

## Myths of the competitiveness of Hong Kong university students

Wong, Wai-Kwok Benson

*Published in:*  
Chinese Education and Society

*DOI:*  
[10.2753/CED1061-1932450204](https://doi.org/10.2753/CED1061-1932450204)

Published: 01/03/2012

*Document Version:*  
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Wong, W.-K. B. (2012). Myths of the competitiveness of Hong Kong university students: A mainstream media perspective. *Chinese Education and Society*, 45(2), 60-74. <https://doi.org/10.2753/CED1061-1932450204>

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**Myths of the Competitiveness of Hong Kong University Students:  
A Mainstream Media Perspective**

Since the rise of China in the twenty-first century, its political and economic power has not only brought the opportunities for development in Mainland China to its surrounding areas; it has also had an impact on the generations in local communities. Hong Kong has particularly taken the brunt. In terms of the prospect of the city, an issue of concern to adults in Hong Kong is whether the younger generation in the region is aware of, and can respond to, the challenges brought about by the rapid development of Mainland China.

After Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government and its socio-political and economic elites have depended politically and economically on the Mainland, thereby emerging a mentality of which "the Mainland's momentum is increasing and Hong Kong is unsustainable." Some tertiary institutions and the business sector have cooperated more actively to enhance the competitiveness of students. For example, Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) set up a "Student Competitiveness Development Committee" in November 2005, which can be regarded as a cooperative effort between local institutions and the business community to enhance the competitiveness of university students. We can see from PolyU press releases that, to a certain extent, the drive for university student competitiveness is the university authorities' enthusiastic response to a discourse that has been cooked up by the local capitalists:

To further enhance the competitiveness and all-round development of PolyU students, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University has established a Student Competitiveness Development Committee (SCDC), with the support of public and business leaders.

The Committee...includes Dr. Michael Yip, chairman of Ocean Grand Holdings Limited and of the SCDC, Mr. Glory Wan, Executive Director and General Manager of Texment Fashions Limited and Vice Chairman of the SCDC, Mr. Wilson Tang, Executive Director of BioEm Innovation Group and member of the SCDC, Prof. Poon Chung-kwong, PolyU President, and Mr. Alexander Tzang, PolyU Executive Vice President.

At the ceremony, President Poon expressed his sincere gratitude to the business community for their kind support. He said, "Being a leader in offering application-oriented academic programs, PolyU places great emphasis on enhancing student competitiveness to keep pace with the ever-changing needs of the market. We are most honored to have received the support from many business leaders in establishing the SCDC, which is set to mark a new chapter in furthering our commitment to this important area."

The Committee will coordinate with the University's overall strategic development plan and recommend to PolyU on how to improve its students' competitiveness and all-round development. In addition, through the committee members' personal networks, it will also help

PolyU open up more opportunities for cooperation with industrial and commercial enterprises, and roll out more student development activities to help students broaden their horizons and maintain an advantage in a society with a knowledge-based economy. Comprised of 16 to 25 members, most members of the SCDC are prominent business leaders, but four PolyU members will also be enlisted; they will serve for a term of two years.<sup>1</sup>

It can be seen from the above quotation that enhancing students' competitiveness is primarily an initiative of the local business community, who build relationships with universities through their social networks and continually emphasize that improving the competitiveness of students is the only avenue to ensure that they have a bright future and sustainable development. In addition, even though a university education is to emphasize the development of the whole person and independent thinking, and not merely to degenerate into a yet another vocational training center, the university's senior management deliberately sought consistency with the values of the business sector. When the business sector brought up student competitiveness, the university naturally responded cooperatively. In fact, the members of the committee were mainly business people; members from the university played only a decorative role.

The role of the commercialized media, other than to provide an unceasingly supply of information as entertainment, is to be the mouthpiece of the state and the capitalists. Through the continuous reporting and reconstruction of certain social phenomena, they permeate the society's expectations and vision (see Louw, 2005). Therefore, in the words of some contemporary media, facing both opportunities and challenges makes them aware that the only option to maintain Hong Kong's prosperity and development is to continue entering this competition with Mainland China, and it cannot lag behind. Early in the twenty-first century, the mainstream media therefore began to construct and interpret the city's prospect in relation to human resources training. Deploying an analysis of printed media's reporting, this article aims to identify and interpret how the media engage in a discourse in the light of understanding the "competitiveness of university students," and then to deconstruct and delineate the meanings behind the discourse and its associated phenomena.

