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Thomas Tse  
*The Chinese University of Hong Kong, kctse@cuhk.edu.hk*

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# Notes From the Field

## Bridge over Troubled Water: Human Rights Education and Nongovernmental Organizations in Hong Kong

By Thomas Kwan-choi Tse\*

**M**y notes from the field examines three prominent Hong Kong NGOs' contribution in promoting Human Rights Education (HRE) in five specific areas: provision of educational resources, school talks, pedagogical innovations, school clubs, and youth engagement in the community. This article shows how their advocacy and education work has helped disseminate the idea of human rights in Hong Kong, push the government to include human rights concerns in its domestic policies, and fill the gaps in HRE due to political neglect and the inadequacy of the existing school system. However, NGOs also face a number of challenges in HRE.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), especially youth work organizations that offer both delivery and advocacy services, are viewed as suitable vehicles for delivering HRE inside and outside schools because the experience, networks, services, and missions of these organizations are geared toward nurturing adolescents' civil engagement and interest through a variety of activities. HRE is a distinct and viable strategy for NGOs to strengthen their profile and human rights work (Mihir & Schmitz, 2007).

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\*Thomas Kwan-choi Tse is currently an associate professor at the Department of Educational Administration and Policy at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. He teaches and publishes in the fields of sociology of education and policy analysis. His current research focuses on civic and moral education in Chinese societies, with a recently-finished project entitled "Civil Society and Citizenship Education in Post-1997 Hong Kong: The roles of NGOs and the government." [kctse@cuhk.edu.hk](mailto:kctse@cuhk.edu.hk)

Felisa Tibbitts' (2002, 2017) recent three models of HRE posit that there is a strong association between the activism-transformation one and NGOs as institutional sponsors. NGOs also occupy a special position in the non-formal education sector and address the deficits of the mainstream schooling system (Lam, 2014; Oguro & Burridge, 2016; Park, Senegačnik, & Wango, 2007; Yuen & Leung, 2010).

Hong Kong is a hybrid polity and further democratization has been deferred by the vested interests and the central government. In addition, the government is complacent about keeping the current human rights framework and has failed to recognize the limits of the existing institutions (AIHK, 2012). As a result, for many years the work on human rights has been unfocused and ineffectual.

The Hong Kong government is not committed to HRE. There are no explicit or systematic HRE programs because HRE is neither a priority of the education policy nor an independent subject in schools. In the name of school-based civic education, HRE is being carried out in a piecemeal and superficial way in school lessons and activities. Outside schools, the Committee on the Promotion of Civic Education promotes civic education through various publications and publicity programs, as well as sponsorship for community organizations to promote HRE. With the shift of emphasis of civic education toward national identity and Basic Law education after 1997, HRE has been disregarded by the government in terms of attention and resource allocation (Chong et al., 2010; Fok, 2001; Leung, Yuen, & Chong, 2011).

The inadequacy of the HRE provided in schools and the community means that schools and students have to rely on external support for HRE (Lam, 2014; Wong, Yuen, & Cheng, 1999). Using three major active NGOs as examples, this article shows their accomplishments in promoting HRE inside and outside schools. It also discusses some difficulties and the prospects in implementing HRE. The data are drawn from newspaper reports and websites, and newsletters, published reports, relevant documents, and learning materials provided by the NGOs. I also conducted interviews with seven key informants involved in the relevant NGOs between April and September 2017.

## Profiles of the NGOs

The three NGOs examined in this article are Amnesty International Hong Kong (AIHK), the Hong Kong Committee for UNICEF (HKCU), and the Boys' and Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong (BGCA).

AIHK was formed in 1976 and became a subsidiary of Amnesty International in 1982. AIHK currently has 200 members and a large pool of volunteers and donors, and is actively involved in global campaigns and local human rights issues. In addition, it is dedicated to HRE as a means of enhancing people's understanding of and respect for human rights. A charitable trust for HRE was set up in 1993 to aid in fundraising for education causes. In 1995, with overseas funding support, AIHK embarked on a three-year education program and appointed its first full-time education officer to concentrate on HRE and organized a seminar on school rules and human rights in light of the passing of the Hong Kong Bill of Rights (*Singtao Daily*, January 22, 1995; *South China Morning Post*, January 22, 1995; January 27, 1995; February 9, 1995). In the past, AIHK organized letter-writing campaigns involving school students (*PTU News*, January 24, 2005). Echoing the move of strengthening HRE by the International Council of Amnesty International in its 2014/2015 strategic plan, AIHK also set up an HRE team in 2015, recruiting two new education officers and further expanding its service (AIHK, 2017; Tusi, 2016).<sup>1</sup>

