Chapter 7
Rise in Voices for Hong Kong Independence: The Emergence of a New Battle for Hong Kong Universities

Abstract This chapter turns to the third repercussion of Occupy Central on public universities by examining the rapid rise of pro-independence voices in Hong Kong society and university campuses after the occupation, and how local and central authorities and universities responded to students' advocacy and promotion thereof. The chapter shows that, after the failure of Occupy Central, a number of Hong Kong people, particularly young people (including university students and graduates), shifted their political goal to attaining either Hong Kong's self-determination within, or political independence from, CPC-led China. At the societal level, pro-independence localist youth political groups use different strategies and tactics to attain their new political goal, while pro-independence students conceptualized and promoted campus activities advocating Hong Kong independence. University heads, bowing to government pressure, warned students against the display and spread of independence messages on campus. One HKU academic who was an Occupy Central cofounder continued exploring China's political future, including the possibility of Hong Kong independence, subjecting himself to official condemnation and severe political attacks by pro-establishment forces and media.

The preceding two chapters presented the post-Occupy struggles in HKU's university senior management appointments and in university students' campaigns to abolish the HKSARCE's role as ex-officio chancellor of all Hong Kong public universities. This and the following chapters turn to the third issue arising from Occupy Central—the spread of the idea of Hong Kong independence within society and on university campuses. In the first 15 years following the handover, Hong Kong independence was not an issue that drew local or central government attention. However, after Occupy Central, the voice of Hong Kong independence, as examined in this chapter, began to bloom so quickly in society and on university campuses that local and central authorities and heads of universities had to issue statements condemning students' advocacy and promotion of Hong Kong independence. The next chapter will discuss whether a political red line has been institutionalized and whether the voices of Hong Kong independence will disappear in Hong Kong society and higher education.

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The pro-independence movement, this chapter argues, is an extension of the social division that informed Occupy Central to the societal level and university campuses, albeit on a smaller scale. It is a new battlefield on which Hong Kong people are pitted against the Hong Kong and central governments over the issue of Hong Kong independence—the new political red line for society and education. Opposition to Hong Kong independence has become a political ideology fully supported by central and local authorities and their supporters, whereas the pro-independence or pro-self-determination political beliefs and ideals held by some Hong Kong people, including university student and graduates, are now political taboos and are severely condemned, threatened, and/or suppressed in society and on campus.

Specifically, this new battlefield grew out of Hong Kong people's complex feelings toward mainland China, including the anti-mainlander sentiments of those wishing to protect local interests and resources, and society's intense frustration with the failure of the student-led Occupy Central to gain greater democracy for Hong Kong. While most have begun to lose hope in a better, more democratic future for Hong Kong, a number of Hong Kong people, particularly those young people (including university students and graduates) who had participated in Occupy Central, continue to fight for the betterment of Hong Kong's political future, both in society and on university campuses. However, they have shifted their political goal from striving for genuine universal suffrage without political screening, to attaining Hong Kong's right to self-determination within, or political independence from CPC-led China. At the societal level, pro-independence localist youth political groups use different strategies and tactics to attain their new political goal, including violence and standing for election to the establishment. On university campuses, pro-independence students dare to conceptualize and debate Hong Kong independence through their students' union magazines, display banners and slogans supporting Hong Kong independence, and challenge university policies making a passing grade in Putonghua (China's common oral language) a graduation requirement. University heads, bowing to government pressure, have warned students, guarded against the display and spread of independence messages on campus. However, this did not stop one HKU academic, a cofounder of Occupy Central, from continuing to explore China's political future, including the possibility of it splitting into independent states, including Hong Kong. For his activities, he has been the target of severe political attacks by pro-establishment forces and media and of government condemnation.

The chapter first traces the emergence of Hong Kong people's anti-mainland sentiments and pro-independence localism. Next, it focuses on four pro-independence localist youth groups that were formed after Occupy Central; it examines their political advocacies and strategies for advancing their political agenda, and how local and central authorities have prevented them from running for political office. Third, the chapter investigates the extension of the struggle for Hong Kong independence from society to higher education institutions. Specifically, it examines the shift in student movements from striving for universal suffrage to seeking Hong Kong independence or self-determination, the controversies arising from the display of pro-independence banners and slogans on university campuses, and students' resistance to university policies making passing Putonghua a graduation requirement. Fourth, the chapter

examines why an academic's speech (outside of Hong Kong) on the future of China and Hong Kong can draw severe criticisms from all pro-establishment fronts, including the local and central governments.

Emergence of Anti-mainlander Sentiment and Pro-independence Localism

Pro-independence localism did not begin with a political agenda, but with Hong Kong people's negative sentiments about having to compete with growing numbers of mainlanders for Hong Kong's limited resources. Since 1997, social interaction and integration between Hong Kong and mainland people have greatly increased, due to the increase in cross-border marriages, mainland immigration into Hong Kong, and (more important) the drastic increase in the number of mainland people coming to Hong Kong for tourist and shopping purposes, particularly after 2003 (Law, 2017).

The recent massive influx of mainlanders into Hong Kong has created more opportunities for social conflict, including tensions and misunderstandings between Hong Kong people and mainland visitors in daily encounters because of differences in oral languages, lifestyle, habits, culture, and social manners—for example, how one behaves when queuing for public transportation (Hong Kong Management Association, 2016). Another type of conflict relates to the competition between mainland visitors and Hong Kong people for limited resources in Hong Kong, ranging from luxury goods and properties, to maternity ward beds, school places, and daily necessities (Lee, 2016; Sung, Ng, Wu, & Yiu, 2015). Parallel trading has become widespread in the areas bordering Hong Kong, seriously disturbing Hong Kong residents' daily lives. To date, however, the Hong Kong government has not been able to ease these problems.

These conflicts inevitably increased many Hong Kong people's dissatisfaction with mainlanders, with anti-mainlander sentiment reaching a climax between 2012 and 2015. This was fully reflected in a full-page advertisement, sponsored by a group of Golden Forum Netizens (2012), that was published in two Chinese-language newspapers (*Apple Daily* and *Sharp Daily*) on 1 February 2012. The advertisement featured a catchy headline—*Xianggang Ren Rengoule* (Hong Kong People Have Tolerated Enough)—over a picture showing a locust sitting atop Lion Rock Hill (a significant city landmark), derogatorily implying mainlanders were voracious pests who consumed everything in their path; the advertisement also asserted Hong Kong people might need to pay HK$1 million every 18 min to raise *shuangfei* children (whose parents are not Hong Kong permanent residents). Since then, radical localists have advocated putting Hong Kong people first, reducing the city's ties to the mainland, and preventing pregnant mainlanders from giving birth in Hong Kong (Ming Pao Editor, 2014). Protests erupted in 2014 and 2015 in which localists expressed anger toward mainland visitors and parallel traders (Hong Kong Management Association, 2016). The main organizer of the 2015 protests was Hong

Kong Indigenous, a pro-independence youth political group that arose following the 2014 Occupy Central (see next section). A common motto of these protests was "reclaiming" (*guangfu*) Hong Kong's trading areas for its people. Some protests involved violence and ended in chaos and arrests.

Facing great social pressure, the Hong Kong government under HKSARCE C. Y. Leung launched three measures to quell Hong Kong people's social discontent, including a zero-delivery policy forbidding mainland women from giving birth in Hong Kong, a restriction on the amount of milk powder exported, and the imposition of heavy additional stamp duties on individual or corporate buyers who are not permanent residents. While these measures have helped to reduce competition for local resources in these areas, social conflicts persist.

However, in the early 2010s, some localist groups began to radicalize anti-Mainlander sentiment and voices, by emphasizing political resistance to China's rule over Hong Kong. For example, the Hong Kong Autonomy Movement (formed in 2011) and Hongkongese Priority (founded in 2013) prioritized Hong Kong people's interests and the protection local identity and cultures (Chin, 2011; Hongkongese Priority, 2014), while simultaneously denouncing the imposition of Chinese national identity and integration with the mainland, and advocating Hong Kong's full (rather than high level) autonomy within or even independence from China. In January 2014, four members of Hongkongese Priority were arrested for having trespassed onto a People's Liberation Army's base while carrying colonial-era flags—seen as symbols of the independence movement (South China Morning Post Editor, 2014). Colonial-era flags and large placards touting Hong Kong independence are common sights at major public demonstrations (e.g., the annual 1 July rally) and are seen as challenging China's sovereignty over Hong Kong and promoting the latter's independence. This pro-independence movement, as examined in the next section, was attractive to and furthered by university students.

Growth of Localist Youth Power for Pushing for Hong Kong Independence

Occupy Central's failure to increase democracy in Hong Kong frustrated many young people, particularly university students, reinforced their negative sentiments against mainland China and the central government, and strengthened their determination to strive for Hong Kong independence. Four major political groups advocating Hong Kong's self-determination or independence emerged after the Occupy Central and ran candidates in local elections to bring their voices into the establishment—Hong Kong Indigenous (established in January 2015), Youngspiration (February 2015), the Hong Kong National Party (March 2016), and Demosisto (April 2016). The first three groups were not satisfied with the leadership of the HKFS and Scholarism, from which the fourth group had evolved.

All four pro-independence localist youth groups are led by recent university graduates or current university students and are attractive to university students and young professionals, particularly those who had participated in Occupy Central and/or in the 2012 anti-national education movement. Since Occupy Central, the four groups have become representative of young people's and university students' quest for greater democracy and even Hong Kong independence. The groups use localism as an umbrella concept to represent their goals of protecting Hong Kong's interests and uniqueness, resisting its integration with the mainland, and striving for greater autonomy or independence. All four consider wining seats in elections an important step toward Hong Kong independence; to advance that political agenda, some localist youths have even embraced violence, as in the 2016 Mongkok Riot. This has worried both the Hong Kong and central governments, which have used various means to ban Hong Kong independence advocates from standing for election and restrict the operation of pro-independence youth groups.

