

Constitution and Culture: Exploring the deep leadership structures of Hong Kong schools

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This article aims to contribute to an understanding of principalship in Hong Kong through probing the formation and preservation of the deep leadership structures that shape its practice. Deep structures are formed partly through a dynamic relationship between constitution and culture which forms bounded “codes” of understanding, conduct and behaviour which combine to shape principalship in Hong Kong and power relationships within schools and collections of schools. After providing a brief historical snapshot of Hong Kong education development since 1945, the paper explores the recent context of principalship and how this influences its shape in schools. Discussion of context focuses on the interconnected elements of constitution and traditional culture. These factors are illustrated using the issues of principal selection and teacher and parent empowerment to show the influence of deep leadership structures on the principal and the system. Depending on the perspective taken, these can be understood as either supportive or obstructive to better school leadership.

Introduction

An influential report released in 1991 (Education and Manpower Branch and Education Department, 1991) laid out in fairly strident terms a view of Hong Kong school principals. The *School Management Initiatives* (SMI) document stated thus:

Because proper management structures and processes are lacking, some Principals are insufficiently accountable for their actions and see their post as an opportunity to become “little emperors” with dictatorial powers in the schools ... Conversely it is possible for a Principal to take minimal interest in running the school. (p. 14)

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While it is difficult to confirm the veracity of such contentious accusations, there is little doubt that the sentiments conveyed were and continue to be widely shared by segments of the education community. The report was accompanied by the introduction of legislation by the then colonial administration which purported to turn schools into more democratic and accountable organisations. By implication and by design, it also sought to lessen the traditional authority of the principal and the School Sponsoring Bodies (SSBs)—the real power brokers within the majority of Hong Kong schools. The SMI was among the first of a series of managerially slanted, decentralising policies designed to restructure school governance through the purposeful redistribution of power and authority (Tse, 2002). This rearrangement aimed, though at varying levels of stated intent, to strengthen the control of the central education agency, increase teacher and parent involvement and usurp the power of principals and their immediate supervisors.

Reforms aimed or partly aimed at altering power relationships in Hong Kong schools, and between schools and the government, have stumbled and continue to do so because they run contrary to the “deep structures” underpinning how schools are ordered and led. In essence, the internal organisational life of most Hong Kong schools reflects traditions developed through a mixture of traditional Chinese cultural values, a policy of non- or minimal interventionism by the colonial government and a fragmented governance structure. Whereas some change is occurring, exogenous influences, in the form of curriculum, public examinations and central resource allocation, have largely determined surface structures in schools; endogenous forces have determined school culture, relationships and perceptions of leadership. In this article I focus on the latter of these—the endogenous forces—through exploring the deep leadership structures that form “principalship” in Hong Kong and so help determine its reaction to central policies.

Principalship in Hong Kong needs to be understood through probing the formation and sustenance of the deep leadership structures that shape its practice. The vast majority of research into principalship in Hong Kong to date has relied on large-scale quantitative methodologies that have taken minimal account of context (for example, see Cheng, 1996). This article has three interrelated subpurposes. After further expanding the notion of deep leadership structures, the first purpose is to provide a brief historical snapshot of Hong Kong’s education development since 1945. The second purpose is to describe the recent context of principalship and how this influences its shape. By “context”, I refer to the interconnected elements of constitution and culture. “Constitution” is taken as the more formal aspects of system governance and organisation. “Culture” relates to the shared norms, values and patterns of understanding that appear relatively common across a system or collectivity and influence individual and group behaviour at all levels. While adopting this definition, ongoing debates about the meaning of culture (Heck, 2002), the hybridity of culture (Rizvi, 1997) and the contention that numerous subcultures operate within any larger cultural pillow are acknowledged (Walker, 2003). Although I discuss the two key contextual elements separately, each is engaged in an ongoing iterative relationship with

the other and with elements such as politics, gender and religion. In other words, all elements are reflected within and between one another and this helps define the context of education and society, and thus the deep leadership structures in Hong Kong schools. The third purpose of this article is to illustrate the influence of deep structures on the principal and or system and show that these can be deciphered, depending on the perspective taken, as either supportive or obstructive to better school leadership. This illustration looks at the issues of principal selection and teacher and parent empowerment.

Deep and Surface Leadership Structures

Surface-level structures can be defined as those tangible, easily identifiable or concrete factors manifest in organisations. These may include, for example, formal mission or goal statements, job descriptions, organisation charts or formal rules and regulations. Such structures shape behaviour at an obvious or superficial level, tend to be cloned across cultures and societies and are easily identifiable. Deep structures on the other hand are non-tangible, less readily identifiable and lurk unseen everywhere in organisations. In terms of this paper, deep leadership structures stem from and reside in the constitutions and traditional cultures guiding Hong Kong schools and wider systems, and inevitably have a major effect on behaviour¹. While explaining that deep structure can take many forms, and that these reflect “codes” of behavioural order, Gordon (2002) details and exemplifies his definition of deep structures:

these codes convey the relative status of people within the social system within which they exist. That is, how these codes or deep structures differentiate people on the basis of power. An example of the effect of deep structures can be seen when people interact with someone whom they recognise as having higher status than themselves. In most settings, particularly social settings, there are historically constituted codes of order, which indicate that when interacting with someone of high status, people are expected to do so in a respectful and deferential manner. (p. 152)

Given the historical construction of deep structures, they are hardy and resistant to change or challenge. While they are capable of adjustment, if it does happen it tends to be slow to take hold. The deep leadership structures that have developed in Hong Kong exert influence on how principals and teachers see the world and on their subsequent actions. The following section lays the historical groundwork for understanding such structures.