This article is divided into three parts: First, an attempt to explore and summarize the academic literature on the nature and content of "enhancing the competitiveness of university students" and then, using Hong Kong printed media's (mostly newspapers) reports on the competitiveness of university students, pinpoint the premises, positions, and perspectives behind the media coverage. Finally, the relevant texts are cited that question the discourse about "enhancing the competitiveness of university students" and the extended political and cultural meanings.

### **The Nature of the Competitiveness of University Students**

While the mainstream media constantly report information about the competitiveness of university students, there is rather little inquiry in the literature about the related social and economic phenomena, and it mainly concentrates on Mainland China. It is worth noting that there is a close connection made between enhancing competitiveness to increasing employment opportunities.

Zhang (2004) interpreted competitiveness in terms of enhancing an individual's abilities with the aim of increasing employment opportunities. At the beginning of his article, he indicated that "the need for employment and to find a position can be said to be a major motivation for students to go to college, especially

with the implementation of paying school tuition; students must both choose and be chosen for employment, they must find employment on their own, and there is increasing pressure in terms of employment.” (Zhang 2004:41) Whereas another key factor for students in Hong Kong receiving university education is to be trained in independent and analytical thinking, and as a key process of personal growth and development, many times in the Mainland, a university education is simply regarded as a tool; college is a training center for high-end professions. Contemporary university students in the Mainland are no longer assigned to specified work units after graduation, and the number of students enrolling in college has steadily increased since 2003, causing the public concern about the difficulties of employment of university students.

Similarly, Zhao (2006) also linked employment to competitiveness, and provided more specific explanations regarding the competitiveness of university students and employment, including that (1) the competitiveness of university students is equivalent to the viability of an enterprise in economics, (2) individuals and groups have relative advantages in the employment market, and (3) the job placement rate of university students has become a key indicator in determining competitiveness. In addition, Zhao brought up the idea of “today’s learning for tomorrow’s development” when addressing how to enhance the competitiveness of university students. Wang (2008) cited a case in the United States and put forward that local “university students tend to view employment as a personal matter and that, very early on, they must consider their future and engage in long-term planning” (p. 191), but the latter part of the article made no specific or systematic explanation of the relationship between personal career planning and competitiveness. Zhang (2009) stressed that some university students have a mentality that fails to respond to challenges presented by the social and economic environment. He pointed out that:

With industrialization, commercialization and the development of information technology presently accelerating the pace of life in society, there are increasing pressures in their studies and increasingly intense competition for further education and employment, which have a huge impact on the lifestyle and mental state of university students, especially for university students in fierce competition for jobs. If they lack normal psychological counseling and education, it is easy for psychologically vulnerable students to develop psychological distortions, character defects, and personality disorders (p. 191).

The assumption behind Zhang’s discussion is that most university students presently lack an awareness of the outside world, which is coupled with an inability to adapt to changes in the non-school environment so that they not only lack competitiveness, but are also even described as having obstacles to personal growth and psychological development. Ge (2009) used a popular political term in Mainland China, “scientific development perspective”, in viewing the competitiveness of university students. Unfortunately, when he repeatedly emphasized that “to enhance the competitiveness of university students, and promote their full development, we must build a learning platform based on modernized technological and cultural knowledge” (p. 322), he provided no analysis of the relationship between his proposal “to adopt a flexible learning system, combining academic education with non-academic education, and to encourage innovation in learning, give full play to the propagation functions of the Internet, correspondence courses, and modern distance-learning education” (ibid.) and

enhancing the competitiveness of university students.

Looking at the competitiveness of university students through observations and discussions in the Mainland, it seems that most of them focus on how to improve individuals' level of knowledge in disciplines and professions, support a proper mentality and attitude when looking for work, and adapt and respond to the rapidly changing economic environment as early as possible. They directly link these to obtaining employment and enhancing competitiveness to increase the successful employment rate of students. From the point of view of choosing a career, the views in the Mainland are not very controversial.

