

Hong Kong anthropologists within global neoliberalism and national and local politics

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There are global neoliberal pressures on the academy that are more or less faced by anthropologists around the world. To what extent are anthropologists required to publish in English in SSCI-ranked journals to keep their jobs and get promoted? But there are also distinctly national and local pressures to some extent counteracting or eclipsing these global pressures. In this article I explore these counteracting pressures in the context of Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, my home society, neoliberalism has reigned supreme, with a remarkably short-term mentality. Yet despite this, anthropology has been flourishing, and has operated with great freedom and generous funding that is quite exceptional by global standards. However, this may be coming to an end. In China there is direct government control over anthropology. Hong Kong, following the protests of 2019 and the advent of the national security law in 2020, may be following suit, with many democratic political figures and some journalists now in jail. In light of this ongoing narrowing of room for freedom of inquiry, what will happen to Hong Kong academics and to anthropology?

KEYWORDS: anthropological practice, Hong Kong, audit culture, national security law, China.

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INTRODUCTION: THE GLOBAL SITUATION

There are global neoliberal pressures faced by anthropologists around the world, although these vary in their degree of intensity. In many places, ranging from China and Japan to various Latin American and European societies, anthropologists are encouraged or required to publish in English in Social-Science-Citation-Index-ranked journals to keep their jobs or to get promoted. This is a distinctly new set of pressures on anthropologists that did not exist several decades ago (Mathews 2015, 2018),¹ when anthropologists had more freedom to develop their own regional anthropologies apart from pressure to conform to a global norm. Journals listed in the SSCI are overwhelmingly Anglo-American in language and place of publication.² Anthropologists across the globe are in effect being institutionally forced to reprise Morgan and Tylor, in the sense that “West is Best” – English-language publication in foreign journals is accorded higher recognition than regional publication in one’s own language, despite the fact that the latter will be more widely read and wield more influence within one’s home society.

This is a worldwide trend shaping anthropologists and other scholars across the globe, driven, most basically, by universities’ obsessions with rising higher in global rankings, which creates an “audit culture” whereby professors are constantly being measured and evaluated in their performance in accordance with corporate global norms (Shore 2008; Shore and Wright 2000; Bary 2010). This is a very real problem for anthropologists around the world, pushing them to write not for their own local audiences but for foreign audiences, whose anthropological premises may be very different from their own (see Kuwayama 2004; Mathews 2010; Kim and Moon 2017).

However, aside from global pressures, there are also national and local pressures on anthropology in different societies, that in many areas of the world counteract or eclipse these global pressures – this is apparent in societies ranging from Brazil to Hungary to many states in the United States, where political pressures have been severely hampering anthropology and other disciplines in the arts and social sciences. In this article I explore these counteracting pressures in the context of Hong Kong, my home society.

1 Social Science Citation Index, 2018. Available at < <http://science.thomsonreuters.com/cgi-bin/jrnlist/jlresults.cgi?PC=SS&SC=BF> >.

2 This is not because of any overt prejudice against non-Anglophone publications on the part of the SSCI, but rather because its membership and rankings are accorded largely in terms of how much different journals are cited. Because there are more Anglophone anthropologists than those of any other language, including Spanish and Chinese, Anglophone journals predominate in the SSCI.

ANTHROPOLOGY IN HONG KONG AND “THE AUDIT CULTURE”

I am a research professor and former chairperson (2014-2020) of the Department of Anthropology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and have been in the department for 30 years; this personal experience is the source of much of the information presented in this article. The anthropology department at CUHK, with 12 professors or lecturers, is the only Anthropology Department in Hong Kong; there are perhaps 20 more anthropologists in different departments in Hong Kong’s eight publicly-funded universities.³ In Hong Kong, the “audit culture” reigns supreme in universities (Lin 2009; Bosco 2017). Professors in Hong Kong are rated every year in terms of how much they have published in top-ranked, typically English-language journals, as well as how they rank in student course evaluations as compared to their colleagues, and how many committees they have served on and overseas presentations they have given.

