

Student Political Activism in a Global Context: An Analytic Imperative for Enhanced Understanding of Higher Education Coordination in Hong Kong

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Introduction

In the face of accumulated contradictions of global capitalism, the current decade sees the international rise of student political activism—among other democratic responses for a similar pursuit of social justice. Against the backdrop of an increasingly interconnected world, global exchanges of rationales, discourses, experiences, and strategies by student activists across various world's locations stimulate and reinforce the spirit of “youth idealism” (Altbach 1989), which in a way challenges state authority and market forces. Students have long played an indispensable role in affecting how academic life of the time is being lived out. Examining student political activism has increasingly become an analytic imperative for understanding better the new university-state-market dynamics. Particularly, it calls for a reconsideration of the political configurations embedded in higher education coordination (Clark 1983).

Burton R. Clark (1983) compares different national higher education systems and conceptualizes their centrality of authority between university-state-market in figurative form as a triangle (known as Clark's triangle). In *Academic Capitalism in the Age of Globalization*, I echoed to the claim by Clark (1983) and examined how academic capitalism manifests itself variedly in Greater China (Tang 2014). My article revealed that mainland China resembles the “ideal type” of state system; Hong Kong resembles a professional system; whereas Macau and Taiwan resemble market systems. The findings are obtained in terms of the centrality of authority located in the respective higher edu-

cation sectors from a comparative but not normative perspective. During the capitalizing processes of knowledge and educational credentials in the Chinese setting, collaborations and tensions among the state, economy, and academia arise but in various patterns. Moreover, for a relevant and committed application of Clark's conceptualization, the student power factor was not taken into analytical consideration, although the agency of student political activism is very essential to shaping the evolving relationship between higher education and the role of the state. In addition, the internationalization of student political activism, in quest for social justice and democracy, challenges the global trend of capitalism. The static nature of the conceptualization is further problematized by the realities brought through globalization, including the “ideoscape” of youth idealism, which is manifested in student political activism and movements across the world.

This article seeks, therefore, to reexamine the tensions and collaborations among the three forces in this power coordination, namely, state authority, market forces, and academic autonomy, and how the tensions and collaborations are affected by the agency of student political activism. As such, it challenges the predisposition of university-government-market dynamics suggested by Clark (1983) through the lens of student political activism as agent of change. By systematic observations of the current affairs of Hong Kong, it suggests the remarkable role played by students in (1) challenging state authority and (2) demonstrating disrespect of market forces, whereas in the meantime (3) defending the academic autonomy of university communities. Reconsidering the four competing values in higher education (social justice, competence, liberty, and loyalty) as claimed by Clark (2008), this paper also argues that student political activism places a greater concern on social justice, but remains highly criti-

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cal about loyalty to the government. Student political activism acts upon any threats, infringements and attacks against academic freedom, especially when the professional life by academic staff encounters potential intervention and endangerment. This is in particular noteworthy as academics are significantly less outspoken than students in defending academic autonomy, not unconcerned with the prevalence of pro-competition higher education policies in Hong Kong, which in turn increasingly redefine and “economize” academic life (Bok 2009).

Challenging State Authority by Student Political Activism

Throughout national histories in contemporary era, youth idealism has been a significant force in providing the minds for a critical thinking that interrogates the absolute power of state authority. This idealism fuels the engagement and mobilization of student political activism and intermittently challenges the hegemonic power structure. In Hong Kong, a comprehensive survey about the mission statements of the student union of local universities reveals that most of them inherit the legacies of pursuing for social welfare and social justice, which extend beyond the concerns about student affairs on university campus. The Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS), a student organization comprising representatives from the eight Hong Kong public tertiary education institutions, aims at promoting student movements and enhancing students’ engagement in the society. Their motto states, “We are dedicated to widening one’s horizons, caring about the society, building a democratic China, fighting for the interests of students” (Hong Kong Federation of Students 2014). Dating back to July 1984 when the Sino-British Joint Declaration was just signed, the HKFS publicly announced its strong preference for introducing direct elections into the selection process for the 1985 Legislative Council. The HKFS is also one of the core organizers of the 2014 class boycott and the subsequent “Umbrella Movement,” which mobilized the historical civil disobedience campaign against the decision of the China’s Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress on the reform for Hong Kong Chief Executive’s electoral system.

