

A Foggy Day at Clear Water Bay

As Visiting Scholar in Hong Kong

By Klaus Meyer, December 2001

Foggy clouds cover Clear Water Bay this morning. From my flat on the university campus, the view goes only to the nearest of the outlying Islands, while those further away disappear into the mist. A lone sailing boat is passing, while a single light on a platform out in the sea indicates that someone is working out there in the sea.

It is getting cooler in Hong Kong in December. I even use a blanket at night, and started wearing a jacket. As I look out into the mist, I remember that I promised the folks back home to write about life in Hong Kong. How is it like to be a teacher at the other end of the world? Are the students smart? Are you teaching the same material and in the same style? Are your colleagues open and co-operative? Can you still stand Chinese food? Do you like living there?

I will try and answer some of the questions, and report about the differences of the university education as I have experienced it here and at CBS in Copenhagen.

Since we are already talking about the weather, let me start with an anecdote. People here were really concerned about the winter, when temperatures hover around 15 degrees, and might at night fall as low as 5. Hardened by Scandinavian winters, I wondered, what's the point? Until I found out that in Hong Kong central heating is as common as air-conditioners are in Denmark. It hardly exists. So, I better find myself a solid blanket!

The weather is inverse. In Denmark people stay indoors half the year because it is too cold, and in Hong Kong people stay indoors half a year because it is too hot. The result is the same... One of the first persons I met after coming to Hong Kong in July, was a former exchange student at CBS. She really enjoyed her time in Denmark and was full of nice comments about the Danes. Yet one thing she simply couldn't understand: what are all those sun-tan studios for? Every second street-corner has one! Here, like in Japan, white is beautiful. Cosmetic firms sell 'whitening' lotion, and traditional ladies carry an umbrella to protect themselves from the sun. Standards of beauty vary, and so does the business serving the fashion minded.

In the classroom

When I head for the classroom to give a lecture, I may carry as little as the key to get in. The power-point slides for the lecture have been uploaded on the website, and I simply download them in the classroom. Similarly, students may have sent me their presentation for uploading ahead of time. Well, sometimes they are late and then download from their own place on the FTP server – or even more old fashioned, come with a disk. Overheads are an occasional complement, but else, most illustrations come via the beamer under the ceiling directly onto the screen. The course materials are accessible on our internal website.

Classroom discussion and case learning in a Chinese context, aren't the Chinese much too shy to say anything? Yes, no all prejudices are wrong, there is often a grain of truth in them. However, there are things one can do about it, such as waiting, relying to a larger degree on group work, asking a group rather than an individual for an opinion, and separating clearly the lecture and the case discussion parts. As it turned out, it is less the culture of not speaking out in front of the group, but the oral language competence and confidence that proves to be a constraint. Fortunately, there are some students with high English competency and some exchange students who take the lead and encourage others follow suit.

It helps that the seating in the classroom is shaped in a three-rowed U, such that everyone can see almost everyone else. This is an essential precondition for any interactive teaching, as discussions become lively only if students can see and hear each other. It is not fancy but spacey and functional. I can walk up to the students if they say something, or withdraw to a corner when the discussion is flowing. It makes the learning environment considerably more dynamic, and puts the students themselves in the centre.

I have been teaching two sections of the corporate strategy course, a 3rd year undergraduate course that is mandatory for both management and accounting students, and an elective for many others. In total there are almost 330 students taking this course. To permit suitable class sizes, they have been divided in seven sections, and I was specifically recruited to teach two of them. The mix of accounting, management, marketing and economics students, as well as class size of 44 is a good basis for discussion. I have 3 or 4 exchange students in each section who, as they are more active and contribute different perspectives, have been very valuable for the success of the course.

Most students prefer making a formal presentation instead of a spontaneous contribution to the discussion, even though this involves more preparation. As in Denmark, I asked one or two groups to open the discussion by giving their views on key issues in the case. Yet, what was meant to be an informal 2-minute contribution grew to a 20-slide power-point presentation. For many this was the only active contribution in class, but it made me feel comfortable to give almost everyone at least a C (between 7 and 8 in the Danish system) on their class participation. It took the students and me a while to get used to each other, but towards the end of the course, I am almost satisfied with the degree of activity in the classroom. Compared to Denmark, spontaneous classroom participation is still less, but attendance is better and students are generally prepared. Hence the level of the discussion is higher and provides a more meaningful learning experience. May be, it does matter that we give class participation grades.

The last sessions have been devoted to group presentations of the assigned cases. The students take these presentations very seriously indeed, as they count for 25% of the course grade. They come dressed for the occasion with suits in black or dark grey, both male and female students. I seem to be the only never wearing a dark suit around here. The power point slides are done professionally, students have considerably routine with that, and know where to find complementary information and illustrations on the web. Sometimes they get bit too long: delivering 35 slides in 20 minutes requires considerably time management. I tend to be hard pressed to deliver 35 slides in an 80 minutes lecture, but the students are a bit faster, albeit sometimes reading from their notes ...