Universities and Colleges as a Major Source of Localist Youths

The first localist youth political group established after Occupy Central was Hong Kong Indigenous, which was founded in January 2015 by Ray Wong, then a 22-year-old graduate of a private tertiary institution. The group's spokesman was Edward Leung, a fourth-year HKU philosophy student who was 2 years older than Wong. Wong had participated in the 2012 Anti-national Education Movement, and both had been a part of Occupy Central, whose failure led both to lose confidence in nonviolent protest as a means of attaining greater democracy in Hong Kong.

The second post-Occupy localist youth group was Youngspiration, which had over 100 members, mainly students and young professionals. After the failure of Occupy Central, Youngspiration's founder, Baggio Leung (born, 1986), a former president of CityU Students' Union (2007–2008), established the group to continue the fight for greater democracy in Hong Kong. Its spokesperson, Donald Chow (born, 1993), had been deputy chairman of an alliance of secondary school students during the 2012 anti-national education movement, and participated in Occupy Central after becoming a student at Chu Hai College of Higher Education, a private college offering degree programs; he joined Youngspiration in 2015. Another spokesperson was Wai-ching Yau (born, 1991), who had just graduated from LU when she participated in Occupy Central.

The Hong Kong National Party, the third political group to arise, was established by Andy Chan (born, 1990) in March 2016, less than 1 year after he graduated from PolyU. In his final year, Chan took part in his first political activity, Occupy Central. He was disappointed by the HKFS's leadership during the occupation, and in early 2015 returned to PolyU and began a successful campaign to withdraw the PolyU Students' Union from the HKFS.

The fourth post-Occupy group, Demosisto, is a student activist group that arose from the ashes of Scholarism, which dissolved in April 2016. Demosisto had about

30 members. Most of its founding members were university students and former Scholarism members. Demosisto's founding standing committee consisted of president Nathan Law (born, 1993; LU student; HKFS); general secretary Joshua Wong (born, 1996; Open University of Hong Kong student, Scholarism), deputy president Oscar Lai (born, 1994; student of Hong Kong College of Technology; Scholarism), and Agnes Chow (born, 1996; HKBU student, Scholarism).

Advocacy for Independence or Self-determination of Hong Kong

Though the four groups arose out of a shared frustration with Occupy Central's failure, they quickly shifted their focus from seeking greater democracy for Hong Kong within China, to pushing for Hong Kong independence. They do not trust the CPC-led central government will grant Hong Kong greater democracy, and consider China's increasing control over Hong Kong a kind of "recolonization" (Veg, 2017). The groups promote Hong Kong's ethnic conscience and city-state conscience, emphasize self-determination as the city's future, and some support the use of violence to counter what they see as the violence inherent in a political system and institutions dominated by pro-establishment forces and Beijing loyalists (Veg, 2017). The Hong Kong National Party, this section argues, is the most explicit of the four in advocating for Hong Kong independence and challenging the Basic Law, while the other three tend to use localism to obscure their independence agenda.

The Hong Kong National Party (2018) considers Hong Kong to have been "colonized" by China in areas ranging from education and culture to economics and politics, and urges Hong Kong people to think of China as "the enemy." The party's founder, Andy Chan (2018), argued that Hong Kong will be truly democratic only when its sovereignty rests with the Hong Kong people, and that independence is "the only way to achieve this." As reflected in its political manifesto, the ultimate goal of the Hong Kong National Party (2016) is to further the cause of Hong Kong independence and reinforce Hong Kong people's sense of ethnic self-strengthening. The manifesto lists six political tasks: build an independent and free Republic of Hong Kong, safeguard and put Hong Kong people's interests first, consolidate Hong Kong's ethnic consciousness and define Hong Kong citizenship, support and participate in all effective democratic struggles, replace the Basic Law, which was not approved by the Hong Kong people, with a popularly constructed Hong Kong Constitution, and build a strong basis for Hong Kong independence by constructing and supporting pro-independence forces in areas ranging from the economy to education.

Unlike the Hong Kong National Party, Demosisto avoids using the term independence. Its manifesto expresses its dissatisfaction with Hong Kong being ruled by the CPC, and the need to unite Hong Kong people to fight totalitarianism through nonviolent means, overcome oppressors, and pursue the "dream of self-determination" for Hong Kong. Unlike the Hong Kong National Party, Demosisto argues that self-

determination and independence are not identical. It recognizes Chinese ethnic identity, but not China's national identity, and regards independence as an "ideal state" for Hong Kong, and therefore an option for its future.

Hong Kong Indigenous advocates placing the needs and people of Hong Kong first (*bentu youxian*). To that end, it has organized anti-mainlander protests in tourist or shopping areas and has called on the government to safeguard the interests of Hong Kong people. More recently, it has advocated protecting Hong Kong's interests through the use of force to resist the existing authoritarian regime, and to counter the "violence" inherent in Hong Kong's political system and infrastructure (*yiwu zhibao*) (Leung, 2016a). In public, Edward Leung has been more vocal about Hong Kong independence than Hong Kong Indigenous' founder, Ray Wong. Leung (2017) asserted large-scale protests like those organized by Occupy Central were not only ineffective in gaining greater democracy, but had plunged Hong Kong into a "democratic recession" (p. 33). On 5 August 2016, speaking at the "Safeguard Democracy, Seize Power" rally (Hong Kong's first-ever pro-independence rally, organized by the Hong Kong National Party), Leung (2016b) argued the sovereignty of Hong Kong belongs to the Hong Kong people, not the central authorities, nor the Hong Kong and Beijing governments. He expressed his mistrust that the Chinese government would grant Hong Kong democracy and freedom, and therefore further advocated Hong Kong people taking back their power to rule Hong Kong and overthrow the Chinese regime by all necessary means, including revolution, bloodshed, and sacrifice. He ended his speech by chanting the slogan of his 2016 Legislative Council by-election campaign, "Reclaim Hong Kong, Change the Era."

Similar to Hong Kong Indigenous, Youngspiration (2015a)—whose motto is "Equity and Justice, Hong Kong People First"—believes Hong Kong's interests and freedom have been encroached on by the recent huge influx of mainlanders, and emphasizes the need to respond by putting localist voices on district councils and the Legislative Council. In a press release, Youngspiration (2015b) stated its goals were to become Hong Kong's third (after the pro-establishment and pan-democratic camps) political force, develop localism, regain Hong Kong people's public power and right to speak out, emphasize Hong Kong first, and raise citizens' level of political participation. Youngspiration (2015a) urged Hong Kong people to protect their freedom and space for survival by developing a strong identity as Hongkongers, on five levels: identification with Hong Kong values (e.g., Hong Kong's history and culture, separation of powers, rule of law); being a part of Hong Kong's ethnicity and culture; putting Hong Kong's interests ahead of outsiders' in policy-making; safeguarding Hong Kong values and interests from encroachment; and possessing a "consciousness of being masters" (*zhuti yishi*).

Having lost confidence in nonviolent means since Occupy Central's failure, many youth localists, particularly Hong Kong Indigenous supporters, pursued their political agenda through more aggressive methods. In early 2015, for example, Hong Kong Indigenous organized "reclaim" (*guanfu*) protests in shopping areas popular among mainland visitors, in an effort to expel parallel traders and reduce their disturbance of Hong Kong people's life. The protests grew violent, and police arrested some protesters, including Ray Wong.

Another example of violent protest was the Mongkok Riot, which took place in the first 2 days of the 2016 Chinese New Year (8–9 February). It started with different localist factions—including Hong Kong Indigenous, which took a leading role and Scholarism, which later dissolved and became Demosisto—protecting unlicensed food vendors on Chinese New Year at Mongkok. While police tried to disperse the crowd, Wong called on the hundreds of protesters to continue to protest, and Edward Leung told them, "If you are a Hongkonger, let's protect our city and our culture" (Lau, 2018). The incident later became a violent confrontation, with protesters setting street fires, throwing bricks, and assaulting police officers, who responded with pepper spray and batons to disperse the crowd; one police officer even fired two warning shots to quell the protesters. Later, the Hong Kong government and Liaison Office condemned the violence as a riot. Over 90 people were arrested, including Ray Wong, Edward Leung, and some university students. To date, nearly 60% of those arrested have been prosecuted on a variety of charges, including arson, rioting, assault, and illegal assembly (Lau, 2018). Wong fled Hong Kong while on bail, while Leung was found guilty of committing criminal offence in the riot and sentenced to 6 years imprisonment in June 2018.

Some, but not all university student leaders, share Hong Kong Indigenous' views on the use of violence in public demonstration. About 2 weeks after the 2016 Mongkok Riot, newly elected CUHK Student Union president Ernie Chow stated that conventional and rational means were not effective in pushing authorities to listen to the people, and suggested there was "no bottom line" when it comes to striving for Hong Kong independence (Leung, 2016). Unlike her CUHK counterpart, HKU Students' Union president-designate Althea Suen, who supported Hong Kong independence, stated her union would "not provoke" fellow students to attack and harm other people. Despite these differences, many university students' determination to strive for greater democracy in or even independence for Hong Kong remains strong.

Running for Political Elections as a First Step to Push for Hong Kong Independence

While some localists advocated violent methods after Occupy Central, the four localist youth groups saw contesting seats in Legislative Council and district council elections as the first step toward Hong Kong independence. This worried local and central authorities, who introduced exceptional measures to prevent them from advancing their pro-independence agenda. The Hong Kong government introduced an unprecedented loyalty confirmation form to prevent pro-independence candidates from standing for political elections and used judicial review to outlaw pro-independence lawmakers for "improper" oath-taking, aided by the NPCSC's fifth interpretation of the Basic Law (as discussed earlier).