The “818 incident” arising in 2011 at the University of Hong Kong (HKU) demonstrated apparently and symbolically the way in which state authority was not respected but challenged. In celebration of the University’s centenary, Mr. Li Keqiang, the Vice Premier of People’s Republic of China (PRC), was officially welcomed by HKU and invited to a ceremony at Loke Yew Hall on 18 August 2011. As one of the two keynote speakers, Li was arranged to be seated in the Chancellor’s chair, a symbol of the highest authority in the university ceremonies. Whereas to the discomfort of many HKU students and alumni, the other keynote speaker, Sir David Wilson, was given a seat in the second row, and was referred to only as an alumnus of HKU in the introduction, deliberately ignoring the fact that he was both an ex-governor of colonial Hong Kong and a former Chancellor of HKU. The official arrangement was widely perceived by some commentaries that it was meant not to downgrade the prestige, or in Chinese term, the “face” of the honorable Chinese guest (Sebag-Montefiore 2011).

In the name of security, Li’s visit had led to a complete takeover of the university campus by the Hong Kong Police Force, arriving with more than 1,000 officers. According to Genomeken, “In Hong Kong University’s] 100 years of history, it has never exhibited any submissive demeanor towards politicians in power.” While the police force was invited to take over the job of university securities, there were no student representatives in this historical ceremony and the students were in a way kept far away during Li’s visit. In particular, the police hindered three students who made attempt to approach Li, whereas one of them was pulled down and locked up in a staircase for almost one hour. Irritated by such an official welcome that offended academic autonomy and “academic dignity,” the student and alumni communities had heated-up discussions that culminated in a protest of 1,000 students, alumni, ordinary citizens, and journalists, gathered on the campus’ Sun Yat Sen Square on the night of August 26. Furthermore, 270 HKU alumni put a full-page newspaper advertisement to condemn the police security arrangements. The incident resulted in the University’s formation of a seven-member committee to carry out a four-month review of arrangements for the “818 incident.” About two months

after the incident, the HKU President Professor Lap-chee Tsui, a world renowned geneticist, notified the University Council that he would not renew his contract after it expired in August 2012. In response, the HKU Council Chairman Dr. Che-hung Leong insisted he did not force Tsui to leave but also supplemented that the new HKU chief should have “political sense” (Chong, Ng, and Wan 2012). The issue aroused the democrats in the Legislature to call for an independent investigation into Tsui’s planned departure.

The Hong Kong students’ critical view on the state authority can further be demonstrated through the Anti-Moral and National Education Protest in 2012. Initiated not by professional teachers but students, the protest was targeted against the incorporation of the first-ever patriotic subject “Moral and National Education” into the local high school curriculum. The student activist group “Scholarism” was the first pressure group which mobilized the protest, overt through occupation of the Hong Kong government headquarters on August 30. With demonstration, open concert and hunger strike, the protest purposed to press the government to withdraw the plans of enforcing the patriotic education as a compulsory subject. “Brainwashing” was the dominant attribute which was discoursed in mobilization of Hong Kong students, parents, and other citizens to join the protest. As manifested by the convener of Scholarism Joshua Wong (a 15-aged high school student at that time), “We don’t want the next generation of Hong Kong people to be brainwashed” (Lai 2012). With over 90,000 people took their doubts to the protest, the political campaign received an affirmative response as the government announced to postpone the proposal on October 8. The students’ political engagement and their idealism, therefore, could be seen as contagious in the awakening of the Hong Kong civil society.

Student Idealism and its Disrespect of the Market Forces

Student idealism contests to an increasingly “economized” academy, especially when academic capitalism is overtly played out by a rising trend of corporate philanthropy (although East Asian universities do not en-

counter the same extent of shrinking government investment on higher education as their counterparts are facing in the West). In 2005, Mr. Li Ka Shing, a Hong Kong-based billionaire, made a historical donation of US\$125 million to the HKU Faculty of Medicine. In reciprocity, the University would rename the Faculty in recognition of Li’s philanthropy. The crisis received immediate criticism from students and some prominent medical alumni, condemning the act as a betrayal to academic autonomy. They protested against this “exchange” and criticized the Faculty had fallen into the “temptation” of money. Especially, they advocated that the “exchange” infringed the hundred years’ history of the HKU Faculty of Medicine, whose name is without any sponsor’s name in the last century. The patron-client relationship justifies the intrusion of the market forces into the academy. Although the protest did not achieve any results and the Faculty was renamed as “Li Ka Shing Faculty of Medicine” starting from 2006, the society has seen the divergence between university administrators and student/alumni groups in understanding university affairs. This knowledge is essential in strengthening university-alumni relationship, including the business of fund raising through alumni.

