

One Hong Kong: Two Histories

'History' and 'Chinese History' in the Hong Kong School

Curriculum

Flora Kan

Edward Vickers

The Department of Curriculum Studies,

The University of Hong Kong,

Pokfulam Road,

Hong Kong,

China

Abstract

Hong Kong's school history curriculum is unique worldwide in that it consists of two entirely separate subjects – 'History' and 'Chinese History' – which differ not only in content, but also in terms of their pedagogy and their assumptions concerning the nature of history as a discipline. The distinct subject of 'Chinese History' was first created in the 1950s, largely in response to the colonial government's desire to limit the politicisation of local schools. However, there was subsequently little interference by the government in the development of curricula for the 'two histories'. The pattern of curriculum development for history in Hong Kong over the past few decades does not support conventional theories concerning the impact of colonialism on education. On the contrary, it suggests that the relationship of colonialism to curriculum development may be better understood in terms of a mutually convenient collaboration between government and local educational elites.

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Introduction

School history curricula in colonial contexts have tended to be portrayed as contributing to 'a devaluation of indigenous culture', through an emphasis on the history of the colonising country and/or the benefits brought by colonisation.¹ This assumption has been reflected in occasional comments by public figures in Hong Kong and China in recent years concerning the alleged effects of 'colonial thinking' on the development of Hong Kong's school curriculum in general, and the teaching of history in particular.² The effects of 'colonialism' on Hong Kong's history curriculum cannot be discounted. However, as we show in this article, these effects can only be understood in the context

of a range of different curricular influences, and a conception of ‘colonialism’ which is considerably more sophisticated than the stereotypical 1970s notions of ‘cultural imperialism’ which continue to inform much comment (academic or otherwise) on the subject of ‘colonial’ education. We suggest an alternative way of conceptualising the impact of ‘colonialism’ on the school curriculum in Hong Kong and perhaps elsewhere.

Our focus is on the most peculiar feature of the curriculum for history in Hong Kong’s schools; that is, the unique division between the two entirely distinct school subjects of ‘History’ and ‘Chinese History’. To interpret this division in terms of a ‘devaluation of indigenous culture’ seems to us to be perverse. Hong Kong’s two histories seem rather to have come to embody a compromise which institutionalises two starkly different visions of ‘what counts as history’, the purposes of teaching it, and what constitute valid means of assessment. That this compromise came about in the first place owes much to ‘colonialism’, but its persistence into the twenty-first century has, so far as we can tell, little to do with any lingering ‘colonial’ or ‘neo-colonial’ influences. It has far more to do with tensions, not only within the local education system, but within broader society in Hong Kong, between, on the one hand, the attraction of global trends in history education as in much else and,³ on the other hand, powerful instincts of Chinese ethnicity and cultural reproduction. These tensions are by no means unique to Hong Kong society, or to the history curriculum here. The division between the two history subjects is in effect a compromise between these tensions that has served to sharpen the sense of a ‘native’ / ‘alien’ (‘Chinese’ / ‘foreign’) dichotomy. Indeed, what emerges from our discussion below of the two histories is the way in which they present

students with a somewhat caricatured vision of cultural identity and difference, and thus of what it means to be ‘Chinese’.

The history curriculum has occasionally been the object of controversy in the local media, particularly in relation to the perceived role of the curriculum in fostering or undermining Hong Kong people’s sense of their ‘Chinese’ identity. In the mid-1970s, for example, government proposals to incorporate Chinese History into a new Social Studies subject provoked a wave of protest in the local Chinese press. The government was attacked for ‘Conspiring to Eradicate Chinese National Sentiment’.⁴ In recent years the issue of local history has been particularly controversial, again because of the potential implications the teaching of Hong Kong history has been seen as having for the cultivation of a sense of national identity amongst students. Moves to promote the teaching of Hong Kong history in the early 1990s provoked accusations in the local pro-Beijing press that the colonial government was encouraging ‘splittist’ sentiment in the territory.⁶ By contrast, the post-1997 administration has explicitly sought to use the subject of Chinese History to promote a unifying national sentiment as part of its efforts to enhance its own legitimacy and authority. Thus the Chief Executive, Tung Chee Hwa, in his first policy address,⁷ announced that

‘We will incorporate the teaching of Chinese values in the school curriculum and provide more opportunities for students to learn about Chinese History and culture. This will foster a stronger sense of Chinese identity in our students.’

The latest junior level curriculum guide for Chinese History includes in its list of aims that of 'building a sense of belonging to China and the Chinese race.'⁸

History teaching in Hong Kong's schools has thus long been a politically sensitive issue, and arguably never more so than at present as the government seeks to use schools to socialise Hong Kong students as citizens of the People's Republic of China. The current Hong Kong government's emphasis on the need to inculcate an enhanced sense of national belonging through the study of Chinese history implies a criticism of the pre-1997 history curriculum for failing to give students an adequate sense of their 'Chineseness'. One of the main aims of this article, therefore, besides analysing the nature of the 'colonial' impact on Hong Kong's two history curricula, is to examine in particular the way in which local students have in fact been taught about the Chinese past.

Background

It is common in many countries for the school subject of history to be divided in two, with part of the course devoted to national history, and part to the history of the rest of the world. However, Hong Kong's school curriculum is unique in the way it separates 'History' and 'Chinese History' into two entirely distinct subjects with different syllabuses, teachers, assessment practices and textbooks.⁹ In this paper, we first look briefly at the origins of this division, then focus on the situation during the past two or three decades and the nature of the very different subject cultures which the two 'histories' have acquired. We consider the roles and relative status of the two subjects in the light of the various political and educational changes that Hong Kong has experienced over this period. In an attempt to make our discussion of these differences more concrete, we have also looked at the way in which textbooks, examination papers and marking schemes for the two subjects have dealt with three historical topics of particular political sensitivity. Finally, we attempt to explain why the division between the two histories has persisted into the post-colonial period, and we draw some conclusions about the impact of politics and colonialism on history teaching and on the treatment of issues of culture and identity in Hong Kong schools.

Why are there two history subjects in the Hong Kong school curriculum?