Youngspiration was the first group to take action, sending its founder and eight other members to contest seats in the November 2015 District Council election; only

one of its candidates (Po-yin Kwong, a physician) won election (Electoral Affairs Commission, 2016b). The second youth group to run candidates for election was Hong Kong Indigenous. In February 2016, while still an HKU student, Edward Leung represented Hong Kong Indigenous in a Legislative Council by-election to fill the vacant New Territories East geographical constituency seat. His election campaign slogan ("Reclaim Hong Kong, Change the Era") strongly pushed Hong Kong independence, as did his promotional materials. However, the Electoral Affairs Commission refused to help him distribute these materials, because they mentioned self-autonomy and advocated the use of force to resist and break forbidden areas. Leung received strong support from other political youth groups and his fellow HKU students, including former HKU Student Union president Billy Fung (who had been a whistleblower in the HKU appointment saga) and a committee member of *Undergrad*, an official HKU Students' Union magazine criticized by the HKSARCE for promoting Hong Kong independence. Despite this, Leung did not win the seat because he polled third, receiving just over 66,000 (15.4%) of the votes (Hong Kong Government, 2016).

The other unsuccessful Youngspiration and Hong Kong Indigenous candidates polled even better. In the 2015 District Council Election, Youngspiration's founder Baggio Leung received 39% of votes cast in his constituency, while its two spokespersons, Donald Chow and Wai-Ching Yau, received 22% and 38%, respectively, of the votes in theirs (Electoral Affairs Commission, 2016b).

These results suggested radical localism had found a political niche, that support for independence was widespread among the electorate, and that the political process was a viable path to independence. Leading members of all four youth political groups—Andy Chan (Hong Kong National Party), Edward Leung (Hong Kong Indigenous), Baggio Leung and Wai-ching Yau (Youngspiration), and Nathan Law (Demosisto)—declared their intention to stand for election to the Legislative Council in the general election of September 2016. Chan explicitly declared that getting seats on the Legislative Council was a first step to push for Hong Kong independence (High Court, 2018), while the other young political leaders were less explicit about the promotion of Hong Kong independence in their election campaign.

However, Chan's independence agenda, together with the unexpectedly strong showings by pro-independence candidates in earlier elections, caught the attention of the Hong Kong government. In July 2016, the Electoral Affairs Commission (2016a) made unprecedented changes to the nominating process for the September 2016 Legislative Council election. In addition to the standard nomination form, which included a declaration of support for the Basic Law and HKSAR, candidates now also had to submit a second form, confirm their support for three specific Basic Law provisions: that the HKSAR was an inalienable part of China (Article 1); that it was directly under central government authority (Article 12); and that no Basic Law amendment could contravene China's established policy on Hong Kong (Article 159). The form also reminded nominees it was an offence to make any false declaration or confirmation.

The Hong Kong government was alleged to use the confirmation form as a form of preelection screening, to deter candidates who explicitly advocated Hong Kong

independence from standing for election and entering the political establishment, and to oust any who managed to do so. In mid-July 2016, Andy Chan (Hong Kong National Party) signed and submitted his nomination form (indicating his support of the Basic Law and HKSAR), but neither signed nor submitted the new confirmation form. When asked by the returning officer for his constituency whether he would "continue to advocate and push for" Hong Kong independence, he did not reply (High Court, 2018), and was disqualified as a candidate. Unlike Chan, Edward Leung (Hong Kong Indigenous) signed and returned the confirmation form, and answered his constituency's returning officer's query; however, he, too, was disqualified by the returning officer. Wai-ching Yau (Youngspiration) did not sign the confirmation form and was not queried by election officials in her constituency, but was confirmed as a candidate for the 2018 Legislative Council general election, as were Baggio Leung (Youngspiration) and Nathan Law (Demosisto). All three won election, with 23-year-old Nathan Law, then an LU student, becoming Hong Kong's youngest ever lawmaker.

This suggests that signing and returning the confirmation form was not an important criterion for disqualifying a candidate, while the candidate's political stance was. Chan, arguing the confirmation form was unlawful, sought to have his disqualification overturned. The High Court (2018), in May 2018, ruled that while the form was "not a mandatory requirement," the returning officer was "entitled and empowered" to request further information to assist him/her in validating a nomination. However, it stipulated that, before disqualifying a candidate, the returning officer must show "cogent, clear and compelling" evidence he/she would not uphold the Basic Law and give him/her a "reasonable opportunity" to respond to any concerns raised.

What was alarming in the High Court's (2018) landmark ruling was that, according to existing law, returning officers had the legal authority to bar candidates because of their political views and beliefs, and that what candidates had said, written, posted, or done in the past could be used to deny them their right to stand for election. In the case of Andy Chan, his returning officer disqualified him based on news reports about him and the Hong Kong National Party, and videos and comments both had posted on social media stating election to the Legislative Council was the first step toward achieving Hong Kong independence and abolishing the Basic Law. However, the Hong Kong Bar Association (2018) rightly criticized the process of inquiring into candidates' personal/political beliefs for being a "political screening process," and a "closed door" exercise that was not regulated by a "fair, open, certain and clear procedure." It argued requiring candidates to uphold the Basic Law was too "vague and imprecise a political concept" to be interpreted and administrated by returning officers (who are civil servants). However, this was not the issue the High Court dealt with in Chan's petition.

The Hong Kong Bar Association's strong objections notwithstanding, the confirmation form arguably offers the Hong Kong government a double layer of safety by listing specific Basic Law provisions candidates must support. The government can not only use the form to bar pro-independence candidates from standing for election, it can also use it to prosecute any successful candidate who later violates

these provisions during his/her tenure for making false declaration and ask the court to disqualify him/her. This can be seen as a form of censorship in political election.

Disqualification of Pro-independence Lawmakers

Despite winning seats in the 2016–2020 legislature, Baggio Leung and Wai-ching Yau from the Youngspiration and Nathan Law from Demosisto, together with three other pan-democratic lawmakers, were disqualified for improperly taking their oath of office at the 18 October 2016 swearing-in ceremony, before the 2016–2020 legislative session. According to the Court of Final Appeal's (2017) judgement, before the beginning of their oath-taking, Leung declared in public his determination to safeguard the interests of, while Yau pledged loyalty to, the Hong Kong nation (*xianggang minzu*). At the oath-taking, each used the term "Hong Kong nation," displayed a banner reading "Hong Kong is not China," and three consecutive times mispronounced the word "China" as "Sheen-na"—a Japanese term for China seen as pejorative by Chinese people. Yau thrice used an obscene word ("Ref-cking") in place of "Republic" when referring to the People's Republic of China. Nathan Law and three pan-democratic lawmakers also made alterations to their oaths. The Legislative Council's president declared Leung's and Yau's oaths were invalid, but permitted them to be retaken at the next session, on 19 October 2016; the oaths of the other four lawmakers were deemed valid.

However, on 18 October 2016, the HKSARCE and the Secretary for Justice sought judicial relief from the Court of First Instance to prevent the Legislative Council from re-administering the oath to Leung and Yau. After the hearing, but before the court rendered its verdict, the NPCSC (2016), as mentioned in Chap. 2, exercised its power to interpret the Basic Law's Article 104, and stipulated oath-taking must comply with the form and content prescribed by law, without alterations. Specifically, it ruled oath takers must swear solemnly and sincerely, read out the oath accurately and completely, and solemnly accept the content thereof, including phrases related to upholding the Basic Law and pledging loyalty to the HKSAR; otherwise, the oath is invalid, and the oath taker is disqualified from office. It further stipulated that no re-administration of an oath could be arranged. After the NPCSC published its interpretation, the Court of First Instance released a ruling disqualifying Leung and Yau, which it claimed had been made independent of the NPCSC's interpretation (Court of Final Appeal, 2017). Despite the court's clarification, the NPCSC's interpretation was seen as an intervention into the court process, and was criticized by the Hong Kong Bar Association (2016) as "a severe blow to the independence of the judiciary and the power of final adjudication of the Hong Kong court."

The Hong Kong government also used judicial review to successfully disqualify Nathan Law of Demosisto and the three pan-democratic lawmakers who did not closely follow the format and content of the oath during their oath-taking. As a result, the Hong Kong government outlawed six lawmakers, costing the pan-democratic camp its key minority status (i.e., one-third of all seats) in the Legislative Council,

and allowing the pro-establishment camp to amend the Legislative Council's (2018b) Rules of Procedure to restrict the pan-democratic camp's ability to filibuster controversial government proposals and bills and to pass the controversial bill on the joint checkpoint for cross-border high-speed link at West Kowloon (Lo, 2018).

Moreover, in the resulting by-elections, held in March 2018, the Hong Kong government continued to use returning officers' newly legitimized legal authority to invalidate the candidacies of pro-independence hopefuls, including Demosisto's Agnes Chow. In January 2018, while still an HKBU student, Chow submitted her signed nomination and confirmation forms; moreover, to prevent the government from challenging her eligibility, Demosisto removed striving for self-determination from its manifesto. Despite this, however, Chow's returning officer disqualified her, citing her affiliation with Demosisto, which had previously advocated democratic self-determination for Hong Kong and had listed Hong Kong's independence as a viable future option, and her past speeches on self-determination (Cheung, 2018). This was more restrictive than the treatment afforded her party chairman, Nathan Law, who had been allowed to stand for and win a seat in the 2016 Legislative Council election.

The Hong Kong government's different treatments of Nathan Law in 2016 and Agnes Chow in 2018 clearly suggest it has shifted its position, and now equates advocating Hong Kong's self-determination with promoting independence. In May 2018, Chow made an election petition to the High Court, on the grounds that, contrary to its ruling in the Chan case, she had not been given an opportunity to explain herself before her returning officer decided to invalidate her candidacy (Cheung, 2018). It remains to be seen whether Chow will win the appeal.

