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Vickers, Edward
Department of Education, Kyushu University

Morris, Paul
IOE, University College London

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Accelerating Hong Kong's reeducation: 'mainlandisation', securitisation and the 2020 National Security Law

Edward Vickers^a and Paul Morris^b

^aDepartment of Education, Kyushu University, Fukuoka, Japan; ^bIOE, University College London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Whilst Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 has influenced education in various ways, major reforms perceived as promoting mainland control have been resisted. For two decades, Hong Kong's educational autonomy under the 'one country, two systems' formula was thus largely maintained. This changed radically with the response to the protests of 2019–2020, culminating in the introduction of a National Security Law. This has drastically constrained Hong Kong's civil society, enhanced central government control of education and accelerated efforts to reeducate Hongkongers as loyal PRC citizens. We trace how this transformation has been enacted and justified, and reflect on its consequences. We analyse the current situation through the lenses of 'internal colonialism' and securitisation, which have characterised governance of China's restive periphery under Xi Jinping. We argue that analytical perspectives in Comparative Education, relating to postcolonialism/decolonisation and globalisation, obstruct or distort understanding of Hong Kong's present predicament.

加速香港的再教育：“内地化”、安全化与2020年《国安法》

摘要

尽管1997年香港回归中国主权已在诸多方面影响其教育，但被视为加强内地控制的主要改革始终被抵制。二十多年来，在“一国两制”方针下，香港的教育自治因此基本得以维持。然而，随着官方对2019–2020年公众抗议作出回应，这种情况彻底改变，最终导致2020年《国安法》的出台及一系列相关改革。这些举措已显著限制香港的公民社会，强化中央政府对教育的控制，并加快将香港人再教育为忠诚的中华人民共和国公民的工作。本文追溯这一转变是如何付诸实际并合法化，同时反思其后果。我们通过“内部殖民主义”和安全化的视角，对当下情况进行分析，这些视角体现了习近平担任主席期间对中国棘手的边缘治理方式的特征。我们认为，比较教育研究中正流行的有关后殖民主义/去殖民化和全球化的分析视角阻碍或扭曲对香港当前困境的理解。

KEYWORDS

Hong Kong; China; the national security law; securitisation; mainlandisation; internal colonisation

关键词

香港; 中国; 《国安法》; 安全化; 内地化; 内部殖民化

Introduction

Following its handover to China in 1997, Hong Kong seemed to defy predictions that its freedoms would not survive that transition. Local politics certainly changed, with

CONTACT Paul Morris  paul.morris@ucl.ac.uk

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significant implications for education. Even before the handover, textbook publishers began self-censoring in anticipation of a new official line (Vickers 2003) and the establishment sought to steer local media, cultural institutions (such as museums) and universities in a 'patriotic' direction. Nevertheless, the post-1997 story of Hong Kong's education system was largely one of successful resistance against more direct attempts at 'mainlandisation'. Massive public protests led to the abandonment not only of a 2003 attempt to enact a National Security Law (NSL), but also a 2012 move to introduce a compulsory 'Moral and National Education' (MNE) school subject. In 2007, a senior official resigned after a Commission of Inquiry condemned her attempts to pressure a University President to silence staff critical of Government policies (Morris 2010). As recently as 2015, we wrote in this journal that:

researchers ... need to recognise the continuing and profound distinctiveness of Hong Kong society, and its education system, vis-à-vis mainland China. This is demonstrated in the degree of official control over schooling. Whereas, on the mainland, Communist oversight of the drafting of school curricula is relatively untrammelled, in Hong Kong Beijing's appointed proconsuls find themselves as constrained as their colonial predecessors by weak government legitimacy, and similarly hobbled in the face of popular opposition. (Morris and Vickers 2015, 322)

'In the Information Age', we concluded, 'attempting to retrofit an internationally engaged, prosperous post-colonial city-state with the apparatus of state-led, top-down nation-building is arguably a Sisyphean task' (Morris and Vickers 2015, 323).

But today, local authorities, at Beijing's instigation, are engaged in precisely such a task. Under the auspices of the NSL, finally enacted in 2020, much of civil society has been silenced and all meaningful manifestations of curricular or pedagogical autonomy face elimination.¹ What, then, has changed since 2015? What do these changes mean for the 'continuing and profound distinctiveness' of the education system? What do they tell us about Xi Jinping's regime and its broader political and ideological programme? And how should all of this prompt educational comparativists to reflect on the preoccupations that have shaped their field in recent years?

On one level, this article sets out to document these transformational changes to Hong Kong's education system. This task cannot be left to local scholars, given the climate ushered in by the 2020 NSL, which exposes critics of the Government to risk of prosecution. Whilst self-censorship has long characterised much local scholarship on education, the NSL has exacerbated this pattern. We further argue that understanding education in Hong Kong requires reference to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) agenda for bringing the entirety of Chinese society under more comprehensive central control. Drawing on government briefings, policy documents, curricular guidelines, media reports and secondary literature, we focus on that drive for control and the political and ideological preoccupations that underpin it. This can be understood as a form of internal colonialism (Calvert 2001; Turner 2018; Bamberger, Yan, and Morris 2021) paralleling in all important respects the conventional 'external' variant, involving: settlement; extension of political control; relations of superordination/subordination; and threatened or actual use of coercion. As in the 'minority' regions of Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia and Tibet, these conditions now characterise Hong Kong: all are subject to the extension of political control by the CCP; settlement from inland China and/or local exodus are

transforming demographics; local identities are being systematically suppressed or erased; and 'national security' legislation provides the basis for legalised coercion.

