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Country Report

## Understanding liberal studies in Hong Kong: Vehicle for civic education and its controversies

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**Keywords:** Hong Kong, civic education, curriculum reform, critical thinking, youth activism

- Civic education in Hong Kong has never had the status of an independent subject in the educational system. It has always been fragmented as a cross-curriculum theme.
- The historical developments of the civic education curriculum in Hong Kong can be summarised as follows: depoliticisation for the most time under the British colonial government; politicisation from the mid-1980s to 1997; and re-depoliticisation after the sovereignty transfer in 1997.
- Liberal Studies, containing elements of citizenship and political knowledge, was reintroduced in 2009 as one core subject and considered a vehicle subject for civic education.
- The subject was compulsory in all senior secondary schools and in the university entrance examination.
- Against the backdrop of mounting criticisms and allegations that Liberal Studies had caused youth activism in Hong Kong, the government completely reconstructed the subject in 2021.

**Purpose:** The author aims to give an overview of civic education in Hong Kong as well as of Liberal Studies, and to discern the reasons behind the reforms to the curriculum and assessment of Liberal Studies.

**Approach:** The analysis is based on government documents related to the subject's curriculum and assessment, press releases and secondary sources. Regarding the controversies, the author draws on numerous studies conducted by educators and scholars in Hong Kong.

**Findings:** The main finding is that there is no empirical evidence supporting a causal relationship between Liberal Studies and youth activism. It seems that the drastic reforms to the curriculum and assessment of Liberal Studies aim to further cultivate an uncritical Chinese national identity in the post-colonial Hong Kong.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Liberal Studies, which had been considered a vehicle subject for civic education, clearly encompassed elements regarding citizenship and political knowledge. However, after its twelve years of implementation in Hong Kong's secondary schools, the government drastically reformed the subject in 2021. As the city witnessed a number of social movements in the last decade, it seems that political awareness of Hong Kong people has greatly improved, especially with respect to the strong presence of young people in these movements. Liberal Studies has often been associated with youth activism and regarded as the main culprit of the radicalisation of students. Given that the reforms of 2021 were launched in a politically heightened environment, the author asks the question: what kind of political considerations motivated the government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (hereafter HKSAR) to implement such drastic reforms to the curriculum and assessment of Liberal Studies.

In this report, the author addresses this question and provides an overview of civic education in Hong Kong as well as of Liberal Studies. The report starts with a brief historical account of civic education from the time under the British colonial government until the reintroduction of Liberal Studies in 2009, and it provides social and political contextualisation essential for understanding the developments of the subject. The author then outlines the features of Liberal Studies and its contributions to civic education. Afterwards, two controversies over the subject are recounted in respect of three important social movements, namely the protests against the introduction of Moral and National Education in 2012, the Umbrella Movement in 2014 and the 2019-2020 Anti-Extradition Protests. The report concludes with a summary of the reforms to the curriculum and assessment of Liberal Studies. The author argues that these drastic reforms may aim to further cultivate an uncritical Chinese national identity in the post-colonial Hong Kong.

## 2 CIVIC EDUCATION IN HONG KONG: FROM DEPOLITICISATION TO POLITICISATION TO RE-DEPOLITICISATION OF CURRICULUM

Liberal Studies, reintroduced as a compulsory subject to all senior secondary students in 2009, was expected to be a vehicle for civic education in Hong Kong (Leung & Yuen, 2009). In order to understand Liberal Studies as a subject with a civic education mission in the context of unique social and political circumstances, a brief summary of the historical developments of civic education in Hong Kong is much needed, as it has undergone significant changes in the last few decades. Due to the city's socio-political conditions, civic education has a tangled past.

Civic education can generally be understood as the education implemented to nurture good citizens as well as to prepare informed and critical citizens (Leung & Yuen, 2009; Chau & Wong, 2020). Political education is the core of civic education, since it delineates the relationship between a citizen and a political community. Members of a political community learn to understand and identify with the community. With adequate political

literacy, they emerge as active citizens and engage in the shaping of the community, where they have a sense of belonging. Even though other themes such as national education and human rights education have become important in civic education around the globe, “civic education without political education is at best incomplete” (Leung & Yuen, 2012, 45). Yet for many reasons, it is not uncommon for civic education to present itself in a depoliticised form – its curriculum contains very limited or no teaching contents pertaining to politics; the political contents are compressed or eliminated in the curriculum. One of the reasons could be the need of governance and Hong Kong under the colonial rule was a typical example (Morris & Chan, 1997; Leung & Ng, 2004; Leung & Yuen, 2012). Kennedy and Fairbrother (2004) also observe that civic education in Asia is characterised more by moral and personal values than civic and public values, which may lead to a depoliticised civic education. However, depoliticisation of civic education is by no means to suggest that the process to define, include and exclude knowledge in a school subject could be apolitical in nature. Tse (2007, 159) claims that citizenship per se is a political concept. At any rate, curriculum planning of civic education, i.e. deciding on what contents and how they are taught in schools, is a highly political act. In this report, (de)politicisation only refers to the teaching contents in the civic education curriculum.

The British colonial government was for the most time (until the mid-1980s) determined to depoliticise Hong Kong for three main reasons. It affected not only civic education or education in general, but also many aspects of the society. First, predominantly worried about legitimacy of its own colonial rule, the colonial government strove to keep Hong Kong people away from the political domain and grossly evaded topics concerning colonialism or sovereignty (Lo & Hung, 2022). Second, political occurrences in China after the Second World War created social unrest and tensions in the colony. For example, the political struggle between the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party resulted in some clashes between their sympathisers in Hong Kong. As the Cultural Revolution later led to internal chaos in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the colonial government feared such disorder would spill over into the colony and discussion of political issues would offend the communist government (Leung & Yuen, 2009). Third, the colonial government downplayed the concepts of national identity and nation-state, in order to prevent the rise of Chinese nationalism and nationalistic sentiments in Hong Kong (Leung, 2015).