When interpreting and analyzing Hong Kong newspaper reports on student competitiveness, however, it was found that some common techniques were used to construct and consolidate the notion that university students must and should have a strong competitive edge; otherwise, the whole generation, the whole community, and the entire region will have no future and no hope. Reflected between the lines was the hegemony of the old generation over the new generation of those with social status over people recently in college. In other words, the older generation with social status has been repeatedly instructing, advising, warning, and/or worrying about the lack of competitiveness of the new generation of university students, so that the latter must transform or adapt to the meaning, ideas, views, and perspectives of the former, in order to respond to demands upon them by society (the society created by this older generation with higher social status). From a cultural point of view, since there is still a respect for, and attention to, the authority of elders in East Asia, the phenomenon of those higher in status and older being superior to those lower in status/younger is even more apparent.

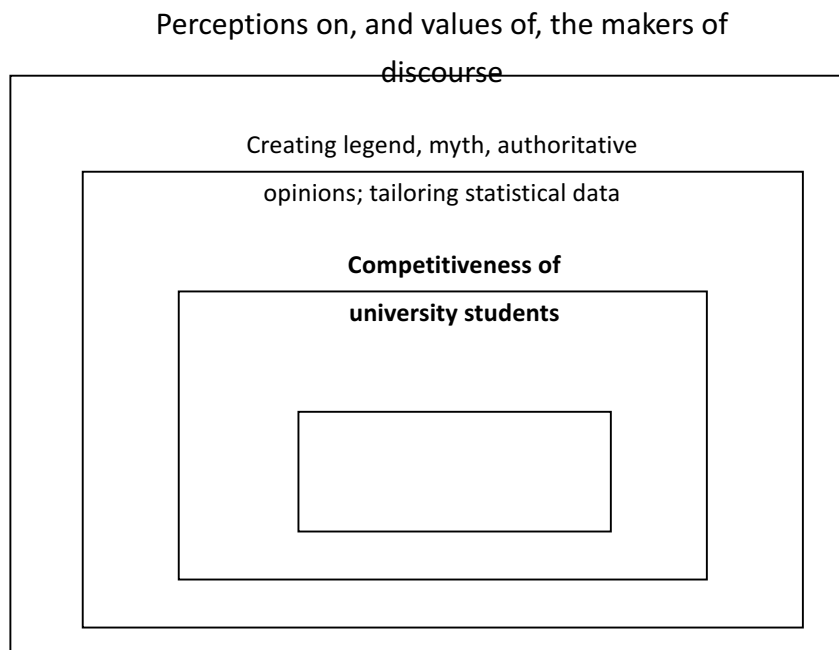
## **How the Media Interpret the “Competitiveness of University Students”**

### ***Research Methods***

For this study, reports in major Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese newspapers from 2006 to 2009 were selected for a critical discourse analysis regarding the “competitiveness of university students,” and they were classified and interpreted according to the following questions:

- (1) Who is saying that the competitiveness of university students must be enhanced?
- (2) Why must competitiveness be enhanced?
- (3) With which group of people are they competing?
- (4) How is competitiveness to be enhanced?

According to an analysis of the texts, the phrase “competitiveness of university students” can be understood in the framework of Figure 1 (see Fairclough, 1995). A region's political, economic and social context constitutes a manufacturer of discourse that mainly reflects the elite, upper class in society. Based on their point of view and ideas, the media then create a series of related authoritative opinions, perspectives, myths, stories, and statistics to rationalize and create the necessity of accepting a discourse on the “competitiveness of university students.”



(Figure 1) Analytical Framework for the Phrase “Competitiveness of University Students”

The critical discourse analysis is not only focused on the content of the discourse; attention is also placed on the language used and the scenarios created by those engaging in the discourse, the value judgments behind the discourse and the positions they reflected, as well as the obvious or hidden agendas found between the lines. In addition, emphasis was placed on the underlying politics of the discourse, whether the speakers are manipulating, dominating, or discriminating against the receivers. To add other viewpoints to this rather hegemonic discourse, some newspaper articles from Taiwan have also been selected to deepen the entire discussion.

