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Outdoor Education in Hong Kong: Past, Present and Future

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Abstract

This paper examines the development of outdoor education in Hong Kong from its colonial roots to the challenges of its uncertain future. The scene is set by a synopsis of Hong Kong's geography, history, economy, and culture. Next, we trace the history of organised outdoor education from the early 1900s to the present day. This is followed by a critical exploration of issues facing youth adventure education programmes and management development programmes. The paper closes with recommendations to return to "real" outdoor courses in natural environments, to raise the standards of training available to outdoor leaders, and finally, to create a governing body that would facilitate inter–organisational learning, raise standards of programme design and delivery, and help build a body of literature that is specific to experiential learning in Hong Kong.

Background

Natural Hong Kong

To the outsider, Hong Kong may seem like one of the most unlikely places in the world for outdoor education to thrive. However, put aside the media's portrayal of an overcrowded concrete jungle and consider that over 40% of Hong Kong is designated government parkland. Verdant and mountainous are two words accurately describing Hong Kong's 1084 square kilometres and 234 islands.

Arable land is restricted to the narrow alluvial valleys as the steepness of the hillsides restricts widespread terracing. Hundreds of kilometres of well–marked trails snake through steep hillsides and ancient villages, and along rocky, deeply indented coastlines and sandy bays. Although most of the countryside was deforested by the late 19th century, extensive reforestation began in the early 1960s as part of an effort to manage the forests for public recreation and nature conservation in the face of rapidly increasing urbanisation (Wong, 1984).

In the early 1970s the population was growing fast; 65% of the four million population were less than 34 years of age. The government had the funds and foresight to invest in the protection of the environment. Twenty–one country parks were created as part of an initiative to protect the land from the urban sprawl threatening to overrun all of Hong Kong (Wong, 1984). The parks were set up with designated campgrounds, barbecue pits, concrete picnic tables, and maintained paths.

Despite Hong Kong's limited physical area, its natural environment presents stern challenges to people venturing outdoors. The climate brings hot and humid summers that make heat exhaustion commonplace. Aside from the northeast monsoon blowing steadily from October to May, swimmers, canoeists, and sailors have to contend with borderline water pollution and the occasional shark attack. Between May and October, typhoons and severe thunderstorms can also present serious dangers to outdoor adventurers. The other major natural hazard is fire. Each winter an average of 300 hillside fires need to be managed (Hong Kong Observatory, 2002).

A Brief History

As formalised outdoor education (OE) is a Western concept it is helpful to explore the relationship between the history of the Hong Kong people and Western influences. It is believed that people have lived in Hong Kong since primitive times. Although Hong Kong was sparsely populated before the 1800s, the Chinese people are renowned adventurers and are believed to have circumnavigated the world between 1421 and 1423 (Menzies, 2002). Ancient Chinese literature contains many poems, stories, sketches, and articles relating to journeys and reflections on those journeys (Legge, 1866).

To the north, Guangzhou has been a trading port with Britain since the end of the seventeenth century. Britain imported Chinese tea to Britain and exported opium from India to China, despite opium trading being illegal in China due to widespread addiction. In a complicated diplomatic and trade dispute, British forces occupied Hong Kong Island in 1841 in order to sidestep restrictions on opium trading in Guangzhou (then Canton). The island provided a safe haven for Britain's illegal traders and a base for possible military operations against China (Endacott, 1964).

Hong Kong Island and the tip of Kowloon (part of the mainland) were ceded to Britain in 1842 in the Treaty of Nanking. From that time Hong Kong blossomed as the centre of British trade in Asia. Under the 1898 Convention of Peking, Britain leased the New Territories and Outlying Islands for a period of 99 years. This additional land was necessary to make the colony viable in terms of food production and enabled the colony to grow rapidly. In 1984, the Sino–British Joint Declaration outlined how all of Hong Kong would be returned to China on July 1, 1997 (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region [HKSAR], 2002).

