

2017

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Recommended Citation

Spires, Robert. "Hong Kong's Post-Colonial Education Reform: Liberal studies as a lens." *International Journal of Education Reform*, 26:2 (2017): 156-175.

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Hong Kong's Postcolonial Education Reform

Liberal Studies as a Lens

Robert Spires

ABSTRACT: The Hong Kong education system is at a crucial point in its trajectory, and changes to public education also reflect broader social, economic and political changes within Hong Kong and globally. Since the 1997 handover of Hong Kong from British control to China, Hong Kong has struggled to develop its own identity under the One Country, Two Systems premise. One of the compulsory courses in the Hong Kong curriculum known as liberal studies, introduced in 2009, provided a useful departure point for exploring many social tensions occurring in Hong Kong. Exploring education reform through liberal studies explains how these social tensions manifest within education, and how these educational tensions manifest within the broader society. Contemporary trends in Hong Kong's education were examined, including the public exams, the proliferation of shadow education and the expansion of self-financed tertiary education options for Hong Kong students. Tensions in Hong Kong are further explained through the notions of post-colonialism. The liberal studies debate mirror aspects of the broader economic, political, and social tensions as they relate to Hong Kong youth, and Hong Kong society at-large, and this article endeavors to explore these tensions through the lens of liberal studies as it relates to education discourse in Hong Kong. Through a combination of literature review from academic and mainstream sources, the article establishes the groundwork for further empirical work in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the issues and tensions in Hong Kong.

KEYWORDS: Hong Kong, liberal studies, education, youth, China



Education reform has been at the center of Hong Kong's political and social debate recently. As China's central government continues to exert its influence in the Special Administrative Region (SAR), education will likely continue to be at the forefront of political debate and social discourse in Hong Kong. The people of Hong Kong are struggling to maintain and encourage democratic ideals while China increasingly flexes its political muscle in Hong Kong and undermines many of Hong Kong people's desire for political autonomy. However, key to understanding Hong Kong's education reform requires not only examining the issues through a dichotomized notion of a Pro- versus Anti-Beijing schism among Hong Kongers, but

also through the *layered colonality* (Law, 2009) evident in the Hong Kong education discourse where micro-political struggles of individual and disenfranchised group agency exhibit friction with larger political forces. Although this dichotomization may oversimplify the situation in Hong Kong, understanding the Pro-/Anti-Beijing schism illuminates macro-level social tensions occurring as Hong Kong struggles to find its identity beyond the identity imposed by colonial and neo-colonial forces (Said, 1979). Certainly, decentered cosmopolitanisms (Pollock, Bhabha, Breckenridge & Chakrabarty, 2000) of postcolonial Hong Kong are also at play as Hong Kong maneuvers between China's economic juggernaut and the shifting sands of a globalized economy.

Liberal studies, a compulsory course introduced in 2006, has been a critical pivot point in Hong Kong discourse. Despite the more recent addition of liberal studies to the curriculum, liberal arts and civic education in general have been increasingly prevalent since at least the mid-1980s, despite overall colonial policy that discouraged a Hong Kong national identity and political autonomy of colonial subjects (Pearson, 1997; Hung, 2014). As Hung (2014) clarified, both the *General Guidelines for Moral Education* of 1981 and the *Guidelines on Civic Education in Schools* of 1985 made explicit the prohibition of political activity in schools. This anti-political legacy of colonial education was countered in the attempt to establish Moral and National Curriculum, which was unsuccessful (Curriculum Development Council, 2012). Since, pro-democracy contingents in Hong Kong have lauded the importance of encouraging civic understanding and participation in youth, and liberal studies has the potential to be a key factor to this encouragement (Chang, 2014a), although pro-Beijing contingents have condemned the course for being blatantly undermining of China's sovereignty. The push and pull between these two sides is exemplified in Hong Kong's educational reform and liberal studies in particular.

Since the 1997 handover of Hong Kong from the UK to China, educational currents have shifted in the Special Administrative Region. Leading up to 1997, the Hong Kong educational system largely mirrored the British system (Law, 1997). Early in colonial history, much of the education provision came in the form of missionary village schools with a distinctly religious element to their education programs. The education system shifted toward secularism in the mid-19th century, and by this point, distinctions were already clear between schools for local Chinese and the British and Chinese elites (Law 2009). English was favored as the medium of instruction in schools, which disadvantaged Cantonese-speaking local Hong Kong students, and in general, curriculum during the colonial period was oriented toward British culture and away from local knowledge. By the late 20th century, the system had several public exams intended to weed out weaker students at various levels, often in terms of socioeconomic status due to the English emphasis.