The vast majority of schools in Hong Kong fall into two main categories: English medium and Chinese medium schools. In English medium schools - often referred to as Anglo-Chinese schools - all subjects are taught in English except for Chinese Language & Literature, and Chinese History. In Chinese medium schools, or 'Chinese Middle

schools', all subjects are taught in Chinese except for English Language. The first government-run Chinese Middle school was established in 1926, at a time when most such schools followed China's 6-3-3 system.¹⁰ The curriculum, including both syllabuses and textbooks, was that of Republican (Nationalist) China. In the Anglo-Chinese schools, emphasis was placed on the learning of the English language, along with a general grasp of modern science and the humanities (with subjects including History, Geography, and Natural Science). Classical Chinese Language was included as a supplementary course.

The development of the Chinese History curriculum, from its beginnings as part of the curriculum for Chinese Literature in the Anglo-Chinese schools, and the curriculum for 'History' in the Chinese Middle schools, to achieving the status of an independent subject in the Certificate of Education Examination (CEE, grade 11),¹¹ is summarized in tables I and II. The creation of this separate subject can be seen partly as the result of a desire on the part of Hong Kong's colonial administration to conciliate local nationalist sentiment. At the same time, the move brought the teaching of the history of China within the ambit of the official school curriculum, a development which, in the view of the colonial authorities, made it less likely that the subject would become a vehicle for the promotion of subversive, anti-colonial ideas. During the Republican period (1912-1949), Hong Kong schools relied on textbooks published in China, which tended to be virulently nationalist and anti-foreign.¹² In 1953, the Chinese Studies Committee was established by the colonial government with the aim of reviewing the teaching of Chinese studies in Hong Kong. It criticised the content and methods of Chinese studies (including Chinese

History) as taught in China, and put forward its own view of the unique nature of Hong Kong and the mission of Chinese studies in the colony:

In the past, Chinese studies in China tended to aim at producing arrogant and bigoted Chinese nationalists. This is not educationally sound and should be strongly discouraged in Hong Kong... Since the founding of the Republic, the Chinese politicians have striven hard to unite the nation by appealing to the people's patriotism, narrow nationalism and racialism. This explains why History textbooks published in China usually contain anti-foreign allusions, comments and propaganda, and are therefore not quite suitable for use in Hong Kong.... Hong Kong is contiguous to China. It is not only the show-window of World democracy in the East, but also the meeting-place and melting-pot of Eastern and World cultures. Here, Chinese pupils cannot only retain and cherish what is best in their culture. In these textbooks, the emphasis should be on Social and Cultural History rather than Political History ... Objectivity in treatment is, of course, to be strictly observed, especially in connection with such topics as the Boxer Uprising and the so-called Opium War.¹³

However, particularly since Chinese History was to be taught in Chinese, the work of drafting syllabuses and writing textbooks did not come under the direct or detailed supervision of expatriate colonial officials. So long as they avoided sensitive issues in modern Chinese History, and did not dwell on the iniquities of foreign encroachments on Chinese sovereignty, the scholars who devised the curriculum were free to pursue their own agenda, which was one of extreme cultural conservatism. The curriculum for Chinese History that emerged thus aimed at giving students a thorough grounding in the history of traditional, dynastic China, ending abruptly at 1911. Since the content and approach of Chinese History presented no challenge to the legitimacy of the colonial

administration, the government henceforth exercised only symbolic control over the development of the subject.

From the 1950s onwards, Hong Kong secondary schools thus had two entirely separate history subjects (See Tables I and II). The separation was reinforced by the use of different languages of instruction for Chinese and 'World' History, since much of the original rationale for separating history into two subjects was that it made no sense to teach the history of China to Chinese students through the medium of English. Hong Kong's expanding system of publicly funded schools was overwhelmingly English medium. Initially, 'English as Medium of Instruction' (EMI) schools were encouraged by the government, which in the early post-war period was generally willing to give funding to schools (almost always EMI) established by missionaries, but less willing to grant assistance to 'Chinese as Medium of Instruction (CMI) schools.¹⁴ At the same time, there was a strong demand for English-medium education from local parents. By the late 1970s, as Hong Kong's secondary schools were attempting to adapt to cater for a mass rather than an elite student clientele, the government began to advocate mother-tongue instruction. However, unwillingness to hazard the regime's fragile legitimacy on this controversial issue meant that it was not until just before Hong Kong's retrocession that the government decided to compel most schools to switch to using Chinese (i.e. Cantonese) as the medium of instruction.

As a result of this change in government policy, History, as well as Chinese History, is now taught in Chinese rather than English in most schools in Hong Kong. It might be supposed that this language factor, along with the demise of the colonial regime in response to whose political concerns the old curriculum for Chinese History was devised,

would open the way for an abolition of the arbitrary division of History into two subjects. Indeed, tentative moves are currently underway to bring about a merger between the two subjects at junior secondary level. , At the time of writing, the outcome of these moves remains uncertain. However, like its colonial predecessor, the current administration has discovered that tampering with the status of Chinese History can be politically explosive. Ironically, given the colonial origins of the peculiar schism in Hong Kong's history curriculum, Chinese History teachers have been quick (in 1975 and currently) to cry sacrilege at any suggestion that Chinese and World History can and should be taught as parts of a single subject or discipline. We propose to devote a separate article to the current proposals for the reform of the history curriculum, and the furore which they have aroused, once they have assumed a more concrete and specific form

Contrasts between the two histories

(1) Aims of history education.

Official history syllabuses only began to be published following the establishment of the Curriculum Development Committee in 1972. This committee drew up 'Teaching Syllabuses' providing guidelines for the teaching of each of the two separate history subjects: History and Chinese History. (*footnote – ref to syllabuses*) Prior to this, the teaching of history had been largely based on the requirements of the different examinations, namely the Certificate of Education, Higher level and Advanced level examinations. These 'Examination Syllabuses' stipulated the aims of the examination and attached a list of the topics that were to be examined.

In the previous examination syllabuses, the aims of history teaching were unstated, perhaps because they were regarded as too obvious to require elucidation. The transmission of 'historical knowledge' was the assumed aim of both History and Chinese History, with past examination papers and marking schemes exercising a strong influence on pedagogy.

