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**TWO CITY-STATES IN THE LONG SHADOW OF CHINA:
The Future of Universities in Hong Kong and Singapore**

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ABSTRACT

Hong Kong and Singapore are island city-states that exude the complicated tensions of postcolonial nationalism. Both are influenced directly or indirectly by the long shadow of China's rising nationalism and geopolitical power and, in the case of Hong Kong, subject to Beijing's edicts under the terms of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration. Both have productive economies dependent on global trade, and each has similar rates of population density--Hong Kong's population is 7.4 million and Singapore is home to 5.8 million people. It remains to be seen whether Hong Kong's peripheral nationalist identity will be retained, or whether the increasingly assertive influence and control by mainland China will prevail and fully assimilate Hong Kong. But it is apparent that Hong Kong is at a turning point. Throughout 2019, protesters filled the streets of the city, worried about declining civil liberties, specifically Beijing's refusal to provide universal suffrage as promised previously in law and the disqualification of prodemocracy candidates, along with the growing control of Hong Kong's government and universities by Chinese central government designates and fears of an ever-expanding crackdown on dissent. Singapore provides a less dramatic but relevant example of the tension caused by the influx of foreign national students and academics who often displace native citizens, combined with government-enforced efforts to control dissent in universities. And like Hong Kong, the long shadow of China influences the role universities are allowed to play in civil society. The following is an excerpt from book *Neo-Nationalism and Universities: Populists, Autocrats and the Future of Higher Education* (Johns Hopkins University Press) that explores the implications of nationalist movements on universities in Hong Kong and Singapore. In both, university leaders, and their academic communities, value academic freedom and the idea of independent scholarship. Yet the political environment is severe enough, and the opportunity costs great enough, that they, thus far, remain generally neutral institutions in a debate over civil liberties and the future of their island states. The exception is the key role students have played in the protest movement in Hong Kong, but for how long?

Keywords: Hong Kong, Singapore, Universities, Civil Society, Academic Freedom, China's Global Influence

Hong Kong and Singapore are island city-states that exude the complicated tensions of postcolonial nationalism. Both are influenced directly or indirectly by the long shadow of China's rising nationalism and geopolitical power and, in the case of Hong Kong, subject to Beijing's edicts under the terms of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration. Both have productive economies dependent on global trade, and each has similar rates of population density--Hong Kong's population is 7.4 million and Singapore is home to 5.8 million people. Both also face the difficulties of a declining domestic population.¹ Both built and leveraged their growing network of universities to attract students and talent to fuel their knowledge-based economies. And both, for different reasons, are exposed to growing social tension caused by autocratic-leaning governments, with implications for academic freedom and the autonomy of universities.

At the same time, nationalism manifests itself in different forms on these two islands. The dramatic protests in Hong Kong in 2019 and 2020 reflected a peculiar and nascent sense of nationalism, shaped by the fear of mainland China's growing political suppression and nationalist agenda. In effect, neo-nationalism in China has shaped and conditioned Hong Kong's tenuous sense

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of identity--what is termed "peripheral nationalism" experienced by other regions where "residents of an ethnically, linguistically, or culturally distinctive periphery resist incorporation by a centralizing state."² For example, Hong Kong, with its Cantonese-speaking population and different Chinese character set, has a linguistic identity distinct from that of mainland China. But it lacks the cultural traditions built over many centuries that other separatist regions share, like those in Catalonia, the Basque territories, Wales, and Brittany.

It remains to be seen whether Hong Kong's peripheral nationalist identity will be retained, or whether the increasingly assertive influence and control by mainland China will prevail and fully assimilate Hong Kong. But it is apparent that Hong Kong is at a turning point. Throughout 2019, protesters filled the streets of the city, worried about declining civil liberties, specifically Beijing's refusal to provide universal suffrage as promised previously in law and the disqualification of prodemocracy candidates, along with the growing control of Hong Kong's government and universities by Chinese central government designates and fears of an ever-expanding crackdown on dissent.

