

Democracy's College

Episode 31: Democratizing Higher Education Through Community Colleges in Hong Kong

Announcer: Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in P-20 educational pathways. This podcast is a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois at Urbana- Champaign. Learn more about OCCRL at occrll.illinois.edu.

In this episode, HyeJin Tina Yeo, a research assistant at OCCRL, talks with Dr. Hei-hang Hayes Tang about democratizing higher education through community colleges in Hong Kong.

Yeo: Here with me today for OCCRL's Democracy's College podcast is Dr. Hayes Tang, a sociologist and a professor at Education University of Hong Kong. He focuses on the sociological role of higher education, specifically focusing on community colleges in entrepreneurial society and global city. He's committed to create new knowledge and application for better education governance and policy innovation in East Asian entrepreneurial societies, amidst Asia, the global inequalities, populism, and authoritarianism. Dr Tang, thank you so much for being with us today.

Dr. Tang: Yeah, thank you, Tina. Thank you for the nice introduction.

Yeo: Please introduce yourself, who you are, and what your current role is, and your research to our listeners.

Dr. Tang: Definitely. I myself am an assistant professor at the Education University of Hong Kong, and I'm in the department of Education Policy and Leadership. So I consider myself a sociologist, and my interest is on higher education, academic profession. And the topic I'm very interested is the access to higher education. So in my field we use the term massification. That means the higher-education sector is more for the mass than for the elites. And the very topic I have been very interested in is the processes and the policy context of how Hong Kong society and the government want to liberalize the access to post-secondary education in Hong Kong.

Yeo: Tell us about a brief background of higher education in Hong Kong for our listeners, who would like to know more about education in Hong Kong. Specifically, we want to hear about the context and purposes of the Hong Kong government's decision to adapt the American two-year college model.

Dr. Tang:

Yeah, well the case of Hong Kong higher education, we don't have a very long history. So we had only one university, that is the University of Hong Kong, since 1912, more than 100 years. And it remains as the single university in Hong Kong, mainly to train elites for the colonial governments, and also for some professions like medicine and engineering and legal profession, et cetera, for the colonial Hong Kong. So until 1963, we had the second university, that is the Chinese University of Hong Kong. And establishment of the Chinese University of Hong Kong was to have another university, which was not so-called colonial, but to educate and also defend the Chinese culture, the cultural China, and higher learning in Hong Kong. So that is the two elite universities in Hong Kong for a long period in Hong Kong's social developments.

So when Hong Kong developed itself socially and economically after World War II, we had very impressive social developments, and we had a very stable society, especially since 1970s. So at that time in Hong Kong we also had more Polytechnics. We had two Polytechnics in Hong Kong to have the technical education for young people and for the Hong Kong economy. In the meantime, we also have different teacher colleges to teach and prepare future teachers for the Hong Kong society. When the birth rate of Hong Kong increased after World War II, where Hong Kong started to stabilize itself after World War II. So that is the situation. We had two universities, some Polytechnics, and some teacher colleges as the landscape of higher education in Hong Kong.

The time when it came to 1989, some audience may know in Beijing mainland China, there was the June 4 incident. And that affected Hong Kong stability a lot. Not in terms of the political situation, but more in the psychology of Hong Kong citizens. So at that time a lot of Hong Kong people, they started to worry about the political future of Hong Kong. Because years ago, in 1984, there's a declaration to decide between the British government and the Chinese government to return the sovereignty of Hong Kong to mainland China. So that is the situation that Hong Kong people started to worry about their own political future, especially the welfare of their own family. So there have been very massive immigration from Hong Kong to other countries, and especially a lot of the western democracies.

So at that time, the government faced a legitimacy crisis. And one explanation to talk about greater access to higher education is about that event. So one explanation is that in order to regain the legitimacy of governance in colonial Hong Kong at that time, the government wanted to massify, to give greater access to higher education. And in particular in early 90s, the two Polytechnics were renamed as university at that time. And also, we had the third university, that is the University of Science and Technology, HKUST, at that time. And then the other two teaching-oriented colleges at that time were also renamed as university at that time.

So that is the first wave of massification in Hong Kong higher education and is somehow related to the politicals in their area at that time. And regarding the second wave of massification, it happened when Hong Kong was entering the 21st century, at the start of the 21st century. As you know, over the world we are talking about, and also discussing the notion of non-Asian economy. And at that time, Hong Kong was returned to the People's Republic of China. And the first chief executive discussed quite a lot about Hong Kong competitiveness and wanted to equip Hong Kong for the knowledge economy in the global knowledge economy. So one important policy agenda of the chief executive of that time was to build human capital for the Hong Kong knowledge economy. In particular, he advocated very strongly that 60 percent of the youth cohort should have access to some form of post-secondary education. And it's out of economic reason, and the rationale that is to equip our young people with generic skills. And nowadays we talk about 21st-century skills, about critical thinking, communication skills, language skills, collaboration, teamwork, things like that.