### ***Who Is Saying It?***

Many pro-Beijing newspapers repeatedly stressed that integration with China is very important to enhancing competitiveness, including *Ta Kung Pao* which, on the theme of internships in the Mainland, emphasized that these were key to enhancing competitiveness.

Recently there have been quite a few reports in the Hong Kong media that more and more Hong Kong college graduates value finding internship opportunities in the Mainland; some organized group internships in the Mainland are enjoying broader popularity, and the numbers of participants and organized groups continually reach new highs. An analysis indicates that, in a broader sense, the increasingly close relationship between Hong Kong and the Mainland is an undeniable factor. For many multinational corporations hiring in Hong Kong, the biggest incentive is that employees from Hong Kong can go to the Mainland and manage effectively in accordance with the company's style. If employees from Hong Kong had no such advantage, generally multinational companies would go directly to the Mainland to find management personnel and not rely on Hong Kong employees, the labor costs of which are far higher than those from the Mainland. To meet this demand, college graduates have joined these Mainland internships simply in the hope of gaining more Mainland experience

and more easily developing their individual strengths and expertise (*Ta Kung Pao*, September 17, 2009, p. A18).

Similarly, *Wen Wei Po*, another pro-Beijing newspaper wrote on the subject of “Hong Kong’s students must strengthen their competitiveness,” using a survey by a major universities to highlight the importance of competitiveness. Between the lines, however, was a view of university students as labor and a more vague implication that competitiveness relies on maintaining cheap labor.

A survey released yesterday by Hong Kong Baptist University and the Human Resources Management Association made a rare comparison between the wages of Hong Kong and Mainland enterprises. Given the trend towards the economic integration of the two areas, this attempt is worth confirming...Hong Kong should recognize the challenge it faces from the Mainland in terms of cheap labor costs; it must accelerate economic restructuring and improve the quality of its work force in order for the regional economy to stay ahead of the competition...

...Twenty years ago, a flood of migrant workers began in the Mainland, with a large influx of less-educated and lower-skilled rural population surging into the Pearl River Delta and other places to make a living, but also providing plenty of cheap labor for Hong Kong manufacturing industries migrating northward. Today, the flood of migrant workers has subsided, replaced in the job market by university students, who improve the quality of the labor force. The cheap wages of Mainland university students further highlight the disadvantage of high-cost Hong Kong wages...<sup>2</sup> (*Wen Wei Po*, October 24, 2006).

In addition, they also adopt the viewpoints of some social and religious celebrities to affirm the perspective established by the media, although it is difficult to know whether the text reflects the original intent of the respondents. For example, the *Wen Wei Po* interviewed Enoch Lin, a senior pastor in the Baptist church of Hong Kong, who said:

People in Hong Kong must view business and market competitiveness from the Greater China perspective; Mainland university students are becoming more and more competitive. Other than having a little confidence in their English, Hong Kong students may otherwise be weaker than they. We have to face reality and change our previous “Greater Hong Kong’s mentality”. People in Hong Kong need a farther-reaching view; in the future, more and more Mainland students will work in Hong Kong (*Wen Wei Po*, April 25, 2009, p. C03).

Many local institutions with economic and social ties to the Mainland also responded positively:

The “Building a New World” summer internship group for university students arranged by organizations including the Hong Kong Youth Federation and New World Development Co., Ltd. hopes to help Hong Kong graduates understand situation in the country and to enhance their

future competitiveness through internships in the Mainland. It is reported that the internship opportunities provided by Mainland enterprises in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Dalian covering the fields of banking, chambers of commerce, building materials, real estate, law, television, and more, and the internships will be six weeks long (*Shantou Daily*, March 16, 2009, p. 2).

### ***Why Enhance the Competitiveness of University Students?***

With the integration of China and Hong Kong, a great deal of Hong Kong's economic activity has migrated north; coupled with the Mainland's rapid economic development and the stagnation of local economic activity (mainly industrial and commercial), going north has become Hong Kong university students' only avenue for personal career development.