Where does that leave Hong Kong's universities? In the case of Hong Kong, students engaged in the larger protest movement blamed university leaders for failing to defend their civil liberties.³ Universities on the island are dependent on government funding and rules, and on the income and networking advantages of enrolling a large number of mainland Chinese students. University leaders, it seems, share a fear of retribution by Chinese officials if they voice support for protesters. Most university presidents sought neutral ground as a path to navigate between competing visions of Hong Kong's future (the protesters and Beijing), sending a message to students and faculty--beware of voicing dissent. One observer stated, the "failure to speak up on the extradition bill and during the early days of the protests does not bode well for academic freedom."⁴

The worst fears of the political activists, and many academics, came true with the passage of the National Security Law for Hong Kong by Beijing. Effective July 1, 2020, it prohibited "secession, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign or external forces." Xi's government then established a new security office in Hong Kong with its own law enforcement personnel. This office can extradite those who violate the new law for trial on the mainland. As a result of this law, plus a mainland China induced reorganization of the management of universities, the future of academic and personal freedom in Hong Kong and the vitality of its universities are very much in doubt. Where Hong Kong's universities were once a magnet for attracting talent globally, now there are the initial indicators of the flight of talent.⁵

Is Singapore an illiberal democracy? Yes, but in its own unique form and with a slow movement toward greater civil liberties. Greater tolerance is, in part, a necessity. The Republic of Singapore has welcomed immigrants since its establishment as a nation in 1965 independent of Malaysia. Immigration has helped fuel its economy, which requires interaction with the larger world. To help attract talent and grow its economy, the ruling government built a higher education system and an international higher education hub dubbed the "Global Schoolhouse" that includes numerous high-profile university collaborations. And attracting students, largely throughout Asia, and international businesses and investment required some form of liberalization.

Singapore provides a less dramatic but relevant example of the tension caused by the influx of foreign national students and academics who often displace native citizens, combined with government-enforced efforts to control dissent in universities. And like Hong Kong, the long shadow of China influences the role universities are allowed to play in civil society.

The following further explores the implications of nationalist movements on universities in Hong Kong and Singapore. In both, university leaders, and their academic communities, value academic freedom and the idea of independent scholarship. Yet the political environment is severe enough, and the opportunity costs great enough, that they, thus far, remain generally neutral institutions in a debate over civil liberties and the future of their island states. The exception is the key role students have played in the protest movement in Hong Kong, but for how long?

Protests and Hong Kong Universities

In the early 1980s, China's president Deng Xiaoping outlined the principle of "One Country, Two Systems" for the reunification of Hong Kong with China as part of the negotiations with the United Kingdom. There would be "One China," with distinct Chinese regions such as Hong Kong and Macau, which would retain their own economic and administrative systems. Mainland China would continue to pursue "socialism with Chinese characteristics."

What the One China, Two Systems policy truly meant for Hong Kong remained a question--a vague promise or a true commitment by Beijing? In the negotiations with the United Kingdom, there was an assurance stated in Hong Kong's new constitution: "The socialist system and policies shall not be practiced in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, and the previous capitalist system and way of life shall remain unchanged for 50 years."⁶ This became known as Hong Kong's "Basic Law," which also included a guarantee of academic freedom under Article 137.⁷

Yet with Xi's election in 2012 as China's president, the One China, Two Systems concept began to erode, at first slowly, and then rapidly. Beijing sought greater political control of Hong Kong, including expanded authority to extradite those who criticized the mainland Chinese government. In early 2019, capitulating to Beijing's desires, the Hong Kong government proposed a bill allowing extradition. This fueled a remarkable response. The protest movement began in March 2019 and escalated into the summer and fall. Police and plain-clothes gangs systematically assaulted protesters, prompting a general strike and citywide protests that included an estimated 1.7 million people. Pro-China protests also were organized by the government. As the conflict grew, radical wings of the protest movement became violent when protesters were confronted by riot police bent on dispersing large crowds; civil disobedience became rampant, including the closing Hong Kong's international airport for a period.