The final years of secondary school were reserved for the academic elite, in particular the children of British colonists and their Chinese bourgeoisie counterparts. The majority of students did not progress beyond Form 5 because exams acted as gatekeepers for the final two years of secondary school. Secondary school culminated in the Form 6 and Form 7 years for the academically strong minority, where students specialized in their coursework, and this coursework, as well as exam results at the end of Form 7 determined your access to a university, and specifically a program, or course.

After 1997, there was a distinct shift away from the British system, at least in public educational debate. This shift may have been the result of Hong Kong's political and social distancing from its colonial heritage, and a concerted effort began to broaden the secondary curriculum akin to the American education system. However, more likely attributed to Hong Kong's positioning as a service-based and knowledge-based economy and economic mediator between east and west, this shift represented Hong Kong's need for a population better prepared for functioning in the global marketplace as a service-based and knowledge-based economic system (Fisher, 2012; Kennedy, Fok & Chan, 2006).

This article argues that some of the elements woven into liberal studies, particularly the focus on critical thinking about social issues, have the potential to improve the situation for the younger generation and encourage a more democratic political process. Liberal studies is certainly not a cure-all and the potentially useful elements could easily be undermined and destroyed. Thinking about their current situation in terms of social issues, environmental issues, political issues, technological issues, economic issues, and personal issues (all of which are a part of the liberal studies curriculum) encourages a generation of youth that can think about, and are positioned to better solve some of society's biggest problems with praxis, in the sense of informed action. This article attempts to establish the groundwork necessary for more in-depth empirical work in order to explore the connections between Hong Kong postcolonial education reform, liberal studies, and the economic, political, social, and cultural tensions in contemporary Hong Kong. This work contributes to the sparse literature on Hong Kong education's place in the discourse on broader issues in Hong Kong. Through a combination of literature review from academic and mainstream sources, this article seeks to establish a foundation for understanding several key elements: trends in Hong Kong education, the liberal studies course and its place in the curriculum, the historico-educational context of contemporary Hong Kong, and important contributions from the field of postcolonial studies (Childs & Williams, 1997). To be clear, this article attempts to take a critical view of Hong Kong education reform. Although an element of this argument is related to the struggle between traditional idealistic teacher-centered ideological orientations and student-centered constructivist and humanistic ideological orientations, this is not the key element of the article's

argument. What is important in this argument is liberal studies' focus on critical thinking and problem-solving skills that merges academic knowledge about the society with higher-order thinking. This article subscribes to neither the idealist orientation of the Aristotelian tradition nor the constructivist orientation of the humanistic perspective. Further, liberal studies is posited as a potential middle way between a purely idealist teacher-centered traditional orientation, which is a key feature of Hong Kong education, and a constructivist student-centered orientation. Current liberal studies curriculum encourages critical thinking as well as incorporates academic elements from the social sciences and is neither designed nor implemented as purely constructivist. Students must learn and are assessed with the national exam on a set of curricular content. In addition, students are encouraged to learn about and become more active participants in their communities as well as select topics of interest. Critical thinking and problem-solving, not only about academic topics like how to solve an equation or how to construct an essay from a reading passage but on actual social issues present in the society today, are essential for democracy and it is this key feature of liberal studies that offers promise in regard to democratic ways of thinking and acting.

Hong Kong being a post-industrial society dependent on service sectors needs to be able to function in the rapidly changing globalized world. This is not only an economic stance, although economics certainly play a role. Hong Kong's economy and society were more diversified economically during the colonial period because of the larger industrial sector and its unique predicament as a gateway to a closed China. However, contemporary Hong Kong has no such advantage as a broker for China. Hong Kong does still have a dwindling competitive advantage as a safer place for investors to store and grow wealth that they accrued on the mainland away from the oversight of the central government. Hong Kong also remains an easier place to start up a business due to low corporate taxes and little interference from the government in business affairs. Socially, the old education structure of having tertiary education reserved for the local elites (whether academically elite through performance on exams or socioeconomically due to social class) and colonial elites, while the bulk of the population goes directly into the workforce, is outdated. In order to adjust to this leveling and flattening of the economy and society, contemporary Hong Kong students need critical thinking and problem-solving skills in order to adapt to social and economic changes in Hong Kong. The article will conclude by arguing for the current and continued usefulness of liberal studies as a lens for further exploration of apparent issues.

Trends in Hong Kong Education

In order to understand the trends in Hong Kong education reform, it is important to discuss several key topics: exams, tutorials, and self-financing

tertiary education. Exams remain a driving force behind educational decisions as well as the abundance of tutorial centers across Hong Kong. This dependence on for-profit avenues for improving educational options has also spilled over into for-profit higher education, which addresses the large numbers of students who are not offered university placements, yet desire further education.

