Post-colonial perspectives on the ‘great tradition’: or, why the British model of university adult education flourishes in Hong Kong, but withered in England

John Holford, University of Nottingham, UK

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Half a century ago, British university adult education was at the zenith of its national and international influence. From the late 1940s to the mid-1960s, the number of university extra-mural departments, staff and classes in England grew steadily (Raybould 1951, 1964). Over the same period, extra-mural departments on the British pattern were established in the West Indies, many African countries, as well as in India, Malaya, Singapore and Hong Kong (Dutta 1986, Titmus 1995, Chiu & Cunich 2008). Fifty years on, the British extra-mural movement is effectively dead: few staff remain; the bulk of departments have closed; such courses as survive have a distinctly different character; once hotly-debated issues of identity and purpose are now mere nostalgia. In one former British colony, however, extra-mural departments developed on the ‘British model’ continue to prosper: the University of Hong Kong’s extra-mural department, for instance, reconfigured in 1992 as a School of Professional and Continuing Education, enrolled 111,708 students in 2005-06 (18,962 ‘full-time equivalent’ students) (Chiu & Cunich 2008, p. 256), and continues to grow. This paper seeks to throw light on the character, strengths and limitations of the ‘English’ extra-mural model of university adult education through a comparative study of England and Hong Kong.

Although sharing a common organisational model, and some similarities in approach, educational approaches in English and Hong Kong university adult education rapidly diverged, as did adult educators’ professional communities, ideals and identities. This reflected differential regulatory and financial arrangements; leadership and governance structures; and cultural, social and market contexts. In consequence, Hong Kong’s adult education was more responsive and attuned to the demands of ‘lifelong learning’ as it emerged in the 1990s. In contrast, the English extra-mural sector had by then lost momentum: ‘trapped in a local history’ (Duke 2008), it proved unable – or unwilling – to adapt to the vocationally-oriented curriculum demanded by late 20th century neo-liberal globalisation.
English University Adult Education

University extra-mural education in England emerged in the early twentieth century from the Workers' Educational Association’s critique of the University Extension movement (‘the average University Extension lecturer is decidedly middle-class in his outlook’ (J.M. Mactavish, quoted in Mansbridge 1913, p. 14). The first university to establish a department was Nottingham in 1920; by 1930, Exeter, Oxford, Cambridge, Hull, Southampton and Leicester had followed suit (Raybould 1951 pp. 126-127; Raybould, 1951). Their initial focus was the ‘tutorial class’, meeting for two hours weekly over three years, undertaking (uncertificated) work of ‘university standard’. Curriculum planning involved close collaboration with the WEA, through ‘joint committees’. Grant-aid from government supported ‘liberal’ (i.e., non-vocational) adult education and the employment of full-time and part-time tutors. The volume and character of English extra-mural provision changed somewhat after 1945: in particular, though the overall number of courses and students grew, the proportion of three-year programmes declined – as did the proportion of students defined as working class. Nevertheless, several defining features remained: the ‘liberal’ curriculum; association with the WEA (and a growing range of other community stakeholders); grant-aid direct from government allowed a relative autonomy to extra-mural departments in the affairs of their universities, and in particular, supporting a cadre of full-time staff. Typically, the full-time staff included lecturers (or ‘staff tutors’) who would not only teach ‘tutorial’ classes, weekly through the autumn and winter for two terms, but also organise – in association with the WEA and other partners – a programme of classes in their subject taught by a larger band of part-time tutors.

University Adult Education in Hong Kong

The University of Hong Kong (HKU) set up its extra-mural department in 1956; as Hong Kong’s other universities were established, they did likewise (Wong 1975, Shak 1989). HKU’s initiative was in line with thinking in the British Colonial Office, which saw them as ‘forming a link between the University and the people’ (CO1023/110, 15 Dec. 1952), as well as among Hong Kong’s business elite. In many respects, Hong Kong’s extra-mural departments mirrored their British counterparts. They employed a cadre of (academic) staff tutors as well as part-time tutors; they collaborated with community organisations in programme planning; they received grant-aid from government. However, they differed in certain critical respects. It was envisaged from the outset that extra-mural studies would extend beyond ‘liberal’ subjects to include courses ‘in professional and commercial subjects’, and that some would lead ‘to a certificate or diploma or other recognised qualification’ (Keswick et al 1952). And, in contrast to England, government grant-aid was not channelled separately to extra-mural departments, but was part of the common system of university funding.

