



Unity and Conflict

by Lam Cho-wai and Lina Leung

The student took the microphone, stood up and gave his views on the June 4 Tiananmen crackdown, a sensitive issue on the mainland, at an open forum held by the University of Hong Kong (HKU).

“Why don’t we mention the deaths from the People’s Liberation Army?” he asked. He was a mainland student, and that afternoon, he was not the only one to stand up and speak out.

After June 4 this year, more and more mainland students have been voicing their opinions at open forums and posting comments on HKU’s Democracy Wall.

While mainland students did not speak at the June 4 forum held at the Chinese University of Hong Kong

(CUHK), they have addressed the student union’s (CUSU) stance on blogs opened by the union.

On one of the blogs, on the Tibet issue last year, mainland students made close to 300 comments, most of them opposed to the CUSU’s position.

“Are you supporting the riots?” was the main question being asked, according to Frederick Fan Cheung-fung, external vice-president of CUSU.

But some anonymous posts on the blog contained stronger accusations. Although the union felt it had a responsibility to respond to the mainland students’ views, they dismissed some of the criticisms from the *fengqing* (angry youth) and issued a statement instead.

“Some of them are very emotional, and not rational,” Mr Fan said. “They tend to support the Chinese government.”

He suggested that being outstanding students, these students are more likely to agree with the mainland establishment because they are influenced by the official perspective while having no access to a wide range of information in China. “Their critical thinking ability is not good,” he said. “Their values have been moulded. They’re brainwashed.”

However, the views of these *fengqing* dominated discussion on the blog. Mr Fan said that might be because local students cannot understand the thinking behind the long essays posted by the angry mainlanders. This,



Aiyu Chan Yi-ngok said mainland students are not eager to discuss politics in public forums but they would discuss with him off the record.

coupled with a general lack of interest in politics, might be a reason why local students were hindered from joining the discussion.

The volume of mainland students’ voice in Hong Kong has risen along with their increasing numbers on local campuses.

According to the University Grants Committee (UGC), the total number of mainland students enrolled for UGC-funded programmes has risen by 35 per cent during the past three academic years. Mainland students now account for more than 11 per cent of all students and more than 90 per cent of non-local students on UGC courses.

With this in mind, Mr Fan said more discussion with mainland students is “definitely a good thing”. He said some open-minded and liberal mainland students have begun to think their government may have been wrong in the way they dealt with the students on June 4, 1989.

He stressed the student union would maintain its stance, “We would not submit to them (mainland students

with opposing views) but to principles,” he said.

Jenny Ngai Sin-hang, an external affairs secretary of the Hong Kong University Students’ Union (HKUSU), agreed it was better to have more opinions than to have silence. She said that mainland students might change their point of view after discussions.

“It’s only a matter of time,” she said. However, the Union has not been able to significantly respond to every student’s views due to time constraints. Also, it will remain firm on its stance regarding June 4, while encouraging an open dialogue and free exchange of ideas at all times.

In April this year, HKU students passed a referendum held by the Students’ Union calling for the official verdict on June 4 to be rectified.

An executive of the Hong Kong Federation of Students, an organisation formed by the student unions from seven tertiary organisations, said mainland students should take a more active role in student unions if they feel groups do not represent them. Crystal Chow Ching, secretary-general of the federation said mainland students should join their student union’s representative council, or become union committee members.

“Hong Kong students are sometimes too simple, too naive.”

This year, the social secretary of the HKUSU and the internal vice-president of the Student Union of Hong Kong Shue Yan University are both from the mainland.

Miss Chow encourages more discussions rather than withdrawal. “We have provided room for discussion,” she said, “so it depends on how much both sides are willing to contribute to it.”

She said the federation places importance on process rather than on outcome, and does not want to lead or dominate discussions.

But the process of interaction can also affect local students’ points of view. Ayo Chan Yi-ngok, a former HKUSU president, said previous discussions with mainland students influenced his views on June 4.

While still president of the union, Mr Chan said at a forum that the students in the 1989 movement should shoulder part of the responsibility for the crackdown. He was voted out of his post after those comments.

“As a democratically elected leader, I had to represent different existing perspectives,” said the International Relations and Economics student.

His own views had evolved as a result of his many interactions with mainland students. For instance, he organised volunteer trips to Sichuan and semi-formal dinners with the China Study Society to exchange views with mainland students. One time, Mr Chan met a student who told him



Brandin Yang Rucheng also takes part in the Hong Kong Youth and Tertiary Students Association.

he was a member of the Communist Party. The student told him the party's views towards the current economic and social conditions in China are rational and objective, and are unlike the extreme positions of the *fenqing* mainland students.

