



Opinion

# **Hong Kong has a China problem: we don't talk and think deeply about the mainland in our universities**

Universities in Hong Kong need to have a conversation about China that goes beyond Mandarin and business opportunities. The lack of research into contemporary China only benefits nativists and colonial-era nostalgists in Hong Kong

**Topic | Hong Kong protests**



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Cooler heads will be needed for Hong Kong to think through the main issue behind the rejection of the [now-dead \[1\]](#) extradition bill. It is a political but also a historical, intellectual, and emotional issue: not just the rule of law but our real relations with the mainland, and its real if inchoate sovereignty.

The [Basic Law \[2\]](#) is here to stay, but it has also become apparent that, not unlike a piece of literature, it means different things to different people and has fundamental ambiguities: for example, what does it mean by “[universal suffrage](#)” [\[3\]](#) and “democratic principles”? It all sounds like a matter for the tutorial room.

As Hong Kong cools off, and school kicks in with [class boycotts \[4\]](#) and nastiness on campuses, the city needs to slowly, rationally think through and work out its relations with the mainland in practical terms and virtually all others.

Universities are precisely where one would expect to find such a conversation. Educational institutions are places to carry on what has been called the “great conversation of mankind”. We humanities professors deal with experience and wisdom accumulated over thousands of years of human civilisation, as well as eternal dilemmas.

When one considers the very real problems, [pressure](#) [5] and pessimism of the city’s youth – even at an elite university like the University of Hong Kong – there is a deep need for what I would call a “China conversation” that goes far beyond language acquisition and business opportunities. Yet when it comes to the mainland, particularly its development and [rise](#) [6] since 1949, the teaching-learning dialogue in Hong Kong is in a sorry state.

There is a lack of teaching, learning and conversation about China at the undergraduate and research levels in universities, particularly within arts and humanities broadly defined. Insofar as China is a concern, the conversation on the publication scene tends to be one-sided and anti-regime.

## [How Hong Kong protesters are turning off their mainland supporters](#)

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Few would or could deny this: peruse the faculty publications and courses at our universities for evidence. Insofar as the People’s Republic of China is an actual subject of teaching or research at all, there is very little diversity of opinion on its politics, [history](#) [8] and contemporary realities.

This may come as a shock to those who believe the city is becoming [colonised](#) [9] by the North.



Apart from a few faculty members on the margins, one is more likely to find diverse views on China among some of the mainland students themselves (who can be better informed and have a more nuanced understanding of the country than many assume), and students who are first- or second-generation Hongkongers with a dual cultural heritage.

Given all our students' worries about their economic [future](#) [10], [immigration](#) [11], [integration](#) [12] into the mainland and so on, this lack of diversity in education and research only benefits [nativists](#) [13] and colonial-era nostalgists for whom the very idea of Hong Kong being part of China is an outrage.

This has been a recipe for conflict between local and mainland students. The only antidote is more conversation, not less – including about politics – between the different groups with different viewpoints. Not shouting matches but seminars and group tutorials.

The lack of such a “great conversation” about China is a symptom of the general lack of humanities education in the city, which places stronger emphasis on business and science. But, in those fields, the focus is naturally not on the complex moral, political, and social dimensions of Hong Kong's relationship with the mainland.

[Will localists warp Hong Kong history as they mine British archives?](#)

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It hardly helps that there is increasing pressure to make the humanities more like business and science: there is greater emphasis on securing grants, as if humanities scholars work in labs, less emphasis on publishing substantial scholarly books and essays, and less attention paid to working closely with students in classrooms and discussions.

The obsession with metrics or data is misplaced when applied to the world of ideas and interpretation that is humanities scholarship. Even teaching is now measured in numbers that tell you little about what the class was about, or what was learned or not. Administrators with little to zero experience in China or Hong Kong are brought in from abroad – but rarely from the mainland – to carry out such supposed reforms.

But as someone who teaches colonialism, empire and modernity in Hong Kong, China and the world, I can tell you that it is indeed possible to have profound discussions with local, mainland and international students about Hong Kong-China relations, global issues and the new world that will be theirs.

What is needed is an expansion of the humanities and liberal arts and sciences. We must develop intellectual diversity and learn to speak with an awareness that there are always two, or more, sides to a story.

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- [2] <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/2155297/liaison-office-legal-chief-tells-hong-kong-basic-law-not>
- [3] <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/2117084/dont-expect-consensus-universal-suffrage-between-beijing-and>
- [4] <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education/article/3023633/education-bureau-will-check-universities-class-boycotts>
- [5] <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/2165579/depression-anxiety-rife-among-university-students>
- [6] <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/2172540/over-40-years-diplomatic-drama-rising-china-opens-and>
- [7] <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3024547/how-hong-kong-protesters-are-turning-their-mainland-chinese>
- [8] <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education/article/2118819/hong-kong-leader-carrie-lam-says-extradition-bill-dead>

kong-pupils-have-poor-knowledge-modern-chinese-history

[9] <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/2159652/hong-kong-separatist-party-leader-andy-chan-ho-tin-calls>

[10] <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education/article/3010178/university-graduates-face-tough-competition-and-low>

[11] <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/2160161/young-professionals-are-leaving-hong-kong-droves-search>

[12] <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/2188939/greater-bay-area-integration-only-way-hong-kong-resolve-its>

[13] <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/1993405/why-hong-kong-independence-localism-nativism-and>

[14] <https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/hong-kong/article/2173215/hong-kong-localists-mine-britains-diplomatic>