


10-2017

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## Citation

QIAN, Junxi, & KONG, Lily.(2017). When secular universalism meets pluralism: Religious schools and the politics of school-based management in Hong Kong. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, , 1-17.

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# When Secular Universalism Meets Pluralism: Religious Schools and the Politics of School-Based Management in Hong Kong

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# When Secular Universalism Meets Pluralism: Religious Schools and the Politics of School-Based Management in Hong Kong

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This article examines the politics of school-based management (SBM) in Hong Kong, with a specific focus on the conflicts between the state and three Christian churches (Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist) running state-funded religious schools. Although the state based its advocacy for SBM on neoliberally driven ideas of participation, transparency, and accountability, religious groups expressed worry about the loss of control over schools as an institution of value transmission anchored in religious beliefs. This article uses the SBM controversy as a case study to advance geographical debates on religious schools and argues that neoliberalism forms a necessary lens through which to examine the state–religion relations concerning religious schools. It offers an analytical framework that emphasizes the mutually constitutive relationship between religious schools and state building. It lends evidence to this argument by situating religious schools in the context of neoliberalization of education policies and arguing that faith-based sensibilities create new vectors of resistance to neoliberalism as a distinctive secular formation. The empirical analyses address three questions. First, we develop a detailed analysis of the discourses and rationalities upheld by the Hong Kong government and the churches. Second, we consider interactions and exchanges between the state and the churches, focusing on the assertions, negotiations, and concessions that both needed to make in a prolonged struggle over the decision-making process. Third, we reflect briefly on the aftermath of the passing of SBM to situate the churches' concerns in a broader context of neoliberal education policy. *Key Words:* *contingent neoliberalism, education, Hong Kong, religious school, school-based management.*

本文检视香港以校为本的管理 (SBM) 政治, 并特别聚焦政府和经营受政府资助的宗教学校之三大基督教会 (天主教、英国国教与循道卫理联合教会) 之间的冲突。尽管政府对 SBM 的倡议是根据新自由主义所驱动的参与、透明和可问责性之概念, 宗教团体却担忧失去学校作为传达根据宗教信仰的价值之机构。本文运用 SBM 的冲突作为案例研究, 推进地理学有关宗教学校的辩论, 并主张新自由主义是检视宗教学校中的政府—宗教关系的必要视角。本文提供的分析架构, 强调宗教学校与国家建构之间的共构关系。本文将宗教学校置放于教育政策的新自由主义化脉络中, 并主张以信仰为基础的感性创造出对抗作为特殊的世俗形式之新自由主义的崭新动力, 藉此证明上述主张。本文的经验分析处理以下三大问题: 首先, 我们对香港政府和教会所拥护的论述与合理性进行细致的分析。再者, 我们考量政府和教会之间的互动与交换, 并聚焦对决策过程的长期抗争而言同时必须坚持、协商与让步。第三, 我们简要地反思 SBM 通过后的境况, 从而将教会的考量置放在新自由主义教育政策的广泛脉络中。 *关键词:* *偶然的新自由主义, 教育, 香港, 宗教学校, 以校为本的管理。*

Este artículo examina la política de dirección basada en la escuela (SBM) en Hong Kong, con un interés específico en los conflictos que se presentan entre el estado y tres iglesias cristianas (la católica, la anglicana y la metodista) que regentan tres escuelas religiosas financiadas por el estado. Aunque el estado basaba su defensa del SBM en ideas de participación, transparencia y responsabilidad de tinte neoliberal, los grupos religiosos expresaban su preocupación sobre la pérdida del control sobre las escuelas equiparando tal control a una institución para la trasmisión de valores anclados en creencias religiosas. Este artículo usa la controversia de la SBM como un estudio de caso con el cual promover debates geográficos sobre las escuelas religiosas, y argumenta que el neoliberalismo forma una lente necesaria a través de la cual examinar las relaciones del estado con la religión, en lo que concierne a las escuelas religiosas. El artículo ofrece un marco analítico que enfatiza la relación mutuamente constitutiva entre las escuelas religiosas y la construcción de estado. Se proporciona evidencia a favor de este argumento situando las escuelas religiosas en el contexto de la neoliberalización de las políticas educativas y arguyendo que las sensibilidades basadas en la fe crean nuevos vectores de resistencia al neoliberalismo como una formación secular distintiva. Los análisis empíricos abocan tres cuestiones. Primero, desarrollamos un detallado análisis de los discursos y racionalidades enarbolados por el gobierno de Hong Kong

y las iglesias. Segundo, consideramos las interacciones e intercambios entre el estado y las iglesias, concentrándonos en las aseveraciones, negociaciones y concesiones que ambos necesitaron para sostener una lucha prolongada sobre el proceso de la toma de decisiones. Tercero, reflexionamos brevemente sobre las repercusiones de la defunción de la SBM para situar las preocupaciones de las iglesias en un contexto más amplio de la política neoliberal sobre educación. *Palabras clave: neoliberalismo contingente, educación, Hong Kong, escuela religiosa, dirección basada en la escuela.*

On 8 July 2004, the Legislative Council of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) approved an amendment of the region's Education Ordinance, which obliged all "aided schools" in Hong Kong—schools run by non-governmental school sponsoring bodies (SSBs) but fully funded by the government—to establish an incorporated management committee (IMC). The IMC, a central component of the school-based management (SBM) initiative keenly promoted by the then Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB),<sup>1</sup> was designated as the supervisory body of a school's day-to-day operation and held accountable directly to EMB. Under the Amendment, the SSB, which previously had full control of schools by appointing all members in a School Management Committee (SMC), could appoint only up to 60 percent of the members in an IMC. The rest consisted of elected representatives of teachers, parents, alumni, and independents. The bill triggered considerable concern, even resentment, among faith-based SSBs, namely, three of Hong Kong's mainline churches: Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist. They expressed worry that the inclusion of non-SSB elements in school management would limit their ability to operate religious schools according to faith-based directions and missions. Beneath the anxiety over the loss of control was also the fear that the IMC, under the government's jurisdiction, might be exploited by pro-Beijing politicians as a channel of ideological infiltration.

In Hong Kong, primary and secondary schools are made up of three groups: public schools, SSB schools, and private or international schools. The first two are fully funded by the government. Before the introduction of SBM, the government did not intervene in the day-to-day operations of SSB schools. In 2015, public schools and SSB schools accounted for 79 percent of primary and 73 percent of secondary schools (Census and Statistics Department HKSAR 2015). Although the official statistics do not specify the numbers of each type of SSB schools, suffice it to say that in 2004, when the controversy erupted, more than 300 SSBs were involved in the provision of primary and secondary education.

Faith-based education, most of which was provided by Christian churches, predated the free provision of compulsory state education in Hong Kong, which was introduced as late as 1971. The Catholic Church has long been the largest SSB in Hong Kong. The Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist churches together operated 40 percent of all primary and secondary schools in 2004. Given this, the debate between the state and the churches over SBM profoundly reshaped state-religion relations.<sup>2</sup> The proposal of SBM was in general met with support from secular sponsoring bodies; associations of teachers and parents even openly praised the diversification of management committees. Progovernment religious organizations running Buddhist and Taoist schools showed compliance, at least. Therefore, the controversy between Christian churches and the state is best analyzed as an irreconciled secular-religious tension, when the churches tried to fend off a specific expression of secular universalism. By secular universalism, we refer to the prioritization of market-based rational logics over other values, including religious ones. It is borne out of a broader neoliberal transition central to the education reforms in Hong Kong (Choi 2005), which affected not only religious schools but arguably the entire education system. Eventually, the introduction of SBM to religious schools escalated to a bitter polemic, as different actors—the government, the judiciary, and faith actors—all constructed their political claims by engaging with or reworking these secular universalist discourses.