Mr Chan found the exchange of views productive. "After listening to their perspectives, not only would we learn more about our stance (through comparing differences), but also take their views into account, so that we would see things from another angle," said Mr Chan, who describes himself as open-minded. These days, he still believes action should be taken to combat problems such as corruption, but he is more sympathetic to taking a more gradual approach with consideration of "socialism with Chinese characteristics".

He has also learnt more about Hong Kong people. "Although you have concrete arguments and can present them well, it doesn't mean that you won't be criticised," he said.



LINA LEUNG

Crystal Chow Ching said discussion between local and mainland students will be more mature in coming years.

"Some Hong Kong people are not that open-minded, and their views are parochial."

Some mainland students would concur. "Hong Kong students are sometimes too simple, too naive," said Eric Feng Shou, a Sociology student from the mainland at CUHK.

"They only think of democracy but seldom think of the difficulties of the government." Mr Feng said mainland students rely on the government for information while Hong Kong students rely on the media, which he says are biased.

"Looking for change doesn't mean that we can really change things. Nevertheless, when we put ourselves in the government's shoes, we can see that it has its difficulties, but Hong Kong students seldom think this way," said Mr Feng. He wants his government to have a greater degree of transparency but he never takes any action to change it.

"Exchange of ideas and interaction should be on an equal platform: it is not that mainland students have to enter the local students' circle or vice versa."

Mr Feng said he is satisfied with the freedom of speech in Hong Kong. "Freedom is a very basic requirement. It means I can discuss with you and nothing is going to happen to us." He took advantage of this freedom to buy a flag of the Republic of China on the Internet, after his roommate hung a People's Republic of China flag on their door.

Nevertheless, he said that mainland students have an advantage over their local counterparts when it comes to understanding China: they have lived



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Eric Feng Shou said local students have to deal with mainlanders in the future, and university life is a good starting point.

in the mainland, received information directly from the government and had experienced first-hand, the changes that have taken place there.

Still, many of them do not make use of this advantage. Mr Feng, who was defeated in the election for the committee of the Mainland Undergraduates Association in CUHK, said mainland students should look for more interaction with local students, read more and get to know more about Hong Kong society so as to make comparisons.

But neither mainland nor local students should "submit" to either side, he said.

"Exchange of ideas and interaction should be on an equal platform: it is not that mainland students have to enter the local students' circle or vice versa. They should stand outside both circles," he said.

Brandin Yang Rucheng, chairman of the University of Hong Kong's China Study Society, supports the exchange of ideas and helps local students to know more about China's current situation through organising activities.

But study pressures, language and cultural barriers have discouraged many mainland students from getting involved with local students, he said.

There is another reason why mainland students do not get that involved. One student at CUHK, who is from Guangzhou and did not want to give his name, said it was always sensitive for them to talk about political issues.

"We should keep our values and make an impact on the development of China."

He attended the annual candle-light vigil on June 4 this year with a few close friends. But he said they did so to commemorate the event only, not to fight for redress. They held up candles and shed tears, while taking care to hide from the cameras.

He said that mainlanders keep a low-profile and seldom express their own opinions in public because they are afraid of being caught.

Among the mainland students in Hong Kong, there is a rumour that the central government has sent people to monitor them. These secret watchdogs



LAM CHO-WAI

Lai Chak-fan said both local and mainland students should be open-minded but not emotional.



COURTESY OF JENNY NGAI SIN-HANG

Both local and mainland students voiced their opinion on June 4 this year on the Democracy Wall in the University of Hong Kong.

may be professors, students or anybody in their circle. The student's parents, mentors and teachers had also told him not to do anything extreme.

"A university is a microcosm of society," said Lai Chak-fan, a freelance writer and one of the founders of Radio 71. Mr Lai, who hosts net radio programmes on current affairs and finance, was a student activist in the 1970s. He explained the mainland's influence in universities is a reflection of Hong Kong society that is "nothing new" and "unavoidable".

Since the Chinese government has more resources than Hong Kong people do, "student movements will encounter

obstacles sooner or later," said Mr Lai, who edited the official student publication of HKU undergraduates when he was a student there.

When faced with different influences, "a university student with critical and independent thinking ability should learn how to face the influences rather than just avoiding them," he said.

Still, learning more about the current situation in China is beneficial to Hong Kong students. Increasing interaction will highlight both unity and conflict in the values and political stance between local and mainland students.

"We should keep our values and make an impact on the development of China," he said. "Otherwise Hong Kong would become no different from the mainland."

"You have to learn by yourselves," said Mr Lai. ▣