Moreover, the Hong Kong government has extended the strategy of disqualification to the lowest level of election. In early December 2018, Eddie Chu, an elected member of the Legislative Council legislator seeking a rural seat to represent his village, pledged his allegiance to the Basic Law and HKSAR and declared he did not support Hong Kong independence to his returning officer; however, the returning officer posed additional questions concerning his views on Hong Kong independence and self-determination and, based on Chu's answers, ruled that he had "implicitly" supported a 2016 joint statement of self-determination, and therefore disqualified him from running in the election (Hong Kong Government, 2018a). Chu became the tenth person to be disqualified for political reasons. Despite this, the Hong Kong government has not sought to remove Chu from the Legislative Council, probably because his legislature tenure expires in 2020, and it would take longer than that to remove him using judicial means. However, Chu's disqualification in the rural election suggests he would also be disqualified if he were to seek reelection to the Legislative Council in 2020.

All this suggests the Hong Kong government's disqualification strategy has become a convenient administrative means by which to preemptively block aspirants with officially unacceptable political stances from seeking election at various levels. While the government has repeatedly stated such disqualification is not political censorship, as disqualified aspirants could file a judicial petition, would-be 2018 candidates (e.g., Agnes Chow) were still effectively deprived of their right to run in Legislative Council by-elections and rural elections, due to their political beliefs and positions.

Development of Advocacy for Hong Kong Independence on University Campuses

The tussle between localist youths and local authorities over the issue of Hong Kong independence soon spread to university campuses. Following Occupy Central, the increased advocacy for Hong Kong independence in society was paralleled by the rise of pro-independence voices on university campuses. Occupy Central had increased university students' social and political awareness (as examined in Chap. 5) and was a catalyst for the growth in the number of university students and student unions who questioned and discussed Hong Kong's political future under the Chinese rule, on campus. Localist youth groups and university students were not totally separate; however, a number of students had dual identities; Nathan Law, for example, was both an active LU student leader and chairman of Demosisto.

Pro-independence students constructed a pro-independence localist ideology and proposed how to turn Hong Kong into an autonomous state after 2047. Controversies over the display of independence banners and slogans at different universities and the Putonghua course at HKBU revealed university students and student unions had a weak identification with mainland China, but a strong tendency to defend advocates of Hong Kong independence. This led to conflicts on multiple levels, with universities, government, and pro-establishment forces all condemning students' defense of the display of independence slogans as a breach of both Hong Kong law and the Basic Law.

Shift in University Students' Focus in Striving for Hong Kong Future

Like pro-independent localists, after Occupy Central, many university students concerned for Hong Kong's future began to change their focus from attaining genuine universal suffrage to exploring independence. They found the "one country and two systems" framework unworkable and did not believe simply changing the HKSARCE would ensure implementation of a better framework. Above all, they did not feel Occupy Central, in which the HKFS had taken a leading role, had advanced the democratic movement, and many urged their student unions to withdraw from the HKFS to protest its failure. In 2015, student unions at four UGC-funded universities—HKU, PolyU, CityU, and HKBU—voted to withdraw from the HKFS. The withdrawal was a severe blow to the HKFS and reduced its membership from seven student unions to four (CUHK, HKUST, LU, and private Hong Kong Shue Yan University). As the HKFS (2016) acknowledged, students' reasons for demanding withdrawal included the adverse impact of Occupy Central, severe divisions in society, and the HKFS's internal organizational problems.

Moreover, many university students began to adopt a hostile attitude toward the central authorities and distanced themselves from issues related to mainland China.

After Occupy Central, seven student unions, including those of HKU and CUHK, gradually stopped participating in the annual 4 June night vigil commemorating China's violent suppression of the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident. Since 1989, these annual vigils had been staged by the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China (2017), whose operational goals included releasing dissidents in mainland China, rehabilitating the 1989 pro-democracy movement, demanding accountability for the June 4 massacre, ending one-party (CPC) dictatorship, and building a democratic China. One of the Alliance's founding partners was the HKFS, and both it and individual university student unions had been strong supporters ever since. Now, however, student unions increasingly considered the 1989 incident too remote from their current membership, felt Hong Kong people had no obligation to venerate a mainland incident, and questioned why it was necessary to fight for democracy elsewhere before attaining it in Hong Kong (Tsang, 2018). In 2015, these student unions began not only to avoid in the annual vigil, but to organize competing localist forums on their own campuses. In 2016, the HKFS decided it should not be a member of any political group and withdrew from both the Alliance and the Civil Human Rights Front—organizers of the annual 1 July rally since 2003. Many student activists, as shown in the next sections, began to accept and promote the ideas of Hong Kong's self-determination or independence, instead.

The Rise and Fermentation of Pro-independence Voices on Campus

As it became a growing force in society, the ideology of pro-independence localism began to be conceptualized and spread on campuses. Although other student unions' magazines (e.g., CUHK Student Union's *Chinese University Student Press* and the HKBU Students' Union's *Jumbo*) also discussed Hong Kong independence, *Undergrad* of the HKU Students' Union led the way. As mentioned in Chap. 6, *Undergrad* was singled out and criticized by then-HKSARCE C. Y. Leung, in his 2015 policy address, for promoting Hong Kong independence.

A review of the themes and cover stories from different *Undergrad* issues between 2014 and 2018 (available from: https://issuu.com/undergrad2014) reveals its constantly changing editorial team's frustration with the local and central governments' governance of Hong Kong, and their hope for Hong Kong's eventual independence. Examples of such themes include *2046 the end of Hong Kong* (April 2014); *Democratic Independence of Hong Kong* (September 2014); *Self-determination of the Future by the Generation of Umbrella Movement (Occupy Central)* (January 2015); *The Beauty and Sadness of the City* (February 2015); *New Nation Movement of Hong Kong* (August 2015); *The Collapse of Imperial Empire and Decolonization of Hong Kong* (August 2016); *Entrapment of Hong Kong in the Communist Rule* (August 2017), *Goodbye Hong Kong* (March 2018), and *City about to Die* (August 2018), which, to some extent, is similar to the June 1995 *Fortune* article, The Death of

Hong Kong. In its latest issue, the *Undergrad* Editorial Board (2018) called the Hong Kong independence movement "righteous" and argued that sacrifice was needed in the pursuit of freedom. It also explored who would bear responsibility for a Hong Kong war of independence and urged independence advocates to reflect on whether their proposed means of achieving Hong Kong independence were as righteous as their goals.

Despite being criticized for promoting Hong Kong independence, these issues represent HKU students' systematic, rational discussion of Hong Kong's political future. In its 2014 February issue (*Hong Kong Nation and Self-determination*, which was specifically criticized by then-HKSARCE C. Y. Leung) , Undergrad (2014a) explored the meaning and development of localism in Hong Kong, and the city's political future. Specifically, it encouraged Hong Kong people to stand united in resisting communist rule, urged them to make a clear boundary between Hong Kong and China, and safeguard Hong Kong's interests, and promoted localism and self-determination as paths for Hong Kong's political future.

In rebuttal to HKSARCE Leung's criticism, in March 2016, the Undergrad Editorial Team (2016) issued an issue entitled *Hong Kong Youth's Declaration*, which proposed turning Hong Kong into a sovereign state with its own government and constitution. It expressed that many Hong Kong youths were dissatisfied with the economic, social, cultural, and political developments in Hong Kong since its handover to China, argued that only Hong Kong people could decide the future of Hong Kong when the Basic Law expires in 2047, and urged that the future of Hong Kong be renegotiated. It made three political demands; specifically, that Hong Kong should: (1) become a sovereign state recognized by the United Nations in 2047, (2) establish its own democratic government, and (3) have its own constitution, drafted and ratified entirely by Hong Kong people. This issue also included articles on such radicals as Edward Leung of Hong Kong Indigenous and the two disqualified lawmakers from Youngspiration, and the contributions made by others who advocated either self-determination or independence for Hong Kong.

Pro-independence ideas were not esoteric concepts limited to student leaders and activists, they were also attractive ideas to ordinary students. Before and after Occupy Central, *Undergrad* surveyed HKU students' perceptions of Hong Kong's future, with sample sizes of 282 in 2014, 569 in 2015, and 385 in 2016 (Undergrad, 2014b, 2015, 2016) (Table 7.1). These surveys, while too small to be representative students of HKU or other UGC-funded universities and private tertiary institutions, suggest a trend in students' perceptions of Chinese rule, and Hong Kong's place in China.

Specifically, the results show that, after Occupy Central, the percentage of responding HKU students who had faith in the "one country, two systems" principle dropped significantly and continuously, while that of students who believed Hong Kong could become an independent state rose at a roughly comparable rate. In the 2016 survey, 62% of responding students indicated it was impossible for Hong Kong to enjoy genuine democracy under the current "one country, two systems" framework. A law student of HKU, Chiu (2018) even argued that the Basic Law has failed democracy and Hong Kong people, and that Hong Kong therefore needed a

Table 7.1 Percentages of HKU students' responses in survey about Hong Kong's future

	2014 (N = 282) (%)	2015 (N = 569) (%)	2016 (N = 385) (%)
Hong Kong's best political future is …			
Maintaining "one country, two systems"	68	53	43
Hong Kong becoming an independent state	15	28	41
If a referendum takes place tomorrow on "Hong Kong should become an independent state, and the result would not be accepted by Beijing," what would you choose?			
Yes	37	54	61
No	43	28	31

Note From Undergrad of HKU Students' Union (2014b, 2015, 2016)

new constitution. He further explained that, under the Basic Law, Hong Kong would never achieve genuine democracy because its terms are "undemocratic," and Hong Kong people have "no real means" to amend it, challenge the NPCSC's Basic Law interpretations, or check the central authorities' power over Hong Kong. Students' level of political pessimism mirrored that of many in the larger Hong Kong community, per the 2017 and 2018 Path of Democracy surveys (see Chap. 2, Table 2.1).

