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Hong Kong Socialist Experimentation in the Colonial Era: Patriotic Schools, 1946-1976

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Abstract

This article describes an autonomous force that existed in the school system during Hong Kong colonial period from 1946 to 1976. In the colonial period, pro-Beijing patriotic schools served as a subordinate culture within schools and attempted to construct an alternative, socialist and People's Republic of China-centred (PRC-centred) identity by providing affordable education for ordinary people. This sociological-historical study provides an understanding of how these schools constructed an alternative culture that opposed the colonial government. It explains and records the socio-political background in which Hong Kong pro-Beijing 'patriots' (socialist/ leftists) set up education for children, the social history of the patriotic faction and its schools, the teaching and learning methods and the socialist strategies of patriotic education in colonial Hong Kong. The study illustrates the interplay between politics and education through a case study of pro-Beijing patriotic schools in Hong Kong.

Pro-Beijing patriotic schools were the only type of school that prepared students for the eventual rule of the PRC after the 1940s. The patriotic schools, together with other PRC-affiliated organizations, represented the influence of the PRC in Hong Kong. It was part of an organized process that was intended to shape consciousness systematically, develop knowledge and form attitudes. The interplay between socio-political development and education enables us to rethink the role that schools could and should play in present day Hong Kong.

Introduction

During the earliest stages of the study of critical education, a number of researchers adopted a top-down model to interpret the connection between education and power. They assumed that schooling reproduces asymmetrical social relations by indoctrinating with attitudes, a collective memory and the identities preferred by the ruling class (Giroux 1983, Wong 2006). This argument considers the dominant and the subordinate segments of society as two opposing sectors with no connection or similarities on a socio-cultural level (Wong 2006). It also ignores the autonomous forces that exist in the school system and prevents us from identifying the possible incorporation and remaking of subordinate culture as two distinct processes in hegemonic strategies.

This paper examines the use of patriotic education in social reproduction in colonial Hong Kong. A substantial literature produced in the field of history of education has focused on official policy-related issues. The shortcoming in this macro-level overview is that marginal and alternative education systems and practices do not receive appropriate attention. The purpose of the present study is to demonstrate an alternative perspective on the macro system. The case of the pro-Beijing schools illustrates the way in which the subordinate culture helped to construct a pro-PRC identity under the rule of the British Hong Kong government.

This study explores and records the socio-political background in which pre-Beijing 'patriots' (socialist/leftist/communists) in Hong Kong established education for children, the social history of the patriotic schools, the teaching and learning methods used and the socialist strategies of patriotic education. It describes the educational practices and curriculum employed in these schools and also examines them to see if they incorporated indigenous Hong Kong

culture. These patriotic schools can be considered to be an example of autonomous forces that existed in the school system, and that opposed the hegemonic strategies of the British Hong Kong government.

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE RISE OF THE PATRIOTIC FACTION AND ITS SCHOOLS

This paper describes pro-Beijing patriotic education experiments that occurred between 1946 and 1976, from the end of the Second World War to the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. The year 1946 is chosen as the starting point because it is the year when pro-Beijing patriotic schools started to be established. For the members of the pro-Beijing faction, the Cultural Revolution heightened tensions with the Hong Kong Government and polarized the attitudes of the public, while leading to the discrediting of Maoism and the opening up of China. Thus the political climate was very different after 1976. For this reason it is appropriate to focus the period of 1946-76 as a distinct historical period with respect to the subject of this paper.

Over the period 1946 to 1976, hugely significant forces began to transform Hong Kong, its society, economy and the role of state. Between 1946 and 1976, the population expanded eight-fold (from about 600,000 to about 4 million), increasing the demand for schooling. Education was neither free nor compulsory and was largely left in private hands. Nine-year free and compulsory education was only provided after 1979. In spite of this neglect by the government, Chinese continued to migrate to Hong Kong. Political campaigns natural disasters and economic hardship in mainland China did not encourage many Chinese to make the return journey. The society of Hong Kong was largely isolated from the People's Republic of China (PRC), leaving a group of pro-Beijing forces working more or less by themselves in Hong Kong to maintain and extend the influence of the PRC Government.

With the shortage of social welfare, the increasing demand for affordable education and the connection with China on a socio-cultural and emotional level the pro-Beijing faction and its schools could have been expected to achieve popularity with ease. However, the development of the pro-Beijing faction and its schools was not a story of uniform success.