Civic education was thus not effectively implemented in the colonial time because the colonial government considered civic education of a political nature a threat and people were being socialised to be politically apathetic (Yuen et al., 2016). As pointed out by Leung et al. (2014), the colonial government utilised civic education as a means to discourage popular political participation. In other words, “[p]eople living in Hong Kong were ‘residents’ but not ‘citizens’ in the colonial period” (Ng & Wong, 2019, 135). There existed a centralised control system of school curriculum until 1960s, which ensured that syllabuses and textbooks were depoliticised and decontextualised by avoiding contents related to contemporary China, local Hong Kong or any politically sensitive topics (Morris

& Chan, 1997). Against the background of the city's rapid industrialisation since the 1960s, the colonial government then prioritised economic developments and personal fulfilments. It adopted a pragmatic strategy in civic education to "neutralise" the colonial rule by constructing the image of a "civilised colonial ruler". On one hand, the colonial government emphasised effective governance and corruption-free administration conducive to successful economic take-off, and it embraced traditional Chinese culture to present itself as open-minded. On the other hand, issues regarding national identity or contemporary Chinese politics were not allowed in the curriculum (Luk, 1991; Leung, 2015).

Civics was introduced as a school subject into Hong Kong's vernacular schools in 1925 and became an examined subject in 1950. The model syllabus was yet apolitical and decontextualised (Leung & Yuen, 2009). In 1965, Economic and Public Affairs replaced Civics. The teaching of politics and discussion of sensitive issues such as repression under the colonial rule were still suppressed in the syllabus (Leung, 2015). There was a clear ban of political events in schools, as specified in the Education Ordinance and Education Regulations (Ng & Wong, 2019). As a result, this depoliticised form of civic education alienated young people from their indigenous Chinese nationality and local politics (Tse, 2007).

Owing to the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 and the impending sovereignty transfer, the attitude of the colonial government changed (Morris & Chan, 1997). The Sino-British Joint Declaration confirmed that the sovereignty of Hong Kong would be handed over to the PRC on the 1st of July 1997. The Chinese central government guaranteed that Hong Kong people were able to maintain their way of life and a high degree of autonomy under the "One Country, Two Systems" arrangement; it also promised self-rule of the people and a democratic government by elections. As democratic developments were expected after the sovereignty transfer, the colonial government decided to gradually develop a more representative government, so as to prepare for the transition and ensure the autonomous status of Hong Kong after 1997. These political circumstances had an extensive impact on education and it was a turning point from depoliticisation to politicisation of the civic education curriculum (Ng & Wong, 2019).

In response to the forthcoming political and constitutional changes, the colonial government released two guidelines on civic education. The Guidelines on Civic Education of 1985 (1985 Guidelines) suggested that schools could implement civic education in a whole school approach, through formal curriculum, informal curriculum and hidden curriculum. However, scholars found the political contents in the 1985 Guidelines conservative and weak (Tse, 1997). The guidelines received overwhelming criticism from educators, educational groups, pressures groups and politicians about the aims, objectives, implementation, and insufficient political contents (Ng & Wong, 2019). Studies pointed to a low level of implementation of the 1985 Guidelines as well as a lack of coherent sense of civic identity or community values (Morris & Chan, 1997; Leung, 2015).

Meanwhile, the colonial government carried out reforms in the formal school

curriculum. In 1984, the syllabus of Economic and Public Affairs was amended to include representative government as one of its topics. Other subjects related to civic education were also modified to incorporate more elements of political issues. For instance, Chinese History discussed the founding of the PRC. Two years later in 1986, Government and Public Affairs was introduced as a new subject dealing with the learning of politics. For the first time, the colonial government decided to present sensitive or previously forbidden contents in the formal school curriculum, such as the social and political conditions of mainland China. More importantly, there was an unprecedented proposal in 1989 to introduce Liberal Studies as a core and compulsory subject for all sixth form students. It intended to use a more contextualised and politicised curriculum, but the proposal was not adopted eventually because all the local universities refused to use it as a prerequisite for university admission. In 1992, Liberal Studies became an optional subject and only a small number of schools (around 10%) implemented it (Morris & Chan, 1997, 257, 260).

Approaching the sovereignty transfer in 1997, the society in Hong Kong had become more politically conscious. That period was shaped by a number of major political incidents both locally and in mainland China, not least because the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989 shocked the people of Hong Kong. More than one million participants joined demonstrations to condemn the violence. After that, the Basic Law of the HKSAR under the PRC, which would serve as a constitution for the HKSAR after the transfer, was passed in 1990. The colonial government enacted the Bill of Rights in 1991.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18 in 1995. These political developments thus demanded a higher level of political awareness from the society. There was a need for the colonial government to deepen the reforms in civic education. Subsequently, the Guidelines on Civic Education of 1996 (1996 Guidelines) replaced the outdated 1985 Guidelines and were well received by the education sector. The primary objectives of the 1996 Guidelines were to “help students develop civic values, civic attitudes, civic beliefs and civic competence towards democracy, liberty, equality, human rights and the rule of law, and to employ these concepts in daily life” (Ng & Wong, 2019, 141). However, the colonial government never substantially enforced the intended curriculum of civic education because of the limited time for implementation before the sovereignty transfer. The actual extent of its implementation is a matter of doubt (Leung & Yuen, 2009).

Following the sovereignty transfer in 1997, the new HKSAR government took charge of internal affairs, and was vested with executive, legislative as well as judicial powers.<sup>2</sup> In light of the enduring depoliticisation of the civic education curriculum in the colonial period, the cultivation of civic awareness was inadequate in Hong Kong, and people had never developed a true sense of citizenship. Their perception of and identification with core values like human rights, the rule of law and freedom of speech were rather “superficial” (Leung, 2015, 7). Besides, civic education under the colonial government brought about an alienated national identity in the society that was disconnected from the contemporary Chinese nation-state (Tse, 2007). The HKSAR government hence had to address the issues of civil rights and identity politics urgently.

