



Commentary | Ka Hang Wong, Might as Knowledge: Curriculum Reform, Epistemic Authority, and the Politics of Legitimacy in Hong Kong

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Introduction: When Power Becomes Common Sense

"I have all the guns and all the money. I can withstand challenge from without and from within. Am I right, comrade?" The provocation in Elaine Brown's reflection on power is not simply about coercion. It is about something more unsettling: the capacity of power to define what counts as "right" in the first place. Contemporary debates about whether "might makes right" often focus on military force, geopolitical dominance, or institutional coercion. Yet in many political systems, power operates more subtly. It does not only compel behaviour; it structures knowledge, language, and moral intuition.

In this sense, the question is not whether might makes right, but how "right" itself is produced through systems of authority that define legitimacy in advance. Nowhere is this more visible than in the governance of education, where states shape not only what citizens learn, but how they understand truth, history, and identity.

In April 2026, Hong Kong media reported (<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education/article/3350358/hong-kong-students-young-6-should-feel-proud-be-chinese-learning-guide>) new official learning guidelines encouraging students as young as six to "feel proud to be Chinese," reflecting the latest phase of the city's post-2019 educational transformation. The guidance emerged alongside the implementation of the 2026 Values Education Curriculum Framework (https://www.edb.gov.hk/en/curriculum-development/4-key-tasks/moral-civic/ve_curriculum_framework2026.html), which places increasing emphasis on national identity, patriotism, and moral cultivation within the school system. These developments illustrate how educational reform in Hong Kong has become closely tied to broader questions of political legitimacy and epistemic authority.

This essay examines this dynamic through the transformation of civic education in Hong Kong following the post-2021 curriculum reforms. It argues that the replacement of Liberal Studies with Citizenship and Social Development (CSD) (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03050068.2023.2212351>), followed by the introduction of the 2026 Values Education Curriculum Framework, illustrates a shift from education as inquiry toward education as epistemic alignment. Rather than treating these reforms as purely pedagogical adjustments, this essay situates them within a broader theoretical question: how political authority is stabilised through the construction of knowledge itself.

Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis (<https://link.springer.com/book/10.1057/9780230336841>) (CDA), the discussion shows how curriculum reform operates not only through institutional redesign, but through linguistic and conceptual practices that define what can be known, said, and believed. In doing so, it reframes "might makes right" as a question of epistemic governance: the ability of power to determine the boundaries of truth. In this sense, "right" is not imposed so much as rendered intelligible within an epistemic order shaped by authority.

From Pedagogy to Problematisation: The Delegitimation of Inquiry

The restructuring of civic education in Hong Kong did not begin as an overt political project. Official accounts presented the reform of Liberal Studies as a response to pedagogical deficiencies. Following a curriculum review (<https://www.edb.gov.hk/en/about-edb/press/cleartheair/20210209.html>) initiated by the Hong Kong government, official statements in 2021 criticised the subject for its lack of systematic knowledge, its overemphasis on current affairs, and its tendency to encourage what was described as misdirected forms of critical thinking.

This framing is significant not because it is unique, but because of what it reveals about the relationship between knowledge and authority. In official discourse, the problem was not simply that students were thinking critically, but that critical thinking had allegedly become detached from "proper" epistemic foundations. It was redefined as a potential source of misinterpretation and instability rather than as an educational aim.

The timing of this discourse is also crucial. It emerged in the aftermath of the 2019 Hong Kong protests (<https://www.hrw.org/blog-feed/hong-kong-protests>), when questions of political participation and identity were highly salient. While official statements avoided direct causal claims, the implicit association (<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3017180/former-hong-kong-leader-tung-chee-hwa-blames-liberal>) between civic education and political mobilisation was widely understood. In this context, curriculum reform can be read as an attempt not only to improve pedagogy, but to recalibrate the relationship between knowledge production and political behaviour.

This is where the logic of “might makes right” begins to shift. Authority is not asserted through force alone, but through the redefinition of what counts as legitimate reasoning in the first place.

The Reconfiguration of Civic Knowledge: Citizenship and Social Development

The introduction of Citizenship and Social Development (https://cs.edb.edcity.hk/file/C_and_A_guide/202106/CS_CAG_S4-6_Eng_2021.pdf) marked a structural and epistemological departure from its predecessor. The removal of the Independent Enquiry Study, the reduction of teaching hours, and the reorganisation of content into three state-defined thematic areas collectively signal a narrowing of epistemic space.