Exams

Hong Kong public schools are framed and guided by a standardized exam system for transition from primary to secondary education and from secondary to tertiary education. Students take public exams called the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) exams (Law, 2007). These exams are used to determine a student's eligibility to attend a university. Based on the student's scores on the four compulsory subjects (Chinese language, English language, mathematics, liberal studies) and the student's electives, which are entered into the JUPAS system, students are then offered acceptance to a specific university and discipline program according to the ranking that the student has placed these programs in the system. Because the results of the exams are not released to the students until mid-July, the students are allowed a short window of time on the JUPAS system, to go back in and rearrange the ranking of their university and program choices based on their actual exam scores (rather than their initial hopes and interests). This mad scramble in July is a particularly tense and emotional time for Hong Kong students (Cheung, 2015a, b) as less than 20% of the students taking the exams will be accepted to public undergraduate university programs (Cheung, 2015a). The pressure on youth to perform well on HKDSE exams has serious emotional effects on the youth including suicide (Cheung, 2015b), particularly with the large numbers who are not accepted into public universities (Cheung, 2015a; Wu, 2013). Despite a shift in thinking about education, Hong Kong's system still relies heavily on the HKDSE exams as the primary means of evaluating students' success, as well as access to tertiary education. This reliance on exams has created an environment where the exam score is seen as more important than the learning it should represent (Yeung, 2015). Although some schools may attempt to break from a traditional teacher-centered model, the system's heavy reliance on exams as gatekeepers to secondary and tertiary education limits the flexibility of teachers, public schools, and curricular choices. Hong Kong's exam system is rooted in the Chinese imperial legacy of civil service exams. These examinations, though on the surface appear a key feature of a pure meritocracy, actually further segregate elites from lower classes due to structural barriers (Elman, 2013). However, the Hong Kong education system and population continue to perpetuate the importance of, and the reliance on, national examinations. This phenomenon has exacerbated the private tutorial services industry, also known as *shadow education*.

Shadow Education

Shadow education refers to private tutorial services, which have proliferated throughout contemporary Hong Kong. Exam pressures have also encouraged a high demand for tutors, who boast of their ability to improve students' exam scores, and often show students "vital clues" and test-taking tricks to game the exam system (Lai, 2012b). Tutorial companies have become big business in Hong Kong, and popular *star tutors*, as they are often referred to by students, in their own literature, and in the media, (Tsoi, 2013) draw thousands of students from across Hong Kong (Chang, 2014b; Tsoi, 2014). The tutorial industry made HK \$2.7 billion in the 2014–2015 academic year alone (Chang, 2014b). The star tutors and their successful companies advertise with large billboards throughout the city, advertisement campaigns on city buses and subway stations showing the tutors posing with pop-stars and other celebrities, and slogans like "market leader" (Chang, 2014b). The prominence of star tutor marketing campaigns is indicative of the consumer-oriented character that has taken hold in Hong Kong education. The growth of *shadow education* (Bray, 2009; 2014), the term used by scholars to refer to private tutoring, undermines Hong Kong public school education and is structurally fueled by the HKDSE and JUPAS systems.

Self-Financed Tertiary Education

Exam reliance also fuels the rapidly expanding for-profit, or self-financed, tertiary education sector, in addition to the publicly funded higher education institutions, targeting the 80% of the students who are not accepted to university programs. The private, self-funded programs are accessible outside the JUPAS system. For-profit schools come in several forms, including higher diplomas, associates degrees, and top-up degrees. Higher diplomas are one- to two-year non-degree programs intended to train students in specific technical and vocational skills. Associate degrees are typically two-year degrees in more general subjects intended as both professional training and foundational coursework for further tertiary study. Finally, top-up degrees are self-financed bachelor's degrees designed for students from the associate degree programs, and in some cases higher diploma, to transfer at least some of their coursework to be an applied undergraduate degree. These programs are criticized for their high prices, and inconsistency in program quality. Confusion about the differences between higher diplomas and associate degrees has become problematic for job-seekers in the private sector as many employers struggle to discern the advantages and skills that these low-prestige programs provide (Lo, Yung & Fang, 2015). Misconceptions abound in Hong Kong about the status of private higher education, and these misconceptions perpetuate social stigma of these students (Qianting, 2015). Finally, many have complained that the high costs of the programs do not

match the potential returns of the occupations that they prepare students for (Lo, Yung & Fang, 2015).

What Do These Trends Mean for Hong Kong Students?