With the introduction of a Certificate-level 'Teaching Syllabus' for History and Chinese History in 1983 and 1990 respectively, the differences in the intended curricula for the two histories became explicit. While the syllabus for History focused on the development of skills, that for Chinese History stressed the importance of nurturing students' 'good conduct' through the study of historical figures as moral exemplars, while presenting a conservative, traditionalist vision of Chinese culture and values.

It is doubtful whether the publication of these official curriculum statements signified any radical new divergence between the two subjects. By the time of the publication of these official teaching syllabuses, the two histories had long since acquired distinct subject cultures of their own. Not only were they entirely separate at the school level, taught in different languages by different teachers, with separate 'History' and 'Chinese History' panel chairs,¹⁵ but the separation extended to university level and to teacher training arrangements. At the University of Hong Kong, for example, dynastic Chinese History was and still is taught in Chinese by lecturers belonging to the Chinese Department, while the history of modern China is taught largely in English by lecturers from the History Department. The history of modern China thus comes under 'History', whereas the entire pre-modern period falls within the remit of the 'Chinese' Department, whose principal fields are Chinese language and cultural studies.

'History' has tended, by virtue both of the language in which it has been taught, and the background of those involved in the development of syllabuses and the training of teachers, to be heavily exposed to overseas influences, particularly from England. Thus, from the 1970s onwards, English officials and university lecturers, most notably Anthony Sweeting at the University of Hong Kong, and through him a number of local teachers and curriculum developers who were his students, have been influenced by changes which have taken place in history teaching in England. For example, Sweeting sought in the 1970s to import some of the methods and concerns associated with the 'New History' in England,¹⁶ emphasizing the ways in which history could be used both to teach interpretative and analytical skills, and to inculcate a range of more liberal social attitudes.

As in England during the same period, in Hong Kong over the past thirty years attempts to justify the teaching of history in terms of the skills it imparts have been symptomatic of a perceived need to defend the retention of the subject within an increasingly crowded school curriculum. In addition, the expansion of secondary education at senior as well as junior levels has, in Hong Kong as elsewhere, put pressure on curriculum developers to 're-package' history for consumption by a broader student clientele. However, in Hong Kong the fragile predicament of History as a school subject has been complicated by the fact that it has largely been taught in a foreign language: English. The competency of many Hong Kong teachers to teach in English has long been in doubt – and even more so the ability of most students to learn through English. English-medium education has helped to ensure that rote memorization of model examination answers has been overwhelmingly the dominant style of pedagogy across the school curriculum. This has naturally tended to frustrate efforts to transform History

in schools into a skills-oriented, critical discipline. The perception on the part of both students and many school principals that History is neither very important nor relevant, has contributed to a steady decline since the late 1970s in the proportion of senior secondary students taking the subject. A 1996 study by Yuen Chun-ying found that Secondary 3 students ranked history among the least 'important' of their subjects – only PE, Music and Art were considered 'unimportant' by more students. History was also ranked 13th out of 15 in terms of the number of students who considered it their most interesting subject.¹⁷

By contrast, Yuen found that considerably more students considered Chinese History interesting, and far fewer considered it 'unimportant' than was the case with History. Unfortunately, he made no attempt to investigate the reasons for this. However, data gained from interviews with teachers and curriculum developers, along with our own experience as teachers, has led us to conclude that the reasons for Chinese History's greater popularity are firstly that it has always been taught in the students' own language, and secondly that the intellectual demands it makes on students are more straightforward than those made by History. In addition, the status of Chinese History within the school curriculum as a whole has tended to be strengthened in recent years as a result of Hong Kong's transition to Chinese rule, since in curriculum terms this subject has been seen as the tabernacle of Chinese culture. The Chief Executive C.H.Tung, has repeatedly stressed the importance of Chinese culture in fostering a stronger sense of Chinese identity.¹⁸ The relative security of Chinese History's status within the curriculum is reflected by the fact that the Advanced level syllabus has hardly changed for thirty years or more, while changes made to the Certificate level (grade 11)(*Flora – What do these 'grades' refer to,*

and if you have inserted a 'grade' reference here, why haven't you done so elsewhere. I suggest sticking to Hong Kong terms in the text, and explaining in a footnote how 'grades' (American?) relate to HK's 'forms'.) syllabus have mainly been confined to the extension of the period of study. Members of the Chinese History teaching community have not felt compelled to justify the continued existence of their subject in terms of 'skills' or complex and demanding pedagogical objectives. Even though the Chinese History syllabus has more recently acquired a formal list of pedagogical aims, little attempt has been made to translate these into practice by reforming the methods of assessment. As far as the aims of the teaching syllabus are concerned, the only change that has been made is the inclusion of 'nurturing the good conduct of pupils through studying the behaviour of historical figures' as a stated aim in the syllabus.¹⁹ As regards assessment methods, questions requiring straightforward factual recall have consistently predominated amongst the multiple-choice and essay questions set for public examinations.

In the case of History, the changing aims of the official subject syllabus have led to actual changes in the classroom, so that, for example, students now encounter data-based questions requiring more analytical skill than factual recall, and also learn something about local history. The more moralistic agenda of Chinese History, with its emphasis on factual recall rather than analysis, has by contrast remained essentially unchanged. This lack of change has partly been a reflection of the complacency of a subject community which until recently has felt confident of retaining or even enhancing its status within Hong Kong's schools.

(2) Chronological Scope

In terms of the chronological scope of the two subjects, the syllabus History at certificate level (Grade 11) has always focused to a far greater extent on the contemporary period. Chinese History syllabuses cover more than 3,000 years, but it was only in the 1990 syllabus that the scope of studies was extended to cover the entire period from 1600 B.C. up to 1976. In other words, the study of post-war Chinese history was avoided for more than 40 years. Even now many teachers neglect the contemporary period because of the amount of time needed to cover dynastic history, and because many of them feel less familiar with the more modern topics in the syllabus. This is reflected by frequent comments in the annual examination reports on the poor performance of students who attempt questions on the modern history of China.²⁰

The origins of the neglect of contemporary Chinese history owe much to the desire of the colonial authorities from the 1950s to the 1980s to keep politics – especially Chinese politics – out of the school curriculum as far as possible. However, the aversion to political controversy that many teachers have retained has contributed to the continued neglect of contentious topics such as the Chinese Civil War and the Cultural Revolution. While nationalistic sentiments with a small ‘n’ may now be politically correct, many teachers apparently still prefer to avoid voicing opinions on the Nationalist-Communist rivalry which has dominated Chinese history for so much of the contemporary period.