With the northward migration of almost all Hong Kong manufacturing, there is also a great northward trend of continually increasing interaction between Hong Kong and the Mainland in the financial, logistic, tourism, and retailing sectors. University graduates previously held the view that the northward migration of manufacturing had little impact on them because, after graduation, they would not and did not need to go into the manufacturing sector. But now the situation is completely different; no matter which industry you go into, you must meet a requirement of having a deep understanding about the Mainland. If you do nothing else today, even if you temporarily get to remain in your position, with people coming up right behind you, it is unlikely to avoid the danger of being eliminated. This is the reason why university graduates actively seek out the experience of going north for internships in the Mainland (*Ta Kung Pao*, September 17, 2009, Page A18).

Hong Kong's Human resources experts predict that, with rapid economic development in China and Hong Kong and the advent of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, as well as the policy of continuous improvement of talent in the Mainland, people in Hong Kong will set off on a northward wave of migration for employment, competing directly with Mainland talent. There are currently at least 300,000 people from Hong Kong working and living in long term basis on the Mainland. The reason Hong Kong citizens are attracted northward is Hong Kong's economic weakness in recent years, while the Mainland economy has strong (economic) growth and great potential. Many people from Hong Kong are willing to sacrifice thirty percent or even more of their wages in order to seek opportunities for development "up north" (*China Business Herald*, March 7, 2008, p. 7).

### ***Who Are the Competitors?***

The desire to make university students more competitive has largely to do with wanting a real "imaginary enemy" so that people in society, and university students, are forced pull themselves together to actively face the threat. Mainland university students naturally become the most immediate threat to local university students. More importantly, the media create a dichotomy by clearly distinguishing between



Mainland students and Hong Kong students, emphasizing the advantages of Mainland students and disadvantages of local students.

According to Hong Kong media reports, there are increasingly frequent academic exchanges between the Mainland and Hong Kong. A survey found that almost half of students in Hong Kong believe that their competitiveness will be surpassed by that of Mainland students in ten to twenty years, mainly because Hong Kong students' ambition, ability to add to their own value, and understanding of the situation in the country does not match those of Mainland students. Between July of 2007 and August of 2008, Powersoft Consultancy Limited interviewed 4,227 Hong Kong students at eight major University Grants Committee-funded institutions in Hong Kong, as well as 318 Mainland students studying in Hong Kong. The survey found that 20 and 28 percent respectively among sets of Hong Kong student respondents felt profoundly that their competitiveness would be surpassed by that of Mainland students in ten to twenty years; and 60 percent of Mainland students believed that they would surpass Hong Kong students in ten to twenty years at the earliest (*Hong Kong Commercial Daily*, February 8, 2009).<sup>3</sup>

#### ***How is competitiveness to be enhanced?***

The literature review in this article mentions that, in the Mainland, competitiveness refers to the skills that university graduates possess when choosing a job in the workplace. The media generally interpret it from the perspective of enhancing language proficiency and changing attitudes:

The year 2008 marks the 30 years of China's reform and opening-up. As China's economy has grown at an average annual rate of nine to ten percent, China has garnered attention in the competitive global market economy. This market trend has made the world increasingly hot with "Chinese language fever"...

College students are the elite of Hong Kong society, and the Government hasn't hesitated to spend a lot of public funds cultivating university students for the long-term development of Hong Kong society. In a society with rapidly developing information technology, language is an important tool for to mutual communication between people; language is a resource and a form of wealth. The more languages and dialects a person can master, the more competitive he/she will be.

Putonghua is China's national language; its 56 ethnic groups and ten major dialect regions need a national language to communicate. Both sides of the Taiwan Straits, along with Hong Kong and Macau also need a national language to communicate; this is a major principle of which everyone is aware. When Hong Kong university students graduate, if they cannot understand or speak Putonghua, or speak haltingly, they cannot communicate with people. This is not a glorious thing, no matter who you are. The education sector in Hong Kong especially seems not to have entirely fulfilled its own professional

responsibility to society...

Teaching and testing are complementary and promote each other, so if teachers go into teaching with great enthusiasm, students' Putonghua level will gradually improve and they will have confidence in using Putonghua to communicate with people. The language proficiency of graduates effectively improves their competitiveness as job candidates; many students write to thank the teachers who taught them Putonghua so that they were able to use what they learned in practice.