Public support was largely behind the protestors. The violence caused initially by police and undercover agents seemingly organized by Beijing authorities was widely condemned. Over 20 percent the population (2 million by some estimates) engaged in both peaceful and violent protest marches in the Hong Kong central region in June and July 2019, placing extreme pressure on Hong Kong's leaders to respond.⁸ One group of protesters broke into the Legislative Council and defaced the city's emblem (now a crime punishable by up to three years in jail) and vandalized the chamber with spray-painted slogans.⁹ Protesters stormed offices used by the Chinese government. Clashes between police and protesters came to include rubber bullets and tear gas.¹⁰

Students played a significant role in organizing the mass demonstrations and in developing what became known as the "five demands" of the protest movement: the withdrawal of the extradition bill, the introduction of universal suffrage and an end to Beijing government appointments, an investigation into alleged police brutality and misconduct and the release of all the arrested, a retraction of the official characterization of the protests as "riots," and the resignation of Hong Kong's chief executive Carrie Lam--an appointment made by Beijing. In early September, student protest groups successfully called for the boycott of classes in Hong Kong universities, which were generally supported by faculty and staff. The boycott began even after Hong Kong's chief executive Lam stated she was withdrawing the extradition bill.

Student unions at 11 universities organized the event and issued a joint declaration of "unforgivable atrocities" by Hong Kong police and "gangsters" and demanded an inquiry into police conduct as one of their five demands. "Hong Kong people have been very clear that there are five demands and we accept not one less. Students' unions of higher institutions will continue our strike," they said, adding, "We have reached the point of no return."¹¹ Thousands of students wore helmets, goggles, and masks at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, holding black banners saying, "Boycott for freedom" and periodically shouting, "Reclaim Hong Kong."¹²

For the large number of students who participated in the often-dangerous mass protest movement, the lack of vocal support by university leaders was a source of consternation. Most university leaders initially chose to largely ignore the pivotal issues of freedom of speech and opinions, and made no public statement for or against the five demands. The focus of university leaders was on condemning the violence.

In late October 2019, a group of University of Hong Kong (HKU) students delivered a petition calling on HKU president Xiang Zhang to issue a statement condemning police brutality and demanding a bar on police searches on campus of students and faculty, legal and financial support for arrested students, and a forum scheduled to listen to students' concerns.¹³ Pressure grew for universities to be more active proponents, if not on the central issues of academic freedom, then on protecting students. Zhang proceeded to send a brief, four-paragraph email to HKU students, staff, and alumni stating, "I am against any form of violence by any party," noting the availability of legal advice, counseling, and other support for students in need. He also outlined the university's policies covering police entry onto campus. He closed by writing, "We have held discussions with students at various occasions in different manners and will continue to do so."¹⁴

Chinese University of Hong Kong president Rocky Sung-chi Tuan did offer a more significant statement of support for students. Prodemocracy students had met in his office, claiming that police brutality included the sexual assault of a student. In an open letter, Tuan stated, "I was able to see personally and up close the pain and suffering of the students, how they were driven to a state of hopelessness, and why they had turned to the university for help." He also noted that, "in teaching students to accept responsibility for their own action, the university shall also help them assert their rights." He would establish a team of alumni volunteer lawyers to support arrested students.¹⁵

Yet Tuan was quickly criticized for his efforts. "It should come as no surprise," observed Phil C. W. Chan in the *South China Morning Post*, that the former head of Hong Kong's university system, Leung Chun-ying, criticized Tuan "for agreeing to condemn the police for 'any proven case' of brutality."¹⁶

In China's Shadow

One might have hoped for greater leadership in the great debate on Hong Kong's future by university leaders and faculty. But there were significant forces at play, including an increased financial dependency on Chinese student enrollment and the changing nature of university governance in Hong Kong that made vocal dissent increasingly difficult.

China's resurgent nationalism under Xi brought measures for greater control not only of Hong Kong's government but its public universities--changes in governance that mirrored similar reforms on the Mainland. All Hong Kong universities are formally under the direction of the chief executive of Hong Kong, who serves as the official chancellor of all the city's universities, and appoints 15 of the 23 members of the "councils" (or governing boards) for each university. These councils hold the power to block faculty and staff appointments and to steer selection of academic leaders, including university presidents, toward individuals sympathetic or approved by the People's Republic of China (PRC) government. The councils are increasingly populated by those who support Xi's policy agenda under the watchful eye of party leaders.

