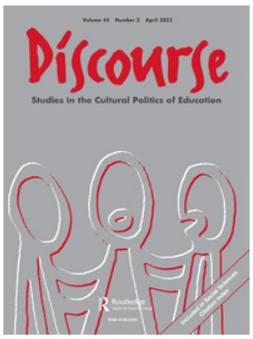

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Departing from hybridity: higher education development and university governance in postcolonial Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explain the path of higher education development and governance in (post-colonial) Hong Kong in light of the concept of hybridity. The paper begins with a historical review, delineating the establishment of major universities in Hong Kong, thereby illustrating how hybridity informs the trajectory of higher education development in the city. Considering the tensions and conflicts that emerged during the post-colonial transition and underlining the influences of managerialism and political activism, the paper draws on data from interviews with university council members and student leaders to outline the issues on university governance in Hong Kong. This paper argues that the response of the Chinese central government to the social unrest in the city represents a re-Sinification process that redefines the idea of the university in postcolonial Hong Kong.

KEYWORDS

Hybridity; university governance; re-Sinification; political culture; Hong Kong

Introduction

The notion of hybridity is significant in understanding the idea of the university in East Asia, as contemporary higher education (HE) institutions and systems in the region are the products of the synthesis of Eastern and Western elements (Altbach, 1989; Hayhoe, 1994). Suggesting that hybridity in HE emerged as a blend of British colonialism and Chinese nationalism in the early colonial years (Law, 2009) and as an embodiment of political ambiguity during the Cold War (Wong, 2005), this paper begins with a historical review of HE development in Hong Kong. The historical review reveals how Hong Kong's HE represents political and cultural proximity to China and the West, thereby constructing a paradigm of hybridity during the colonial period (Lo, Lee, & Abdrasheva, 2022). This form of hybridity was preserved and evolved into a cosmopolitan model after 1997 (Postiglione, 2013), which not only inherited the colonial legacy but also emphasised the importance of international connectivity in the context of globalisation.

Nevertheless, given the rapid evolution of the political economy, tensions and conflicts emerged, resulting in political polarisation in postcolonial Hong Kong. Such changes

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significantly influenced HE governance in the city and led to questions about the sustainability of the hybrid model. Drawing on 40 semi-structured interviews with university council members and student leaders, this paper delineates the existing model of university governance, underlining managerialism and political neutrality, and the challenges that emerged within the context of the rise of localism and political activism. The paper considers the social movements, particularly the 2019 protests, and assertive response of the Chinese central government as a watershed in Hong Kong's HE development. Furthermore, the paper argues that the assertive actions denote a re-Sinification process that redefines the idea of the university in postcolonial Hong Kong.

Hybridisation as a trajectory

Hong Kong has long positioned and branded itself as a place where East meets West. This East-meets-West approach constitutes a normative belief that underpins the identities and behaviours of the individuals and institutions in the city as well as its HE (Lo, 2020). Historically, Hong Kong is seen as a territory that exemplifies a dual sense of 'frontier' (Duara, 2016), which reveals the geographical implications of the city as a portal to economic and security imperatives and liminal nature of the territory, characterised by indeterminacy and the absence of a relatively fixed identity. These senses of frontier illustrate Hong Kong's essence as the intersection of China with the West. Its geographical location and autonomous status during the colonial period allow the city to have a certain degree of political ambiguity, enabling its exceptional political and legal arrangements and facilitating its development of international networks (Cheung, 2021; Richard, 1997; Tang, 1993).

This dual sense of frontier, which emphasises Hong Kong's political and cultural proximity to China and the Western world, resonates with the concept of hybridity stressed in postcolonial theory. Specifically, postcolonial theorists see hybridity as a mixture and use it to demonstrate the dynamic and porous nature of cultural and social boundaries. As a theoretical perspective, hybridity entails the assumption of cultural purity and essentialism, as it constitutes a form of mixing. Thus, it can be used as an analytical tool to examine the contested nature of identity and diverse ways of imagining the self and the other in the processes of colonisation, decolonisation and globalisation (Marotta, 2020; Pieterse, 2020). From this theoretical perspective, Hong Kong provides a 'third space' where cultures converge and appropriate one another, generating a unique mix of Chineseness (i.e. the meaning of being Chinese) and international qualities (Chan, 2012). On the one hand, Hong Kong represents a geopolitical and cultural liminal space where novel ideas and practices can be created through combinations of differences (Duara, 2016). On the other hand, the ideas of indeterminacy and contested identity embedded in hybridity explain the political conflicts between Hong Kong's localism (featured by Western cosmopolitan values and identity) and the essentialised version of Chineseness (represented by a claim of purity and characterised by Chinese nationalism and patriotism) (Lin & Jackson, 2020).