The shift in Hong Kong's curriculum to a more comprehensive and broad curriculum has not brought about an equivocal shift in the emphasis on national exam results for university admission. National exams in Hong Kong are considered the most important, if not the sole, deciding factor for university admission which has institutionalized a rabid exam tutoring industry. In Hong Kong, so-called *star tutors* (Tsoi, 2013) and their extensive tutorial businesses are virtual educational celebrities with slick advertisements throughout the city on buses, in the subways, on buildings and billboards, and in print and online media. Tutorial corporations often have student clienteles numbering in the tens of thousands and promise high pass rates on public exams, high rates of university entrance, and the ability to analyze prior public exam questions to predict future tests using sophisticated statistical software. In-person tutoring sessions fetch a premium fee, and *star tutors* video broadcast their lectures to remote classrooms throughout Hong Kong. The converging forces of technology, the capitalist pursuit of the business of education, and the stark reality of test performance as sole measure for university entrance (which disadvantaged students see as the only door to upward mobility) has created a situation where gaming the system is an accepted and integral part of the education system, and the expansion of for-profit higher education is the next logical step.

With these issues in mind, we take up the question of curriculum reform and the adaptation of the Hong Kong education system to global trends in education. Without a matching of curricular shifts to the broader and deeper structural expectations of the society, specifically the emphasis on testing and the system of university entrance, curricular innovations will likely fall short of their intended goals. The diversity of electives in public secondary schools in Hong Kong is one such promising innovation. The widening of focus to incorporate a variety of youth talents and interests is a hopeful trend. However, the relatively small number of students who take these newly offered courses and the associated exams, as compared to the more traditionally popular business courses, the reality is more disheartening. Students are not participating in these diverse offerings on a large scale. Hong Kong must have an accompanying shift of social attitudes and political will toward the valuation of a variety of skills, knowledge and talents, as well as a more nuanced, varied, and comprehensive system of university admission moving away from reliance on public exams, in order for curricular changes to result in social changes.

Conversely, there are also important drawbacks to a shift from a traditional approach to a constructivist approach to education focused on critical thinking and problem-solving, as opposed to rote memorization. In particular would be the local preference for a more traditional, teacher-centered mode

of education (Biggs, 1996). As Biggs (1996) noted, Hong Kong students typically prefer teacher-centered modes “despite the examination pressures and associated reproductive teaching/learning strategies, and the almost exclusive reliance on expository teaching in large classes, with their low level cognitive goals” (p. 151). This calls into question whether these preferences are based on familiarity. However, Biggs (1993) argued that this preference was due to stable ways of managing learning in an existing and ongoing system. Further, detractors argue that constructivist approaches can devolve into moral relativism in which no knowledge is given precedence over any other knowledge (Rosenberg, 2015). In order to better understand how liberal studies is situated within these conflicting paradigms, an overview of how liberal studies fits within social and political currents, as well as Hong Kong education reform and the broader Asian educational context, follows.

Liberal Studies

Introduced in 2003 and mandated as compulsory in 2009, liberal studies is a combination of social sciences and critical thinking, and it has become a hotly debated topic in recent discourse (Tsoi, 2014). Liberal studies encompasses three main components: self and personal development; society and culture; and science, technology, and environment (Cheung, 2014). The liberal studies course allows students to explore contemporary political and social issues in Hong Kong and conduct small-scale research projects on topics of interest.

After the Umbrella Movement student protests in Hong Kong in 2014, pro-China leaders have criticized the course as being a key cause of youth unrest and dissent. In particular, some liberal studies teachers have been criticized for publically promoting their support of the student pro-democracy movement in classrooms and accused of giving preferential treatment to politically active students in their courses (Tsoi, 2014). Other leaders have lauded the importance of liberal studies as “an educational means to help students liberate their minds from bigotry, falsehood, and muddled thinking, and their hearts from social apathy” (Cheung, 2014). A professional organization called the Hong Kong Liberal Studies Teachers’ Association (2016) has even formed to disseminate liberal studies—related information, news, and advocacy activities in Hong Kong.

Proponents of liberal studies continue to promote the value of the subject, and its importance as a compulsory subject, particularly in terms of its value as a catalyst for democracy. Many scholars of democratic political theory agree that democracy and education go hand-in-hand, although this assumption has been challenged (Hochschild, 2010). Democracies certainly depend on involved and active citizenry, and liberal studies certainly plays a role in encouraging active engagement in society. Scholars have also established the importance of critical thinking in citizenry for the proper functioning of a democracy (Weinstein, 1991).