The controversy, to begin with, was situated in the broader context of state-religion relations in Hong Kong. In postcolonial Hong Kong, traditional Chinese religions (Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism) and Christian denominations have all established partnership with the state in terms of welfare provision and the building of communities; politically, however, Christian groups, having lost the privileges they enjoy in the colonial period (1841–1997), are alienated from the incumbent state (Kwong 2002). Due to the postcolonial threat to Christian churches' social prestige and the fear of losing religious freedom under Chinese rule, Christian churches have constituted a major force in

the struggle for democratization in post-1997 Hong Kong (Kwok 2015). The controversy over SBM also articulated with the worry shared by the general public that the HKSAR government acted as a spokesperson and representative of the Chinese central state, whose goal was ultimately political assimilation. Debates surrounding SBM were entangled with other contentions and struggles. These included the proposed legislation based on Article 23 of the Basic Law of Hong Kong, which was hotly contested just a year before the SBM issue erupted, as opponents believed that it was a way of enabling the suppression of anti-Beijing dissidents in the name of protecting “state security.” Another example was a controversy set in motion in 2010 and ended in 2012 with the state’s compromise, when the Education Bureau sought to introduce Moral and National Education as a compulsory part of the curriculum, which was viewed with suspicion and dubbed by detractors as “brainwashing education.”<sup>3</sup>

The second context of the controversy was the neoliberalization of education in Hong Kong, which this article frames as a distinctive secular formulation. Recent education reforms in Hong Kong have echoed the global trends emphasizing market standards, efficiency, quality, and accountability. These reforms devolve some decision-making powers to schools but also entail the recentralization of state power by means of a nomenclature of monitoring and assessment. Fear of the loss of school autonomy is not confined to religious schools but shared by other state-funded schools, as this study reveals later.

This article examines the politics of SBM in Hong Kong by engaging with but also advancing the literature on geographies of religious schools. Religious schools have long been the center of impassioned debates, both within and outside academia, and the contentions have been identified as those between the secular and the religious, the universal and the particular (Jackson 2003; McKinney 2006). Although the vast literatures in education studies and political theories tend to treat religious schools as passive objects of state policies and political discourses (Burtonwood 2003; Dagovitz 2004; Gardner, Cairns, and Lawton 2005), recent works in sociology and geography have instead analyzed religious schools as performative constructions that enliven institutional and political identities by responding to state secularism in proactive, often resistant ways (Kong 2005; Bano 2011; Hemming 2011a, 2011c; Dwyer and Parutis 2013). In particular, geographers have shown a growing interest—with case studies mainly drawn from the United Kingdom—in addressing

religious schools as coconstituted by religious orientations and state constructions of community, citizenship, and national identity (Hemming 2011a, 2011c; Dwyer and Parutis 2013). These studies imply that faith actors are not a monolithic category but active in engaging with and reworking state secular discourses. This article builds on debates surrounding these agendas and politics and aims to advance a fuller theorization of religious schools as a contingent, ongoing, and hybrid site of negotiation and contestation. Instead of relying solely on the ideological and discursive construction of religious schools, this article develops a situated, processual analysis of a prolonged contention involving overt struggle and resistance.

Overall, this article aims to contribute to the growing literature on religious schools in two ways. First, although extant literatures in sociology, political philosophy, and political science have reiterated the tensions between state secularism and faith actors’ claims for distinct identities, they tend to reify religious schools as an ideal type, with fixed attributes, standing as a constitutive outside to the secularism of the broader society. The lack of sensitivity to situated dynamics places these analyses in an either–or stalemate, with some scholars arguing for the legitimacy of religious schools and others arguing the opposite. In *realpolitik*, however, faith actors and the state are caught in competing, yet mutually constitutive situations. Religious schools, as a geohistorically embedded social institution where complex rationales and claims come into mutual play, defy clear-cut boundaries between secularism and religiosity. If we approach the secular–religious tension as a process, not a given status quo, it becomes clear that state projects and faith actors coevolve as they respond to and negotiate with one another. This article delineates an analytical framework that attends closely to the performative construction of religious and secular values and identities amidst compliance, negotiation, or resistance. Following Dwyer and Meyer (1995), this article is interested in not only the ideological construction of religious schools but also political decision-making processes that are notoriously uncertain in local contexts and involve a labyrinth of negotiations and exchanges.

Second, although the tension between religious schools and secular discourses is central to the geographical literature on faith-based education, there is a curious paucity of research that explores the relationship between religious schools and the neoliberal restructuring of state authority, which is, arguably, the single most important context of contemporary public

policies in many developed capitalist societies. This article argues that neoliberalism provides a particularly relevant context for understanding tensions and accommodations between religious schools and state authority, because neoliberalization, in its twenty-first-century forms, entails the active reconstruction of state apparatus and recentralization of state power (Peck 2001; Peck and Tickell 2002). To bring neoliberalism into the picture, on the one hand, allows us to analyze neoliberalism as contingent, processural, geohistorically specific, and in dialectic relationship with local claims, traditions, and institutions (Springer 2010). In this vein, this article joins other analyses that have recognized that neoliberalism is negotiated and coevolves with situated conditions (Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2010; Peck 2010; Springer 2010). On the other hand, a growing literature in geography demonstrates how neoliberal policies of education have gained great momentum in advanced capitalist societies (Mitchell 2003; Klaf and Kwan 2010). Studies on charter schools in the United States, for example, illustrate how privately run but publicly funded schools are particularly susceptible to a neoliberal mandate of market efficiency and accountability (Hankins and Martin 2006; Mitchell and Sparke 2016). Although sophisticated analysis has been applied to the desire of state and private actors to enlist and create “resilient” subjects responsive to market logics (Mitchell 2003; Mitchell and Sparke 2016), the studies tend to view neoliberalism as an overwhelming project that produces uncontested policy results. Less work, however, has been done to analyze how neoliberalization of education is unevenly constituted. This article argues that faiths effectuate new vectors of resistance to neoliberal education policies. Akin to other kinds of faith-based organizations, religious schools live in multiplex relationships with neoliberalism, accepting certain neoliberal ethos but simultaneously contesting it on the basis of religious ethics and identities (Williams, Cloke, and Thomas 2012).

The controversy over SBM offers a particularly fraught case because of the explicit tensions between religious autonomy and state control in Hong Kong. Hong Kong, after all, is increasingly characterized by a culture of civic disobedience and widespread distrust of the incumbent state, instituted after the 1997 Handover (Ma 2007). Instead of provoking an overt antimarket agenda, neoliberalization of education in Hong Kong stoked the pro-democracy sentiments of Hong Kong citizens, especially faith actors, who in turn urged the state to recognize alternative positionalities to the neoliberal mantras of standards, competitiveness, and efficiency.