The early leaders of Hong Kong University’s extra-mural department were products of British, or at any rate British colonial, university adult education. They valued liberal, non-vocational, study: ‘it is my desire’, wrote Gerald Moore, the
first Director of Extra-mural Studies in a memorandum to the HKU Senate a few months after his appointment in 1956, ‘to provide as many “liberal” courses as possible, in order to counter-balance the number of more utilitarian courses which the Department will also be requested to run’ (quoted Chiu & Cunich 2008, p. 51). His notion of ‘liberal’ courses was somewhat broader than that applied under the English regulations – for instance, he included language learning – but his structural model would have been recognised by any English adult educator – even its language was identical: there were to be three-year ‘tutorial’ classes, 24 meeting ‘sessional’ classes, ‘terminal’ classes of 6-12 sessions, and summer schools ‘of an intensive character, lasting from five to ten days’ (ibid.) Moore’s successor, Ieuan Hughes, took a similar view: he devoted the first third of his de facto inaugural lecture (de jure a ‘university lecture’: HKU had not followed Nottingham’s lead in making the directorship a professorial appointment) to a history of British university adult education in which Tawney, his Rochdale ‘economic class’ (which Hughes had taught for three years: ‘an education in itself’), and the 1919 Report (Ministry of Reconstruction 1919) had star billing. In his model for university adult education, the ‘resident tutor’ was ‘the kingpin’; each class must ‘develop local roots ... by getting the class to elect its own officers’; this would develop ‘two-way traffic of communication ... bring[ing] the university and the community closer to mutual benefit’ (Hughes 1962, pp. 2-3). This reflected, of course, the ideology and methods of British university adult education at the time.

In their in many respects impressive study, Chiu and Cunich (2008) focus on the formal work of HKU’s extra-mural studies – programmes, growth, student numbers, finances and so forth – and ‘readers may be surprised to find that information about the alumni is negligible’ (p. 249). There is similarly little about the character, attitudes and ideology of academic staff and how these changed, or about the intellectual, social or political impact of extra-mural work. In fact, British adult educational methods and ideology seem to have had some intellectual and political impact: Moore’s class report on Tsuen-wan township (1959), Joe England’s The Hong Kong economic scene (1969), and Keith Hopkins’ classic Hong Kong: the industrial colony (1971) are very much in the tradition of local and community studies celebrated in British post-war adult education (cf Coates & Silburn 1968). Hopkins’ book was the first major critical social, political and economic study of the colony, and rightly influential; England’s pioneering work on Hong Kong industrial relations (England 1971, England & Rear 1975), and his Fabian Society pamphlet (England 1976), contributed to the social-democratic critique of the colony’s industrial and economic policies which emerged in Britain in the mid-1970s – the TUC, for example, demanded a tripartite inquiry. (The Foreign and Commonwealth Office would not concede this, but H A Turner, Montague Burton Professor of Industrial Relations at Cambridge, was offered a grant by the Overseas Development Ministry ‘to make a study of labour organisations and labour relations in Hong Kong’ (Turner et al. 1980, p. ix).)
But this is only a small part of the story. The bigger picture lay in the demands of Hong Kong adults. Educational opportunities in the colony were severely restricted, especially after 1949. The story has been oft-told: the population swelled with refugees, whose education had itself been curtailed by a decade of war; the economy rapidly industrialised; GDP (and inequality) grew (Leung 1996). In this context, adult education could rely on what the HKU extra-mural department’s second director called the population’s ‘eagerness’ to take advantage of educational opportunities. Hughes aimed to charge more for vocational courses ‘using the balance to reduce the fees for liberal studies’ (Hughes 1964, p. 19), but this policy was highly dependent on managerial attitude. His deputy (1965-68) and successor (1968-86), Roger Williams, took a very different view: ‘the main emphasis of the Department’s programme lies in the field of vocational and professional education. This reflects a world-wide trend ... particularly appropriate ... in Hong Kong, where the opportunities for higher education are limited ...’ (quoted Chiu & Cunich 2008, p. 102). This approach was strongly endorsed by the business lobby, in political circles, in the UGC, and in the university (Chiu & Cunich 2008, pp. 101-4). Rapid population and economic growth, politics dominated by colonialism and competing forms of nationalism, and a weak and divided labour movement, all combined with slow expansion of state-provided educational opportunities to leave curriculum growth at the mercy of effective demand. As early as 1968-89, five of the seven staff tutors were allocated to professional and vocational courses, and by 1973, 80-85% of extra-mural courses were vocational or professional (Chiu & Cunich 2008, pp. 103-4).

