Academic Barbarism and the Asian University: The Case of Hong Kong

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Introduction

Asian universities are featuring more prominently in ranking tables and levels of investment into research in China are producing world-leading research centres. In 2013, the Chinese government invested more than 1.18 trillion renminbi, or $190 billion, which is more than two percent of its gross domestic product, in “the development of scientific research and experimentation,” according to China’s National Bureau of Statistics (Tallow 2015). However, recent studies reveal there are still strong educational inequalities in China and that the main reason for this is disparities in access to education between urban and rural areas (Qian and Smyth 2005). A survey by the China Youth Daily in 2009 reveals that only 11.2 percent of respondents believe educational gaps are narrowing (Yang et al. 2014). Hannum and Wang (2006) have also recently discovered that these regional inequalities have led to educational stratification in recent times. Studies reveal that a significant factor for the reproduction of educational inequalities is the degree of stratification of educational opportunities (Allmendinger 1989; Hopper 1968). Stratification is generally understood as the extent “to which education opportunities are differentiated between and within educational levels” (Nikolai and West 2013: 60). Yang et al.’s study also reveals that income inequality strongly impacts educational inequality in China. The figure for average years of schooling (AYS) is 6.66 years for the lowest income group and 10.39 years for the highest income group in China (2014: 7). Since the rigid stratification of society is also based on the rural/urban
divide, where 54.32 percent of the population still live in rural areas, and where an expensive hukou system prevents many working-class students from access to premier educational institutions, it appears likely that the recent “tertiary tilt” in government spending will lead to great inequality in the future. As we have seen, a “tertiary tilt,” built on international pressure to enter the university rankings race, can lead to heightened inequality in developing countries and developing regions (Gruber and Kosack 2014).

Hong Kong, of course, has a very different educational structure and history to that of China. As a former colony of the UK it shares many of the organizational structures of the UK academic system. For example, it has always followed the RAE (now REF) guidelines in monitoring research. Hong Kong also still performs consistently well in the PISA rankings (unlike China). However, what is most noteworthy for this study and for the examination of the academic industry in general in the Asian region is that Hong Kong tops the polls in terms of university rankings when rankings are correlated with GDP and per million population (Hazelkorn 2010: 26). However, this is despite the fact that Hong Kong has one of the worst Gini coefficients in the developed world. Harsh levels of social inequality stunt social mobility and progress towards equality of opportunity in Hong Kong. There are also strong connections between levels of social inequality and educational attainment in this “global city.” Hong Kong is a society where upwards of 20 percent of the population live beneath the poverty line. This chapter therefore extends the arguments made earlier in relation to how the university is “perpetuating inequality” to Hong Kong as an example of a leading twenty-first-century Asian education hub. It seeks to contribute to the important body of work on equality studies and attainment research by examining two interconnected aspects of educational inequality in higher education in Hong Kong: first, the relative shortage of degree places available for local students at local universities, and second, the relatively strong correlation between income and educational attainment across the districts in Hong Kong. This chapter also assesses government initiatives that claim to encourage higher levels of post-secondary participation, in particular through the rapid development of self-financed sub-degree programmes. A secondary argument discusses how university rankings criteria have a deleterious effect on the commitment to promote mass