In concluding, we consider implications for the Comparative Education field. In recent years, much scholarship has dwelt on the implications of European colonialism/imperialism and Western 'hegemony' for education across Asia and beyond (Chen 2010; Lim and Apple 2016; Takayama, Sriprakash, and Connell 2017), echoing calls for comprehensive 'decolonisation'. While deserving serious consideration in the West, such demands do not constitute a plausible global master-narrative (Vickers 2020). Definitions of colonialism as a quintessentially Western pathology are implicit in the common distinction (e.g. Fairbrother 2003; Li and Liu 2021) between 'colonial' and 'postcolonial' phases in the local past, but such labels lack explanatory power in a post-retrocession context aptly described as 'more colonial again' (Vickers 2001). Hong Kong demonstrates the dangers involved in constructing 'coloniality' or 'colonialism' as intrinsically 'Western' in the face of a Chinese hegemonic project with strong colonial overtones. Another strand of scholarship in comparative education has stressed the influence on education systems around the world of forces beyond the nation state, including Globalisation, Global governance and 'World (essentially liberal western democratic) systems'. These concepts have similarly limited explanatory power in a context overwhelmingly dominated by colonialism undertaken by and in the name of a non-Western nation-state.

'Securitisation' and education in contemporary China

Some have suggested that the growing radicalism of Hong Kong's democracy movement – beginning with the 2014 'Umbrella Movement', and intensifying in 2019–2020 – needlessly provoked a draconian clampdown. Summers argues that if pan-democrats had not short-sightedly rejected an electoral reform package passed in 2010, the political tumult of the subsequent decade might have been avoided (Summers 2019). Others (Chan, Nachman, and Mok 2021) have argued that the increased political activism was a response to attempts to promote a gradual mainlandisation. This is not the place to deal in detail with claims relating to the broader political scene rather than specifically to education. The escalation of unrest from mid-2019 needs to be understood in the context both of underlying youthful desperation and an incompetent and provocative official response (Vines 2021). Local youth have increasingly found themselves outcompeted for university places, jobs and housing by new arrivals from the mainland, with the rate of in-migration controlled by Beijing. But local factors alone cannot account for the government's handling of this unrest, or its educational response. Viewed in the wider Chinese political context, it becomes apparent that while the 2019–2020 protests may have affected the timing and intensity of the local crackdown, the broader direction of travel was already set.

Since 2012, a pattern of increasing intolerance of ideological deviance and denial of meaningful agency to sub-national groups has been evident in Tibet and Xinjiang, where political repression has markedly intensified under Xi Jinping. Xinjiang has witnessed a 'securitisation' of identity discourse, with almost all expression of cultural distinctiveness by the region's Muslims construed as threatening national integrity and security (Tobin 2020). The rhetoric of the West's 'Global War on Terror' has been appropriated to brand Muslim Uyghurs as a 'terrorist' threat (Roberts 2020). Nor are only 'minorities' on

China's periphery seen as politically threatening; like the authoritarian regimes of 1980s Taiwan and South Korea, the CCP faces slowing growth, rising inequality and an increasingly complex and sophisticated society bubbling with low-level discontent (Overholt 2017).

Unlike those military dictatorships of the 1980s, which eventually conceded democratising reforms, the CCP has tightened its control. McGregor (2019, 20) highlights Xi Jinping's attribution of the collapse of the archetypal multiethnic socialist polity, the USSR, to an 'infiltration of Western values' and consequent corruption of Party discipline and public morale. Moderate voices have been silenced, with lingering admiration for the West discredited by Western democracies' roiling crises since 2008. Simultaneously anxious of its domestic legitimacy and disdainful of Western decadence, the Party has intensified central control while ratcheting up nationalist propaganda. Despite signalling a determination to tackle insecurity and inequality at home, its capacity or willingness to follow through remains in question. Like many regimes faced with similar internal tensions, it has sought to shore up support by preaching the imperative of 'patriotic' loyalty in the face of foreign hostility. The 'Chinese Dream' of the 'Great Revival of the Chinese Nation' invites citizens to sublimate their hopes of individual betterment in shared celebration of national aggrandisement.

Education plays a crucial role in this project (Vickers 2021, 2022). From 2017, control over curricula for the school subjects closely associated with political socialisation – Chinese language, history and morals/politics – has been recentralised, with the People's Education Press tasked with producing uniform textbooks for nationwide use. The drive for uniformity has extended to curbing bilingual schooling in the 'minority' regions of Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang and Tibet. In Xinjiang, introduction of a 'National Security Law' was coupled with 'National Security Education' (NSE), marked by a special 'NSE Day' (Roberts 2021, 231). With all pretence of pluralism abandoned, the 'consciousness of the Chinese national community' (中华民族共同体意识), premised on a Han-centric vision of 'outstanding traditional Chinese culture' (中华优秀传统文化), has become core CCP doctrine. In peripheral or 'minority' regions, this underpins a concerted assimilationist drive coupled to settler colonialism, as an influx of Han migrants from 'Inner China' steadily reduces local diversity (Roberts 2021). Doctrinal correctness is personified by Xi Jinping himself, now leader for life, with instruction in 'Xi Jinping Thought' mandated at all levels of schooling from 2021.

Influenced by the CCP's growing power and repression of peripheral peoples, historians and political scientists have increasingly questioned the conventional view of China as unambiguously a victim of colonialism, instead emphasising the essentially imperial nature of the modern Chinese state. Scholars associated with the 'New Qing History' portray China's last imperial dynasty as participating, along with Russia and Britain, in the competitive imperialism of early modern Eurasia. Confucian bureaucrats were as convinced of their 'civilising mission' vis-a-vis peripheral peoples as were the pro-consuls of European powers (Vickers 2015). The Soviet-inspired repackaging of Chinese colonialism as an egalitarian project of inter-ethnic brotherhood was ultimately premised upon Han supremacy and superiority (Mullaney et al. 2012). This legacy of home-grown colonialism and chauvinism is crucial to understanding the recent turn towards a more assimilationist policy in China's restive borderlands. At the same time, China's colonial victimhood remains a core theme of state propaganda; in 2021, the PRC consulate-general in

Mumbai lashed out at critics of Hong Kong's NSL, accusing 'Western politicians' of 'scapegoating China to conceal their failure in containing COVID-19' and trying to 'beautify colonial history and deliberately undermine China's sovereignty over Hong Kong'.²

