

“We are for laissez-faire!”
Excellence in Teaching and in being an academic,
the Chinese University of Hong Kong way

To STINT: An Excellence in Teaching Scholarship report

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Introduction

When I applied for the STINT Excellence in Teaching scholarship in the autumn of 2011, I did not specifically write where I would like to go. The list of partner universities at the time consisted of several colleges and universities in the US, as well as two universities in Singapore and one in Hong Kong. I thought it would be interesting to simply see who would express an interest in my qualifications, and had decided to let fate take its course. In February 2012, I was informed that I had been awarded the scholarship and that I would be going to the Chinese University of Hong Kong to work at the Department of History.

When I was young in the 1980s, Southeast Asia was a region I had meant to travel to, but studying and working got in the way. Being given the chance to experience life in a part of the world one has never visited is a gift in itself, both as a kind of personal development and as a way of becoming a better historian and teacher. I was, and still am, very grateful for the opportunity to experience teaching history in a region so very different from Sweden, and one of the most valuable aspects of my semester was the immersion in a culture where Asia, of course, is the centre of attention, and Europe, in particular Scandinavia, is on the periphery, to some extent. It has taught me a lot.

Preparatory visit

I arranged to visit the university in early May and was given an excellent schedule by Yvonne Heung. I was given a general overview of the university and the department, and then had scheduled meetings with several of the lecturers and professors of the department. I had been given a choice of three courses, one on Ancient and Medieval Western History, and two on World History, and chosen the first as I felt that I was not sure what would constitute an appropriate treatment of the world from a Hong Kong perspective. During my visit I also took the chance to walk around Campus and to discover its best parts, my favorite being the beautiful Alumni Trail, a hillside tropical garden linking the Central Campus with Chi Chung College.

My future Teaching Assistant (TA) Dr. Jessie Woo and I met and planned the outline of the

course, Professor Frederick Cheung who had previously taught the course in question gave me good advice and tips, Professor Mu-chou Poo gave an overview of life at CUHK that was very valuable, and Professor Ian Morley gave tips from the perspective of a fellow foreigner in the land.

One thing that struck me when I visited my future colleagues was that no one wanted to grill me on how I usually conduct my teaching. Instead, they were very interested in hearing where I would like to travel. I later realized that this is due to the high regard placed on teachers in the Hong Kong system, and the trust that is placed in the competence of a colleague.

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

The university celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2013, but its history goes back a little further. In 1949, many Chinese academics fled China after the Communist revolution and quite a few came to Hong Kong. Some of these founded a small college, called New Asia College, where they wanted to create a learning environment that fused the best of the Chinese and the Western traditions. In its early days the college rented rooms in the city, and eventually another college, United, was developed. Funds were very limited and the operation of these early academies was dependent on the dedication of both staff and students. There are stories of students fainting from lack of food.

Thus, when in 1963 the Chinese University was founded on a deserted and rather shabby hilltop far away from the centre in what was then a rural area, it represented a distinctly different alternative to the older University of Hong Kong that had been founded by the British on Hong Kong Island in 1911. The Chinese University championed a strong pride in its mission and in its historical heritage. The Chinese medieval academies of the Song and Ming periods were important inspirations. The Chinese University is bi-literate (Chinese and English) and tri-lingual (Putonghua or Mandarin, Cantonese and English). All students are required to take courses in English and Chinese, and courses in general education and physical education are also mandatory. The College system unites students and faculty in a community where communal dining and other activities are important.

My work at the department of History

I taught one course during the semester, *Ancient and Medieval Western History*. This meant that I had one lecture per week, and my Teaching assistant took care of the four tutorials that were arranged during the semester. The central administration schedules the lectures, but not the tutorials. I was given freedom to decide on the examinations, and together with my TA I decided to have one mid-term quiz, compulsory tutorials, and an end-of-term paper. I feel this worked out very well. There was an extensive and very demanding course description listing the literature

for the course, but fortunately I was also free to construct the syllabus for the course.

For each lecture I gave a few titles as recommended reading. Some of the most ambitious students did prepare for the lectures, but some, of course, did not. If a student missed one of the tutorials they had to send in a text to compensate. The grading system was fabulous. Points were given for the performance in the three areas of examination, and the sum of these gave the final grade. This meant that a student who had missed tutorials of course got few points there, but could compensate by doing reasonably well in the other examinations. Grades are given on an A-F axis and calculated so only a certain percentage of the group can get an A, etcetera. Out of 38 students that ended up taking my course no-one failed, which is almost incomprehensible to a Swede. They all did at least the minimum required to get a D or a C-. If we could adopt this system in Sweden, a lot would change for the better for the universities as well as for the students.

In comparison with my normal life in Sweden I had a fantastic semester, with a light but rewarding and stimulating teaching load. I can still feel the positive effects of having been so privileged. I really enjoyed preparing lectures by reading new or highly regarded research on each of the twelve topics, and I also enjoyed being able to use almost exclusively research-based literature in teaching, not textbooks.

Activities during the semester

Apart from teaching I was able to spend time on my research, finishing an article and a few shorter texts. Some of this material was used to improve the lecture PPTs. I participated in the Gender Research Centres' seminar, presenting research on Swedish gender equality and on my own research into the late medieval queenship of Scandinavia.