Among Hong Kong University’s adult education staff there was, in consequence, a strong ethic of service to the community, but very little of the professional ideological identification with liberal studies, or with social and labour movements, which marked British university adult education. The community commitment tended to be interpreted through the needs of public and private sector professionals (social workers, librarians, housing managers for the massive public housing schemes initiated in the 1950s, managers more generally, bankers and so forth), and of vocationally-oriented language students.

This orientation meant university adult education was well-placed both organisationally and ideologically to take advantage of the challenges of Hong Kong’s 1990s transition from an industrial to a service economy. This period was marked by innovative leadership, repositioning of extra-mural studies within the educational marketplace, building international strategic partnerships, and establishing a Federation of Continuing Education to represent adult education with government (Chiu & Cunich 2008, Lee 1992, Cribbin & Kennedy 2003). The result, especially after Hong Kong’s transition to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, and in the context of international neo-liberal hegemony in lifelong learning, was a series of major initiatives in which market-oriented former extra-mural departments ‘delivered’ expansion in university-level education at minimal cost to government and taxpayer (Cheung 2006, Cribbin 2002a, 2002b, Kennedy 2004,
Young 2008). Ironically, perhaps, a major feature of this was the development of ‘community colleges’, teaching school-leavers on a full-time basis: by 2005/06, over 7,000 such students accounted for 30 per cent of HKU SPACE FTE students (Chiu & Cunich 2008, pp. 238-9).

Discussion

It is, of course, oversimple to suggest that English university adult education was defined by liberal studies and its partnership with a ‘voluntary’ student base represented by the WEA. By the mid-1950s, liberal adult education appeared in the doldrums even to its most passionate advocates. Harrison (1959) located this in the context of the growth of welfare and educational opportunity. Wiltshire (1956) named the ‘great tradition’ in order to defend it against the ‘vigour and adventurousness’ of the growing technical and vocation provision: ‘if not a dying tradition,’ it was ‘certainly no longer a determining one’ in the extra-mural world. His argument was that the great tradition’s ‘purposes and convictions’ should ‘inspire’ the new broader policy:

If it can we shall be beginning a new stage of development in English adult education; if it cannot, then adult education will go on in name but be dead in spirit. ... [The] extra-mural department ... will be little more than a part of the university’s administrative machinery .... (Wiltshire 1956, p. 97)

Half a century later, even this prediction seems a trifle optimistic: in English (‘pre-1992’) universities, adult education has not even gone on in name. In contrast, Hong Kong’s extra-mural bodies flourish. What light does this throw on the history of adult education? Different levels of explanation emerge.