Hong Kong: the mainland perspective

What, then, is Hong Kong's place in the 'consciousness of the Chinese national community' the Party is seeking to construct? Put simply, this revolves around three basic concepts: race, culture and colonialism. As in Taiwan, incontrovertible 'Chineseness' is portrayed as a factor of Han ancestry and the inheritance of 'outstanding traditional Chinese culture' (Vickers 2021). In this, the CCP today mimics its old adversaries: Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist (KMT) regime, and post-war Hong Kong's anti-Communist patriots, for whom an ultra-traditionalist vision bolstered 'Chinese' pride amidst the horrors of Maoism and indignities of colonial subjugation. The post-Mao CCP has portrayed the separation of Hong Kong and Taiwan as no more than a lingering colonial indignity whose resolution is essential to expunging the shame of the 'Century of Humiliation'. For patriotic mainlanders, as for most of postwar Hong Kong's newly-arrived refugees (Luk 1991), the idea that Hong Kong (or Taiwan) could ever be regarded as a site of Chinese 'colonialism' would seem nonsensical. An ethnocentric vision of nationhood informs a perception of Hong Kong and Taiwan as inalienable constituents of the Chinese realm, illegitimately sundered from it by the machinations of foreign colonialists.

Unfortunately for the CCP, identity consciousness in Hong Kong, as in Taiwan, has in recent decades evolved far beyond anti-colonial Chinese patriotism to embody a visceral sense of distinctiveness from the mainland PRC. The CCP only countenances the legitimacy of a singular national identity defined by the state; for Beijing, local denizens are 'Chinese residents of Hong Kong', not 'Hongkongese'. The 'One Country, Two Systems' formula for reunification was conceived as a tactical ploy for re-establishing PRC sovereignty. Hong Kong's international status and connections, embodied in its legal and institutional framework, were seen as useful assets for a China rebuilding its ties with the outside world, but as signifying no authentic claim to cultural distinctiveness. Moreover, piloting 'One Country, Two Systems' there was intended to pave the way for reunification with Taiwan. With acknowledgement of the shifting and diverse nature of Han culture largely absent from mainstream PRC discourse (Mullaney et al. 2012), Hongkongese and Taiwanese alienation from the mainland is seen merely as mis-recognition of a shared cultural essence – a mis-recognition fomented by the same malign colonial forces that originally tore them from the motherland.

In 2019–2020, the calculus of Beijing's Hong Kong and Taiwan policy underwent a profound shift. Protests in Hong Kong began in June in opposition to a new extradition law, introduced ostensibly to enable a local man accused of murdering his Taiwanese girlfriend to be extradited to Taiwan. Given the political taboo on treating Taiwan separately, extradition provisions encompassed the entirety of the PRC, and this provoked local disquiet. The deployment of unprecedentedly forceful policing tactics to quell the unrest initiated a cycle of violence (Vines 2021), which in turn influenced the presidential election underway in Taiwan. There, the KMT, which had anticipated ousting the independence-leaning President Tsai, instead lost heavily in January 2020, as the repression in Hong Kong boosted Tsai's support.

Violent protests and their violent suppression thus seemed to signify abandonment by Beijing of both faith in the viability of ‘peaceful reunification’ with Taiwan and belief that Hong Kong’s economic value outweighed its political inconvenience.³ Mounting frustration with repeated outbursts of discontent fed a growing sense that Hong Kong’s threat to national unity and CCP authority outweighed its economic usefulness. Signalling this shift was a revision in July 2020 (immediately following promulgation of the NSL) to Hong Kong’s portrayal in mainland school textbooks for *Morals and Rule by Law* (道德与法治). In an otherwise almost unchanged text, a passage celebrating Hong Kong’s rapid post-1997 economic growth and status as ‘the world’s freest economy’ was replaced by one promoting the new ‘Guangdong-HK-Macao Greater Bay Area Scheme’ (PEP 2020, 101). A section was also added explaining the precedence of ‘one country’ over ‘two systems’: “‘One country’ is the precondition and foundation for implementing ‘two systems’; ‘two systems’ is subordinate to and arises from (从属于派生于) ‘one country’, and is integrated within ‘one country’” (100).

Mainland discourse on the educational origins of HK’s unrest

This hardening of Beijing’s stance on ‘One Country, Two Systems’ was accompanied by official attempts to explain local unrest to the mainland public as the outcome of lingering colonialism and malign Western interference. Schooling was portrayed as the most important arena for transmitting this foreign ‘poison’. Lamenting the failure to inculcate local youth with an understanding of their Chinese ‘roots’ is a longstanding trope of mainland officials and Hong Kong’s pro-Beijing camp (Morris and Vickers 2015). However, portrayal of local schools as cradles of disloyalty to the regime intensified following the ‘Umbrella Movement’ of 2014, with a particular focus on the subject of *Liberal Studies*.

Although the origins of *Liberal Studies* can be traced to the 1990s, plans in the early 2000s for restructuring the local education system led to its reinvention as a compulsory school subject. Although its Chinese name (通知教育) translates simply as ‘General Studies’, curricular guidelines envisaged fostering not only knowledge and understanding of current affairs (local, national and global), but also critical thinking. Teachers were expected to produce their own ‘issues-based’ learning materials, and the government refrained from formally ‘approving’ textbooks. In practice, from the outset educational publishers did produce textbooks, and self-censorship ensured that many offered a narrative remarkably similar to that of mainland texts (albeit with less effusive endorsement of the CCP) (Vickers 2011). But in the hands of some teachers, some of the time, *Liberal Studies* offered a forum for relatively open classroom discussion of topical matters.

Intensifying unease towards *Liberal Studies* can be traced to the 2012 protests against the introduction of another compulsory secondary school subject: *Moral and National Education* (MNE). Had that subject been introduced as planned, it would have provided a patriotic counterweight to *Liberal Studies*. In the event, MNE was throttled at birth and its main opponents were the very students whose political loyalty the subject was supposed to assure. After the Umbrella Movement of 2014, led by many of those who had spearheaded the anti-MNE campaign, pro-Beijing elements suggested that the 2014 unrest had been fuelled by *Liberal Studies*. A 2015 report commissioned from the Chinese University of Hong Kong by the Hong Kong Government found no evidence that *Liberal Studies* had ‘radicalised’ students. Other commentators meanwhile pointed

to the role of various factors beyond the school gates in encouraging discontent amongst local youth (Chan et al. 2020).