Emphasis on combining differences is relevant to understanding Hong Kong's situation during the early colonial era, as the territory was a contact zone between British imperialism and Chinese nationalism, 'where national and developmental ideas could encounter colonial and free-trade principles to generate hybrid and new practices beholden to neither political ideology' (Duara, 2016, p. 212). According to Law (2009), such an idea

of conflating imperialism and nationalism can explain the establishment of the University of Hong Kong (HKU), which was the first and leading university in the city. The university was considered as an imperial project that served the goals of institutionalising Western civilisation in China, producing Anglicised Chinese elites to support the British colonial rule and accommodating the desire of the Chinese in Hong Kong and Mainland China for Western education. The hybrid nature of the university can be further affirmed by its emphasis on the superiority of Western education and importance of avoiding denationalisation among the Chinese in Hong Kong. Thus, though emphasis was placed on the use of English as the university's medium of instruction and on the employment of an entirely British staff, the university was built as a secular, instead of Christian, institution to avoid uprooting the students from their traditions. This incorporation of the Chinese nationalistic consciousness and narrative made the university an embodiment of a blend of British colonialism and Chinese nationalism (Law, 2009; Lin, 2009).

In a similar vein, Wong (2005) and Chou (2010) examined the establishment of The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), which is a major university in the city, from the perspective of political–cultural liminality by inspecting the colonial government's goals of defusing the tensions between the pro-Beijing and pro-Taipei camps and containing communist influence in Asia within the broad context of the Cold War. As Wong (2005) noted, the colonial government decided to incorporate 'several private Chinese colleges to form a Chinese university that enjoyed full official recognition', as it 'sought to counter the campaigns of Beijing and Taipei to recruit students from the colony', thereby preserving the colonial status quo (p. 214). Chou (2010) traced the connection between the US government's containment of communism and support for the development of HE in Hong Kong by revealing how the political–cultural liminality under the colonial rule allowed a group of exiled Chinese intellectuals to use Hong Kong as a place for preserving and renewing the Chinese culture after 1949. Consequently, the New Asia College and Research Institute, which are HE institutions founded by some of the aforementioned Chinese intellectuals in the 1950s, grew 'to such stature that they were incorporated into a full-fledged university (i.e. CUHK, added by the author) within a decade' (Chou, 2010, p. 5).

Hybridity remains relevant to the development of HE in postcolonial Hong Kong. For example, Postiglione (2013) highlighted the importance of the British colonial legacy, cultural inheritance of Chinese traditions and Hong Kong's position as China's gateway to the rapid growth of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, which is an American-style research university established in the late colonial period and continued to grow after 1997. In response to globalisation, Hong Kong universities have stressed the significance of internationalisation in shaping their development since the 1990s. Various internationalisation initiatives [e.g. extensive international research collaboration and international recruitment, which were identified as important factors for the success of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (Postiglione, 2013)], along with the diversification of the student population and aspirations of becoming a regional education hub (Cheng, Cheung, & Ng, 2016; Postiglione & Jung, 2017), characterise the HE development in post-handover Hong Kong. In fact, Hong Kong intended to emphasise its international connections and special combination of Chineseness and international qualities for distinguishing itself from other Chinese cities, despite the opening up of China to the world and internationalisation of the other Chinese cities (Chiu & Lui,

2009; Chu, 2011). Such characteristics show that in the context of globalisation, Hong Kong remains a zone of openness after the handover.

Conflicts in transition

This section illustrates the conflicts over Chineseness in the contexts of decolonisation and nationalisation in Hong Kong. As early as the 1990s, researchers began to notice the conflictual impacts of the transition to reintegration with Mainland China on the development of Hong Kong's HE. For example, Law (1997) indicated that the growing Chinese influence on Hong Kong's HE since the early 1980s has conflicted with British efforts to preserve its interests. He noted that the conflicts involve not only the elimination and rectification of Britain's colonial mechanisms, practices and traditions in HE but also the institutionalisation of China's national sovereignty. In explaining the conflicts in the educational realm within the context of re-Sinification, researchers highlighted the importance of the ideological dimensions of the Hong Kong–Mainland China tension. For example, Morris and Vickers (2015) believed that Hongkongeseness rooted in civic attributes conflicts with the mainland-style ideological orthodoxy. In a similar vein, Pan (2021) noted that the strong sense of local identity can explain the resistance to the promotion of Chinese nationalistic patriotism among university students. In response to the conflict situation, researchers proposed the ideas of 'Hongkongeseness as a variant of Chineseness' (Lo, 2016) and 'pluralistic Chineseness' (Lin & Jackson, 2021) to defuse the tensions between nationalisation (or re-Sinification) and Hongkongese alienation by the mainland. However, the rise of localism and anti-mainland sentiment were observed and were associated with the increase in student activism and resulted in student involvement in social movements in postcolonial Hong Kong (Tse, 2007; Veg, 2017).