Economy and Culture

Hong Kong's economy is based on the trading of manufactured goods to and from China and on the provision of financial services. Although in recent years many competing ports have developed along the coast of the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong remains one of the busiest ports in the world.

The early to mid 1990s were Hong Kong's golden years. Since 1997, almost every person and enterprise has taken a financial battering in the Asian Economic Crisis, the "dotcom meltdown", 9/11, the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome crisis, and the Iraq War. This economic collapse led to a large proportion of the middle classes and upper working classes owning properties with substantial negative equity. This situation holds a gloomy cloud over the territory, which has lead to frequent widespread layoffs, a high suicide rate, and anxiety amongst the population.

Most Hong Kong people live in expensive, cramped apartments. The high cost of housing puts great pressure on young people to study hard and find a job that earns a lot of money. This is compounded by Chinese culture's expectation of the young generation financially supporting older family members. It is not unusual for a man to support a spouse, children, and at least one set of parents. Lack of privacy and overcrowding are part of life at home and on the streets. These pressures have led to a focus on earning money at the expense of other parts of life, such as people's connections with the natural world.

Cantonese is the mother tongue for the vast majority of Hong Kong's 6.8 million inhabitants. Mandarin is not widely spoken, but most educated and young people speak English. The principal religions of Hong Kong are Christianity and Buddhism (HKSAR, 2002). Confucian thinking has

an enormous, religion–like power over Chinese people. Born in China in 551 BC, Confucius promoted his teachings as a way of finding harmony and peace in turbulent times. The core of Confucianism lies in demonstrating humility, loyalty, patience, hard work, respect for elders and optimism (Legge, 1866; Bond, 1986). These attributes are deeply valued in today's Hong Kong society as a moral guide for living. Modern Hong Kong people are characterised as being cautious, repressed, patient, humble, modest, and non–aggressive (Bond, 1986).

Much behaviour is governed by the concept of "face", a positive social value a person earns (in the eyes of others) by acting or speaking in a way appropriate to the current social situation (Goffman, 1955). Standing out from the crowd can be frowned upon and may cause people to dampen their individual actions or make self-effacing comments (Bond, Leung & Wan, 1982), while highlighting their team's strong performance. A common viewpoint is that it is far better to do and say nothing, than to do or say something that may be regarded as wrong. Hsu (1949) suggests that Chinese people are good at refraining from expressive spontaneity except at mealtimes and when in natural environments, where cultural norms permit the spontaneous expression of emotion.

Leisure time for most people is spent in air–conditioned shopping malls, restaurants, cinemas and karaoke bars, while hiking remains a thriving, though minority activity.

The Evolution of the Outdoor Education Field

Where it all Began

Using formalised adventure experiences for the development of young people started in the early 1900s. The majority of organisations were based on the British system and include: The Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, Sea Cadets, Duke of Edinburgh's Award, and Outward Bound.

Founded in 1911, the Scouts were the first Hong Kong organisation to use outdoor adventure as a means of personal development, followed by the Girl Guides in 1916 (Scouts, 2005). Early photos show Chinese boys in scout uniforms, so we know this was not an organisation just for young colonials. The Scouts followed the UK model closely, providing challenging and progressive training for the physical, intellectual, social, and aesthetic development of young people. By 2001 there were over 80,000 active members in Hong Kong, with seven residential training centres at their disposal.

The Hong Kong Playground Association was established in 1933 as a non–profit social service organisation funded by the government. They built and managed playgrounds and football pitches in many of the less affluent areas of Hong Kong. In the 1960s they established an outdoor centre on Lantau Island, which offered healthy, weeklong camps for disadvantaged children. Since that time they have expanded their organisational goals to enhancing the healthy development of children and youth through outdoor adventure, educational programmes, and vocational training (Hong Kong Playground Association, 2003).

