

PACIFIC FORUM

The Climate of Civil  
Disobedience: Liberal Studies as a  
Political Instrument under Hong  
Kong's Secondary Education  
Curriculum

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## **Pacific Forum**

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## ABSTRACT

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In the most recent decade Hong Kong has undergone mass socio-political unrest. The outbreak, and amplification, of citywide civil disobedience has been magnified by the launch and delivery of Liberal Studies as a compulsory subject under the local senior secondary education curriculum. This has raised the political consciousness and awareness of Hong Kong youth. This paper first presents an overview of the anti-national education curriculum campaigns, the Umbrella Movement and the consequent socio-political unrest. It will then explore the political controversies over the delivery of Liberal Studies. Next, it will analyze how Liberal Studies has been subject to curricular reforms, and discuss whether such amendments have been the result of politicization by the pro-Beijing camp to counter the proliferation of anti-government and anti-China sentiments among Hong Kong youth. Lastly, this research will assess whether the aims to offer Liberal Studies as part of the secondary education curriculum have been fulfilled, and discuss how to close the gaps between the expected and actual learning outputs.

### **List of Abbreviations**

CGTN: China Global Television Network  
CCP: Chinese Communist Party  
HKDSE: Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education  
HKEAA: Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority  
HKFS: Hong Kong Federation of Students  
HKUST: Hong Kong University of Science and Technology  
NEPCG: National Education Parents Concern Group  
NESC: National Education Services Centre  
NPCSC: National People's Congress Standing Committee  
OHKF: Our Hong Kong Foundation  
PTU: Professional Teachers' Union

## INTRODUCTION

Liberal Studies was introduced in Hong Kong in 1992 to counter the older rote learning strategies. Rote learning is linked to the legacy of Confucianism, which has been influential within and beyond China for over 2,500 years. Confucianism highlights learning in order to repeat knowledge from memory rather than for the purpose of understanding it *per se*.<sup>1</sup> After a raft of postcolonial education reforms, Liberal Studies became a compulsory subject in the Hong Kong education curriculum from 2009. This subject contains ample socially and politically sensitive topics for discussion. These include contemporary issues and affairs in Hong Kong and mainland Chinese contexts, such as Tiananmen Square in Beijing during the crackdown on June 4 in 1989, a highly politically sensitive incident prohibited for circulation on the Internet, social media, and any other public platform in mainland China.<sup>2</sup> Allowing Hong Kong students to discuss a range of socio-politically sensitive issues during Liberal Studies lessons has provided an important departure point to explore social, cultural, and political tensions and identity conflicts taking place in the city.<sup>3</sup> Here identity crises have been developing among Hongkongers, especially those of younger ages, due to their experience of cultural, linguistic, and political dislocation as being mainland China's outsiders, alongside their distrust of the Chinese regime.<sup>4</sup> Hong Kong students' sense of disorientation would be deepened when they study "Hong Kong Today" and "Modern China"—two areas of study of under the Liberal Studies—as two separate streams; and the courses encourage students to understand the development of Hong Kong and mainland China as two distinctive trajectories.<sup>5</sup> Also, Hong Kong students' sense of distrust of Beijing's regime is heightened when they are exposed to learning a range of civic and political injustices happened in their motherland.

Liberal Studies, alongside English, Chinese, and mathematics, has been named one of the four compulsory subjects for all senior students taking the local university entrance examination—the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE).<sup>6</sup> The subject aims at broadening students' knowledge base and improving their social awareness through studying a range of

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<sup>1</sup> Li, X. and Cutting, J. (2011). Rote Learning in Chinese Culture: Reflecting Active Confucian-Based Memory Strategies. In Jin, L. and Cortazzi, M. (eds.). *Researching Chinese Learners* (p. 21). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>2</sup> *China Digital Times* (2019). Silencing Discussion of June 4, Online and Off. Assessed from [https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2019/06/silencing-discussion-of-june-4-online-and-off/?\\_cf\\_chl\\_jschl\\_tk\\_=2ad07e4cbaff58337601a0fdbd2d63ce8244cf44-1602737548-0-AY4vGDxx7v3iWeAhGwMaYJXAoGd50g4HNtr5xaBP9\\_1U8T4St8PSPs9YR2XXgRQtVYhYpdjxoCiW9y1Adwzd0J7d5GplCsOs5qflgZGwmvltGttU5jutPxxirGzQcixBkpyo4U6\\_tMxs7-1htZpWcalwC8o-l4lIJhtaoNZ3AgqhzPXfuW0Ts3uUgZlcpffZi9pYznPiLeEdo-4tPM-6DMnxkoCiVtygBSbnFPotPxUQ45pItsBxGvT2-0QncUhEzQLRrYOOQdN6mwAn8bgHJcpOoAvNCuCXRjdIgZ7sNPGcB03FI3a9BUBBAV7nXe13xi1vW5D6SQNH R506L9vhug](https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2019/06/silencing-discussion-of-june-4-online-and-off/?_cf_chl_jschl_tk_=2ad07e4cbaff58337601a0fdbd2d63ce8244cf44-1602737548-0-AY4vGDxx7v3iWeAhGwMaYJXAoGd50g4HNtr5xaBP9_1U8T4St8PSPs9YR2XXgRQtVYhYpdjxoCiW9y1Adwzd0J7d5GplCsOs5qflgZGwmvltGttU5jutPxxirGzQcixBkpyo4U6_tMxs7-1htZpWcalwC8o-l4lIJhtaoNZ3AgqhzPXfuW0Ts3uUgZlcpffZi9pYznPiLeEdo-4tPM-6DMnxkoCiVtygBSbnFPotPxUQ45pItsBxGvT2-0QncUhEzQLRrYOOQdN6mwAn8bgHJcpOoAvNCuCXRjdIgZ7sNPGcB03FI3a9BUBBAV7nXe13xi1vW5D6SQNH R506L9vhug)

<sup>3</sup> Spires, R. (2017). Hong Kong's Postcolonial Education Reform: Liberal Studies as a Lens. *International Journal of Educational Reform*, 26 (2), 154.