The HKSAR government yet once again depoliticised civic education and was predominantly concerned with national education. In fact, Tung Chee-hwa, the first Chief Executive of Hong Kong, highlighted the aim of national education to develop a national Chinese identity (Tse, 2007). The Curriculum Development Council (hereafter CDC), as an important advisory body to the Education Bureau of the HKSAR government,<sup>3</sup> issued a policy document in 2000 – *Learning to Learn: The Way Forward in Curriculum Development*. The document pointed to “moral and civic education”, with particular focus on national education. The CDC integrated civic education with sex education, religious education, ethics and life education (Leung et al., 2014); and it gave much attention to moral values, such as responsibility, commitment, respect and perseverance. Themes such as politics, democracy, and human rights were marginalised (CDC, 2000). In this regard, national identity was predominantly understood in a cultural way, “focusing on cultural China, but avoiding political China, and aiming at promoting patriotism and displaying love for the motherland and traditional Chinese culture” (Leung & Yuen, 2009, 37).

Two competing orientations characterised the historical developments of civic education in Hong Kong: politicisation and depoliticisation of its curriculum.<sup>4</sup> Under the British colonial government, civic education was for a long time depoliticised. Political contents were not represented in the formal school curriculum and political engagement was discouraged for the sake of sustaining political stability. From the mid-1980s to 1997, the colonial government attempted to politicise civic education and prepare the people for the transition. It launched reforms to the education system and included more elements of politics in civic education subjects. After the sovereignty transfer in 1997, the HKSAR government reversed the course of development and again re-depoliticised civic education, which focused more on moral and nationalist values, including filial piety, modesty, integrity, collective responsibility and “Chineseness” (see Tang & Wong, 2021).

Liberal Studies was reintroduced under these social and political circumstances in 2009. How could it be understood as a vehicle for civic education and what was it supposed to contribute to civic education? The following sections turn to these questions.

### **3 FEATURES OF LIBERAL STUDIES**

The reintroduction of Liberal Studies was part of the massive education reform proposed in 2003 and implemented in 2009, which fundamentally altered the education system of secondary as well as higher education in Hong Kong. Originally, Hong Kong inherited the British 3-2-2-3 system. In this old system, after completing three years of junior secondary school and two years of senior secondary school, students would sit the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE). After that, eligible students could receive two years of matriculation course. Upon completion, they would sit the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE), which was at the time the actual entrance examination for higher education. Students with adequate performances in the HKALE could proceed and be admitted to a local university, and receive three years of university education. It was an examination-oriented system (Deng, 2009).

Under the New Academic Structure since September 2009, the so-called 3-3-4 system has been in place in Hong Kong's secondary schools and universities. Instead of two years of senior secondary school plus two years of matriculation, students receive three years of senior secondary education. Instead of two public examinations (HKCEE and HKALE), students only need to sit one – the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE). Students with adequate performances in the HKDSE can apply for universities and receive four years of university education. In this new system, every student is provided with the opportunity to take part in a three-year senior secondary course (Education Bureau, 2011).

Back in 2003, the HKSAR government proposed Liberal Studies as one of the core subjects in the new 3-3-4 system (Chau & Wong, 2020). This proposal was later approved and it resulted in the composition of four core mandatory subjects under the New Academic Structure: Chinese Language, English Language, Mathematics and Liberal Studies. Liberal Studies was elevated to the status of a compulsory core subject. It meant that all students must study Liberal Studies during their three years of senior secondary school and take the examination on this subject in the HKDSE. Students with a failed grade in Liberal Studies were automatically denied direct entrance to university for any undergraduate programmes.

**Graph 1: Curriculum Content in New Academic Structure (Education Bureau, 2011, 3)**

4 Core Subjects	2 or 3 Elective Subjects	Other Learning Experiences
Chinese Language English Language Mathematics Liberal Studies	2 or 3 subjects chosen from NSS elective subjects, Applied Learning courses or other language courses	Moral and Civic Education Community Service Career-related Experiences Aesthetic Development Physical Development
(45-55%)	(20-30%)	(15-35%)

Liberal Studies was an integrated and interdisciplinary subject, which aimed to help students see connections of knowledge and apply knowledge across disciplines. It intended to encourage open-mindedness and curiosity in learning. It was a response to the criticisms regarding rigid curriculum design in the old system: “Before the 2000s, [...] Hong Kong school subjects were regarded as too much fix on traditional subject line without much knowledge integration between subjects. Various subject knowledge has been taught in compartmentalised subjects, with repetition across different subjects” (Chong, 2020, 14-15). Liberal Studies could be seen as a solution to the educational issues in Hong Kong secondary education – a narrow academic focus, lack of cross-curricular linkages, and lack of relevance and responsiveness to the changing social, political, and individual needs (Deng, 2009).

According to the Liberal Studies Curriculum and Assessment Guide (Secondary 4-6),

published together by the CDC and the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (hereafter HKEAA) in 2007, they adopted a student-oriented approach when formulating the curriculum. Students were not expected to become specialists in any specific academic field, but to become “informed, rational and responsible citizens of the local, national and global community” (CDC & HKEAA, 2007, 4). They chose an issue-enquiry approach to assist students in developing a capacity for independent learning. Teachers were advised to employ various learning and teaching strategies, and utilise different materials including media resources. In this way, students could learn to critically evaluate information, analyse questions in hand, consider numerous viewpoints and make sound judgments based on facts (CDC & HKEAA, 2007, 4).

The aims of Liberal Studies were (CDC & HKEAA, 2007, 5, author’s emphasis):

- to enhance students’ understanding of themselves, their society, their nation, the human world and the physical environment;
- to enable students to develop multiple perspectives on perennial and contemporary issues in different contexts (e.g. cultural, social, economic, political and technological contexts);
- to help students become independent thinkers so that they can construct knowledge appropriate to changing personal and social circumstances;
- to develop in students a range of skills for life-long learning, including *critical thinking skills*, creativity, problem-solving skills, communication skills and information technology skills;
- to help students appreciate and respect diversity in cultures and views in a pluralistic society and handle conflicting values; and
- to help students develop positive values and attitude towards life, so that they can become informed and responsible citizens of society, the country and the world.

The curriculum framework allowed great flexibility for the choice of specific discussion issues and the use of curriculum resources, in order to accommodate student diversity and guarantee relevance of the learning experience in the subject. Schools and teachers could, based on characteristics of the schools and needs of students, organise teaching and extra activities for the subject.