At the Chinese University of Hong Kong, in the Faculty of Arts to which anthropology belongs, this means that one is ranked by an array of very specific criteria, as I know well since I go through this process every year. To “exceed expectations,” for example – a mark roughly equivalent to the B+ grade we might give to students who are good but not outstanding – one must have in a given year, “one journal article or book chapter of international excellence or high-impact; or two journal articles or book chapters of international reputation or with potential for high-impact,” and “one external competitive research grant in the last two academic years”; one must have “CTE [course evaluation] scores: 60% of courses taught ranked in the [...] 61st-80th percentile”; and one must have “excellent contributions to the management/development of Department/Unit/Faculty through chairmanship/membership of committees/boards/panels”. On the basis of criteria such as these, professors are ranked into the categories of “far exceeding expectations”, “exceeding expectations”, “meeting expectations”, “below expectations”, and “far below expectations”, with pay raises and prospects for advancement calibrated in accordance with one’s yearly scores.⁴

This reliance on annual ratings contributes to a remarkably short-term mentality: “publish three articles in your first three years in international journals, or you probably won’t get a contract renewal”, young professors are told, and ignore this advice at their peril. Any young professor who focuses only on

3 There are also perhaps a dozen other people with PhDs in anthropology in Hong Kong who practice other professions, from law to business to archeological consulting to secondary-school education, and who may teach anthropology classes on a part-time basis.

4 As department chair I came to appreciate this very meticulous rating system, which replaced an earlier more subjective system based more on the opinion of a department chair. With this rating system, personal judgment now plays almost no role in evaluation. The “audit culture” certainly has its demerits but also may have merits in lessening the role of subjectivity in evaluation.

writing a book (although a book too is typically necessary for tenure for socio-cultural anthropologists in Hong Kong), or on publishing only in the very top journals (which typically require many revisions before one's piece appears in print), will likely not last for long, regardless of their academic potential: it is "produce now or be gone!". The largest barrier to tenure is at the faculty and university levels, with decisions made by senior university committees. These are people who may have never met the candidate and make their decisions not on the basis of any human feelings, but rather on the basis of what appears on paper, in CV's and especially outside referees' critiques (who, for anthropology, will be anthropologists from outside Hong Kong, typically Western- or East-Asian based).

The publications of an anthropologist pursuing tenure generally must be in English. If a professor publishes in Chinese for a local or national audience, this will generally not "count". Local relevance in one's publications is distinctly beside the point. Higher authorities in Hong Kong would much rather have academics publish works for foreign audiences, who may find such works irrelevant to their own concerns, than to publish relevant works for local audiences. This is done in the name of ensuring global quality but has the effect of preventing them from having any effect on local discourse unless they do this in their "spare time".⁵ The Research Assessment Exercises, by which academics' research is strictly assessed in Hong Kong, claims to evaluate Chinese-language research by the same standard as English-language research, but few academics in Hong Kong believe this. Recent research assessment exercises seek also to assess the "impact" of research in Hong Kong, attempting to measure influence beyond the academy, but since much of their assessment is at least partially based on impact on government policy, when the government is widely seen as unresponsive the effect may be counterproductive.

There is enormous pressure on junior professors, and indeed on all professors in the Department of Anthropology and in all departments at CUHK, to perform in accordance with the faculty and the university's standardized guidelines: have at the very least one international publication a year, and always have a research grant (despite the fact that research grants are not necessary for many kinds of anthropological research). The path to tenure is remarkably rigid, and those who do not very closely follow it, regardless of their potential or their brilliance, will probably be cast aside: over the past 20 years, well over half of the assistant professors who have been hired in anthropology have not gained tenure.⁶ Hong Kong university provosts and

5 "Academics denied their place in debate on Hong Kong", Op-ed column, *The South China Morning Post*, April 22nd, 2013.

6 Many of these assistant professors left CUHK before going up for tenure, knowing that their chances of getting tenure were slim. Most have remained employed as academic anthropologists elsewhere.

other top management, like university management around the world these days, are obsessed with university rankings. This may be reflected in the rigidity of tenure evaluations; as a provost once explained to me, “if someone might never be outstanding, why would you want to keep them any longer than necessary?”. This is a serious barrier to the well-being of anthropologists and other academics in Hong Kong – for a junior scholar, one’s career life expectancy at CUHK may be short.

