

**STINT Teaching Sabbatical – Gender Studies Program, Chinese University of Hong Kong**

**Autumn 2019**

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The SINO building on the CUHK campus and the logo of the Gender Studies Program – Photo: Sebastian Mohr

## **Preparation and planning**

The official first contact from my side with the host institution was at the beginning of January 2019 when I contacted the program director and administrator of the Gender Studies Program at CUHK. The purpose of this contact was to introduce myself and to coordinate the initial visit at CUHK during the spring of 2019 as part of which the details of my assignment during the sabbatical were discussed. Following this first contact, Olivia Kwok, the Program Officer at CUHK's office of Academic Links contacted me and informing me about possible places to stay during the initial visit in the spring of 2019, visa requirements, accommodation during the sabbatical itself, and arrangements for my partner (who was accompanying me throughout the whole sabbatical) to audit classes at CUHK over the duration of our stay in Hong Kong.

The fall and spring semesters at CUHK are referred to as Term 1 and Term 2 respectively. Classes in Term 1 (the fall semester) start at the beginning of September and end at the beginning/middle of December. Term 2 (the spring semester) starts at the beginning of January and ends in the middle/at the end of April. My initial visit at CUHK was in the middle of April 2019 (for the duration of one week) in order to be able to meet all teachers of CUHK's Gender Studies Program. For the sabbatical itself, I stayed in Hong Kong from the middle of August until the end of December. The administrator for the Gender Studies Program, Alexandra Lau, helped to coordinate all those dates, and the final dates for both the initial visit and the sabbatical itself were confirmed by mid-January 2019. This was very helpful in regard to booking flights and a hotel early on.

The initial visit to meet all teachers at CUHK's Gender Studies Program and to plan my sabbatical in more detail took place April 15<sup>th</sup> to April 20<sup>th</sup> 2019. The program for that visit was coordinated between Olivia Kwok from the Academic Links Office and Alexandra Lau from the Gender Studies Program. The program of the visit included an introduction to CUHK more generally and a campus tour on the first day. The second day was dedicated to meeting everyone at the Gender Studies Program and hearing more about the program itself, the courses offered, and not least talking about what collaborations and assignments during the sabbatical could look like. Here, I also found it very helpful to present my home university and its gender studies program so that my colleagues in Hong Kong could get an idea of what teaching looks like at Karlstad University. I also presented what kind of ideas I had for the sabbatical. The second day also included a lunch with the entire faculty at the Gender Studies Program, which was a wonderful occasion to not only learn about culinary customs but also get to know my new colleagues in a more informal setting. The third day of the initial visit contained visiting classroom activities at the end of the term. For this particular instance, I was allowed to sit-in during students' presentations of BA-theses and thereby got very useful insights into the quality of work of students in the program. Day four and five were spent visiting different apartment offers that could serve as accommodation during the sabbatical. While Olivia Kwok from the Academic Links Office had initially supplied me with some links for short-term apartment rentals, I had on my own researched additional apartment rentals before the April visit and had setup appointments in order to each apartment. Finding the right place for a reasonable amount of money can take time in Hong Kong, so setting aside two days for that is certainly worthwhile.

The outcome of the initial visit was that I would be co-teaching two courses together with a teacher from CUHK and in addition would give a presentation of my research as part of the Gender Studies Seminar Series as well as a presentation of my research for the Sociology Department that provided an office space for me during my visit. Other plans such as developing a summer school together were relayed to the fall. What is important to consider when thinking about whether to co-teach a course with a colleague from CUHK or whether to teach a course by yourself are two things: what do you want to get out of your sabbatical in pedagogical terms and what kind of teaching engagement would be

most suitable for that. I had made the decision that I wanted to learn from my colleagues at CUHK by teaching courses together with them rather than teaching one by myself, an option that promised intensive pedagogical exchange. Yet CUHK's internal way of calculating teaching engagements somehow is counterproductive for such co-teaching engagements since when a CUHK teacher co-teaches a course, it is only counted as being responsible for half of the course thus leading towards that they have to take on additional teaching assignments. In CUHK terms, co-teaching means that one teacher teaches one half of the classes and the second teacher the other half whereas my understanding of co-teaching means to collaboratively design, plan, and teach all classes together. So, when preparing your teaching engagements at CUHK, make sure to keep that in mind and make sure to agree on what co-teaching entails with your respective host department/program.