## Theorizing the Politics of Religious Schools: The Entanglement of State, Religion, and Education

### Religious Schools in the Geographies of Religion and Education

Debates on religious schools have proliferated in recent years, against a backdrop of increased involvement of religious organizations in the provision of formal education. State-funded religious schools are particularly contentious, because the generosity of state funding often implies the conformity to a secular modernity (Dwyer 1993). Academics and policymakers criticizing religious schools base their arguments on variegated versions of liberal secularism and universalism: (1) Religious schools lead to the segregation of religious adherents from the cultures and values of mainstream society (Flint 2007; Breen 2009); (2) religious schools encroach on free choice and individual autonomy, because religion acts as a superior source of authority in terms of ideologies and worldviews (Jackson 2003; Dagovitz 2004; Hemming 2011c); (3) there is a danger of religious schools radicalizing members of religious groups and breeding a sense of enmity toward the state and other sections of society (Short 2002; Merry 2015).

In parallel, those arguing in favor of religious schools also turn to liberal democratic lexicons to buttress their positions. Four major arguments have been advocated: (1) Religious schools are not necessarily ignorant of the ethos and values of a broader society, nor are they simply vehicles for nurturing particularism (Flint 2007; Breen 2009); (2) personal autonomy is not absolute but exercised within cultural contexts (Burtonwood 2003); religious schools create autonomous individuals by facilitating “social interactions and networks that supply meaning, membership, solidarity and purpose” (Merry 2015, 142); (3) political liberalism includes a defense of pluralism; therefore, respect for views and values of religious communities should be deemed a desirable virtue (Dagovitz 2004; Hemming 2011c); (4) religious schools must be celebrated, for they offer an institution in which religious ethos can be defended, and communal identity can flourish and be protected (Valins 2003; Flint 2007).

The arguments just reviewed provide an informed point of departure to understand the origins of contentions around religious schools. Yet, as we suggested earlier, it is somewhat futile to reify religious schools as an either-or choice between rejection and recognition, in tandem with abstract political logics. An

either—or heuristic reifies the epistemological separation between religious schools and the secular state, at the expense of a scrutiny of ambivalence, interaction, and mutual constitution. Instead, a situated approach allows an understanding of relationships between state secularism and religious schools as negotiated, frictional, and ongoing. Religious schools are not external to secular discourses of the state but constitutive of and constituted by state building. This coconstitution is characterized by “contingent, often contradictory, assemblages and alliances,” but it is also “prone to subversion in various sites and spaces” (Williams, Cloke, and Thomas 2012, 1484). It is by acting on each other, and responding to each other’s claims, that the state and religious schools construct and perform identities and authorities. Once discourses and rationales are translated into concrete political actions, the process is fractured and incoherent, rather than linear, fraught with not only conflict and contestation but also cooperation and compromise.

Religious schools need to be problematized and relativized as such, because of their dual identities as faith organizations and simultaneously educational establishments. Both are heavily contested loci of governance and have far-reaching implications for state–society relations. The geographical literature on religious schools has generally been framed within the relationships between faith and the state, and extant analyses have adeptly analyzed how religious schools are ideologically constructed as subjects of state interventions and expected to be better integrated to national cultures, multiculturalism, civic participation, and broader communities (Dwyer and Meyer 1995; Hemming 2011a, 2011c; Dwyer and Parutis 2013). Although the studies have insightfully unpacked that faith actors are not coopted by the state but rework state discourses to reconcile religious schooling with the state’s promotion of community cohesion, citizenship education, and multiculturalism, more refined understanding is needed with regard to how faith-based ethos, sensibilities, and identities motivate faith actors to contest state mantras. Important insights can be drawn from the wider literatures in the geography of religion and the geography of education.

In the geography of religion, studies have highlighted the state’s secular intervention as one primary focus of research. Impulses for secular reason in the modern society, as Wilford (2010) contended, entail that secular concerns of rationality, modernity, and progress take precedence over and restrict

religious authorities in various areas of public debates and policies, although it does not necessarily result in the overall decline of religious beliefs. This notwithstanding, many communities continue to organize certain aspects of collective social life on the basis of religious conventions and norms, leading to a de facto split of power between the state and religion (Arif 2008). The thesis of postsecularity, for example, makes a strong claim for the robust presence and visibility of religion in public life in late capitalist society (Habermas 2002; Cloke and Beaumont 2012). As Kong (2010) wrote, the intersection of the sacred and the secular has been ongoing and abiding—the project of purifying the public sphere by excluding religious elements has never been complete and, in some contexts, not even a quest.

In this context, relationships between religious organizations and the secular state are complex and manifold, involving recognition and collaboration and, at the same time, negotiation and even overt contestation. One corpus of research that pertains to this study is that on faith-based organizations (FBOs). In Western societies, FBOs are now increasingly hubs of social welfare and services (Ley 2008), which is, to an extent, comparable to the provision of education by religious groups in Hong Kong. FBO-provided service fills the gaps in social welfare amidst the withdrawal of the state from certain public responsibilities. The state and faith actors, on the one hand, seek to form relations of “co-governance,” as faith bodies are included in policy debates due to their important role in supporting services and communities (Dinham and Lowndes 2008; Beaumont and Cloke 2012). Activities conducted by FBOs are celebrated in policy discourses as state–society partnership and community empowerment (Chapman 2009; Kong and Woods 2016). On the other hand, however, discordances between the state and FBOs are likely to emerge from partnership. The state tends to follow an instrumental, problem-solving orientation and treats FBOs foremost as repositories of utilities and resources. In contrast, the aspirations and narratives of faith actors that have no direct bearing on utilitarian purposes could be rendered invisible in state discourses (Dinham and Lowndes 2008; Williams, Cloke, and Thomas 2012).

From the preceding discussion, one could reasonably maintain that religious organizations and groups might be coopted by political rationalities endorsed by the state. At least, religious organizations are willing

to enter into negotiations and demonstrate certain flexibilities in theologies, orientations, and views (Hackworth 2010; Bano 2011). This rapport cannot be taken for granted, however, when faith-based ethics, interests and agendas are in conflict with and prioritized over rationalities of state governance. As Williams, Cloke, and Thomas (2012) argued, religious groups are empowered to “resist, revise, or modify government rationalities and technologies” in explicit and articulate ways (1486). The provision of social welfare by FBOs, after all, is often underscored by the commitment to deliver social justice and address social problems that the state fails to fix (Beaumont 2008). In many cases, FBOs carve out spaces of ethical identities and challenge relations and practices in secular economies and socialities (Cloke and Beaumont 2012). With regard to neoliberal agendas, FBOs comply in some circumstances but in others transgress and subvert them. We return to this point in the next subsection.

From a geography of education perspective, it has long been argued that the spaces of education are contested and politicized (Basu 2013). On the one hand, as Mills and Kraftl (2016) argued, ethos and identities of schools are by no means “free-floating from socio-material and historical circumstances” (21). Academic accounts of education policies need to consider the ongoing evolution of state forms and practices, shaped by transformations within and beyond a nation or region (Lingard and Ozga 2006). As a quintessential institution through which communities express, transmit, and defend values and identities, schools are central to many political contests and caught up in ideological struggles that extend well beyond the boundaries of schools (Collins and Coleman 2008). One illustrative example is the struggle over the implementation of National Standards in the United States, which, as Merrett (1999) analyzed, was a war of scale, as the state mandate to reform education in tandem with market efficiency and competitiveness collided with locally based control of value inculcation.