THE ENVIABLE RECENT SITUATION OF ANTHROPOLOGY IN HONG KONG

Yet aside from this very serious barrier to well-being, anthropology has been flourishing in Hong Kong, operating with considerable freedom and generous funding, as have I found throughout my career. Hong Kong has been transformed from its recent past, as I discuss in the latter half of this chapter, due to the imposition by China of the national security law in 2020; but there has been at CUHK up until this writing no direct political pressure by the university on anthropologists or other academics to say or not say certain things in the classroom or in one’s publications.⁷ As for research grants, almost all academics in Hong Kong rely primarily on grants by Hong Kong’s Research Grants Council, which utilizes a worldwide pool of referees whose views and ratings are treated as sacrosanct. Grant applications have a 30-40% success rate; almost every member of the Department of Anthropology at CUHK has received a grant in recent years. Salaries of Hong Kong anthropologists are among the highest in the world, although there is mandatory retirement at age 60 for associate professors and 66 for full professor, with some minimal flexibility. Because of the global glut in PhDs in the humanities and social sciences and diminished job prospects in the United States and Western Europe, Hong Kong has recently been able to hire among the best job candidates in the world. Thirty years ago, professors in Hong Kong were often from second or third-tier foreign universities, but recently they have been from the world’s top universities. About half of Anthropology’s own PhD graduates now have teaching positions in mainland China, with others working as professors in

7 It may be that in a given department, a chair privately guides a junior professor as to what to write or not write about in her articles or what to do research on, for academic or for political reasons. If a given professor were consistently criticized in course evaluations for adopting certain political positions, there might be pressure to at least “better explain your views”. But in my six recent years as department chair, this has never happened. This is in contrast to Singapore, where I have often heard that there is considerable pressure from higher-ups concerning one’s views, and also the United States, where I have heard that student pressures on some campuses have caused professors to adhere to strictly politically correct guidelines. However, the situation in Hong Kong has been changing; in the future, this comparative freedom from political pressure may or may not remain.

Hong Kong or having postdocs overseas; none are unemployed or employed in positions unrelated to their anthropological training.

The Department of Anthropology at CUHK has expanded from seven members to 12 members over the past 15 years, an expansion due in large part to its MA program. Taught MA programs exist in most academic departments in Hong Kong and, unlike undergraduate programs, which are overwhelmingly made up of students from Hong Kong, MA programs tend to consist of mainland Chinese as the majority of their students. Anthropology at CUHK typically has twice as many MA students admitted each year as compared to undergraduate students. These students help the finances of the department, providing a separate basis for funding and for the department's expansion. Beyond this, these MA students are often among the most intellectually curious students in the department – not just the department's expansion and financial well-being but also its intellectual vitality owes much to them. (Phd and MPhil students are of course highly important, but because they often seek to become professional anthropologists, they may have more particular career-track personal goals than MA students, who are studying anthropology largely from intellectual curiosity, as well as, for some, a desire to obtain Hong Kong residence rights). This large presence of MA students marks a fundamental difference between anthropology in Hong Kong and in many other places – a separate source of funding means that the higher administration of the university does not have unlimited power in shaping the department, in that the budget that they provide is not the only budget that funds it. Teachers hired by MA money must largely teach MA courses, but they also add greatly to the Anthropology Department as a whole.

Anthropology in Hong Kong is thus quite severe in terms of getting tenure; but aside from this quite serious factor, anthropological practice in Hong Kong, if its conditions were widely known, would be the envy of anthropologists around the world, simply in that funding for research and for salaries is so ample (even among the exploited category of adjunct teachers, pay is twice as much in Hong Kong as in most US universities). This is partly because Hong Kong is a comparatively wealthy society, and partly because professors in Hong Kong are paid in accordance with civil-service salaries, with no differentiation by discipline: professors of anthropology are paid as much as professors of business. Underlying these factors, the well-being of anthropology is due to the fact that the diminution of the social sciences and humanities that has taken place throughout much of the world has not taken place in Hong Kong, with professors still accorded considerable respect. Given the recent rapid shifts in Hong Kong, however – given the fact that Hong Kong and its educational system are now increasingly shaped in accordance with mainland China – this era may perhaps be coming to an end.

