. Some have returned to Hong Kong as true believers of the intersectional gospel; they preach it to their graduate students, hoping to clone them for faculty positions of their own. For now, the CCP takes a relaxed view of this trend in Hong Kong because it knows four important truths about the Western Woke World.

First, it knows of not a single instance when a communist regime, or any other, was toppled by preferred pronouns. The Party worries more about Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyers, and other vessels of the US Seventh Fleet, that barrel through the Taiwan Strait. Second, the CCP knows that the more Hongkongers lash themselves, and harangue Westerners, for misogyny, cis-gender heteronormativity, Islamophobia, homophobia, and a dozen other putative pathologies, the less focused they will be on the evisceration of political life in Hong Kong and the radical reordering of their society. Third, the CCP has noticed the pleasing affinity of Chinese and Western authoritarianisms. On some items, the Party is still not sure who influenced whom. “Consider: what we call subversion and seditious protest, you call ‘disinformation’ and ‘insurrection.’” We use CGTN to communicate official propaganda, you use CNN to do it. We impose a National Security Law on rebellious Hongkongers, you invoke an Emergency Act against rebellious Canadian truckers. We use the state to keep minds clean of hate speech, you employ Facebook and Google and Twitter to do the same. We employ the Central Security Bureau to investigate incorrect thinking, you task the Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion for the same purpose. To be sure, vaccine passports and social credit are our innovations, but we applaud how quickly you guys are catching up.”

Lastly, the CCP knows that Western-trained progressives in Hong Kong, natives and expats alike, will give a wide berth, as if it were a prairie fire, to the one identity that really matters to most Hong Kong people: the identity of Hongkonger, Hong Kong culture, Hong Kong history, the Hong Kong nation, “my city, my view, my home,” to recall the slogan of House News, the predecessor of Stand News. Instead, there will be copious lectures on “desire” and the Other. Masculinity will be deconstructed for the millionth time. Every long-standing convention will be exposed as a mask of power. But political tyranny will always be somewhere else and Hong Kong’s distinctiveness terra incognita. On its forlorn shores, Critical Theory will renounce its holy mission to be critical and acknowledge the limits of emancipation.

More sober academics—the majority in Hong Kong who look askance at Identity Politics—will make, already have made, their own concessions. Dangerous topics—the treatment of Uighurs in Xinjiang, the status of Taiwan and Tibet, the treatment of religious groups on the Mainland, the history of Hong Kong protests—will no longer be studied openly, which is to say they will no longer constitute research proposals for funding, either internally or through the Research Grants Council. Better to switch topics to Europe and North America or, in Asia, to swap political problems for social, economic, and environmental ones. And as Mainland academics replace Hongkongers, new names will shine in the firmament of political theory: Xiao Gongqin, Wang Shaoguang, Wang Hui, Jiang Shigong, and Pan Wei. Scholars who, students will be informed, grasp far better than Western theorists (and unmentionable Hong Kong thinkers) the specificity of Chinese civilization and the kind of politics appropriate to it. Marxism is not Kantianism. Liberalism is not the Dao.

And, for its part, the government will tolerate the occasional expatriate wild man or woman who bangs the democratic drum. “What harm, really, can they do? Why give them the attention they crave? Such vainglorious lunatics provoke incredulity more than they inspire awe. Even if some locals admire a gweilo’s nerve, they have no plans to emulate it.”

One last distinction among the faculty remains to be noted; it is the divide between local Hongkongers and Mainland colleagues. The latter tend not just to be more accommodating to power than the former, they also comprise an aggressive, pro-Beijing contingent that openly attacks pro-democracy professors. This minority is sometimes described as “nationalist”, a misleading designation; it conflates the interests of the Communist Party with that of the Chinese people, a gratuitous conceit as PRC citizens are never permitted to appraise the CCP’s performance in universal, fair, and competitive elections. Rather than nationalists, these Mainlanders are Party-ists, avid supporters of the government. That element is growing as Hong Kong universities employ ever greater numbers of Mainlanders. All the same, most Mainland scholars, so far as I could tell, were not true believers. They were something more understandable: people with highly attuned antennae who, since early youth, had learned to follow CCP cues and observe its red lines, aware that families back in China are potential objects of retaliation for the deeds of their children in Hong Kong. Despite all such deterrents, some scholars from China who work in Hong Kong detest the Communist Party and take large risks to stay
truthful: I have been fortunate, over the years, to know a few of them personally.