The Display of Hong Kong Independence Slogans on University Campuses

The desire of many university students, student leaders, and activists for greater autonomy in Hong Kong was further reflected in their defense of the displaying of Hong Kong independence slogans on campus. Early in September 2017, banners and posters advocating Hong Kong independence mysteriously began to appear on university campuses, raising alarm in the Hong Kong government. This was not the first time such banners had turn up on campus. On 1 October 2016 (China's national day), independence banners and posters appeared for a few short hours on the campuses of eight UGC-funded universities and seven other tertiary institutions. They were quickly removed by university authorities and the issue quickly subsided. At the beginning of academic year 2017, however, when independence banners and posters reappeared on numerous campuses (including CUHK, CityU, EDUHK, PolyU, HKU, HKUST, and Hong Kong Shue Yan University), the row

lasted nearly 20 days and drew conspicuous attention from the media, local community, and the Hong Kong government.

The controversy was most serious at CUHK and EDUHK. At CUHK, independence banners and leaflets were displayed in several places on campus on the first day of the academic year (4 September 2017), but were quickly removed. One day later, a giant, black independence banner was hung in an open space in the Cultural Plaza and independence posters (reading "Fight for the Homeland (Hong Kong), Fight for Hong Kong Independence") filled the democracy wall—a CUHK Student Union-managed bulletin board on which students could freely express and share their views. Students required permission to display banners, but the student union had not received any such application. Some student union members protected the banner and posters against removal by the university management.

At EDUHK, the students' union itself, rather than anonymous students, displayed a pro-independence large banner and related posters in areas it controlled on campus, as a show of support for its CUHK counterpart (EDUHK Students' Union, 2017). On 8 September 2017, the controversy took a dark turn, when remarks appeared on democracy walls of EDUHK and CityU "congratulating" the newly appointed undersecretary for education on losing her son who had committed suicide the previous day. This lack of empathy was criticized for overstepping the boundaries of social and moral norms in a manner that should not be tolerated in civilized society in general, nor on university campuses in particular.

The independence banner controversy resulted in students being confronted on several fronts. First, the row sparked a direct confrontation between university management and students, particularly student unions. In CUHK, the university authority urged the CUHK Student Union to remove the independence banner, as it constituted a breach of Hong Kong law and went against university policy, which opposed Hong Kong independence (Ming Pao Reporter, 2017). The student union resisted what it called the university's self-censorship and allegiance to the authorities, and offers to negotiate a settlement (Ming Pao Editor, 2017). On 21 September 2017, however, the university issued an ultimatum, and the students' union removed the banner hanging in CUHK's Cultural Plaza. In EDUHK, university authorities quickly removed the banner, posters, and related materials without informing its student union. The student unions of both CUHK and EDUHK criticized their universities' infringement on their governance, and called the removals a form of self-censorship (Ming Pao Reporter, 2017).

Second, the row initiated an open and direct confrontation between local and mainland students. On 4 September 2017, in a protest against Hong Kong independence, a female mainland student tore some independence posters from the democracy wall, but was confronted by students' union members on duty to protect the banner and posters (Cheung, 2017). She insisted independence slogans should not appear on campus, but was urged to use her own posters to express her stance, instead of tearing down those with which she did not agree. Similar actions by a Putonghua-speaking mainland student were recorded on EDUHK campus (Cheung, 2017), and at CUHK, on 7 September 2017, about 50 mainland students protested against CUHK Student Union, claiming its views were not representative of all CUHK students. They cov-

ered some independence posters with anti-independence posters, with such slogans as "The fall of Hong Kong begins with Hong Kong independence" and "Hong Kong independence is not democracy."

Third, the independence slogans led to on-campus confrontations between CUHK Student Union members and off-campus pro-establishment groups. On 7 September 2017, about 10 members of a pro-establishment group, Cherish Hong Kong Democracy and Freedom, came to CUHK to support anti-independence mainland students, and quarreled with CUHK Student Union members (Zhou & Ji, 2017). The group displayed a large, Chinese-language banner stating Hong Kong independence was poisonous, that independence and splitting from China should be opposed, and that university authorities should expel students who advocated Hong Kong independence. On 8 September, it and other pro-establishment groups went to EDUHK to protest students' promoting Hong Kong independence and posting offensive remarks about the death of an education undersecretary's son. On 17 September 2017, another radical pro-establishment group, Caring Hong Kong Power (established in 2011), protested against pro-independence students in front of CUHK's democracy wall, and used a big poster reading, "Here is China" to cover some independence posters.

Fourth, the displays invited external condemnation from pro-establishment media and forces and the Hong Kong government, in particular. After the first display, on 4 September 2017, two pro-establishment newspapers, *Weiwenpo* and *Takungpo*, began to severely criticize student unions for breaching the Basic Law, and urged universities to ban such displays on campus. On 8 September 2017, the Hong Kong government also issued a very strong response, with HKSARCE Carrie Lam publicly condemning the posting of "extremely callous and insulting" and "entirely disrespectful" remarks targeting the undersecretary for education (Hong Kong Government, 2017). She also revealed she had expressed her "deep concern on this matter" to the EDUHK's VC, and had urged the university administration to "take appropriate action as soon as possible" regarding the displays. Additionally, on 11 September 2017, 39 pro-establishment lawmakers sent a joint letter to the Secretary for Education, urging the Hong Kong government to deal seriously with independence slogans on university campuses, and to help universities prevent students from being used to promote Hong Kong independence. All these condemnations provoked a strong student reaction, and on 10 September 2017, the student unions of 13 higher education institutions (including seven UGC-funded universities) issued a joint statement accusing the Hong Kong government of "exerting pressure on universities authorities to punish" students whose speech might have threatened those in power (Student Unions of Higher Institutions, 2017).

In response to social pressure, various VCs made individual statements reasserting the importance of free speech and their university's stance against Hong Kong independence. However, these individual responses neither deterred pro-independence students nor satisfied anti-independence forces. About a week after the HKSARCE's public condemnation, on 16 September 2017, the heads of ten universities (including eight UGC-funded universities, Open University of Hong Kong, and Hong Kong Shue Yan University) issued the following joint statement disapproving of Hong Kong independence:

> We treasure freedom of expression, but we condemn its recent abuses. Freedom of expression is not absolute, and like all freedoms it comes with responsibilities. All universities undersigned agree that we do not support Hong Kong independence, which contravenes the Basic Law. (Heads of Universities, 2017)

It is unclear whether the Hong Kong government worked behind the scenes to exert pressure on the universities or their heads voluntarily issued the statement. Either way, the statement toed the local and central governments' political line that the promotion of Hong Kong independence contravenes the Basic Law. In response, 12 students' unions from public and private higher education institutions criticized the 10 university heads for misleading the public, and insisted teachers and students should have the freedom of speech to discuss Hong Kong independence, as promised in the Basic Law's Article 27 (Students' Unions of Higher Institutions, 2017). Until the last independence banner was removed (from CUHK campus), top government officials and pro-establishment media and forces frequently used the statement to criticize pro-independence students for their promotion of independence on university campuses.

Similar bans also appeared on secondary school campuses. On 5 April 2016, a group of roughly 60 secondary students founded Studentlocalism, whose stated political mission was to protect localism (*hanwai bentu xuesheng shiming*) (Studentlocalism, 2016). Specifically, it advocated preparing Hong Kong for independence, and attempted to extend the discussion from university campuses to Hong Kong's secondary schools. By September 2016, students of at least 56 schools (over 10% of all secondary schools in Hong Kong), including Wah Yan College (Hong Kong Island and Kowloon), Ying Wa College, Diocesan Boys' School, and La Salle College indicated they would try to establish similar concern groups on their campuses (Lam & Cheung, 2016). Studentlocalism's goal was to establish concern groups in at least 200 schools. However, the Education Bureau declared "no pro-independence advocacy or activities should appear in schools … and any organisation which serves to promote independence must be banned" (Lam & Cheung, 2016). Then-HKSARCE C. Y. Leung repeatedly said there was no space for such discussion in schools or on school campuses—a view strongly supported by pro-establishment forces.

The condemnation by government officials and others in power of students' advocacy for Hong Kong independence neither calmed students nor made the controversy subside. On the contrary, it reinforced students' and young people's hostility toward the government and triggered them to make unnecessarily incendiary comments (e.g., concerning the suicide of education undersecretary's son) in lieu of rationally seeking support for their rights.

What is more serious is that they began to build up resistance to integration with mainland China, and a willingness to distance themselves from national identification with China. The withdrawal of university student unions and HKFS from the annual 4 June candlelight vigil and the annual 1 July March illustrates university students' lack of interest in mainland China's affairs and future, while their promotion and defense of pro-independence slogans and banners on campus reflect their categorical rejection of China's national identity.

The Controversy of Passing Putonghua as a University Graduation Requirement

University students' disinterest in mainland Chinese affairs and issues was further manifested in their demands for the review or even abolition of university policies making passing a mandatory course on Putonghua (the official common oral language of mainland China) a graduation requirement—despite Hong Kong's main local dialect being Cantonese. Like all other languages (Wright, 2004), both Putonghua and Cantonese have communicative and identity functions. On the surface, students' wanting the Putonghua policy reviewed or eliminated is about the inconvenience of having an additional graduation requirement, and the lack of necessity of Putonghua proficiency for university graduates in Hong Kong. In the post-Occupy Central context, however, this controversy can be interpreted as an extension of pro-independence localism to the language arena in university curricula, as a means of resisting national identity and reinforcing Hong Kong people's awareness of the need to protect their local language and culture. In other words, the Putonghua controversy is related more to students' strong sense of pro-independence localism and low sense of national identification with China, than to the communicative and economic importance of Putonghua. To understand the issue, it is important to understand the controversy surrounding the promotion of learning Putonghua in the broader context of Hong Kong.