Liberal Studies and Democracy

Liberal studies has the potential to be an important component in moving Hong Kong toward a more democratic system, despite Hong Kong's markedly undemocratic past as a colonial possession, and through its transition to its new position as part of an authoritarian China. Liberal studies also offers a useful focal point from which to explore whether a democratization process is occurring in Hong Kong, and if it is indeed occurring, how is it manifesting in the public discourse as well as educational reform. The course's focus on understanding social issues in Hong Kong and China, as well as the emphasis on self-awareness and development are promising from a democratic perspective, as Bullock stated, "Hong Kong's liberal studies classes may represent the beginning of a new age for the Chinese as a whole" (2015). Although Bullock may be overstating the importance of the course as it currently stands, these sentiments echo the potential benefits specific elements of the curriculum offer.

A new age for the Chinese, however, may not benefit the Hong Kongers specifically, if it is largely oriented toward mainland interests and an overriding central government authority. The real long-term impacts of liberal studies and recent education reforms remain to be seen in terms of Hong Kong's democratization and concrete results for the disenfranchised. Whether we are seeing a process of democratization or seeing a fleeting hiccup in the shift from a devaluing of the hierarchical Euro-centric colonial ways of thinking and being toward the neo-colonization by mainland imperial economic and social forces (Memmi, 1965), this article argues that liberal studies represents a desire for a more democratic system among the populous as well as some potential strategies for achieving this goal. Since the 1997 handover, the ghosts of the colonial mechanisms were taken up by the Beijing regime, not the least of which was the education system. The remnants of colonial policy have been retooled with a façade of autonomy which hide the maintenance of the positions of the colonial elite and their mainland counterparts. The Beijing regime's intention was certainly to democratize neither the Hong Kong education system, nor the Special Administrative Region on the whole, despite the Hong Kong populace's political momentum and numerous protests and demonstrations. Liberal studies does, however, represent one of many half-hearted concessions toward Hong Kong's imagined sovereignty, while economic power players continued shoring up their economic privilege behind the scenes.

Political and social polarization over curriculum has increased particularly since Beijing's attempts at establishing a patriotic national curriculum in 2012 (Liu, 2012) and the Hong Kong population has become more aware of mainland influence in education reform. Proposed in 2012 and intended to be implemented in 2013 by the Hong Kong government, the patriotic pro-China curriculum was retracted after large-scale protests throughout Hong

Kong (Liu, 2012). In the summer of 2012, national curriculum protests also coincided with demonstrations in remembrance of the Tiananmen Square events of 1989, and the swearing in of Hong Kong's chief executive C. Y. Leung who was also backed by Beijing's central government, and whose administration also introduced the national curriculum idea (Lau, 2012), illustrating the integral part that the public school curriculum plays in political and social currents in Hong Kong. Hong Kong citizens have increasingly identified more as Hong Kongers than Chinese since the mid-2000s and this shift in identity adds to the polarization on the educational issues (Denyer, 2014). Student groups, such as Scholarism led by students such as Joshua Wong, a teenage key activist in the 2012 and 2014 protests, have been integral to mobilizing the Hong Kong population to resist: national curriculum, Beijing-controlled elections, and pressure to dismantle liberal studies (Moyer, 2014). The distinctly youthful demographics of anti-China demonstrations further draw Beijing's attention to liberal studies as a component of social unrest, although the direct connection between youth protests and liberal studies has yet to be established.

Liberal Studies and China

Conflict between pro-Beijing supporters of a more patriotic, China-centered curriculum, and pan-democratic supporters of liberal studies has reached a fever pitch in the media, as exemplified in the statement by Ng Shun-wing of the Hong Kong Institute of Education, "In Hong Kong, we teach critical thinking, not like in China, where they teach by indoctrination and memorizing" (Steger, 2015). Wong Chi Man of the National Education Services Centre countered this sentiment, stating "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" (Lai, 2012a). Potent vitriolic language has been pointed at the pan-democratic youth movements in Hong Kong, including referring to protesters as "political rogues" (Lau, 2013). Government advisor Chen Zuo'er described pro-democracy education officials as "noxious weeds," blamed them for educational and social issues, and called for their eradication (Waisen, 2015). Mainland media are demonizing teachers and professors as "blindly inculcated the young with Western ideas like universal values and democracy" (Denyer, 2014). Youth leader, Joshua Wong, argued, "We don't want the next generation of Hong Kong people to be brain-washed" (Lai, 2012a). Jiang Yudui of the China Civic Education Promotion Association countered that sentiment when he stated "A brain needs washing if there is a problem, just as clothes need washing if they're dirty, and a kidney needs washing if it's sick" (Lau, 2012). The British colonial administration did not benefit from a populous educated to question the status quo, and neither does the Beijing regime. Therefore, the designation of liberal studies as a mechanism to encourage critical thinking among the youth could not have

been the intention of this aspect of the curriculum, at least from a mainland central government standpoint.