On the other hand, education is contested because it is one of the primary loci in which subjectivity and citizenry are produced (Boulton 2010; Basu 2013). In this view, education policies are conglomerates of discourses that take the appearance of “a fundamental, abiding rationality, linked by nature to the just and the good” (Foucault 1997, 62, cited in Christie 2006). As Mitchell (2003) argued, “Educational systems were an integral part of broader political struggles over the making and remaking of state citizens and their social identities,” and one ultimate objective is “the creation of a particular

kind of state subject” (390). In the United Kingdom, for example, religious schools have been exhorted by the state to place more emphasis on community cohesion and citizenship education to ensure religious adherents’ loyalty to the British polity and common values and instill a spirit of civic and political engagement (Flint 2007; Hemming 2011a, 2011b; Dwyer and Parutis 2013; for a comparable case of Singapore, see Kong 2005).

### **Bring Neoliberalism into the Picture**

As we have suggested, neoliberal transitions offer rich opportunities for exploring the nexus of religion, education, and state authority. In a broad context where neoliberal doctrines are often adopted as indisputable policy rationales, education policies often consolidate neoliberal hegemony by means of reforming school curricula, training techniques, criteria of assessment, and so on. As Mitchell (2003) argued, neoliberalism has elicited a transition from the conception of education as embodiment of humanistic values to the focus on rationalization, market effectiveness, and efficiency (Basu 2004), with localized meanings and selves “formed through the economic system and organized through performance as the central moral code within that system” (Funnell 1995, 139). Schools are exhorted to nurture students’ and staffs’ aspirations for progress, produce capable subjects for economic goals, and meet the criteria of a changing labor market (Klaf 2013; McCreary 2013; Finn 2016). Neoliberalization also reinforces a culture of constant monitoring and assessment of the performances in educational processes (Finn 2016).

Mitchell (2003, 2006) noted that in North America and Europe, the focus on respect for plurality and difference in liberal education has been displaced by educational standardization motivating a strategic, mobile cosmopolitan identity characterized by awareness of global competitiveness and the economic purposes of cultural capital. Neoliberal education policies apply “golden rules” such as the prioritization of competition and the retrenchment of state bureaucracy. As Klaf and Kwan (2011) argued, these techniques of governance stitch together a “one-size-fits-all” straitjacket that does not allow flexibility or diversity.

So far, geographers have not dedicated much work to ask how neoliberalization of education acts as a catalyst for alternative social formations, which might relativize, destabilize, or even contest the hegemony of neoliberalism in specific and uneven ways, if not transcend them completely. Also, few studies, if any, have



taken note of the ways in which neoliberalism affects educational processes in faith-based schools. Yet, faith-based motives could be translated into political impulses that question and counteract neoliberal restructuring of education, because FBOs have contradictory relationships with neoliberalism.

On the one hand, FBOs have been criticized for being coopted by neoliberal governance, as they help perpetuate the withdrawal of the state from sustained welfare programs and are complicit in the moral interventions into the lives of the poor (Cooper 2015). FBOs might be actively involved in the promotion of an ethic of welfare to work and emphasize individualized, desocialized notions of responsibility (Hackworth 2010; Williams, Cloke, and Thomas 2012). On the other hand, however, FBOs are constituted by “theo-ethics,” and discourses and technologies deployed in pursuit of grand-scale rationalities might “be subverted by the practice of particular ethical precepts and affects” (Williams, Cloke, and Thomas 2012, 1493; Williams 2015). The relationships between neoliberal governance and faith-based social formations are ambiguous and porous, and it is reasonable to postulate religion acting as an axis of collective agency against neoliberal techniques of governance (Bolton 2015).

To sum up, the points of view that we have drawn together enable us to conceptualize religious schools in terms of the mutual constitution of state power, educational aspiration, and religiosity. This approach revisits the embeddedness and volatility of faith-based education (Dwyer and Parutis 2013) and is sensitive to the incomplete, selective ways in which neoliberalism is realized and the many alternative logics played out locally (Ong 2007; Y. E. Cheng 2016). While the secular–religious tension unfolds in Hong Kong, the state incorporates a form of pastoral care to create market-sensitive subjects. This study presents a situated analysis of the exchanges between the state and religious groups in a concrete space–time, taking into account how religious schools constitute statecraft and reinvent themselves by actively engaging with the rationalities of state governance.

## Methods

The empirical analysis focuses on three areas of inquiry. The first concerns the discourses and rationalities underpinning the Hong Kong government’s and churches’ competing visions of SBM. The second considers interactions and exchanges between the state and churches before and after the Amendment was passed, focusing on the assertions, negotiations, and

concessions that both parties had to make in a struggle over decision-making processes. Finally, we reflect briefly on the aftermath of the passing of SBM to ascertain whether the churches’ worries were borne out, while shedding light on the broader context of the reconfiguration of state power.

The article bases its analysis on textual sources, namely, Hong Kong–published newspaper articles (published between 1 January 2002 and 31 December 2015), government documents and briefs, transcripts of Legislative Council debates, three court rulings based on a judicial review of the Amendment, and letters and announcements published by Christian groups. Newspaper articles form the primary source of data. We collected Hong Kong–published Chinese- and English-language newspaper reports on SBM, totaling 318 in Chinese and 80 in English.

We choose to focus on secondary materials for two reasons: First, data offered by these accounts are highly nuanced, enabling us to paint a comprehensive picture of the gradual unfolding of the controversy from multiple positionalities; second, we have not collected primary data through interviews with protagonists, because this article is largely a historical study of a political struggle occurring a decade ago, and changed sociopolitical milieus in Hong Kong might lead interviewees to reinterpret the original controversy. The pool of newspaper materials used in this research is exhaustive of all media accounts on SBM. Among them, approximately 50 percent contain specific information on state rationalities, religious actors’ concerns, and the discourses that both parties mobilize to support their stances, whereas the rest contain only factual information about the unfolding of the controversy, verified against one another, and are therefore of lesser importance to the analysis.

We acknowledge that published accounts are necessarily partial, and although public statements from religious actors and the state are nuanced, both parties selectively emphasized their concerns. For example, whereas the churches focused on internal harmony within religious schools and resistance against ideological disruption, they might have chosen to conceal concerns over the state’s likely intervention into the schools’ finances, to avoid suspicion over abuse of funding or even corruption within religious organizations; also, even if the state attempted to consolidate its control of faith groups by means of SBM, it would refrain from stating so but emphasize civic participation and accountability. These will be equally unlikely revelations in interviews, however. Despite the partiality of public

accounts, they offer relevant insights into how secular-religious tensions were playing out in Hong Kong.

To make a final methodological note, most newspapers in Hong Kong have political leanings, whether neutral, progovernment, or prodemocratization (we specify the political stances where we quote in the empirical sections). Our analyses use two means to deal with this issue. First, we triangulate between different newspapers to check on how events are reported (it turned out there was a great deal of consistency across newspapers with different leanings). Second, we bear in mind how newspaper articles might report from the positionalities of specific actors; this was useful as it is precisely situated discourses and claims that enabled political actions, and we analyzed the reports for the positionalities and corresponding claims and actions.