At this point, I should make the Danish students a big complement – those I met in my classes (mostly cand.merc. and cand.merc.int) generally speak very good English. Coming from Denmark, my expectations as to Hong Kong student's English language abilities were apparently too high. But also local businesses recruiting university graduates are complaining about falling standards of English. Given the competitive challenges for Hong Kong as centre for multinational business in Asia, this is actually a serious challenge for the Hong Kong economy.

Every class comes to an end, and there stands what many students consider most important, and for teachers the least interesting part – the final exam. Since the grade has four components: presentation, participation, midterm and final, the latter counts for only 30%. Still some students get very anxious about it, and send me e-mails with questions on what exactly they shall prepare. "What ever you think may be

useful for solving the case” is not what they’d like to hear, but since the final is based on a case, all may be relevant.

After the final comes the grading. I have a teaching assistant to check the multiple choice questions, but that leaves 84 essays of up to 1200 words to read for me. If only I had followed the example of my US-American colleagues and relied on multiple choice as much as permissible – it would have saved me a lot of time, and potential controversy. But I simply believe that university education is about application and about training reasoning and analytical skills. One can’t test that with multiple choice. My final has been scheduled for December 18, and I have to report in the grades by December 26 – not in four weeks like in Denmark. So, guess what I’ll be doing for Christmas this year...

The Department

My motivation for coming here was not just to teach, but also to learn about the different cultural environment in business and academia. Teaching is a part of that and hopefully I will bring some ideas back to Denmark, such as the use of the internet (or intranet) to support the classroom interaction. The university itself is also organized different in many ways. A notable difference is that we are part of a university, whose main focus is on science and engineering. The business school is an important part – last not least in terms of generating revenues through MBA and other programs. However, this creates a different atmosphere in that we are running into other scientists every now and then. In fact my own office is on the same corridor as the biology department. (When I first was shown to my new office, I was bemused and wondering what my grandfather, who was professor of Botany, would have said...).

A second major difference is that the university has a campus, as many universities in the US have, rather than being spread across the city as many universities in continental Europe. About a third of the students and many members of faculty actually live on campus, and one runs into them literally all the time. For a Dane, or in fact other flat-earthers, there is however one problem: The campus is three-dimensional. It goes up and down, and in fact quite steeply. What looks like a simple shortcut on the map, is in fact impossible to climb, especially in the summer heat. So better take the walkways between the buildings. And be aware that one building’s 11th floor may be the other’s ground floor.

The campus has several canteens and restaurants serving mainly Chinese but also Western food at very reasonable prices. In fact, it was so cheap that I lost my motivation to cook at home. The only drawback is that the staff in all but two places doesn’t speak much English – so use your hands to order... There are also occasional cultural events on campus, from (Western) classical music to Chinese Opera, which are free to students and anyone living on campus.

I have been assigned a faculty flat, which is really lovely. It is larger than most places in Hong Kong and suitably furnished – though I had to get bed linen, towels and the like. The best is the view over the sea to the islands of Clear Water Bay, on warm summer evenings as on foggy winter mornings.

The university has made major efforts in recruiting faculty from the US and hence is providing an environment that makes it attractive for US-based academics to consider moving to Hong Kong. This includes not only US-comparable salaries, but also well-equipped office and classroom facilities, teaching assistants, and attractive on-campus accommodation. Many faculty members are overseas Chinese, a typical professor here may originate from Shanghai or Taipei, got a PhD at a top US institution and then taught in the US for several years before moving to the current position at HKUST. The strong links with US academia have led to many practices to

follow an American model such as the organization of courses and internal procedures within the university.

The administration is generally smooth and competent, although there is a fair bit of bureaucracy – some of the forms, say to claim expenses, are even more complex than in Denmark. Although the administration is mostly more centralized than at CBS – for example the department is not administrating its own teaching programs, only the courses offered by the department – it doesn't seem so remote as in sometimes feels at CBS. May be this has something to do with the physical proximity, may be with the continuity of administrative staff. The department secretaries act as effective liaison with other parts of the bureaucracy, and can tell me exactly what needs to be done, for instance to get exams organized or to get my visa extended. A lot of internal procedures are done online, from student enrolment to updating class lists, to administrating research grants, and this works fine. Most relevant information is readily available online.