In May 2007, an article entitled "A Survey on the Strengths of the Eight Major Hong Kong Higher Institutions 2007" published in the *Hong Kong Economic Journal* revealed that, in a survey commissioned by the Education and Manpower Bureau, employer ratings of graduates' Chinese language proficiency scores indicated that the Putonghua proficiency of Lingnan University graduates was the top among the eight universities and their written Chinese was second only to those from the Chinese University of Hong Kong (*Sing Tao Daily*, January 15, 2008, p. F02).

There are four issues that must be brought to the attention of in-school university students and graduates as quickly as possible: First, learning Putonghua. Language is the primary tool of communication; if they can't even speak Putonghua well, the big list of words they learn later through their Mainland experience will be empty talk. At the moment, the language ability of Hong Kong university students is either nothing to boast about or just okay, and sometimes provokes a lot of jokes. Therefore, to be able to speak decent Putonghua, one must continually improve one's level. Those whose Putonghua is still lacking need to work harder. Second, whether employed or not, the rare opportunity of getting a job in the Mainland should be cherished, and learning from experience in all aspects of the Mainland should be done with confidence and determination; it will be of great help to future development. Third, parents can no longer remain stuck in their impressions from when their own generation went out into the world, but should move beyond this boundary. When communicating with their children, they need to understand their thinking right away and support their desires and actions to go north to work or absorb experience. Fourth, not only the universities themselves, but also social organizations should do everything in their power to arrange more group internships the Mainland, in order to see this trend play an increasingly important supporting role in the future economic development of Hong Kong (*Ta Kung Pao*, September 17, 2009, Page A18).

Leo Sham, director of Powersoft Consultancy Limited, pointed out that the strong competitiveness of Mainland students puts pressure on local students to improve. He said that Hong Kong students have an increased sense of crisis, and should be motivated to grasp advantages and compete; he encouraged students to learn the "three written and

spoken languages” (the written ones include traditional and simplified characters as well as English), to improve their personal communication skills and enhance their international vision. Moreover, they should better understand developments in the Chinese market, economy, policies, and society. Sophomore Ng Dik-Fung from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University Department of Engineering Physics believes that the innovative thinking of Hong Kong students is an advantage over Mainland students; and he praised the Mainland students for being hard-working and diligent in their studies, making them extremely competitive. To hold onto his advantages, he is actively learning Putonghua, has participated in a delegation to the Mainland to learn about developments in the Mainland market and broaden his horizons, and is considering going to the Mainland to develop himself after graduation. He believes that, if Hong Kong students learn with modesty and humility, they do not need to worry about being surpassed by Mainland students (*Hong Kong Commercial Daily*, February 8, 2009).

It can be seen from the above texts that, in the eyes of the pro-Beijing media, only by integrating with the Mainland in terms of language, study, and life experience can the competitiveness of university students effectively and substantially be enhanced. Otherwise, people in Hong Kong will not be able to benefit from the rapid development momentum of the Mainland. The most interesting part is that, while the *Sing Tao Daily* and *Ta Kung Pao* repeatedly emphasized that the Putonghua level of Hong Kong citizens is insufficient and must quickly catch up, the *Hong Kong Commercial Daily's* reports stressed that students should focus on learning the “Cantonese, Putonghua, and English” spoken languages and “traditional and simplified characters, along with English” written languages. If the former seems to deliberately neglect English, not to mention the maintenance of Hong Kong’s role as an international city, then the three languages and three dialects mentioned in the latter can be considered to balance Hong Kong’s position as both a Mainland city and an international cosmopolitan city, without losing its unique local identity. In terms of narrating the attitudes of students, the reports cited above repeatedly stress that Mainland students work hard and have initiative and enterprise; but the locals are portrayed as passive, lacking a sense of crisis, and less enthusiastic. This general dichotomy is the method commonly used to highlight the lack of competitiveness of Hong Kong university students.