Both History and Chinese History devote a great deal of attention to political history. In the case of History, a greater concentration on nineteenth and twentieth century history, along with a new topic structure that since the mid-1980s has focused on themes such as nationalism, liberalism and the development of representative government,

has provided students with ‘a more politicized historical framework than was previously the case, and one more relevant to Hong Kong’s future’.²¹ By contrast, the political emphasis of Chinese History relates to the rise and fall of ruling dynasties over three millennia. Thus students of Chinese History are taught of the glories of China’s traditional civilization, the virtues of wise and strong rulers, and the evils of weak government and foreign depredation, invariably portrayed as the consequences of corrupt and venal behaviour on the part of emperors or their officials.

(3) Assessment through Public Examinations

Until the early 1990s, both subjects followed a similar assessment system at Certificate level, using essays and multiple-choice questions. At Advanced level, assessment was entirely essay-based until 1994. However, from 1993 and 1994, data-based questions totaling 40% of the assessment weightings have been included in History examinations at Certificate level and Advanced level respectively. Meanwhile, assessment methods for Chinese History at the Certificate level have remained unchanged. In this respect the development of Chinese History teaching at A’ level in recent years has differed radically from the development of the subject at more junior levels. In 1994, data-based questions accounting for 25% of the total mark were included in the Advanced level examination for Chinese History – possibly reflecting the influence of previous changes to assessment practices for History.²² Data-based questions have served as the means of implementing History’s concern with students’ acquisition of historical methods or skills, whereas, as we have already noted, the acquisition of such

skills has not been similarly valued in the study of Chinese History, certainly at the Certificate and junior secondary levels.

The numbers of students taking Chinese History at the CEE and Advanced /Advanced Supplementary level have consistently been much higher than the numbers of those taking History – in most years roughly double. As we have already noted, this has probably owed much to a perception on the part of students of Chinese History as a relatively straightforward, predictable subject in which results reflect diligence rather than analytical skill (although changes to assessment practices in recent years have perhaps made this perception less justified in the case of A' level Chinese History). The fact that History, as well as posing a somewhat more taxing intellectual challenge to candidates in public examinations, has, until very recently, been largely taught and examined in English, may well have deterred many students who are weak in English from taking the subject.

The examinations for both Chinese History and History continue to include a multiple choice paper at the Certificate level, though in the case of History the weighting of this paper has been significantly reduced following the introduction of data-based questions. The minutes of History subject committee meetings at the Hong Kong Examinations Authority, as well as interviews with the subject officer, indicate that one of the main reasons for the retention of multiple choice questions has been a lack of confidence in the ability of markers to exercise their own discretion. The subject officer also believes that multiple choice questions, if they are set well, can test skills besides simple factual recall, although other members of the subject committee have occasionally expressed reservations about the retention of this type of question. In the case of Chinese History,

however, any doubts as to the appropriateness of multiple choice questioning as a form of assessment do not appear to have troubled curriculum developers.

(See Table III for a summary of the differences between the intended curricula for History and Chinese History)

The case of particular historical topics

In this section, the treatment of two topics taught in both History and Chinese History (the Opium War and the Boxer Incident), and the issue of local history, is analysed so as to illustrate some of the main differences between the curricula for the two history subjects.

The Opium War (Table IV)

The ‘Opium War’ is the most politically sensitive topic in Hong Kong’s history. At times of tension between Britain and China, the ‘Opium War’ has often become a topic of debate in local newspapers. In 1973, for example, allegations were made in *Wen Wei Bao* that the colonial government was subtly advocating a pro-British perspective by encouraging the setting of questions on this topic which emphasized cultural differences between Britain and China – thus downplaying the issue of British ‘war guilt’.²⁴ The newspaper cited the 1973 CEE question: “Explain the causes of the Opium War in terms of the following perspectives: economic, cultural and historical tradition”. There have also been suspicions expressed concerning the reasons for the absence (from 1970 until the mid-1990s) of Hong Kong history from either of the two history curricula. For example, it has been argued that British shame over the Opium War prompted a

reluctance on the part of the colonial government to introduce Hong Kong history into the curriculum.²⁴ However, this allegation misrepresents the actual content of the curricula for History and Chinese History since, ironically, for many years the only topic included in either curricula which had any relevance to local history was the very topic which arguably reflected least well on the British: that of the Opium War itself.

Interpretation of the War

The political sensitivity of this topic can still be perceived in the latest editions of textbooks for both History and Chinese History. Self-censorship has clearly influenced the production of textbooks for both subjects, for example in the use of terms designed not to offend the Chinese government. Thus, in History, the term ‘The Opium War’ has been substituted for ‘The First Anglo-Chinese War’, the name by which all textbooks previously called the war, in deference to what publishers or authors supposed to be the wishes of the colonial authorities. In the case of one of the most popular History textbooks, the account of the Opium War was radically altered in the 1996 edition, in a clear effort to make the account conform more closely to the orthodox mainland interpretation. The alterations involved removing virtually all negative references to Chinese practices such as:

‘Official & judicial corruption’

‘Hong’ merchants ‘squeezing’ (extracting bribes from) people’

‘The role of “unscrupulous Chinese” in assisting foreign opium smugglers’.²⁵

Particularly in Chinese History textbooks, though also to some extent in the more recent editions of textbooks for History, descriptions that carry nationalistic sentiments also figure in the narration. In the most recent edition of one popular Chinese History textbook, the following changes are evident:

‘Opium was “detrimental to China” changed to “detrimental to the *nation*”.

‘The physical and spiritual health of the “Chinese people” changed to “*national* people”

Value judgements also appear, such as:

‘The British ...ignored the *virtue of justice* by importing large amounts of high price opium to China’.