Criticisms of *Liberal Studies* resurfaced and intensified during the 2019 protests. A key critic was Tung Chee-Hwa, Hong Kong's first Chief Executive, during whose tenure planning for the subject had begun. Tung branded the initiative a 'failure' and blamed it for escalating youth violence. A think tank he founded – the *Our Hong Kong Foundation* (OHKF) (团结香港基金) – was also routinely cited in media reports concerning *Liberal Studies* (Chan, Lau, and Leung 2020).

Such criticisms were reinforced through a feedback loop exemplifying classic 'United Front' tactics. Alongside Tung's OHKF, other pro-Beijing front organisations such as the 'concern group' 'Help Our Next Generation' (Chan, Lau, and Leung 2020), and the local editions of the newspapers *Wen Wei Po* (文匯報) and *Ta Kung Pao* (大公報), generated fulminating critiques of the school subject. These were then cited in the media on the Chinese mainland as evidence of mounting concern amongst the Hong Kong populace over the role of schools in general, and *Liberal Studies* in particular, in corrupting young minds. Local United Front outfits thus contributed to legitimating a narrative blaming dissident schoolteachers, in league with 'foreign forces', for 'brainwashing' youth.

As the protests escalated during August 2019, the *People's Daily* (人民日报) thundered that "'Liberal Studies' texts" were 'trafficking contraband' (私货) (2019b). Unnamed 'experts' and 'Hong Kong media' reports were invoked, but the only named source was *Wen Wei Po*. *Liberal Studies* was accused of 'polluting' students' minds with 'poison', fomenting hostility towards the police, 'promoting "Occupy Central"', 'distorting facts', 'beautifying lawbreaking' (美化违法), and generally disseminating 'political propaganda' (政治宣传品). Criticising the excessive scope given to teachers' professional judgement, the article alleged that unvetted teaching materials lacked 'neutrality' (中立), allowing 'yellow' (pro-democratic) teachers to peddle anti-Beijing propaganda. The article cites a report in *Wen Wei Pao* showing a textbook cartoon depicting the forcible arrest of an 'Occupy Central' protester in 2014. The protester declares to police (portrayed in unflattering terms) that 'occupying the streets is not a crime'. Juxtaposed with this image is a photograph of a policeman coming to the aid of an injured comrade during the protests, suggesting that police were in fact subjected to violence from protesters in 2014. The *People's Daily* noted with alarm that a key leader of the 2014 'Occupy Central' movement, the University of Hong Kong (HKU) Law professor, Benny Tai (戴耀廷), had co-edited one *Liberal Studies* textbook which constituted 'an Occupy Central action manual'.

Having established the grounds for outrage, mainland media outlets positioned themselves as platforms for popular anger. The *Beijing Daily* quoted 'netizens' dismissing *Liberal Studies* textbooks as 'subversion manuals' (教唆书) (2019). The following day, the *China Daily* quoted another netizen who claimed that the textbooks made him 'come out in a cold sweat' (2019). Drawing an unfavourable contrast with Macau, where a local student had impressed Chinese netizens with accounts of his studies of national history, the paper denounced *Liberal Studies* texts as 'brainwashing propaganda' (洗脑宣传). *Wen Wei Po* was cited blaming the subject for rendering youth susceptible to manipulation by 'other actors' (别的用心者) intent on spreading 'poison'. As evidence, *China Daily* displayed the cover of a text entitled *Hong Kong Today* (今日香港), published

by local educational publisher, Ling Kee. This featured a collage of photographs: the National Day Flag Raising Ceremony, a crowd of people holding HKSAR Bauhinia flags, and (the offending image) a pro-democracy demonstration.

Fuelling the chorus of uproar, the *China Youth Daily* dubbed textbooks the 'diseased roots' of the 'Hong Kong problem' (2019). Comments posted online beneath this article included one blaming the local dominance of the English language for the prevalence of 'colonial' thinking. In response, another netizen urged, 'Promote *putonghua* and simplified characters, emphasise education in Chinese humanities, patriotism and the Party line!', while yet another opined that 'the problem is that Hong Kong teachers are ignorant of the mainland!'

Having helped spark this online outrage, the *People's Daily* in mid-September issued its own measured, definitive verdict (2019a). Lamenting that a lack of proper vetting allowed 'politics' and 'contraband matter' to 'permeate' the classroom, the paper focussed on the failure to balance *Liberal Studies* with education in 'national citizenship' (国民教育). It endorsed the teaching of 'critical thinking', but insisted on the 'precondition' of a 'sufficient foundation of knowledge'. Without 'education in national citizenship', teaching critical thinking was like training students to 'walk on one leg' (一条腿走路). 'Without proper understanding of Chinese history and national conditions', it was, the paper averred, all too easy 'simply to deny reality'. Firm anchoring to their 'Chinese coordinates' (中国坐标) was necessary to prevent young Hongkongers from slipping into a naive embrace of 'Western standards'. The most urgent task for Hong Kong education was therefore 'decolonisation' (去殖民化). The article recalled that, in her latest annual policy address (in 2018), the Chief Executive had urged the nurturing of youth 'of quality' (素质), with 'responsibility towards society, national consciousness and an international outlook'. But it asked, 'Can Hong Kong education today measure up to this standard?', before concluding: 'Reflection is needed, consensus is needed, reform is needed. Because once education is lost, everything is lost'.

A similar tone was struck by an article in *Guangming Daily* posted on the website of the Communist Youth League (2019). Calling for 'urgent reform', this also acknowledged the value of a 'liberal education' in 'broadening minds' and fostering autonomous 'critical thinking'. However, it lamented the lack of any coherent, 'unified' (統一) system for training *Liberal Studies* teachers, and the laxity over textbook vetting. Referring to the textbook co-edited by a 'leader of Occupy Central' (Benny Tai), the article deplored the coverage therein of this protest movement. 'Certain textbooks', it observed, 'encourage students to "struggle" against the national flag, national emblem and national anthem' and peddle distorted interpretations of 'one country, two systems'. In short, it claimed that *Liberal Studies* had become a vehicle for 'fake news and rumour-mongering', with especially dangerous consequences in a lax media environment which exposed students to 'external influences' (外部因素) that were 'intensifying their interference' (强势干扰).