In 1936, The Boys and Girls Clubs Association of Hong Kong was founded to promote balanced physical and mental development and good citizenship for children and youth. In 1964 they expanded their provision from basic reading and writing and simple activities on rooftops of public housing blocks, to their first summer camps, which offered outdoor pursuits. In 1985 they opened Bradbury Camp, their first dedicated residential camp (Boys and Girls Clubs Association, 2000).

The Civil Aid Service was founded in 1952 as a volunteer emergency organisation. For many years the Civil Aid Service and the British Army were the main resources for formal, vocational outdoor training in Hong Kong. The Civil Aid Service has operated Hong Kong's mountain rescue service for decades, while the British Army provided specialised hard–skill training for its personnel (HKSAR, 2002).

In 1961 George Stokes was sent to Hong Kong by the British Welfare Department to establish the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme. Available to boys from 1961 and girls from 1963, it was built around service, expeditions, learning skills, and physical recreation—just as in the UK. In 1997, to cut colonial ties, the name was changed to the Hong Kong Award for Young People. In the 2001–2002 school year over 46,000 young people were enrolled in the scheme (Hong Kong Award for Young People, 2003).

The Hong Kong Sea Cadet Corps was started in 1968 by the Hong Kong Naval Reserve, and was modelled on the UK Sea Cadets. Since then they have provided nautical training courses for young people in the form of team skills, leadership, sailing, and expeditions; all with the aim of developing participants' devotion to duty, loyalty, and self-respect in order to become useful citizens in the community (Hong Kong Sea Cadets, 2003). In 2002, the Sea Cadets had a total membership of 1500 people.

In 1971, Outward Bound Hong Kong (OBHK) was founded by a committee comprising former Outward Bound staff from the UK and a Hong Kong shipping company executive. Written in 1965, the original prospectus states that the target participants would be boys (Outward Bound Hong Kong, 1965), although the participants from the early courses were adults sponsored by their employers, one third of whom were civil servants. These courses were physically demanding and militaristic in style, with a serving army Sergeant Major rotated onto the staff on a six monthly basis. Outward Bound thrived in the 1980s and 90s, as they built a self-sufficient island base, procured a 132 ft. sail training tall ship, and started operating in South China. In 2003, OBHK delivered over 32,000 training days.

In 1973, a Christian, non–profit youth organisation called Breakthrough was created to provide learning activities for young people in the areas of culture, education and community service. They often used outdoor activities as part of their work, which has touched 500,000 young people (Breakthrough, 2003). A large number of other Christian organisations employ adventure education activities in their work, as well.

Adventure education has also established itself as a valid tool in drug abuse prevention. Between 1999 and 2002, the government gave over 11 million HK dollars (£815,000) in grants to 13 non–profit organisations in order to provide training for young people in the Beat Drugs campaign. This training included adventure education and interactive drama.

The Youth Pre–Employment Training Programme commenced in the year 2000. Its mission is to help young people gain skills that will make them more marketable to prospective employers. It is fully funded by the government and contains a compulsory module of 80 hours of outdoor leadership, teamwork, and discipline training. Over 35,000 young people completed the programme between 2000 and 2003 (HKSAR, 2004).

Schools

More than 800 primary and secondary schools use outdoor adventure activities to "develop" students (Hong Kong Education Department, 2004). Although a number of secondary schools have climbing walls and ropes courses, the most common activities on offer are hiking and camping, often with inexperienced teachers. It is not surprising that accidents have happened, such as the one in 1996, when three school children and two teachers died when they were trapped and over–run by a hill fire while on a school hiking trip. Families of the deceased brought a lawsuit against the school alleging a failure to provide adequately qualified teachers for the excursion (Hong Kong Standard, 1999). This tragedy has made many teachers wary of taking to the hills, and more outdoor excursions are being restricted to purpose–built recreational camps. These camps, of which there are almost 40 in Hong Kong, are very busy and are booked–up months in advance. Activities on offer include ropes courses, rafting, kayaking, and climbing on artificial rock walls. The end goals of many youth camp programmes appear to be recreational, as opposed to educational.