HKCU was established in 1986 as an independent local NGO to raise funds to support UNICEF. In recent years, HKCU (2007, 2016) has also promoted and advocated for children's rights via organizing education and youth programs in Hong Kong. In the early 1990s, it started to deliver school talks to primary and secondary school students. Following UNICEF's strategy, HKCU also expanded its work on HRE.<sup>2</sup> In 2005, HKCU (2016) established a youth and information centre to organize various children's rights educational activities. Its education team working on HRE currently comprises seven full-time staff.<sup>3</sup>

The BGCA was founded in 1936 to nurture neglected and uneducated children through literacy and skill-set training, games and sports, and material aids (Kwok, 2006). When the government expanded the provision

of social welfare services in the 1970s, this voluntary agency received government funding and became a state partner in the provision of children and youth services. Its central vision and mission is to nurture children and youth to become contributing citizens and to raise parental and social awareness of the younger generation's welfare, particularly that of disadvantaged groups. The BGCA (2004) believes that children's opinions and willingness are crucial to a child-friendly city and it also advocates for children's and adolescents' rights by providing special city-wide or local-district projects for them to channel their views and encouraging social participation. It also raises the society's awareness and concern on children's rights and children's participation.

### **Accomplishments in HRE**

This section discusses the accomplishments of the abovementioned NGOs in HRE in recent years in five major areas: provision of education resources, school talks, pedagogical innovations, school clubs, and youth engagement in the community.

#### *Provision of education resources*

HRE can be promoted through the distribution of materials such as leaflets, booklets, teaching packages, and videotapes. These materials help provide basic knowledge about human rights, the related foundational texts, and the institutions that support human rights. Each year, AIHK distributes information packs on its education program to all secondary schools in Hong Kong. Teachers are welcome to apply for exhibition materials and the magazine *Human Rights*, a thematic bilingual quarterly publication suitable as a tool-book for reference. In 2016, 118 schools subscribed to the magazine.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, HKCU provides different education resources for school teachers, such as the first interactive educational kit on the UNCRC, lesson plans on the global goals for sustainable development, and the One Minute Video Series (*Singtao Daily*, November 2, 2009). It also translated some materials for the "World's Largest Lesson", which was

launched in 2015 in partnership with UNICEF.<sup>5</sup>

### *School talks*

A more direct approach to delivering HRE is to meet the target audience, such as students and teachers. HKCU began conducting school talks in early 1990, with the number of school talks conducted each year increasing from less than fifty in 2009 to 140 in 2013. The talks, which include videos, life stories, and statistical data, enable the students to learn about the lives of children around the world and UNICEF's work on child survival, protection, development, and civil participation. The topics covered in the 2016/17 school year included children's rights, natural disasters and children, war and children, water and sanitation, children in mainland China, ending child trafficking, and HIV/AIDS and children.

In 2016, AIHK delivered thirty-two talks on human rights to 8,000 participants in local schools and tertiary institutions.<sup>6</sup> Recently, AIHK extended its thematic school talk program to primary students. The topics covered in the 2016/17 school year included the rule of law, human rights, rights of the child, freedom of expression, refugees and asylum seekers, and the death penalty. AIHK also provides issue-based lectures for secondary students on various human rights issues. Case studies based on prominent court cases have also been used in student debates to highlight the conflicts involved.

### *Pedagogical innovations*

In addition to disseminating human rights content, the NGOs have developed innovative delivery and learning methods (Mihir, 2009). For instance, an interesting and interactive learning approach "Theatre in Education" is very popular among young children. HKCU has been collaborating with professional theatrical groups to develop drama education tours for primary school students since 2002.<sup>7</sup> There were thirty performances in 2016/17. The drama performances and interactive sessions enable the students to easily understand children's rights, and encourage them to take up responsibilities and respect others. In the latest program,

students can make decisions for the main characters and change their destiny. By experiencing situations in which children are deprived of their rights, the students can also learn about their own rights and ways of speaking up for themselves, and apply this knowledge to their daily lives.

Film screenings are another interesting way to help arouse interest in human rights. AIHK has held the Human Rights Documentary Film Festival annually since 2011 (Tsui, 2016). Each year, the festival has a main theme, and the theme for 2015 was HRE. In 2015, AIHK also hosted nine in-school film screenings. The documentary list included children's movie series and gender series, and covered issues such as school bullying, equality and non-discrimination, forced eviction, the right of the child to be heard, poverty, child refugees, the death penalty, and women's rights.

