

## **The Function of Education in Shaping Chinese National Identity in Colonial Hong Kong**

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### **Introduction**

The substantive issue of shaping local Chinese identity for social cohesion in the face of internal social disruption, external communist threats and international cold-war politics was one of the key policy challenges of the British colonial government. This article examines how education could support the formation and establishment of pro-British-government Chinese identities in colonial Hong Kong. Some researchers (Kan, 2007; Vickers, Kan and Morris, 2003; Vickers, 2000, Luk 1991)) have noted that the curriculum for colonial Hong Kong does not support theories of colonial cultural imperialism in which colonial governments diminish the indigenous culture of the local population and indoctrinate the local people with the host country's culture. On the contrary, traditional Chinese culture and values were promoted in the colonial education system of Hong Kong.

This article reviews not only the curriculum, but past educational practices. Schooling and school knowledge are viewed as a social construction, which bear on the relationship of education and the changing politics. To uncover the major dynamics that determine the politics of education and that lead to social and cultural transformation, the function of education and the adoption of Chineseness (traditional Chinese cultural traits) in Hong Kong education are reviewed.

### **The Function of Education from Sociological Perspectives**

Historical sociologists and neo-Marxist educators like Michael Apple (1982; 1988; 1993; 1999; 2003), Ivor F Goodson (1997; 1988) and Basil Bernstein (1971; 1996) suggested how pro-government ideology is translated into schooling practices, for instance, how it can be effectively inculcated; and, how its content has been manipulated to serve the dominant group (usually the state and government in power). They suggest that the dominant group plays a key role for maintaining social stability and economic prosperity through regulating education policies.

Amongst all type of interest groups and dominant powers, nothing can be compared to the degree of the state, the political entity, especially as the one in power. The relationship between education and power has been concerned in particular to the area of the state function. Close nation-state relationship can only be built by accommodating the culture of subordinated groups (O'Connor, 1973). Education therefore is in the process of re-contextualising itself for being convergent with the nation's identities. Modification and adjustments made in education are hegemonic strategies for reaching the political goals. Therefore the colonial government incorporated Chineseness in education was an attempt to consolidate the legitimacy of its rule.

### **Chineseness in Hong Kong Chinese Identity**

During the colonial era, the British colonial government and the PRC (People's Republic of China) government were two opposing states confronting each other in the struggle for the allegiance of loyalty in Hong Kong. The notion of Hong Kong's national identity emerged as a result of an ever-changing conceptual evolution, in which stages of history have left their imprints amongst the population. In fact,

most Hongkongers failed to identify themselves first and foremost with the Chinese 'motherland' (CUHK, 2007). Many studies found that the majority of the Hong Kong population claimed to have dual-identity -- Chinese and Hongkongese (DeGolyer, 1997; Lau, 1997).

Despite the discrepancies in these two identities, Chineseness was shared by both. Lau Siu-kai (1997) conducted research on *Hongkongese or Chinese : the problem of identity on the Eve of Resumption of Chinese sovereignty over Hong Kong* in 1997 stating an overwhelming majority of both Hongkongese and the Chinese in Hong Kong respected people who performed filial duties to their parents (93.5 percent), and had tremendous respect for hardworking people (over 85.5 percent). He found the overwhelming majority of the local Chinese population was "ethnically and culturally Chinese." He also reminded us that "in the 1985 survey, 60.8 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Chinese culture was the finest on earth, and 78.6 percent felt proud to be Chinese" (Lau, 1997, p. 10; 1988, p. 179). This result suggested Chinese notions of nation and state have evolved under the influence of Chineseness. Although Hong Kong had its own indigenous identity, their identification of Chinese rested on Chinese cultural consciousness.

It is interesting to note how strong attachments to traditional Chinese ethical and cultural traits distinguished Hong Kong national identity from that of the PRC. During the Destruction of Four Olds campaign in the PRC, old values and customs of all types were persecuted and discouraged by the Red Guards. In the Pi-Lin Pi-Kong "Criticise Lin (Biao), Criticise Confucius" Campaign, neo-Confucianist thinking and behaviours were eradicated. The PRC government attempted to establish a new Chinese communist identity at the expense of its culture and tradition during the Cultural Revolution. Hong Kong on the contrary became a key bastion of the Chinese traditional culture amongst all Chinese communities. The elements extracted from Chineseness gave the Hong Kong population identifying characteristics albeit different from that of the PRC. Such Chinese identity helped to structure the relationship of the local people with the colonial government.

Chineseness also rationalised the rule of the British in Hong Kong. According to the principles of Chineseness, no matter how splendid a ruler's military record was, his reign would be considered tyranny unless it met the Confucian criteria (Townsend, 1974; Ho, 1998). Legitimacy was not rested on ethnic background, but on Confucian and traditional Chinese values. In this sense, alien (non-Han) rulers, such as the Mongolians and Manchus, could earn their legitimacy through the learning of Chinese culture (Ho, 1998).