While Figure 1 has introduced a framework for the phrase “competitiveness of university students”, Figure 2 depicts the implications of each layer included in that framework, based on the interpretation laid out above:

Hong Kong's marginalization, limited space for  
development, integration with Mainland

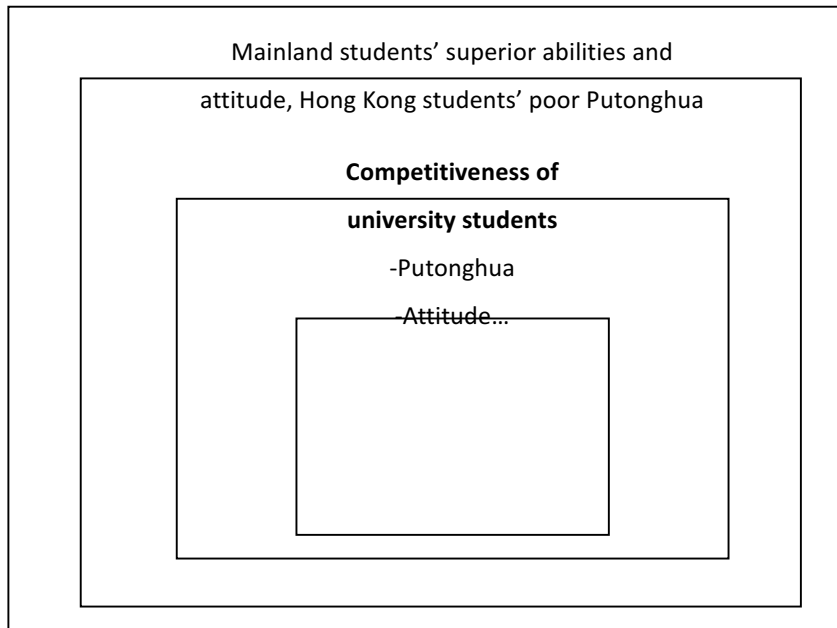


Figure 2

**A Critical Reflection on the Discourse of “Enhancing the Competitiveness of University Students”**

Referring to the local newspaper media's discussions, there is essentially no one questioning and challenging the discourse and its implied meanings, including that (1) a university education serves to enhance the competitiveness of students, and (2) due to their diligence and hard work, Mainland university students are inevitably superior to people from Hong Kong. While the Hong Kong newspapers (especially those with a pro-Beijing background) are largely in agreement regarding “enhancing the competitiveness of university students,” some newspapers in Taiwan do not hold such a view. First, with respect to the myth about university student competitiveness, Taiwanese political scientist Chih-Yu Shih found that the discourse demonstrates that enhancing competitiveness is merely a contest to become outstanding slaves. He said:

The outstanding ones, indeed, are a group of people with a slave mentality who, through competition in the presence of their commonly envisioned European and American masters, prove that they can become better slaves. And Asia is the arena where the slaves have the opportunity to prove that they are more slavery. In fact, teachers from the so-called superior schools in Europe and America need not trifle over rankings; even though European and American students take the GRE or SAT test, only a tiny minority are like our students who rush to get tutoring in Asia or in the United States or Canada, so that we cannot even trust when our students get higher scores on tests...

Universities around the world come to Taiwan to recruit students, provoking some soul-searching on the issue of whether Taiwan's universities can compete. Previously, the education authorities also called for debunking the myth about early childhood education. Simply put, this myth originates in the culture of higher test scores, so parents always want to give their children a boost by having them start learning

at an early age. It is unlikely that parents on either side of the Taiwan Straits are able to avoid doing this. But the Ministry of Education should really get rid of its own similar myth. Taiwanese higher education is after nothing more than trying to get an unscrupulously early start in order to get a higher grade in international accreditation, just like those parents in early childhood education. Are they able to retain students with their international accreditation scores, and what kind of students do they retain? (*Mass Age*, December 2, 2009).<sup>4</sup>

Even though Shih's comments are not directed specifically at the competitiveness of university students, they point out that the university is no longer a place for the pursuit of knowledge and truth, but instead has become a place to continually pursue ranking and competitiveness. Not only have universities lost their way; Shih also indicates that they have lost their will as independent social critics and are only able to go along with the values and ideas of the government and the capitalists.

Second, many viewpoints deliberately take Mainland students' aggressiveness, enterprising approach, and diligence as a symbol of competitiveness, but can these expressions fully reflect their "competitiveness?" The following comments are about how the behavior of people from a certain place presumably indicates whether or not they are competitive. Such comments are not only cavalier and lacking in persuasiveness; they actually reflect how the elite and adult world views university students entirely according to their own point of view, no matter how low the economic/social influence of these students may be, and expects them to become a competitive group of students in accordance with the expectations and requirements of this elite group.