Liberal studies, as it has developed of late, illustrates friction between broader political tensions, specifically in terms of Hong Kong anxiety over Beijing's use of education to increase influence in the Special Administrative Region, and Hong Kong's desire for autonomy and global competitiveness (Bullock, 2014; Cheung, 2014; Denyer, 2014; Ip, 2015; Steger, 2015; Tam, 2016; Zhao, 2014). As Ip described, "teachers had used the subject as a vehicle for spreading their political beliefs, while defenders argued that the subject had encouraged students to be livelier, more politically aware and more capable of independent thinking" (2015), illustrating the benefits and anxieties associated with liberal studies in the popular psyche. Although liberal studies was a response to complaints that Hong Kong's public school curriculum focused too much on rote learning, detractors claim that the subject is superficial and biased against the mainland (Ip, 2015). One former director of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office described problems in Hong Kong's education as filled with "seeds of bitter melon and poisonous beans" (Steger, 2015), illustrating that some pro-mainland Hong Kong contingents hold the notion that Hong Kong's education system is divisive and instilling anti-mainland sentiments in students (Steger, 2015; Zhao, 2014). Mainland officials have even referred to anti-mainland contingents in the Hong Kong education system as "noxious weeds" (Waisen, 2015). Powerful responses toward these aspects of the Hong Kong education system, and particularly liberal studies, are also signs of the potentially powerful impact of liberal studies, the challenge it may represent to the status quo, and its important role as a curricular representation of bigger conflicts between Chinese and democratic ideologies. Coupled with other social currents running counter to the Beijing regime's claims at political legitimacy in Hong Kong, liberal studies is part of an aggregate of challenges to mainland authority, and hence likely to come under further attack.

Liberal Studies and the Growth of Liberal Arts in Asia

The introduction of liberal studies in Hong Kong's k-12 curriculum mirrors a larger trend and longer tradition throughout Asia, particularly in higher education, toward a more liberal arts-focused curriculum (Fisher, 2012). Liberal arts have been increasingly added to university programs in South Korea, Singapore, and Japan for years, and more recently in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and even in mainland China (Fisher, 2012). This shift toward liberal arts is, in part, a response to the success and reputation of western universities, particularly in the United States, and a method for providing local students more opportunity, ease, and access into foreign universities. The shift is also part of a reaction to the growing importance of the knowledge economy in international business, and the processes of globalization. However, the

increase in liberal arts in Asian universities is not without push-back from political conservatives, such as legislators in Japan who targeted humanities programs at Japanese universities (Takahama & Kobayashi, 2015). Also in Japan in 2015, students protested recent security legislation put forward by Japan's prime minister Abe, and criticized the policy as anti-democratic (Kingston, 2015). The economic anxieties over rapidly changing job markets and the knowledge economy fuel the conflict over liberal arts in education worldwide. Components of the liberal studies curriculum are highly useful and potentially effective at improving social mobility and economically disadvantaged youth's competitiveness in the job market, as well as in further academic study. However, these same components of liberal arts are also potentially disturbing of the status quo and conventional modes of power.

Historico-Educational Context

Liberal studies curriculum arose from historical circumstances in Hong Kong's educational context based on colonial legacy and the neo-colonial reality of the post-1997 handover. During the British colonial period, education was largely based on the British educational system, was largely apolitical and general in nature (Evans, 2008), and was intended to maintain colonial legitimacy (Sweeting & Vickers, 2007), spread Western ideals (Evans, 2008), and benefit colonial interests (Sweeting & Vickers, 2007; Pennycook, 1998). Originally, education in Hong Kong was loosely organized to favor the British elite economically, linguistically, and culturally (Evans, 2008). Although the British colonial authorities took a hands-off approach to Hong Kong education initially, a shift occurred in education for the Chinese colonial subjects after tensions in the early 20th century (particularly related to the Chinese Revolution of 1911 and labor strikes in the 1920s) were designed for assimilation into the British way of life, and to the benefit of colonial business interests (Sweeting & Vickers, 2007). During the economic expansion of Hong Kong in the 1960s and 1970s, coupled with the influx of mainland immigrants during China's Cultural Revolution, Hong Kong education expanded to match its growing needs for a technically skilled workforce. Since this period, Hong Kong's curriculum has become decidedly more politically oriented, a trend that was even further accelerated after the 1997 handover (Deng, 2009).