Further preparation following my initial visit happened via e-mail and personal meetings. Sonia Wong, the colleague that I taught together with, and I exchanged ideas for course plan development, curriculum, and concrete in class exercises and teaching formats before the start of the sabbatical. While some of that planning happened via e-mail throughout the spring and summer of 2019, the biggest part of that preparatory work actually took place in August after arriving in Hong Kong and before the beginning of the term in September. Before the arrival in Hong Kong in August, I had also signed a lease for an apartment (by the middle of May 2019; One Dundas Serviced Apartments in Mong Kok/Yau Ma Tai), sorted out everything necessary for the Visa (Hong Kong only recognizes married partners as dependents, not the Swedish "sambo"), and had confirmed that my partner was able to audit classes at CUHK during the sabbatical. Both the visa arrangements and the arrangements to audit classes was rather easy and were secured with the help of Olivia Kwok from the Academic Links Office and with the help of an officer from the HR-department in regard to the visa application.



Colleagues from the Gender Studies Program – Photo: Sebastian Mohr

### Tasks and responsibilities

Before arriving in Hong Kong for the sabbatical, my host program, the Gender Studies Program at CUHK, and I had agreed upon the following tasks: co-teaching two full-time BA courses (each corresponding to 30 credit points in the Swedish system), two presentations on my ongoing research

at the seminar series in Gender Studies and Sociology respectively, developing teaching collaboration between CUHK and Kau by planning an international graduate summer school, and participation in a Professional Development Course offered by CUHK for its teaching staff. However, due to a sudden and serious illness short after my arrival in Hong Kong (which required hospitalization and subsequent sick leave), this list of tasks was revised. The tasks and responsibilities I had during the sabbatical were thus the following: co-teaching one full-time BA course (corresponding to 30 credit points in the Swedish system) called “Qualitative Research Methods in Gender Studies” together with Sonia Wong, two teaching sessions for the BA course “Understanding Masculinities and Social Change”, one teaching session for the BA course “Family and Society”, one teaching session for the MA course “Feminist Methodologies”, one full-day methods workshop for graduate students in gender studies and sociology, developing teaching collaboration between CUHK and Kau by planning an international graduate summer school, and research presentations as part of the Gender Studies and Sociology Seminar Series respectively.

Co-teaching the BA-course “Qualitative Research Methods in Gender Studies” together with Sonia Wong (approx. 30 first or second semester students) entailed the following tasks and responsibilities:

- developing a course plan with corresponding learning goals, curriculum, examination requirements, and teaching formats and exercises
- weekly teaching preparation meetings between course teachers
- 3 hours of face-to-face teaching for 14 weeks (offline and online)
- approx. 1 hour of student supervision every week
- reading and grading of final research reports

Teaching sessions in other courses comprised the following tasks and responsibilities:

- preparatory meetings with each course leader
- developing a curriculum and teaching format as well as exercises for each session
- 4 sessions of 2 hour face-to-face teaching (offline and online)

The idea for a full-day methods workshop for graduate students from the Sociology and Gender Studies Program developed after a meeting with graduate students short after my arrival in Hong Kong. At that meeting, students told me that they would like more opportunities to get feedback on their graduate research and tips for how to conduct research, approach analysis, or write up their research for thesis chapters, articles, or book chapters. In collaboration with the graduate students, I thus designed a workshop, which had intensive feedback sessions for each participant as its focus and which was organized in research lab/colloquium format (as part of which peers give feedback to each other based on shorter inputs/presentations). The workshop was supposed to take place at the end of November 2019. At that time, however, the protests in Hong Kong had reached CUHK’s campus, which was vandalized and thus a safe teaching environment could not be guaranteed. While I offered students to either conduct the workshop at my apartment instead or to meet online via a video conferencing service, most graduate students had left Hong Kong for personal safety reasons by the time and felt that they could not participate in the workshop.