## Secular Universalism Meets Pluralism: The Collision of Rationalities

### SBM as Neoliberalization of Education

The promotion of SBM in Hong Kong took place in a context wherein successive reforms in education—which Y. C. Cheng (2009) described as a “reform syndrome”—were designed. Rationales for these reforms have echoed global neoliberal trends in education policies, with the emphases on competitiveness in global economy, market efficiency, and improved education quality (Mitchell 2003; Mitchell and Sparke 2016). A common characteristic of the reforms is that they are top-down, based on doctrines and principles alleged to be universally applicable, regardless of the diversity of practices on the ground and “structurally embedded conflicts of interests” (Choi 2005, 248). In particular, the notion of “stakeholder” has been popularized: Education is viewed less as a holistic process of value inculcation and more as a means to meet the expectations of a diversity of stakeholders. Most of the reforms were introduced after the 1997 Handover to sustain the advantaged position of Hong Kong in the global economy, of which SBM was an integral element.

With regard to school management, the Hong Kong government has adopted in general a devolution-cum-accountability approach. Report No. 7 published by the Education Commission, a semigovernment consultation body, recommended that key players of education participate in developing school goals and quality indicators (Education Commission 1997). The SBM scheme decentralizes some decision-making power to schools, in terms of education goals, personnel, and finance. It also makes

room for flexibility in the use of resources and formalizes procedures for planning, conducting, and assessing school activities (Lam 2006). Devolution, however, has entailed the implementation of sophisticated mechanisms of evaluation and accountability, which, as Leung (2004) and Pang (2008) commented, has led to the recentralization of state power and created a culture of managerialism.

The Hong Kong state claims that SBM is underscored by the philosophies of participation, transparency, and accountability. A key report produced by an advisory committee appointed by the Director of Education, for example, promoted explicitly a vision of “world-class schools” competing in “a global and knowledge-based economy.” The report privileged “student outcomes,” “a professional learning community,” and “a strong alliance of stakeholders” as the overriding priorities of school management (Advisory Committee on School-Based Management 2000, 1–2).

To materialize these ideas, a series of changes to the structure of school management have been prescribed for aided schools to comply with. To begin with, the SBM envisages a radically decentralized system of school management. Whereas previously an SSB might manage schools in a collective manner and use one school management committee to run multiple schools, the Amendment mandates that each school should be run by a separate IMC to respond to the situated conditions and demands within the school.<sup>4</sup>

Accordingly, the Amendment clearly underscores the notion of “stakeholders,” and it is prescribed that at least 40 percent of the members sitting in an IMC should consist of teachers, parents, alumni, and independents, to represent a diversity of views on the missions and values of education from perspectives of teaching activities, family needs, and the general society’s expectations. Before the passing of the Amendment, the state’s promotion of SBM through public media relied heavily on the claim that SBM was conducive to the democratization of school management by inviting voices of stakeholders. Arthur Li, then Secretary for Education and Manpower, suggested that the composition of IMCs reflected principles of participation and transparency:

To introduce into the IMC the participation of teachers and parents is a means to facilitate effective communications between sponsoring bodies, parents, teachers and alumni, to improve the transparency of school management and minimise the likelihood of lapses and problems. (“Let the Parents Contribute” [progovernment] 31 May 2004)

Above all, as Peck and Tickell (2002) commented, rationalization and standardization consolidate state apparatus of control and authority. SBM fundamentally enhances mechanisms of accountability to ensure the “efficient” use of human and financial resources. Although the amended Education Ordinance states that the IMC is accountable to both the Education Bureau and the SSB, in practice, a formalized channel of accountability has been established only between the school and the Permanent Secretary for Education. Under the provisions of SBM, each IMC is required to draft a constitution detailing the school’s vision and mission and submit it to the Permanent Secretary for approval.

In advocating utility maximization, the state saw no problem comparing schools to corporations. Fanny Law, then Permanent Secretary for Education and Manpower, commented, “Aided schools are funded by the government, and like joint-stock companies; thus the management has to be open and held accountable to outsiders” (“Fanny Law” [neutral] 10 May 2004). Overall, the state privileged SBM as a global best practice, which Hong Kong, as a cosmopolitan hub, must embrace to stay in tune with the standards of progress and modernity (“Accommodating Opposing SSBs” 30 April 2004; “The Diocese Failed” [neutral] 24 November 2006). Noticeably, there was a conception of modern citizenry underpinning discourses about SBM. Central to this construction of citizenry were notions of active citizen participation, stakeholder interests, and a polity accountable to a state regime that actively intervened to create an environment of competitiveness and efficiency (Peck 2001).

### **The Religious–Secular Collision**

As we mentioned earlier, state–religion partnerships in the provision of welfare and service might dispense with faith-based identities, values, and sensibilities (Dinham and Lowndes 2008). The vision of secular citizenry envisaged by SBM similarly does not take into account the aspirations of religious schools to pass on faith-based identities and values. Ever since the draft of the Amendment was made public in November 2002, the Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist churches, unified under the roar of Cardinal Joseph Zen, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Hong Kong, launched a concerted movement of resistance to SBM, through both media outlets and legal channels. Their unyielding stance eventually evolved into a cornerstone event in the political landscape of

postcolonial Hong Kong. The churches’ overall argument was that the state trumpeted a secular universalist rationality and risked obliterating pluralism in education. SBM was also critiqued for impinging on free choice, because students and parents should be entitled the right to choose the context of socialization wherein to fulfil the education mission (Legislative Council Debate 8 July 2004).<sup>5</sup>

Christian churches’ anxiety was, first of all, concerned with the distribution of power in school management. They contended that the incorporation of non-SSB elements in the IMC resulted in the weakening of power of SSBs. Relatedly, Christian churches worried about the “fragmentation” of power, as under the Amendment SSBs could no longer inculcate values to schools as a central authority but had to deal with separate IMCs with different constitutions and internal debates. In this sense, the state would marginalize SSBs by exercising a policy of “divide and rule” (“Bishop Zen Appeals” 27 May 2004).