Professors and Journalists

Have I been unfair to the academy? Is it not true that every occupation in Hong Kong took similar evasive action?

A striking contrast to professorial timidity is the behaviour of local Hong Kong journalists, expatriate journalists stationed in the city, and their professional organizations. Media outlets such as RTHK (Radio Television Hong Kong), I-Cable, Now TV, Apple Daily, and the online portals Citizen News and Stand News were important channels of information for Hongkongers, keeping them abreast of events the government preferred kept tightly under wraps. Inevitably, these organs were denounced by government spokesmen, internet mobs, and Communist Party proxies. Reporters were trolled, harassed, assaulted in broad daylight, and arrested. Hong Kong media has its fair share of pap. Yet, a significant constituency of journalists persevered in their vocation to report the news truthfully and provide forums for different perspectives on it. Hong Kong investigative journalists are, or were, some of the finest in the world. (Readers interested in knowing more about the variety of media outlets and platforms in Hong Kong - mainstream, state orchestrated, and oppositional [citizen and student journalism] - and how they handled recent conflicts in the city, are referred to the excellent book by Luwei Rose Luqiu, Covering the 2019 Hong Kong Protests, published in 2021 by Palgrave-Macmillan).

Similarly, journalist organizations, unlike their academic counterparts, remained active and robust throughout the crisis. It might be the Hong Kong Journalists’ Association (HKJA) demanding clarifications of government policy or defending fellow journalists, or the Hong Kong Foreign Correspondents’ Club challenging the Chief of Police Commissioner Chris Tang to explain what he meant by “fake news”; a fake news law, supported by Tang and Chief Executive Carrie Lam, was pending. By contrast, journalists told me that while professors were willing to speak on their specialist areas such as the Basic Law or the electoral system, they could not get them to speak “on the record”, or be facially identifiable on camera, to discuss the impact of the NSL on teaching, scholarship, and research. Why this caution? Fear of the government is only part of the answer. The other part, I suggested, lies in a phenomenon that the new regime had no role in creating. To explain it requires generalizing about tendencies that are neither universal nor applicable to every professor.

Universities today are forges of conformism. It is not just the requirements of receiving tenure, though it is mostly these, that habituate academics to servility in Hong Kong and in every country where tenure is available. Conformism is integral to academic professionalization as such. It selects for weak personalities, deters strong ones, and intimidates all in between. The condition is far more advanced in the West than in Hong Kong. Mark Mercer, president of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (SAFS), and a professor of philosophy at Saint Mary’s University, in Nova Scotia, describes academic professionalization as follows:

To be hired, a young scholar often has to include in his dossier a statement of support for diversity, inclusion and equity. Three years in, there’s probationary review. Two more years, and tenure review and promotion to associate professor. Eight years later review for promotion to professor. At each step, more people with power view the dossier: department members, dean, academic vice president, and finally the appointments committee. The scholar has to be sure to be in step with university policies and initiatives to please people outside the department (sometimes within it). As well, Collective Agreements are becoming more specific about what materials the scholar is to include in the dossier and how they are to be weighed by evaluators. Young professors see that they need to find a secure lane to drive to make it to full professor.

Getting tenure and promotion, then, requires years of studied pliability and eggshell inoffensiveness to avoid upsetting colleagues on whom one’s advancement depends. Increasingly, it also requires grantsmanship, standardized “deliverables”, and research collaboration, the blood thinners of originality. No wonder the fledgeling rarely takes flight.