<sup>4</sup> *New York Times* (2019). 'One Country, Two Nationalisms': The Identity Crisis Behind Hong Kong's Turmoil. Assessed from <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/27/world/asia/hong-kong-protests-identity.html>

<sup>5</sup> The Education University of Hong Kong (n.d.). Certificate in Professional Development Programme in Teaching Modern China in Liberal Studies Curriculum. Assessed from <https://www.eduhk.hk/acadprog/pdp/bwp036.htm>---

<sup>6</sup> *South China Morning Post* (2020a). Liberal Studies Debate Traps Hong Kong Students in Political Combat Zone. Assessed from <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education/article/2147234/how-did-hong-kong-school-subject-liberal-studies-become-so>

social, cultural, and historical issues.<sup>7</sup> The subject encompasses six major modules: (1) personal development and interpersonal relationships; (2) Hong Kong today; (3) modern China; (4) globalization; (5) public health, and; (6) energy technology and the environment.<sup>8</sup>

The Liberal Studies textbooks depict Hong Kong society as free, non-discriminatory, and protective of speech, belief, and cultural and religious expression. The city's optimistic outlook on diversity paves the way for more inclusive notions of what Hong Kong citizens represent, and how its society has developed as a model of multiculturalism, tolerance, and dynamism. Moreover, the textbooks cast local students as the decision-makers of the future who should endeavor to ensure equality, eliminate any forms of discrimination, and uphold relevant multicultural values and interests.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the rhetoric, the mandatory subject has been criticized by pro-Beijing camps as an instrument to radicalize local children and youth to join anti-government protests, including the anti-national education protests and assemblies (2012), the Umbrella Movement (2014), and socio-political demonstrations that followed the controversy over the extradition agreement (2019-20).<sup>10</sup> Among the subject's most vehement critics is Rita Fan, formerly the only Hong Kong representative on the National People's Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC), a top legislative body of China. She denounced Liberal Studies teachers as working against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to influence students who hold anti-China biases, despite a lack of empirical findings drawing any positive association between Liberal Studies and proliferation of anti-government and anti-Beijing sentiments.<sup>11</sup>

"Liberal studies is one of the causes that has led to the over-enthusiasm of young kids in current politics," Priscilla Leung, pro-Beijing politician, barrister, and academic, added. Leung claimed some Liberal Studies teachers "fail to offer an objective view" and inject their political viewpoints into the classroom. "Young people, we all know, are rebellious ... and they want to criticize everything," she said. "But they don't have enough [of a] firm theoretical and knowledge base to make a very objective analysis [about] what's going on in Hong Kong."<sup>12</sup> Echoing Fan and Leung, the city's pro-establishment camp, a pro-Beijing body, has collectively attributed the outbreak of a series of large-scale social campaigns in Hong Kong in the most recent decade to the launch of Liberal Studies as a compulsory subject in the senior secondary education curriculum.<sup>13</sup> China's Minister of Education Chen Baosheng additionally attributed

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<sup>7</sup> *South China Morning Post* (2020b). What Is Liberal Studies in Hong Kong and Why Is It Controversial? Accessed from <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education/article/3102439/what-liberal-studies-hong-kong-and-why-it-controversial>

<sup>8</sup> *South China Morning Post* (2020b).

<sup>9</sup> Jackson, L. (2015). Religion in Hong Kong Education: Representation in Liberal Studies Textbooks. *Asian Anthropology*, 14 (1), 55.

<sup>10</sup> *South China Morning Post* (2020b).

<sup>11</sup> *South China Morning Post* (2020a).

<sup>12</sup> *ABC News* (2019). Hong Kong School Students Join Pro-Democracy Protests, Prompting Criticism of Curriculum. Assessed from <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-09-12/hong-kong-school-students-join-pro-democracy-protests/11499528>

<sup>13</sup> *South China Morning Post* (2020c). Was Liberal Studies Responsible for Radicalising Hong Kong Youth During Protests, and Should It be Axed? Accessed from <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3102585/has-liberal-studies-radicalised-hong-kongs-youth-do-they>

the rise of pro-Hong Kong independence sentiments within the Chinese special administrative region to a failure to instill Chinese patriotism among Hong Kong children.<sup>14</sup>

This paper will first provide an overview of (1) the anti-national education curriculum campaigns; (2) the Umbrella Movement, and; (3) the consequent socio-political unrest. The author will then discuss the political controversies over the launch and delivery of Liberal Studies. Next, the author will address the curricular reforms of Liberal Studies and examine whether such amendments are the result of politicization by the pro-Beijing camp to counter the development of anti-China sentiments among Hong Kong youth. Lastly, the author will explore whether the initial aims of providing compulsory Liberal Studies have been fulfilled, and discuss how to close the gaps between expected and actual learning outputs.

## NATIONAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM (2012)

The Education Bureau of Hong Kong announced that national education would become a compulsory subject throughout all Hong Kong public schools by the end of 2015. Private schools, including international schools, would be exempted from integrating national education into their curriculum.<sup>15</sup> This announcement triggered mass public discontent, with some 90,000 taking to the streets on July 29, 2012.<sup>16</sup> Protesters worried that compulsory national education would be an attempt by the CCP to brainwash Hong Kong children and youth, who would be asked to learn to appreciate their motherland.<sup>17,18</sup> Critics denounced Hong Kong Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying for attempting to strengthen Chinese patriotism among future generations of Hong Kong students by introducing them to CCP propaganda. The general public lived amid fears that educational policy would propel mainland China's political influence over the next generations of Hong Kong and jeopardize a distinct Hong Kong identity.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *South China Morning Post* (2020a).

<sup>15</sup> *BBC News* (2012). Hong Kong Debates "National Education" Classes. Assessed from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-19407425>

<sup>16</sup> Global Nonviolent Action Database (2012). Hong Kong Students and Residents Reject National-Education Classes, 2012. Assessed from <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/hong-kong-students-and-residents-reject-national-education-classes-2012>

<sup>17</sup> *BBC News* (2012).

<sup>18</sup> *CNN* (2012). "National Education" Raises Furor in Hong Kong. Assessed from <https://edition.cnn.com/2012/07/30/world/asia/hong-kong-national-education-controversy/index.html>

<sup>19</sup> *South China Morning Post* (2017). Is Chinese National Education Set to Make a Comeback in Hong Kong? It's Not If, But How, Experts Say. Assessed from <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/2105343/chinese-national-education-set-make-comeback-hong-kong-its>



Figure 1 Parents, teachers and pupils turn out in force at Hong Kong Government headquarters in 2012 against plans for national education. Photo: Felix Wong

“We don’t want the next generation of Hong Kong people to be brainwashed,” said Joshua Wong (then aged 15), renowned as the former convener of Scholarism, a joint-high schools’ student group which helped organize the protests alongside the National Education Parents Concern Group (NEPCG) and the Professional Teachers’ Union (PTU).<sup>20</sup>

Alternatively, Wong Chi-man, who directed the National Education Services Centre (NESC), said, “It’s impossible to be brainwashed ... Hong Kong people still have access to a lot of information. All education is, to some extent, designed to brainwash. I think the word ‘brainwash’ is too negative. It evokes something out of *Clockwork Orange* ... Hong Kong’s future and China’s future are inseparable. We will never be independent so we should learn to think the same way as China. Teachers should lead children to think about Hong Kong’s future.”<sup>21</sup>

The national education campaign was waged between pro-democracy citizens and pro-Beijing supporters. The campaign outcome was expected to affect the chance for Hong Kong to realize democracy. “We are sitting on a volcano,” said Dixon Sing, an associate professor at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST). “Beijing is trying to speed up the process of integrating Hong Kong in the cultural sense, ahead of elections when everyone gets to vote,” Sing added. Relative to the rest of China, Hong Kong has enjoyed a high degree of freedom of press, the right to assembly and transparent, accountable institutions. The ultimate civil goal of universal suffrage has yet to be approved by CCP.<sup>22</sup> Beijing noted at the time that

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<sup>20</sup> CNN (2012).

<sup>21</sup> CNN (2012).

<sup>22</sup> BBC News (2012).



Hong Kong might get the right to universal suffrage as early as in 2017, although such an indication is now interpreted by Hongkongers as an empty promise.<sup>23</sup>

According to an editorial in *Global Times*, a leading state-aligned newspaper of China, Hongkongers urgently need to receive national education as many of them have already been brainwashed by Western ideologies, primarily due to Hong Kong's previous status as a British colony.<sup>24</sup> Despite the urgency, on Sept. 8, 2012, then-Chief Executive Leung gave in to public demands and revoked the 2015 deadline for all public schools to adopt the national education curriculum. He announced that public schools can decide if they would like to voluntarily deliver national education to their students.<sup>25</sup>

## UMBRELLA MOVEMENT (2014)



Figure 2 Lightning strikes as protesters gather outside the central government offices. Many began singing in the rain. Photo: Bloomberg

The anti-national education protests paved the way for Hongkongers, particularly young people, to develop socio-political awareness. Socio-politically aware cohorts learned that employing mass social movements could be seen as a successful means to prompt the Hong Kong government into revoking laws which would put their own cultural and civil rights at stake.

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<sup>23</sup> *BBC News* (2012).

<sup>24</sup> *BBC News* (2012).

<sup>25</sup> Global Nonviolent Action Database (2012).

Another set of mass protests dubbed the “Umbrella Movement” commenced in Hong Kong on Sept. 23, 2014. A group of university students organized by the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS) and the Wong-led Scholarism movement marched through central Hong Kong to demonstrate against the NPCSC’s decision, three weeks earlier, to restrict the number and manner in which the city’s next chief executive candidates were to be selected. The student groups worried that NPCSC’s decision would jeopardize the realization and optimization of universal suffrage in the 2017’s chief executive election.<sup>26</sup>

The student-led protests made up one segment of the Umbrella Movement, which also contained a significant pro-democracy adult population who had been fighting for Hong Kong’s democracy from as early as the 1980s. Three founding leaders of this group (university professors Benny Tai and Chan Kin-man, and Rev. Chu Yiu-ming) became central to the planning and leadership of the Umbrella Movement, with the hope to increase middle-aged participation. Road blockages and occupation in Central—the major business and financial hub in Hong Kong—were arranged, causing economic and transportation disruption. Occupations were also applied to neighboring business districts including Admiralty, Causeway Bay, Tsim Shai Tsui, and Mong Kok.<sup>27</sup>

