

Panel on Education Special Meeting on June 18th, 2016

Written Submission

Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are not the abstract concepts that can be connecting to our everyday life. For the former, it refers to a condition that the academics can and should pursue their own study, especially in social sciences and humanities, without political taboo, restrictions and limitations. The academics, especially for the young and contracted-based ones, should be protected institutionally so that they would not be got rid and expelled rudely and unprofessionally, using the excuse of poor and unsatisfactory performance apparently in the academic and/or teaching area(s). However, it is indeed political discrimination and exclusion. For the latter, institutional autonomy has been distorted, turning out to be such an unlimited and unrestricted autonomy, becoming *abuse* in a restless way by the senior management, BUT not to protect the academics in a concrete sense.

In contextualizing academic freedom, it should be relating to the freedom to express, present, teach and deliver the ideas, without being threatened. One lively example is that teachers can deliver the controversial topics and engage in the debatable views even though students don't like, provided that an open and interactive environment is ensured and maintained. Students cannot take revenge by writing the negative and insulting views using the teaching assessment system, and even by complaining to the top managers such as faculty dean in order to force the teachers to shut up or impose the self-censorship, an effective method to threaten the academics. The case can be handled under the accountable and responsive mechanism, and would NOT be used as a ground to threaten the colleagues when considering their contract renewal, promotion and/or substantiation.

However, it is a fact that when academics face the above case, there is **NO** mechanism to protect them. As a result, when they are intended to renew, promote and substantiate, they find that the unsubstantiated, illogical and even falsified remarks have been imposed to them after learning the negative result. In this regard, academic freedom is *de facto* not existing.

Another principle of academic freedom that is being violated is of political discrimination. This means that the employment SHALL NOT and MUST NOT be affected by your political belief and affirmation, regardless of which you are pro-Beijing or pro-democratic. In fact, I respect those pro-Beijing academics who are able to acknowledge and respect divergent views,

even though they don't like or affirm. Unfortunately, there are NO such independent and professional academics in Hong Kong. Instead, such pro-Beijing academics in the senior management, regardless of the Hong Kong people or non-Hong Kong people, have forged an alliance aiming to exclude those politically incorrect academics who are able to meet the requirements and then get the position based on their own merits. As mentioned above, the unaccountable, top-down and irresponsible appraisal system for staff performance, under the dominance of the senior management in the name of institutional autonomy, furthers such a trend. As a result, the local academic field has become de facto small-circle group with homogeneity, monopoly and hegemony.

Recently, internationalization has become a fashionable term so as to promote the globalization of higher education in Hong Kong. However, without academic freedom, without institutional autonomy embracing integrity, accountability, inclusion and democratization, *academic demoralization* and *institutional abuse* have actually been prevailing.

To recap, without institutionalizing academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Freedom is only a slogan and violation is common; whereas autonomy is controlled by the powerful, regardless of the government or senior management, aiming to legitimize power abuse, discrimination and exclusion based on political subservience. As a result, the Hong Kong's academic field is over, and finally, Hong Kong is over!

Wai-Kwok Benson Wong, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor

Department of Government and International Studies

Hong Kong Baptist University