The subject was comprised of three Areas of Study, namely “Self and Personal Development”, “Society and Culture” and “Science, Technology and the Environment”. They served as platforms for the exploration of related issues. These three areas each included different modules, in total six modules as shown in Graph 2. Each module contained some “themes” and “questions for enquiry”. These guiding questions showed possible pathways for exploring into these issues, and indicated the expected breadth and depth of the enquiry. Alongside the questions, some “explanatory notes” were provided to help teachers and students understand the issues and to suggest possible perspectives and directions (CDC & HKEAA, 2007, 9-10, 13-15).



**Graph 2: Curriculum Framework of Liberal Studies (CDC & HKEAA, 2007, 11)**

Areas of Study	Independent Enquiry Study (IES)
<p><b>Self &amp; Personal Development</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Module 1: Personal Development &amp; Interpersonal Relationships</li> </ul>	<p>Students are required to conduct an IES making use of the knowledge and perspectives gained from the three Areas of Study and extending them to new issues or contexts. To help students develop their IES titles, the following themes are suggested:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Media</li> <li>Education</li> <li>Religion</li> <li>Sports</li> <li>Art</li> <li>Information and Communication Technology (ICT)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Society &amp; Culture</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Module 2: Hong Kong Today</li> <li>Module 3: Modern China</li> <li>Module 4: Globalization</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Science, Technology &amp; the Environment</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Module 5: Public Health</li> <li>Module 6: Energy Technology &amp; the Environment</li> </ul>	

The assessment design combined both conventional written examination (80%) and school-based assessment (20%) (CDC & HKEAA, 2007, 130). For school-based assessment, each student was required to conduct an Independent Enquiry Study (IES), an enquiry-based project, and present it in written or non-written form. Students should document the study in a learning portfolio; illustrate the process of enquiry as well as the stages of development; and interpret, analyse and reflect on the obtained knowledge. Throughout the process, teachers should provide guidance to students from time to time (CDC & HKEAA, 2007, 133).

**Figure 1: Textbooks of Liberal Studies for Two Modules – Hong Kong Today and Modern China (The Standard, 2020)**



#### 4 AS A VEHICLE FOR CIVIC EDUCATION

Prior to the actual implementation, Liberal Studies had already been considered a vehicle for civic education. Through the study of this subject, students should become informed, rational and responsible citizens. Indeed, the second module “Hong Kong Today” touched upon themes such as rule of law, socio-political participation and identity of Hong Kong people, while the third module “Modern China” dealt with China’s reform and opening-up (CDC & HKEAA, 2007, 14). The intention to attend to political education was noticeable. Nevertheless, it should not be viewed as an independent subject of civic education. As shown in Graph 1, Moral and Civic Education was also included in the category of Other Learning Experiences. Both Liberal Studies, and Moral and Civic Education existed under the New Academic Structure. It was mainly due to the fact that civic education in Hong Kong has been fragmented and it has never had the status of one school subject. Rather, it has always been a cross-curriculum theme (Kennedy, 2016).

Before the New Academic Structure was being enforced and Liberal Studies was being taught in senior secondary schools, scholars analysed the contents of Liberal Studies Curriculum and Assessment Guide (Secondary 4-6) (CDC & HKEAA, 2007). Leung and Yuen (2009) found out that Liberal Studies might address some important components of civic education, namely political education, national education and human rights education. It was the first time that a subject with a clear civic education mission became compulsory and students had opportunity in the formal school curriculum to acquire political knowledge. However, they concluded that the elements of political education in the subject were limited in scope and conservative in tone. Despite the lack of explicit mentioning of human rights, Leung and Lo (2012) revealed that some of the aims and topics in the modules of Liberal Studies were closely connected to human rights. Yuen and Chong (2012) also claimed that the teaching of human rights could be found in discrete topics of Liberal Studies.

Scholars later conducted empirical studies to better assess the contribution of Liberal Studies to civic education. For example, Yuen et al. (2016) carried out a qualitative research by interviewing teachers and students from five different schools, and analysed their perspectives on the subject. They discovered that the most striking contribution of the subject was the improvement in social awareness of the students. Liberal Studies not only helped students to stay aware of current controversial issues in the society, but also engaged them in the critical discussion of such issues. They inferred from the data that, “the teaching and learning related to LS [Liberal Studies] may help the building up of informed citizens who thereby can have the capacity to tackle controversial issues and arrive at their own judgment” (Yuen et al., 2016, 65). Their findings echoed those in the Progress Report on the New Academic Structure Review (CDC et al., 2013), published after the first cohort of students completed their three years of senior secondary school and the HKDSE.

In their detailed account of three social studies subjects in Hong Kong’s primary and secondary education, including Liberal Studies, Chau and Wong (2020) contended that

these subjects did not qualify as pure civic education, because their syllabuses were mingled with other non-civic contents such as science and technology. Nevertheless, civic education elements were embedded in these subjects and conveyed to students from primary to senior secondary level. From a democratic perspective, Liberal Studies also had “the potential to be an important component in moving Hong Kong toward a more democratic system” (Spires, 2017, 162). It tackled contemporary social issues, especially disputed topics in Hong Kong as well as China, and fostered students’ self-awareness and political literacy. Students were trained to navigate through complex political developments with necessary skill sets and reflect on the democratisation process of Hong Kong.

## 5 CONTROVERSIES SURROUNDING LIBERAL STUDIES

When the HKSAR government implemented the New Academic Structure in 2009, Liberal Studies quickly became one of the most controversial subjects in the history of Hong Kong. Since the beginning, the education sector was somewhat concerned about teacher training and teaching resources (Chong, 2020). It was sensible because this interdisciplinary subject was challenging for many teachers and there lacked sufficient training in universities for Liberal Studies teachers. However, this section focuses on two other controversies, and delineates the standpoint of the subject’s opponents and related political implications.

### 5.1 Controversy over the translation of “critical thinking”

Cultivating critical thinking is an important objective of Liberal Studies. In the subject’s Curriculum and Assessment Guide, the term was frequently used. As emphasised above, one of the aims was to develop critical thinking skills in students (CDC & HKEAA, 2007, 5). The section of Broad Learning Outcomes also stressed that, by the end of the course, students should be able to “apply critical thinking skills, creativity and different perspectives in making decisions and judgments on issues and problems at both personal and social levels” (CDC & HKEAA, 2007, 6).