The process of recruiting new members of faculty is also entirely different than in Denmark, and more close to the US practices. A recruitment committee within the department manages the process, collects applications, evaluates them, and makes a recommendation that then is decided upon by the department board. Candidates for junior positions (assistant professors) are invited for a campus visit of typically 2 days during which they get to meet basically all members of the department. They give a seminar and have a individual meeting with all the senior people. Then they are taken out for lunch and dinner, and have a whole day of informal meetings with everyone who may be relevant to meet. Afterwards, every faculty member gives written feedback to the evaluation committee. For visiting faculty, there are no campus visits, but the C.V.'s are circulated widely – so everyone seemed to have seen my C.V. before I arrived. Contrast that with Denmark where everything is 'top secret' and as an ordinary faculty member I hear only rumours, and sometimes may be taken by surprise as to who is being appointed as my new colleague. On the other hand, with less outsider involvement in the process, being respected by the key people in the department becomes more important in the US system applied here.

Life

There is life outside work, and in fact outside campus. The only draw back of our wonderful campus is that it is a bit remote, and it takes about 45 to 60 minutes by bus and metro to get into Kowloon or to Hong Kong Island, the centres of business, shopping and cultural events. The campus is about a 20 minutes bus ride from the nearest metro station. Thus, whatever I want to do outside the campus, I have to get on a bus, or a taxi first. The busses leave just outside the campus gate – or I could also say on top of the hill, because the campus is downward sloping. So, I first walk ten minutes uphill – in summer as slowly as possible, because else my shirt is through by the time I reach the bus stop. The bus is either a white double-decker bus, or a yellow minibus (called green minibus). The minibus is like a taxi, it loads up people at the university of the Metro station until is full, and then goes almost non-stop. When you want to get out, you have to shout "Bus stop, get out, please" or something like that – in Cantonese. So these were actually the first words of Cantonese I learned.

In the bus or the Metro, one simply presses the 'octopus card' against a pay-machine, and the fare is deducted from the card. It is like a cash card system, so when there is no money left on the card, you need to recharge it. It is quite convenient because it saves you worrying about how much to pay, or about carrying change.

Near the metro station is one of Hong Kong's mega shopping malls. This one is very modern, though not the fanciest compared to those on Hong Kong Island or near Kowloon Tong. On Sundays, it is crowed especially with young people and

families. In the supermarkets, I was surprised about how many British products there were. Maybe I should have expected that, but there is just so little distinctly British left elsewhere in this city. From Campbell Soup to 'Digestive' cookies, to the type of toast they have – which is the only bread, I have seen here so far. But I learned the reason for that: real bread wouldn't survive the humidity, just as chocolate wouldn't survive the heat. I guess I will eat noodles and fruit instead, then.

I spend mainly weekends exploring Hong Kong. There isn't so much to see for tourists, albeit I recommend both the Hong Kong Museum of Art and the Hong Kong Museum of History. The latter museum is built as an experience path recreating selected settings from the history, starting with the first settlements 6000 years ago. I found the next exhibits recreating aspects of historical ways of life in local communities most interesting. This type of exhibit naturally is selective and conveys a lot of messages of how the curators of the museum see, or wish to see, their own history. I noticed two things: the British don't seem to have played only a minor role in this 6000 years of history, in fact foreigners really appear 'on stage' only twice in the Opium war (the British) and in the occupation of WW II (the Japanese – portrayed very negatively, similar to how I have seen it in Singapore). The second observation I made is that Chinese society seems basically a conflict free society, there have never been any internal conflicts, or have there ...?

A must see is 'The Peak' with the view over Hong Kong. There is a huge shopping mall and viewing platform at the top of the peak tram, but I recommend taking a walk and enjoying the view from less crowded places. For best enjoyment, come at night and in romantic mood.

A special Hong Kong treat is dim sum, or lunch. Where it is served the traditional way, waitresses are coming around with their carts and offer their food for you to choose, such as on my first weekend excursion to the floating restaurant in Aberdeen Harbour. Menus exist, but mainly for tourists. It's good to have local friend to order – that is to negotiate with the waitresses with the food carts. On weekend lunchtime, there are lots of families with children, making restaurants a very crowded and lively place. Dim sum is really a social affair where even Chinese take their time to eat and enjoy each others' company. Being used to London prices (let alone Copenhagen prices), I didn't think restaurants are expensive anywhere in Asia.

People I met outside my work environment include a number of Danes. Amusingly, with a few words of Danish, I am suddenly 'one of us' and a link of expatriate Danes back to home. The Danish Business Association holds monthly gatherings that turned out to be useful networking events. Over a pint of Carlsberg, live and business far from home are discussed, and I could practice Danish before I forget it. This is also a place where Danes behave like they do at home, e.g. smoking without bothering to ask their neighbours if it might disturb them. Nowhere else in Hong Kong did I ever feel disturbed by smokers, as smoking has become less popular over the years.

The expatriate networks are important not just for social reasons; they also help business. When I was interviewing a managing director in Shanghai, I wanted to know how he deals with the Chinese way of business, or what we know as 'guanxi'. So, I asked about his most important network relations. He responded, "first, the local authorities ..., and second, I am chairing the Danish Business Association in Shanghai...". Networking is not just a Chinese practice; it helps every business!