In 2015, AIHK (2017) launched the Youth Human Rights Journalists Program, an initiative targeted at senior secondary school students, to improve adolescents' knowledge of various human rights issues such as children's rights, rights of expression, discrimination, and the controversy over the death penalty.<sup>8</sup> Approximately fifty students joined the program in 2015 and were given human rights and journalistic training by current journalists and scholars of mass communication. The participants are required to submit a news report after each workshop and an in-depth news report as a graduation assignment. The student journalists then exhibit their works and participate in "Human Rights Press Awards." The program not only helps students recognize their responsibilities and influence in enhancing and protecting human rights, but also equips them with "critical human rights consciousness".

Experiential learning in the local community is also an attractive and down-to-earth approach for learners. The rule of law is the bedrock of human rights protection, and AIHK's Rule of Law Walking Tours have been conducted for school students and members of the public since 2016. The participants can listen to stories about the legal history of Hong Kong and learn about Hong Kong's path toward the rule of law as they walk along the historical streets in Central. In 2016, AIHK conducted eleven school tours with 170 participants.<sup>9</sup>

The BGCA's Junior Advisor Project was launched in 2005 as a means of

recruiting primary four to secondary two students to participate in the service units in a number of local districts. Over the years, the project has covered themes such as care for the environment, domestic violence, green living, children living in inappropriate housing, happy learning, and news in children's eyes, with activities including community visits, workshops of questionnaire setting and interview techniques (*Hong Kong Economic Times*, June 20, 2005).<sup>10</sup>

### *School clubs*

Although the above mentioned innovative and interesting HRE activities can effectively communicate knowledge on human rights and provide “education about human rights”, they do not necessarily provide “education through human rights”. It is still not sufficient to only cultivate a human rights culture without placing emphasis on action for transformation, both personal and social. Hence the NGOs have placed greater emphasis on action and empowerment in some recent HRE programs, such as shaping the daily life environment in schools and the community.

In 2001, AIHK initiated an AI Club program in local secondary schools and international schools to equip students with comprehensive knowledge of various human rights issues and skills for organizing campaigns on campuses. Since then, many international schools in Hong Kong have set up AI Clubs on campus. AIHK has also fostered inter-school groups to encourage more adolescents to become involved in various AI activities and to share their experiences with their peers.

HKCU has achieved great success in a similar scheme called the “UNICEF Club”, which was launched in 2007 based on similar programs overseas.<sup>11</sup> The number of clubs increased steadily from twenty-five in 2012/13 to forty-seven in 2015/16. The club committees can receive training, promotional materials, souvenirs, and financial subsidies from HKCU. The clubs need to hold at least three events each year, including assemblies, speeches on “International Water Day” or “World Refugee Day,” booth games, movie appreciation, hunger banquets, and joint school functions.<sup>12</sup> The students are encouraged to participate in community services and



organize campus activities to arouse their peers' concerns about world children in need and crises. In the 2012/13 school year, twenty-five UNICEF Clubs organized seventy-seven child rights educational and promotional activities, and raised HK\$35,000 for UNICEF's global work.

The clubs can serve as a platform for students to practice what they learn in the classroom and to penetrate the works of HKCU into the school environment. Some students would contact HKCU to serve as volunteers with this contact point. Furthermore, the UNICEF Clubs have links to different HKCU projects, such as the Young Envoy Program discussed below.

### *Youth engagement in the community*

HRE for children can become more relevant and effective when it is close to the community. Efficacious, well-informed, and committed citizens need a platform to express their opinions and opportunities for civic participation. These opportunities can help broaden the participants' horizons, enhance their understanding of current social issues, and improve their self-confidence and sense of community. Accordingly, HKCU and BGCA organize a wide range of youth engagement programs each year so as to actualize children's right to participation, nurture young leaders to serve the community, and draw public attention to the needs of children (Table 1). The activities usually include elements of service learning and community-based learning, and bring about visible changes in the community.<sup>13</sup>

Table 1. Overview of Four Major Programs

<b>Organizer</b>	<b>Name and Year</b>	<b>Activities</b>	<b>Constituency</b>
HKCU	UNICEF Young Envoys Program since 1996	A ten-month training program comprises leadership training camp, understanding UNICEF workshop, school project, social service project, community project, and field visit	Over 1,080 secondary school students between 1996 and 2016

HKCU and two other children's rights NGOs	Children's Council (formerly UNCRC-Child Ambassadors' Scheme) since 2000	Learn about children's rights and present motions relating to children issues, interact with government officials and legislative councilors	Held twelve times until 2017, with over 600 child counselors and forty motions concerning children discussed
BGCA	Hong Kong Junior Chief Executives since 2001	Training and opportunities to prepare a policy address or conduct a poll of Hong Kong children's top ten news items of the year. Meet with the officials, attend a children's rights forum and media program, and conduct a mock debate in the Legislative Council.	Eight batches of students ranging from primary five to secondary two, 291 participants in total
BGCA	Junior District Councilor since 2005	Training activities and community learning. Attend meetings with district councilors, and express their concerns about district problems.	A biennial local district project for around fifty primary four to secondary one students

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Sources: BGCA (2009), Children's Council (2011), HKCU (2013:5), *Ming Pao* (23 June 2007), and interviews with Informants No.4 (10 June 2017) and No.5.