Before the founding of the PRC in the 1940s, a number of socialist sympathizers had taken up residence in Hong Kong. They made use of the accessibility of Hong Kong as an outlet to connect the communist base areas with the outside world, through both propaganda and trade (Carron 1971). They were considered a pro-Beijing, socialist, China-centred and anti-colonial force by the Hong Kong Government during the colonial era. The members were called 'leftist',

‘socialist’, ‘communists’ or ‘patriots’ by the local people, usually depending on the political stance of those making the description.

Dozens of pro-Beijing patriotic schools were established in Hong Kong during the 1940s to 1950s, including Chung Ye School, Nan Fang School, Heung To, Mong Kok Workers’ Children’s School, Fishermen’s Children’s School, Hong Wah Middle School, Chung Wah School, Sun Kiu School, Fukien School, Tai Tak School, Tai Tung School, Nanshan Public School, Pui Kiu Middle School and many others. They proclaimed their loyalty to the PRC government after 1949. According to a colonial government report released in 2005 (after being kept secret for 30 years), the pro-Beijing faction and its schools in Hong Kong were controlled by a Party Committee that was subordinate to the Guangdong Provincial Party Committee, which also controlled the communist labour circle in Hong Kong (FCO 1974). In March 1970, there were 44 patriotic schools in over 90 separate premises providing education to 21,164 students. As most schools housed as many as 5 per cent more students than were registered, and a few thousand more students studied in unregistered patriotic premises, in schools in the Walled City or in various premises owned by the trade unions, they probably provided approximately 37,700 places, and constituted about 3.1 per cent of the total student population (FCO 1974). These schools were financially self-supporting until 1967. It is recorded that they received HK\$4 million from the PRC government in 1970 (FCO 1974). The main feature of these schools was the use of ideological conditioned educational practices. It was the only type of school that had a mission in line with the political stance of the Beijing government, and it aimed to prepare students for the anticipated reunification with the PRC.

The pro-Beijing educators believed education played a significant role in establishing the cultural and ideological conditions for socialist revolution. In addition to responding positively to the public pronouncements and calls of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), these patriotic schools provided inexpensive education for the lower classes. Over the years they attempted to build an alternative to the dominant models of education and to provide socialist education in Hong Kong. Their efforts represented the Chinese socialists’ influence in Hong Kong, as they attempted to challenge the practices and culture of capitalism and colonialism. They aimed to develop the knowledge and anti-hegemonic forces necessary to reorganize production and society in colonial and capitalist Hong Kong.

Patriotic schools were successful from the 1940s to mid-1960s, partly because they managed to combine Chinese patriotism with a modern school system (as opposed to the *si shu xue tang*, old-style Chinese schools which were popular in pre-war Hong Kong), but mainly because of the shortage of educational places and the rapid growth of the local population. Thousands of students, including adult students, received education in the day and/ or night patriotic schools before the mid-1970s. Apart from providing day school education ranging from kindergarten to secondary schools, they had evening schools, workers’ schools and various training courses for adults. In October 1946, the patriotic faction even established a higher educational institute, Tat Tak College, to prepare talented individuals to serve as administrative officers (or senior officers, *ganbu*) in China. In two and a half years, six or seven batches of students, in total about 100 students, were sent to serve the CCP on the mainland, (Zhou 2002).

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SOCIALIST AND PATRIOTIC EDUCATION

Any consideration of patriotic education in Hong Kong has to take into account that it was a part of an organized process to shape consciousness systematically, develop knowledge and form attitudes. The implementation of patriotic and political education was in fact illegal, as it was promoting loyalty to another authority apart from the Hong Kong British Government. Shortly after the founding of the PRC, the Special Bureau of the Education Department (SBED) was established to work with the Special Branch of the police to study communist activity in schools. Regulations and educational policies were imposed to establish control over politics in school (Sweeting 1993). Three patriotic schools, the Dade academy and two Workers' Children's Schools were closed by force on the grounds that they taught political subjects (Zhou 2002). Deportations of teachers and principals, closures of schools and raids on schools for illegal teaching materials were fairly common in the 1950s (Zhou 2002). In the eyes of the Hong Kong government, education in these patriotic schools was strongly connected with political indoctrination and communist infiltration. The pro-Beijing faction's schools functioned to foster alternative loyalty by teaching pro-PRC socialist values, norms and concepts. In this sense, they were resisting the hegemonic strategies imposed by the British Hong Kong Government.