A BRIEF LOOK AT ANTHROPOLOGY IN MAINLAND CHINA

The academic situation of anthropology in mainland China is different from that of Hong Kong (see Song 2017; Chen 2017; Mathews 2022). In mainland China too, there is an intense audit culture judging and grading academics (Li 2010; Yi 2011). However, there is also growing government control over academics in the era of Xi Jinping, with universities enjoined to teach Communist Party doctrine and Xi Jinping thought.⁸ Research grant applications – often, in mainland China, on minority ethnicities in the country, a major government-designated topic of anthropology and ethnology – sometimes having to lavishly praise the Party and its policies in order to be successful. This control has waxed and waned over the decades, but over the past few years it has become particularly strict, with some anthropologists losing their jobs or having their research centers shut down because of their research into overly sensitive topics such as civil society, or Muslims in China, and with foreign anthropologists increasingly disinclined from presenting their research. This is true not just in anthropology but in the academic world as a whole in China.⁹

In anthropology classrooms in China, there is the ubiquitous camera and recorder that may be monitoring what is said and done; there may be observers from the Party silently sitting in on one's class. Anthropology professors in mainland China tell me (Mathews 2022) that this is a situation they have learned to live with. One anthropologist said that while he cannot publish research on dangerous topics such as civil society, he can indeed use his critical thinking to analyze topics such as foodways, sustainable development, or intangible cultural heritage, topics that will not arouse the ire of the government. As another professor maintained to me: "Normally no one is checking the recorder. If some student made a report to the university, then they'd come back to check; but no one has reported on me, so I don't need to worry. In my graduate seminar, unlike my big undergraduate class, I can be fairly free in what I say." Anthropology in mainland China is by some accounts (Chen 2017) flourishing; outside observers may overestimate the degree of restriction that anthropologists must suffer. Nonetheless, it seems clear that anthropology as practiced in mainland China is considerably different from anthropology as practiced in much of the rest of the world in its degree of government control. Former students now teaching in mainland China have told of how they have been warned to avoid classroom discussions on topics ranging from religion to cultural identity to gender.

China has long had an ambivalent attitude towards education outside mainland China, with millions of parents dreaming of sending their children

8 "How Xi Jinping is shaping China's universities", *The Diplomat*, August 10th, 2018.

9 "China's higher-ed ambitions are at odds with its tightening grip on academic freedom", *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 24th, 2019.

to places like Harvard, from which President Xi Jinping's daughter graduated,¹⁰ but with the Chinese government also railing against Western education, and against foreign texts taught in Chinese schools. Hong Kong offers, through its universities' various faculties of social sciences and arts, an education that has been largely in common with its counterparts in Western Europe, the United States, and Japan, and different from that of mainland China. Many MA students in anthropology as well as other disciplines have been educated in universities on the mainland, and are being exposed, often for the first time, to education outside the Chinese mainland. This may be a shock to them. Anthropology, we teach students, is always political, whereas on the mainland it is thought of as never political, I have been told by mainland students. Anthropology critically examines basic assumptions about the social, cultural, and economic world we live within, as is still encouraged in Hong Kong education, but significantly discouraged in education on the mainland.