Private schools with bigger budgets are more likely to have their own in–house programmes. Most pupils at Hong Kong's 20 international schools take part in a weeklong off–campus, residential experience every year. Once students are in secondary school, these adventures often take place overseas. Some schools have also added climbing, kayaking, and sailing courses to their physical education curriculum.

The Quality Education Fund is a government fund of one billion Hong Kong Dollars (HKD) (UK £74 million) available to secondary schools and universities. Between 1998 and 2003, HKD 426 million (UK£31 million) was allocated to projects for "all–round education", which included outdoor education, computing, dance, and music projects (Hong Kong Education Department, 2004). Another source of money for primary and secondary schools is the Education Department's "Outdoor Education Camp" funding programme, which provides young people with up to 50% of the cost of a three to five day programme at an outdoor centre.

An outdoor adventure experience is a key component of the Primary Prevention Program designed to identify and provide assistance to "at risk" 11 and 12 year olds. Since 2000, close to 4000 students have been selected each year and findings of an evaluation study show a significant enhancement among participants in self-confidence, optimism, belongingness, social skills, and willingness to tackle problems (Lau, 2002).

Much of the government support for outdoor education emerged in the late 1990s, when Tung Chee Wa, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, initiated a shift away from the traditional didactic educational techniques so prevalent in Hong Kong's schools. This shift emphasised a holistic approach and encouraged teachers to use a more interactive, experiential, and creative styles of delivery (HKSAR, 2002). Local schools have tried to adopt this curricular and pedagogical approach, and training has been provided by a number of educational and non–profit institutions. However, both teachers and pupils find it hard to eliminate the traditional didactic style, as studying with the aim of obtaining high exam marks is of huge cultural importance. This is an example of how experiential education approaches contrast with the long–established Chinese emphasis placed on academic success.

Although most children in Hong Kong will have a formal outdoor experience during their school career, we question their educational value. Our observations indicate that while many outdoor programmes exist, their educational content and experiential nature is minimal. Programmes like

these, which are largely instructor driven with predetermined outcomes, can be regarded as active rather than experiential (Hovelynck, 2001). This critique is explored in the third section of this paper.

Outdoor Management Development

Apart from the focus on young people, outdoor education in Hong Kong also comprises an element of outdoor management development (OMD). Outward Bound started to run dedicated corporate programmes in 1985, in order to help fund their traditional youth programmes. From the early 1990s small, private, adventure–based training companies started operating in Hong Kong — often by former Outward Bound instructors. By the late 1990s the market was flooded with providers competent in technical skills but short on business, learning, and facilitation know–how. These providers often based their programmes around hired ropes courses at hotels, schools, and outdoor centres. Few ventured into the hills or onto the sea.

Corporate entertainment masqueraded as OMD in the mid 1990s, with paintball war games, a circus trapeze, executive fire–walking, and executive walking-on-water. In the latter two, participants did get burned and did sink, despite having the requisite positive attitude.

Instructor Development

Until the 1990s there were so few specialist outdoor education organisations in Hong Kong that the opportunities to learn from each other and develop as well–informed professionals were minimal. This lay in contrast to the West where many camps, companies, and schools had been developing programs and policies alongside each other and conducting research since the 1940s.

Hong Kong's outdoor education community has differing ideas of the skills required of an outdoor leader. Some organisations required instructors to possess a certificate for each activity skill they taught, plus first aid qualifications. Other centres hired instructors because they demonstrated a high level of skill in one particular area, regardless of their teaching experience or qualifications. Limited importance was given to life experience, facilitation skills, and knowledge of educational theory.

Quite often, local instructors would remain working at the same organisation that initially trained them for up to 25 years, seldom having the opportunity to see and learn how other instructors from other organisations taught skills or reviewed activities. The geographical isolation of Hong Kong meant that its outdoor instructors worked in a near vacuum, in which older instructors trained younger instructors in methods that have seen little evolution. In practice, this meant that a young instructor could end up running a given activity the same way it had been presented by the last four generations of instructors.