Liberal studies was designed specifically to address the growing political awareness of the Hong Kong population and provide a contextualization of Hong Kong society within global economic, political, and social realities (Deng, 2009). The official description of the subject by the Hong Kong Education Bureau is as follows: "Liberal Studies aims to broaden students' knowledge base and enhance their social awareness through the study of a wide range of issues" (Hkedcity, 2014, p. 1). The Education Bureau also described that the broader social purpose of liberal studies is to create

“informed, rational and responsible citizens of the local, national and global community” (Deng, 2009, p. 588). The implementation of the subject as a compulsory subject coincided with the shift from the structure of lower and upper secondary systems that matched the British O-levels and A-levels, to the new 3–3–4 system consisting of 6 years of secondary and 4 years of undergraduate education. This new system, introduced in 2000 and fully implemented in 2009 more closely mirrors the US structure (Deng, 2009) and presents a marked step away from the colonial legacy. Curiously, the liberal studies course was introduced by a Beijing-controlled regime which may have been an attempt by the central government to assure Hong Kong parents that their children would have a decidedly different education than students on the mainland. Alternatively, pro-Beijing supporters may see liberal studies as a way to obfuscate larger authoritarian trends in policy, and an attempt to concede minor curricular compromises while pressing for broader scale mainland-oriented shifts.

Post-Colonialism

Contributions from postcolonial studies offer useful theoretical constructs for the educational and social issues occurring in contemporary Hong Kong (Childs, & Williams, 1997; Said, 1979). As Hong Kong continues to struggle with its identity as a former British colony, and a current Special Administrative Region of China under the One Country, Two Systems program (Sang, 2009), postcolonial theory helps inform us of the broader implications of Hong Kong’s educational reform as tensions between postcolonial identities increase (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2005). Hong Kong fluctuates between a desire to exert political autonomy and a reality of economic dependence on China, as well as the West. Hong Kong’s strategic location in relation to the mainland is what drew the British in the first place, a precarious predicament still, due to Hong Kong’s proximity to major manufacturing centers in Guangzhou, Foshan, Shenzhen, and other parts of Southern China. What Hong Kong lost in terms of manufacturing jobs to the opening of China’s economy to the wider world, Hong Kong gained as a broker, and financial center, of Asian trade. Hong Kong’s relative advantage with the China market due to proximity is diminishing because neo-liberal economic processes are flattening the playing field in China (Friedman, 2006). China’s development of its own mainland financial centers is anxiety provoking in Hong Kong as a threat to its previous competitive advantage. The postcolonial situation of Hong Kong is also a neo-colonial situation in regard to China (Memmi, 1965). Hong Kong is increasingly less important to China as a broker of its goods, and less important to the rest of the world as an access point to China (Durfee, 2009). These realities create pressure in Hong Kong to align more concretely with China’s rule of law. China has made it clear that it wants to develop Shanghai as a financial center by 2020, and shift its reliance on Hong

Kong for foreign banking and investment (Entrepreneur, 2010; Durfee, 2009). Hong Kong can only maintain its niche if it can remain flexible, adaptable and innovative in the world of finance and business incubation in the shadow of China's heavier and slower hand.

Hybridity

The long-lasting effects of being a European colony, coupled with Hong Kong's unique situation as a part, yet separate from China (Sang, 2009), is better understood through postcolonial theory's concept of *hybridity* (Bhabha, 1994), or a de-essentialized understanding of culture in postcolonial society as a malleable and subjective notion that moves beyond simple colonizer/colonized simplification. The notion of hybridity informs the understanding of the combination of influences on Hong Kong thought and politics (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2005). Pollock, Bhabha, Breckenridge, and Chakrabarty's (2000) notion of *decentered cosmopolitanism* is also particularly useful in understanding the myriad influences in contemporary Hong Kong as a world city despite Beijing bringing it back into the Chinese fold. The fluidity of Hong Kong culture and economics in relation to globalization is not only a sign of the ghosts of colonial rule as Hong Kong's economy is precariously perched in the current hegemonic influence of China, but also the Hong Kong people's vibrant international cosmopolitan culture poised for the global financial market. Hybridity in Hong Kong must both be problematized as a result of powerful hegemonic economic interests and influences, yet also seen as an effective social adaptation strategy of a highly transcultural capitalistic society. Hong Kong and its education system are at once contending with neo-imperialistic pressures from China's central government, the rapidly changing global economy, while simultaneously exerting its own autonomy over educational and social trajectories. This combination of postcolonial forces and identities are what Law (2009) calls layered coloniality. This layered coloniality is a mixture of tensions between what is imposed by outside social, economic, and political forces, and the expressing of a yearning for agency and sovereignty. Liberal studies is precariously situated at the crux of these tensions, which helps us to understand the identity of today's Hong Kong youth. Race, ethnicity, and culture are aspects of the hybridity of Hong Kong youth. In terms of the Chinese youth, mainlanders bring mainland culture to the more cosmopolitan and westernized Hong Kong, while adopting and adapting to the global influences in Hong Kong. Local Hong Kong youth also adapt to the growing mainland influence, and its advantages. South Asian culture also impacts the hybridity of the Hong Kong youth as the lingering influence of British colonialism and its subjects from abroad continually incorporate their culture into the Hong Kong landscape.