Apart from ideological and emotional conflicts, the tension involves issues on HE policy and governance. For example, as globalisation led to the emergence of internationalisation in HE, Hong Kong has opened its HE system to nonlocal students since the early 2000s. This policy rapidly increased the number of Mainland Chinese university students in Hong Kong (Lo, 2017). In this context, Lai and Maclean (2011) and Lui (2014) examined competition for educational and employment opportunities between local and nonlocal students. These authors argued that Hong Kong's HE underwent a process of 'mainlandisation', 'nationalisation' or 'delocalisation' rather than 'internationalisation', as students from the mainland accounted for over 70% of the nonlocal student population.

Meanwhile, the effect of the reunification with China on the relationship between the state and university drew researchers' attention. Thus, Burns (2020) offered a historical review of how the governance arrangements for Hong Kong universities have varied, along with the changes in the political circumstances, since the early twentieth century. Law (2019) further explained how politics, which intersect with managerialism, influence university governance in post-handover Hong Kong. He noted that university councils and leaders must 'mediate between internal university needs and external market and political demands' (Law, 2019, p. 201). Thus, university governance in the city is 'a political exercise of leadership, contextualised in a changing multileveled (global, national, and local) world' (p. 201), whereas managerial culture and practices (e.g. emphasis on competition and performativity) essentially shaped Hong Kong's HE system. Considering this finding, Marginson (2021) argued that the roots of the

problem lay in the differences between Western and Chinese political cultures, which fundamentally differ in defining university autonomy but simultaneously influence Hong Kong's HE (see also Yang, 2020).

The findings presented in the studies on university governance effectively illustrate the changing state–university relationship and tensions around the (re)nationalisation process in HE governance in Hong Kong. However, as Hsieh (2023) argued, the 'multiple dimensions' and 'sinuous and continuous characteristics' of HE governance existed during the period of transition. Thus, in light of this argument, this study seeks to provide a highly comprehensive understanding of the transition of Hong Kong's university governance by using the notion of hybridity to frame the trajectory of HE development in the city. The conflicts reported in this study demonstrate how the renationalisation process contextualises the changes in university governance after the handover and involve the conflictual relationships among social and cultural groups (e.g. Mainland China–Hong Kong conflict), contested identities (e.g. Chinese versus Hongkonger) and authority (e.g. different understandings of university autonomy in Chinese and Western political cultures). Thus, the conflicts represent 'the negative feelings that the post-colonial subject often has towards their identity and the instability of this identity and how this "splitting" carries on beyond the moment of political decolonisation, becoming part of the post-colonial experience' (Azada-Palacios, 2022, p. 1434; citing Bhabha, 1994). The conflicts also exemplify the situations of the liminality and in-betweenness of postcolonial subjects highlighted by postcolonial theorists. In this sense, the conflicts illustrate the concept of hybridity, which emphasises the tensions between essentialism (e.g. Chinese nationalism and patriotism) and hybrid awareness (e.g. Hong Kong's localism and convergence with Western values) and the hierarchical relationship among the associated subjectivities (e.g. between Chineseness and Hongkongeseness) (Lin & Jackson, 2020; Pieterse, 2020).

Research methods

The data reported in this paper were drawn from semi-structured interviews conducted with 20 council members from six publicly funded universities in 2018 and 2019. The council members were interviewed as a purposive sample, because they were actively involved in university governance and thus 'knowledgeable people' in governance issues (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). The participating interviewees covered all the membership categories in a university council, that is, external lay members, staff members, student members and ex-officio members (university senior management). The interviews delved into the encounters of those who served in the council, power relations between the council members and impacts of the broad socio-political situation on universities. Specifically, the interview questions centred on the council members' participation as well as the concessions between themselves with regard to governance issues (i.e. financial issues, staffing matters and substantive concerns). The council members were asked to give examples of their cooperation and/or negotiation with other players involved in university governance, linked with broad cultural and political settings (e.g. close integration with Mainland China). To address the structural transformations, the data analysis concentrated on the effects of the postcolonial political adjustments on the organisation and distribution of power in the governance of Hong Kong universities.

To exemplify the effects of the growth of student activism on university governance, the analyses were supplemented with student narratives taken from the interviews with 20 student leaders (those holding an executive rank in student organisations) from seven publicly funded universities in 2020. During the interviews, the students were questioned about their feelings about authorities and the role of student organisations and leaders in social movements. The interview questions focused on two main themes: (1) the experiences of the student leaders in university governance and campus culture, and (2) the feelings of the student leaders about major social issues. The student leaders' perceptions were relevant, as they were co-opted into various governing bodies in their university and thus shared varying degrees and positions of power in the different stages of authority within the governance construct.