As in China, a systematic effort emerged to constrain academic freedom, buttressed by not only threats of penalties and, in some instances, imprisonment, but also financial incentives to voice and publish pro-mainland policies. In turn, this created a relatively new environment of self-censorship among academics. Prior to Xi's ascendancy, Hong Kong encouraged open debate and had policies that attempted to attract academic and professional talent to Hong Kong. Like Singapore, Hong Kong formulated a strategy to become a "higher education hub" for Asia as a means to bolster Hong Kong's rapid economic expansion and booming financial and business sectors.

Prior to the higher education hub strategy, Hong Kong's higher educational institutions included two major universities, the University of Hong Kong, established in 1911, and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, established in 1963. A new technical university, the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, was added in 1991, and five additional universities were created from existing colleges or institutes in the 1990s. In 2007, Donald Tsang, then chief executive of Hong Kong, explicitly stated his intention to recruit nonlocal students to Hong Kong schools and universities. Hong Kong increased admission quotas for international students, relaxed employment restrictions, and provide scholarships for nonlocal students from mainland China.¹⁷ Hong Kong's universities flourished.

But since Xi's election as president of China, infringements on academic freedom became more frequent and severe. Hong Kong's government wrestled with its difficult mandate to reconcile China's increasing authority and insistence on the Communist Party's notion of civil order with the expectations of academics and the public for continued freedom of speech and extensive legal rights under the One Country, Two Systems doctrine. For Beijing, universities appeared as one of the primary sources of fomenting unrest and political opposition. This, in turn, triggered the selective removal of controversial academic figures from their positions, government interference in promotions and appointments, selection of politically connected and Chinese-aligned figures as presidents of Hong Kong's universities, and increasing pressure to limit speech on campuses..

The 2014 Occupy protests that briefly paralyzed Hong Kong were originally advocated by two professors (one at the University of Hong Kong and one at Chinese University of Hong Kong), and the Occupy and Umbrella protests were led and implemented by students. The two professors, law professor Benny Tai at HKU, and professor of sociology Chan Kin-man at CUHK, were imprisoned by the Chinese authorities.¹⁸ At Lingnan University, Professor Chin Wan-kan, author of the 2011 book *Hong Kong as a City State* and proponent of complete autonomy for Hong Kong, was informed that his political activism "severely hurt the reputation of Lingnan." His contract was not renewed in 2016.¹⁹ Cheng Chung-tai, a lecturer at Hong Kong Polytechnic University, was fired after he was accused of "desecrating the flag" by displaying upside-down versions of the PRC and HKSAR (Hong Kong's Special Administrative Region) flags on the legislator's desks in the Legislative Council.²⁰

One well-publicized case involved HKU law professor Johannes Chan. In 2014, Chan was recommended by a faculty committee for a position as pro vice chancellor, but his candidacy was attacked by Hong Kong state-sanctioned media because of his political views on human rights and Hong Kong's constitution. HKU's governing board then blocked his appointment, against the recommendation of HKU faculty and its administration.²¹ Peter Mathieson, the president of HKU, stated that the board had acted against the "best interests of the university."²²

Hong Kong's government ministry overseeing universities has numerous methods for influencing tenured faculty. For example, they can deny the extension of contracts beyond the mandatory retirement ages, set for between 60 and 65 at Hong Kong's universities. Several politically active faculty were denied extensions, including faculty supportive of the Occupy protests. Concerns about contract extensions raised questions about Hong Kong's competitiveness with universities in the United States and Australia in hiring and retaining faculty: prospective faculty became concerned that they might be labeled as "troublesome faculty," fired, and possibly jailed.²³

It is difficult to project what Hong Kong's higher education system will look like in the near future. How can it attract and retain academic and professional talent? Can Hong Kong's institutions remain competitive with other leading world universities?²⁴ The future of Hong Kong's universities is tied to the outcome of the larger question of the island's political future and the sustainability of Xi's form of neo-nationalism, which increasingly punishes dissent.