### **Discussion: Strengths and difficulties**

Overall, the NGOs offer a wide variety of projects and activities with regard to HRE, and play an active educational role in informing the public, particularly the adolescents. These projects and activities have several merits. First, many of the activities are free of charge or very affordable for the participants. Second, with their specific niches and advantages, the NGOs can target their specific target groups and provide diversified and novel services and activities that can meet the needs of different people. Third, the NGOs serve as a bridge between the wider community and the formal schooling system by bringing together the service-recipients, volunteers, community groups, the media, and private sector sponsors. For instance, training the trainers is a viable strategy and HKCU and AIHK

regularly recruit volunteers (mainly college students) to take part in their education workshops and train them as voluntary school speakers to lead various school programs or translate teaching materials.<sup>14</sup> HKCU conducts various drama- and theatre-in-education programs in collaboration with professional theatrical groups. HKCU and the BGCA have also sought sponsorship from the business sector for their projects.

These NGOs promote HRE in complementary ways, and sometimes in cooperation with other NGOs. For example, in 1996, AIHK and Oxfam Hong Kong co-conducted a survey on secondary school teachers' and student teachers' conceptions of human rights and global values. The Youth Human Rights Journalists Program afore-mentioned also involves the assistance of other NGOs. Since 2002, AIHK (2017), together with other NGOs, has organized a series of events on annual International Human Rights Day to raise people's concerns about the local and global human rights situation. In addition to the usual carnival-style celebrations, the organizers held inter-school debating competitions in 2003 and 2005 and a writing competition in 2006. Moreover, AIHK worked with other concerned groups in shaping civic education policy. They pushed for including HRE in the new civic education guidelines, lobbied the curriculum committee to make civic education an independent secondary school subject, and held talks to facilitate teacher professional training in HRE. AIHK occasionally forms ad hoc alliances with other advocacy and pressure groups to advance common causes, such as the Alliance of Civic Education (established in 2002) to challenge the government's current policy on civic education, particularly its one-sided emphasis on national identity.

HKCU collaborated with Hong Kong University's Faculty of Law in a study on children's rights education between 2012 and 2014. The Children's Council also relies on collaboration among NGOs. The BGCA and HKCU are active supporters of the Children's Rights Forum and have advocated for the Commission on Children for many years.

The network or social capital aside, another asset of these NGOs is their branding. A niche of AIHK is its position as an international human rights expert in the eyes of the school sector. With its long history of over fifty years and wide coverage of branches in more than sixty locations,

Amnesty International is well vested in knowledge of the relevant laws and policies. AIHK can easily access these rich and diversified resources in terms of cross-regional exchanges and support, which have enabled the organization to gain public recognition. The strength of HKCU lies in the brand name of the United Nations.<sup>15</sup> HKCU's track record in HRE has also earned it word-of-mouth recommendations. Finally, the BGCA has built a solid reputation in the field of children and youth services through its widespread community network of children and youth centers.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to embracing the international standards on human rights, the NGOs have developed localized HRE programs in terms of language and contents, and take account of the needs of students and school teachers and the specific requirements of the local context. AIHK uses many Hong Kong examples and court cases in its school talks, and matches them with the teaching content of the school curriculum. In the case of HKCU, after translating teaching materials from English to Chinese, it adapts the materials to the local context by adding local examples and activities suitable for local schools.<sup>17</sup> HKCU also draws special attention to issues of children's rights in Hong Kong such as the learning pressure of students, school bullying, and education for minority children. Because Hong Kong is a highly developed city, children's right to life and protection are not serious problems. Instead, children's participation and developmental rights deserve more attention, for instance, children's rights to participate in entertainment and recreation.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the contents of the UNCRC may not necessarily meet the teachers' "appetite". Instead, it is easier to use terms such as "world citizen" because teachers have a positive perception of such concepts, and think that they can enhance students' international perspective.<sup>19</sup> For example, topics on the Syrian civil war and climate change can be presented to provide a global view as an entry point to attract teachers.