Nonetheless, the translation of the term in Chinese caused some fierce criticisms. Critical thinking was translated as “*pipanxing sikao*.”<sup>5</sup> Its literal meaning is “critiquing and judging thinking.” The most vocal critic of this Chinese translation was Regina Ip, a pro-establishment lawmaker in Hong Kong.<sup>6</sup> Back in 2008 before the implementation of the New Academic Structure, she began to raise concerns about the usage of this translation in Liberal Studies curriculum. In a paper submitted to the Panel on Education of the Legislative Council, she argued that this Chinese translation had negative connotations and led students to believe that criticising was equal to thinking (Ip, 2008). She further claimed that the meaning of “*pipanxing sikao*” did not match that of critical thinking and referred to scholarly definitions of the term. The Education Bureau responded to Regina Ip, and countered that her understanding of critical thinking was actually in line with

what had been stated in the curriculum documents, i.e., “critical thinking is about drawing out meaning from given data or statements, examining their accuracy, generating and evaluating arguments, and seeing things from different perspectives” (Education Bureau, 2009, Annex). Additionally, the Education Bureau pointed out that governments, academics and teachers in many Chinese-speaking communities in the world, including Hong Kong, mainland China, Taiwan and Singapore, had adopted the Chinese translation “*pipanxing sikao*.” It even appeared in official United Nations documents (see United Nations, 2004).

Social movements in the early 2010s reignited the debate about the Chinese translation of critical thinking. In a meeting of the Legislative Council in 2014, Regina Ip restated her concern about this Chinese translation. While repeating the need for correcting the translation, she made a parallel example that some answering samples from students in the HKDSE had displayed a clear anti-government political attitude. She believed these students failed to achieve the subject’s objective of considering different viewpoints (news.gov.hk, 2014). Later in an interview, she asserted the incorrect translation of critical thinking had wrongly guided students to believe that the purpose of thinking was to criticise, and made students have an inborn confrontational attitude towards the pro-establishment camp (Ming Pao, 2015a). Some scholars in Hong Kong supported her criticism regarding the translation. For example, Prof. Leonard K. Cheng, the President of Lingnan University, agreed that the Chinese translation of critical thinking was problematic (Ming Pao, 2015b; Cheng, 2019). He contended that the purpose of critical thinking was not finding problems for the sake of criticising. Instead, it required a prudent and thoughtful attitude as well as the necessary knowledge and skills for identifying the roots of problem.

Pro-establishment politicians and lawmakers continuously attacked this Chinese translation and interpreted the anti-government tendency among students as a failure of cultivating critical thinking. Due to mounting pressure, since December 2014, the Education Bureau has thus gradually changed the Chinese translation of critical thinking from “*pipanxing sikao*” into “*mingbianxing sikao*,” something similar to deliberative thinking (Chong, 2020, 20).

## 5.2 Controversy over youth activism

More fierce criticisms were directed at the impacts of Liberal Studies on young people. There were three major social movements in the last decade, including the protests against the introduction of Moral and National Education in 2012, the Umbrella Movement in 2014 and the 2019-2020 Anti-Extradition Protests. Youngsters and students were very much involved in all three of them. As they occurred after the implementation of the New Academic Structure in 2009, allegations that Liberal Studies bred youth activism and radicalised young people became louder on the side of the pro-establishment camp. This section first illustrates how such accusations emerged, developed and later intensified in

2019; and then outlines scholarly views on these allegations.

Young people's participation in social collective actions caught extensive attention for the first time during the protests in 2012. The HKSAR government attempted to introduce Moral and National Education as an independent subject of civic education. The Moral and National Education Curriculum Guide (Primary 1 to Secondary 6) (Consultation Draft) was released by the CDC in 2011. As Leung and Yuen (2012, 47-48) analysed, the learning objectives in the "national domain" mainly addressed "Chinese cultures, histories, traditions, people's livelihood, economics, technologies, and advancements." Its curriculum minimised or left out political issues in the PRC. Due to public concern over indoctrination and strong resistance to the implementation of Moral and National Education, the HKSAR government's proposal resulted in an anti-national education campaign, in which student groups were the main forces (Chong, 2020). Scholarism was the most well known one among these student groups. It was founded by secondary school students in May 2011 and became the leading organisation of the campaign.<sup>7</sup> They viewed the curriculum of Moral and National Education as biased and filled with affective education; they organised rallies, demonstrations and press conferences to express worries about possible brainwashing, but these tactics were largely in vain. Seeking to press the government to withdraw the plan, Scholarism escalated their tactics and initiated an occupation of the public area beneath the government offices in August 2012. At the same time, three of its members went on a hunger strike. The campaign ended after ten days of occupation, when the HKSAR government eventually shelved the proposal. However, some began to concern about whether youngsters had developed a heightened sense of civic awareness. From 2012 on, the pro-establishment camp had been targeting Liberal Studies and vehemently criticising the subject for instigating students' participation in social movements (Chong, 2020).

Hong Kong witnessed two years later another social movement – the Umbrella Movement. In August 2014, the Chinese central government announced its decision on the reforms of Hong Kong's electoral system that a nominating committee was to be established for the 2017 Chief Executive election. The nominating committee was interpreted as a mechanism to pre-screen the candidates, and the reforms were perceived as dishonoring the promise of giving Hong Kong people genuine democracy after the sovereignty transfer in 1997. Thousands of protesters resorted to civil disobedience and occupied main streets in several downtown areas of Hong Kong (Mok & Yuen, 2016). The movement lasted for 79 days. Unlike the anti-national education campaign, no single organisation led the Umbrella Movement. Yet, Scholarism and the Hong Kong Federation of Students were very active.<sup>8</sup> They co-organised the Class Boycott Campaign, in which many students from senior secondary schools and universities took part. Accusations related to Liberal Studies continued. Particularly, some teachers of the subject were criticised for publicly demonstrating their support of the movement in classrooms (Tsoi, 2014).