Deep Structures Historical Context²

A Minimally Integrated Sociopolitical System (1945 to Mid-1960s)

The decades immediately following World War II witnessed minimal government intervention, or even direct interest, in education. The re-establishing colonial administration continued its pre-war ideology and treated key social services such as health, housing and education as functional policy areas only.

In essence, the administration considered these as spheres where individuals, family and other groups were expected to take care of their own needs, sometimes with the assistance of voluntary and charitable agencies encouraged by the government (Jones, 1990). In educational terms, this translated into a situation where the vast majority of schools operated outside the control of the government. For example, in 1950 only 5.8% of school students were enrolled in government schools, 9.6% and 19.6%, respectively, attended grant-aided (mainly missionary-based, “Anglo-Chinese” secondary schools) or subsidised schools (mainly primary Chinese-vernacular schools)—the remaining 65% of the student population attended wholly private (Chinese) institutions (Jones, 1990). Due to rapid expansion of the school system and government reluctance to cater for this, the number of mainly Chinese-vernacular, private schools flourished during the 1950s and 1960s. Culturally, many of these schools operated in line with traditional values based predominantly within agrarian traditions similar to those common in mainland China.

In perhaps the most widely respected attempt to capture the spirit of Hong Kong in the post-war decades, Lau (1982) developed a social structural model that described Hong Kong as a minimally integrated sociopolitical system. This system consisted of three key structural features, “an autonomous bureaucratic polity, an atomistic Chinese society and the weak linkage between them” (Leung, 1996, p. 157). In Lau’s structure, the bureaucratic polity encompassed an undemocratic political system where the mostly imported senior civil service ruled loosely over an underprivileged Chinese majority. The conscious insulation of the colonial bureaucracy, according to Leung (1996), “rendered it insensitive or even oblivious to the interests and demands of the people it ruled” (p. 52). The distance between the bureaucracy and the people was further extended by the administration’s inherent lack of legitimacy due to its colonial status. A corollary of the government’s “non-interventionist” or “cooperative independence” (Leung, 1996) approach was that much of the local community continued to be influenced by hybrid Chinese cultural traditions, which Lau (1982) labelled as “utilitarianistic familism”. He described the concept thus:

Utilitarianism familism can be defined as a normative and behavioural tendency of an individual to place familial interests above the interests of society or any of its component individuals and groups, and to structure his relationships with other individuals and groups in such a fashion that the furtherance of his familial interests is the primary consideration. (p. 201)

The period appeared one of “applied decolonisation” (Sweeting, 1992), where the British showed both unwillingness and an inability to provide education to Hong Kong’s existing population or the growing flood of refugees regularly arriving from mainland China. The pattern of education development during the period embraced a diffuse education system within which the government played a minor role, and within which English was used in only a small minority of schools. Most schools received little direct government support, and even fewer among these were directly run by the government. As a result, most schools or

groups of schools developed as independent entities whose structures, hierarchy and values were shaped separately through interaction between utilitarianistic familism, political non-intervention and what Lau called the “Hong Kong experience” (Leung, 1996), which focused on survival and generating wealth.

Positive Non-interventionism (Mid-1960s to Late 1980s)

The colonial government’s reluctance to take responsibility for education and other social services was seriously challenged in the mid-1960s. Although this challenge obviously resulted from an accumulation of complex factors and events, the incident most commonly cited as defining it was the 1966 Star Ferry riots (see Scott, 1989). The riots and what they symbolised alarmed the administration to the extent that they rushed to be more involved in educational provision. They were forced to face the fact that the existing political structures could not meet the escalating demands of the growing Chinese population or provide them sufficient opportunity for institutional expression. As a result, the administration rather hurriedly introduced three types of reforms (Scott, 1989). The first sought to reduce the gap between the government and the Chinese community, for example, by declaring Chinese an official language. The second introduced new labour legislation, and the third significantly improved provision of goods and services to the public. Among these was increased education provision, but in a peculiarly Hong Kong way.

Up until this time the government had largely taken a hands-off or non-interventionist approach to education. As a result, education remained predominantly in the hands of private providers, thereby, in the government’s view, exonerating the government from fiscal or curricular responsibility. As the government embarked on the path to rapidly expand provision, it faced a number of problems. First, given the scope of the increases required, it was impossible to build anywhere near the number of schools needed within the required time. Second, the administration still did not want to become heavily involved in internal school operation and sought to maintain its non-interventionist stance where at all possible. These twin problems were addressed by significantly expanding the number of schools fully subsidised by the government. This approach has been called positive or active non-interventionism (A. B. L. Cheung, 2000). That is, the government began to pay for almost the entire operation of what were formerly private schools, and new schools, while at the same time allowing established or new sponsoring bodies to retain operational and ideological control, within certain (often politically defined) boundaries. Such boundaries were predominately functional demarcations operationalised through bureaucratisation at both the system and school levels (Morris & Sweeting, 1991). According to Sweeting (1992) this bureaucratisation served to encourage standardisation, centralisation and a lack of innovation. It may be that such outcomes not only played out noticeably in the surface structures of schools, but also mixed comfortably with existing beliefs and thereby reinforced their constantly forming deeper structures.