The reaction of mainland anthropology students to this instruction, often so different from what they previously were exposed to, has generally been positive. A visiting researcher on Tibet was asked several years ago at a public talk if he felt that Tibet would be better off if it were independent. He said yes and explained why in some detail. I watched with concern many mainland MA students in the audience, expecting anger, but found only bemusement: "That's an interesting view. I hadn't heard that before", one said afterwards. While there are a few students who are nationalistic in their views and who have criticized Hong Kong students for their lack of love for the Chinese motherland, they have been a small minority. From all the information we have received in surveys of graduated MA students, the vast majority greatly appreciate the training they have received from us.¹¹ In a survey conducted of MA graduates in 2017, we received responses such as "Anthropology was an eye-opener, that expanded my mind" and "Anthropology [...] was a wake-up call for me to see the world in a different way".¹²

The open minds of many of our mainland students is not simply due to the vigor of our own training. Many mainland students have long had VPN on the mainland, Virtual Private Networks that enable them to hurdle the Great Firewall which blocks Chinese internet access to overseas sites; China is nowhere

10 See "What did China's first daughter find in America?", *The New Yorker*, April 6th, 2015.

11 This is apparently less true in other disciplines. In engineering, for example, mainland MA students may have no knowledge of the differences between Hong Kong and China, since this is not relevant to their academic studies, and thus some may be outraged at what they find. However, prospective MA students who seek to study anthropology or similar disciplines typically know what and how we teach and come to us for that reason.

12 MA graduates from the mainland in anthropology have taken a wide range of subsequent occupations, from becoming Hong Kong NGO workers, to insurance agents, to founders of various businesses on the mainland, to PhD students in anthropology at CUHK and at Cambridge and elsewhere.

near as stringent as North Korea in its blockage of information. Nonetheless, it seems clear that MA programs such as ours in anthropology, others at CUHK and Hong Kong, and, for that matter, in the world at large, serve as a crucial conduit for education beyond China for many inquisitive mainland students. The mainland government is no doubt well aware of this in allowing many of its citizens to study beyond China's bounds – they apparently seek a window beyond China for many of their brightest young people. If mainland authorities were to proclaim that “we will no longer allow mainland students to go to Hong Kong to study,” this spigot of students could be quickly turned off. Mainland authorities probably would not do this, because it seems likely that they are fully aware of the need for mainland students to study outside China to obtain a broader view of the world. But they certainly could. If this happens, anthropology in Hong Kong will lose its privileged position, to be in the same state as anthropology in much of the rest of the world, as a discipline under significant threat. However, the threat to anthropology in Hong Kong, and much more importantly, the transformation of Hong Kong at large, is more immediate and fundamental than this, as I will now discuss.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF HONG KONG

Hong Kong since 1997 has been a part of China. The “one country, two systems” formula has meant that Hong Kong has kept many of its own governing structures – its own currency, its own laws and courts, and its own educational system. However, Hong Kong has undergone great turmoil over the past few years, with massive protests and then the imposition of mainland-imposed law. Hong Kong is, as of this writing, being rapidly assimilated into mainland China in its regulations and institutions. Before returning to anthropology, allow me briefly to outline what has happened to Hong Kong.

In spring 2019, Hong Kong's Chief Executive, Carrie Lam, set forth a bill that could lead Hongkongers to be extradited to the mainland and tried in mainland courts. In a Hong Kong that has viewed its separation from institutions in mainland China as sacrosanct, this seemed profoundly threatening. The extradition bill led to massive demonstrations; on July 16, as many as two million of Hong Kong's 7.5 million people attended a protest¹³ In a society that has never allowed its Chief Executive to be elected by more than a small circle, demonstrations have been the only way that members of society can express their discontent over the years, as has often happened; but unlike earlier years, the government in summer 2019 largely ignored these protests. Protests intensified throughout fall 2019, and became more violent, with protesters destroying Hong Kong mass transit stations and vandalizing

13 *BBC News*, “Hong Kong protest: ‘nearly two million’ join demonstration”, June 17, 2019.

mainland-Chinese-owned banks; police were accused of engaging in brutality and sexual harassment. In all, 16,000 canisters of tear gas were fired at protesters,¹⁴ exposing virtually the entire urban population of Hong Kong.

In anthropology at CUHK, we worked hard as a department in fall 2019 to keep lines of communication open between undergraduate students, mostly from Hong Kong, and MA students, mostly from the mainland; they had intense discussions, but despite their different political backgrounds, civility was maintained. This came to an end in November, when the Chinese University of Hong Kong itself emerged as the site of intense clashes between the police and protesters, with police shooting tear gas and protesters throwing Molotov cocktails. The university was occupied by protesters for close to a week, after which the fall semester was ended early; CUHK then spent painful months repairing the massive damage to the university, costing some US\$ 9,000,000, with 75 buses damaged or destroyed (Sum and Raine 2020).