**Figure 2: Umbrella Movement – Occupation of Harcourt Road, Admiralty (Credit: Damir Sagolj and Tyrone Siu/Reuters; Crowder, 2015)**



Criticisms about Liberal Studies reached a peak in the 2019-2020 Anti-Extradition Protests. The trigger for this social movement was the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill proposed in early 2019. People were deeply unsettled that the amendment bill would have torn down the legal firewall between Hong Kong and mainland China, allowing the Chinese central government to extradite individuals to the mainland. It was considered a direct erosion of the “One country, Two systems” arrangement in place since 1997. Stirring up fear and unease in society, the amendment bill sparked off unexpected protests of such scale in Hong Kong in June 2019, which lasted for more than a year. In the movement, protestors adopted two different strategies. There were conventional protest activities, such as demonstrations with more than one million of participants. Protestors employed a variety of peaceful tactics including hunger strikes, human chains, petitions, labour strikes, and class boycotts. A trend of radicalisation was also observable, especially in the later stages. Radical tactics were used for the most part in the clashes with the Hong Kong Police Force. These tactics included road-blocking, using laser pointers, throwing objects, petrol bombs, and vandalising public or government-owned properties. Young people constituted a huge part in both peaceful protest activities and violent confrontations with the police.

In search of an explanation for youth radicalisation, pro-establishment politicians and mouthpieces pointed the finger at Liberal Studies. In July 2019, Tung Chee-hwa, the first Chief Executive, contended that Liberal Studies was a complete failure and the main reason why young people now had “problems” (Lam & Chiu, 2019). From July to September 2019, Ho Lok-sang, a scholar at Lingnan University, wrote four articles for China Daily, claiming that Liberal Studies was “harmful” to students and blamed the failure of the subject on teachers (see, for example, Ho, 2019a; Ho, 2019b). Wen Wei Po, a pro-Beijing state-owned newspaper, published an article describing teaching materials of

Liberal Studies as poison and propaganda from the pro-democracy camp (Wen Wei Po, 2019). In the aftermath of the Anti-Extradition Protests, Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor, the then Chief Executive, proposed the reforms to Liberal Studies curriculum in her 2020 Policy Address to the Legislative Council:

“We cannot bear to see that with the infiltration of politics into school campuses, students are drawn into political turbulence or even misled to engage in illegal and violent acts, for which they have to take legal responsibilities that will impact on their lives.” (HKSAR Government, 2020a)

“There has been ongoing controversy over the subject of Liberal Studies under the senior secondary curriculum in the society. Hence, the direction of reform in future should focus on rectifying the previous deviation from the subject’s objectives [...]” (HKSAR Government, 2020a)

It stands out that she made direct connections between the subject and political activism of young people, and stressed that such “deviation” had to be fixed. She went on to suggest that critical thinking in Liberal Studies curriculum misguided and advocated students to object to everything about the government, and this situation had to be corrected (Yau, 2020).

These social movements and intensifying denunciations of Liberal Studies brought the subject into the spotlight. On paper, the correlation between the subject and youth activism might seem plausible in view of the timeline of occurrences. The issue was not left unattended, and the presumed causal relationship has been repeatedly questioned by scholars over the years.

Studies found out that the teaching and learning of Liberal Studies did not have a direct impact on youth activism. It was true that the subject, as a vehicle for civic education, conveyed political knowledge and enhanced students’ political awareness. However, discussion of controversial issues did not naturally conduce to social and political participation. Yuen et al. (2016), through in-depth interviews with students, recognised no causal relationship. They observed that students were able to differentiate between the study of Liberal Studies, an academic study, and political participation, a social action. Participation of young people was driven more by the arousal of a specific event. Indeed, some of the interviewees joined the public rallies during the Umbrella Movement, but clearly pointed out that they were triggered by the decision of the Chinese central government to reform Hong Kong’s electoral system. These students believed Liberal Studies was vital to them, as controversial issues were presented in a more balanced way.

Based on the data from two qualitative studies, Lee and Chiu (2017) identified that the subject had different impacts on students. After acquiring political knowledge through Liberal Studies, some would make a conscious decision to disengage from politics. Others

developed cynical views towards political participation, when they became “disenchanted” with political realities in Hong Kong. Since the curriculum demanded them to make judgment after considering different opinions, students in general tended to adopt a moderate and circumspect orientation in analysing politics. In addition, the examination-oriented learning style was common among the students. Many of them focused merely on certain examination skills and aimed for good grades. They summarised that students believed Liberal Studies had little bearing on their political participation.

From the perspective of political socialisation, Ng (2014) conducted an explorative study and focused on how students in Hong Kong were socialised to become active and participatory citizens. He concluded that civic education teachers played an important role in the process, but school principals, family members, peers and community stakeholders helped young people to construct the notion of active citizenship as well. In order to better assess the influence of Liberal Studies teachers on students, Mok and Yuen (2016) interviewed teachers from ten different schools in Hong Kong about their understanding of critical thinking. In the conclusion, they criticised those teachers for paying “sole attention to the bias engendered by the sensational anti-government media but [being] grossly ignorant of the bias inflicted by those even more powerful pro-establishment and pro-government media” (Mok & Yuen, 2016, 41). It seems that even though the role of teachers was significant, teachers did not necessarily nurture an anti-government generation. Other scholars discerned that teachers maintained professional neutrality while teaching Liberal Studies in classrooms (see Fung & Su, 2016; Fung & Lui, 2017).

Furthermore, research showed other factors leading to the rise of youth activism. Lee et al. (2017) discovered that social psychological factors, such as grievance, efficacy and anger, contributed to people’s support of and participation in the Umbrella Movement. In an onsite survey done by Cheng and Chan (2017), most of the participants in the Umbrella Movement had previous experience in protests and movements. According to a meticulous report written by Kennedy et al. (2018a), radicalisation of Hong Kong young people could be attributed to a number of factors, including critical political events, daily and personal experiences, school education, social networks, family socialisation, political figures, media and Internet. The role of school education in relation to youth radicalism was less direct, rather mixed, and generally not very significant.