Developing teaching collaborations between CUHK and Kau by planning a joint international summer school involved several meetings with all teaching staff at the Gender Studies Program. Before those meetings, I had prepared input in relation to what formats such a summer school might take, what administrative/bureaucratic requirements would have to be considered, what funding opportunities are available, and what kind of topics a summer school might touch upon, and what kind of time plan we would need in order to make the summer school a reality. The meetings themselves encompassed



discussion of these inputs and finding a common ground and ideas of how to move ahead. Upcoming tasks in relation to the summer school are described under “Action Plan”.

My research presentations at CUHK during the sabbatical were rather traditional in the sense that they encompassed public lectures of up to 45 min on a topic of my choice from my research with subsequent question and answer sessions with colleagues at CUHK and other members of the audience.



Lennon Wall on CUHK campus – Photo: Sebastian Mohr

## Activities during the Teaching Sabbatical

As described above, I had a number of teaching assignments, both co-teaching and teaching individually, which involved the tasks and responsibilities mentioned earlier. However, the activities during the sabbatical extended beyond that. Some of these activities connected directly to the work at the Gender Studies Program such as participation in teachers and research meetings, taking part in the research seminar series, and joining a supervisor-PhD student workshop. Other activities involved other people and departments at CUHK as well as other scholars in Hong Kong such as attending a one-day session of a professional development course and teaching and research networking with CUHK staff and staff from other universities. Still other activities such as conference participation and scholarly workshops took place outside of Hong Kong.

Teachers meetings involved discussions of course and program development, staffing issues as well as discussions of administrative tasks. Research meetings provided the opportunity to talk about each person's research and writing projects and served as a space in which to discuss shared research

interests. Taking part in the seminar series involved joining my colleagues in attending talks by visiting scholars and acting as a moderator for one of those talks. The supervisor-PhD student workshop was organized and led by a colleague at the gender studies program and involved different activities designed to establish communication between supervisors and PhD students beyond the traditional feedback on drafts of papers or chapters.

Teaching and research networking with other scholars at CUHK and academics at other universities worked pretty much on my own initiative. I informed myself about interesting and relevant scholars in Hong Kong that I would like to meet during the sabbatical and contacted them and setup meetings, either over lunch or coffee, at which we discussed research and teaching. Some of these meetings were one-time events, other meetings led to concrete initiatives for research collaboration. Participation in the Professional Development Course by CUHK had been planned from the very beginning of the sabbatical. Originally, the course encompassed a number of different sessions, but due to a change in plans caused by my sudden illness, I was only able to attend one time. Conference and workshop participation outside of Hong Kong were engagements that I had committed myself to already before the sabbatical and served the purpose of dissemination of results from ongoing research projects as well as research networking.



Students waiting for Graduation Ceremony on CUHK campus – Photo: Sebastian Mohr

### Important lessons

My sabbatical was very much influenced by the social and political situation in Hong Kong in the fall of 2019. Students and teachers at CUHK were directly affected by the protests and to some degree also