The NGOs have also actively and strategically sought to gain entry to the schools against the opportunities arising in Hong Kong's recent curriculum reform by integrating HRE into the relevant school subjects and learning activities (Leung, 2007). By sharing their knowledge on human rights, the NGOs can enrich the school curriculum and education practices

and contribute to teaching in areas such as moral and civic education or relevant subjects.<sup>20</sup> To increase the teachers' incentives for inviting AIHK and HKCU to conduct HRE, the school talks are made to align with the aims and content of the relevant school curriculums at different levels. Furthermore, AIHK scrutinized the content on human rights and the rule of law in the textbooks, with a view to suggesting corrections and improvements to the publishers. AIHK (2016a, 2016b) is also concerned about curriculum review, asking the Curriculum Development Council to include and strengthen HRE with reference to international human rights treaties.

HRE can also be incorporated in extra-curricular activities. For instance, under the new senior secondary curriculum starting in 2009, all senior secondary students have to engage in 405 hours of Other Learning Experiences (OLE) over three years, of which nearly one-third should be allocated to moral and civic education, and community service (Curriculum Development Council 2009). Schools accordingly need to recruit students to engage in service learning with NGOs. In response to the OLE initiative, AIHK launched the "Young Human Rights Journalist Scheme" and student participants can credit the hours required for OLE.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, HKCU's school partnership scheme in 2015/16 also mainly catered for the needs of OLE of the pilot school.

Given that many HRE programs offered by the NGOs have been one-off activities that primarily focus on content knowledge and thinking skills, HRE in Hong Kong are still marginal and not properly institutionalized. Admittedly, these HRE programs closely match the "Values and Awareness Model" described by Tibbitts (2002), in that they aim to enhance adolescents' awareness of human rights. Although there is some emphasis on the cultivation of universal values and critical thinking, there are limited opportunities for practical applications to local human rights issues. Moreover, although the other programs do not neglect action skills and participation, the programs only include small numbers of participants and the participation is somewhat restrictive in terms of breath and depth.

## Prospects

Using the three NGOs in Hong Kong as examples, this article has highlighted their contribution in promoting HRE in five specific areas. The NGOs help young people explore human rights issues in the relevant school subjects, and use experiential learning in different extracurricular activities. In addition to the “one-off” reach-outs, the NGOs provide some platforms and opportunities for young people to participate and voice their concerns through different HRE programs. The NGOs also play a salient connectivity role within the field of HRE, including bridging the gap between formal and less formal education (or between schools and the community), and fostering collaborations among different partners.

Although faced with unfavorable contextual factors, the NGOs have managed to exhibit their active agency in promoting HRE. In addition to their expertise and branding, they have taken advantage of new opportunities arising, adopting different strategies in promoting human rights, and experimented with a reconciliatory approach to HRE. The NGOs have also strengthened their capacity in HRE by building and utilizing their resources and social capital. The government’s recent decision to establish a Commission on Children in 2018 was welcomed by these NGOs, because they saw it as a chance for an independent and authoritative body to look after children’s well-being and formulate long-term targets and strategies related to children’s rights. The NGOs have also advocated for pluralistic representation on the commission, to ensure that children’s voices and opinions are heard and considered in the policy-making process, including the issue of HRE (BGCA, 2018; HKCU, 2018). It remains to be seen whether the commission will extend HRE to a larger child population. However, the prospects for HRE are dim, particularly with the deterioration of human rights due to the central government’s meddling in Hong Kong affairs and tightened control over the society by the local government. A case in point is the human rights abuses by the police in the recent social movements.

## Notes

1. From Informants No.1 (11 April 2017) and No.2 (27 April 2017).
2. From Informant No.5 (24 August 2017).
3. From Informant No.1.
4. Statistics provided by AIHK on 11 April 2017.
5. From Informant No.7 (30 Sep. 2017), and World's Largest Lesson, *available at* <http://worldslargestlesson.globalgoals.org/>
6. Statistics provided by AIHK on 11 April 2017.
7. From Informants No.5 and No.6 (24 August 2017).
8. From Informant No.1 (11 April 2017).
9. Statistics provided by AIHK on 11 April 2017.
10. From Informant No.3 (5 April 2017).
11. From Informant No.6 (24 August 2017).
12. From Informant No.6.
13. From Informant No.3 (5 April 2017).
14. From Informant No.6.
15. From Informant No.5.
16. From Informant No.3.
17. From Informants No.5, No.6 and No.7 (24 August 2017).
18. From Informant No.6.
19. From Informant No.7.
20. From Informants No.1 (11 April 2017) and No.7 (24 August 2017).
21. From Informant No.1.

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