So the government wanted to give Hong Kong knowledge economy, and they also wanted to make Hong Kong an education hub as a new industry for Hong Kong's new economy. And nowadays, yeah, we also talk about how we have lots of so-called world class university, according to some ranking measurement. So at that time, we had the community colleges idea. So the government wanted to borrow somehow the American system to introduce community colleges in Hong Kong. And, in the meantime, they wanted to change the Hong Kong education from the British one, from the British system, to an international system. I think it's more about the American system. So we changed them from seven years high school, three years university education to the American model. And it became a more international model, from six-years high school to four-years university. So that is the short history of Hong Kong higher education and how the idea of community college was being introduced into the Hong Kong case.

Yeo: Thank you for sharing the history of higher education in Hong Kong. It seems that Hong Kong wanted to increase access of higher education through the community colleges system.

Dr. Tang: Yeah. They want to increase the access, but out of a very economic concern, that is to human capital. And they also want to say that is for the well-being of our young people to help you to self-enterprise yourself to make you more competitive for the global knowledge economy and the changing employment markets, and you need generic skills to get adapted to the new economies at that time.

Yeo: It's been about 20 years for Hong Kong to adapt the American two-year college model. What are the distinct characteristics of community colleges and students at community colleges in Hong Kong?

Dr. Tang: I think one very distinct characteristic of Hong Kong community colleges is that to give the second chance of Hong Kong young people to get into the public university in Hong Kong. So the community colleges are all operated on self-financing model, so they are private colleges. But one purpose of the community college in Hong Kong, that is to help young people who failed to get into the public university of Hong Kong, and they are considered more prestigious one in the Hong Kong society. A second chance to enter the public university in Hong Kong. And I think another distinct characteristic of community colleges is that they are more on the liberal arts education. So as we talk about nurturing the generic skills of Hong Kong young people, that's a good match, between liberal arts education and also the nurturing of generic skills.

And because those colleges are operated on self-financing model, I think it's also out of more economic reason, because it's less costly to set up humanities and social sciences major programs in community colleges than some majors which required laboratory work and lots of different technical resources. And so, I think it can achieve the very good goal of giving liberal arts education to Hong Kong young people, especially when we compare the education in high school. Because I had a project about interviewing the graduates of community colleges. Mostly they compare their scenario, and they treasure it a lot. They appreciate a lot the liberal arts education.

Yeo: What I am hearing from you is that students who failed their college entrance exam can have a second chance to go to college, through the community college system. So they'd have a chance to transfer. So what does the transfer process look like in Hong Kong community colleges? Are four-year universities open to the transfer admission? Or is there any collaboration program between four-year universities and community colleges in Hong Kong?

Dr. Tang: It's mostly like the transfer students case in the American scenario. So the more achieving students, they can get into the public university, according to their achievement in community college. And for some cases they need to get the interview at the university. But mostly it's about their GPA, their scores gained in community colleges.

Yeo: I can see that the criteria or qualification for that transfer would be competitive and high, but still the four-year universities opened to the transfer admission. And then the community college counselors or academic advisors are well aware of those criteria or qualifications or requirements for the transfer admission so that they can help students who want to transfer to four-year universities.

Dr. Tang: Yeah, that's what I discover from my research. The counseling service of community colleges is very helpful because it's very transparent. And as I said, it's mostly depending on the scores, the GPA, the young students achieved in

their college life. So the counselors can give very accurate and practical advice depending on a student's GPA. And then they also have some training, like mock interviews or helping the young students to get through the admission processes. And also what is very interesting, and for some community colleges in Hong Kong, they also include a lot of successful cases from the past graduates. So that kind of information can be very helpful for the graduating students from community colleges to get prepared to get into the public universities in Hong Kong.

Yeo: In what ways do the community college system in Hong Kong contribute to democratize higher education and achieve social justice in higher education?

Dr. Tang: I would take this question from the perspective of assessment, which is the admission, university admission exam. So with our community colleges in Hong Kong, there's only one open exam. And only students who are very good and also very well trained for the examination skills, they can get into the public university. But in a way community college can democratize higher education. It's because young students, they can have more liberal assessment through continuing assessment and also different kinds of assessment like group-work presentation, writing essays, which is very different from the high-stakes public examination in Hong Kong at that time. And some achieving students of colleges, they appreciate a lot the liberal way of doing assessment, and then they can do well unexpectedly, and then they can get into a good university in Hong Kong.