involved in them. While gender studies is a discipline that takes the necessity of public engagement of scholarly work very seriously, the experiences in Hong Kong made that necessity even more clear. Thus the most important lesson from the sabbatical is that one cannot do away with the direct relation between one's own teaching/pedagogical practice and the social and political world in which a learning institution such as an university is embedded in. While some parts of the academic environment at CUHK were invested in keeping teaching activities unpolitical and tried to not get them involved in the ongoing political and social dynamics in Hong Kong, it was clear to most colleagues that that was an impossibility. The protests were ubiquitously present on campus through student activities, posters, Lennon Walls, and in conversations. At the same time, there was a feeling of insecurity among students about what to do, how to behave, what side to take, and how to comprehend what was going on. In addition, it also seemed that different groups of students did not necessarily engage with one another or talked to each other about what was going on. The use of digital technologies for the consumption of news about and updates on the protests did not make things easier since some students and colleagues seemed to be absorbed in a constant flow of information about the protests. While of this was going on, my own positionality as a teacher, scholar and person made itself noticeable. Born in East Germany and experiencing the protests that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, enjoying the opportunities of a democratic Germany and unified Europe afterwards, and not least being invested in political activism myself, I felt it a necessity to involve the teaching I was responsible for in the political and social situation. For my colleague, Sonia Wong, and I, this meant that we changed our course from the original plan. While we did not change learning goals or content, we did change the format to reflect our attempt to involve teaching and pedagogy in the social and political situation. Concretely, we made the situation a topic of in our teaching. Not by forcing any specific political view point on students or by forcing them in conversations we were thinking were important. Rather, we provided them with a space in which they themselves could choose what they wanted to address and talk about. Sonia and I saw our task first and foremost as that of moderators who would guarantee that students felt comfortable to share their experiences and talk to one another about what they felt and thought about. This meant that we established ground rules for the discussion: nobody is judged – nobody judges anyone, nobody is discriminated against – nobody discriminates anyone, everyone is treated with respect. Besides those rules, we let students decide what they wanted to address. In order to facilitate the discussion, we organized an anonymous online poll in which students could make suggestions via their mobile phones for what they wanted to discuss. Once we had gathered all suggestions, students themselves (again, anonymously) voted on their suggestions to find those topics that they themselves thought were most relevant to discuss. This voting process lead to the establishment of two different groups: one in which students discussed the current political and social situation and possible solutions for it, and a second group in which students could share their experiences, thoughts, and feelings without necessarily having an opinion on or political statements about the current situation. Sonia and I set aside time for these groups each week and served as moderators, who secured that the ground rules were observed by everyone (language barriers made this a challenge from time to time). Students utilized these open spaces. For some of the students, these spaces were the first time that they got to talk to other students about what was going on. For others, it was an opportunity to vent off frustrations or to simply share how they felt emotionally. Another dimension of these open spaces was that they served as a space in which democratic decisions could be reached through dialogue and that dialogue led to exchanges that were not there otherwise. While students used these open spaces for a few weeks, at some point they informed Sonia and I that they did not feel them necessary any longer. This was not due to the fact that the situation had eased but rather that students felt that they had established a space in which they could communicate to one another without the necessity of an open space. At that point, Sonia and I stopped with the open spaces but communicated to students that the option to re-open them was available at any time. It is

of course hard to assess the success of these kind of pedagogical tools or to even talk about them in terms of success, yet the important lesson from this experience is that teaching is much more than only providing students with knowledge about and experience of a certain scholarly field. Teaching and engaging with students is also about democracy in action, about a sensitivity in regard to privilege and power in the class room, and about the emotional and affective dimensions of interpersonal relationships between students and between students and teachers. It will be hard to be a good teacher and to achieve teaching goals and learning outcomes if one ignores these dimensions.



Students organizing group work during class – Photo: Sebastian Mohr

### **Comparison between the host and the home institution**

The gender studies programs at CUHK and Kau differ in important ways. First of all, while Kau offers the opportunity to get a BA and MA in gender studies, it is not an independent degree program as at CUHK. This means, that students at Kau have a lesser degree of connection to the gender studies program than students at CUHK have. At CUHK, students were very much actively involved in the program through own initiatives and activities. For example, the first semester students of gender studies at CUHK that I taught during my sabbatical had designed their own bag with a logo on it that they sold and used throughout the semester. This led to a larger degree of identification with the program as such. That kind of engagement is lacking at Kau. Another important difference is the international outreach that the CUHK gender studies program has. While most students at CUHK at the BA-level are local students, CUHK also has a rather high number of international students who take gender studies classes. That is not the case at Kau where so far most students are Swedish. In addition, all classes at CUHK are conducted in English (which sometimes leads to challenges with local students who are not always sufficient in English) meaning that the classes themselves are international in