Cheng (2002) labelled this period of great expansion the “Quantitative Era”. In terms of time markers it began with the implementation of universal primary education in the mid-1960s. By 1978 nine-year universal, free and compulsory education was achieved. By 1980, 87% of the student population stayed at school beyond nine years; 40% of students studied in government or government-aided schools, while the remainder still attended self-financed private schools. The percentage of these private schools continued to decline year by year as more schools shifted to the subsidised or aided or Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) tracks (Postiglione, 1992). For example, by 2002, private schools comprised only 8% of all secondary schools and private primary schools virtually disappeared as inspection standards tightened under the Code of Aid.

The period not only was one of substantial quantitative expansion, but also witnessed the signing of the 1984 joint declaration that formalised the timetable for the change of sovereignty to Chinese rule³. It also saw the establishment of the Education Commission (EC) and the publication of a number of influential reports, which gradually led to a shift from quantitative to more qualitative educational concerns.

Direct subtle Interventionism (Late 1980s to Present)

Toward the end of the 1980s, as quantitative demands were satisfied, the administration turned its attention to quality. This thrust took a number of forms and was driven by various rationales. For example, reasons given for the emphasis on quality range from growing recognition of disparities between schools (Cheng, 2002), attempts by the colonial government to embed democracy in schools before the change of sovereignty (Walker & Dimmock, 1998), and government intent to reign in the power of the sponsoring bodies and school principals (Leung & Chan, 2001), which was deemed essential for real change to happen. In truth, the reasons probably included elements of all of these, and more, but may best be understood as couched within a broader global movement toward radical public sector reform (Cheng, 2002; Leung & Chan, 2001; Tse, 2002). Public sector managerialism impacted all areas of the Hong Kong public service, and education was no exception. Beginning with the School Management Initiative (which broke the convention of public consultation), the major education reforms aimed to improve school efficiency and effectiveness through increased accountability, additional mechanisms for tightened central control of certain functions, and the devolution of power and responsibility both to and within schools. The substance of these reforms drew on global, and usually decontextualised, policy and educational trends (Dimmock & Walker, 1997; 1998). Other reforms reflecting the “quality” emphasis included widespread curriculum reform, the imposition of quality assurance inspections and mandatory School Based Management (Education Commission, 1997), all of which have bridged the 1997 change of sovereignty.

Cheng (2002) suggests that school management reform basically targeted school quality as a means of reducing gross disparities between schools and

imposing more rigorous requirements on those incapable of providing the necessary standard of education required following the achievement of compulsory education. He also argued that due to the rapid expansion in the number of aided schools, many of the School Sponsoring Bodies charged with running these schools were incapable of providing that standard. While discussing the propagation of sponsoring bodies, Cheng stated his position:

The school sponsors used to be church bodies who ran schools with particular missions. The newcomers among the sponsors now included fraternity organisations, charitable bodies and individual philanthropists who were invited by the government and took up school sponsorship as a matter of status seeking. Many such school sponsors were much less prepared professionally to provide quality education, let alone face students unprepared for school. (p. 48)

The educational scene in the early 21st century continues the rhetoric of quality pursued through stronger, often subtle, government intervention driven largely by economic considerations and a desire for increased external control over schools. This scenario is reflective of broader global agendas toward public sector reform which have not only spanned colonial and postcolonial Hong Kong governance, but actually increased since 1997. As M. B. Cheung (2000) concludes,

The transfer of sovereignty has seen not only a continuation of the pre-1997 state form under the non-change logic of transition. The decolonization syndrome, as well as the desire to reform inherited colonial policies and to chart a new course and new vision for the Special Administrative Region (SAR) by the “takeover” elites, have encouraged and facilitated further state expansion. Whereas the colonial form of state interventionism was endogenously driven by bureaucratic reformism, the new SAR interventionism is clearly more subject to exogenous forces embedded in ... new global and economic conditions. (p. 307)

In summary, education development in Hong Kong transpired within the context of a minimally integrated sociopolitical system where, until 1997, a British-controlled autonomous bureaucratic polity existed, on the whole, quite comfortably alongside an atomistic Chinese society (Postiglione, 1992). In effect, this structure minimised direct government intervention and allowed it to remain largely detached from Chinese society and its internal dynamics until the late 1980s. One of the key outcomes of this is that the majority of schools have operated largely independent of direct government control. This has left the much of the power for internal operation to SSBs and school principals operating in fragmented individual or collective entities that have developed mechanisms and cultures that buffer how they do things from undue outside interference. In such environments, many schools and school leaders seem to remain, at least to an extent, influenced by fairly traditional Chinese beliefs about relationships, organisation and leadership. These values form floating segments of the deep leadership structures that shape Hong Kong schools and can militate against more participatory leadership and governance forms. These can cast leadership in both positive and negative lights as the government continues to try to assert itself more on education through curriculum and governance reforms.