At the level of content, the curriculum foregrounds national development, constitutional structure, and global interdependence. Yet the more significant transformation lies in how knowledge is framed. Across official teaching materials, historical and political claims are consistently presented in ways that reduce interpretive plurality.

For example, colonial-era treaties are described using evaluative language (https://cs.edb.edcity.hk/file/teachers/ppt_for_teachers/en/lt1_t1t1f1_1_e_r2.pdf) such as “unequal” and “imposed,” while China’s sovereignty over Hong Kong is framed as continuous and undisputed. The British colonial presence is frequently characterised through the term “occupation.” These lexical choices are not merely descriptive; they are interpretive anchors that guide understanding before interpretation begins.

Through CDA, these patterns can be understood as forms of presupposition and modality management. High-certainty formulations (https://cs.edb.edcity.hk/file/teachers/ppt_for_teachers/en/lt1_t1t1f2_1_e.pdf) such as “indisputable” position contested historical narratives as settled fact. This has the effect of transforming historiographical questions into declarative statements, thereby narrowing the scope of legitimate inquiry.

What emerges is not simply a revised curriculum, but a reconfigured epistemic environment in which the boundaries of truth are linguistically stabilised.

Language, Identity, and the Production of the Political Subject

The role of language in this transformation is central. One of the most significant features of CSD materials is the repeated use of collective possessive constructions such as “our country” (https://cs.edb.edcity.hk/file/teachers/ppt_for_teachers/en/lt1_t1t1f3_1_e_r5.pdf). This phrase functions as what discourse analysts describe as a presuppositional trigger (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0378216604000608?via%3Dihub>): it assumes rather than argues for inclusion within a national collective.

This linguistic structure collapses a distinction that is central to civic education in many contexts—the distinction between learning about a nation and identifying with it. In this framework, identity is not presented as an open question but as a precondition of learning itself.

The implications of this are profound. Identity is no longer something to be explored, compared, or debated. It becomes a foundational assumption embedded within the language of instruction. In this sense, the curriculum does not simply transmit knowledge about the nation; it participates in the production of national subjectivity.

The absence of sustained engagement with alternative identity frameworks, particularly a distinct Hong Kong identity, further reinforces this dynamic. This is notable given Hong Kong’s post-1997 constitutional arrangement under the Sino–British Joint Declaration (<https://www.cmab.gov.hk/en/issues/jd2.htm>), alongside the continued existence of British National (Overseas) (<https://www.gov.uk/british-national-overseas-bno-visa>) status, both of which complicate any singular account of political identity formation. The government’s repeated claim that Hong Kong is an “inalienable part of China” (<https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202504/01/P2025040100565.htm>) directly contradicts the Joint Declaration, which recognises Hong Kong as an autonomous political entity and permits residents to retain BN(O) status.

From Knowledge to Moral Order: The 2026 Values Education Framework

If the 2021 reforms restructured the content of civic education, the introduction of the Values Education Curriculum Framework in 2026 extends this logic into the moral domain. Unlike CSD, which operates as a subject, the Values Framework is designed to permeate all areas of schooling, embedding normative expectations (<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education/article/3350358/hong-kong-students-young-6-should-feel-proud-be-chinese-learning-guide>) across disciplines and age groups.

This shift marks a transition from epistemic governance to moral governance. Education is no longer concerned solely with what students know, but increasingly with what they should value. Concepts such as national identity, civic responsibility, and social belonging are reframed as moral imperatives rather than analytical categories.

This represents a process of moralisation in which descriptive claims are converted into normative obligations. The distinction between understanding the nation and internalising allegiance to it becomes increasingly blurred. Knowledge is no longer neutral; it is ethically charged.

In this configuration, the curriculum functions as a mechanism through which political legitimacy is not only communicated but internalised. Authority operates not through external compulsion, but through the shaping of affective and moral orientation.

Epistemic Power and the Contemporary Logic of “Might”

The reforms in Hong Kong illustrate a broader transformation in how political power operates in contemporary governance. Traditional accounts of “might makes right” focus on coercion, military capability, or institutional dominance. However, the case examined here suggests a more diffuse and arguably more durable form of power: the capacity to structure epistemic reality.