outlook. This is certainly not the case at Kau where there still is an insistence on conducting classes in Swedish prohibiting international outlook in teaching to a certain degree. In regard to the content of classes, CUHK's gender studies program offers a somehow broader spectrum of courses – both in terms of theory and methods – than is the case at Kau. Especially the education in regard to methods and methodologies is better integrated in the course offering at CUHK than at Kau. The gender studies program at CUHK also has courses and activities that directly target actors in the public and private sector outside of the university and therewith connects gender studies students with possible future employers, something that still needs to be developed at Kau. The gender studies program at Kau on the other hand is probably better in utilizing more interaction and dialogue based teaching than the courses given at CUHK, and Kau also is better prepared and further ahead when it comes to offering online and long distance classes. While all teachers at CUHK are formidable in their engagements with students, it seems that the traditional model of giving long lectures rather than group based work and learning activities is preferred. This however is not only the case in gender studies at CUHK. I observed similar dynamics also in other programs. The courses at Kau and what is demanded of students also seem to be better adjusted to student's work loads than at CUHK. While in Sweden the credit system provides for transparency in regard to how many working hours students are supposed to invest into a course (e.g. 202 hours for 7,5 credits) at CUHK that is not very clear and transparent and seems to result in a heavy work load for students in all courses independent of how many credits a student will earn per course. My impression was that students at CUHK were investing many more working hours than Swedish students for comparable courses – something that in the long run might contribute to a work overload among students.



Graffiti on CUHK campus – Photo: Sebastian Mohr

## Recommendations

My recommendations for future sabbaticals at CUHK would be the following:

- Establish contact with your host department/program as early as possible in order to provide you and the host department/program with the opportunity to reach an agreement in regard to assignments, tasks, and responsibilities that works for everyone involved (especially when it comes to wanting to co-teach courses)
- Insist upon that the sabbatical's purpose is to provide a learning outcome for both you as a visitor and the host department/program and that your task is not to substitute for someone else at the host department/program – the sabbatical is a chance for extra activities in regard

to teaching rather than a chance to make up for existing shortcomings at the host department/program

- Inform yourself about the teaching at the host department/program before your initial visit and invest some time to get to know your future colleagues by reading their publications and informing yourself about their research interests before meeting them for the first time
- Be willing to challenge yourself in regard to your own teaching habits and be willing to embark on teaching collaboratively since that will give you invaluable insights into your own and other's teaching habits/conventions
- Reflect about your privilege as a Swedish scholar, especially if you are recognized by others as white and Western-European, and involve yourself and your teaching in the social and political circumstances at CUHK and in Hong Kong
- Be the one to take initiatives in making connections to your colleagues and other scholars at CUHK – while everyone is very welcoming, kind, and helpful, they are also very much working all the time and might simply forget to reach out to you while you are there
- Be prepared to work at a more traditional academic environment without the usual shared social lunch and fika-culture as we found in Sweden
- Be prepared for language barriers (and adjust your teaching accordingly) and be open to learn some Cantonese for everyday purposes while in Hong Kong – it will open the hearts of the people you meet
- Say yes to invitations and engagements offered to you that will provide you with the opportunity to immerse yourself in the academic environment of CUHK and in the social/cultural/political context of Hong Kong
- Set aside ample time to find a good apartment that you feel comfortable with and secure a lease short after your initial visit so as to guarantee that you will get the place you want for a reasonable amount of money
- Take your partner (sambo) with you and make sure to arrange the possibility for them to audit classes at CUHK beforehand



Lennon Wall in underground pathway in Hong Kong – Photo: Sebastian Mohr



## Action plan

Concrete initiatives that I will be working on during the coming year are:

- Developing and planning an international summer school together with colleagues from CUHK; the summer school is planned to take place for the first time in 2021, and 2020 will be used to plan the summer school content wise and in terms of practicalities as well as for finding funding to support the summer school; the long term plan is to offer a summer school every year with teachers from CUHK and Kau alike and international students as participants
- Inviting scholars from CUHK to visit Kau during 2020 in order to coordinate the development of the summer school
- Implementing changes to the program at Kau to reflect a more international outlook and closer collaboration with non-university actors in the private and public sector; concrete steps and measures will have to be coordinated among teaching staff in gender studies at Kau and with the leadership of the department
- Working towards a joint research application with colleagues from CUHK that establishes a collaborative research project that compares the Nordic contexts with contexts in Hong Kong and the larger Chinese Region; applications are supposed to be submitted in 2021 and colleagues from CUHK will visit Kau during 2020 in order to develop the project application



Goddess of Democracy on CUHK campus – Photo: Sebastian Mohr