Constitution and Culture

As stated, for the purposes of this paper, deep leadership structures are defined as comprising two central, interacting factors. The first of these are the values and norms underpinning the constitution of the major part of the school system; in other words, how most schools are organised through a system of SSBs. The second factor is the hangover of hybrid forms of traditional Chinese beliefs and norms. Both these factors connect with and reflect other contextual conditions such as macro and micro political interaction. Admittedly, a concentration on constitution and culture does not explicitly address all variables that comprise the deep leadership structures in Hong Kong schools. For example, few would dispute that religion has a significant impact on many schools in Hong Kong (Tan, 1997) and has helped shape deep leadership structures. However, this is considered as one of the factors that combine to form the values, ideals and assumptions that comprise the hybrid structures that help construct Hong Kong school leadership. The following section briefly explains the SSB system and how this shapes leadership in Hong Kong schools.

Deep Structures and Constitution

At present there are approximately 1275 primary, secondary and special schools in Hong Kong. Of these about 5% are “government”⁴ schools and over 83% are subsidised (or aided) schools—the remainder are either private, international or DSS schools (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2002). Our interest here is with the subsidised schools sector and how their governance is constituted. At present there are 341 different SSBs (all are non-profit-making bodies) operating under the education ordinance or Code of Aid. Theoretically, the education ordinance provides the Secretary of Education and Manpower⁵ with broad-ranging powers over schools, but in reality, as long as schools steer clear of major political activity, ostensibly follow the curriculum and language policy and do not rock the boat, the central authority rarely becomes involved in their life or operation. In fact, some of the larger SSBs and principals of “famous schools” are so influential in their own right that they can scupper or at least weaken policy that diverges from their position or may harm their independence (Bush & Jackson, 2002; Leung & Chan, 2001).

This Hong Kong situation can be difficult to understand in that, under the Code of Aid, subsidised schools, once established, are almost totally funded (the SSB contributes the initial cost of furnishing and equipping the premises) through the public purse according to the same formula regardless of location, sponsorship or prestige (Postiglione, 1992). In effect, they are publicly funded but privately operated institutions. The list of the 341⁶ sponsoring bodies makes fascinating reading and reflects the scattered ideological development of education over the past few decades. School sponsors include an huge assortment of religious bodies (with various divisions within these sometimes forming their own SSBs), charitable organisations, district associations, formalised collections

of Old Boys associations, clubs, trade and merchant associations and clan-based groups. The ten largest SSBs oversee approximately 410 schools, 160 SSBs run multiple schools (ranging from two to 99 schools) and 182 SSBs each operate one school only. The SSB is responsible for appointing a supervisor and an unpaid School Management Committee (SMC) for each school under its umbrella. Although there are currently efforts in train to include teachers and parents on the SMCs, at present they mainly involve people who are not involved in day-to-day school affairs or in school policy making.

Although the issue is under rigorous challenge, there have traditionally been few firm guidelines in place for appointing supervisors, or the number of schools a supervisor or SMC member can serve⁷. In some SSBs it is rumoured that supervisors are those who donate considerable amounts of money to the SSB; in others they are drawn from religious orders or specific church communities only. Some SSBs appoint principals from other schools (or, in a small number of cases, from their own school) to act as supervisors and it is not uncommon for business leaders to take up the position. Though largely unstated, particularly in primary schools in rural areas, supervisors are sometimes appointed on the basis of family, clan or business relationships. Supervisors have considerable legal responsibility and often work closely with the principal in policy and personnel decisions, although this is not always the case and the level of involvement can vary widely. In some schools, supervisors are involved only symbolically whereas in others they are invasive. The relationship between the supervisor and the principal is paramount in determining what happens in the school—this relationship can be influenced by the number of schools a supervisor supervises. Of the SSBs running multiple schools, approximately 75 SSBs appoint one supervisor to one school whereas approximately 85 appoint one supervisor to take care of a number of schools. At the top of this range, for example, Po Leung Kuk (one of the largest SSBs) appoints only one supervisor for its 47 schools.

The portrait that emerges is one of a system that is decentralised and fragmented in terms of ideologies, linkages and practices. Although often held up as being centralised, in essence, the system is one that breeds unevenness in terms of quality, focus and independence. Given that the norm in most SSBs is that the supervisor leaves the school principal firmly in charge of internal operation, it is also one that has shaped and continues to shape principal leadership and power relations within the school. This can be seen in a number of aspects that operate within the SSB system.

Depending on the size and norms of the SSB, school principals have almost absolute authority over staff selection and promotion⁸. Although it is by no means the rule, it is not unusual for teachers, particularly from more prestigious schools, to return to their “mother schools” to teach—this association often provides them with a selection advantage. Much more common is that teachers in subsidised schools tend to stay teaching in the same school, or at least the same SSB for most, if not all, of their careers. This is understandable given that it is difficult to move between schools and SSBs. Sponsoring bodies, principals and schools may have a tendency to look after their own and value staff longevity and loyalty.