‘The *insulting* Treaty of Nanjing was signed’

‘The treaty of Nanjing marked *an era of suffering* in the modern history of China.’

There is also a marked difference between the approaches of Chinese History and of History textbooks regarding the inculcation of moral values. Thus, the Chinese History curriculum gives great prominence to the role of Commissioner Lin Zexu when students examine the ‘Opium War’. In one popular textbook Lin is described in the following terms:

‘a *bright* official’

‘the most *persistent* official’

‘*far-sighted*’

A picture of Lin Zexu destroying opium in Fumen is also included. While the Commissioner is held up as a shining exemplar, the textbook writer heaps ignominy on Lin's adversary, Captain Elliot:

he '*actively* supported the export of opium to China for economic benefits',
'*persuaded* the British government to use force against China',
and exhibited '*barbarous* behaviour ...'

A stated aim of the Chinese History course is 'to nurture students' good conduct through learning the behaviour of historical figures'.²⁶ Also, in the most recent version of the official syllabus it is explicitly stated that through Lin's story, students are to learn about 'serving the country whole-heartedly and protecting the interests of the national people'.²⁷ Lin's role in the Opium War is also given prominent attention in textbooks, exam questions and marking schemes. In other words, Chinese History tends to focus on the behaviour of individuals in particular events more than on the historical context. The role of Chinese History, as perceived by those who teach it and design the syllabuses, is to transmit an understanding of correct and incorrect values, whereas this kind of explicit moral agenda is less evident in the formal curriculum for History.

The Boxer Incident (Table V)

The differences between the aims and methods of History and Chinese History are also clearly demonstrated in the ways they handle the topic of 'The Boxer Incident'. This was an outbreak of anti-foreign sentiment which originated in Shandong Province in north-eastern China in 1900, spreading to cities such as Tianjin and Beijing. More

hawkish elements within the Qing imperial court, led by the Dowager Empress Cixi, gave their active support to the movement. A number of foreigners, particularly missionaries, along with many Chinese converts to Christianity, were killed, and the Boxers besieged the foreign legation quarter in Beijing for several weeks until they were dispersed by the combined forces of various foreign powers. This defeat is generally considered to have delivered a fatal blow to the prestige and credibility of the Qing regime. Table V compares how the two history subjects handle this topic.

Interpretation of the Incident

There are significant differences between the two histories in terms of their interpretation of the causes of the Boxer Uprising, as well as in the way students' answers are assessed. Most Chinese History textbooks place greater emphasis on foreign encroachment as the dominant cause of the Boxer than do Modern History texts. The books use statements such as:

'...after the Sino-Japanese war, Shantung became a German sphere of influence. People had long suffered from foreign aggression and anti-foreign activities were generally given support by the people...'

'The Boxers aimed at assisting the Qing court to fight against the foreigners. They killed missionaries and burnt churches. Later, many people joined them and Cixi formally recognized the society's legitimacy.'

The Chinese History marking scheme also sees foreign encroachment as the dominant cause of the Boxer Uprising.

‘...people’s anti-foreign state of mind was a result of foreign expansion in China...’

‘...foreign aggression led to a severe blow to traditional industries and China suffered from economic hardship.’

By contrast, the interpretation put forward in most History textbooks tends to see foreigners as having become, at least in part, scapegoats for a variety of problems in China, many of which, such as the series of natural calamities affecting Shandong in the 1890s, were not of their making. The increasingly blatant foreign encroachments of the late nineteenth century were, it is sometimes implied, simply an obvious hook onto which many Chinese hung a number of other largely unrelated grievances. Thus, one textbook emphasizes the irrational and racist elements in Chinese anti-foreignism, while other History textbooks generally draw attention to the factors besides foreign encroachment that gave rise to the Boxer Incident.

In other respects, however, the accounts are similar, and generally include an emphasis on the role played by the Dowager Empress Cixi in the rebellious acts of the Boxers. This is given prominence in texts for both histories, but especially so in Chinese History, where her treacherous and ‘insincere’ behaviour is singled out for moral condemnation.

A sort of ‘moralising nationalism’, focusing on the behaviour of individuals, and seeing historical events as a consequence of the good or bad moral character and sincerity of these people, constitutes a major theme in textbooks for Chinese History. Thus Cixi is portrayed in the following terms:

‘She was in tight control of power, hence Emperor Kuang-xu could do nothing’

‘She was anti-foreign’
‘...[she] made use of the Boxers to repel foreigners’
‘Once the situation deteriorated, she flattered foreigners’
‘...[she was] conservative, blind to modernisation’
‘...[she] was herself involved in bribery’
‘...[she was] insincere, [and] had no desire for reform’

A very similar treatment of Cixi’s role is evident in one of the newest textbooks for History. This may perhaps be attributed partly to the recent switch to using Chinese as the medium of instruction in most local secondary schools. New History textbooks seem in recent years to have been written first in Chinese before being translated into English, whereas previously the reverse tended to be the case. Thus, in one recently published History textbook, the theme of Cixi’s ‘sincerity’ (or lack of it) recurs on page after page, reflecting the treatment more traditionally associated with Chinese History. As with the revisions to the account of the Opium War in another popular textbook,²⁸ this emphasis reflects the sort of moralising, nationalistic account favoured in mainland China, and perhaps similarly indicates an urge on the part of some local textbook publishers to be – and be seen to be – promoting an officially ‘authorised’ version of History.

Local History (Table VI)

The influence of the changing political climate on History teaching has been most apparent in relation to the teaching of local history. During the latter years of British rule the issue of whether or not Hong Kong history was to be offered and, if so, at what level and in what way it was to be taught became a matter of considerable political sensitivity.