In this sense, “might” does not simply impose itself upon “right.” It defines the conditions under which “right” becomes thinkable. Through curriculum design, linguistic framing, and moral integration, authority operates at the level of knowledge production itself.

This does not require the suppression of alternative perspectives in an explicit sense. Instead, it operates through selection, repetition, and naturalisation (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0378216604000608?via%3Dihub>). Certain narratives are foregrounded until they become self-evident; others are marginalised until they become difficult to articulate within the dominant framework.

The result is not overt coercion, but epistemic alignment. The boundary between knowledge and legitimacy becomes increasingly difficult to disentangle.

Rewriting Legitimacy: Knowledge, Memory, and Post-Conflict Governance

This logic can be further illustrated through comparison with broader patterns of post-conflict and post-crisis governance within the People’s Republic of China following the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48445934>). In that context, political contention was not only managed through coercive capacity, but also through a reorganisation (<https://8964museum.com/time/en/t-h02-004/>) of interpretive categories that structured how political events could be understood in public discourse. Over time, this involved the stabilisation of official classifications (<https://hongkongfp.com/2026/03/31/closing-statements-in-tiananmen-vigil-group-trial-set-for-may-as-activist-again-barred-from-referring-to-1989-massacre/>) that render certain forms of collective action illegible within dominant frameworks of political meaning, alongside a broader shift towards narratives centred on development, stability, and economic modernisation.

In the case of Hong Kong, rather than engaging directly with plural interpretations of recent political history, curricular materials (https://cs.edb.edcity.hk/en/index_cs.php) increasingly foreground themes of constitutional order, national development, and social cohesion. This is not merely a question of inclusion or exclusion of specific content, but of how epistemic priorities are reorganised. Political events are positioned less as contested historical phenomena and more as moments to be understood through pre-established interpretive frameworks (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-54382112>) that emphasise continuity, order, and developmental progress.

What is significant in both cases is not simply the presence or absence of particular narratives, but the structuring of the epistemic field within which those narratives become intelligible. Legitimacy is therefore not only asserted through institutional authority or legal enforcement, but also through the systematic privileging of certain forms of knowledge over others. In this configuration, developmental narratives, particularly those associated with economic reform and national progress, acquire a privileged explanatory status, while interpretations centred on contestation, rupture, or dissent are rendered silent within official pedagogical space.

Conclusion: When Truth Becomes Governance

The transformation of civic education in Hong Kong following 2021 illustrates how contemporary political authority can operate through the governance of knowledge rather than through direct coercion alone. The shift from Liberal Studies to Citizenship and Social Development, and subsequently to the Values Education Framework, reflects a broader reconfiguration of the relationship between education, identity, and legitimacy.

Rather than treating these reforms as isolated policy adjustments, this essay has argued that they should be understood as part of a wider logic of epistemic governance. Through discursive strategies that structure historical interpretation, linguistic forms that presuppose identity, and curricular frameworks that embed moral expectations, education becomes a site where the boundaries of truth are actively produced.

In this sense, the question of whether “might makes right” must be reformulated. In contemporary contexts, might does not merely assert right; it constructs the epistemic conditions under which right appears self-evident. Power operates not only through force, but through the quiet normalisation of knowledge itself.

The significance of this lies not only in Hong Kong, but in the broader political question it raises: when authority defines the terms of knowledge, what remains of dissent, and where does critique begin?

Ka Hang Wong received his PhD in History from the University of Technology Sydney in March 2026. His thesis provides a historical analysis of BN(O) status and how it evolved from being a token of British nationality into a tool of political resistance against a totalitarian party-state’s assault on Hong Kong.

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These short pieces, typically between 1,500 and 5,000 words, describe an aspect of the author's ongoing research project. This typically will be a small part of a much larger project, and describe contingent findings, emerging questions, or field experiences.

- **Commentaries**

A commentary is a learned opinion piece that may or may not be footnoted and evidence-based. The author will offer a clear and concise perspective on a social, cultural, political, or economic issue of the day, one which speaks to larger questions. Commentaries usually are between 1,000 and 1,500 words.

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All Commentary Board contributions should be styled like Op-Eds or editorial essays rather than research articles, making strong arguments in clear, concise language. Essays do not need a lengthy literature or historiographical review, and should avoid footnotes. References to recent news stories are encouraged, and should be linked to original sources.

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