Singaporeans First

Singapore has its own particular form of nationalism. Singapore is ruled by a semi-autocratic government that systematically constrains dissent, although to a much lesser degree than in Hong Kong. In recent years Singapore has felt rising anxiety arising from the socioeconomic displacement caused by the influx of foreign nationals.

Like Hong Kong, as well as the other "Asian Tiger" nations, Singapore pursued a long-term policy of increasing educational attainment rates of its citizens, while welcoming foreign investment and talent viewed as a necessity to generate and sustain a globally competitive economy. Higher education was a key part of this successful policy. Beginning in 2002, Singapore's government launched its Global Schoolhouse--the first "higher education hub," which was later imitated in many other nations. The initial plan was to bring international students to Singapore to attend existing and dozens of new institutions, many of them established in partnership with foreign universities.

Teo Chee Hean, then minister of education, outlined this ambitious strategy in a 2000 address, emphasizing that "in a knowledge economy, intellectual capital is a prized resource. As traditional seats of scholarship and learning, universities are now seen as valuable sources of 'brainpower' needed to drive the new economy." As Minister Teo described it:

Our vision, in shorthand notation, is to become the Boston of the East. Boston is not just MIT or Harvard. The greater Boston area boasts of over 200 universities, colleges, research institutes and thousands of companies. It is a focal point of creative energy; a hive of intellectual, research, commercial and social activity. We want to create an oasis of talent in Singapore: a knowledge hub, an "ideas-exchange," a confluence of people and idea streams, an incubator for inspiration.²⁵

From this vision came an initiative called Singapore's "open-door" policy. The objective was to attract 10 world brand name universities to establish branch campuses or partnerships with local institutions. This would form the means for Singapore to recruit up to 3,000 globally recognized scholars as well as 150,000 international students by 2015. International students would be eligible for grants, and the government would waive a portion of their tuition in exchange for three years of work in Singapore after graduation. International students could also work during their studies and for one year after graduation.²⁶ The Singapore government increased university funding to help attract foreign talent, often offering lavish research grants to international scientists. Singapore's government also made new governance arrangements that established universities as semiautonomous corporations--a trend found in other parts of Asia that reflected norms in the United States.

From 2002 until 2015, many of the goals of the program were realized. Prior to 2000, Singapore featured two major universities: the National University of Singapore (NUS), established in 1980 by merging Nanyang University and the University of Singapore; and Nanyang Technical University (NTU), established 1991. These two universities offered degrees at the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral level, with NTU specializing in technology. Singapore's higher education network of institutions grew to include the new Singapore Management University in 2000, the Duke-NUS Medical School campus in 2009, LaSalle College of the Arts in 2009, Singapore Institute of Technology in 2009, and Singapore Institute of Management University in 2005.²⁷

Other successful international partnerships included a branch campus of the international business school INSEAD, the new Singapore University of Technology and Design campus developed in collaboration with MIT in 2012, and the Yale-NUS College--a partnership between NUS and Yale University, which opened in 2014 -- although NUS decided in August 2021 that it would end the relationship with Yale and absorb the college into NUS's direct management.

Some ventures failed. The University of New South Wales opened a campus in 2007 but soon withdrew, and the Tisch School of the Arts and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, opened campuses, which closed in 2014 and 2015, respectively. The University of Chicago opened a campus of its Booth School of Business in 2000 and continued operations until 2014, when it moved to Hong Kong.

But overall, Singapore's Global Schoolhouse initiative was a tremendous success. Singapore attracted international students, increasing from 50,000 in 2002 to 90,000 in 2010, seemingly on the way to the 150,000 goal. The evolving links with China played a part in this increase: students from China represented over a third of all international students, and China became Singapore's largest trading partner. The recruitment of international scholars and increased funding also revitalized NUS and NTU, and both

rose steadily in the international global rankings of universities that focus on research output, with NUS ranked 1 in Asia and 11 internationally, and NTU ranked 2 in Asia and 12 internationally, according to 2019 QS World University Rankings.²⁸

However, another outcome was a growing sense of resentment among Singaporeans. Many objected to the subsidies given to international students and their increasing numbers in prestigious universities, seemingly at the expense of local Singaporean students. Political pressure grew on the ruling People's Action Party, or PAP, to reduce the number of international students. Singapore's press and politicians expressed concern about the increasing numbers of foreign workers and academics, triggering a backlash to Singapore's "open door" policies. Immigrants arrived in Singapore on two tracks: one as mostly unskilled workers and the other as highly compensated "foreign talent." Singapore's population of 5.5 million included 3.38 million Singaporean citizens, 0.53 million permanent residents, and 1.63 million nonresidents.²⁹ The large influx in the number of foreign residents strained funding for Singapore's public services, housing, and educational institutions, and generated increased resentment.