However, when teachers and curriculum developers were asked whether they felt that the exclusion or downplaying of local history within the curriculum in the 1960s or 1970s seemed odd, most stated that they themselves at that time felt no pressing need for the promotion of Hong Kong history. (*could we insert here a reference to my PhD – ‘History as a School Subject in Hong Kong, 1960s-2000’?*) The drive for the introduction of local history came in the late 1980s from a few individuals within the Advisory Inspectorate of the Education Department. Their efforts coincided with very significant changes underway in Hong Kong’s social and political situation, since many commentators have seen the late eighties as marking the rapid emergence of a definite ‘Hong Kong identity’ among the local population. (*also ref my PhD, Ch. 5*) In addition, whereas the scholarly field of Hong Kong history was until the 1970s a rather desolate one, by the late nineteen-eighties there existed a substantial and varied corpus of historical scholarship upon which curriculum developers were able to draw in designing a local history course.

As we have already noted, it has often been alleged in the local Chinese press that the British authorities in Hong Kong were anxious to keep local history out of the curriculum because they were afraid that including it would lead to the arousal of anti-British sentiment.²⁹ There would appear to be some truth in this allegation. Until the late 1960s, the curriculum for Certificate-level History did include a section on local history, which put forward an account of Hong Kong’s development under British rule from a broadly ‘colonial’ perspective. Few schools opted to teach this, and the section was dropped in 1970, at a time when the British administration in Hong Kong was anxious to shed its ‘colonial’ image. However, the persistent neglect of local history seems

principally to have been a reflection of the lack of importance attached to Hong Kong history by a local population which has only begun consciously to adopt a 'Hong Kong' as distinct from a 'Chinese' identity within the past two or three decades. The fact of British rule, as well as certain policies of the colonial government – including the policy of keeping the school curriculum in general as 'depoliticised'³⁰ as possible – have undoubtedly had an impact on the politics of identity in Hong Kong. However, there is no evidence to support the assertion that the re-introduction of local history into the curriculum over the past few years has been the result of any sinister colonialist or neo-colonialist plot.

The inclusion of Hong Kong history in the school curriculum became a hotly debated issue in the 1990's, especially when it was formally incorporated into the revised syllabus for junior level History. This generated controversy as the government's motives were seen to be part of a colonialist attempt to dilute the nationalistic sentiment of local students by internationalising the portrayal of Hong Kong in school textbooks. This controversy led eventually to the incorporation of Hong Kong history into both History and Chinese History, with revised syllabuses issued in 1996 and 1997 respectively.

Although History and Chinese History now both incorporate Hong Kong history, their approaches are entirely different. In History, Hong Kong history is studied in the context of the development of civilizations worldwide. Hong Kong is therefore seen from a more international perspective. In Chinese History, however, issues in Hong Kong history listed for teachers' reference are related to contemporaneous developments in China. Thus, Hong Kong is seen exclusively as part of China.

An overview of the differences between Hong Kong's two history curricula (Table VII)

The Chinese History syllabus at Certificate level includes the stated aim of promoting 'students' analytical power and ability to learn independently', but in practice this merely involves enabling students to understand the reasons behind certain conclusions already reached by historians. As the marking schemes indicate, for some questions students are asked to provide reasoned arguments, yet they are seldom required to challenge established views and offer alternative interpretations. History, on the other hand, reflects Western (specifically, English) curricular influences in its more rigorous insistence – at least in public examinations – on testing students' ability to construct reasoned arguments and provide interpretations based on evidence. That is why data-based questions were introduced into the examination for Certificate level History in 1994, but have never been on the agenda for Chinese History at the same level.

Chinese History is also characterized by a strong and explicit moral agenda. The behaviour of certain historical figures is often presented in the form of examples for students to emulate or avoid. This sort of guiding exemplar can be found in the official syllabus and in the marking schemes for public examinations. The use of role models in this way is deeply-rooted in the Confucian tradition, and its prevalence in the Chinese History curriculum is one illustration of the profound cultural conservatism of the curricula for Chinese subjects in Hong Kong's schools, exhibited also in the Chinese Language and Literature curricula. By contrast, the syllabuses and examination marking schemes for History, emphasising as they do the skills of criticism and analysis, do not

adopt an explicitly moralising tone. Nonetheless, in promoting such a pedagogical approach the History curriculum arguably does, by implication, advocate a 'liberal' set of values.

Changes to the History curriculum have been more consciously geared to perceptions of the changing needs of society. Thus, for example, the shift of aims, from 'understanding the past' in the 1970's to 'critical thinking skills and civics-related aims' in the 1980s and 1990s reflects the social change from an elitist education (cognitive orientation ??) to that of mass education (skills orientation). Because of its more sensitive subject matter, Chinese History has had a special political role to play both before and since the change of sovereignty. Under the colonial administration, the cultivation of a local and national identity was a sensitive issue to be avoided or diverted by stressing cultural rather than political identity. The provision of Chinese History as a separate subject within the school curriculum was in part conceived as a legitimating shield against anti-colonial sentiments. As long as there was no threatening of the colonial regime, the government only exercised a symbolic control over the development of the subject.

Chinese History was originally intended to present a 'depoliticized' version of history, at least to the extent of avoiding topics and perspectives that explicitly related past events to contemporary controversies. In addition, the pedagogical approach, designed as it has been to inculcate a set of traditional moral values while requiring the learning of received interpretations, was not conducive to the development of students' capacity for critical or independent thought. However, although avoidance of politically sensitive issues was initially a hallmark of this subject, in recent years it has become politically correct to

adopt an openly nationalist stance in Hong Kong, and textbooks and syllabuses for Chinese History have thus tended to become more explicit in their nationalism. The teaching of History in Hong Kong's schools, as opposed to the teaching of Chinese History, has also been characterized by rote learning, though not to quite the same extent. In the case of History, the reliance of students on rote learning has largely been for linguistic reasons, rather than as a result of attempts to indoctrinate them with 'appropriate viewpoints'. In other words, poor standards of English have prompted both students and teachers to resort to rote learning – a tendency that the recent promotion of mother-tongue instruction may help to remedy. In addition, there has been a real shift in both the ideological subtext of formal History syllabuses, and in the pedagogical methods adopted for implementing them. In terms of both ideology and pedagogy, the shift has been in a markedly liberal direction. The introduction of data-based questioning in particular, as well as the general ethos of the subject, aim at fostering critical attitudes in students. The degree of success with which such attitudes have in fact been fostered is difficult to gauge, but examination questions and, particularly at A-level, marking schemes too have been designed so as to reward candidates who display an ability to argue critically. Thus the subject of History, which was previously more like Chinese History in its 'depoliticised' avoidance of more sensitive periods and issues, has during the past fifteen years or so become, at least potentially, a vehicle for the promotion of liberal democratic values within the school curriculum.