The duration of the interviews was 45–120 min. Face-to-face interviews were the main mode used for the council members; however, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews with the student leaders were conducted online. The language used in the interviews was either Cantonese or English. When required, specific interviews were translated, but all, regardless of whether or not they were translated, were transcribed. Each interviewee was given a code name in accordance with their role as well as affiliation. The interview data were coded using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analytical work focused on distinguishing the insights of the status quo with regard to the effects of social and political issues (e.g. political unrest and student activism) on university governance in Hong Kong.

The majority of the interviews conducted with council members were done prior to the 2019 protests, whereas student leaders were interviewed in 2020. The aim of this analysis thus has not been for their viewpoints to be contrasted regarding the interplay existing amongst university governance and the broader societal context. Instead, the voices and opinions of the two groups have been used for providing a more thorough portrayal of university governance that currently exists within the Hong Kong context.

Profiling university governance in Hong Kong[1]

Colonial legacy: a managerial and depoliticised model

As mentioned previously, the colonial government saw Hong Kong's HE as an imperial project that promoted British interests in the Far East before the Second World War. Thus, the government took direct control of HKU, which was the only university in the city at the time. However, in the context of the postwar global waves of decolonisation and associated weakened legitimacy of the British colonial rule, the Hong Kong colonial government began to consider local educational demands. As other HE institutions were established in the city, the University Grants Committee (UGC) was established in 1965 to act as a 'broker' or 'buffer' between the government and public universities, and the councils of the universities obtained considerable authority over institutional matters (Burns, 2020). This governance structure, which imposed a highly indirect method of holding the university to account, was seen to uphold the academic freedom and institutional autonomy of the universities (Mok, 2019). However, as the UGC has played a strong auditing role since the 1990s, it has become an increasingly strong external force capable of steering the universities in various aspects, and 'its insistence on quality, performance, accountability and fiscal transparency defines the limits of institutional autonomy and

provides strong justification for supervision and regulation of institutional development and governance' (Law, 2017, p. 48).

This governance structure was preserved after the handover and evaluated by the interviewees. A senior administrator at University E agreed that the universities are under the UGC's supervision, as the agency is a rule maker whose authority is 'non-statutorily official':

> We need to follow the rules of the game … As they (the UGC) would consult and seek the universities' advice, the eight institutions were somewhat engaged (in the rule-making process). We could give our advice. We could give our advice very strongly. However, ultimately, they (the UGC) made the decisions. (UE2)

Thus, he noted that the universities are not in a bargaining position in their relationship with the UGC. A senior administrator at University A also said:

> Though the UGC claims that it has no authority, it oversees the performance of the eight major universities and their missions, visions and strategic priorities. If the UGC disagrees with some items, it will not fund them. This action can apply pressure on the universities. (UA5)

Another senior administrator at University C added that academic units that provide programmes under government manpower planning are under strict regulations, whereas 'the UGC has tightened control over its universities in recent years'. Thus, he disagreed that the UGC acts only in an advisory capacity despite acknowledging that the universities are publicly accountable (UC2). Similarly, a senior administrator at University D, who praised the constructive role of the UGC in upholding university autonomy, noted that the universities are regulated by their agreement with the UGC, as they are publicly funded (UD1). The excerpts can be contrasted with the UGC's emphasis on the statutorily prescribed autonomous status of its institutions and predominant role of university councils in governance matters. According to the UGC, its role is to provide 'the institutions with developmental and academic advice, having regard to international standards and practice' (UGC, 2017, webpage). This contested account of the UGC substantially articulates the 'regulatory autonomy' or 'negotiated freedom' enjoyed by the Hong Kong universities in this managerial system (Law, 2017, p. 48).

The growth of managerialism, in which performance and competition were emphasised, considerably shaping Hong Kong's HE development after colonial rule, had passed (Postiglione & Jung, 2017). Emphasis on the importance of the values and practices of managerialism resulted in the reform of Hong Kong's HE sector, distinct from reforms that occurred in a number of Confucian heritage countries, including South Korea and Taiwan, where HE policies were substantially moulded by political democratisation. Managerial reforms in Hong Kong's HE were, by contrast, underpinned by developmental logic and thus separated from social innovation and political engagement and continued to be depoliticised in their nature (Lo, 2010). In other words, the managerial reforms echoed traditional perceptions of the depoliticisation of HE.