These patriotic schools believed that education in capitalist society serves to make people yield meekly to capitalist exploitation and oppression (PKMS 1976, Wong 2002). Education in the patriotic schools, they felt, should imbue the new generation with communist ideology and give them the necessary knowledge for building socialism and communism. In this sense, it had to be based on a new educational theory and methods that were radically different from those of the colonial and capitalist society, and had to have entirely new content. They believed that the remnants of the old ideas in the minds of people and the bourgeois ideology infiltrating from outside would impede the building of socialism and communism.

In order to draw a picture of the efforts to produce a pro-Beijing identity and culture, examples are drawn from the social history of a few patriotic schools in Hong Kong, including Hong Wah School, Fukien Secondary School, Pui Kiu Middle School, Mongkok Workers' Children's School and Heung Tao School. Six aspects of their educational practices are examined: (a) attitudes towards public examination; (b) textbook and teaching materials; (c) assemblies and talks; (d) class teacher lessons; (e) extra-curricular activities; and (f) special projects and joint school activities.

ATTITUDE TOWARDS PUBLIC EXAMINATIONS

What distinguished the patriotic schools in the colonial era was that they supported the Beijing government. Their withdrawal from the process of public examinations was their strongest protest against the colonial education system. Members of the patriotic schools thought that the public examinations in Hong Kong were a way of controlling school knowledge (*Wen Wei Pao* 1952) and part of the government's 'slavish educational systems' (FCO 1974). Their students' withdrawal from sitting for public examinations was a declaration of the patriotic schools' political stance and indicated that individual interests were subordinated to largest interests. Without taking the local public examinations, many of these schools' students ended up continuing their studies in Mainland China and then staying on in the Mainland to work. When the PRC Government discouraged students from going to the Mainland after the failure of the Great Leap Forward in 1959 and the nature disasters of the following three years, these students were forced to seek employment in Hong Kong. A larger number of the patriotic school students

then sat for local public examinations. Many other students preferred to work in PRC-related enterprises or organizations.

TEXTBOOKS AND TEACHING MATERIALS

On April 18, 1958, a raid was conducted on the library of the Pui Kiu Middle School (PKMS) (Zhou 2002). The officer-in-charge of the Hong Kong Island Section of the Inspectorate of Education visited the school with five assistants. Nineteen books were confiscated and four were used as evidence of the ‘mismanagement of the school’ in a warning letter addressed to the school supervisor on May 13 (Zhou 2002). On the basis of these and other accusations, such as hiring of unregistered teachers, and discussion of political issues in school meetings, the principal of PKMS was deported on August 6, to Lo Wu. His teaching registration and qualifications were cancelled (PKMS, 1996).

In the 50th Anniversary Issue of the PKMS school journal, two pictures of graduate students, in 1967 and 1968, are printed, with students holding the Little Red Books (saying of Chairman Mao) in front of the camera (PKMS, 1996). Students studied the *Little Red Book* as an important guidebook for life. These schools were conducted as extensions of the Mainland educational system preparing for the ‘reconstruction of the Motherland’. Students were exposed to experience and knowledge which were different from that of other Hong Kong students, who were considered as being exposed to the ‘corruption of capitalism’.

ASSEMBLIES AND TALKS

Despite the strict limits laid down in the Government’s education ordinances, the enforcement of these regulations varied from case to case. Those who implemented and operated patriotic education were constantly at risk of being prosecuted, arrested, disqualified and deported. Yet, patriotic schools still held their morning assembly with talks and discussion on the achievements of contemporary China, the news of New China and even debates on socialism (FCO 1974, Lau 2008).

Among all these activities, the most controversial was the national flag-raising ceremony. From the 1940s, almost all vernacular schools (except the government Chinese school) raised the flag of China and/ or the UK and paid respect to either or both pictures of Dr. Sun Yat-sen (the founder of the Republic of China) and Mao Zedong (Zhou 2002). In 1948 an amendment of the Education Ordinance provided the Director of Education with the power to refuse or cancel the registration of any teacher, close any school and control the curricula and textbooks of all schools to prevent Communist influence in schools.

No salute, song, dance, slogan, uniform, flag, document or symbol which, in the opinion of the Director (of Education), is any way of a political or partly political nature should be used, displayed or worn, as the case may be, upon any school premises or upon the occasion of any schools activity except with the permission of the Director and in

accordance with such conditions as he may see fit to impose. (Education Department 1971).

However raising the national flag on May Day was kept as conventional practice of the patriotic schools and no warning was ever received from the Government prior to 1958 (Zhou 2002).