Yeo: It's good to hear that students can learn college cultures and have a different learning experiences at community colleges. From your work, I was also impressed with how community colleges in Hong Kong collaborate with overseas universities. Tell us about the internationalization of community colleges in Hong Kong.

Dr. Tang: Yes. The intention is for democratizing higher education because, as I said, around 25 percent of the graduates of community college can get into the public university in Hong Kong. That means quite some of them, if they want to continue with their education, they need to appraise and they need to get admitted to other universities. So because of that, the community college in Hong Kong, they start to develop a collaboration with some good universities overseas. Mainly they are from United Kingdom and also Australia. And then they run the international, we call it top-up degree, to help students to transfer to their collaborative programs. So they can transfer their credits. So they study two years more, or sometimes one-point-five years or one year, and then they can get a university degree.

And some collaborative program is also good in a way that after studying a semester or so in Hong Kong, they can transfer to the main campus of the

overseas university. And then for the young people at that time, they can also have some experience of overseas education. So in that way it's also an outcome of democratizing higher education in Hong Kong through, I say it in my paper, a policy innovation between the overseas university and the Hong Kong community colleges system.

Yeo: Just like American community colleges, I can see that community colleges in Hong Kong provided broad and wide education opportunities for underrepresented students and minoritized students. In what ways do you think community colleges in Hong Kong are unique?

Dr. Tang: It's about a contest. One point I didn't mention about a distinct characteristic of community college system in Hong Kong, is that there are very few cases of dropping out. Although very usual that not majority of students can get into public university in Hong Kong, but the phenomenon of dropping out, or cooling out, according to the sociologist Burton Clark, it's not common in Hong Kong. And it's highly related to the cultural contexts of Hong Kong. I would consider it is the Confucian context. It's very important to get higher education. Parents and students, they aspire to gain a university degree as completion of their human developments. So they become complete with the degree, and that's a very Confucian idea in a contemporary setting.

Yeo: It's great to hear that community colleges in Hong Kong focuses on liberal arts education. I'm sure that will help students to develop critical thinking and increase their understanding of the democratic process and social justice. Do you also think the community college contribute to that too?

Dr. Tang: Yeah, I think it plays a role. It plays a role to liberate young minds by building their critical thinking through the teaching and learning experience, subjects like humanities and social sciences, including some that's related to political science. Although there are many different variables in the social contexts which nurture young people's civic mind, including the internet, but I think the teaching and learning processes and interaction between instructors and students, they are helpful in a way for the civic-mindedness developments and also the democratic mind, to some sense, among Hong Kong students.

Yeo: You briefly mentioned about the "cooling out" function in the community colleges in Hong Kong. Could you tell us about what "warming-up" or "cooling-out" functions look like in East Asian higher education? And in addition to that, tell us about what challenges community colleges in Hong Kong are encountering?

Dr. Tang: In the context of East Asian higher education, as you asked, I think less focus on the Confucian model. And as I said, it's a very Confucian idea for studying more

and then for attaining higher learning, higher education in order to become a better man or woman. And that's why the cooling-out functions do not happen more often than the warming-up function. And that's why even quite the majority of the graduates of Hong Kong community colleges, they cannot get into the Hong Kong public university as they planned it. But they want to somehow to gain a degree through international top-up degree. I am developing a concept called "educational desire" to capture the very interesting cultural and educational phenomenon.

So as for your question about challenges faced by community colleges in Hong Kong, I think it relates highly to the policy continuity. I did not introduce the current phenomenon right now, is that starting from 2010, the Hong Kong government wanted to introduce more independent new colleges of higher education instead of supporting a lot of the community colleges in Hong Kong. So those new colleges of higher education, they are more oriented to vocational degrees and business education. So all those new colleges, including community colleges, they all operate on self-financing model. So to some extent they are competing for student enrollments. And I think that is the challenges faced by Hong Kong's community colleges. I think some colleges may have some difficulty in running their program, but I would expect that some students would still be very interested in community colleges because it's a good way to get a second chance to get into a more prestigious public university in Hong Kong.

Yeo: For our listeners who are not familiar with warming-up or cooling-out functions in community colleges, could you briefly describe what they are, and then also how those concepts, warming-up or cooling-out functions, apply into your research?