These movement initiators and leaders endeavored to fight for universal suffrage—where the chief executive would be elected in the 2017 election by the majority of votes cast by the voting population. They also aimed to raise the political consciousness of Hongkongers in the long-run.<sup>28</sup> The purposes of public disruption and occupation were mainly to paralyze the Hong Kong economy in order to force the government to agree to protesters’ socio-political demands. However, although the Hong Kong Stock Exchange Index (i.e. Hang Seng Index) fell by 6% during the Umbrella Movement (much less severe than the 15 to 20% drop predicted by market watchers), the Hong Kong Stock Exchange outperformed its counterparts in Italy, Japan, and other markets. Moreover, retail sales increased during the course of the movement than in the same period in the previous year.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, protesters failed to economically and politically disrupt Hong Kong. The movement ultimately failed and halted at the end of 2014, after police dismantled the last remaining road occupation, and some 30 leading activists, including Wong, were arrested.<sup>30</sup>

The organization of the movement was premised on the rising political consciousness shared by Hongkongers—especially among the young generations—the previously successful anti-national education protests and, as some critics contend, the delivery of Liberal Studies. In the most recent decade, the city has seen a flood of Hongkongers capitalizing on political consciousness and civil liberties to fight against the Hong Kong government and CCP’s decisions to speed up political, cultural, and other forms of “mainlandization.” Even though the Umbrella Movement failed to help Hong Kong citizens attain universal suffrage in the

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<sup>26</sup> Congressional Research Services (2014). Protests in Hong Kong: The Umbrella Movement. Assessed from [https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20141024\\_IF00056\\_01936f7fcb6fd485b07f325cf58fabbb276713fc.pdf](https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20141024_IF00056_01936f7fcb6fd485b07f325cf58fabbb276713fc.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> Chan, C. (2014). The Hong Kong Umbrella Movement: A Students' or a People's Movement? *E-International Relations*. Assessed from <https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/52947>

<sup>28</sup> Chan, C. (2014).

<sup>29</sup> *The Diplomat* (2016). Why Did Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement Fail? Assessed from <https://thediplomat.com/2016/04/why-did-hong-kongs-umbrella-movement-fail/>

<sup>30</sup> *New York Times* (2014). Three Months of Protests End Quietly in Hong Kong. Assessed from <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/15/world/asia/three-months-of-protests-end-quietly-in-hong-kong.html>

2017's chief executive election, Hongkongers have continued to display civil disobedience whenever they have been discontent with controversial political decisions. This was evidenced especially strongly in the most recent incident of civil disobedience and socio-political unrest between 2019 and 2020.

### SOCIO-POLITICAL UNREST (2019-20)



*Figure 3 A riot police officer attempts to subdue a protester during an anti-government demonstration in Hong Kong. Photo: Reuters*

In February 2019, Hong Kong government planned to introduce the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill 2019, known simply as “the Extradition Bill.” The bill was proposed to allow transfers of criminal fugitives wanted in the Greater China Region, ostensibly overturning previous laws prohibiting the extradition of wanted persons from Taiwan, Macau, and Hong Kong to mainland China. Public consultations on the bill took place between Feb. 12 and March 4, 2019, where approximately 3,000 submissions were received supporting the bill and 1,400 submissions in opposition.<sup>31</sup>

Anti-extradition bill protests in Hong Kong began on April 28, 2019, where opponents of the bill highlighted their fears that Hongkongers could encounter unfair trials and violent treatment from mainland Chinese law enforcement authorities. They also worried that the bill would give mainland China greater influence over Hong Kong by threatening activists and journalists’

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<sup>31</sup> Shek, D. (2020). Protests in Hong Kong (2019-2020): A Perspective Based on Quality of Life and Well-Being. *Applied Research in Quality of Life*, 15, 619. DOI: 10.1007/s11482-020-09825-2.

freedom of expression.<sup>32</sup> Protests ranging in size from tens of thousands to more than a million people took to the streets throughout the course of the socio-political unrest. After protests turned violent on June 12, incumbent Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam announced on June 15 that the bill would be suspended indefinitely.<sup>33</sup>

Protesters feared that the bill might be revived, so demonstrations continued, and even heightened, to call for a complete withdrawal of the bill. On June 16, a crowd estimated at nearly 2 million individuals took part in a demonstration.<sup>34</sup> As crowd sizes increased, so too did clashes between police and protesters. The protesters' five main demands included (1) for the protests not to be characterized as a "riot"—a designation that could carry legal implications; (2) amnesty for arrested protesters; (3) an independent inquiry into alleged police brutality; (4) implementation of complete universal suffrage; and (5) the withdrawal of the bill.<sup>35</sup> In September 2019, the bill was completely withdrawn, yet mass protesters were not satisfied and continued to call for "five demands, not one less!"

On Oct. 1, as mainland China celebrated the 70<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of CCP of rule, Hong Kong experienced one of the most "violent and chaotic" days in the city's history.<sup>36</sup> An 18-year-old was shot in the chest with a live bullet as protesters attacked officers with poles, petrol bombs, and other projectiles.<sup>37</sup> In response to violent conflicts between protesters and police, the Hong Kong government banned protesters from wearing face masks to make the identification of rioters easier.<sup>38</sup> In early November of the same year, Junius Ho, a pro-Beijing lawmaker, was stabbed in the street by a man pretending to be his supporter.<sup>39</sup> A week later, a police officer shot one protester at close range when activists were attempting to set up a roadblock. Later that day another man was set on fire by protesters. Between Nov. 17 and 29, a standoff between police officers and students barricaded on the campus of Hong Kong Polytechnic University took place.<sup>40</sup> Large-scale and violent protests decreased in 2020 due to concerns over COVID-19 and China's new national security legislation, which allows police greater leeway to make arrests, but Hongkongers' discontent with the local police force, local government, and mainland China has been compounded.

