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by Wing-Wah Law

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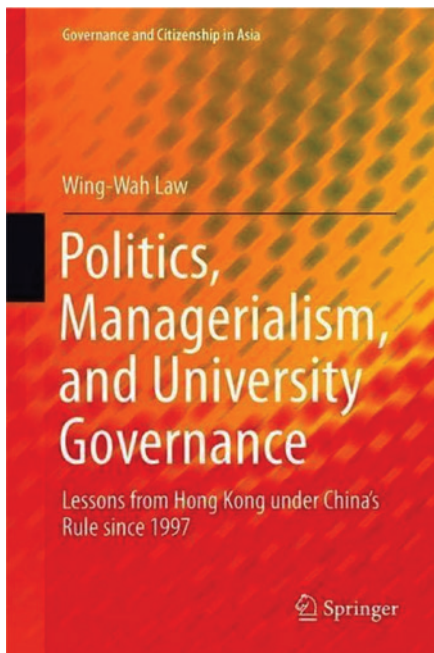
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Book review

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Politics, Managerialism, and University Governance: Lessons from Hong Kong under China's rule since 1997,
by Wing-Wah Law

Singapore: Springer Nature; 2019; 223 pp.; ISBNs: 978-9-81137-302-2 (hbk); 978-9-81137-303-9 (ebk)



You can tell a lot about a country from its universities: what they do, how they do it – in other words, their governance. Authoritarian regimes, which understand the power of ideas because the legitimacy they claim rests on a particular one, invariably keep a tight grip on who runs them and to what purpose. So, universities in a society where a powerful authoritarian regime is attempting to suppress dissent, yet where the universities have traditionally operated according to liberal norms of open academic debate, will inevitably become sites of conflict. Presently, Hong Kong's universities offer a compelling case study of such a conflict.

Writing a book that is largely about fast-moving current political and social events is inevitably a risky undertaking, and it is to Wing-Wah Law's credit that his book stands the test of time well – so far, at least. At the time of writing this review in January 2020, events in Hong Kong have moved since last summer at a pace and at a level of intensity that no commentator, so far as I know, anticipated. The outcome of the current unrest is accordingly unknowable.

Law's distinctive thesis in this book is that, to at least an extent, the continuing pro-democracy protests have been turbocharged by the failure of student groups to achieve various relatively modest changes intended to protect university autonomy from Beijing-directed interference. If the thinking in Beijing was of the 'slippery slope' variety, it was a grave miscalculation: failure to make progress with changes to university governance has helped to convince activists, Law argues, that there was no alternative to direct confrontation.

Law observes that Hong Kong's public universities have closely followed British patterns so far as state direction and institutional governance and organization are concerned, even to the extent of creating a binary university/polytechnic model and then merging the two systems in 1994, just as had happened a little earlier in Britain. Even the state regulator retains its colonial-era title of the University Grants Committee (UGC), whereas the British UGC was abolished in 1988 and in England constant political tinkering has moved regulation through three organizational iterations since then.

We may see, in the future, an even more marked contrast: Law suggests that the present, and probably continuing, struggle for democratic rights by the people of Hong Kong 'will be a new test for public universities' ability, as a public democratic sphere, to tolerate and promote rational, critical discussion of issues deemed politically sensitive by the central authorities' (213). If Hong Kong's universities are indeed able to act as truth-speakers to power, as Law clearly hopes – although I think that he is not exactly holding his breath in anticipation that they will – then they will offer a much-needed example to British and other universities on speaking out on what Law describes as 'issues deemed politically sensitive'. In his preface, Law says that after Britain's handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, he received a 'well-intentioned' warning to keep off the topic of China's involvement in Hong Kong affairs, a warning that he 'did not take ... seriously' (ix). In any event, he is certainly back on the case now, and higher education is more than ever central to Hong Kong's democratic struggle.

Law's interest is in the interplay of managerialism (by which he means the use of corporate structures and methods in university decision making), politics and governance in Hong Kong's universities, with his specific research question being to discover what were the roles of university governing bodies in leading and guiding their senior management teams on key decisions. He argues that the tensions between those demanding greater local control of Hong Kong's affairs and the demands of the authorities in Beijing and their local supporters are now the key factors in university governance – as they no doubt are in the control of a wide range of other Hong Kong organizations, public and private.

The leading roles played by students in the 2014 'Occupy Central' demonstrations, and in a range of subsequent actions, has, Law argues, radicalized a whole generation of young Hong Kongers. University governing bodies, meanwhile, with memberships mainly from older generations, have attempted to mollify pro-Beijing elements. Law describes (at perhaps excessive length for a book intended to have an international readership) the rejection in 2015 by the University of Hong Kong's Council – its governing body – of the appointment of a pro-vice-chancellor known for his pro-democracy leanings, after a year's wrangling (95). Another area of conflict in the 2015–16 period, affecting all the public universities, was what became known as the 'abolition campaign' (109). The colonial-era governor had been the ex-officio chancellor of each university, with a purely formal role, on the British model. This continued after the handover, with the Hong Kong chief executive taking on the ex-officio role. But it was soon apparent that chief executives wanted to do more than preside at degree ceremonies and the like, and sought to affect universities'

governance by, for example, appointing university council members perceived as being politically aligned to Beijing's interests. This produced the student-led campaign, which, however, failed in its objective of abolishing the role of chancellor.

Law argues that, despite the impressive and sophisticated levels of student activism displayed in these and other cases, no real changes were achieved within the universities. The conclusion was therefore drawn by activists that if relatively minor concessions were unavailable from the Hong Kong authorities, they had no choice but to confront Beijing and its local supporters directly, on a broad pro-democracy front. Resistance to university governance reforms thus helped to move the struggle from university meeting rooms out on to the streets, shopping malls and metro stations of Hong Kong. Questions of university governance have rarely had such an impact.