Strangers to tenure, journalism in Hong Kong selects for a tougher, scrappier breed of animal, forced to live on its wits to meet urgent deadlines and routinely inserted into tense, dangerous situations. We owe to photojournalists and to live-streaming
for now and may even find its existence convenient; it “proves” that the Basic Law’s guarantees of press freedoms are still robust in Hong Kong. Besides, as an anglophone medium, even in a city where English is extensively spoken and read, HKFP has no reach to the Cantonese working class, unlike the forcibly bankrupted tabloid Apple Daily.

The fate of Hong Kong’s journalists would seem to vindicate professorial docility and the opportunism of university managers. The efforts of journalists were in vain, were they not? That is one perspective. Here is another one. To say that something was in vain is, by definition, to vault over it, to judge it when it is over. But people do not act in overs; they act in the present, that interval between past and future. And in that present, now past, journalists acted with principle and courage, unwilling to concede defeat in preparation for being defeated. They manifested these virtues at the same time as others repudiated them. Journalists are mostly locals, as Hong Kong academics are. They have young families to look after, parents to whom they owe filial obligations, just as academics do. Like academics, they have few options outside of Hong Kong, probably fewer. And, like academics as well, journalists span a range of statuses from rookie to veteran. The chief difference is that a considerable number of journalists lived up to the standards of their vocation and fought back in public to defend it. These journalists served Hongkongers nobly by reporting news the government and, even more, the police wished to hide. They stopped reporting, not when they were menaced, over months and years, but only when they were hounded out of existence. Each of them has earned the right to hope, with the Russian poet: “Long will there be a place for me in people’s hearts/Because in my harsh age I sang of Liberty…”.

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In the 1923 Preface to Outcry, a book of short stories, the culture critic Lu Xun recounts the lesson he drew from an early literary failure. He and some Chinese compatriots living in Tokyo were in the final stages of creating a forward-looking, experimental magazine that aimed to advance cultural reform in China. The magazine was to be called New Youth. But as the day of publication drew near, those who had promised to write for it, and those who had agreed to finance it, drew back from their commitments. The project was stillborn. To begin with, Lu Xun could only feel a sense of futility in his failure. But later, it provided him with one important insight: “I came to think...” he wrote, “that a lone individual will be encouraged by support and stimulated to struggle

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68 For instance, [https://news.rthk.hk/rthk/en/component/k2/1618547-20211105.htm](https://news.rthk.hk/rthk/en/component/k2/1618547-20211105.htm)
69 For an overview of the carnage, see [https://hongkongfp.com/2022/01/05/explainer-the-decline-of-hong-kongs-press-freedom-under-the-national-security-law/](https://hongkongfp.com/2022/01/05/explainer-the-decline-of-hong-kongs-press-freedom-under-the-national-security-law/).
70 [https://www.vice.com/en/article/akvjd8/hong-kong-journalists-cabbies-fried-chicken](https://www.vice.com/en/article/akvjd8/hong-kong-journalists-cabbies-fried-chicken)
71 [https://twitter.com/Quicktake/status/1481840538823315456](https://twitter.com/Quicktake/status/1481840538823315456)
72 [https://news.rthk.hk/rthk/en/component/k2/1618547-20211105.htm](https://news.rthk.hk/rthk/en/component/k2/1618547-20211105.htm)
73 Seeking “additional financial information” is one of the government’s standard tools of harassment. See [https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/policies/article/3164269/hong-kongs-largest-journalist-group-faces-scrutiny](https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/policies/article/3164269/hong-kongs-largest-journalist-group-faces-scrutiny).
74 From Alexander Pushkin, Exegi monumentum (1836)
6 Lu Xun, “Preface,” From The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China, edited and translated by Julia Lovell. London: Penguin Books, 2010, pp. 15–20, at 18.
by criticism. But indifference – shouting into an abyss – generates something else: a peculiar hollow sense of desolation.”

We foreigners who until recently lived in Hong Kong, who witnessed its despoliation, and for whom the city’s very name, and its heroic past, stir emotions too intense to air in public with dignity: we foreigners will never be indifferent to the fate of Hong Kong’s people. In these lines, I have documented the universities’ degraded state. But when asked what I miss most about the city I lived in for twenty-one years, my answer is always the same. I miss Hongkongers.

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