Conclusion – History, Colonialism and Chineseness in Hong Kong

Comments by political figures – and by some academics—³¹ concerning the nature of the colonial impact on Hong Kong’s education system, have tended to reflect the assumption that there was direct manipulation of the school curriculum by the colonial authorities with the aim of promoting ‘colonial thinking’. Our study of the development of Hong Kong’s two histories suggests that the real nature of colonialism’s impact has been somewhat more subtle and complex than is commonly supposed.

Ronald Robinson, a historian of British imperialism, has argued that colonialism (particularly the British form) is better understood not simply as the projection of ‘metropolitan drives’ from Europe on a ‘passive periphery’. Rather, he argues that imperialism usually proceeded ‘by combining with local interests and affiliating with local institutions’ so that ‘the true metropolis appears neither at the centre nor on the periphery, but in their changing relativities.’^{32,5} Thus the history of imperialism is not simply the story of the forcible imposition of European models on other parts of the world, but of a variety of different ‘collaborative contracts’ tacitly arrived at between indigenous elites and colonial powers. The terms of such contracts are, Robinson says, seldom simply dictated by the colonialists, whose reliance on collaborators often gives the latter considerable leverage and scope to pursue their own agendas. Moreover, this collaborative model blurs the distinction between ‘colonial’ patterns of dominance of one state by another and other forms of influence not normally considered ‘colonial’.

The separation of history into two separate subjects was the act of a colonial administration concerned to limit possible threats to its own legitimacy, while at the same time accommodating elements of China’s historiographical tradition within a curriculum

otherwise dominated by subjects taught in English and modeled on English prototypes. The evolution of the subject of Chinese History can thus perhaps be best understood by seeing it as the product of a ‘collaborative contract’ between nervous British administrators and the highly conservative Chinese scholars and educationalists who were behind the drafting of the original textbooks and syllabuses. However, the very conservatism of the approach adopted in the teaching of Chinese History, which in the 1950s was at variance with the Marxist approach favoured in mainland China, by the time of Hong Kong’s transition to Chinese rule was being seen by the scions of the new political order as a useful tool with which to shore up their popular authority.

The development of the curriculum for History, meanwhile, has been subject to strong influence from England, where History teaching over the past couple of decades has been undergoing fairly radical changes. The sorts of values or skills that History has increasingly sought to promote – such as those of critical and independent thought – coincide with the British agenda, at least under Governor Patten, for the preparation of Hongkongers for life under Chinese rule. As we have seen, certain changes, particularly the introduction of local history, have been interpreted in this way by Hong Kong’s pro-Beijing press. However, a view of curriculum development for History which sees it as part of a neo-colonialist conspiracy does not seem to be supported by the evidence. Those responsible for shaping the curriculum, and for teaching the subject in schools, have overwhelmingly been local Chinese. The initiative for the introduction of local history, for example, was entirely in the hands of a few Chinese officials in the Advisory Inspectorate. Moreover, calls from those involved in the development of the History curriculum for the promotion of critical thinking and liberal social attitudes predated any

moves by the British administration to democratise local political institutions. The political climate in Hong Kong during the late 1980s, as well as the changing priorities of the colonial administration, may have strengthened support in various quarters for the local history project, but there is no evidence of any interference by the policy branches of the colonial administration in the process of curriculum development for History.

The interpretation of history in China has traditionally been seen as a central function of the state, with the production of authorised accounts of the national past being the province of a department of the imperial government. Though it owes its separate existence to the politics of colonialism in Hong Kong, the approach to history embodied in the Chinese History subject (particularly below sixth form level) is perhaps quintessentially Chinese in its assumption that the state will determine the ‘correct’ version of the past to be taught in schools. With respect to the subject of History, however, despite the presence of some pro-Western bias, particularly prior to the 1980s, the subject culture, as well as the nature of the topic content, has meant that greater emphasis has been placed on the provisional nature of historical knowledge, and the need for a critical, skeptical approach to historical sources. Superficially then, of the two histories, Chinese History and the values it promotes might seem to be more authentically ‘Chinese’ (even though the sixth form curriculum has in recent years been increasingly influenced by developments in the sister subject of History), while History might be seen as an English-inspired colonial import.

Whether it is considered fair to see Hong Kong’s two histories in this light depends very much on which views of ‘Chineseness’ and of the nature of culture more generally are taken. If culture, and Chinese culture in particular, is taken to be a static

'essence', incommensurable with other cultures, then the approach to history which the subject of Chinese History embodies would seem to be more legitimate. This is very much the sort of approach to Chineseness espoused by the current Beijing regime, as well as by prominent members of Hong Kong's new administration. This approach posits a dichotomy between 'Chinese' and 'Western' (or 'foreign') culture of the sort famously expressed by a nineteenth century Chinese statesman: 'Chinese learning for essentials; Western learning for practical use'.³³ To describe the history curriculum in Hong Kong this could be rephrased 'Chinese historiography for the national past; Western historiography for everywhere else'. Thus, for the politically 'essential' task of teaching students about the national past, an authentically 'Chinese' approach may be required, whereas for an understanding of the rest of the world, a Western-style critical approach is acceptable. This view of history teaching coincides with the desire of the new regime on the one hand to bolster the 'Chinese' identity of local people, while at the same time retaining Hong Kong's role as an 'international city' for commercial purposes.

Chinese History has so far continued to perform a collaborative role by trimming its content and approach in such a way as to bolster the legitimacy of the new regime. If History has, by contrast, been more or less left alone, this is probably because its more global focus makes it at once less controversial and more peripheral to the Tung government's project of promoting Chinese culture and nationalism through the school curriculum. Only in the area of local history has History really trespassed on controversial territory, and in doing so revealed the extreme sensitivity of Beijing-affiliated elements regarding the question of how Hong Kong's past should be interpreted. History continues to offer some students the opportunity to study the local and global past

in a spirit somewhat more critical and analytical than that which characterizes most other subjects taught in Hong Kong schools. However, the proportion of Hong Kong students who do actually experience the study of history – of whatever sort - in a critical spirit seems likely to remain relatively small.

