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INTERNATIONAL



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Students from mainland China have been recruited by the U. of Hong Kong, which sees them as crucial to its goal of being internationally competitive.

Hong Kong's Universities See the Mainland as Fertile Ground for Recruiting Students

Their numbers are small, but they are expanding the region's academic influence

BY JIANG XUEQIN

TAYLOR SUN'S PARENTS work at Peking University, China's most highly regarded liberal-arts institution. He has lived since birth in the housing complex opposite the campus, and he went to the university's elementary school and high school. When he took the national matriculation examination, he scored high enough to attend Peking. His parents were proud and his classmates envious—but Mr. Sun decided that it was time for a move.

In late August, after the Chinese University of Hong Kong offered him a scholarship as an information-engineering major, he joined a steady trickle of mainland students heading for the former British colony. Now in the middle of his first year, he is still struggling with Cantonese—the variety of Chinese spoken in Hong Kong. And he is still trying to make friends, and still trying to decipher the enclave's bus routes.

"When I have time to myself, I like to go wandering, but I get lost a lot," says Mr. Sun, a tall, rotund 18-year-old. "What I like about Hong Kong is that I can make decisions for myself and take chances, finally."

Four years after Britain returned its colony to China, mainland students are a fixture in Hong Kong's higher-education system. Once virtually banned from studying here, mainland students are now important assets for Hong Kong's struggling universities, particularly the top two. Although mainland undergraduates make up only 1 percent of the student populations at the University of Hong Kong and at its rival, the Chinese University, administrators

say they play a vital and growing role. The University of Hong Kong sees mainland talent as crucial to its goal of being internationally competitive; Chinese University plans to become the center of education in southern China, aiming eventually to attract one-third of its students from the mainland.



Kenneth Young, of the Chinese U. of Hong Kong: "The freedom of discourse is newer for mainlanders, so they take advantage of it."

Both participate in a new program that permits them to recruit mainland students.

But both universities must first overcome the cultural misunderstandings between the mainland and Hong Kong. For decades, residents of Hong Kong, long one of Asia's chief centers of entrepreneurial capitalism, considered China a poor, backward dictatorship where inveterate Communists ruled over country bumpkins. In turn, mainlanders decried what they saw as Hong Kong's crass materialism and smug individualism. Indeed, Chinese tourists to Hong Kong still feel discriminated against—for instance, when they are stopped by police officers who suspect them of immigration violations. Recently, Hong Kong's Supreme Court, in a controversial decision, ruled that mainland children of Hong Kong residents are allowed in only on one-month visas. As the mainland economy surges and Hong Kong's falters, officials of the enclave are beginning to rethink the attitude of discrimination against mainlanders—especially students.

MAINLAND TALENT

Four years ago, it was Beijing that forbade mainland undergraduates to study in Hong Kong's universities, for fear that the government would be accused of inundating Hong Kong with mainlanders and threatening the territory's prosperity and autonomy. "It was much harder for Chinese students to get a visa to study in Hong Kong than in the United States," says the University of Hong Kong's registrar, Henry Wai.

But Hong Kong universities felt that they were being denied mainland-student talent.

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so they petitioned China's Ministry of Education to reverse the policy. Eventually the ministry permitted all eight of Hong Kong's public universities to recruit mainland students who have been admitted to universities in the cities of Beijing, Guangzhou, and Shanghai, and in Jiangsu, a province in central China, or who are already studying there. The education ministry requires Hong Kong universities to work with mainland institutions and only permits them to recruit students from those institutions. The University of Hong Kong recruits students from the three best mainland universities—Peking University and Tsinghua University, in Beijing, and Fudan University, in Shanghai. Chinese University recruits from Peking and Fudan. The mainland institutions cooperate reluctantly and try to hang on to their best students. After Mr. Sun got into Peking, he attended a recruitment session and decided to apply to the Chinese University.

Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust, the philanthropic branch of a popular horse-racing track, donated the equivalent of \$17-million last year to pay for three-year scholarships for 450 mainland students to study in Hong Kong, in an attempt to improve relations between Hong Kong and the mainland. The first batch of 150 students arrived in 1999, with 30 students each going to the two leading Hong Kong universities. Despite public wariness about mainlanders, the Hong Kong government expressed support for the effort, last year passing legislation to permit students from the mainland to stay in Hong Kong and work after graduation.

ACTIVE RECRUITING

The University of Hong Kong hopes to recruit as many as 500 mainland students next year, up considerably from the 30 new students recruited this year. Financing for the additional students remains to be found.

The University of Hong Kong now has 420 research graduate students and 90 undergraduates from the mainland. "They're impressive," says Ian Davies, the vice chancellor. "There's always been concern about these mainland students taking jobs away from Hong Kong students, but Hong Kong students can learn much from these mainlanders, especially Chinese culture."

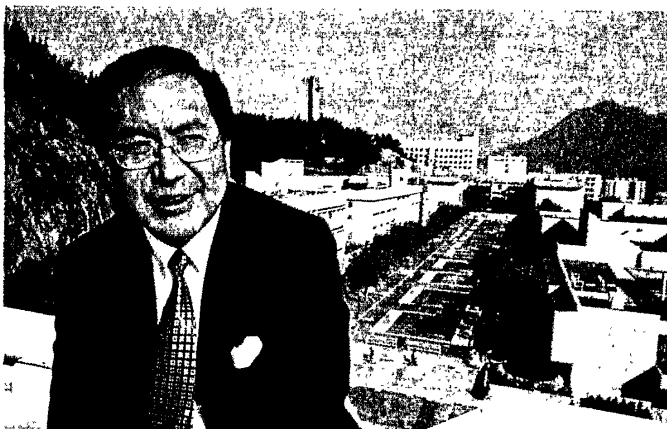
Kenneth Young, pro vice chancellor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, says close to 95 percent of the foreign graduate students on that campus are from the mainland. Indeed, 44 percent of the candidates studying for doctorates in Hong Kong—776 out of 1,758—are from the mainland.