The rising importance of Putonghua in society and education. Since Hong Kong's 1997 return to Chinese sovereignty, Putonghua has become increasingly important in education and society at large. In the first year after the HKSAR's establishment, the Hong Kong government introduced a general language policy stressing biliteracy and trilingualism (i.e., written proficiency in both Chinese and English, and oral proficiency in English, Cantonese, and Putonghua). This indicated a change from the colonial era's bipartite division between English and Chinese, to a tripartite structure with English as an international (rather than colonial) language, Putonghua as a national oral language shared with the rest of China, and Cantonese as a common local dialect (Law, 2004). In 1998, immediately after the handover, Putonghua became an important subject in primary and secondary education (Curriculum Development Council, 1997); by comparison, it had (since 1984) been offered by the colonial administration as an elective only, with a view to preparing Hong Kong people for the handover (Leung & Hui, 2011).

In Hong Kong, learning and mastering Putonghua is important for two main reasons. First, Putonghua is an important oral language of communication. Hong Kong's Putonghua syllabus emphasizes the importance of mastering Putonghua because it is the common language for all 56 ethnic groups in China (Curriculum Development Council, 1997, 2017). Because of the influx of mainland tourists to Hong Kong since 2003, Putonghua proficiency has become essential in the service and retail industries, particularly in tourist areas, and among those Hong Kong people who must interact with economic and political elites in mainland China (such as Hong Kong delegates to the NPC and CPPCC). Moreover, Putonghua has global economic value (Davison

& Lai, 2007), and is one of six working oral languages at the United Nations. In 2008, the United Nations also replaced traditional Chinese characters (used in Hong Kong and Taiwan) with simplified Chinese characters (used in mainland China) in its official documents.

Second, Putonghua is associated with Hong Kong people's Chinese national identity. The Hong Kong's Curriculum Development Council (1997, 2017) acknowledged that learning Putonghua could strengthen students' affiliation to and identification with Chinese Culture. China's Ministry of Education (2016) even considered learning Putonghua and simplified Chinese characters a part of its nation-wide patriotic education for Hong Kong people.

The Hong Kong government has also sought to promote using Putonghua as the medium of instruction in Chinese Language classes. In the 2002 *Chinese Language Education Curriculum Guide*, the Curriculum Development Council (2002) clearly defined Cantonese and Putonghua as oral Chinese languages for students to learn in Chinese Language lessons, but stressed students' need to be able to speak and understand Putonghua to benefit from increasingly frequent exchanges with mainland China, and to recognize and read simplified Chinese characters to enlarge the range of their reading. The Council also identified the use of Putonghua as the medium of instruction in Chinese language education as a long-term goal. Such a policy does not contravene the Basic Law, because it allows Hong Kong to keep its original policies (including medium of instruction), while at the same time sensibly permitting them to be developed and improved as necessary (NPC, 1990, Article 136). In 2008, the Hong Kong government earmarked HK$200 million to support schools' use of Putonghua to teach Chinese Language for 3 years and began to arrange for 20 teaching experts from mainland China to come to Hong Kong schools to offer advice and help.

As a result, the percentages of primary schools and secondary schools using Putonghua to teach the Chinese Language subject at all or some class levels increased from 55.5% and 31.8% in 2008/09, to 71.7% and 36.9% in 2015/16, respectively (Education Bureau, 2016). However, further breakdown shows that, in 2015–16, the percentages of primary and secondary schools using Putonghua in at least 50% of lesson time at all grade levels and in all classes were only 16.4% and 2.5%, respectively. Despite this, the Education Bureau (2015) reiterated the Curriculum Development Council's position that using Putonghua to teach and learn Chinese language is "a long-term development target of the Chinese Language curriculum."

One strong argument in support of using Putonghua to teach Chinese language is that it could enhance the standard of Hong Kong students' Chinese language reading and writing (Ma, 2018). Interestingly, an academic study by the Hong Kong Institute of Education (2015) (now renamed EDUHK) found no conspicuous evidence supporting this claim, but did find evidence that the use of Putonghua could be a barrier to students in class discussions. Based on this study, the Director of the Audit Commission (2017) criticized the Education Bureau and cast doubt on its Putonghua policy. In response, the Education Bureau (2018) admitted that using either Cantonese or Putonghua would raise students' Chinese reading ability equally, and that there was "no clear correlation" between students' reading performance and

whether their school had adopted Putonghua as a medium of instruction for Chinese Language.

Resistance to Putonghua and debate on language and identity. Despite its economic and sociopolitical importance, in the early 2010s, public resistance to Putonghua and its use as a medium of instruction began to emerge, coupled with calls for the protection of the legal status of Cantonese. Underlying this language issue was the struggle between Hong Kong people's local (Hong Kong) and national identities, of which language is an integral part. Putonghua and Cantonese embody different cultures and represent different levels of identity; Putonghua carries the culture of mainland China and is an important mark of Chinese national identity, whereas Cantonese carries a specific local culture and the essential characteristics of a local identity. While the two cultures or identities can be seen as supplementary to each other in the formation and development of Hong Kong people's multiple (local, national, and global) identities, in the context of Hong Kong's independence movement, they are seen by pro-independence localist groups as mutually exclusive and incompatible.

The Putonghua–Cantonese and national–local identity struggles are fully reflected in the controversy over the Education Bureau's remarks about the status of Cantonese in China. In January 2014, the Education Bureau, on its language learning support webpage, posted an note describing Cantonese as a Chinese dialect, but not an official language; facing severe criticism (Ma, 2018), the note was quickly removed, but not before it triggered a debate about the status of Cantonese in Hong Kong, where about 90% of the population are Cantonese speakers. Supporters of the Education Bureau contended that Putonghua is an official language in Hong Kong related to loving China and loving Hong Kong, and that its use can raise students' Chinese proficiency, particularly their Chinese writing abilities (Ma, 2018). Critics of the Education Bureau (e.g., Cheng & Pang, 2014) argued it was tragic to use Putonghua to teach Chinese language in Hong Kong. They insisted Cantonese is an official oral language that should be protected and safeguarded.

The Putonghua/Cantonese and local/national identity dichotomies can also be seen in public demonstrations. In the 1 July March of 2010, the author saw, for the first time, groups of young people waving banners and placards, stating "Safeguard Cantonese and Resist the Use of Putonghua as the Medium of Instruction (PMI) in Chinese Language Subject." Similar anti-Putonghua slogans appeared in subsequent 1 July marches. The 2018 March included such slogans as "PMI, a Wrong Way," "Use Cantonese in HK (Hong Kong)," and "CMI (Cantonese as the medium of instruction), the Right Way."

Some young people formed groups to protect Cantonese as mark of their local identity, and denounced Putonghua as their national language and identity. A representative group was the Societas Linguistica Hongkongensis (SLH), established in 2013. Per its Facebook page, SLH (2018) regards Putonghua as a "foreign" language, like English. It states its mission is to safeguard the right of Hong Kong people to learn and use Cantonese and traditional Chinese characters, and to inherit and promote the local Hong Kong culture embedded in Cantonese. It supports the use of Cantonese as the medium of instruction in Chinese language education, and

encourages non-Cantonese speaking people to integrate into Hong Kong society by learning Cantonese. From 2014–15, the SLH conducted annual surveys to find out which primary or secondary schools used Putonghua to teach Chinese language, and their geographic distribution. It worried that, if more schools and families were to replace Cantonese with Putonghua as a main medium of communication, Cantonese and its embedded Hong Kong culture would gradually disappear. The SLH's founder, Lok-hang Chan, a fourth-year student at HKBU, presented the findings of the society's annual Putonghua survey in January 2018, and later participated in the storming of HKBU's Language Center.

Anti-Putonghua Course Campaigns in HKUST and HKBU. In higher education, Putonghua is considered an important second language to English. Since 1997, five (of eight) UGC-funded universities have made Putonghua either a mandatory course or a graduation requirement, including EDUHK (applicable to students majoring in Chinese language education), HKBU (one mandatory three-credit Putonghua course, since 2007), HKUST (one mandatory three-credit course in Chinese Communication), LU (two mandatory three-credit courses in practical Chinese), and PolyU (one mandatory three-credit Chinese language and communication course, taught in Putonghua). This language requirement is expected to equip students with good Putonghua proficiency, facilitate their communication, and exchanges with Putonghua speakers in mainland China and elsewhere, and help them find jobs, particularly in mainland China. Moreover, good Putonghua proficiency could help Hong Kong's local students communicate with mainland academics (who are good at neither English nor Cantonese) and mainland students, who (as presented in Chap. 3) account for nearly 80% of all nonlocal students in UGC-funded programs in Hong Kong's eight public universities. After Occupy Central, university students began to question the necessity of making Putonghua a graduation requirement, and the HKUST and HKBU student unions launched campaigns urging universities to review their Putonghua policies and requirements.

In HKUST, local students and mainland students whose common oral language is Putonghua are required to pass a mandatory Chinese Communication course. In August 2015, HKUST students protested the Putonghua-only teaching of three mandatory Chinese Communication courses, complaining they were being put at a disadvantage compared to native-Putonghua-speaking mainland students, because all discussion and oral assessment were conducted in Putonghua. In March 2016, a group of HKUST students (named HKUST Cantonese, 2016) pushed for a referendum on the issue, accusing the university of not paying attention to their need to use Cantonese to learn in these courses. They did not oppose offering Putonghua-teaching Chinese Communication courses, but wanted the university to offer alternative courses using Cantonese as medium of instruction. They further argued that Cantonese is closely connected to their daily lives, and could be equally important as Putonghua in academic, social, and professional contexts. Between 8 and 10 November 2016, HKUST Students' Union polled students on the need for the university to provide alternative courses using Cantonese as the medium of instruction. As a result, beginning in the 2017–18 academic year, HKUST began to offer the courses in both Putonghua and Cantonese, and to exempt students from having to have the three

credits, under certain conditions. The matter was resolved without severe conflict between HKUST students and the university administration.