Given the extended tenure of teachers and the tendency for both schools and SSBs to remain relatively insular, promotion positions are often at a premium. This is compounded by a practice that seems to dictate that if a person leaves a particular SSB (one that oversees multiple schools) or school, and takes a position in another school, they must normally start again at the bottom of the internal hierarchy and begin the long trek to promotion all over again. As principals (sometimes with their supervisors) hold considerable discretion over promotion within schools, teachers seeking advancement may tend to be careful not to alienate or antagonise the principal and so jeopardise their chances. On occasions when supervisors do become involved in promotional decisions, there is a risk of them using undue influence. For example, while investigating the dilemmas faced by a group of Hong Kong principals, Walker and Dimmock (2000) interviewed a principal who was faced by a supervisor championing the promotion of a close personal associate over a trusted professional. Against his better judgement, the principal went along with the supervisor's choice. He explained his feeling thus:

The rest of the teachers felt uncomfortable with the decision. I tried to explain it, but how can you explain it? I can't say a teacher got promoted because he was related to a school manager ... it is not fair to them. (p. 16)

Principals are selected by the school SMC which is constituted by the SSB. The size of the sponsoring body has a marked effect on how principals are selected, and, subsequently, on issues of availability and quality. School Sponsoring Bodies can very roughly be divided into three groups. Small SSBs manage only one school or two schools, medium SSBs from two to ten schools, and large sponsoring bodies ten schools or more. In small SSBs principals are almost always selected from within the sponsoring body; this is true even when the SSB goes through the façade of open advertisement. Part of the criteria for selecting principals may well be their proven long-term affiliation and loyalty to the school. Some SSBs, particularly at the primary school level, have also faced accusations that some principals are selected on grounds more of relational connections than of ability. Medium-sized SSBs seem to follow a similar process, although principals may also, at times, be appointed from among teachers of other affiliated schools (within the same SSB). Only very occasionally might a new principal be brought in from outside. In large SSBs there is relatively more opportunity for movement or promotion within schools under the same SSB, but the situation of new principals being brought in to head schools from "outside" remains more the exception than the rule⁹.

Large SSBs tend to have their own succession planning mechanisms. Even though the selection of principals may be constrained by factors such as religion, gender or even relationships, depending on the beliefs of particular sponsoring bodies, as a general rule the larger the SSB, the more chance there is that a principal will come from other than an affiliated school. Such appointments may accompany crises or major changes in direction. As noted, though, there remains a far greater probability that promotion will come from within the SSB

and it seems very difficult to move between SSBs. The rule appears to be that the longer you stay, the harder it is to move. As a result, in all types of sponsoring bodies, principals tend to stay in the one school for much of their career as a school head. This phenomenon of “home-grown” principals is borne out, for example, by the fact that, of the 93 new principals taking up posts in September 2002, approximately 42% became principals in the same school within which they already worked. Although figures are unavailable, one suspects that if appointments were similarly analysed in terms of SSBs, the percentages would be even higher.

In summary, the diffuse nature of the formal structure of education in Hong Kong, the historically ingrained decentralisation of school personnel management functions and the subsequent propagation of sponsoring bodies with diverse practices, ideologies and cultures have led to a situation where the SSBs, not the government, control the selection and promotion of principals and teachers. Through its policy of allowing a multiplicity of sponsors, the government ensured that no one group would come to exert undue influence and thereby have overall control of education. Ironically, this, in many ways, now inhibits the Education and Manpower Bureau from exerting the control it desires to to revamp the outdated Code of Aid and increase the responsibility and accountability of the SSBs (Leung & Chan, 2001).

Deep Structures and Traditional Culture

A second key element in the development and preservation of deep leadership structures in Hong Kong schools is culture (Walker & Dimmock, 2002a). In terms of education, cultural influence works iteratively with the constitution of the SSB system. When discussing traditional culture as comprising an important antecedent of deep leadership structures it should not be regarded as a static creation; cultures constantly shift and recreate themselves in reaction with mutating sociopolitical-economic conditions. However, there are elements of culture which seem to endure because they are cased so deeply within the collective psyche and reinforced continually through various institutions and human interactions. In Hong Kong, traditional culture may be more impenetrable in some organisations than in others. Because of the SSB system and its almost feudal fragmentation of educational governance and accompanying functions, individual and/or collections of aided schools may well be among the more impervious of organisations.

As noted earlier, Lau (1982) used the term “utilitarianistic familism” to refer to one of the key interrelated ingredients of, among other things, the development of Hong Kong and the apolitical nature of its Chinese population. This has left a resilient mark on the attitudes and behaviour of people in Hong Kong. Further comment by Lau (for example, see Lau, 1982; 1988), however, suggests that this form of familism has been steadily declining in Hong Kong since the mid-1970s. Whereas this is undoubtedly the case given the shifting nature of culture, equally, influential elements of what can be termed “traditional” Chinese culture endure

and will probably continue to do so. As Lau (2000) recently commented while discussing Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty,

It is also likely that, despite all sorts of conflicts, the Hong Kong identity and the larger Chinese identity will become increasingly complementary inasmuch as claiming the Hong Kong identity not only does not involve denying one's Chinese identity, but also acts to reinforce it. (p. 281)

In terms of education development in Hong Kong, it can be argued, enduring customs and socialisation primarily, though not exclusively, sheathe strong elements of traditional culture within deep leadership structures and influence how people think, act and behave. These may have endured more in schools than in most other organisations because of the blinkered development of individual institutions and SSBs, government non-intervention and aspects of family socialisation.

