

# **Hegemony and Classification: State Policies and Chinese School Identities in Colonial Hong Kong.**

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## Objective

Through the case of Chinese school identity in colonial Hong Kong, this article develops a theory of state policy towards educational institutions upholding the culture of a subordinated group through blending the notion of classification of Basil Bernstein and the idea of hegemony of Antonio Gramsci. Chinese schools use the Chinese language as the chief medium of instruction. In the context of colonial Hong Kong, they were institutions transmitting the culture of the colonised Chinese residents.

## Theoretical Framework

Inspired by Bernstein's theory of classification, I consider the identity of Chinese schools as being determined by their *external cultural boundary* and *internal material cleavage*. The external cultural boundary refers to the cultural categorization of Chinese schools as opposed to other institutions. When the Chinese language and Chinese culture are taught exclusively at Chinese schools within the educational system concerned, these institutions are then culturally classified. The internal material cleavage refers to the schism among Chinese schools in such matters as financial resources, building facilities, and remuneration of their personnel. The identity of Chinese schools is most discrete when they are culturally segmented from other institutions but are not divided among themselves by their stark material differences.

The strength of Chinese school identity has important bearings on the stability of the social order within which the institutions find themselves. For when these schools are culturally classified, they tend to inculcate in students cultural and linguistic traits that are significantly distinct from those of other schools; and, as a result these hinder social integration. In addition, when Chinese schools are culturally too distinctive from others, the instruction of, and in, the Chinese language and Chinese culture becomes the prerogative of these institutions and thus the demise of Chinese schools leads to a crisis of continuation of Chinese culture. This situation can be exploited to foment oppositional campaigns, especially if most Chinese schools receive

substandard treatment from the government and are not divided according to differences in material resources.

Hegemony, according to Gramsci, is the historical process through which ruling power is consolidated by compromising with the demands of the subordinated part of the society. This paper distinguishes between two forms of concession granted by the powerful to handle the educational institutions of the dominated group, namely, *cultural accommodating* and *institutional incorporation*. The former takes place when the culture upheld by the subordinated institutions is absorbed into the 'selective tradition' of mainstream schools; the latter occurs when the educational establishments of the subordinated population are either assimilated directly into state-run schools or become institutions which are substantially government-funded. These two forms of hegemonic practice lead to crucial ramifications of the identity of Chinese schools because the move of cultural accommodation can profoundly change their degree of cultural distinctiveness; while the policy of institutional incorporation modifies the material distinctions among Chinese schools.

### Historical Argument

In colonial Hong Kong the identity of Chinese schools was blurred both because these schools were culturally declassified when the learning of Chinese was introduced into mainstream English schools, and because the government's incorporation of only select Chinese schools into the state-operated or government-financed sector caused a cleavage in the Chinese education system. The material cited to substantiate this claim originates from local newspaper reports, published official documents, and declassified governmental files stored in archives in London and in Hong Kong.

Chinese schools predated British imperial rule in Hong Kong. Shortly after the territory became a British dependency in 1841, English schools came into being as the colonial government and western missionary bodies swiftly inaugurated these institutions. The cultural classification of the two types of schools was never categorical, however, for since the earliest days of British rule Chinese-language learning had been made part of the curriculum of English schools and all Chinese students were required to pass a test of Chinese every year in order to be promoted to the next grade. These moves were made because, as Hong Kong was occupied as a stepping stone to penetrate China, the colonizers had to ensure Chinese elites groomed by their schools were well-versed in both English and Chinese and could serve capably as middlemen between East and West. In subsequent years, the British took further steps to strengthen the teaching of Chinese in English schools whenever they needed to counter the influence of Chinese nationalism in the local educational

system and to satisfy demands from London to use as much indigenous language as possible for education in colonies. These concessionary moves culturally declassified Chinese schools and blunted their identity.

After WWII the strength of identity of Chinese schools was further attenuated by the material gaps resulting from the colonial state's partial incorporation of Chinese institutions. Before the war, most Chinese schools in Hong Kong had been private establishments receiving no funding from the British. In the early postwar years anti-colonial pressure from both the international arena and the local Hong Kong society propelled the British to become more active in providing schooling opportunities using indigenous language. Thus, the government launched a considerable number of Chinese schools that were either directly state-operated or substantially government-funded. Nevertheless, the government's incorporation of Chinese institutions was incomplete because as the British considered Chinese residents— mostly refugees fleeing disturbances in China— impermanent dwellers in Hong Kong, they shrugged off the responsibility of providing all school-aged children with schooling opportunities. Due to this attitude, a considerable number of private Chinese schools in the Colony remained unaided and operated under very stringent conditions. Creating three types of schools with vast difference in material resources, the government's incomplete incorporation of Chinese institutions fragmented the identities of these schools.

### Significance

This paper seeks to construct a theory of education and power through combining the ideas of classification of Bernstein and of hegemony of Gramsci. So far, the notion of classification has been employed by many researchers to examine the role of schools in maintaining social order through shaping cultural identity; and the concept of hegemony has been frequently used to analyze the ways domination is perpetuated via concessions by the ruling class. No hitherto literature, however, has endeavoured to weld the insights of these two important thinkers into a theory explicating the ways through which concession by the dominant group fortifies power relations via modifying the social identity emanates from the school system. This paper takes a first step towards this direction. In addition, this article refines both the concepts of classification and of hegemony. It delineates the former into the dimensions of external cultural boundary and internal material cleavage; and the latter, into cultural accommodation and institutional incorporation. By doing so, it will furnish scholars of the traditions of Bernstein and Gramsci with more sophisticated analytical tools to explore the link between education and social power.