In a substantial number of school journals of a patriotic school, Pui Kiu Middle School (PKMS), I have seen pictures depicting the flag raising ceremony held in assemblies. Such practices were repeated once or twice a year in PKMS and were reported in the school journal of PKMS (PKMS 1996). Even though the flag raising ceremony, the singing of the national anthem, and saluting the flag and the leaders of China was prohibited by the Education Ordinance, patriotic schools observed this practice on May 1 and the Chinese National Day (October 1).

In the end, a Government notice was issued to schools on April 24, 1958 by the Education Department reminding them that, 'Schools are not allowed to hang any flag with a political flavour'. This act of the Education Department was considered a humiliation to the Chinese nation. No explanation was given, even after repeated enquiries made by schools. In the end, eight patriotic schools raised their flag on the day as usual and received warning letters from the Government, requiring an explanation (Zhou 2002). To these patriotic schools, the decision to keep their tradition of national flag-raising, at the risk of being prosecuted of their pro-Beijing identity. The colonial Government's intention of suppressing and regulating the activities of patriotic schools strengthened their allegiance to the PRC.

CLASS TEACHER LESSON

Political discussion was carried out in the regular classes of many patriotic schools. Reading or sharing supplementary materials from the Mainland, such as the *People's Daily*, the *Little Red Book* and Communist handbooks, were technically illegal in the colonial days (FCO1974). However, every student in these patriotic schools read pro-Beijing newspapers, usually *Da Gung Bao*, *Wen Wei Bao* and sometimes *People's Daily*, together with their class teacher every morning for approximately 10 to 15 minutes in the class teacher lesson.

EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

As the career paths of the students were mostly pre-arranged, the students of these patriotic schools were free from the pressure of public examinations. Students therefore had time for a great variety of learning experiences. Voluntary organisations in patriotic schools played a prominent role in maintaining connections between their students and the working classes. Students were taken to work in farms and factories to have a taste of peasant life and the life of the workers. It was also arranged that senior students could work for the schools and the working class on regular basis, for instance, by holding private tutoring classes to teach workers mathematics and writing, or doing chores in schools, or building or extending schools premises.

JOINT SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

Special projects were organised with three goals. The first goal was to consolidate the relations between the schools and the group sponsoring them. The second was to promote socialist ideology and to strengthen students' faith in its norms and doctrine. The third was to enhance students' understanding of contemporary China. The first goal was achieved with activities such as home visits, the establishment of a parent-teacher association and its activities, the founding of an alumni association and mass dances and parades held in collaboration with other patriotic schools. The second goal was mainly supported by numerous community service activities. The third goal was attained through regular tours to China. Such tours were organised even during the turbulent years of the Cultural Revolution (Lau 2008).

CONFRONTING THE GOVERNMENT AND THE SOCIETY

In many Asian countries nationalistic education is part of their civic education (Lee 2008). However, education in colonial Hong Kong was basically 'apolitical' (Fairbrother 2006, Lee 2004, Leung 1997, Sweeting 1993, Watson 1982), 'denationalised' (Wong 2002) and examination-orientated, emphasizing economic and pragmatic values. Both public and private schools were forbidden by the Education Ordinance to teach politics as a subject or to inject politics into other subjects (Sweeting 1993). Other preventive measures were also introduced to prevent the infiltration of politics into education: all textbooks had to be approved by the Education Department, all extra-curricular activities were supposed to be reported, inspectors from the Department made sudden visits to private schools from time to time, violations could be punished by the deregistration of the school and deportation of members of the school needed no legal procedure as long the consent of the Governor was obtained (Sweeting 1993, Zhou 2002). Mainstream schools in Hong Kong steered clear of politics and the political campaigns undertaken in the PRC were rarely mentioned in schools before the 1990s (Lee 2004, Sweeting 1993). The underlying principle that contributed to the apolitical and denationalised educational system in Hong Kong was the concern for legitimacy (Kan 2007, Luk 1991, Sweeting 1993, Vickers 2000, Vickers et al. 2003).

The patriotic schools rejected the government curriculum. To them, it represented the ideology of the British Hong Kong Government and was in conflict with the fundamental principles of the PRC government. Hong Kong was in their eyes a foreign-ruled capitalist colony, while the PRC was a nationalistic socialist sovereign state. Education in patriotic school contributed substantially to cultivating a sense of Chinese socialist identity and loyalty to the PRC. In the pro-Beijing faction, schools were expected to supplement and perhaps even replace families in socializing the new generation into the new role of national citizenry. The content of their patriotic education was wide in range, including knowledge, values, attitudes, and the group identification necessary for a political community.