Education in Hong Kong has long been described as depoliticised, as during the colonial period, it was separated from the target of nation building (Wong & So, 2020). This belief of depoliticisation was fostered by the government during colonial times to encourage political apathy towards Britain and China, thereby curbing the opinions on the

existence of an illegitimate colonial government (Fairbrother, 2003). As a consequence, universities were identified as conservation organisations for the promotion of social productivity, enabling social movements and encouraging the governing privileged to stand up to British colonial rule in Hong Kong (Lo & Pan, 2021). Furthermore, Confucian heritage, which covertly disregards the concept of creating challenges for social and political influence, played a vital role in individuals' mentality. As explained by Morris and Vickers (2015), the British observed a traditionalist style of Confucianism, which invoked individuals in the past to emphasise the merits of political stagnation and servility with regard to compassionate leaders as the greatest stimulus for an agitated population. Although student activism was apparent in Hong Kong in the 1960s and 1970s (Leung, 2000), HE was mainly depoliticised during the colonial years.

Such a governing logic was exemplified in the comments of the interviewed university leaders on the political participation of their staff and students. For example, a senior administrator at University E noted:

> Some staff and student council members were involved in social movements. However, their involvements have no direct relationship with the university's operation and management. They should avoid linking the issues about protests and social movements with university affairs. (UE2)

Another senior administrator at University B commented on the controversial political issues in his university:

> These issues harm the university's reputation and do not benefit students. We, as the management, need to handle them appropriately. We should avoid them happening, although not all of them are avoidable. (UB2)

Echoing this sentiment, a senior administrator at University A pointed out that 'reputation risk management is our main priority', as 'the UGC takes risk management very seriously, and as a university, we treasure our reputation the most' (UA5). Such an attitude favouring depoliticisation also outlines the Hong Kong universities' approach for managing political crises. For example, during the 2014 Occupy Central movement[2], the management of Hong Kong universities decided to adopt the tactic of holding a politically neutral position, whereby the universities displayed open assistance for their students' actions whilst simultaneously seeming to support the Hong Kong authorities (Macfarlane, 2017). Following similar reasoning, in a statement during the 2019 Anti-Extradition Bill Movement[3], public university heads made an announcement that offering a political answer to social instability was beyond the scope of universities (Kou et al., 2019).

To summarise, a depoliticised component exists within the development of HE, which was interwoven with British colonial political priorities throughout the colonial years and occurred as an expansion of the managerial governing mode after the handover.

Postcolonial challenges: politicisation of university governance

Political incidents, especially the social movements in the 2010s, significantly influenced university governance in Hong Kong. The active participation of university communities (including staff and students) in the social movements made university governance politically relevant and illustrated the politicisation of the HE sector. For example, Wang (2017) proclaimed the importance of student groups as social networks in rallying the

assistance of various social groups during the 2012 Anti-Moral and National Education Movement[4], concentrating on two groups, namely, Scholarism, and the Hong Kong Federation of Students. The aforementioned groups were the two prominent student groups leading the 2014 Occupy Central Movement, though the movement was initiated by academics. Furthermore, Wang (2017) argued that since the 2012 Anti-Moral and National Education crisis, student groups have represented an evolving political influence that played an essential role in a variety of political occurrences in Hong Kong, including the 2014 Occupy Central Movement as well as the 2016 Legislative Council election (see Chan, 2013; Veg, 2017 for details). To depict the politicisation of university governance, Law (2019) explained how a controversy over the appointment of HKU's senior management emerged because of the Occupy Central Movement. The controversy brought about demands to abolish the current system, in which the government head acts as the ex-officio chancellor of all the public universities in Hong Kong.

The studies revealed the rise of political activism in Hong Kong since the handover in 1997, characterising the city's politics as well as the Hong Kong universities' operation and management in recent years. As reported in the preceding section, university management attempted to avoid political interference in university affairs and considered political activism as a risk to be managed (UE2, UB2, UA5). However, from the staff's perspective, external interference exists and undermines university autonomy and academic freedom. A politically active staff council member at University B noted:

> Owing to my political participation, the pro-establishment groups made complaints to the university against me. These are external interferences in university affairs threatening institutional autonomy. (UB1)

Another staff council member at the same university believed that his political participation caused the nonrenewal of his employment contract:

> I was involved in the external politics and internal affairs of the university, but all these are unrelated to my academic performance. I am one of the best in terms of research performance in my department … The university management did not use an objective way to assess my performance. They were against me by considering my non-academic activities and adopting a subjective way to do the appraisal. In my opinion, this has undermined academic freedom. (UB2)

A staff council member who served as the chair of the trade union of University C explained the influence of politics on staff appointment matters:

> Some council members went against him (a politically active academic staff). The trade union was involved in the incident. Those in charge of the matter knew they would get into trouble if they dismissed him. They thus focused on the performance appraisal system. As a result, a political issue became a wrestling match over the appraisal system. (UC1)

The excerpts suggest the existence of political interference in university governance and resonate with the argument that the managerial model is incapable of prohibiting the intervention (Lo & Pan, 2021).