At the societal level, both England’s and Hong Kong’s adult education grew in response to social pressures. In England these were articulated through class-based institutions within the emerging early 20th century welfare state. In Hong Kong, the rapidly industrialising market economy of the later 20th century generated individual aspiration and demand for education; its colonial and business-dominated politics restricted welfare provision and educational opportunity, and colluded in an identification of educational with labour market values; its labour movement was too politically divided to provide a social movement base for university adult education. In addition, of course, university elitism – far from absent in England – was overlaid in Hong Kong by colonial and linguistic dimensions (cf Choi 2003, Sweeting & Vickers 2007).

However, the institutional level is also significant. According to Raybould, although R.H. Tawney originally supported extra-mural departments as likely to oblige universities to give serious consideration to adult education, he later concluded ‘the opposite result had ensued’. By establishing such departments, universities ‘felt that they had discharged their consciences’ (Raybould, 1964 p. 156). Raybould saw this tendency as strengthened because ‘important questions’ about adult education had to be referred outside the university, and in particular key decisions taken ‘by the Ministry’. In his view, earmarked grants had ‘neither
ensured effective partnership’ between the universities and other stakeholders in adult education, nor improved ‘the standing of extramural education within the universities’. He argued that universities should receive a single grant, to include adult education: though this would present a ‘severe’ challenge to extra-mural departments, it would be ‘salutary’ (p. 159). More recently, Duke (2008) has suggested that this led, in effect, to English university adult education failing to adapt and modernise: ‘Trapped in protected but marginalised departments, [it] became inward-looking and proved irrelevant to the challenges and possibilities ... of mass higher education.’

In Hong Kong, university adult education may have been provided through extra-mural departments, but they never enjoyed the privileged access to government which underpinned the English extra-mural world. The colony’s extra-mural directors had to carry their case to their vice-chancellors, senates and councils; when they lost (as they often did), their recourse was not to the Ministry, but to the market. The market, in its own way, provided.

Finally, there is the level of people. This is insufficiently understood. We know something of the English extra-mural student, partly through the work of historians (e.g., Rowbotham 1981), but largely because English extra-mural education was a response to, and remained to the end in many ways inseparable from, the WEA. We know a little about English extra-mural staff – though more often through their published work than their working lives. We have, at least, through journals such as Adult Education and The Highway, access to a rich database of what concerned the more articulate and thoughtful English extra-mural staff. In contrast, perhaps because its professional community was too small to generate much by way of published work or debate, there are few sources of this kind on the history of the Hong Kong extra-mural world – or at any rate, few have been exploited.

In the absence of such rich data, let us conclude by glancing briefly at two influential works, in broadly the same field, by prominent Hong Kong University extra-mural academics. The first is Chinese labour under British rule (England & Rear 1975); the second The spirit of Chinese capitalism (Redding 1993). Joe England, a former WEA tutor-organiser, took up a post at Hong Kong University’s extra-mural department in the late 1960s; John Rear, a member of the department for three years, moved to the Department of Law when it was established in 1969. England was responsible for introduction and early development of a Diploma in Management Studies. Gordon Redding took over from him in 1973, leading the programme until his appointment as Professor of Management (in the Department of Management Studies) in 1982. As suggested above, Chinese labour under British rule bespeaks an ideological position and motivation very similar to that of many British university adult educators of the time, not least in industrial relations (cf Holford 1994). The spirit of Chinese capitalism is an innovative study of Chinese management and business organisation. Both studies clearly originate in interests, and utilise data and
networks, originally developed through extra-mural teaching: England and Rear with trade unions, managers and the government’s Labour Department; Redding with Chinese managers. But while England’s and Rear’s world view was social democratic – they were criticised by Turner (1980) for offering ‘a UK-derived policy prescription for labour relations of dubious applicability to Hong Kong’ (p. xiv) – Redding had no such baggage. For him, extra-mural work provided data, networks, and skills; but his ideological position came from the managers he taught, rather than from his professional colleagues in adult education, or their ‘tradition’. As Wiltshire remarked, it was the ‘new policy’, rather than the ‘great tradition’, which conformed ‘more closely ... to the aims and methods of the modern universities’ (1956, p. 97).

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