

## Why Chinese and Hong Kong students clash in Australia: the patriotic v the protest movement

Written by Christine Cunningham, Senior Lecturer in Educational Leadership, Edith Cowan University

---

The [protests in Hong Kong](#) have led to some open clashes here in Australia between students from mainland China and others from Hong Kong.

There were angry scenes between pro-China and pro-Hong Kong groups in [Sydney](#) and [Melbourne](#), as well as at universities in [Brisbane](#) and [Adelaide](#).

These clashes are troubling for the Australian university sector, which enrolls [182,555 mainland Chinese and 11,822 Hong Kongers](#) as international students at various education institutions.

---

***Read more: [Trust Me, I'm An Expert: Why the Hong Kong protesters feel they have nothing to lose](#)***

---

Our current research suggests differences in the curriculum studied by mainland Chinese and Hong Kong students may help to explain the beliefs underpinning the protest movements.

Our research involved in-depth interviews of a random sample of more than a dozen international postgraduate students from mainland China who are studying, or very recently have been, at Western Australian universities.

The interviews took place in late 2018 – before the recent Hong Kong protests. We asked the participants about their experiences studying in Chinese schools where [Moral Education](#) is a compulsory subject.

## Lessons in China

The Moral Education curriculum teaches Chinese children to be politically proud of the Chinese Communist Party ( [CCP](#) ) and loyal to the ideals of a One-China worldview.

Moral Education is a stand-alone subject and also embedded within other subjects, such as history and Chinese literacy studies. Moral Education starts being taught in the early years of schooling and continues throughout high school and during undergraduate university studies.

In primary school, all Chinese children are supposed to join the Young Pioneers, a [130 million-strong youth organisation controlled by the CCP](#)

In high school, teachers invites students who achieve highly academically and morally to join the [Communist Youth League](#) . In university, excellent students are invited to join the Communist Party.

In contrast, Hong Kong students do not study Moral Education and cannot join the Young Pioneers, Youth League or the Communist Party.

## When East meets West

Preliminary indications from our interviews suggest that when mainland Chinese students arrive in Western countries for postgraduate studies they carry with them a moral duty to uphold their national identity. This identity is arguably constructed through the Moral Education lessons.

The following are translated Mandarin quotes from participants in our study. Each quote comes from a different student, but we have de-identified them to protect their identity. They are talking about their experiences of studying Moral Education in their primary and high school years:

## Why Chinese and Hong Kong students clash in Australia: the patriotic v the protest movement

Written by Christine Cunningham, Senior Lecturer in Educational Leadership, Edith Cowan University

---

I was taught to love our motherland and love our country. It's the right thing to do.

We were taught many slogans that were inspirational, positive and patriotic. It taught us to love our country, our family and our society.

In secondary school Moral Education made us all feel we are part of one China and what the government is doing is to give us a better life.

We are also learning from our interviews that even after mainland Chinese students study in Western universities for several years, they are unlikely to change their previously learnt ideological positions.

I think although the Communist Party is a one-party dictatorship, because in a big country like China it is very difficult to apply democracy and maintain the sustainability otherwise it will be too chaotic.

When I was standing under the party flag and sworn in to join our Communist Party it was so exciting. After so many years of ideological and political education, I believe that the Communist Party is the most advanced organisation of our society.

Now, especially when we are living overseas, if you hear the Chinese national anthem it brings me to tears of pride, belonging and identity.

### **Sympathy for the Communist Party**

Another phenomenon our interviews revealed is that many of our participants expressed strong sympathy towards the CCP government.

That holds even after they learn about facts and events that have been censored in China,

including the 1989 [Tiananmen Square massacre](#) .

I will most likely participate (in) rallies like welcoming President Xi's visit to Australia because I am [...] Chinese and I have a sense of belonging and responsibility attached to this Chinese identity. I also will be vocal about protecting China's sovereignty.

China is a big country with a large population and there are still many people who are not well educated, therefore they are easy to be incited by others. Although the one party is never 100% perfect, it at least proved itself that most people in China have a good life under its leadership.

### **Isolated in Australia**

Over the course of three interviews with each participant in our study, we discovered many Chinese international students feel isolated from Australian friendship circles.

They expressed concern at the lack of opportunities to truly engage with Australian students during their time living here. Many worry that local Australian students just aren't interested in them.

Actually I have little knowledge about how Australian society works – aside from the common social norms. I don't know where I can access such knowledge. Some locals take it for granted that we should have known this, but we really don't as we grew up in a totally different place.

For me I tend to have the impression that the local students believe we Chinese students are not interested in talking to them, so they would not take the initiative and talk to us either. I suggest that our university can do more about it like organising activities so we could access local friendships.

## Why Chinese and Hong Kong students clash in Australia: the patriotic v the protest movement

Written by Christine Cunningham, Senior Lecturer in Educational Leadership, Edith Cowan University

---

**Read more:** [Australian universities can't rely on India if funds from Chinese students start to fall](#)

---

International education should be a two-way transaction, deep in its engagement and fluid in its ability to change as we change.

But what these interviews show is the strong feelings many students from mainland China have about their country and government, which perhaps explains why they feel anger towards those who protest against that way of life.

The growing trend of these Chinese graduates returning to their homeland for work opportunities also has a bearing on their continuing patriotism and sense of national identity.

*The authors do not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and have disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.*

Authors: Christine Cunningham, Senior Lecturer in Educational Leadership, Edith Cowan University

**Read more** <http://theconversation.com/why-chinese-and-hong-kong-students-clash-in-australia-the-patriotic-v-the-protest-movement-122405>