From the students' perspective, politicisation largely refers to the heightened tensions between students and university management given the rise of pro-independence localism on university campuses (Law, 2019). The growth of localism characterises the political stance of the student leaders interviewed:

> A political stance is essential to running an election for a cabinet of the student union. In recent years, we say there are localist or pro-independence cabinets. This shows the voters' authorisation. If a cabinet does not have a vison, it is difficult for them to win the election. (UE7)

> We positioned this cabinet as a localist one. Thus, the social movement was aligned with our stance. All the student organisations and students we know basically supported this movement. Of course, our social circle is not wide, but all my friends were generally involved in the movement. (UE10)

Such localist sentiments were vocalised by factions on campus, and radical advocacy had become increasingly influential in social movements. Therefore, radicalisation was perceived in the upsurge of student participation in the 2019 Anti-Extradition Bill Movement (Dupré, 2020). A student leader at University E confirmed that students tend to support and employ extreme activities to pursue their political objectives:

> I realise that now, the students are more willing to participate in activities that are more intense. This is very different from the past, when the more intense the activities, the less willing the students to join. Now, the more intense the activity, the more the students who would join. (UE11)

She asserted that the radicalisation reflects the vandalism perceived in the wide society. Within this context of the prevalence of radical advocacy, the students used graffiti to express their political views, causing damage on campus. As a result, university campuses became political battlegrounds during the 2019 protests, whilst the university students were actively involved in the movement. The students' act of using their university as their primary platform to promote their political ideas and achieve their political objectives led to conflicts with the university management, who believed that universities should not be used as a site for politics (Lo & Pan, 2021; Lo & Auld, 2023).

The growth of political activism and localism on university campuses is related to the idea concerning Hong Kong people having a dual and hybrid identity, referring to a blend of Chineseness, found mostly in ethnocultural characteristics, and 'Hongkongeseness', which is ingrained in having civic qualities (Morris & Vickers, 2015). This dual identity resulted in an indecisive citizenship entwined within the legacies of the British colonial rule, its geopolitical and cultural relations to Mainland China and its transfer of sovereignty to China (Pan, 2021; Vickers, 2005). Consequently, against the background of increasing frustration with and cynicism towards the Hong Kong government, especially among young individuals, the government's effort to promote a nationalistic identity as well as nationalistic education was considered by some as merely Chinese nationalistic propaganda and conflicting with Hong Kong's local civic beliefs. In addition, the citizenship culture, which is rooted in Hong Kong universities, was seen as split between the preference of young Hongkongers for their localism and the nationalistic orientation of government executives (Pan, 2021).

After the protests: towards 'securitisation'

Despite the politicisation of university governance, characterised by tensions, according to the interviewees, conflicts did not surface before the 2019 protests. For example, a staff council member at University B noted:

> In informal settings, behind closed doors, there might be a group of council members who feel like this and a certain group who feel like that. There might be tensions, but I do not see them in formal settings. It is performative. (UB6)

A staff council member and chair of the trade union of University A agreed that the university management was responsive to the staff. He said, 'the management would not dare to ignore the comments collected by the union. This helps us identify the collective concern of colleagues' (UA2). The interviewed student leaders agreed that the university management respected the students' voices. They also noted that the management tolerated the students' radical forms of expression in various political events, including the 2019 protests. Thus, a degree of trust exists between the students and university management (UE5, UE11). Meanwhile, the interviewed senior administrators recognised the importance of the participation of the staff and students in university governance, though some expressed concern over the quality of the opinions provided (UC2, UE2, UA5).

However, the 2019 protests exposed political discontent within the context of the rise of localism and anti-mainland sentiments. As a result, intending to suppress the social unrest, in 2020, the Chinese central government introduced the National Security Law (NSL) in Hong Kong. According to the student leaders, the NSL influenced their campus life:

> We (the student union) are under pressure, given the introduction of the NSL. We must pay more attention to our statements and stand on various issues. For example, we were requested to remove some banners and posters. Given the stricter censorship imposed, we are in a weaker position. (UE9)

> In the past, the university management tolerated what was posted on the Democracy Wall. Now, they seem under heavy pressure. Displaying materials on the Democracy Wall has become a sensitive issue. They thus urged US to remove the materials on the wall. (UE10)

The changed political atmosphere is further exemplified by the removal of artwork memorialising the June Fourth Incident from Hong Kong university campuses (Leung & Sharma, 2022a). Meanwhile, several universities decided to cut ties with their student union owing to the involvement of some student union members in controversial political activities during and after the 2019 protests, thereby causing the disbandment of such student unions (Leung, 2021). Furthermore, several academics left their university after the pro-establishment media made allegations about their participation in or support of the 2019 protests (Leung & Sharma, 2022b; Sharma, 2021).