After a recent evaluation of National Taiwan University's College of Medicine, during which the renowned professor Daisy Lan Hung witnessed behavior among students, including being late to class and eating and sleeping directly on their desks, she wrote an article criticizing these students for not only lacking the aspiration to care about national affairs as past intellectuals did, but also for lacking even a basic spirit of professionalism, which would make it difficult for them to face international competition...in this discussion, however, including in the original text by Professor Hung, the causes and consequences are too quickly inferred from the phenomena, to the point of jumping ahead to solutions. Meanwhile, there is a lack of rational analysis of the many linkages in the middle and no reflection on the premises of the arguments, unfortunately resulting in a decline in the quality of the public discussion.

First of all, Professor Hung, Ministry of Education officials, and other commentators all argue on the basis of competitiveness; no matter whether they are describing "the issue of Taiwanese domestic workers," "losing a job because of one's professional attitude," or "improving competitiveness by increasing general knowledge," they are all unquestioningly premised on so-called competitiveness.

Even if we set aside a values-based, philosophical discussion of whether the concept of "competitiveness" from the finance and business field is applicable to the field of education, however, we can say that the current

discussion of even the most basic questions, such as what exactly is competitiveness, and what exactly is the object of the competition, is quite confused...

Second, even if the attitudes of the students at National Taiwan University's College of Medicine were as lax as Professor Hung indicated at the time, and they really were that way all the time, would this truly result in a decline in their "competitiveness" (however defined), leading to such evils as difficulties in finding employment, getting lower quality jobs, and migrating to other locations? Unfortunately, much of the present discussion lingers on assumption and speculation, or arbitrarily expounding on individual cases, but it has not presented any objective evidence whatsoever (*Lihpao Daily*, November 16, 2009, p. 02).

These two articles from Taiwan persistently question whether the essential values behind "competitiveness" are, as the social elites say, the development of the country and region and the promise and hope of the next generation, or rather the desire to train a group of submissive and obedient, highly capable and adaptable, well-educated but powerless workers, perhaps to become another tool manipulated under the values and power structure of the government and the capitalists.

### **Conclusion**

Deploying critical discourse analysis, this article attempts at exploring the power relationships reflected in the texts, including the unequal power relationship between the government and the capitalists (and even universities) creating and (re-)producing the myth of competitiveness, and the university students participating in the competition. The former require the latter to conform to their requirements and expectations if they are to survive in a fierce and severe social and economic environment. Throughout the process of enhancing their competitiveness, however, and even in the discussion of enhancing the competitiveness of university students, the students themselves have had no voice. In addition, embedded in the political and social values of the authorities, notably integration, development and prospect, is a determination that enhancing competitiveness is the only choice to affirm an identity and then survive in society and the workplace and that, only by playing this game can one survive and gain a foothold. As a result, even highly competitive students actually have no genuine empowerment in the contest of enhancing the competitiveness of university students. The winners are not the hard-working and enthusiastic local university students who can speak fluent Putonghua and/or English, and have extensive learning and working experience in the Mainland, but instead are the socio-political and economic elites who are constantly creating, duplicating and manipulating the discourse.

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<sup>2</sup> Available at <http://paper.wenweipo.com/2006/10/24/WW0610240002.htm> (accessed on November 13, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> "Jin ban gangsheng renwei jinzheng nengli zai 10 zhi 20 nian huo bei neidisheng chaoyue" [Nearly Half of Hong Kong Students Think Mainland Students May Surpass Their Competitiveness in 10 to 20 Years], February 8, 2009, available at [http://www.hkcd.com.hk/content/2009-02/08/content\\_2239161.htm](http://www.hkcd.com.hk/content/2009-02/08/content_2239161.htm) (accessed on November 23, 2009).

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<sup>4</sup>"Zhuoyue daxue, zhuoyue nuli" [Outstanding University; Outstanding Slaves], December 2, 2009, available at <http://mass-age.com/wpmu/blog/2009/12/02/7329/> (accessed on January 15, 2010).