Most important learning experience

I have greatly benefited from an environment where the focus is on meeting the course requirements, on the part of the students, and on delivering good courses and research on behalf of the staff. At CUHK there seems to be a strong belief in the power of the interest and drive of the individual. Thus the faculty follows their own research interests, and I never heard anyone speaking disparagingly of the interests of another colleague. The concept passion for studies was even used by the university vice-president in his blog on the first page of the CUHK website. I've also seen the great benefits inherent in a system where the faculty is allowed to devote itself to its key tasks – teaching and doing research. The administration deals without hitch with administration, and the students deal with their studies. There is a sense of trust in this system: one has high expectations on each other and the high expectations are realized.

I also think that the key to success in CUHK is that a certain culture has been set, a formula for a course for example, and within that formula the individual lecturers and professors have full freedom to express their research interests and other interests that benefit high quality.

Comparison between the Swedish, or Örebro, and the Hong Kong, or CUHK, systems

Academic excellence is at the core of the work at CUHK. I have the impression in Sweden that the system, whatever that is – the university leadership most often – believe in frequent and massive reorganization as a way to create excellence. This costs quite a lot of money and makes everyone spend time and effort trying to learn the new systems and structures. I do not hesitate to call this a form of bulldozing. Obviously being bulldozed from time to time does not enhance focus on developing research.

At CUHK there is a great belief in the importance of the meeting between student and teacher, and the lecture is considered an important medium of teaching. Students take about four courses per semester that run parallel to each other. Therefore they will have four lectures and on average one tutorial per week. Each class requires preparation. Most teachers produce PowerPoints or other materials for each class and either post them on the main page of the department, or on Blackboard.

The system of Teaching Assistants is excellent and should definitely be considered in Sweden. A position as TA is a position one has to apply for, and thus it is a form of teaching position. The TA's are PhD students, who get an income and teaching experience in a formalized, structured, transparent way. As it is a formal position, it has a job description and those who apply are expected to want to do that kind of work.

What I would like to achieve once back in Sweden

I have two goals regarding my work in Sweden:

1. I would like to advocate a system that respects the time, effort and competence involved in higher education and research.
2. I would also like to encourage the evolution of a system where administrative personnel does administrative work, the students study, and teachers do research and conduct high-quality education where their competence as researchers is utilized.

I was very impressed by the quality of the courses taught at CUHK. The system with fairly frequent lectures for the students, combined with tutorials, and with a combination of quiz and paper for assessment, is very good. I'd also like to examine why so many of the students in a Hong Kong class actually end up finishing the course – in my course of 38 students 100 % finished, some with a poor grade, a few not on time, but many with very good results.

Plans for future contacts

There are some potential arenas for collaboration. One is the Gender Research Center, the multi-disciplinary group that organizes seminars and conferences. Professor Hon Ming Yip from the Department of History is one of the directors of the center. There is also very interesting research on historical anthropology, including religious culture as an important locus of identity and sense of community, that fits very well with my research and teaching interests.

About the programme Excellence in Teaching

The idea of sending Swedish scholars abroad to teach, thus experiencing another academic culture from within, is excellent. I would never have learned as much as I have had I not taught a course at CUHK. Meeting students from a different culture in their own environment has been very thought-provoking. I felt that I returned to Sweden and took up my teaching activities at Örebro University with a new perspective on students, teaching, research and the expectations one can place on such resources as administration.

Advice to future Excellence in Teaching scholars

Hong Kong is a competitive milieu and people are taught to work very hard from a young age. This will mean that the faculty works very hard, often on individual projects. The positive side of this is that you are free to do the same. However, there can also be an experience of loneliness. I encourage future scholars to use the means of interaction that are available outside Campus, such as the Swedish Church (Svenska kyrkan i utlandet) if one is thus inclined, and the Swedish Chamber of Commerce (www.swedcham.com.hk). There is a group called Young Professionals within the Chamber of Commerce that is worth checking out. For women there is the association SWEA, gathering Swedish women in foreign lands for various social activities. Also, do ask people to go to lunch with you, people are extremely kind and gracious and really want visitors to enjoy Hong Kong.

One might consider studying Chinese. There are courses given on Campus. The Campus in itself offers a lot of opportunities for sport, and the libraries are excellent. As for the travelling mentioned in the introduction, well, one could fill a whole semester just visiting the various fascinating regions around Hong Kong. I visited Cambodia and found it fascinating of course. China is so immense and fascinating that it can be a little daunting, but there are of course a number of itineraries worth exploring. People will probably also tell you to go to Taiwan, Japan, Burma, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia and so on, and everyone has his or her favourite destinations. Travel to a few of the places and dream about the rest that is how I managed to travel while still getting the work done.

If one stays at one of the Colleges there is communal dining. Check the College website and

contact one of the academics listed there. Ask them to meet for lunch. That way you have the opportunity to meet some of the very highly qualified scholars of the CUHK in a non-office setting.

The quote in the title of my report is from a statement during the first week of the semester in September 2012. Students and faculty were protesting against the introduction of compulsory national education in Hong Kong. Why was this a problem? There were of course several reasons, but one that was given in a very assertive way had to do with the culture of Hong Kong: “We are for *laissez-faire!*” I felt that the remark summed up very much about the history and culture of this particular, very proud, region.