From the postcolonial theoretical perspective, the tensions, conflicts and consequent changes on university campuses illustrate the clash between the nationalist ideologies (e.g. Chinese nationalism and patriotism) and hybrid practices, customs, values and identities in decolonising societies (e.g. cosmopolitan orientation of Hong Kong) (Duara, 2016; Lin & Jackson, 2020). The emphasis on national security [or 'securitisation', according to Vickers and Morris (2022)] also exemplifies the intrinsic rivalries between the intention of retaining Hong Kong's political ambiguity and cultural proximity to China and the West (which lies in the hybridity of Hong Kong) and the notion of becoming Chinese (Lo et al., 2022). This point is discussed below.

Hybridity is dead, long live hybridity

The governance structure of Hong Kong's HE system was modelled on the British system, aiming to avoid external political interferences in university affairs, thereby stressing

university autonomy and academic freedom (Mok, 2019). However, whilst the existing governance model is insufficient to prevent external interferences (as stated above), the relationship between the state and university defined in this governance structure does not seem to fit the political circumstances of postcolonial Hong Kong.

Zha (2011) noted that state authority is considered to be intrinsic in the Chinese development model, which sees universities as crucial institutions for national development. In other words, national requirements and interests have precedence over other matters. Consequently, the governance structure of the Chinese HE system is centralised, which accentuates the ideological control of the party–state over academia, particularly within the fields of humanities and the social sciences, which contradicts Western standards and ideologies (Xu, 2021). In this sense, remaining politically ambiguous, which is stressed in Hong Kong's HE governance (and in the hybridity of Hong Kong, in general), does not align with the ethos of China's HE governance.

To clarify the core reason for the political tensions on Hong Kong university campuses, Yang (2020) argued that Hong Kong disregarded the significance of the Chinese political culture, which emphasises a hierarchical relationship between social players, in the development of its HE governance. Thus, he noted that 'the Hong Kong higher education system has shown little respect for traditional culture. Institutionally the system only accepts Western rules and behaviour' (p. 231). Similarly, Marginson (2021) contended that the differences between Mainland China's and Hong Kong's political cultures resulted in 'a head-on collision between the Western and Sinic "Idea of a University"' (p. 5). In this context, Jiang and Wang (2020) believed that reinforcing the government's supervisory role in HE by reforming university governance and advocating patriotic education is essential for Hong Kong's HE sector to further integrate itself within the national development of Mainland China.

In a similar vein, recent research on public governance in postcolonial Hong Kong highlighted the institutional incompatibility between Chinese sovereignty and Hong Kong's hybridity in the implementation of the 'One Country, Two Systems' principle. For example, Cheung (2021) argued that the hybrid or contradictory nature of contemporary Hong Kong exists as an 'exceptionalism':

> Hong Kong was designed to be exceptional post-1997, within a highly centralised/unitary and supposedly homogenous communist party-state … This makes it special and unique internationally. Today, over two decades after reunification, Hong Kong remains a geopolitical hybrid, both within the broad People's Republic of China jurisdiction and yet outside its specific jurisdiction in terms of the application of the national system, law, and related institutions, thus creating tensions and ambiguities from time to time. (p. 9)

Apart from political ambiguity, he pointed out that Hong Kong's cultural proximity to Chineseness and Westernness caused resistance to homogenisation despite the political unification (Cheung, 2021, pp. 9–10). On this point, Lui (2020) argued that the institutional framework of 'One Country, Two Systems', which aims to maintain the status quo, implies a lack of readiness for post-handover evolution (e.g. changing political relationship with Beijing and intensifying social and economic integration with the mainland), especially in the context of the rise of China.

Such arguments vividly framed the conflicts in HE governance presented previously and justified securitisation, which represents a type of re-education and an intensification

of mainlandisation (Vickers & Morris, 2022) and the process of transforming Hong Kong universities into 'institutions to transfer patriotic education to Hong Kong's elite' (Burns, 2020, p. 1045). Relatedly, the government's call for the participation of Hong Kong universities in China's Belt and Road Initiative and Greater Bay Area Scheme[5] denotes the mobilisation of the universities' contribution to national development, which repositions the universities within the global and national landscape of HE (see Lo et al., 2022 for details).