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<sup>32</sup> *BBC News* (2019a). The Hong Kong Protests Explained in 100 and 500 words. Assessed from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-49317695>

<sup>33</sup> *BBC News* (2019a).

<sup>34</sup> *Bloomberg* (2019). As Many as Two Million Protestors Hit Hong Kong Streets. Assessed from <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-06-16/protests-swell-as-hong-kong-rejects-leader-s-compromise>

<sup>35</sup> *BBC News* (2019a).

<sup>36</sup> *BBC News* (2019b). China Anniversary: Beijing Celebrations Mark 70 Years of Communist Rule. Assessed from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-49808078>

<sup>37</sup> *BBC News* (2019a).

<sup>38</sup> *BBC News* (2019a).

<sup>39</sup> *New York Times* (2019). Pro-Beijing Lawmaker Stabbed in Hong Kong. Assessed from <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/05/world/asia/junius-ho-stabbed-hong-kong.html>

<sup>40</sup> *BBC News* (2019a).



## POLITICAL CONTROVERSIES OVER HONG KONG'S LIBERAL STUDIES CURRICULUM

The political controversies over the launch and delivery of Liberal Studies to all local senior secondary school students have sparked public concerns for nearly a decade, especially during the times of mass youth-led protests. As early as in the 2012's HKDSE, Question Three of Paper One of the Liberal Studies examination required candidates to give answers in respect of materials on local party politics. Members of the press and the education sector called this a leading question that required students to indicate their political stance on societal issues. These members suspected that the subject and the examination *per se* would be utilized as a political instrument, influencing youths' political positions and attitudes. In that year, then-Chief Executive Leung responded to the queries by issuing a press release:

The contents of the Liberal Studies curriculum include the theme of "rule of law and socio-political participation," which aims to encourage students' discussion on Hong Kong people's participation in socio-political affairs. It is therefore in line with the requirements of the curriculum to ask candidates to analyze socio-political phenomena in a public examination paper and such a question should not be regarded as a politically leading question. In setting the question concerned, the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA) did not take into account any political considerations. In fact, the public examination of this subject aims to assess candidates' ability in applying critical thinking skills and creativity, as well as making judgments and decisions from different perspectives and the question itself has no predetermined political stance or model answers.<sup>41</sup>

Leung's statement indicated that Liberal Studies is a subject aiming to encourage local students engaging in socio-political participation. As a result, the subject *per se* containing—or prompting students to develop their viewpoints on—political matters was not a taboo when Liberal Studies was first introduced. It was not until the outbreak of mass socio-political movements that youths either led or participated in that the Hong Kong government and especially Beijing have realized Hong Kong youth have had the ability to initiate mass socio-political campaigns, and even unrest, and that the majority of them can develop a collectively high political awareness. Beijing has been increasingly deeming Hong Kong youth's socio-political awareness and participation a threat to their national solidarity. After the anti-national education campaign, Beijing has learned that the more socio-political participation Hongkongers take part in, the more bargaining power the opposition camp and the general public at large acquire and the harder it becomes to minimize oppositional voices in the city. Therefore, in recent years, the pro-Beijing camp has, in part, become progressively more critical of the Liberal Studies curriculum because they prefer cutting as many sources as possible for Hong Kong youth to develop their political consciousness, regardless of whether those sources are primary or periphery. The pro-Beijing camp has politicized the curriculum and delivery of Liberal Studies to bar Hong Kong's opposition from strengthening their political weapons.

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<sup>41</sup> Hong Kong Government (2012). Press Release - LCQ6: Liberal Studies examination of Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination. Assessed from <https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/201205/09/P201205090382.htm>

For example, on Nov. 25, 2019, China Global Television Network (CGTN) host Liu Xin interviewed Tang Fei, the principal of Heung To Secondary School (Tseung Kwan O) in Hong Kong. Tang argued that Liberal Studies had acted as an instrument for political mobilization. He explained a significant portion of the content relates to sensitive political affairs and issues. Students have been asked to think politically from an early age, and Tang expressed concern that many secondary school students are immature and too politically inexperienced to fully and genuinely grasp the contents of the syllabus. An increasing number of teachers have taught their students to interpret and analyze political incidents included in the teaching materials from a position opposing the government. Students have then internalized teachers' influences and become very critical of the government, supporting opposition parties' views.<sup>42</sup> It is noteworthy that, until this point, the accusations and critiques against the delivery of Liberal Studies had been empty rhetoric lacking strong evidentiary support. While most of the mass scale socio-political movements occurred after Liberal Studies became a compulsory subject under the local senior secondary education curriculum, there are no studies illustrating that the provision of Liberal Studies and proliferation of youth's socio-political participation form a causal relationship.

However, since the widespread Anti-Extradition Bill movements and sentiments occurred, the criticism against offering Liberal Studies has been amplified, as pro-Beijing politicians and media have blamed the content and especially the delivery of the curriculum as an instrument to encourage students to take part in mass demonstrations and unrest. Here the anti-extradition bill movement has been happening from April 2019, in which Hongkongers have been protesting for the aforementioned "five demands," including revoking the extradition bill. In May 2019, Aristo Educational Press Limited, one of the publishers who revised the books of Liberal Studies, was lambasted by the state-owned *Wen Wei Po* as supplying "poisonous information" to Hong Kong youth. The pro-Beijing newspaper denounced the publisher as printing textbooks with the inclusion of politically biased and false information, alongside inciting pro-Hong Kong independence sentiments.<sup>43</sup>