It is not the purpose here to detail traditional Chinese culture¹⁰, but some brief explanation is necessary, since its dominant norms seem to typify much of what happens inside many schools in Hong Kong. In the most basic of terms, traditional Chinese culture emphasises a morally based social order to achieve harmony. This harmony, according to Munro (1969, cited in Leung, 1996), rests on three elements:

The first element is a collection of occupational positions, every one having its own "job description". Second, there is the hierarchical relationship between these positions. Third, a formalized code of behaviour, variously affecting the occupants of each place in the hierarchy, ties the whole together; the social virtues are realized by individuals who abide with this code. (p. 23)

In organisational terms, this translates to dutiful participation in a "hierarchical, morally sanctioned division of labour" (Leung, 1996). A number of leading features of traditional (agrarian) cultures as they underpin organisational behaviour flow from this understanding. The first is that people are judged by their contribution to the collectivity and how well they do their often minutely prescribed jobs. The interests of this collectivity, harmony and order (to the organisation) are more important than those of the individual. Individuals are expected to put the organisation first, and the moral standard is a reciprocal one, that is, it applies equally to formal leaders and workers. The second feature is that being at the top of a hierarchy gives one the right to lead and interfere in any sphere of operation. This means that leaders should not be openly criticised or confronted, and that they are assumed to have all the answers. The flip side of this is that leaders should not openly criticise workers and should protect them and their livelihood—security in return for respect and obedience. Loyalty in terms of longevity and maintaining one's position is highly valued. A third feature is that conflict is the antithesis of order and harmony and is therefore to be avoided if at all possible, especially within the bounds of the preceding two features.

While individual schools and principals obviously differ, recent research in Hong Kong suggests that, in general, traditional values continue to be stored in deep structures. For example, research into principalship in Hong Kong suggests

that the dilemmas faced by principals are multifaceted with regard to their sources and constituent elements; and are generally related to harmonious relationships among colleagues, and respect for hierarchy or seniority (Walker & Dimmock, 2000). This research showed that principals' attempts to manage the most complex problems seemed invariably dependent at least in part on values, particularly the urgent need to maintain harmonious relationships within the school, rather than a reliance on personal or professional beliefs. Likewise, while discussing teacher education and empowerment, Lo (2002) suggests that Chinese schools must be understood "in the context of hierarchy, acquiescence and conformity" (p. 26). Referring specifically to Hong Kong and the Chinese Mainland, he explains that teachers are not active seekers of professional status and political influence, and that their regard for hierarchy and deference towards people on the basis of position make it awkward, and even undesirable, to promote personal views in open forums. Teachers in Hong Kong schools, for example, are reluctant to confront superiors, express dissent and criticise peers. As discussed below, therefore, policy attempting to mandate changes in power relationships based on Western organisational thought in the hope of opening school-level decision making has little chance of success, especially in classrooms. In addition, such structures may risk upsetting the *status quo* through causing embarrassment and even resentment.

Further research findings suggest that Hong Kong principals practise a type of remote leadership in which strong, almost autocratic, leadership is expected not only by principals themselves, but also by teachers (Walker & Dimmock, 2002b). Such findings may suggest that shared leadership, for example, regardless of what the policy proposes, is difficult given the deep leadership structures in many schools. This is borne out by existing power dynamics within many Hong Kong schools, which also appear to reflect traditional values. For example, disputes are often settled in private, not through open debate, and decisions are normally made before meetings even commence (Lo, 2002). It is important here to note that this does not imply that teachers in schools do not have opinions, do not attempt to influence change or are not interested in school affairs—rather, it indicates that their involvement is not operationalised through open structures and tends to be hierarchically bounded. Teachers in Hong Kong are involved at various levels in their own ways in decisions in their schools—even if this is not structurally obvious.

As noted above, traditional values also influence promotion. Leaders are often promoted according to their loyalty (usually defined in terms of longevity, age, religion, seniority and duty to the school and/or SSB) in order to maintain continuity and harmony. Such relationships appear underpinned by a belief that people must be carefully observed and have formed trusting relationships before they can take a position of leadership. An extended period of close acquaintance can also be seen as necessary to ensure the safeguarding of organisation harmony, or at least surface harmony, and so preserve the public image of the school and avoid conflict, within both the school and the SSB. These issues are discussed further below.

In summary, the influence of traditional cultural values seems to endure in many Hong Kong schools. Associated values interact within a mutually sustaining relationship with the SSB constitution to maintain deep leadership structures that help determine beliefs and behaviour in schools. Given the fragmented and insular nature of school governance in Hong Kong and the continued inability of the central government to influence key in-school processes, schools and school principals perhaps more than most organisations continue to operate according to deep leadership structures that have accumulated with minimal change over the last few decades¹¹. This is not to claim that there has been no change, or that some schools, SSBs and principals have not undermined some aspects of this structure but rather to say that, in general, its power remains an inescapably influential factor in leadership processes in schools.