Many Hongkongers decried the violence against property, and sometimes against people, into which the protests descended. Protesters engaged in violence against property, such as the MTR mass transit system, because they saw this as the only way they could get the government to pay attention to their demands; but while protesters saw the MTR as being linked to the government, many Hongkongers depended on the MTR to get to their jobs. On the other hand, many on the mainland did not understand that the protests were not supported only by a few malcontents aided by “outside forces”, but by the majority of Hong Kong people. In one 2019 survey of Hongkongers, only 11% of respondents identified themselves as Chinese, with most others proclaiming themselves as Hongkongers; when asked if they were proud of being citizens of China, 71% of respondents answered “no”, with 90% aged 18-29 answering “no”.¹⁵ This underlying alienation from China, a society from which many of today’s Hongkongers had fled in earlier decades, is the major reason why the protests took place.¹⁶ It is also the major reason why China has reacted by suppressing all dissent in Hong Kong. Mainland Chinese authorities have not understood why Hongkongers have been so ungrateful to mainland China for all the economic help it has given Hong Kong over the past two decades. Nor

14 “Hong Kong police used crowd control weapons 30,000 times since June; over 6,000 arrested”, *Hong Kong Free Press*, December 10th, 2019.

15 “Hongkongers identifying as ‘Chinese’ at record low; under 10% of youth ‘proud’ to be citizens – poll”, *Hong Kong Free Press*, June 28th, 2019.

16 Some commentators speak of economic doldrums and real estate prices as also being key in understanding why these protests took place (“Tiny apartments and punishing work hours: the economic roots of Hong Kong’s protests”, *The New York Times*, July 22nd, 2019). Given Hong Kong’s vastly inflated real estate market, most young Hongkongers will never be able to buy an apartment. One cause of these high prices is wealthy mainland investors buying up apartments in Hong Kong.

have they understood why Hongkongers have not felt the deep love for “the motherland” that they themselves feel (see Mathews, Ma and Lui 2008), and why this love has not developed in the decades since Hong Kong was returned to China – why Hongkongers have not become closer to but rather more alienated from China in recent decades.

Protests largely came to a halt in spring 2020 because of Covid-19. On July 1st, 2020, the Chinese government set forth its own legislation for Hong Kong, the national security law, criminalizing four offenses – secession, subversion of state power, terrorism and collusion with foreign forces to endanger national security.¹⁷ This law is a violation of the “one country, two systems” formula whereby Hong Kong has managed its own internal affairs. However, it was necessary in Chinese eyes because of what the mainland saw as chaos in Hong Kong. The law has been primarily targeted at protesters and at democracy advocates and organizers – many opposition members of the legislative council, who resigned *en masse* in the wake of the law’s imposition, are now in jail. As a journalist has noted,

“Lawmakers and leading political figures who supported Western-style democracy have been ousted from office, are languishing in jail or on bail awaiting trial and ruled ineligible for election. Organisations perceived as sympathetic to such causes have been called out by Chinese state media and methodically forced or pressured to disband [...] The seemingly unaccountable resources being poured into enforcing the law and the trivial nature of some offences – among them stickers with words deemed subversive, songs sung at a rally, giving chocolate and hair clips to inmates – reveal the extent to which officials will go in the name of stamping out acts considered subversive.”¹⁸

The fact that this journalist, writing for the mainstream *South China Morning Post*, could write this is indicative of a remaining degree of freedom of expression, at least in English, one which remains as of 2023, as can be seen in such journalistic outlets as *The Hong Kong Free Press*. However, this is truer in English than in Chinese. *Apple Daily*, the leading voice of opposition to the Chinese Communist Party, was shut down in June 2021, and its founder, Jimmy Lai, along with some editors and editorial writers for the publication, languishes in jail. Chinese-language news organizations such as *Stand News* were also forced to disband.