The dissonant viewpoints between university administrators and student/alumni groups towards capitalism were exposed in the recent “Umbrella Movement.” Amidst the social upheaval, an engineering company named Chung Wo Development Holdings Limited decided to cancel its existing funding for all universities, simply due to their unclear position to oppose the Movement. The immediate response was not made by the institutions, which received the donation, but the alumni groups and individual academics at large. Academics at Baptist University self-initiated an annual scholarship in support for the best undergraduate dissertation, which addresses social justice; meanwhile, alumni of Polytechnic University established a scholarship awarded to students who have best performance in practicing human rights and social justice. Another scholarship for HKU and other universities was self-initiated by some artists, cultural practitioners, and common citizens and they raised more than US\$20,000 within one week. The civic responses evinced the pos-

sible rise of civic philanthropy in Hong Kong higher education. The rise negotiates upon marketization and social justice, and may exemplify a consonance between autonomy and philanthropy for academia's sake.

Students' Gatekeeping of Academic Autonomy

Students have long played an imperative role in affecting how academic life of the time is being lived out and projected a high moral ground for the academia. Student political activism acts upon any potential intervention and endangerment against academic freedom. Particularly remarkable is that academics are significantly less outspoken than students in defending academic autonomy.

Known as the "Watergate incident" of Hong Kong academia, the case of Robert Chung's affair in 2000 is well illustrative of the above argument. An active public opinion polling researcher, Dr. Chung revealed to the mass media that he was hinted by his former doctoral advisor (who was also the HKU Vice President at that time) to refrain from his polling work, as the public opinions usually reflect critical view about the post-handover Hong Kong government. Anticipated public debates had risen and HKU set up an independent investigation panel. The public hearings resulted in the *Report to the Council of the University of Hong Kong*, concluding that the President had intervened Chung's academic freedom. According to the scholarly book *Academic Freedom in Hong Kong*, the HKU Student Union played an active role in asking the Council to adopt the Panel's Report (Currie, Petersen, and Mok 2006), followed by more than half of HKU academics signing the petition in agreement with the Student Union's request. Consequently, the President was compelled to resign. With the lesson learned, the University accommodates Chung's team which has been updating critical public opinions about the government and PRC in the last fifteen years and beyond.

The Roads Ahead

In the literature of social movement, Leung (1996) argues that the 1980s' Hong Kong student movement

had lost its leading role, and much of its "vitality and momentum," in socio-political action (p.158). It was largely due to the extensive and effective mass mobilization tactics of political organizations for fastening the pace of Hong Kong democratization at that time. But the otherwise have appeared in Hong Kong nowadays, epitomized by the leading role of students in the Umbrella Movement. On top of its tremendous mobilization power, Peter Popham (2014) claims the Movement is "the politest demonstration ever." Local and foreign visitors to the protesting sites have possibly witnessed the epitome of an ideal society the Hong Kong students were constructing.

Within a global context, student political activism is an analytic imperative for enhanced understanding of higher education coordination in Hong Kong. In view of the long been neglected role of students in the analysis, further research on the topic should be conducted in making a better sense of the changing reality. According to Philip G. Altbach (1989), there are three main parties that contribute to the formation of student movements: (1) core leadership, (2) active followers, and (3) "a much larger group of students who are sympathetic to the broad goals of the movement but who are rather vague about the specific aspects and who are only sporadically, if at all, directly involved" (p. 102). It is argued that peers (including "peer culture") play an important role in encouraging students' participation in activism, most often due to the "generational revolt." This conceptualization informs the research design for the empirical research, namely to probe the newer generations' experiences, values, perceptions and subjectivities of political engagement. In terms of level of involvement, future research may hypothesize that local students would be more active than Mainland/international students, undergraduates are more active than postgraduates, and disciplinary major can be taken into consideration in the students' understanding about political and social affairs. Meanwhile, the process of how "youth idealism" is formed deserves attention, including the possible effect by liberal studies (due to the global trend of "common core" in first year undergraduate curriculum), and the globalization of popular youth culture.

Hong Kong people, especially its young people, had been perceived as politically apathetic in the colonial era. But the civic awakening due the recent student movements leads us to redefine the meaning of political participation and “political apathy” among younger generations, together with the young women’s perception and subjectivities about political participation. In search for social identities and emotional ties with “Hong Kong,” the students’ passion and fearless pursuits compel the status quo to respond—and researchers to reexamine the predominant university-state-market dynamics in determining the new reality of higher education coordination.

Acknowledgments

The author expresses his gratitude to his former research assistant Jessica Wong, who later completed her Master’s in International Relations at the University of Western Australia. Also, to Professor Alvin So from the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology for his constructive comments on this study that was presented at the 16th Annual Conference of the Hong Kong Sociological Association.

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