Acknowledging post-handover efforts to strengthen national education, the *Guangming Daily* stressed that 'national ties' had nonetheless 'been broken and the dark spirit of British colonialism persists' (民族纽带自断, 英殖阳魂长存). Singapore was cited as a model of successful post-colonial nation-building, thanks to civic education centred on the 'Eight virtues' of Chinese tradition, and effective implementation of 'patriotic education'. A similar programme is identified as a 'precondition' (前提) if Hong Kong is to resist 'foreign interference' (外来干扰). In comments, several netizens allude to patriotic

education in the USA. Referring to a Legislative Councillor's objections – on grounds of anti-foreign discrimination – to textbook assertions that 'We are all Chinese', one objected, 'If we go to study in America, the textbooks say "We are all American", don't they?'. Emphasising the persistence of Western colonialism, another complained, 'We only took back sovereignty over the land. Law, education and the economy are still colonised'. Others enthusiastically endorsed rumoured plans to send local teachers to the mainland for training (*Guangming Daily* 2019).

By the autumn of 2019, the narrative that education in general, and *Liberal Studies* specifically, was responsible for the disaffection of local youth was firmly established in public discourse on the mainland and in local pro-Beijing circles. This narrative was elaborated and publicised in a two-part documentary, *Another Hong Kong* (另外一个香港), released by CCTV (China's state broadcasting service) in May 2020, in the midst of preparations to enact the NSL (to be ratified by the National People's Congress in June). This blamed the protest movement on the machinations of 'foreign powers', accused Benny Tai and media magnate Jimmy Lai (dubbed 'puppets' of malign foreigners) of 'infiltrating' the local education system, and pinpointed *Liberal Studies* as the chief vehicle for subversion (CCTV 2020). Under pressure to respond, in late 2019 the Hong Kong authorities had announced a 'voluntary' review of *Liberal Studies* textbooks, in which all major educational publishers agreed to participate. When this process was completed in the summer of 2020, the mainland press expressed satisfaction. 'People of all walks of life' greeted the 'disinfection' of school texts, claimed the *People's Daily* (2020), marking an 'important step' towards restoring 'educational order'. The *Beijing Daily* welcomed the removal of references to 'Lennon Walls' and other phenomena associated with local protests, as well as what it portrayed as offensive allegations concerning the illicit trade in live human organs on the mainland (*Beijing Daily* 2020).

However, before these revisions were announced, the political context had already been transformed by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, which from early 2020 distracted global attention from Hong Kong's ongoing political crisis, exacerbated Sino-Western mistrust, and supplied a rationale for imposing sweeping new controls on the entire population of the PRC, including Hong Kong. Until the summer of 2020, commentary in local and mainland media continued to suggest that moves such as introducing a textbook vetting procedure for *Liberal Studies* might be sufficient to placate its critics. But the promulgation, in June 2020, of Hong Kong's NSL signalled a transformation in the climate within which education policy was conducted. As the targeting of *Liberal Studies* in CCTV's *Another Hong Kong* documentary had already indicated, it was clear that curricular tinkering would no longer suffice; a wholesale reorientation of local schooling towards the inculcation of uncritical loyalty to Beijing was mandated.

The National Security Law of 2020 and a new agenda for education

Signs of fundamental shifts in local governance, specifically relating to the role of the mainland authorities, preceded the promulgation of the NSL. After years of mounting annoyance in Beijing with the obsequious incompetence of local officialdom, the unrest of 2019–2020 seems to have exhausted the patience of CCP leaders. In the autumn of 2019, Vice Premier Han Zheng was assigned overall charge of Hong Kong affairs by the Central Government (Vines 2021, 68). During the first two decades following

the retrocession, it had often been unclear whether decisions by local officials represented attempts to second-guess their mainland overlords, or responses to Beijing *diktat*. But in 2019–2020, it became clear that Beijing was assuming direct command.

Education, already the focus of critical attention from ‘patriotic’ forces, served as a barometer of this shift. In May 2020, the Secondary Diploma Examination for History, set by the Hong Kong Examinations Authority (HKEA), asked students to debate the proposition: ‘Japan did more good than harm to China in the period 1900–1945’. As soon as the question became public, local pro-Beijing and mainland media directed a storm of invective at the HKEA, accusing it of ‘whitewashing’ Japan’s role in early twentieth-century China and fostering ‘traitorous’ thoughts (Cheng 2020). In an unprecedented move, the question was ‘withdrawn’ after students had already sat the examination, with examiners instructed not to mark their answers. Several HKEA officials were subsequently sacked.

The furore surrounding this episode was soon superseded by reaction to the promulgation of the NSL in June 2020. Echoing previous CCP practice in Xinjiang, this mandated ‘National Security Education’. However, the text of the law did not spell out precisely what this would entail; this gradually became apparent over the following year.

Perhaps the most important educational effects of the NSL were indirect, stemming from its influence on the overall political and judicial context and its retrospective application. These included the disqualification from public office of almost all pro-democrat politicians, and arrest of many on NSL-related charges (including colluding with a foreign power and sedition), as well as the closure of the most significant pro-democracy media outlets, most notably the *Apple Daily* newspaper (蘋果日報) in June and Stand Media in December 2021. Their proprietors and senior staff were arrested and imprisoned; many were denied bail. Many civil society groups with a record of opposing the government have meanwhile dissolved or ceased operating, in an attempt to protect their members or staff from prosecution. These include the ‘Hong Kong Alliance in Support of the Patriotic Democratic Movement in China’ (香港市民支援愛國民主運動聯合會) and Amnesty International (Davidson 2021).