Throughout the 2019-20 mass socio-political unrest, Hong Kong police arrested at least 9,216 persons, 3,725 of whom were students (45% in secondary education).<sup>44</sup> Some 100 staff members of local primary schools and kindergartens have also been arrested.<sup>45</sup> Former Chief Executive Tung Chee Wah called Liberal Studies a "failure" in July 2019 because it had escalated violence among young individuals in Hong Kong.<sup>46</sup> Members of the pro-Beijing camp also accused some Liberal Studies teachers of inciting students' political hatred against the government.<sup>47</sup> In response to the civil disobedience, Chief Executive Lam said in May 2020

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<sup>42</sup> *China Global Television Network* (2019). Liberal Studies Curriculum Stokes Fires of Rebellion among HK Youths. Assessed from <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2019-11-26/Liberal-studies-stoke-fires-of-rebellion-among-HK-youths-LWtFiSMRnW/index.html>

<sup>43</sup> *Hong Kong Free Press* (2020a). Hong Kong Teachers' Union Raises Concerns over Censorship as Publishers Revise Textbooks After Gov't Review. Accessed from <https://hongkongfp.com/2020/08/19/hong-kong-teachers-union-raises-concerns-over-censorship-as-publishers-revise-textbooks-after-govt-review/>

<sup>44</sup> *Radio Free Asia* (2020). Hong Kong Erases Banned Political Groups from School Teaching Materials. Assessed from <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/erases-08192020105604.html>

<sup>45</sup> *Radio Free Asia* (2020).

<sup>46</sup> *South China Morning Post* (2020b).

<sup>47</sup> *South China Morning Post* (2020b).

that the government would announce changes to the Liberal Studies curriculum by the end of the year, emphasizing that education itself should be independent of any political purposes.<sup>48</sup>

Tang believed Liberal Studies teachers failed to be politically neutral when teaching the subject, and authorities from HKEAA designed education schemes and examination papers that led students to opinions aligned with opposition parties' interests. Liberal Studies has therefore been viewed as a means to cultivate anti-government and anti-China sentiments in students.<sup>49</sup>

The continual outbreak of civil disobedience in Hong Kong has prompted students to believe that it is acceptable to violate the law in order to achieve what they perceive as politically just actions. These protesters, especially those at younger ages, have been influenced by "heroism." They have sought to be "heroic" in the sense that they strive for the ideal of law and order, guarding Hong Kong's future, though they understand they could potentially be arrested and prosecuted. Hong Kong has been experiencing a rapid growth of mainlandization potentially jeopardizing both Hongkongers' civic rights and their cultural identities, and the protesters have therefore been exercising civil disobedience in the hopes of maximizing their claims of civil liberty and retrieving their Hong Kong identity.

The curriculum has also lacked content about mainland China, contributing to an insufficient level of understanding about the Hong Kong youth's motherland.<sup>50</sup> Even though the curriculum includes the area of study on "modern China," most Chinese context is separated from that of Hong Kong. In order to improve the social and cultural harmony between Hong Kong and mainland China, the curriculum could integrate the Chinese contexts into Hong Kong's, allowing Hong Kong students to understand the linkage between Hong Kong and Chinese values, affairs, and issues. In the long run, the delivery of a more integrative curriculum is conducive to the rise in young Hongkongers' sense of belonging and attachment to their motherland.

The Education Bureau has introduced a voluntary vetting scheme to amend the teaching materials, and six major publishers announced that they would revise the content in their textbooks in August 2020. For example, "separation of powers" was removed from at least two publishers; and sensitive materials such as a photo of a "Lennon Wall"—a board made out of messages written on memos by protesters—together with both the annual July 1 pro-democracy march and the 2016 Mong Kok socio-political riot were replaced. The separation of powers in part divides government rule into three branches: executive, legislative, and judiciary.<sup>51</sup> Such a ruling concept is beneficial to the improvement of both the transparency and reliability of the governance itself. Alternatively, a Lennon Wall, in the Hong Kong context, originally referred to the mosaic wall created during the Umbrella Movement, located in the Admiralty district of Hong Kong. The mosaic wall was one of the primary artworks of the Umbrella Movement to champion free expression and demand democracy.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, the

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<sup>48</sup> *South China Morning Post* (2020c).

<sup>49</sup> *China Global Television Network* (2019).

<sup>50</sup> *China Global Television Network* (2019).

<sup>51</sup> Gittings, D. (2013). Separation of Powers Under the HK Basic Law. *SSRN*. Available at SSRN: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2412448>

<sup>52</sup> *The Conversation* (2020). "Lennon Walls" Herald a Sticky-Note Revolution in Hong Kong. Assessed from <https://theconversation.com/lennon-walls-herald-a-sticky-note-revolution-in-hong-kong-129740>

Mong Kok riot took place during the Lunar New Year holiday in 2016, where localist groups, small political groups and pro-democracy parties confronted the police officers and chanted for the establishment of "a Hong Kong nation." Localist groups have been formed by Hongkongers who were frustrated by the failure of the Umbrella Movement. They have been considered particularly radical as they have firmly expressed anti-Beijing sentiments and actively called for Hong Kong autonomy. At least 54 rioters were arrested during the incident.<sup>53</sup>

One textbook also deleted a description of how Chinese troops cleared pro-democracy students in Tiananmen Square in Beijing during the crackdown on June 4, 1989. PTU and Education Breakthrough, a newly established student group, criticized the Education Bureau's vetting scheme as an act of "political censorship."<sup>54,55,56</sup> Another publisher removed a line in a textbook stating "some political groups criticized the law enforcement methods by police in recent years for violating human rights and infringing upon Hong Kong residents' freedom of assembly and protests." Some textbooks added "warnings" to chapters about civil disobedience which state that social movement participants should face legal consequences and abiding by the law is a civic responsibility.<sup>57</sup>