HKBU students' demonstrations against mandatory Putonghua courses, however, drew far wider public and mass media attention. Since 2007, HKBU (2018) required students to reach basic Putonghua proficiency by passing a three-credit Putonghua course before they could graduate. In an April 2016 poll, over 90% of responding HKBU students agreed this requirement should be scrapped. In June 2017, the HKBU Language Center responded by announcing it would exempt students who passed a Putonghua proficiency assessment examination from taking the Putonghua course. However, when the Language Center released the results of its first Putonghua assessment, on 10 January 2018, only 30% of the 345 candidates had passed the test (Chiu & Liu, 2018).

On 17 January 2018, HKBU Students' Union president Tsz-kei Lau and a group of about 20 students occupied the university's Language Center for nearly 8 hours, demanding an explanation of the low passing rates, and a release of the test's assessment criteria. In a letter clarifying the occupation, the HKBU Students' Union (2018) explained it had tried different means—including public letters, referenda, and senate meeting presentations—to have the university review its Putonghua requirement, and had only resorted to occupying the language center after having received no response. It respected students' freedom to take the Putonghua course, but did not understand why the course was mandatory.

During the standoff, the center's staff reportedly felt intimidated by some students' unruly behaviors and attitudes, including the use of foul language by the students' union president (Chiu & Liu, 2018). The standoff was filmed, and the online video clip went viral. On 24 January 2018, HKBU's VC Prof. Roland Chin suspended two student protesters—the students' union president and another student, Lok-hang Chan (SLH's founder). The students' union criticized the decision for creating a white terror on campus and organized an on-campus demonstration against it. About 200 HKBU students and staff, as well as students of other universities (including HKU, CUHK, CityU, and LU) participated in the protest, and forced the VC to lift the suspension temporarily. In early April 2018, after an internal disciplinary hearing, four students—Tsz-kei Lau (Year 1, social science, then-president of HKBU Students' Union), Lok-hang Chan (Year 4, Chinese Medicine), Wai-Lim Liu (then-student representative on the senate, Year 4), and Ho-yin Ho (Year 4, then-chief editor of *Jumbo*, the HKBU Students' Union's official magazine)—were disciplined for violating the university's code of student conduct, and required to apology to the Language Center; three of them also received class suspensions and/or were ordered to perform community service (Table 7.2).

The anti-Putonghua language requirement occupation in HKBU was complicated by the background of the student leaders in the standoff, and by HKBU students' conflicts with their university management and off-campus pro-establishment groups. First, three of the disciplined students were affiliated with groups with anti-mainland tendencies. On 24 March 2018 (before receiving the university's letter of discipline), Tsz-kei Lau, as HKBU Students' Union president, together with Wai-ching Yau of Youngspiration and Occupy Central cofounder Benny Tai attended a controversial

Table 7.2 Penalties given to the students who participated in HKBU's anti-Putonghua row

Student name	Class suspension	Community service	Apology letter
Tsz-kei Lau	1 semester	No	Yes
Lok-hang Chan	8 days	40 h	Yes
Wai-lim Liu	No	20 h	Yes
Ho-yin Ho		Unknown	Yes

Note Information collected by the author from different newspapers in Hong Kong

forum in Taiwan that was later condemned for promoting separatism in China (Taiwan Youth Anti-Communist Corps, 2018). Lok-hang Chan, founder of the SLH, claimed to be neither a localist nor an advocate of Hong Kong independence, but a culture conservationist dedicated to preserving and promoting Cantonese in the face of rising Putonghua usage in Hong Kong (Chiu, 2018). Per the website of pro-independence Demosisto, Wai-Lim Liu was a member of its standing committee in 2018. In his public apology to the Language Center (which actually mocked the HKBU administration), Liu (2018) admitted having been a social activist for 8 years as a member of first Scholarism and then Demosisto, and had participated in both the anti-national education movement and Occupy Central. He stated he joined Demosisto because he wanted to propose answers to questions about Hong Kong future.

Second, the controversy over the occupation was intensified and complicated by external forces. On the one hand, HKBU students got support from their counterparts at other universities (including HKU, CUHK, CityU, and LU), who joined their on-campus demonstration on 26 January 2018. The student unions of HKU and CUHK even issued a joint statement criticizing the HKBU administration's decision to suspend the two students without due process. Some students posted Chinese obscenities insulting HKBU's VC and his administration on the democracy walls of such universities as HKU, CUHK, and CityU. Similar to the "congratulatory" remarks on the death of an official's son, these insults were not tolerated. Moreover, the HKBU students who participated in the Language Center standoff, particularly the group's leaders, were severely criticized by outside media sources, including *People's Daily (Overseas Edition)* and *Global Times*, even before they received their internal disciplinary hearing (Dan, 2018; Nan, 2018). At home, Acting HKSARCE Matthew Cheung publicly condemned the students' improper behaviors and insulting words. Before the start of the HKBU students' demonstration, on 26 January 2018, the pro-establishment group Cherish Hong Kong Democracy and Freedom (which had earlier gone to CUHK to protest the appearance of independence messages) entered HKBU campus to support HKBU's VC's decision to suspend the two students, urged the VC to abolish the student union, and quarreled with students for about 20 min.

Third, the anti-Putonghua campaigns were more than a fight to abolish Putonghua proficiency as a graduation requirement; they were a struggle to preserve the distinctions between Hong Kong and mainland China. The state media, however, saw the fight as an expression of anti-mainland ideology in Hong Kong. In *People's Daily*, Nan (2018) criticized HKBU students for their shortsightedness while people in

different parts of the world were clamoring to learn Putonghua, and attributed the students' anti-Putonghua preoccupation to their default "opposing all things related to mainland China" (*feng neidi bi fan*). *Global Times* labeled Lok-hang Chan an advocate of Hong Kong independence, while *Global Times* commentator Dan (2018) described the occupation as an ideological confrontation in which a small number of Hong Kong students who had been corrupted by localist thoughts on campus to express anti-Putonghua emotions; Dan attributed the confrontation to the students' colonial mentality.

However, an associate dean of HKBU's Faculty of Arts, Prof. Lo (2018) criticized the argument for learning Putonghua as superficial patriotism. He rightly pointed out that, although their accent might differ from their Beijing counterparts', Hong Kong young people have better Putonghua proficiency than previous generations, because they start learning Putonghua in primary education. He further suggested that abolishing the Putonghua graduation requirement was the best option, as HKBU should trust its students to make good career planning choices and master Putonghua if needed. To Lo's disappointment, in June 2018, the HKBU senate recommended keeping the Putonghua requirement but allowing students to decide whether to include their Putonghua course results in calculating their cumulative grade point average.

Moreover, to students who resisted Putonghua as a graduation requirement, the linguistic distinction between Cantonese and Putonghua represented an identity distinction between "we" (Hong Kong) and "they" (mainland China), rather than between "local" (Hong Kong) and "national" (China). Dan's (2018) attribution of students' resistance to Putonghua as a colonial mentality was "accurate," but not in the way he intended it; in the colonial period, Hong Kong people had to learn their colonizer's language (English), and now they had to learn Putonghua—the language of their new sovereign overlords. This is reflected in Liu's (2018) apology letter, in which he expressed that the language graduation requirement was to help China unify its national language policy. His thinking is in line with that of his political group, Demosisto (2018), which rejects Chinese as Hongkongers' national identity.

In Hong Kong, Cantonese, English, and Putonghua are major oral languages in both education and society. They serve different but complementary functions within and without Hong Kong, and have different levels of local, national, and global economic and sociopolitical significance. Whether in oral and/or written form, different languages represent different but not necessarily mutually exclusive identities. While the final results of the anti-Putonghua campaigns at HKBU and HKUST are not yet known, they have revealed a significant clash between local and national identities, and many Hong Kong people's strong preference for keeping their Hong Kong language, culture, and identity, rather than adopting those of the mainland under the "one country, two systems" principle.

The above sections, however, point to a larger issue. If pro-independence advocacy is not tolerated in political elections or by the establishment, and the display of pro-independence banners and slogans on campuses is banned, will pro-independence speeches and/or research by academics be tolerated and protected in higher education, under the umbrella of academic freedom? This is the focus of the next section.

Controversy Over Benny Tai's Speech on Hong Kong Future in Taiwan

In addition to being condemned for inciting Occupy Central, HKU law scholar Benny Tai was also severely criticized by the local and central governments and pro-establishment newspapers and forces for speaking about the futures of China and Hong Kong at a forum in Taiwan (i.e., outside of Hong Kong and mainland China). This controversy has revealed a political red line has been drawn regarding discussions about the future of China and Hong Kong by academics in public universities.

Benny Tai's View on the Futures of China and Hong Kong

Between July and December 2017, Benny Tai published a series of articles in a Chinese newspaper (*Hong Kong Economic Journal*) about the future of Hong Kong. In one, Tai (2017) proposed ten possible scenarios for China's future, ranging from the continuation of the CPC's totalitarian or authoritarian rule, to China splitting into different independent states to form a Chinese federation. He further remarked that no one could know which scenario was most nor least likely and reminded Hong Kong people that all they could do was to strengthen their self-consciousness of and ability for autonomy.