Indeed, the premise that youth activism first started after the reintroduction of Liberal Studies was unfounded. The focus on the participation of young people in social movements in the last decade largely obscured earlier social actions in Hong Kong. It was estimated that there were 16,817 public meetings and processions between 1997 and 2004 (Ma, 2005). Typical examples in this period were the 2003 protest against the National Security Bill, the heritage preservation campaigns in 2006 and 2007, and the Anti-Express Rail Link Movement from 2009 to 2010. Previous generations of young people already had experiences in political activism. Tracing back to the time under the British colonial



government, scholars affirmed that youth radicalism was not new in Hong Kong (Kennedy et al., 2018a). Since the 1960s, their presence in social collective actions has been noticeable. Young people even played a crucial role in some early radical actions such as the riots in 1966 and 1967.

Several controversies accompanied Liberal Studies throughout the years. When the subject was portrayed parallel to the timeline of social movements in the last decade, one might come under the impression that the teaching and learning of Liberal Studies led to youth activism. However, as this section reveals, scholars have repeatedly debunked this misconception by conducting academic studies. There is no causal relationship between the subject and youth activism. Liberal Studies has become the scapegoat of students' active political participation (Chong, 2020).

## 6 FATE OF LIBERAL STUDIES

Despite the lack of empirical evidence to support these allegations, the HKSAR government decided to reform the subject. In fact, Liberal Studies was officially reviewed for three times in total. Both in the 2013 short-term and 2015 mid-term regular reviews, the subject received favourable comments from the CDC, the HKEAA and the Education Bureau, with respect to its curriculum and assessment (Chong, 2020).

The Progress Report on the New Academic Structure Review, published in 2013, confirmed that most of the broad learning outcomes and curriculum aims of Liberal Studies were achieved. The majority of teachers and students gave positive feedback regarding the subject. Teachers indicated that Liberal Studies helped raise their students' civic awareness and improved their study and generic skills (CDC et al., 2013). According to the Report on the New Academic Structure Medium-term Review and Beyond, issued in 2015, the curriculum areas of Liberal Studies were "well received for broadening students' perspectives and outlook, building self-confidence, facilitating all-round development and nurturing positive values and attitudes" (CDC et al., 2015, 12). The majority of schools reported very positively regarding student achievement of the curriculum aims and nearly 80% agreed that the curriculum framework should be maintained. Due to these positive responses, the curriculum and assessment of the subject had remained largely unchanged at the time.

Later, in November 2017, the HKSAR government set up the Task Force on Review of School Curriculum (hereafter Task Force) to review the implementation of the New Academic Structure. The Task Force conducted a three-month public consultation between late June and mid-October 2019, at the height of the 2019-2020 Anti-Extradition Protests. The majority of the written submissions concerning Liberal Studies urged the government to abolish the subject, or alleged that the subject led to unruly and radical youth behaviours in social events (Task Force, 2020, 6). Even though the Task Force reaffirmed that Liberal Studies assisted students in developing the capacity to approach controversial issues from multiple perspectives with critical thinking and problem-solving skills, the Task Force recommended trimming the contents of Liberal Studies and allowing

students to opt out of the Independent Enquiry Study (IES). The curriculum content should also be regularly reviewed and issues for enquiry should be updated (Task Force, 2020, 25-27).

The actual reforms came much stronger and utterly reconstructed the subject. Carrie Lam officially announced the reforms to the curriculum and assessment of Liberal Studies in November 2020. On the next day, Kevin Yeung Yun-hung, the Secretary of Education, held a press conference to lay out the key points of the reforms. The subject would be renamed; the curriculum content and teaching hours would be streamlined; there would be only “pass” or “fail” in the public examination of the subject; the Independent Enquiry Study (IES) would be removed from the curriculum; and students would be given opportunities to visit mainland China (HKSAR Government, 2020b). Four months later, he explained that the reforms aimed to strengthen students’ learning of national developments and the Constitution of the PRC, and to cultivate their Chinese national identity (HKSAR Government, 2021a). Liberal Studies was eventually renamed as Citizenship and Social Development and the curriculum would cover three core themes: Hong Kong under “One Country, Two Systems,” Our Country since Reform and Opening-up, and Interconnectedness and Interdependence of the Contemporary World. According to the latest curriculum and assessment guide, one newly added aim is to help students “inherit Chinese culture and heritage in a pluralistic society, deepen understanding and sense of identity of individuals with Chinese nationality and Chinese citizenship, and at the same time appreciate, respect and embrace diversity in cultures and views” (CDC & HKEAA, 2021, 5). It indicates a shift from a global perspective to a national one in the curriculum.

The cultivation of a Chinese national identity in school curriculum has become paramount to the HKSAR government. In the early implementation stage of Liberal Studies, some scholars perceived its contents of national education as pro-China and believed the subject might have an implicit objective of promoting blind patriotism. However, Fung and Lui (2017) argued that Liberal Studies failed to achieve this objective, as students demonstrated strong critical thinking and independent judgment abilities in their empirical study. Given the presence and active role of young people in the social movements, the Chinese central government and the HKSAR government regarded these social actions as young people’s manifestations of anti-China or anti-government sentiments. They also found the outcome of Liberal Studies, or more precisely its national education component, unsatisfying in terms of cultivating a Chinese national identity (Pan & Lo, 2018). To the HKSAR government, Citizenship and Social Development was indeed a remedy for the failure of Liberal Studies and a channel to continue indoctrinating Chinese patriotism and uncritical national identity into Hong Kong youth (Lo & Hung, 2022).

## 7 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Liberal Studies, as a vehicle for civic education in Hong Kong, was fundamentally reformed in the social and political environment following the 2019-2020 mass protests.

The debate about the subject was heated. Accusations holding Liberal Studies responsible for youth activism and even youth radicalism intensified in recent years, with reference to young people's participation in several large-scale social movements. In this regard, scholars have conducted various studies and pointed to the lack of empirical evidence supporting any causal relationship between them. However, the HKSAR government ultimately decided to reconstruct the whole subject. It appears that curriculum planning was not a major factor in the decision-making process. Instead, the drastic reforms to the curriculum and assessment of Liberal Studies seem to aim at further cultivating an uncritical Chinese national identity in the post-colonial Hong Kong.