University student unions, which played a prominent role in the 2019–2020 protests, were also targeted. As of the end of 2021, most universities had stopped collecting dues for their student unions and many had excluded student union representatives from participation in university governance. In comments on the fate of the HKU student union, the Education Secretary stressed that universities were ‘not above the law’ and must abide by the NSL, while insisting that they had ‘autonomy’ in determining how they would comply with it (EDB 2021a). Meanwhile, mandatory courses in ‘National Security Education’ were introduced (echoing the compulsory Politics courses for university students on the Chinese mainland), along with flag-raising ceremonies and recitations of the national anthem. In Baptist University, the new courses were given an infantilising twist, with contraventions of the NSL illustrated by the cartoon characters ‘Ms Naughty’ (頑皮小姐) and ‘Mr Breach’ (違反先生) (Ming Pao 2021). In 2022, the Government began denying visas to academics recruited by local universities.

The disbandment in August 2021 of the Professional Teachers Union, previously the largest and most powerful local labour union, was the most dramatic signal of the NSL’s chilling effect on the education sector (HKPTU 2021). This followed extensive criticism from mainland media and a number of performative arrests of teachers and publishers accused of threatening ‘national security’. In October 2020, the union attempted to

defend a primary school teacher who was sacked after asking students questions about freedom of speech and independence from China (Sullivan 2020); the following month, a teacher was dismissed after making factual errors in an online class discussing the Opium War (Wong 2020a). In July 2021, five staff at the HK Association of Speech Therapists were arrested by the new 'national security police' on a charge of 'sedition' arising from the publication of a children's picture book, *Guardians of the Sheep Village*, which was portrayed as 'stirring up hatred' against the government (Chau 2021b). By the second half of 2021, the scope for public criticism of the authorities – by teachers or anyone else – had been drastically narrowed.

Securitising the curriculum – national security and 'national education'

It thus took some time for the educational implications of the NSL to become apparent. As late as the autumn of 2020, it seemed that the *Liberal Studies* subject, target of so much angry commentary, might survive in modified form. In September 2020, a government 'Task Force' appointed in 2017 to study the 'optimisation' of the senior secondary curriculum issued its report. Amongst various proposals for revising and 'streamlining' a crowded timetable (CDC 2021), this report recommended retaining *Liberal Studies*, but reducing lesson time, while requiring government vetting of textbooks (SCMP 2020). Shortly afterwards, the pro-Beijing *Our Hong Kong Foundation* issued a report of its own criticising the 'broad' and 'vague' curriculum for *Liberal Studies* and calling for more 'guidance' for teachers, a slimmed-down curriculum and simplified assessment (Kwok and Lau 2020). But neither report advocated abandoning or radically revamping the subject.

However, in November 2021, the government effectively abolished *Liberal Studies*, 'renaming' it *Citizenship and Social Development*, while announcing a drastic revision of the grading system (to a simple 'pass' or 'fail') and a new requirement that students visit the mainland. Chief Executive Carrie Lam declared that the subject 'had deviated from its original objective and should teach students about the development of China, the constitution and the rule of law' (Chan 2020). These reforms went much further than those earlier recommended by the Task Force, the OHKF, or even the *People's Daily*.

The resulting changes (introduced from September 2021) saw class hours cut from 250 to around 150 hours and topics reordered to ensure permeation of 'national education'.⁴ In press releases early in 2021, the EDB portrayed this as a minor curricular tweak, reacting strongly against any who suggested otherwise. On 4 February, an official circular described the 'smearing' of 'national education' as 'political indoctrination' by 'some people' intent on 'politicisation'. It expressed 'regret' that 'individual parties' had engaged in 'a blatant attempt to destroy the trust between teachers and the Bureau'. Such 'parties' sought to 'mislead' the public 'into thinking that national education violates the educational rationale of developing students' critical thinking and multiple-perspective thinking' (EDB 2021b). The bureau insisted that the enhanced focus on Hong Kong's relationship with China and the PRC's constitution was in line with the aims of the original curriculum. But echoing the *People's Daily* op-ed writers, it stressed the need for a solid foundation of 'knowledge' as the basis for critical thinking:

... the proposed theme of 'Hong Kong under "One Country, Two Systems"' enables students to learn about the political structure of Hong Kong, significance of the rule of law and

fundamental rights and duties of Hong Kong residents as stipulated in the Basic Law. Furthermore, in order to help students acquire a broad knowledge base, students are required to study the political structure of the nation in the revised curriculum. These are the essential topics for students to learn, based on the professional judgment of the curriculum committee, and definitely not ‘political indoctrination’. (EDB 2021b)

The EDB’s defensive posture was reinforced in a 9 February Press Release that assigned malign motives to critics of the reforms. The language now took on a new tone: while officials sought to maintain the appearance of consensus, considerations of ‘security’ or public ‘safety’ were invoked to justify a decisive injection of central control. Whilst the Bureau insisted that its decisions were informed by consultations with educational ‘professionals’ and had been ‘positively received by the public’, references to the securitisation of schooling and educational ‘deviations’ were drawn straight from the CCP lexicon:

It is incumbent upon the EDB to safeguard the education profession and protect the interests of students. Therefore, the EDB cannot disregard the long-standing deviations in the implementation of Liberal Studies. Speculating on the EDB’s motive for launching the reform of Liberal Studies and opposing the continuous development of the curriculum of the subject not only disregards the learning interests of students, but also ignores the professional considerations behind the bureau’s optimisation of the subject. (EDB 2021c)

This suggested that, in opposing necessary measures to ‘safeguard’ and ‘protect’ students, critics of the changes might themselves be undermining national security. It was becoming clear that open criticism of any aspect of government policy might now be construed as contravening the NSL.

In a ‘Clear the Air’ Press Release of 5 May 2021, the EDB still insisted on the continuity between *Liberal Studies* and *Citizenship and Social Development* (EDB 2021d), but its case was undermined by the simultaneous elaboration of curricular content for the rebranded subject (EDB 2021g). Implementation of this was to start from September 2021 with the topic ‘Hong Kong under “One Country, Two Systems”’. In ‘supplementary notes’ issued in June, it was explained that other themes would include ‘Our Country since Reform and Opening Up’, ‘Interconnectedness and Interdependence of the Contemporary World’, and a compulsory ‘Mainland Study Tour’ introducing ‘Chinese Culture and Modern Life’ (CDC 2021). To support instruction on ‘Hong Kong under “One Country, Two Systems”’, the Bureau released PowerPoint slides for classroom use that set out authoritative interpretations of constitutional matters. These stated that ‘national security is a matter for the central authorities: no matter in a unitary or federal state, national security legislation is always introduced by the central, not the local government’ (EDB 2021f).