The emphasis on English worldwide as a language of business converged in Hong Kong with the British colonial legacy and English remains an essential

aspect of social mobility within Hong Kong society. The major commercial firms in Hong Kong's dominant finance and trade sectors conduct much of their business in English, and daily office interactions, as well as most business meetings, are largely English based. Also, with the rapidly growing attention on China's markets, Mandarin (or Putonghua) has quickly eclipsed Cantonese as the preferred Chinese language of business. Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong youth are at a double disadvantage social mobility-wise if they can speak neither fluently. With the rise in mainland Chinese immigrants to Hong Kong, the competition for prestigious opportunities and positions is intensified further. How language issues play out in educational reform in Hong Kong in the coming years may also reflect the struggle between China and the English-speaking Western world.

Liberal Studies as a Lens for Understanding Hong Kong Tensions

Liberal studies is also useful in helping to understand larger economic tensions in Hong Kong. Hong Kong is a cultural and economic crossroads, uniquely situated between the Chinese economic behemoth, and the increasingly neo-liberal economic policies driving globalization. Within these converging forces are serious concerns within Hong Kong that the younger generation be properly prepared for the uncertain economic future. Hong Kong's concerns are echoed worldwide, and education systems are grappling with myriad ways to address these concerns. The proliferation of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) curriculum in Hong Kong (Legislative Council Panel on Education, 2015) exemplifies society's desire for a technically skilled workforce in order to compete globally in highly skilled industries and is mirrored across the Western world. Contrastingly, liberal studies exemplifies Hong Kong's desire for a flexible and critically thinking populous able to quickly adapt to the rapid social and economic changes in the global landscape. Hong Kong must balance these two curricular orientations in educational reform. Technical skills become swiftly outdated and jobs become outsourced over time to less-developed countries as those technical skills are disseminated or replaced by machines. Liberal studies is uniquely situated to encourage the adaptability and proactive approaches necessary for the younger generation as they enter the workforce and contend with the emerging global workplace.

Liberal studies is useful to better understand political tensions in Hong Kong as well. Hong Kong youth are also growing up in a politically uncertain era. Although the colonial elites have maintained some power positionality, power concessions were made to mainland elites as well. Colonial connections to Britain have become more diffuse while mainland connections have been strengthened. Aligning with the earlier colonial connections has uncertain consequences, and full absorption into the Chinese fold has uncertain consequences as well. The authoritarian rule of the Beijing central

government sits in stark contrast to the laissez-faire open-for-business approach to foreign investment that characterized the years leading up to the handover. After the defeat of the national curriculum proposals put forth by pro-Beijing contingents in the Legislative Council, it was clear that the Hong Kong/Beijing relationship remains tentative and that a substantial contingent of the Hong Kong people does not wish to be fully integrated into China, at least ideologically. Liberal studies is an important part of a curricular orientation distinctly positioned to promote democratic ideals in Hong Kong, in spite of its shift from colonial rule to possession by China.

Finally, liberal studies is useful for understanding the larger social and cultural tensions in Hong Kong. Racism and discrimination toward mainlanders continue in Hong Kong despite Hong Kong's reliance on mainlanders in the tourism sector. Depending on how liberal studies is implemented in classrooms, the curriculum is promising in regard to facilitating productive conversation among youth about the social factors inflaming antagonistic sentiments. If implemented thoughtfully and oriented toward critical thinking, elements of the liberal studies curriculum have potential to widen youth's perspectives from anger and frustration pointed toward individuals to broader understanding of the social forces at work. Conversely, if implemented in a fashion akin to the proposed national curriculum of 2012, liberal studies also has the potential to fuel negativity toward mainlanders. Liberal studies can even act as a tool to help youth appreciate the diversity in Hong Kong, the open cosmopolitan atmosphere that made Hong Kong such an attractive environment for business, and the benefits of democratic ideals in maintaining an adaptive society.

In conclusion, this study endeavored to explore the economic, political, social, and cultural tensions occurring in contemporary Hong Kong, as well as the interplay between these tensions within Hong Kong education reform, specifically liberal studies. The article focused on establishing the groundwork needed in order to conduct more empirical work on this topic. Further research is necessary, using this work as a theoretical foundation, in order to understand the perceptions among the Hong Kong populous regarding liberal studies, especially the youth, their parents, and educators, and their views of the course's role in these economic, political, social, and cultural tensions. 

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