When a 2013 white paper outlined a government plan to grow Singapore's population to 6.9 million by 2030 through increased immigration, the result were large demonstrations (an unusual event in Singapore) and the first major political pressure to reduce immigration. In response, the government sharply curtailed work visas. Net migration to Singapore dropped from its peak of 228,000 in 2008 to less than 50,000 in 2014.³⁰ The government also provided 2,000 extra university places to Singaporeans at public universities over four years, starting in 2014, and capped foreign placement at 18 percent of the island-state's total enrollment.³¹ By 2019, international student enrollment dropped to about 65,000 students, and scholarships for these students were reduced to \$130 million (a decrease from \$210 million in 2014).³²

The Singaporean parliament and Ministry of Education began to express concerns about the small proportion of native Singaporeans in tenure-track faculty positions, which in 2014 stood at 25 percent at NUS and NTU--the result of the prior "pro-foreigner policy."³³ The government responded by urging universities to "do more" to hire a "local core" of Singaporeans as faculty.³⁴ The Singaporean government also shifted its emphasis in educational funding away from international students and toward continuing education for Singapore's citizens. The new policy took the form of the ambitious 2015 SkillsFuture initiative, which the Singaporean government described as "a national movement to provide Singaporeans with the opportunities to develop their fullest potential throughout life, regardless of their starting points."³⁵

SkillsFuture represented a massive US\$1 billion per year investment by the government. All Singaporean citizens were eligible for grants for early and midcareer training to update their skills, switch careers, obtain career guidance, and prepare for the new "automation economy."³⁶ This investment was paired with a program for Singaporean adult learners, including large reductions in fees to enroll in undergraduate courses.³⁷

The rise in the international reputation of Singapore's universities was impressive. But there emerged concerns about an overreliance and focus on quantitative measures of excellence, known as key performance indicators, or KPIs. International rankings of universities rely heavily on the citation count of academic publications, for example. To move up the rankings, Singapore's universities adopted policies for hiring, promotion, and tenure that relied heavily on these metrics. Critics contended that such practices favored research by foreign academics while discouraging research on local political and social issues that were much less likely to be publishable in prestigious international journals.³⁸

In January 2019, an article titled "Opaque Policies, Fixation with KPIs, Rankings: Why Arts and Humanities Academics Quit NUS, NTU" criticized Singapore's "incessant pursuit of rankings" and the "relative lack of academic freedom when it comes to certain projects or research initiatives." The article appeared in the online newspaper *Today* but was taken down after just four days after the threat of a legal challenge by NUS administrators.³⁹ Rather than suppressing concerns, the legal challenge triggered an international response, and the article was quickly reposted by a number of online sites outside of Singapore.⁴⁰ Since then, NTU and other universities have broadened the criteria for faculty advancement. But the fact remains that global rankings drive much of the research behavior away from regional and local needs, and thus engagement with local communities.

Fake News and Academic Freedom Tested

Singapore has the semblance of a democratic republic yet has had one-party control since 1959, first as a self-governing state within the British Empire, and by 1965 as an independent city-state. The government mandates constraints on social behaviors and on academic freedom that, while not as egregious as the situation in Hong Kong or in China, pose challenges for university leaders, faculty, and students.