17 “Explainer: 10 things to know about Hong Kong’s national security law – new crimes, procedures, and agencies”, *Hong Kong Free Press*, July 1st, 2020.

18 “With the national security law, I’m finally getting a taste of life in a communist country”, *The South China Morning Post*, September 21st, 2021.

The direct effect of the national security law has been relatively small, with 250 people arrested as of April 2023.¹⁹ But the effect on Hong Kong institutions such as the press, NGOs, and education has been large. Reporters Without Borders ranked Hong Kong 70th in the world in press freedom in 2019, toppling to 140th of 180 societies in the world by 2023.²⁰ The decline in press freedom is due in part to self-censorship: reporters unsure about where “the red line” is may not report on controversial issues. Many civil society organizations in Hong Kong have disbanded, and international NGOs such as Amnesty International have fled the city.²¹ National security law education with emphasis on patriotism toward China has become prominent in Hong Kong secondary schools.²² In the face of these changes, many Hongkongers have chosen to leave the city: as of early 2023, some 144,500 have obtained visas to settle in Great Britain; many more have gone to Canada, Australia, and Taiwan, a major factor in Hong Kong’s ongoing population loss over each of the past three years.²³

As for universities in Hong Kong, student unions, hotbeds of activist views during the protests, have been disbanded, and at several universities students have been arrested for protests or for activism of various sorts. In the university classroom, there has been an increase in caution as to what is said; there is a national security hotline that disgruntled students may call, leading teachers to watch their words. “‘There are no boundaries to research and studies provided that they are within the law’, a HKU spokesperson said”, as quoted in a report on Hong Kong University, Hong Kong’s flagship university;²⁴ but the problem is that no one, including the heads of universities in Hong Kong, knows where the law’s boundaries are. Baehr (2022) offers a dark assessment of the national security law’s reach in Hong Kong higher education both in terms of senior management’s use of the law to monitor faculty and in terms

19 “Hong Kong national security law: small number of people arrested or convicted in 3 years, justice chief says”, *South China Morning Post*, April 2nd, 2023. Other Hong Kong laws have been used to prosecute some 2019 protesters. “Police said they had arrested 10,279 people in connection with the 2019 social unrest. Of those, 2,899 were charged with offences such as rioting, wounding, illegal assembly and arson by the end of [...] October [2022]”, “Hong Kong protests: cases dropped after 3 years against some of the 6,000 arrested but not charged, lawmaker reveals”, *South China Morning Post*, March 21st, 2023.

20 “Hong Kong ranks 140th on 2023 International RSF Press Freedom Index Below Colombia, Cameroon”, *Hong Kong Free Press*, May 3rd, 2023.

21 “Timeline: 58 Hong Kong civil society groups disband following the onset of the security law”, *Hong Kong Free Press*, June 30th, 2022.

22 “National security education highlighted in over 50 Hong Kong secondary school profiles”, *Hong Kong Free Press*, December 7th, 2022.

23 “Hong Kong’s population drops for 3rd straight year, while city posts net outflow of 60,000 residents in 2022”, *South China Morning Post*, February 16th, 2023.

24 “One of Asia’s most prestigious universities is on the frontline of a battle for democracy”, CNN, September 19th, 2021.

of professors' own passive acquiescence to the new order. In fact, most university subjects are safe: classes in engineering or music or chemistry are unlikely to tread in dangerous areas; but for history or sociology or political science or anthropology, there is indeed potential danger. Will academic criticism of policies of the Chinese government result in one's firing or jailing? This has happened thus far only minimally, but how this unfolds in the future remains to be seen.²⁵

ANTHROPOLOGY IN HONG KONG'S FUTURE

As discussed earlier, anthropology in Hong Kong, unlike on the mainland, is based on critical thinking. As I wrote in February 2021,

“Critical thinking’ – training students to examine the evidence from multiple perspectives and reach their own carefully considered judgement – has long been seen as the holy grail of Hong Kong university teaching, as has incessantly been emphasized to professors in recent decades [...] However, as Hong Kong becomes more and more assimilated into mainland China [...] how long can this continue?”²⁶