Tai's views drew little public attention in Hong Kong until he attended a forum hosted by the Taiwan Youth Anti-Communist Corps, in Taiwan, on 24–25 March 2018. The host group, which was seen by the Chinese government as promoting Taiwan independence, posted a video clip on YouTube that included a guest list and parts of some speeches given at the forum, including Tai's (Taiwan Youth Anti-Communist Corps, 2018). Other attendees from outside Taiwan included representatives of three groups criticized by the Chinese government for promoting independence in Tibet, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia, and such notable Hong Kong people as Emily Lau (former chairperson of the Democratic Party and former lawmaker), Wai-ching Yau (member of Youngspiration), a former deputy secretary of the HKFS, the then-presidents of two student unions (HKU and HKBU), and a former chairman of the CUHK Student Union. Per the video clip, when asked to conclude his speech, Tai remarked that, only after China ends its dictatorship and becomes a democratic nation, will various ethnic groups be able to exercise their right of self-determination; he further suggested Hong Kong could consider becoming an independent state member of a federated system or confederation, similar to the European Union. On 25 March 2016, two pro-Beijing and pro-establishment Hong Kong newspapers—*Takungpo* and *Wenweipo*—began to seriously criticize Tai for promoting Hong Kong independence (e.g., Takungpao Reporter, 2018; Wenweipo Reporter, 2018).

Waves of Political Attacks on Benny Tai's Independence Remarks

The newspaper attention given to his remarks led to Tai being severe condemned by various pro-establishment forces. First, a few days after he made the remarks, both the local and central authorities formally condemned Tai. On 30 March 2018, the Hong Kong government (2018b) issued a press statement that singled out Tai (ignoring other Hong Kong participants) and "strongly condemn[ed]" him, as "a university teaching staff member," for proposing Hong Kong "becoming an independent state." A week later (6 April 2018), HKSARCE Lam (2018) explicitly expressed that she and her administration considered Tai's speech to have been advocating Hong Kong independence, and that the government would set the record straight and ensure the public correctly understood the issue. As with the government response to the display of independence slogans on university campuses, she explained the government was in no way suppressed freedom of speech or academic freedom; rather, it was the responsibility of her administration to safeguard the national security, territorial integrity, and development interests of Hong Kong society. When asked, Lam declined to cite the specific law Tai had violated and said her administration had condemned Tai's views without taking legal action against him.

Stronger condemnation of Tai came from the central government, which considered the forum an arena for the collusion among five fractions of separatists who wanted to split China—advocates for Taiwanese, Tibetan, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolian, and Hong Kong independence, respectively. One day after the Hong Kong government's 30 March press statement, the State Council's Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office condemned Tai for colluding with external separatists to promote the construction of an independent Hong Kong state (Xinhua News Agency, 2018a). It asserted Tai's remarks had "severely violated China's Constitution and the Basic Law and related laws of Hong Kong," and had "challenged the bottom line of the principle of "one country, two systems." It further expressed that it "resolutely advocated and supported" Hong Kong government efforts to "regulate" any collusion between Hong Kong independence advocates and other separatist fractions as "safeguarding national sovereignty and security." Repeating the central government's positions, the Liaison Office emphasized that Hong Kong independence is a severe violation of the law, and that there was "no space for Hong Kong independence in China and the world, and there should be 'zero-tolerance' for Hong Kong independence among Hong Kong people and all Chinese people" (Xinhua News Agency, 2018b).

Following these condemnations by local and central authorities, local and state pro-establishment media launched a wave of political attacks on Tai. Between 27 March and 6 April, *Wenweipo* published six editorials accusing Tai of advocating Hong Kong independence, violating China's Constitution and Hong Kong's Basic Law, threatening national security, misleading young people, poisoning students' minds, and setting a time bomb by opposing China and creating chaos in Hong Kong (Wenweipo Editor, 2018b). They also urged the Hong Kong government to handle Tai's case in accordance to law, and demanded HKU "expel" Tai to safeguard its

reputation and protect its students from being poisoned by his views (Wenweipo Editor, 2018a).

On 2 April 2018, the state-run media joined the attack, with *People's Daily* accusing Tai of seeking overseas help to divide China and challenge the "one country, two systems" principle, and urged the HKSAR government to launch legal action against Tai as soon as possible (Wang, 2018). It further warned Hong Kong independence advocates that they "could not escape the penalty of law and history." A week later, *People's Daily* published an article accusing Tai of abusing academic freedom and freedom of speech in defense of his alleged advocacy for Hong Kong independence, and reminding HKU not to buck the tide of "mainstream" (i.e., pro-establishment) voices when deciding whether to dismiss Tai (Zhang, 2018).

Various local pro-establishment groups added fuel to the fire by creating and shaping public opinion against Tai. First, on 2 April 2018, 41 pro-establishment Hong Kong lawmakers issued a statement echoing the state's positions, and making accusations similar to those in the two pro-establishment newspapers (Legislative Council, 2018a). One lawmaker, Chow (2018), published a letter in a major English newspaper accusing Tai of "encouraging his students to learn the wrongful idea of Hong Kong independence," and contending that independence and separatism would lead to hatred, violence, bloodshed, and causalities. As such, Chow concluded, "Tai is no longer suitable for tenure at HKU" and urged HKU to take "appropriate action," without mentioning what it would be. Next, on 6 April 2018, various pro-establishment groups denounced Tai in *Weiweipo* and *Takungpo*, including the Hong Kong Hakka Association, Hong Kong CPPCC (Provincial) Members Association, and all Hong Kong delegates to the Beijing Municipal CPPCC and Shaanxi Provincial CPPCC. Finally, some pro-establishment groups went to HKU to protest on campus against Tai, and to urge HKU to dismiss him.

That was not the end of the saga, however. At a 24 May 2018 Legislative Council meeting, pro-establishment lawmakers introduced a motion to discuss the impacts of Tai's independence remarks on the interests of Hong Kong and China. As reflected in the Legislative Council's (2018a) Official Records of Proceedings, the "discussion" was a battle between the pro-establishment and pan-democratic camps over freedom of speech in society and academic freedom in universities. The pro-establishment camp insisted the Legislative Council needed to show its determination to defend the "one country, two systems" principle and oppose any views on Hong Kong independence. They accused Tai of promoting and spreading views on Hong Kong independence, and urged the Hong Kong government to enact the National Security Bill (which was shelved after triggering a 500,000-person demonstration in 2003) to curb the spread of the Hong Kong independence movement. One pro-establishment lawmaker even accused Tai of fostering the atmosphere that led to the 2016 Mongkok Riot and turning Hong Kong's streets into "rivers of blood." Another pro-establishment lawmaker urged the Education Bureau and HKU authority to follow up on Tai's remarks. In the meeting, the Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs condemned Benny Tai three times for his independence remarks, reiterated the position of the local and central authorities that there is no space for discussion about Hong

Kong independence, and restated that the Hong Kong government's condemnation of Tai has nothing to do with the suppression of free speech nor academic freedom.

Pan-democratic lawmakers defended Tai, stating he did not advocate Hong Kong independence, and asked the pro-establishment to respect academic freedom and freedom of speech. The Democratic Party chairman contended a diversity of views was normal for a society, and rational discussion was needed to address them (Legislative Council, 2018a). He further warned the Hong Kong government and pan-establishment forces that the more they sought to suppress independence issues, the more attractive they would become to young people. Some pan-democratic lawmakers tried to depict Tai's independence comments as minor, compared to past state leaders. They argued that, if pro-establishment lawmakers condemned Tai, they should also condemn PRC founder and former Chairman Zedong Mao, who in 1920 advocated splitting the Republic of China into 27 independent states, and President Jinping Xi's father, Zhongxun Xi, who suggested in 1979 that Guangdong Province would achieve more economically as an independent state, than as part of the PRC (Legislative Council, 2018a).

Benny Tai's Rebuttal

In response to repeated political condemnations and media attacks, Tai criticized the Hong Kong government and pro-establishment forces for singling him out. On his Facebook page, on 5 April 2018, Tai (2018a) posted a strongly worded demand for answers from the Hong Kong government to five questions: how did his speech in Taiwan advocate self-determination for Hong Kong; why did the government not give him a chance to explain his position before condemning him; why did the government not express its concerns when he earlier published similar views; why did the government politically target him in a serious official statement, and not others who had directly and explicitly advocated Hong Kong independence and self-determination; and what was the government's political reason for taking the extremely rare step of issuing a strong statement about a private citizen with neither official title nor political party affiliation. However, as an initiator and cofounder of Occupy Central, Tai was (and is) no longer seen merely as either a private citizen or an academic.

Moreover, Tai reasserted his views on Hong Kong independence. Although he was not invited to the 24 May 2018 Legislative Council meeting, Tai asked a pan-democratic lawmaker to read a statement on his behalf, which he posted to his Facebook after the meeting. In the statement, Tai (2018b) explicitly restated that he "does not support Hong Kong independence at all," but insisted Hong Kong people should have the right to discuss the issue without presumptions. He further questioned whether the Hong Kong government were drawing a political red line in society and academia, wanted to produce a chilling effect on people in discussions about Hong Kong's political future, and were paving the way to reintroduce the National Security

Bill, which could be used to sue people who advocated Hong Kong independence or challenged the CPC's leadership in China.

It remains to be seen whether the attacks on Benny Tai will have a chilling effect on Hong Kong academia, and whether the government's measures will prevent pro-independence activists from fielding candidates in future elections. However, higher education institutions have become a major arena in which pro-independence students have developed and exercised their independence advocacy, battling university administrations over freedom of speech, and expression concerning Hong Kong independence. Speeches and writings exploring China's political future, including separatism, have become politically sensitive. Will the central government officially draw a political red line on the independence issue? What tactics will the Hong Kong government use to curb the spread of independence ideas and activities in Hong Kong society and education (including higher education)? Will these anti-independence efforts silence pro-independence voices in Hong Kong society and on university campuses? All these will be examined in the next chapter.

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