In the Legislative Council debates on the proposed Amendment, some legislators resonated with the churches’ position, contending that in contrast to the self-declared advantages of participation and democratization, the Amendment would initiate “a process of centralisation of power of the education authority” (Yiu-Chung Leung, legislator sympathetic with the churches, Legislative Council Debate 8 July 2004). Legislator Andrew Cheng resonated, suggesting that the sentiment felt by churches emerged because

Under the new legislation, the incorporated management committee (IMC) of each school will be accountable to the Government, while the sponsoring body is made a mere figurehead, the ideology of the sponsoring body will then be swept under the carpet. . . . In particular, sizable SSBs such as the Catholic and Protestant Churches will feel being split. (Legislative Council Debate 8 July 2004)

Meanwhile, the Christian churches, especially the Catholic Church, expressed unease with the prospect that SBM would bring internal politics and antagonism, disrupting harmony and consensus in management. In this line of argument, religious bodies, different from secular actors, prioritized unity and collectivism, whereas allowing different stakeholders to represent their interests would only instill the cultures of individualism and self-centeredness (“‘Conspiracy’ to Deny” [neutral] 19 March 2002). In various media comments, the churches reiterated that religious schools should not be turned into battlegrounds, with ceaseless lobbying and politics:

Under the new regime, the teachers, parents and alumni on the IMC are chosen by election, and they may not endorse the education ideals and principles of the school-sponsoring bodies. . . . The result is, one teacher or parent representative who is strongly opposed to the education ideals and principles of the school sponsoring bodies could turn the IMC upside down. (“Bishop Zen’s Response” [neutral] 23 March 2004)

The churches’ main concerns were threefold. First, arguing against the idea of principals and teachers sitting on IMCs, Cardinal Zen wrote that it was unreasonable for salaried personnel to supervise themselves. Second, in an open letter to Catholic schools in Hong Kong (19 September 2000),<sup>6</sup> Zen suspected that the illusion of transparency created by stakeholder participation concealed “hidden agendas,” insinuating likely liaisons between “outsider” members and the state. Third, and more important, Zen argued that one single member strongly against the SSB would be enough to wreak havoc, causing insoluble division in the IMC, making the execution of the SSB’s vision and mission a challenge.

Based on these views, the churches called on state policies to be sensitive to religious views and rationalities. For example, the churches insisted that in different contexts people needed to approach democracy in different ways: Whereas the general society called for democracy based on public discussion, active debate, and voting, democracy in the schools must be balanced with the necessity for minimal politicization, because good education, especially a faith-based one, could only be carried out in a peaceful and collaborative environment (e.g., “Bishop Zen’s Response” 23 March 2004). The stance of faith communities followed the conviction that direct state interventions would make it difficult for religious schools to transmit faith-based visions and missions. Education in Christian schools followed religious teachings and encouraged students to lead a life inspired by religion. The churches’ fear of ideological disruption and infiltration loomed large, given the potential disagreement between the churches and outsiders and, worse, the anti-Christian stance adopted by the Chinese central state.

These views notwithstanding, the churches avoided purporting to the public the image of hard-core reactionaries hostile to politically correct lexicons of participation, transparency, and democracy. As argued before, religious schools are contingent and hybrid, defying an either–or choice between the religious and the secular. Comparable to madrasahs in Bano’s (2011) study, the churches hoped to convey the impression that they were flexible in their stance and

receptive to the democratization of school management but simply wanted to approach it differently. The churches repeatedly remarked to the media that they welcomed wholeheartedly the basic spirit of SBM but found problematic the ways in which it was put into practice (e.g., open letter, Cardinal Zen, Footnote 7; “Gloves are Off” 18 October 2003; “Bishop Peter Kwong Accuses” 13 June 2004). Supported by the Anglican and Methodist churches, the Catholic Diocese proposed a two-tier structure, in which a school management committee (accountable to the SSB) acted as the governing body of the school, while seeking counsel from a second-tier school executive committee made up of teacher, parent, and alumni representatives.

In response to the churches’ opposition, the HKSAR government similarly charted a course between critiquing the “particularism” of religious schools and reaffirming the respect for plurality. On the one hand, progovernment comments occasionally portrayed the Christian churches as “trapped in outdated mindset” and resistant to progress (“The Diocese Should Progress” 4 February 2010). On the other hand, the state insisted that SBM by no means aimed at political assimilation, because members appointed by SSBs, who accounted for up to 60 percent, ensured that religious visions and values could be effectively transmitted. Precisely because the state could not simply dismiss as irrelevant the claims of faith communities, the legislation of SBM underwent protracted negotiations and compromises, as we analyze in the next section.

## Struggling over the Political Decision-Making Process

In the case of religious schools under state intervention, friction between abstract logics of utility and efficiency and situated needs and concerns of faith actors induces much uncertainty amidst a byzantine process of coevolution and coconstitution (Mitchell and Sparke 2016). In the case of SBM, the controversy was shaped by the highly divided nature of politics in post-1997 Hong Kong. The struggles extended beyond the boundaries of schools and became enmeshed in campaigns for fuller democratization and liberalization under Chinese sovereignty. In this context, the Christian churches were allied with prodemocracy parties and legislators to counter the power bloc of progovernment politicians.

Between 2002 and the passing of the Amendment in 2004, the state, the Christian churches, and prodemocracy legislators engaged in prolonged debates to negotiate the terms of the bill. The Amendment actually offered Christian schools an option to bypass the compulsory requirement of establishing IMCs, if the registration of the schools were to be changed to the Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS); that is, to become partly subsidized private schools. Under DSS, schools would receive less funding from the state and have to considerably increase tuition fees, which was at odds with the philanthropic philosophy of the churches. Akin to state–religion partnerships in a neoliberal context (Dinham and Lowndes 2008), the HKSAR government prioritized the definition of religious groups as a resource to be drawn on to help in the provision of social (in this case educational) service, rather than as a community group with its own mission and ethos, betraying uneven relations of power in local state–religion relationships. Although state officials kept praising Christian groups for contributing to a vibrant and diverse education sector, they also insisted that it was unlikely to exempt religious schools from SBM, as the law was supposed to be universally applied (“Michael Suen” 26 April 2008). The churches had no option other than to negotiate within the parameters set by the overarching ideologies of SBM.

In the Legislative Council, the pro-Beijing Democratic Alliance (DAB) and Liberal Party stood in support of the government. Even the prodemocracy Democratic Party found it difficult to resist the seductive vocabularies of participation, transparency, and accountability and did not adopt an unequivocally oppositional stance to the bill. A newspaper article in *Ming Pao* suggested that the rhetoric of democratic school management was hegemonized to such an extent that the prodemocracy camp found themselves in a “dilemmatic situation” (“Cheung Man-Kwong Suggests” 14 March 2004). Nonetheless, led by Legislator Cheung Man-Kwong, the Democratic Party made a number of efforts in the hope that government power could be properly harnessed and checked. In response to accusations of abuse of power and conflict of interests in school management, the EMB made a number of compromises. Among others, the revisions to the draft Amendment gave SSBs more power to intervene in financial matters of schools; SSBs were given the right to nominate candidates for principals; moreover, the minimum numbers of teacher and parent members in an IMC were reset to one, instead of two as in the original draft.

Another issue that fueled heated debate concerned the power of the Permanent Secretary. Cheung Man-Kwong, for example, criticized the Amendment for running the risk of rubber-stamping the state’s abuse of power (“Implementation Date” 17 June 2004). Polemics concentrated on four capacities specified by the draft Amendment for the Permanent Secretary, namely, the rights to dissolve IMCs; to appoint an unlimited number of members to an IMC and revoke the registration of any member not deemed “proper and fit”; to approve and revise the constitution of an IMC; and, finally, to close down a school refusing to set up an IMC. In response to the concerns, EMB agreed to delete provisions authorizing the Permanent Secretary to close down schools and dissolve IMCs. Yet, with regard to the approval of constitutions and appointment or removal of IMC members, Permanent Secretary Fanny Law insisted that the government needed to retain the power to monitor schools, claiming, though, that the discharging of this power would be subject to maximal constraints and that a channel of appeal would also be put in place.