Deep Structures in Action

The deep leadership structures discussed above help to define school leadership in Hong Kong and, collectively, to differentiate it from leadership in other societies. Depending on the perspective taken, the structures can be understood to be either supportive or obstructive to better school leadership and educational change. Two brief examples illustrate the complexity of this suggestion. The first looks at the issue of principal selection and the second at one small aspect of recent reform, that of promoting teacher and parent participation. Both issues can be seen as part of a reform agenda designed to rein in the power and independence of SSBs and reshape the role of the principal. In terms of empowerment, Leung and Chan (2001) express a view that School Based Management (SBM) reforms (beginning with SMI) are little more than managerial imperatives intended to re-regulate the relationship between the central authority and the SSBs. In their view, calls for “decentralisation” are mainly intended to increase control over SSBs, rather than to empower teachers or parents.

Principal Selection and Quality

As it stands, the selection of principals is in reality the responsibility of hundreds of disparate bodies. Recent reforms either implemented or proposed aim to take greater control in this area, as well as over the appointment of supervisors and members of SMCs. If one takes the view that those close to the school—with intimate knowledge of what it aims to achieve—are better placed than detached bureaucrats to know the type of leader required by a school, then the present system may actually appear close to ideal. However, if one views the situation from a broader perspective, major problems of equity and quality can emerge. A tension between such views is presently being played out in Hong Kong. Both sides suggest their way as the best way forward. While the central agency attempts to gain more control over principalship quality and appointment, the SSBs argue strongly that their assurance methods are already

sound and that their rights of selection and self-control should not be challenged. To date, this tension has largely been resolved through compromise with little real change resulting and SSBs managing to retain much of their influence.

Concerns for quality can also be identified in the ways the SSB system interacts within enduring cultural norms and behaviours. There are obvious advantages in teachers and principals working long term in the same environment and having an intimate knowledge and understanding of it. However, if progression and promotion hinge only on loyalty, years of experience, status, seniority, or personal, religious or ideological affiliation, etc., the efficacy of the system can be seriously questioned. Even if those selected are first-rate practitioners, there often endures an emphasis on leading today's rather than tomorrow's schools. In reality, some of the principals selected are excellent, but relatively widespread undertones of favouritism continue, particularly in some primary and religious schools (Walker, Stott & Cheng, 2003).

Participation and Empowerment

The second illustration relates to policy designed to empower teachers and parents to become meaningfully involved in school-level decision making, including through the SMC (see Walker, 2003). For example, recent reform attempts to control involvement in SMCs through amending the education ordinance were so vigorously opposed by some influential principals and SSBs that the policy stalled for some time, and this produced a watered-down outcome (Leung & Chan, 2001; also see note 7). Through such action, the established deep leadership structures demonstrate their ability to confound centralised moves to reduce their power. Again, whether this holds positive or negative implications is a case for conjecture. If one takes that view that decentralising reforms are actually harmful to schools because of the reality that they shift extra power to the centre, then the strength of strong leadership structures can be seen in a positive light. In other words, if the reforms that seek to usurp the power of SMCs and principals are perceived as actually interfering with local control in favour of a centralised ideology, the deep structures are protective. On the other hand, if the failure of the reforms means that SMCs continue to be made up of people with little real knowledge, interest or expertise for improving education—and in the process exclude parents and teachers—resistant structures may be seen as detrimental.

Similarly, reforms proposed to promote teacher and parent participation have generally been thwarted. Such moves began with SMI, and although the initiative is widely considered to have failed, the thrust has continued in various guises. Leung and Chan (2001) explain that participatory management that is “based on the principle of equality and a contractual relationship between the boss and subordinates—is culturally alien to a Chinese society like Hong Kong” (p. 242). They argue that these approaches, originally cloned from Australia, depend too much on a culture of individualism which simply

does not hold in Hong Kong. Leung and Cheung explain that Hong Kong differs sharply from Australia in that it has “retained considerable elements which support hierarchical power relationships between junior and seniors” (p. 243). Such sentiments are supported by M. B. Cheung (2000), who states, “the large power distance (in Hong Kong) traditionally renders the principal the most powerful figure in the school ... His/her administrative decisions are final and to be obeyed without question” (p. 241).

The other side of the same structural empowerment coin is that teachers and parents are themselves reluctant to engage in shared decision making. In societies like Hong Kong, vertically aligned cultural systems mean people not only accept but expect substantial power differentials based on position and status. Similarly, parents in Hong Kong are often reluctant to actively participate in school-level decision making. “Schools are seen as irresponsible if such decisions have to rely on parents who are not supposed to be professionals in education” (Cheng, 1995, p. 97). In high power distance societies, it is difficult for principals to encourage others to become openly and honestly involved in decision making, even if they want to. In many cases, principals are seen as neglecting their leadership role if they do not take a strong personal stand. Leung and Chan (2001) summarise the influence of deep leadership structures on the increased participation and empowerment of teachers and parents:

The Chinese community in Hong Kong seems to have retained considerable elements which support a hierarchical power relationship between seniors and juniors. Since management is culture-bound, it would be unrealistic to expect top-down structural reform will effectively introduce an attitudinal change in organisations. If reforms are to be successful, they require a strong commitment and a change of values and attitudes on the part of leaders and subordinates. If the relationship between the principal and teachers in most schools remains too hierarchical and authoritarian it would be too optimistic to expect the school authorities to allow parents, whom they considered as uninformed outsiders, a bigger say in running schools. (p. 245)