One teacher in the department of Anthropology at CUHK decided that she would not teach about contemporary China, for it is too dangerous, and eventually left the department. Other teachers have continued to teach about contemporary China, including discussion of topics such as the Cultural Revolution and the Great Leap Forward; they do so in order to preserve academic freedom in the classroom. I myself teach Culture of Hong Kong and assign readings about the recent protests. I present multiple views, including those

25 It is often difficult to know why university and departmental decisions take place: was a given scholar denied tenure because of the controversial subject matter she was teaching and writing about, or because she published too little? Was an adjunct professor let go because of his controversial views or because of financial considerations? It was widely reported that the Government and Public Administration Department at Chinese University was restructured (“Two universities in Hong kong plan to restructure politics departments amid security law chill”, *Hong Kong Free Press*, May 30th, 2022.), something that seemed to some overtly political, since a number of prominent democracy activists were among its *alumni*. However, applications to the department drastically fell after the enactment of the national security law because most Hong Kong students no longer had any interest in working for the government; this was the direct administrative reason for its restructuring. In 2023, a scholar in the Department of History at Chinese University who had written extensively about the Tiananmen Square incident was denied a visa renewal by Hong Kong Immigration (“Historian sacked from University in Hong Kong after immigration officials decide not to renew her visa”, *South China Morning Post*, October 29th, 2023). This was indeed overtly political – a decision by Hong Kong Immigration rather than by CUHK itself.

26 “Academic Gordon Mathews: why I am staying in Hong Kong – for now”, *Hong Kong Free Press*, February 21st, 2021.

of mainland Chinese authorities as well as the pro-democracy camp, without explicitly advocating anything, but simply getting students to think more deeply for themselves. If I did this on the mainland, I would lose my job, I suspect. However, this has not yet happened in Hong Kong, and indeed, I have recently won a university-wide teaching award based partially on this class.

I am now retired although I still teach; I will continue teaching for a few more years. I am probably safe in my remaining years, but as for my younger colleagues, the long-term outlook is more ominous, as the Chinese government now apparently seeks to transform Hong Kong into simply one more city in China. A conservative anthropological colleague on the mainland has maintained to me that “Hong Kong is part of China, so it is only fitting that Hong Kong practice the same norms and follow the same rules as the rest of China”. Perhaps she is right – few countries on earth would allow a city under their jurisdiction to remain opposed to their norms and rules. But this also may signify, in an intellectual sense, the coming death of anthropology and liberal academic inquiry as a whole in Hong Kong.

On the other hand, however, these past two years have been a time of joy at CUHK – after years of Zoom calls and isolation, masks are gone and live classes are back in session, and the campus is full of students as lively as ever. My classes, including Culture of Hong Kong, have been full of student comments and questions – it is almost as if the protests and the national security law have not happened; students are as eager to learn as ever. Many students, seeing what has happened to Hong Kong, have indeed left the city, and more hope to leave. Most of us, however, continue to live our lives here and wait to see what may come.

The worries that I once had as a junior professor in Hong Kong facing the return to Chinese sovereignty to Hong Kong in 1997 did not come to pass. Various distinguished foreign professors warned me early in my employment at CUHK that I might soon see posters denouncing foreign professors, or that the Chinese military might come rolling down the highway from Shenzhen – I needed to be acutely careful, I was told. However, those things have not happened; instead, anthropology has been vigorous, and even now it flourishes in its day-to-day functioning: lively classes and seminar talks continue as they always have. The future today is cloudy. But the future has always been cloudy. Anthropology might wind up shuttered, and I may possibly wind up deported or in jail. But it is also at least possible that anthropology in Hong Kong might flourish over the next 30 years just as it has over the past 30 years. I have no basis for this hope other than my own experience over the past three decades, with my fears consistently proven unfounded. Just possibly, this might hold true for the next three decades as well.

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Receção da versão original / Original version	2022/04/22
Receção da versão revista / Revised version	2023/07/17
Aceitação / Accepted	2024/04/19