Dr. Tang: I think to make it very simple, it's about processes. So the cooling-out processes as advocated by sociologist Burton Clark. It talks about the very systematic processes of colleges. So community colleges, they are welcoming to all kinds of young people and other kinds of people into the college system. But through the two-year processes, the colleges want to let young people know they are not good enough to get into the academic track, meaning they are not good enough to get transferred to a university. So because of that, they make use of the counseling services and also the very objective, so-called objective, assessment system so that young people would get informed that they are not suitable for doing academic studies. And because of that, their educational aspiration throughout the college experience ... but I find in my recent research is that, in our day times and also in the Confucian, East Asian context, more often the warming-up phenomenon appears. Meaning that the processes of college in Hong Kong community colleges, they have their education aspiration reinforced or even further warmed up through the two-year college experiences through the more encouraging teaching and learning processes. And the counseling

service, I think that make a big contrast, is that the counseling service tend not to discourage young people to get into public university, but to encourage them to be very helpful to them. And for one economic reason is that, for college to get reputation, to prove they have a very practical educational outcome, is the success rate of transferring students to public university. And that is a lot of different reasons to explain the more often warming-up function of Hong Kong community colleges.

Yeo: Yeah, it was fascinating to see that students can actually recognize their latent academic capabilities. They couldn't actually see that in high school. So they can feel, "I can do that. I can study this way." I think that's really great.

Dr. Tang: Yeah, I think as I said, it's about the assessment system and also the structure of subjects. Because the subjects provided in high school is like the greater diversity provided in university. So students, they get a case and also experience in some new subjects, then they find that they are more interested in that and they can do better in that. And not until the end of the semester, but through the very first assignment given by the instructor. Through the continuous interaction and assessment process, they found the new talents and new academic interests that they have. That's the very function which community college can do, and not high school can do, and not the vocational education institution can do.

Yeo: Yeah, I agree that community college can provide diverse educational and career pathways for underrepresented and minoritized students. You mentioned the community colleges in Hong Kong are all self-financed. How does the system work for students from low-income families?

Dr. Tang: I think we need statistics to give a more accurate picture, but there are quite a lot of lower-class students in community college. And for my particular project about what is successful cases, we also come across students from the lower class. So I think the social-class issue is not the issue facing community college. Although the community college charge tuition fees, but I think it's still affordable to students from more disadvantaged backgrounds. And the government gives loans for them. So what I'm talking about, limited to the two-year college experience and transfer, because they need to pay back their loans after they graduate.

So I will say the problems, the social class issue and the injustice problem, would appear more after university. And that's one of my big interests, talking about alignment between higher education and repressed youth engagement after graduation. Because we are talking about a greater access to higher education, and given the Confucian context, there's a great demand for whatever kind of higher education. So the massification trend I think would persist, even though

we're worried and we're curious about the function and also the value of higher education.

But then we have different kinds of higher education institution. There would form a hierarchy according to the historical context and also some perception of the employers and the general public. So the social-class problem and the social-justice issue will appear after the experience of higher education due to increasing massification of higher education. So that's very interesting to me, and I do feel concern about the social inequality and social-justice issue. But the situation in the Confucian system would be quite different. I think you're also aware about the case in South Korea. Although the unemployment rate of university graduate increased, but I don't think the case would discourage young people to get into universities. So that's my very big interest in understanding educational desire in Confucian systems.

Yeo: As we close, what call to action or advice would you share with our listeners in terms of increasing access and broadening participation via community colleges in higher education?

Dr. Tang: I think it's about resources. The new massified sector of Hong Kong higher education is operated on a self-financing model. So they need to survive in a very competitive way, and they need to be concerned about the student market. So I think that in order to give greater access and to broaden participation through community colleges in higher education is by giving more resources to community colleges in higher education. And I think community colleges should also give a more diversity of different major programs, because my concern is more about youth engagement after they graduate. So I think some more vocational-oriented programs would be helpful.

And how to remain and to treasure the liberal arts education tradition of college with vocational ones, that would be a very interesting topic to develop. And after all, I think from the perspective of young people, they should be given more well-informed choices, because lastly, the high school graduate, one of the main goals is to get into a very prestigious university in Hong Kong or overseas, but they are only a minority. So we want to give more well-informed choices, mainly after the public exam results are announced, they will start to plan ahead. So at that particular point, I think the government and society should give more well-informed choices, and then that can give a more efficient way to democratizing higher education in Hong Kong.

Yeo: Dr. Tang, thank you so much for joining us today.

Dr. Tang: Thank you for the very interesting and stimulating questions. Thank you, Tina.

Announcer: Tune in next month when Dr. Heather Fox, at OCCRL, talks with Dr. Amanda Smith, the dean of transitional opportunities and career education at Rock Valley College. The conversation will focus on integrating equity into program review.

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