One example is a 2019 controversy at the Yale-NUS college, a new liberal arts college that was one of many joint academic teaching and research programs with foreign universities. The Yale-NUS college was governed by a board that includes Singaporean leaders from business and government, Yale administrators and corporation members, as well as the presidents of

NUS and Yale. When the Ministry of Education noted concern regarding a scheduled week-long program at the college titled “Dialogue and Dissent in Singapore” to be led by Alfian Sa’at, a Singaporean playwright, it was canceled. The short class was to feature screenings, panel discussions, and conversations with prominent dissidents. In canceling the event, Yale-NUS College professor Tan Tai Yong stated his concern over the possibility of international students enrolled in the class losing their visas for engaging in political activity. There was also concern within the college of the academic value of the class. “The fundamental reason why we took the decision,” he said to the *Octant*, Yale-NUS’s campus newspaper, “was risk mitigation.”⁴¹

Yale’s president Peter Salovey stated that “Yale has insisted on the values of academic freedom and open inquiry, which have been central to the college and have inspired outstanding work by faculty, students and staff.”⁴² Salovey requested that Yale’s vice provost for global strategy (and former Yale-NUS president) Pericles Lewis investigate. In a detailed report that included interviews with Yale-NUS administrators, faculty, and the instructor of the course, Lewis concluded “that the decision to cancel the module was made internally and without government interference in the academic independence of the College.”⁴³ In founding the college, the agreement with NUS and ministerial officials stated guarantees on academic freedom and autonomy in setting the curriculum and hiring of academic staff.

The reality or appearance of capitulation by Yale-NUS president Tan Tai Yong raised long-simmering worries at Yale and elsewhere about academic freedom when operating programs under semi or fully autocratic governments. Cancelling the Yale-NUS class generated international attention. An editorial in the *Washington Post* stated, “Although only 16 students were enrolled, the decision has revived a debate on whether American liberal arts colleges and other Western universities are compromising their values of academic freedom and the free exchange of ideas when they expand into places with restrictive political climates such as Singapore, the Persian Gulf states and China.”⁴⁴ Such are the constraints on personal freedom that even if students at Yale-NUS wanted to protest the cancellation of the class, they were prevented from doing so: Singapore’s government allows for protests and demonstrations only in a section of a specific park in the city and does not allow non-Singaporeans to participate.

Shortly before the events at Yale-NUS, Singapore’s government aggressively sought new powers to constrain freedom of speech, with implications for universities. In May 2019, parliament passed the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act, also known as the “Fake News Law.” It gave government ministers sweeping powers to remove online articles if they are deemed to be “false or misleading, wholly or in part,” and if the minister concludes that the removal is “in the public interest.”⁴⁵ Before drafting the bill, Singapore created a Parliamentary Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods. The committee heard testimony from faculty, including former Rhodes scholar P. J. Thum. He strongly objected to the bill and claimed that the ruling People’s Action Party itself had used “fake news” repeatedly. Thum’s testimony was rebuked by government officials. More than 170 academics signed a letter stating their concerns about the bill and the suppression of academic freedom in Singapore.⁴⁶

The Fake News Law gave Singaporean ministers the power to order “corrections” to “false and misleading” content anywhere in the world, not just in Singapore, and required internet service providers to block censored content. With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, ministerial officials claimed the new law would help block false information about the pandemic, thereby better protecting public health. But more than 100 academics from throughout the world thought otherwise, signing a letter protesting the threat to academic freedom.⁴⁷ One of the first usages of the law was to block a Facebook page known as the “States Times Review” run by an Australian-based Singaporean political activist named Alex Tan.⁴⁸

Singapore’s partial shift away from international students and foreign ventures in higher education reflects its own nationalistic approach to education. Singapore’s unique history, with its very recent national origin that fused diaspora populations from India, Malaysia, and China into a nation in 1965, defies traditional notions of nationalism that rely on common ethnic, linguistic, and cultural origins. As an island-state, Singapore has been likened to a local dish known as *rojak*, a salad-like mixing together of peoples, which predates its formation as a nation. As a result, nationalism in Singapore is formed in a context of what P. Yang has called a “constitutive sociocultural hybridity” in which authenticity is derived differently than it is in other nations with more easily identified markers of cultural inclusion.⁴⁹

Singapore’s shift away from foreign ventures was dramatically illustrated by the abrupt closure of Yale-NUS College in August 2021, with little notice to either the Yale-NUS leadership or NUS faculty who were to be part of the “New College” which was to be a merger of the Yale-NUS College and the NUS University Scholars program. The abrupt decision caught Yale University and Yale-NUS leaders by surprise, and while the stated motivation for the “merger” was to save costs and improve access, many observers contend that political factors weighed heavily in the decision.⁵⁰ The new model for liberal arts at NUS is more of a “Singapore First” approach that includes New College and an NUS-managed Faculty of Arts and Sciences, bypassing the more American-style academic culture that prevailed at Yale-NUS College, and removing the Governing Board for Yale-NUS that included equal numbers of US and Singaporean members.