‘National security’ was now permeating both curricular guidelines and the processes through which these were generated, distributed and enforced. One indication of this was that a set of EDB promotional videos on the ‘optimisation’ of the senior secondary curriculum – under cover of which the government had effectively abolished *Liberal Studies* – was made available only in Chinese, and blocked to most viewers outside PRC territory.⁵ More tellingly, on the same day (4 February) that an EDB press release fulminated against those ‘smearing’ national education as ‘political indoctrination’, new guidelines were issued on the implications of the NSL for schools (EDB 2021e; Chan, Ng, and Cheng 2021). These included restrictions on bringing ‘outsiders’ into schools for

discussions of ‘political’ matters and an obligation to report to the police students or teachers suspected of contravening the NSL.

In parallel, schools were required to implement ‘National Security Education’ (NSE) across the curriculum, and at all levels – from age six upwards (Chau 2021a). As in Xinjiang since at least 2018 (Roberts 2021, 231), this has been accompanied in Hong Kong by the institution of a special ‘National Security Education Day’ (first marked on 15 April 2021). NSE is envisaged as a ‘cross-curricular’ theme, consisting of eight ‘strands’ that would ‘permeate’ various subjects. For example, students of Economics will learn about the ‘interdependence’ and ‘economic security’ of Hong Kong and the mainland (Kwan 2021). A ‘Curriculum Framework’ for NSE, issued in May 2021, called for a mixture of ‘classroom teaching and life-wide learning activities’ (EDB 2021g, 1). Previous cross-curricular guidelines – e.g. for civic education in the 1980s and 1990s (Morris and Scott 2003) – had served a largely symbolic function, and been quietly ignored by most teachers. However, the post-NSL political climate suggests a different outcome this time. Both officials and teachers are being required to take oaths of loyalty to the ‘Basic Law’ and the Government (Government of the HKSAR 2021). Education Secretary Kevin Yeung stated that, in implementing NSE, teachers and schools would do best to rely primarily, or solely, on materials provided by the government (EDB 2021h).

The eight ‘strands’ of NSE progress from (1) ‘concepts’ through (2) the place of national security in the constitution and Basic Law; (3) purposes and principles of the NSL; (4) the duty of the HKSAR to safeguard national security; (5) the ‘ultimate responsibility of the Central Government’ for national security; (6) ‘offences that endanger national security’, (7) ‘major domains of national security’ and (8) ‘the relationship between NS and human rights, freedom and the rule of law’ (EDB 2021g). Under each strand, the guidelines specify content or themes appropriate for various age groups, but history and ‘tradition’ are assigned prominent explanatory roles throughout. For example, the notes for Strand 1 (‘concepts’) stipulate that junior secondary students should understand the ‘13 domains of National Security’ (including ‘cultural security’), and ‘have a basic understanding of national and world history and issues (e.g. colonial expansion, regional warfare, terrorism), through which to understand the importance of national security’ (3). Senior secondary students should understand ‘contemporary issues related to NS’ such as ‘economic crises and territorial disputes’.

The NSE curriculum repeatedly underlines the hierarchical relationship of the central and SAR authorities. Strand 3 (‘purposes and principles’) requires junior secondary students to ‘understand the role of the Central Government in different fields, such as development of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area and safeguarding of national security’ and to ‘compare the national security laws of different countries, and understand ... how [the NSL] reflects the modern rule of law’ (7). Invoking international practice serves to normalise national security legislation as a universal attribute of nation-states, while underlining Hong Kong’s destiny within the broader Pearl River Delta region mirrors the narrative purveyed in mainland texts – of ever-closer integration with a solicitous ‘motherland’ rather than outward-facing internationalism (Vickers 2021). Insistence on the legislative supremacy of Beijing also reflects a normative definition of ‘rule of law’ consistent with the mainland’s ‘rule by law’ approach. Under Xi Jinping, ‘law’ has increasingly been invoked to reinforce social order, political discipline and

CCP control, as signalled in the rebranding of the school subject 'Thought and Morals' as 'Morals and Rule of Law'.

Of all the NSE strands, 'Major domains' (Strand 7) receives the most elaboration (EDB 2021g, 12–14). This links the notion of 'ecological security', involving understanding of the 'interdependence of organisms living in different environments and the importance of maintaining ecological balance' (12) with the (implicitly 'organic') unity of the Chinese nation. At upper primary level, teachers are exhorted to 'strengthen understanding of Chinese culture (e.g. traditional festivals, customs, etiquette)', although, ironically, such practices are today more profoundly (and 'organically') rooted in Hong Kong society than on the Communist mainland (Luk 1991). Senior secondary students are required to 'understand the impressive cultural tradition of our country, and recognise that safeguarding cultural security is an important foundation in unifying our country and our people, as well as maintaining the stability of our country' (14).

Strand 8 of NSE requires students to understand that 'rights and freedoms' have 'limits' and come with 'responsibilities', while encouraging them 'to promote others' compliance with the law and respect for the rule of law' (15). This encouragement to monitor other citizens echoes practices common during the Cultural Revolution. Similar calls to monitor transgressions against 'national security' were made by prominent pro-Beijing figures in Hong Kong. During the 2019 protests, former Chief Executive C.Y. Leung established an '803 action' fund to offer rewards for information leading to the arrest of key pro-democracy campaigners; this was extended in 2020 to reward reports of breaches of the NSL by teachers, amongst others (Wong 2020b).

Conclusion

Through fostering fear of surveillance and pervasive mistrust, as much as through direct interventions or sanctions, Hong Kong's 2020 NSL has already had a dramatic effect in constraining freedom of expression within local schools and colleges, as well as in the media and society more broadly. As in other totalitarian contexts, compliance with the government's agenda is promoted through cultivation of a consciousness of *insecurity* amongst educators, encouraging them to self-censor to preserve their positions, livelihoods or even personal liberty. The imperative of compliance is reinforced by the introduction of a performative dimension into 'national education', epitomised by the 'National Security Education Day', compelling schools, colleges and institutions beyond the education sector to participate in a public jamboree of patriotic enthusiasm. All this constitutes the context for the introduction of key curricular changes – the abolition and replacement of *Liberal Studies*, the introduction of NSE, and related revisions to the wider school curriculum – whose full extent and implications are still emerging.