### **Education Policies to enhance Chineseness in Education**

With regard to the British education policy in Hong Kong, the tendency was for the political authorities to build up a sense of Chineseness and belonging in the newly established Chinese society. Instead of anglicizing the local schools and obliterating Chinese culture, the British government embraced Chineseness (Lau, 1988). Through promoting traditional values, Chinese identity and indigenous cultures, the British secured their rule.

Chineseness was not always the core sense of identity in Chinese communities. There were times when it was not in fashion in the eyes of the Chinese politicians. Under the flags of national salvation, unity, independence and anti-imperialism, new generations of overseas-educated Chinese revolutionists, intellectuals and publicists, such as Hu Shih (1891-1962), Chen Duxiu (1879-1942), Li Dazhao (1889-1927), Lu Xun (1881-1936) and Zhou Zuoren (1885-1967) spoke of the abandoned ancient cultural traits during the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Wang, 1996).

The outcome of the endless waves of national crisis was related to the rejection of Chineseness which had failed to prove its effectiveness in maintaining the country's sovereignty and nationhood (Levenson, 1959). Chinese modern nationalism gained huge popularity and provided a new foundation for China's revitalization and regeneration. Levenson implied that traditional Chinese values and modern Chinese nationalism as two competing ideological systems for the loyalty of the late Qing intellectuals. He suggested the history of modern China was one in which nationalism replaces traditional value system as the dominant Chinese view of their identity and place in the world (Levenson, 1959). This paradigm places Chineseness and modern nationalism into oppositional directions.

In order to promote Chineseness in education, efforts were shown in the colonial education policies. The emphasis on Chineseness was mainly manifested in (1) the employment of Hanlin teachers; (2) the emphasis on Classical Chinese learning and teaching; and (3) the use of Cantonese as a medium of instruction.

The Hanlin Academy was an academic and administrative institution founded in the eighth century Tang dynasty, China. Membership was confined to the elites who performed secretarial and literary tasks for the court. One of the main duties was to interpret Confucian classics for the Imperial Examinations. As early as 1912, the Faculty of Arts at the University of Hong Kong employed two Chinese Hanlin scholars lecturing on classical Chinese (Lo, 1963; Wong, 2002) despite the abolition of the Imperial Examination in 1905. In 1927, the Chinese Department was established hiring more prestigious scholars from the Qing court dynasty which ended in 1911 (Lo, 1963; Wong, 2002).

When the traditional education began to lose its former hold both as a basic education for the masses and at a more advanced level as the avenue to wealth and fame in mainland China, Wen Yen Wen (the classical literary style of Chinese) and classical Chinese literature became fashionable in Hong Kong. According to Ng-lun Ngai-ha's research (1984), the colonial regime up to the 1920s and 1930s did not bring marked changes in popular literacy which remained basically rooted in the traditional and relatively confined to village society. Knowledge prepared for Imperial Examination, such as an eight-part essay, imperial examination specialised books were widely used as teaching materials in vernacular schools in the New Territories through the 1930s. Teaching at these schools would start with *San-zi-jing* a *Three-word-phrases Book*, *Qian-zi-wen*, a *Thousand Character Classic* and *Bai-jia-xing*, *The Hundred Surnames*. Two other popular primers were the *Xiao-jing*, the *Classic of Filial Piety* and *You-xu-gu-shi-qiong-lin*, the *Collected Stories for Children*. Brighter students would study *The Four Books and Five Classics* after a year or two (Ng-lun, 1984).

The third approach that was adopted by the colonial government was the use of Cantonese as the medium of instruction. From 1935, the government started to convert schools from English to the vernacular language Cantonese and adopted Cantonese (not Putonghua) as the medium of instruction for subjects other than English (Sweeting, 1990). Cantonese itself preserves more features of ancient Chinese than other Chinese dialects. It retains most of the final consonants of the older language and has at least six tones, in contrast to the four tones of Putonghua or Mandarin, modern standard Chinese in the PRC and Taiwan (He, 1999). To distinguish meaning between words or word elements, Cantonese has the same arrangement of consonant and vowel sounds with ancient Chinese (He, 1999). The adoption of Cantonese to a certain extent strengthened the uniqueness of Hong Kong identity and the influence of Chineseness.

## **Conclusion**

As an alien colonizer, the British Hong Kong government maintained social cohesion and economic prosperity without serious disruptions in its 155-year regime. This article suggests the British education policy posed as an important vehicle to consolidate its rule. It argues the emphasis of Chineseness

empowered the colonial government to stop the political infiltration from either the pro-Beijing or the pro-Taiwan factions; spared the government from the accusation of destroying Chinese culture, thus, encouraging apathy towards politics and legitimized the colonial rule.

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