Hong Kong Education Secretary Yeung has dismissed claims that the controversial amendments of Liberal Studies textbooks amounted to political censorship or screening, stating:

"I would not say it's political screening ... We look at the textbooks already in the market and provide some professional advice to the publishers. And you can see that the publishers adjust the textbooks by themselves. For some basic concepts, such as separation of powers, this is about a statement of facts. There is no separation of powers in Hong Kong, no matter [whether] it was before [the handover in] 1997 or after 1997 under the Basic Law."<sup>58</sup>

If political censorship has not been applied, it is hard to explain why publishers only removed contents deemed threats against Beijing's regime. Since Leung stated that the ultimate purpose of offering Liberal Studies is to encourage students' socio-political participation, major historical events, such as Beijing's Tiananmen incident and Hong Kong's Mong Kok riot, should be discussed by students at class. There is no indication of how the exclusive deletion of such content from Liberal Studies textbooks could be justified, except that Beijing has been attempting to rewrite Hong Kong's history.

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<sup>53</sup> *BBC News* (2016). Hong Kong's Mong Kok Clashes: More than Fishballs. Assessed from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-35529785>

<sup>54</sup> *South China Morning Post* (2020b).

<sup>55</sup> *Hong Kong Free Press* (2020a).

<sup>56</sup> *South China Morning Post* (2020d). No Cause for "Political Censorship" Paranoia over Hong Kong Liberal Studies Review. Assessed from <https://www.scmp.com/comment/letters/article/3100082/no-cause-political-censorship-paranoia-over-hong-kong-liberal>

<sup>57</sup> *Hong Kong Free Press* (2020a).

<sup>58</sup> *South China Morning Post* (2020e). Hong Kong Education Chief Denies Changes to Liberal Studies Textbooks Amount to Political Censorship. Assessed from <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education/article/3099623/hong-kong-education-chief-denies-changes-liberal-studies>



## CURRICULAR REFORMS

Publishers of education textbooks have been erasing references to banned political groups but inserting positive references to the ruling CCP. For example, the now-dissolved pro-democracy groups Demosisto and Hong Kong Indigenous were deleted from Liberal Studies teaching materials. The increasingly lopsided curriculum has limited the freedom of thought, information and expression. The next generations could be barred from accessing two-sided, less biased political information, and deciding their political stance and attitudes based on their preferences.

Liberal Studies aims at facilitating students' development of multiple perspectives on contemporary issues and helping them become independent thinkers while establishing a range of skills, including critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving.<sup>59</sup> The implementation of the vetting process of Liberal Studies textbooks has sparked public concerns on whether the next generations of Hongkongers can still be independent and critical thinkers, making decisions based on their own political, social, and civic interests.

While a voluntary vetting process has been exercised, critics of Liberal Studies continue to pressure the Education Bureau to making further educational reforms. Wong Yuk Shan, the head of the Open University of Hong Kong, has suggested the Bureau turn the subject from a compulsory course to an elective, or cancel the subject from the HKDSE syllabus, to avoid any parties using it to radicalize students.<sup>60</sup> Additional critics have commented that the vetting process of the subject should be mandatory rather than voluntary, should Liberal Studies be kept in the syllabus.<sup>61</sup>

An interim report by the task force on a review of school curriculum released in 2019, alongside a study published by Our Hong Kong Foundation (OHKF), a think tank set up by former Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa in 2020, contended that the subject should remain a compulsory course for HKDSE takers. While the Education Bureau will wait until reviewing the final report published by the task force to decide their way forward, there are several factors that members of the education sector and students should take into account:

If the subject remains a compulsory course, teachers should abide by professional ethics and present both sides of the political interpretation and analysis. They should not initiate students to engage in civil disobeying activities. Students should be encouraged to make their own decisions on what political stance they uphold and whether they should take part in any social movement, without any influences given by the authority figures at their schools. The more objective and unbiased arguments teachers present during class, the more freedom of thought, information, and expression their students would be entitled to, and the less political manipulation teaching staff would be accused of.

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<sup>59</sup> *South China Morning Post* (2020b).

<sup>60</sup> *Hong Kong Free Press* (2020b). Potential Changes to Hong Kong Liberal Studies Subject Draw Concern. Assessed from <https://hongkongfp.com/2018/05/02/potential-changes-hong-kong-liberal-studies-subject-draw-concern/>

<sup>61</sup> *South China Morning Post* (2020f). HKDSE: What Is Liberal Studies And Why Are Some Modules Controversial? Assessed from <https://www.scmp.com/yp/discover/news/hong-kong/article/3102457/hkdse-what-liberal-studies-and-why-are-some-modules>

If the subject is made voluntary, school representatives should inform junior secondary school students of the advantages and disadvantages of studying Liberal Studies, so as to allow students to better understand whether it is in their interests to take the subject once they promote to senior secondary education. While it is inevitable that peer pressure would play some part in students' decision-making on what courses to take, Liberal Studies teachers should emphasize the importance for students to make genuine decisions on whether they should take Liberal Studies by considering if they would like to learn, in part, about the socio-political examination and analysis of the city and China's current affairs and issues.

## CRITICAL THINKING

Under the current political climate in Hong Kong it is nearly impossible to delink the understanding of societal issues from political discussion. Therefore, analyzing politically sensitive topics is necessary for Liberal Studies students to broaden their knowledge base on contemporary societal topics. To authentically understand society from multiple perspectives, the Liberal Studies curriculum should be de-politicized as much as possible.