The introduction of the NSL itself, as well as its specific educational provisions, signify how the central PRC authorities will govern Hong Kong. We have moved on decisively from the situation analysed in our 2015 article (Morris and Vickers 2015), with education treated essentially as a local matter, and the authorities sensitive to the need to sustain consensus in a context of fragile legitimacy and a lively civil society. Today, education is front and centre of a concerted programme of 'thought reform' imposed from Beijing. As in Xinjiang and Tibet, this reflects an explicitly assimilationist agenda amounting to internal colonialism, extending beyond education to

incarceration of dissidents, state surveillance and demographic change. One significant difference vis-à-vis the 'ethnic minority' regions is that Hong Kong's possession of any distinctive cultural, let alone political, identity was never acknowledged by the CCP. With denial of identity comes denial of agency: negation of Hong Kong's very existence as a distinctive community, and assertions of its status as just another place where 'Chinese people' happen to live, delegitimize any claims to a communal voice. This is the fundamental aim of the current intensification of 'mainlandisation', which, contrary to the pre-2019 picture painted by Chan, Nachman, and Mok (2021), now involves eliminating rather than blurring the boundaries between Hong Kong and the Mainland through the suppression of all autonomous political participation and expression. But the use of the term 'mainlandisation' rather than 'colonialism' to describe Beijing's attempts to snuff out local distinctiveness risks downplaying the status of the Hongkongese identity that is targeted for eradication. For those in Hong Kong experiencing this reeducation drive, the loss of dignity and agency involved is as real as it is for the Tibetans and Uyghurs, Chinese policy towards whom is increasingly described in 'colonial' terms (Roberts 2020).

The 'securitisation' of education in Hong Kong, bringing it more closely into line with mainland practice, is premised on a narrative of China's insecurity, rooted in stories of colonial victimhood. The relationship between NSE and revisions to the local curriculum for History and Chinese History requires a separate article, but the essential point here relates to the denial of local identity, with Hong Kong's history refracted through the prism of China's 'humiliation' and subsequent, triumphant, CCP-led 'revival'. In December 2021, local schools were for the first time required, like their mainland counterparts, to mark 'Nanjing Massacre Memorial Day' as another occasion for displays of performative patriotism. The EDB had distributed a package of teaching resources, including a video of graphic documentary footage of Japanese soldiers butchering Chinese civilians; in at least one primary school, this was shown to a class of six-year-olds. The horrors of political violence as they relate to Hong Kong might be better taught with reference to the Chinese Civil War, the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution – given that most locals are descended from refugees fleeing those periods of turmoil. But the prime objective of 'mainlandisation' dictates that young Hongkongers be taught to identify with a totemic 'national' calamity inflicted by foreigners, rather than exposed to inconvenient truths about the local past.

Preoccupations with 'coloniality' and 'Western hegemony', increasingly prominent in the field of Comparative Education, threaten to obscure or undermine critique of the repression now facing educators in Hong Kong and China, while distorting understanding of the global politics of education. As Tröhler observes, educational scholars, mesmerised by theories associated with 'globalisation' or 'World Systems' and largely ignorant of history, have shown 'little sensitivity' to 'indications of nationalism', 'now rampant for at least two decades across the globe' (Tröhler 2022, 8); a point driven home by Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The same is true of many of those obsessed with Western 'coloniality'. Many 'critical' scholars assume 'colonialism', 'coloniality', imperialism and the whole apparatus of industrial modernity to be quintessentially 'Western' phenomena. Few treat China itself as a colonial agent or imperial hegemon, rather than simply a victim of foreign imperialism. But a proper regard for history in all its complexity demands that we treat China as *both* past victim *and* present perpetrator of

colonial violence. Another troubling feature of much scholarship in the ‘decolonising’ mode that it tends to focus as much on the ‘positionality’ of a writer as the substance of their argument, so that the views of ‘Western’ scholars on ‘Chinese’ matters are discounted. However, for reasons that will be plain to anyone reading our analysis here of education’s role in Hong Kong’s accelerating re-colonisation, today it sadly falls primarily to those of us based outside China to tell this story.

Notes

1. The NSL came into force in HK on 30th June 2020 and has been extensively deployed. It encompassed crimes of ‘secession’, ‘terrorism’, ‘subversion’ and ‘collusion with foreign forces’, all carrying a maximum penalty of life imprisonment. The law is retrospective, allows trials to be held on the Mainland, is adjudicated by government-selected judges (without reference to juries), and applies to anyone anywhere. The UN commented that law’s vague wording could lead to: ‘discriminatory or arbitrary interpretation or enforcement which could undermine human rights protection’ (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/07/hong-kong-national-security-law-10-things-you-need-to-know/>).
2. <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cgmb//eng/zxhd/t1803797.htm>.
3. This impression was confirmed by the official reports of the ‘Two Sessions’ (annual meetings in Beijing of committees of the National People’s Congress and ‘Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference’). In 2021, these omitted references to ‘One Country, Two Systems’ and ‘Hong Kong People Ruling Hong Kong’, instead using the phrase ‘Patriots Ruling Hong Kong’ (爱国者治港) (HKFP 2021).
4. The Bureau insisted that topics dropped from the curriculum, such as ‘personal development and interpersonal relationships’ or ‘quality of life’, could be covered elsewhere in the school curriculum.
5. Attempts to access this material from the UK were greeted with the message, ‘this content is only available in certain countries’.

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Notes on contributors

Edward Vickers is UNESCO Chair in Education for Peace, Social Justice and Global Citizenship at Kyushu University, Japan, and visiting professor at the Institute of Education, University College London.

Paul Morris is Professor of Comparative Education at the Institute of Education, University College London. Previously he was Dean of the Education Faculty at Hong Kong University and President of the Hong Kong Institute of Education (Now EDUHK).

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