Impediments to broader participation in schools can also be seen from various perspectives. For example, if schools and SSBs resist reforms that force teachers to take on ever-increasing workloads in the name of “participation”, and so harm student learning, resistance may be justified. However, if structural intractability is seen as impeding meaningful change, by, for example, demearing teacher professionalism or reducing student opportunity to learn through imposing unwarranted accountability or student allocation mechanisms, then the deep leadership structures may be seen as negative. As with the issue of principal selection, deep leadership structures form a double-edged sword and can be perceived as simultaneously protecting and hindering schools.

Conclusion

This article aims to contribute to an understanding of principalship in Hong Kong through identifying the deep structures that have influenced and to a large extent continue to influence how leadership is practised, and, subsequently, how

reforms are perceived and implemented in schools. Deep structures were conceptualised as power relationships that define action and behaviours in schools and across the wider system. Given the uniqueness of the Hong Kong system, where the state is the provider but in no way the dominant direct supplier of education, such deep structures may be more influential in schools than in other organisations. Change has happened slowly and still does so, and occasionally breaks the enduring influence of constitution and culture. For example, power relationships have shifted somewhat in some schools as teachers become increasingly involved across levels, individual principals react more freely and positively to meeting student needs and some SMCs look beyond their immediate circle for future principals. As Hong Kong education continues to transform as part of an ever mushrooming China, the hybridity that has typified Hong Kong's existence will continue to shape schools and school leaders. It may be that the dynamic tussle between existing structures and values, and those accompanying ongoing reform efforts, will mingle to further define the uniqueness of Hong Kong's school leadership for the benefit of its students.

Notes

1. Gordon (2002) acknowledges that deep structures can be interpreted in different ways, depending on one's theoretical preference. For example, cultural theorists may interpret "structures" as related to cultural rather than structural forms, and genealogists may see them as "being synonymous with that of an archaeology of order" (p. 152). My interpretation in this paper is that deep structures are formed through a dynamic relationship between constitution and culture and that these have formed bounded "codes" of understanding, conduct and behaviour that shape principalship in Hong Kong and subsequent relations with both teachers and superiors.
2. For more information on the history of education in Hong Kong since 1945 see the work of Leung (1996), Morris & Sweeting (1991), Sweeting & Morris (1993), Sweeting (1990; 1995). See Jones (1990) and Sweeting (1990) for pre-1945 perspectives.
3. For an excellent description of changes in the lead-up to the change of sovereignty and discussion of how these are similar and different to those in other colonies see Bray & Lee (1997) and Lee & Bray (1997). For perspectives on principals' perception of the change of sovereignty see Dimmock & Walker (1997) and Walker & Dimmock (1998).
4. Government schools are run directly by the government and are governed by civil service regulations. As a consequence, appointment and promotions are based on seniority and a common appraisal process.
5. In 2002 the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) and the Education Department (ED) were amalgamated to form an overarching educational body, adopting the title of the former. There is no longer a Director of Education; rather, there is a politically appointed Secretary for Education and Manpower and a Permanent Secretary for Education and Manpower drawn from the ranks of the Public Service bureaucracy.
6. This included the English School Foundation (ESF) schools as one sponsoring body.
7. The recent Education (Amendment) Bill 2002 aims to exert further control of the composition of the SMC or Incorporated Management Committee (IMC). Among other things, the Bill recommends that SMCs become incorporated bodies; prescribes SMC membership; requests the development of a constitution, including information about composition, election, principal selection, etc; requests public declaration of the interests of SMC members; limits the number of SMCs on which a person can serve to five; and sets benchmarks for involvement in SMC meetings.

8. Beyond numerous anecdotal accounts it is difficult to substantiate these claims from the literature, especially that written in English. As far as I can discover, there have been no rigorous studies that have investigated the influence of SSBs on internal school operation and leadership. Therefore the discussion is necessarily both limited and tentative. It is hoped that through beginning discussion in the area, further studies into the phenomenon may result. The Audit Department conducted a survey in some schools querying the control and process of progression and promotion in practice. In reality, the bigger the SSB, the greater the centralised approval of promotion required.
9. Some claims have been made that the EMB (when working as the Education Department) actually encouraged internal promotion by requiring “non-home-grown” principals to undergo a two years’ probation period, but not requiring this of their “home-grown” peers.
10. For further understanding of Chinese culture from a psychological perspective see Bond (1996); from a sociological perspective see Lau (1988). For an interesting discussion on Asian values see Patten (1998). The discussion here is drawn from Leung (1996).
11. This is not to say that the central authorities cannot exert considerable pressure on schools and SSBs. For example they hold leverage over all SSBs through their power to decide which SSBs are allocated new schools and through involving selected principals only in government committees and working groups. At a more micro level, the establishment of the Quality Education Fund (QEF) has also initiated some change through encouraging principals to rely more on teachers for expertise and implementation. Government-promoted competition also pressures schools to change, as does the increasing activity of the media.

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