Footnotes:

¹ Philip G. Altbach and Gail P. Kelly, *Education and Colonialism*, (New York: Longman 1978), p. 5; Martin Carnoy, *Education As Cultural Imperialism*, (New York: D.McKay Co. 1974).

² Before the handover of sovereignty, the Chief Executive C.H.Tung, said to the press (March 11., 1997) that accounts of the Opium War needed rewriting because the opium issue was not properly presented in school textbooks. W.Y. Wu, the group leader of the Cultural sub-group of the Preparatory Working Committee for the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, in an interview in Wen Wei Bao (26 September 1996), said that Hong Kong history has never been offered in the Chinese History curriculum and that Hong Kong is part of Chinese territory, therefore the introduction of Hong Kong history should be incorporated into Chinese History instead of into History. He further added that Chinese History should become a compulsory subject after the handover.

³ Frank et al., 'What Counts As History: A Cross-National and Longitudinal Study of University Curricula', *Comparative Education Review*, vol.44, no. 1 (February 2000):29-53.

⁴ On 7 March 1975 the entire front page of the Oriental Daily newspaper was devoted to this issue, and reported the opposition of prominent scholars, school teachers, and the teachers' union leader.

⁵ On 27 June 1994, there were newspaper articles reporting that the June 4 incident would be included in the grade 9 Chinese history textbooks in the coming academic year. The next day, the Director of Education, S.W.Wong, stated that 20 years should have lapsed before an event can be included in history. On 29 June 1994, Wong said to the press that after meeting the publishers, they agreed to delete the part on the June 4 incident. At the same time, Wong stated that the Education Department was planning to issue a circular to publishers stipulating that only those events which happened at least 20 years ago could be included in school history textbooks.

⁶ See below, n.24

⁷ The first Policy address was made on 8 October, 1997.

⁸ 'Chinese History Syllabus[Forms 1-3]' (Education Department, Hong Kong Government, 1997).

⁹ 'History' is often referred to locally as 'World History' in order to distinguish it from 'Chinese History', but the official title of the subject is simply 'History'.

¹⁰ Six years primary education, followed by three years junior secondary and three years senior secondary education. This system was itself imported from the USA.

¹¹ A public examination held at the end of Grade 11.

¹² *Report of the Chinese Studies Committee* (Education Department, Hong Kong Government, 1953, mimeographed), p. 31.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Since the English language enjoyed a higher commercial value, and EMI seemed to offer better career prospects than Chinese, government-run EMI schools expanded rapidly in the post-war period.

¹⁵ In secondary schools, the departments of History and Chinese History each have their respective heads.

¹⁶ Anthony E. Sweeting, *Social Attitudes and the Teaching of History*, (Hong Kong Caritas: Educators' Social Action Council 1974).

¹⁷ Yuen Chun Ying, *Students' perceptions of the aims and content of curriculum in Hong Kong* (M.Ed. thesis, The University of Hong Kong 1996).

¹⁸ The Policy Addresses of 1997, 1998 and 1999

¹⁹ *Chinese History Syllabus [Forms 4-5]* (Education Department, Hong Kong Government, 1997), p.6.

²⁰ *Annual Reports: Hong Kong Certificate of Education Board* (Education Department, Hong Kong Government, 1968-77); 'Annual Reports' (Hong Kong Examinations Authority, 1978-99). According to the reports, the most unpopular and poorly answered questions have been those related to contemporary history of China, e.g. the Warlords, the Nationalist-Communist Relation, May Fourth and New Cultural Movement, Revolutionary Movements, PRC after 1949.

²¹ Paul Morris, 'The Effect on the School Curriculum of Hong Kong's return to Chinese Sovereignty in 1997', in *Curriculum Development in Hong Kong*, ed. P. Morris, 2d ed. (Education Papers no.7, Hong Kong: Faculty of Education, The University of Hong Kong, 1995).

²² According to the Chinese History subject officer of the Examinations Authority, data-based questions are too demanding for grade 11 students, hence this type of question has only been introduced in the Advanced level and Advanced Supplementary level examinations. The Examination Reports showed that in general, the performance of students in answering data-based questions was 'satisfactory'. One of the present authors, Flora Kan, has played a role in shaping assessment practices for A level Chinese History in recent years through her membership of the Sixth Form Chinese History Subject Committee at the Hong Kong Examinations Authority.

²³ Wen Wei Bao (a pro-China newspaper), 5 October 1973.

²⁴ For example, *Cai Jing Daily*, 20 February 1984; *Ming Pao*, 3 October 1995; *Wen Wei Bao*, 5 August 1996; *Da Gong Bao*, 4 September 1996; the columnists in one way or another denounced the government for not including Hong Kong history in the history curriculum. At the same time, curriculum developers were in fact attempting to introduce the teaching of local history at junior secondary level, and being attacked in the local pro-Beijing press and by Chinese officials for doing so. See below, pp. 22-25.

²⁵ Nelson Y.Y. Kan, *New Certificate History*, Aristo, 1996

²⁶ *Chinese History Syllabus [Forms 1-3]* (n.7 above), p.8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.28.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.18.

²⁹ See n.23 above.

³⁰ Paul Morris and Anthony Sweeting, 'Education and Politics: the Case of Hong Kong from an Historical Perspective', *The Oxford Review of Education*, vol.17, no.3. (1991): 249-67.

³¹ For example, Ming K. Chan, in the preface to *Education and Society in Hong Kong*, ed. Postiglione G, (Hong Kong University Press, 1992).

³² R. Robinson, 'The Excentric Theory of Imperialism: with or without empire', in *Imperialism and After*, ed. Mommsen and Osterhammel (London: German Historical Institute, 1986), pp.261-87.

³³ Teng Ssi-yu and Fairbank, J.K., *China Response to the West: A Documentary Survey, 1839-1923*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979).