Divergent Futures?

China's assertive global presence, rising economic strength, and dogmatic nationalism are major influences on both Hong Kong and Singapore, but with significant differences. Seemingly with little choice, Hong Kong's government responded to Xi's increased nationalism by cooperating with mainland Chinese authorities, including a pivot in policies to favor mainland Chinese students and increasingly for suppressing of dissent. There is an emerging sense of the inevitable integration with China; the future of Hong Kong may be less as a "global city" and instead as one of many Chinese cities, with economic activity coming increasingly from trade with the Mainland.

Beijing's new National Security Law for Hong Kong bodes ill for the independence of Hong Kong's universities, severely eroding the One China, Two Systems promise. The vastly expanding power of Beijing to forcibly limit the civil liberties of Hong Kong's citizens promises a further crackdown on university faculty and students similar to that experienced in China's Mainland. As observed by Amnesty International, "Under this new law 'secession, subversion, terrorism and collusion' with foreign forces incur maximum penalties of life imprisonment. . . . [T]hese offences are so broadly defined they can easily become catch-all offences used in politically motivated prosecutions with potentially heavy penalties."⁵¹ The law also resulted in changes in the governance of Hong Kong universities, further stacking their governing boards with mainland Chinese appointees.

Where once there was a hope of two separate university systems between Hong Kong and Beijing, that seems on the brink of dissolution. If this continues to be the case in a post-COVID-19 world, we should expect a flight of talent from the Chinese city-state and a real decline in the vitality of its universities. The erosion of academic freedom and enforcement of political orthodoxy will degrade the competitiveness of Hong Kong's universities as part of the cost of complying with mandates from China.

China's influence on Singapore includes a dependency on high number of fee-paying Chinese foreign students, but more specifically Singapore's dependency on China as a trading partner and, at the same time, economic competitor bent on dominating Asia and beyond. As an independent state with limited natural resources, Singapore knows that its economic competitiveness depends on high-quality academic institutions, an ability to attract global talent, and a well-educated population. This awareness has resulted in high levels of funding and growing international reputations for its research universities, fed initially by increasing numbers of international students and faculty.

But over the past few years, Singapore has moderated its investment in higher education and curtailed the recruitment of foreign students and faculty, and the government has decreased civil liberties with a direct impact on its higher education sector. The Fake News Law and other efforts to control dissent have a chilling effect. But one might speculate that these increased controls on civil society will only partially erode Singapore's reputation as a global powerhouse for higher education. They are difficult but navigable. Both Hong Kong and Singapore face their own economic slowdowns, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. When combined with their aging and declining domestic populations, this makes innovation and excellence in higher education even more important for sustaining prosperity.

In both city-states, universities played a key role in boosting their economic competitiveness. Both need to manage the external reality of China *and* seek political support from their native populations. It is a balancing act. In theory, the solution for both requires increasing numbers of foreign or nonresident students and workers, and an energetic and global higher education system to maintain a competitive workforce. Yet it appears that the trajectories of their two higher education systems are going in different directions under the long shadow of a powerful China. The political environment for universities in Singapore is much more positive and sustainable than it is in Hong Kong.

ENDNOTES

1. Hong Kong is home to a majority ethnic Chinese population, which comprises 93 percentage of the population, and a very low birthrate, at 1.2 children born per woman. Singapore is home to a more ethnically diverse population, with a majority 74 percent ethnic Chinese population and minority Malay and Indian populations comprising 13 and 7 percent, respectively. Like Hong Kong, Singapore is experiencing a low birth rate, which has dropped to only 1.14 in 2019.
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