

We Don't Need No Education

Thought control in the classroom is real -- and it works.

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It was the summer of 2012, and Hong Kong was in an uproar. The pro-Beijing government's attempts to put in place a so-called "patriotic education" curriculum -- one with lessons similar to those taught in mainland China -- were met with howls of protest across the city. The government claimed it was only trying to further a more thorough understanding of Chinese culture and history. Hong Kong, of course, operates under different laws that provide greater rights and freedoms than the mainland. And Hong Kongers, ever defensive of their way of life, took to the streets by the tens of thousands.

Teenagers gave impassioned speeches; students went on hunger strikes; parents cried that their children should not be brainwashed.

Did the protesters overreact? After all, the hubbub was just about textbooks -- not the outright denial of free speech or another right.

In fact, a new study indicates that those decrying "thought control" were right to worry:

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A group of economists from universities in the United States, Hong Kong, China, and Germany set out to measure how much a government can influence the thinking of its citizenry via education. They examined changes to the mainland Chinese high school curriculum that were rolled out between 2004 and 2010, with the explicit goal of turning potentially rebellious students into upstanding members of the Communist Party's harmonious society. A 2001 Education

Ministry document explained that the curriculum sought to "form in students a correct worldview, a correct view on life, and a correct value system."

To find out whether the changes worked, the researchers conducted a survey of the political views of 2,000 students at Peking University, some of whom had studied under the new curriculum and some of whom had not. Noam Yuchtman, one of the paper's authors, said the team had doubts that the reforms had been effective. After all, citizens know that the Chinese government is inclined toward indoctrination, and the university's students are among the country's brightest.

Turns out, the new curriculum worked like a charm. The authors found that students who studied it were more likely to view China's system as democratic and more likely to trust government officials, and they were more suspicious of unrestrained, American-style capitalism. (The government's attempts to influence students' attitudes toward ethnic minorities were less successful, as were its efforts to convince students to prioritize the environment over economic growth.)

Yuchtman and his co-authors show that the stakes of education disputes -- whether they're waged over Chinese national values, evolution, or World War II history -- are high. The researchers warn against classroom content that is manipulated to benefit a country's elite, by glossing over its historical wrongdoings, for example.

In Hong Kong, the government eventually backed down. The "patriotic education" plans have been put on ice, and the rowdy protests have ceased. Hong Kong students won't have to worry about being another brick in the wall -- at least for now.

Illustration by Pete Ryan for FP

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