The contents of teaching materials should promote analytical thinking to socio-political issues rather than descriptively lead students to believe in a certain political side. Raising students' awareness of societal issues and developing their analytical skills can only be achieved if students can gain access to more objective materials rather than tabloid resources.<sup>62</sup> For example, in teaching materials, the presentation of descriptive data sets and information should be followed by a section of open-end question which would provide students space to think about the socio-political motives and outcomes of each contemporary affair or issue discussed, and how different major stakeholders are affected in the socio-political discussion. In doing so, students are given more room to develop their own set of understandings.

It is noteworthy that the understandings of Hong Kong societally and politically are parallel to some extent. Human figures can hardly eradicate the expression of their political views when analyzing or addressing societal issues. Therefore, it is inevitable that teachers will politically influence their students to a certain extent in their critical and rational thinking development when discussing societal issues. Political influences should not be counted as a significant concern so long as deliberate political manipulation by teachers is avoided. The minimization of political manipulation can only be accomplished when teachers at school prevent intentionally politicizing and capitalizing on their authority to radicalize students' perspective. Teacher pedagogies should be de-politicized such that personal political interests and values should not be explicitly expressed by the teaching staff in front of students. Even if they declare their political stance on a certain set of societal issues, they should also display arguments made by the oppositional side politically. In doing so, teachers could encourage students to consider multiple political sides of any societal affairs and disputes, prior to concluding their own political opinion.

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<sup>62</sup> *South China Morning Post* (2020d).

Exposure to radicalized political perspectives, half-truths, false notions, and oversimplified ideas is inevitable thanks to both conventional and social media.<sup>63</sup> Rather than aiming to avoid all biased information, students should be encouraged to think critically when digesting any information, regardless whether the details present or implicate political interests similar to those the students themselves uphold. Only by developing critical thinking skills can students optimize their judgment of the credibility of available information sources.

## CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent restrictions on social gatherings, along with the enactment of the national security law for Hong Kong have significantly reduced the ability to carry out conventional protests. The national security law criminalizes any act of protest deemed to promote (1) secession from China, (2) subversion of the central government's authority, (3) terrorism through the use of violence or intimidation, and (4) collusion with foreign or external forces.<sup>64</sup> People now turn to employ more creative and inventive approaches when “demonstrating” by, for example, purchasing *Apple Daily*, the local newspaper owned by Jimmy Lai, an arrested pro-democracy activist in Hong Kong.<sup>65</sup> As freedom of speech and expression has been substantially limited under the law, the Liberal Studies curriculum and teachers' pedagogies may undergo further reforms to avoid publicly delivering forms of oppositional expression against the Hong Kong government or Beijing.

Liberal Studies textbooks claim Hong Kong society is non-discriminatory in terms of speech, belief and cultural and religious expression. The city's outlook on diversity and inclusion should notion that the city embraces both supporting and opposing voices. Under the law, however, now any expression of oppositional opinion can be seen as a gesture leading to imprisonment or alternative form of criminal sanctions. It would be difficult for Liberal Studies learners to authentically interpret societal affairs from a logical, critical, and objective perspective given that negative comments on local government or Beijing could be seen as divisive and illegal. It is explicit that the law would discourage opposition parties from continually using Liberal Studies as a political instrument to heighten young generations' anti-government and anti-Beijing dispositions, at the expense of truly allowing Hong Kong students to critically engage in socio-political discussions. The law encourages students in Hong Kong to establish “politically-correct” rather than critical thoughts.

Contrastingly, the pro-Beijing camp is able to express its concerns about potentially biased political influence by teachers during the delivery of Liberal Studies lessons, and promote schemes for voluntary vetting the curriculum. It may be necessary for the Education Bureau to establish a team specifically handling complaints from any parties, including members of pro-Beijing camp, district councillors, and parents of students, who believe any registered teachers

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<sup>63</sup> *South China Morning Post* (2020g). Hong Kong's Liberal Studies Textbooks Lack Accuracy and Depth. Accessed from <https://www.scmp.com/comment/letters/article/3101040/hong-kongs-liberal-studies-textbooks-lack-accuracy-and-depth>

<sup>64</sup> *BBC News* (2020). Hong Kong Security Law: What Is It and Is It Worrying. Assessed from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-52765838>

<sup>65</sup> Washington Post (2020). Police Throttle Hong Kong Protests against Beijing, But Anger Still Seethes on the Streets. Assessed from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/hong-kong-protests-police-china/2020/10/01/331c2efe-0145-11eb-b92e-029676f9ebec\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/hong-kong-protests-police-china/2020/10/01/331c2efe-0145-11eb-b92e-029676f9ebec_story.html)

are breaching their professional ethics when delivering Liberal Studies content. Once a complaint is received, the team should be responsible for investigating, through communicating with the rest of the Liberal Studies teaching staff at the school where the accused teacher works, so as to screen all teaching materials other than textbooks prepared and delivered by the accused teacher, and uncovering the teacher's pedagogies by talking to relevant students (whose identities must be kept anonymous throughout and after the investigation) as to whether the accused engaged in deliberate political manipulation. If the complaint is validated, the Education Bureau should impose sanctions on the teacher.

However, instead of sanctioning unprofessional teachers, the Bureau chose to facilitate the removal of politically sensitive content from Liberal Studies textbooks. Awareness should be drawn to the fact that the pro-Beijing camp does not criticize the content of Liberal Studies materials as provocative, misleading, and radical. Rather, it is the delivery of Liberal Studies by certain teachers that they fear is radicalizing students and within their concerns. Hence, the Bureau's actions to censor certain details from the learning materials that are considered anti-CCP are ineffective when teachers can continue to use their current pedagogies.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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