Last but not least, prodemocracy legislators strove to implement a mechanism to assess the effects of the new law, should it be finally passed. Initially, Cheung Man-Kwong proposed to postpone the legislation of the Amendment for three or five years, during which period the schools might practice IMC on an “experimental” basis. The HKSAR government adamantly rejected this proposal, on the basis that the state could not surrender the power to enforce SBM. Eventually, the EMB and Cheung Man-Kwong reached consensus on a plan, which envisaged the legislation of the Amendment in 2004 but a policy review in 2008. Ironically, the 2008 policy review exposed once again the ability of neoliberal rationalities to discipline and unify opinions. A report summarizing findings of the review, which was commissioned to Policy 21 Ltd, the University of Hong Kong largely repeated the hegemonic rhetorics of active citizenship, transparency, and effectiveness, asserting that “the great majority of stakeholders of IMC schools did not consider that the relationship between their schools and SSB deteriorated and their schools had deviated from the original mission of SSB in running the schools” (Policy 21 Limited, 2009).

On 8 July 2004, the Education (Amendment) Ordinance finally passed the Legislative Council, with a vote of twenty-nine to twenty-one. The Democratic Party opted to oppose the bill, at the urging of the prodemocracy camp and Christian churches. Christian

groups generally held the view that the revisions made to the draft Amendment were too moderate and failed to substantially challenge a centralized regime of power. Endorsed by the Anglican and Methodist churches, the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong took a radical step and brought the HKSAR government to court. In 2005, 2009, and 2010, the Diocese filed three successive writs for judicial review. The overall reasoning of the Diocese was that the SBM scheme violated Articles 136, 137, and 141 of the Basic Law of HKSAR, given that these articles allowed religious organizations to “continue to provide religious education” (Article 137) and run schools “according to their previous practice” (Article 141). In the church’s view, SBM clearly impaired the “previous practice” of Christian schools, limiting their autonomy and affordance in providing faith-based education.

All three cases were turned down by the court. Nevertheless, the bases of the judges’ rulings provided a valuable window into the uneasy relationship between secular universalism and cultural pluralism. The specific ways in which the judiciary in Hong Kong approached the relationships between the state, religion, and education exemplified the ambiguities and complexities of state rationales and the positions of faith actors. First, the role of religious institutions in the socialization and cultivation of citizens was recognized and respected in overt terms. Second, however, it was also agreed that religious institutions were not asocial but must be subject to secular interests and concerns, related to the ongoing development of a social totality. Hence, finally, education provided by religious institutions was viewed as embedded in, not separate from, changing ideologies and norms of the broader society, which echoed our argument that religious schools are not external to, but inside, the ongoing construction and performance of secular interests.

In the ruling by the Court of First Instance on 23 November 2006, the judge wrote that continuity with previous practice meant that religious organizations could run schools and teach courses in religion as they did before 1 July 1997 but did not entail that religious schools had a right of veto on any change in the education system (Court of First Instance 2006, HCAL 157/2005). If the argument of the Diocese was deemed valid, the ruling continued, then “more than half of the aided schools in Hong Kong are, in effect, immune from whatever educational policies that Government of the Hong Kong SAR may formulate” (Para. 144). The judge went on to argue that the autonomy of religious schools was by no means absolute, but subject to

government policies: “The privilege of autonomy carries with it the requirement of accountability” (Para. 247), because aided schools received huge funding from the state.

The Catholic Diocese appealed the judgment. On 3 February 2010, the Court of Appeal ruled, again in favor of the government. The judge endorsed the previous interpretation on the continuity with previous practice by arguing that “the theme of continuity envisaged by the Basic Law is not a prescription for ossification” (Court of Appeal 2010, CACV 18/2007). The ruling thus emphasized that what the Basic Law envisaged was that the systems and policies practiced in Mainland China would not be introduced to Hong Kong, but there was a necessary implication in the Basic Law for ongoing development and improvement of systems in the region. Finally, the Court concurred that there should be a balance between religious autonomy and “greater transparency of management, more efficient management, and enhanced accountability to the public purse” (Para. 68), while adding that the IMC, composed of SSB, teacher, parent, alumni, and independent representatives, should not be ruled out as a vehicle by which autonomy could be exercised.

Unwavering even after two successive losses, the Diocese brought the case to the Court of Final Appeal. Writing in their judgment on 13 October 2011, two judges presiding over the case decided that it was not a constitutional right protected by the Basic Law for the SSB to exert 100 percent control over schools. While resonating with arguments in previous rulings, however, the judges held that Article 141 of the Basic Law should not be interpreted just in terms of the right to continue to run schools but from a perspective of religious freedom (Court of Final Appeal 2011, FACV No. 1 of 2011). For the judges, the question at stake was whether SBM violated religious freedom. Citing as evidence the facts that the amended ordinance stated explicitly that SSBs had the right to set the vision and mission of schools and that the policy did not impede religious worshipping or praying in schools, the court reached the conclusion that SBM had not led to the erosion of religious freedom.

## **Epilogue: The Neoliberal Phantom of State Power?**

The ruling of the Court of Final Appeal did not give closure to the politics of SBM. The Christian

churches, unsurprisingly, expressed profound disappointment over the rulings and declared that they would never give up on ideological unity in schools. In the face of profound conviction on the part of the Christian churches, the question lingers as to what has transpired since the courts dismissed the appeal of the Diocese. This section briefly discusses the developments in Hong Kong's school management in the aftermath of the passing of the Amendment, which projects back to the question of whether the churches' anxieties over SBM were warranted. Our role, however, is not to present a singular, normative answer to this question, which is ultimately ideological, after all.

Since the 2011 ruling, there has been no room for Christian schools to continue to dodge the establishment of IMCs, but hitherto there has been no media spotlight on churches whose religious mission and values were subverted. The absence of public records capturing the churches' complaints of ideological infiltration or IMC members propagandizing against religious values appears to suggest a lack of solid evidence that "outsider" members readily act as agents of state secularism. We reach this conclusion for three reasons: First, given the manner in which the churches harnessed public discourse in the earlier phase to resist the Amendment, ideological infiltration appears to be such a sensitive issue that it overrides other concerns such as the need to maintain a public image of organizational unity; second, Hong Kong has a strong sector of neutral and prodemocracy media, which do not withdraw vis-à-vis state authority even under Chinese rule. Finally, in the 2012 controversy over the Moral and National Education, there was no evidence that IMCs could easily be exploited by the state to sway the opinions of schools.

Yet, it is equally hasty to dismiss the concerns of churches as unfounded and invalid. On the one hand, at this moment, it is perhaps too early to be conclusive, as schools run by the three churches started to establish IMCs only in 2011. On the other hand, the past decade has indeed witnessed the centralization and consolidation of state power in terms of the control over education in Hong Kong, through a neoliberally inspired system of accountability and evaluation. Despite the gesture of devolution, the most decisive powers have been centralized to the state, which has led to the restriction, rather than relaxation, of grassroots decision making. Three issues put the spotlight on how centralized power of the state has been produced and how this has yielded deleterious effects. Media accounts suggested that all state-funded schools

were subject to these new initiatives, although not specifying whether religious and secular schools were evenly affected. Nonetheless, these neoliberal impulses shed important lights on religious schools at the edge of secular social formations, both within and beyond the context of this study.