Gerard Postiglione, director of the Wah Chung Center of Research on Education in China, at the University of Hong Kong, says the enclave's universities are recruiting mainland students because the academic skills of Hong Kong students, especially in English communication, are decreasing. "Hong Kong students are provincial and utilitarian," he says. "It's true that Hong Kong students can say whatever they want, but the freedom of discourse is newer for mainlanders, so they take advantage of it."

The university's mainland recruitment, however, has a selfish goal, according to a campus official who requests anonymity. Its chief purpose, this official says, is to replace its own worst students.

Hong Kong companies are demonstrating a strong preference for students who have studied overseas, in part because the best students there tend to go abroad, and

"Our strategy is to become southern China's education hub," says Arthur Li, the vice chancellor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.



PHOTOGRAPH FOR THE CHRONICLE BY DAVID MCINTYRE. BLACK & WHITE

Mr. Postiglione believes that the enclave's higher-education system must recruit more students and more professors from the mainland to stay competitive.

The Chinese University of Hong Kong has a more ambitious goal: "Our long-term strategy is to become southern China's education hub," says Arthur Li, the vice chancellor. The university's faculty, international profile, and location will attract students from the southern Chinese mainland, which lacks strong universities, he says. "There's a general perception in Hong Kong that it can do without the mainland, but that's a false premise—Hong Kong's success depends on the mainland."

Mr. Li acknowledges that the Chinese University itself does not have a strong brand name on the mainland. That is why the faculty, especially from the business school, is rapidly expanding its presence in China. Besides a prodigious number of academic exchanges and joint-research programs in the department of business administration, the business school—Asia's top business institution, according to London's *Financial Times*—has established a master's program in finance at Tsinghua University and plans to establish an independent master's program in accounting in Shanghai. "One-third of our faculty does China research," says Japhet Law, the business school's dean. "Our No. 1 strategic partner is China."

If the two leading Hong Kong universities want more mainland students, how do mainlanders feel about Hong Kong universities?

Mr. Sun says he finds his days at the Chinese University of Hong Kong busy and fulfilling; when he's not in class or studying, he plays basketball, goes to guest lectures, and often attends dinners held by other mainlanders. He has a cell phone, a personal computer with Internet access, and air conditioning, all luxuries on the mainland. He and a roommate share cramped quarters, but back at Peking University, he would have shared an even smaller room with three other people.

And even the notorious arrogance toward mainlanders no longer seems like such a problem. "The Hong Kong economy is no longer growing as fast as it once did, so Hong Kong people are now insecure and feel threatened by mainland Chinese," says Isabella Wong, director of China affairs at the University of Hong Kong. Mr. Sun concurs:

"There's only a small segment of the student population that looks down on mainlanders, but they just ignore us."

In fact, some mainland students can now look down on their Hong Kong counterparts. Mainland students may not be the best of Peking and Tsinghua, but they perform well academically in Hong Kong's universities, with grades placing them in the top echelons.

"Hong Kong students are really anti-intellectual," says Zhu Hong, a second-year student at the University of Hong Kong who came from the mainland with her family when she was 12. "Mainland students like to talk about international politics and cultural issues, but Hong Kong people are practical and never discuss those issues. It's hard to start a conversation with a Hong Kong student. Some of my mainland friends have said that they regret coming here."

But university officials believe that students from Hong Kong and the mainland have much to learn from each other. "Mainland students are hard-working, keen to learn, have a solid foundation in the sciences and mathematics," says Mr. Wai, the registrar at the University of Hong Kong. "But unlike Hong Kong students, they don't have any hands-on experience and are not used to making their own decisions. Mainlanders respect their professors, but Hong Kong Chinese are willing to express themselves."

COMFORTABLE ROOMMATES

"This program is benefiting all students," says Ms. Wong. "Hong Kong students work harder because of competition from mainland students, and mainland students learn to be more comprehensive and open-minded."

For his part, Mr. Sun agrees: "The benefits of coming to Hong Kong are that I have more freedom and choice and more time for myself. I'm learning to be independent here."

Most mainlanders and Hong Kong students do, in fact, get along well. "When I first came here, my Hong Kong classmates thought I was poor and backward," says Charlie Cao, a third-year student at the University of Hong Kong who came from Shanghai to study information engineering. "But now I have many Hong Kong friends, and we get along well."

"I wanted to live with a mainlanders so I can improve my Chinese," says Wai Fong,



"Hong Kong people are now insecure and feel threatened by mainland Chinese," says Isabella Wong, director of China affairs at the University of Hong Kong.

Mr. Sun's Hong Kong roommate. "I don't think that Hong Kong Chinese stay away from mainlanders because they look down on them. It's mainly the language barrier. But Hong Kong Chinese have realized the importance of the mainland economy and are now working hard to learn Chinese."

On the Chinese University campus, Ruby Lee's dormitory overlooks the green hills of the Hong Kong coastline. A native of Beijing, the second-year business-administration major shares her room with a first-year student from Hong Kong, and as they're laughing and holding hands, Ms. Lee explains that they met in accounting class and are now the best of friends. "When I first came, I just hung out with mainlanders and felt that Hong Kong students looked down on me," she says. "But as my Cantonese improved and I understood Hong Kong Chinese more, I think there's no difference between us."