Theoretically, such developments illustrate the disappearance of the hybrid nature of Hong Kong that emerged in the colonial era. Specifically, the restoration of Chinese sovereignty over Hong Kong entailed an expansion of the Chinese cultural and political core, thereby diminishing the cultural and political characteristics and identities of Hong Kong, which is a peripheral part of China (Vong & Lo, 2023, This issue). Such zero-sumism substantially illustrates the relational framework (i.e. core–periphery structure within China) (Ge, 2018) that features the Chinese political culture seen as crucial in defining HE governance in the Chinese context (Yang, 2020). Furthermore, the re-Sinification process essentially undermines the validity of the Greater China framework, which considers peripheral Chinese societies (including Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan and overseas Chinese communities) as variants of Chineseness and unbounded Chinese cultural carriers and makers that serve as reference points in the construction of the subjectivity and worldview of the Chinese cultural core (Lo, 2016; Tu, 1991; Wang, 1993).

However, the re-Sinification process and concomitant disappearance of hybridity (which appeared in the colonial period) do not mean that the concept of hybridity is no longer relevant to Hong Kong's HE development and governance. Instead, as the emergence and reform of China's modern HE are the result of the combination of Chinese and Western elements and (re)learning from the West as well as other educational models (Shen, Han, & Liu, 2022; Yang, 2011), re-Sinification in the contemporary context will inevitably involve a combination of Chinese and non-Chinese elements. In this sense, re-Sinification does not mean the restoration of cultural purity but refers to another form of hybridisation that stresses 'Chinese characteristics'. From the perspective of the political core (i.e. the central state), emphasising Chinese characteristics represents 'a high level of cultural confidence' after accomplishing 'a successful synthesis of knowledge drawn from the best of China and West' (Yang, 2023, This issue; Xu, 2023, This issue). Nevertheless, from the peripheral perspective (e.g. that of Hong Kong's localists), asserting Chinese characteristics can mean the display of party–state authoritarianism, expression of nationalism and patriotism, attempts to snuff out local distinctiveness and a form of (re)colonisation (Lo & Pan, 2021; Vickers & Morris, 2022).

Conclusion

This paper delineates the colonial legacy (i.e. political and cultural proximity to Chineseness and Westernness), postcolonial challenges (i.e. tensions and conflicts caused by the rise of localism and political activism) and most recent changes (i.e. securitisation/re-Sinification) within the context of Hong Kong's HE in light of the concept of hybridity. The colonial legacy explains the emergence and continuity of hybridity before and after the handover. In the context of HE, hybridity refers to Western-style university governance that simultaneously stresses academic (e.g. institutional autonomy and academic freedom) and managerial (e.g. accountability) values within political settings in a

strong, centralised party–state. Subsequently, the rise of localism and associated political activism brought about tensions and conflicts that revealed the fundamental dilemma (i.e. becoming Chinese or remaining hybrid) in postcolonial Hong Kong (Cheung, 2021) and characterised university governance in the city (Law, 2019; Lo & Pan, 2021). The enactment of the NSL and its influence on university governance indicate determination to Sinicise Hong Kong and transform its universities into agencies for patriotic education and national development (Jiang & Wang, 2020).

This delineation exemplifies the deterioration of Hong Kong's hybrid nature and affirmation of 'Chinese characteristics'. It also resonates with the argument that the Chinese political culture, which consists of the Confucian concepts of relationships and the authoritarian nature of the party–state and is oriented towards hierarchically organised social settings, underpins the HE governance framework in contemporary China (Yang, 2020). However, as discussed previously, the development of HE in China involves an ongoing hybridisation process. Therefore, the re-Sinification process can be seen as a move towards another form of hybridity. In this regard, the application of re-Sinification in Hong Kong's HE encompasses the ascent and descent of hybridity and thus denotes the complexity of hybridity in the context of China.

Notes

1. Some interview data presented in this section was adapted from Lo (2021).
2. The movement known as the Occupy Central or Umbrella Movement in 2014 was initiated in pursuit of universal suffrage.
3. The Anti-Extradition Bill Movement in 2019 refers to a series of large-scale protests, of which the immediate cause was the government's plan for changes in legislation allowing for criminal suspects to be extradited to Mainland China.
4. The Anti-Moral and National Education Movement in 2012 was a movement against the government's proposal to teach 'moral and national education' as an independent subject in primary and secondary schools.
5. The Belt and Road Initiative is a strategy for strengthening China's global connectivity by constructing infrastructure; promoting policy exchange, financial integration, free trade and people-to-people bonds; and developing a network of key cities along the historical Silk Road. The Greater Bay Area Scheme, which includes Hong Kong, Macao and nine cities in Guangdong Province in Southern China, aims to promote the integration of industries, academia and research and encourage cross-border HE and research collaboration in the area.

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