The first issue was the widespread complaint among teachers about the dramatic increase in workloads, not only because the government had raised the bar on teaching standards and education quality but also because under SBM, teachers needed to deal with a huge amount of paperwork to frame grounded experiences of teaching into a system of preformulated quality indicators. Instead of answering to a diversity of student needs, teachers had to answer foremost to a management leviathan driven by market-based logics.

The second issue concerned the policy of "optimizing" school and class sizes. As the number of school-age children shrank rapidly due to low fertility rates, numerous schools in Hong Kong could no longer recruit enough students. It was suggested by the public that classes might be downsized to increase education quality and hence school survival. Yet, the state decided to close down schools with low recruitments ("killing schools," in local parlance), insisting that classes could not be downsized, for the sake of efficient use of resources. Although many IMCs appealed that problems of recruitment and class size should be left to schools, the authority emphasized that they had the final say in education policies, raising suspicion over the genuine willingness of the state to devolve power and promote democratic decision making (e.g., "The Professionals" 13 December 2008).

A third debate focused on the policy of enforcing compulsory criteria on schools using English as the medium of instruction (MOI). In 1997, the HKSAR government implemented a program to encourage schools to use Cantonese as the MOI, in the belief that learning with one's mother language was conducive to education quality. Only a small number of schools meeting specific criteria were allowed to use English as the MOI. This invited criticisms over the creation of a divide between English MOI schools as more respectable and prestigious and Cantonese MOI ones as inferior (e.g., "Cheng Yin Cheong" 22 February 2005). After the passing of the Amendment, it has been expected that the decision of MOI would be handed to IMCs, but the state has yet to make a concession in this regard.

In sum, the Christian churches' opposition to IMCs was one specific manifestation of a general perception

of the expansion of state power amidst Hong Kong's neoliberal transition. The transfer of power from SSBs to the state was symptomatic of a larger tension at play in Hong Kong society, anchored in neoliberal imperatives and secular universalism. It was complicated by factors such as faith actors' claim to alternative management culture and the suspected ideological encroachment of the local and Chinese central state.

## Conclusion

Geographical analyses of religious schools have demonstrated that state discourses are not applied in educational contexts in coherent and unilinear ways. Instead, various actors appropriate and rework state discourses, presenting ideological and cultural ideas that are hybrid and ambivalent, rather than clear-cut (Hemming 2011a; Dwyer and Parutis 2013). Yet this line of research has generally not focused on religious schools as a locus of overt contestation and struggle for power, as has been the case of SBM in HKSAR. In this sense, this case allows us to develop broader arguments in the geographies of religion and education and to delineate new theoretical contours sensitive to localized struggles. Neoliberalism, in this study, is seen as an important context for secular-religious tension to unfold. When we tease out the logics behind the politics of SBM, it is clear that state secular intervention comprised both the use of discursive power and a mechanism of actions grounded in neoliberal logics of good governance. The state used education reform as a technology to instill a conception of citizenry, not by directly indoctrinating students but by mongering a new vision of state-society partnership through the appointment of IMC members.

Empirical evidence of this case allows us to draw a few insights to advance a theorization of the politics of religious schools. First, in insisting on SBM, the Hong Kong state prioritized "common values" over sectoral religious ones but could not simply dismiss religious concerns. It thus had to make gestures of compromise and concession. Therefore, the state's ability to stamp its authority was not total, even with the seemingly indisputable arguments about democratic participation and transparency.

Second, when faith actors in Hong Kong were engaged in the provision of social services—in this case, education—the ways in which they maneuvered between religious and secular interests were characterized by both flexible accommodation and overt

resistance. Working "inside" the state by being a recipient of state funding did not entail that faith actors would dispense with the values and goals outlined in their organizations' missions and become "docile subjects co-opted under institutional pressures of their funders" (Williams, Cloke, and Thomas 2012, 1488). Resistance, however, had to be balanced with flexible accommodation of competing claims, in this case, in the form of the churches' willingness to institute alternative mechanisms of participation and accountability.

Finally, in negotiating state-religion relations, key actors are embroiled in contexts not necessarily central to religious matters. This explains why the recognition for religious schools and pluralism is neither complete nor absolute but always subject to the intervention of context-specific secular rationalities. The controversy in Hong Kong was certainly related to a struggle about faith in the public sphere and reverberated with Dwyer and Parutis's (2013) work about how religious schools were a key site of struggle, but in this instance, the context of debate and negotiation suggested that far larger stakes were at play. The circumstances were framed by a larger quest by different actors to transit from government to governance, where citizens and groups were seeking to put their stakes in the ground in relation to market-based reason. Neoliberal impulses, however, were enmeshed in issues of democratic struggle in Hong Kong and the unspoken fear of "infiltration" of pro-Beijing elements. Although the contestation over the management of religious schools was grounded in a question of religious authority over faith-based schools, it was closely framed by concerns over diversity, religious rights, religious freedom, and democratic citizenship.

To conclude, we suggest that, beyond the scope of this article, the study of religious schools can benefit by the approach of bringing together the outward-looking and inward-looking perspectives, as advocated in the literatures on the geographies of education (Bradford 1990, in Kong 2013; Thiem 2008). The former is a macro political economy (Holloway, Brown, and Pimlott-Wilson 2011) approach that has traditionally examined educational provision and what it tells us about wider social, economic, and political processes. The latter is a micro social-cultural (Holloway et al., 2011) approach that emphasizes actual education processes, social difference within school spaces, and the importance of the voices of children and young people in understanding educational experiences. Throughout the article, we have argued, on the



one hand, that religious schools are coconstituted by faith-based ethos and secular discourses and, on the other hand, that neoliberalism offers a highly relevant context for theorizing religious schools as hybrid and contingent. This coconstitution unfolds not only at the level of religious–state relations, though, but also mundane practices of teaching and learning and the formal and informal networks, collaborations and exchanges between clergy, managers, teachers, and students. This article has not ventured to incorporate an inward-looking, microlevel direction, but the potential remains for examining the ways in which state rationalities could be reworked and resisted through lived practices, in the religiously coded affective environment of the campus.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the Education Bureau of Hong Kong SAR for granting access to policy documents and are also grateful to Nik Heynen and the three anonymous reviewers for their constructive advice and guidance throughout the review process. Lily Kong served as the corresponding author for this article.

## Funding

This study was made possible by funding from the Singapore Management University Lee Kong Chian Chair Professorship Fund and the National University of Singapore Provost's Chair Fund.

## Notes

1. The EMB was renamed the Education Bureau of HKSAR in 2007.
2. In this article, the notion of the state refers to the local state of HKSAR; where necessary, reference to the Chinese central state is specified.
3. In 2010, the Hong Kong government proposed the addition of a Moral and National Education program to primary and secondary school curricula. The program propagated allegiance to the Chinese state and embrace of Chinese national identity. It aroused an outcry of opposition, on the ground that pro-Beijing indoctrination would impair prodemocracy and profreedom spirits in Hong Kong. In 2012, the Hong Kong Government suspended implementation of the program indefinitely.
4. For the full text of the Amendment, see Education (Amendment) Ordinance (2004).
5. See Legislative Council of Hong Kong SAR (2004).
6. See Zen (2000).

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