In today's Hong Kong, these attempts can be observed not only in secondary education, but also in higher education. The Hong Kong national security law, passed in June 2020 in Beijing, stipulates that national security must be taught in schools and universities. Accordingly, in May 2021, the Education Bureau drafted the "Curriculum Framework of National Security Education in Hong Kong" as the guideline for the implementation of national security education in primary and secondary schools, which should also include learning elements such as nationhood and enhance students' sense of national identity (Education Bureau, 2021b). Kevin Yeung, as the Secretary of Education, asserted that it was a requirement for higher education institutions to incorporate national security education into their curriculum (HKSAR Government, 2021b). All eight publicly funded universities in Hong Kong have now introduced a course on national security and designated it as a graduation requirement for all students (inmediahk.net, 2022).<sup>9</sup> Even though the contents of the course differ, the national security education in Hong Kong universities reminds us of the ideological and political education (*sixiang zhengzhi jiaoyu*) in Chinese universities that is a compulsory subject and encompasses civic education elements (see Zhang & Fagan, 2016; Lu, 2017). Burns (2020) said the future of Hong Kong's universities would be intimately tied to mainland China.

From a historical perspective, this is perhaps only an episode in the developments of civic education in Hong Kong. As scholars tactfully put it, civic education has for long been manipulated as a tool of governance, both before and after the sovereignty transfer in 1997 (Leung, 2015; Yuen, 2016, 69). Political considerations and the need of political stability have never been absent in determining the curriculum of civic education. The developments since the British colonial period show that the set-up of a civic education subject and its curriculum somehow reflected the reactions of the respective ruling governments to changing social and political circumstances. The government in power would very likely construct civic education in a way that serves its interests. Tse (2007, 170) explains that "[w]hile the colonial perspective credits the British contribution to the miraculous transformation of the territory, the nationalist perspective advocates only national integrity and reunification." One recent salient example is the claim of the HKSAR government that Hong Kong was never a "British colony" (Education Bureau, 2022). It could have significant impacts on the interpretation of this part of Hong Kong's history in school curriculum. Mok and Yuen (2016, 29) encapsulate the situation after the

sovereignty transfer:

“After the handover in 1997, Hong Kong has been caught between two very different forces. On one hand, there is still a strong tendency to retain its international outlook, to preserve the use of English Language, and to promote the civic-mindedness and global awareness of the people, especially students. [...] On the other hand, there is more and more emphasis of the understanding of Chinese culture, recognition of the Chinese identity, appreciation of the “national situation,” and deference to the Central (i.e. the Central People’s Government in Beijing) or the Mainland which is the sovereign country of Hong Kong.” (Mok & Yuen, 2016, 29)

The influence of the Chinese central government seems to be overwhelming now. It remains an intriguing question of how the HKSAR government can strike a balance between the international orientation and the nationalist pressure. It is also interesting to see whether the HKSAR government retains certain autonomy, when it comes to educational matters (particularly civic education); or whether the Chinese central government plays a decisive role in the future of Hong Kong’s education. Due to the limited space, the report focuses on curriculum planning and political considerations in the reforms to the curriculum and assessment of Liberal Studies. Yet, other factors also warrant attention. In his in-depth analysis of Liberal Studies, Deng (2009, 598) reaffirms the notion that “a school subject is a distinctive purpose-built enterprise, constructed in response to social, cultural, and political demands and challenges toward educative ends.” Other than respective governments, future studies can turn to various stakeholders such as pressure groups, NGOs as well as teachers’ unions, and examine how they shape Liberal Studies and generally civic education in Hong Kong.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The United Kingdom ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 1976, which was also extended to British Overseas Territories, including Hong Kong. The Bill of Rights was intended to incorporate the ICCPR into Hong Kong's domestic law.

<sup>2</sup> The degree of autonomy of the HKSAR government is questionable. According to the law, the Chinese central government is responsible for Hong Kong's defence and foreign policy, but the HKSAR government can establish external relations under the name "Hong Kong, China". The Chief Executive, as the head of government, is elected by an election committee (composed of only 1,500 members) and then appointed by the Chinese central government. (Basic Law of the HKSAR of the PRC, adopted by the PRC 7<sup>th</sup> National People's Congress on 4 April 1990, effective as of 1 July 1997, Art. 12-14, 16-17, & 19; Annex amended by the Standing Committee of the PRC 13<sup>th</sup> National People's Congress on 30 March 2021, Art. 1-2).

<sup>3</sup> The Education Bureau of the HKSAR government is responsible for policies, programmes and legislation in respect of all levels from pre-primary to higher education; and their effective implementation (Education Bureau, 2021a).

<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the characterisation of civic education curriculum in Hong Kong according to stages of politicisation and depoliticisation is indeed a topic up for debate. Some scholars do not recognise the politicisation of civic education curriculum from the mid-1980s to 1997, as they make a differentiation between intended curriculum and implemented curriculum. Moreover, some claim that civic education in Hong Kong has undergone a politicisation process after the sovereignty transfer in 1997 (see, for example, Lo & Hung, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> In this report, the transcription of Chinese terms is based on Mandarin pronunciations. It aims to reach to a broader spectrum of readers. In Hong Kong, the daily spoken language is yet Cantonese.

<sup>6</sup> In general, there exist two broadly defined political orientations in Hong Kong. On one hand, the pro-establishment camp or pro-Beijing camp is comprised of conservative politicians, lawmakers, business elites etc. They support the policies of the Chinese central government towards Hong Kong and advocate closer relationships with mainland China. Notable political parties in the pro-establishment camp include the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (DAB) and the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions (FTU). On the other hand, the pro-democracy camp is often regarded as the opposition in Hong Kong, as it usually takes up a non-cooperative or even confrontational stance towards the Chinese central government and the HKSAR government. The pro-democrats embrace liberal values such as rule of law, human rights, civil liberties as well as social justice, and support democratisation. Major political parties in the pro-democracy camp include the Democratic Party and the Civic Party.

<sup>7</sup> Joshau Wong, a well known activist in Hong Kong, was a founding member of Scholarism.

<sup>8</sup> The Hong Kong Federation of Students is a student organisation formed by university students.

<sup>9</sup> They are Hong Kong University, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, City University of Hong Kong, Baptist University, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Lingnan University and Education University of Hong Kong.

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