In spite of the closure of several schools and the de-registration of a few schools, there remained dozens of pro-Beijing patriotic schools in Hong Kong throughout the last fifty years of the colonial era. While the government suppressed some socialist organisations, they allowed some others to continue. The government crackdown was selective. For instance, leftist papers and trade unions continued to function. The existence of the pro-Beijing schools was an area where the authorities exercised discretion.

The wave of harsh governance measures directed against the pro-Beijing faction in the 1950s helped to hold the local socialist groups together. In the context of the suppression by the Hong Kong Government, difference between various branches organizations and societies of the pro-Beijing faction were not seen as particularly significant. Exogenous pressure from the Government and society pushed them together and consolidated the organization and composition of the faction.

Tension between the socialist schools and the Hong Kong Government soared with the increasing pressure of Cold War politics, and this exacerbated the tone of the anti-colonial rhetoric. The turning point in the relationship between the pro-Beijing faction and the British Government of Hong Kong and mainstream Hong Kong society came in 1967. After the leftist inspired riots of 1967, the pro-Beijing socialist faction was isolated as they lost the sympathy of the public.

Although the 1967 riots originally arose from workers' grievances and labour disputes, the confrontation between the pro-Beijing workers and the British Hong Kong Government was marked by spasmodic violence and bombing. Hundreds of bombs, genuine and fake, were placed in the streets with signboards proclaiming the pro-Beijing and anti-colonial stance of the people who placed them (Zhou 2002). Students and teachers were found to be involved in printing and distributing inflammatory leaflets and in the manufacture and planting of fake and real bombs. During the confrontation, 37 patriotic schools teachers and 217 students were arrested and the headmasters of certain patriotic schools were detained under the Emergency Regulations. When a student was injured while making a bomb in the Chung Wa Middle School, the Government closed and deregistered the school (FCO 1974). Whether justified or not, the resentment of the population against the local pro-Beijing faction was aroused.

Because of the 1967 riots, a large number of the local inhabitant were alienated from the PRC government, and popular support for the Hong Kong Government increased (Bray 2001). The government claimed that the teachings and the education provided by these pro-Beijing schools were political and full of communist indoctrination. After 1967, such accusations and the suppressive measures imposed were increasingly accepted by the public and considered fair.

With the expansion of free compulsory education in the 1970s, great emphasis was placed on the ranking system. Only schools whose students had excellent academic performance in the public examinations were popular. Competition between schools and student was fierce, as jobs and advanced-school placements were rigorously based on the ranking system for schools. With no tradition of taking public examinations, a low percentage of trained graduate teachers, no support from the Hong Kong Government, and inability to enrol enough students, many patriotic schools closed down in the 1970s. In the end, only six were left in 1991 when the Direct Subsidy Scheme (a new Government sponsorships system) was introduced.

CONCLUSION

This article describes the actions of the pro-Beijing patriotic groups in Hong Kong and their involvement with education, including the ways they used to theorize and to experiment with education. Their schools positioned themselves in opposition to much of what was institutionalized by the Government. They believed that the Government curriculum represented the ideology and the benefit of the British Hong Kong Government, which was in direct conflict with the fundamental principles of the PRC government. The original commitment of the

patriotic faction was nationalistic, anti-colonial and socialist. The patriotic schools reacted to colonial dominance by providing a curriculum of criticism and renewal. They interpreted mainstream education as a product of capitalism, and as part of the colonial government's attempt to foster pro-British identity and culture. The patriotic schools offered an alternative curriculum which contested the Government's colonial curriculum.

Two theoretical implications can be derived from the complicated story told in this paper. Autonomous forces should not be ignored when examining the notion of hegemony to anatomize education and power. Schools, teachers and students are important components of education. As shown in the historical narrative set out above, this understanding is crucial, and there is no guarantee that the culture of the dominated will be smoothly made or remade according to the rulers' directions. Even though there were official measures and regulations directed against them, the patriotic schools still survived and continued to provide an alternative form of education. However, in the long run the hegemonic strategies of the pro-Beijing patriotic faction were unsuccessful, as reflected in the diminishing size and scale of their schools. These pro-Beijing educators overlooked the importance of accommodating the culture and needs of the subordinated indigenous group in their educational policies and practices, and failed to see the connections between power and education in an interactive and reciprocal manner. This theoretical blind spot prevented them from having a more nuanced approach to state formation and education in colonial Hong Kong.

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