Historically, the vast majority of outdoor instructors have been male. Being an outdoor educator in Hong Kong was not widely accepted as being a valid job for a woman. Most families of Hong Kong Chinese women would have forbidden them from taking such a culturally unacceptable job. Furthermore, many male participants were unable to accept instruction and advice from a female instructor. These generalisations remain largely applicable today, although there are now more female instructors operating.

As in many other countries, the road to an instructor certificate in sailing, mountain leadership, sea kayaking, or rock climbing is via a bureaucratic, multi–tiered qualification system. The instructor tickets available are largely based on the British National Governing Body (NGB) Awards and focus primarily on sea kayaking, hill walking, and sailing. There is, however, no legal requirement to be qualified to operate as an outdoor instructor.

Current Issues

Incongruence Between Experiential Education and Chinese Culture

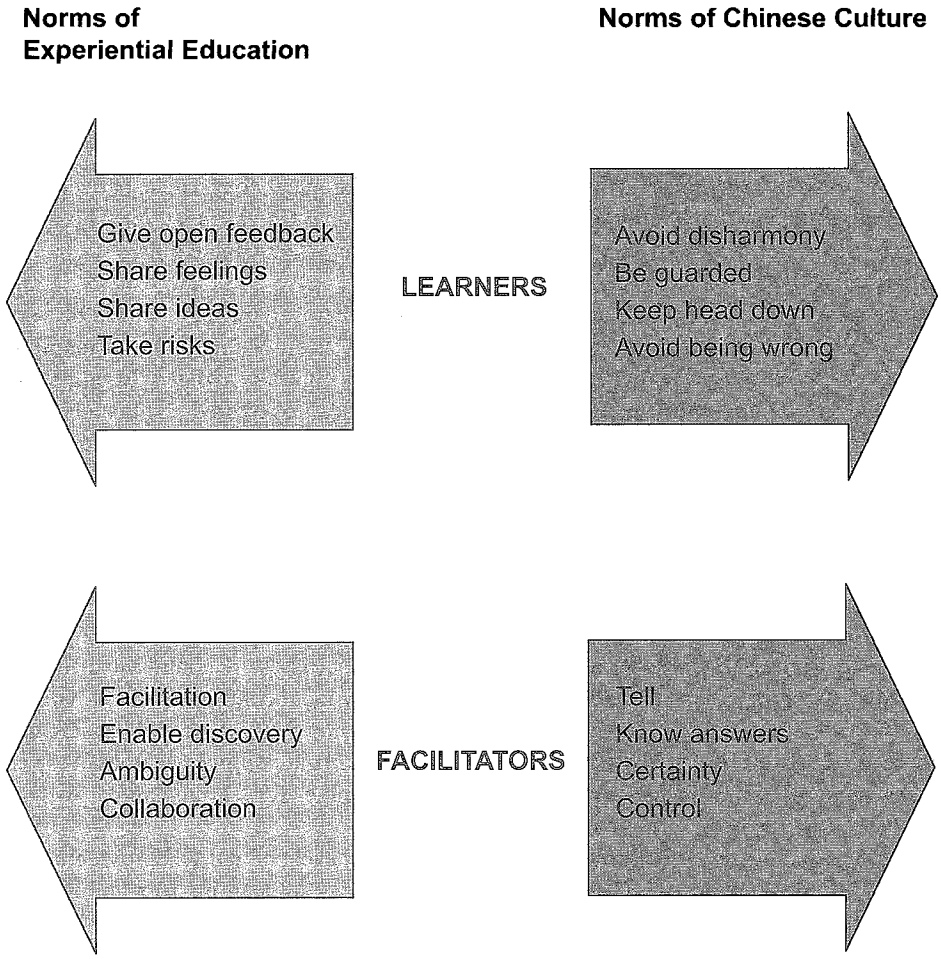
As highlighted in the previous section, there appears to be considerable incongruence between the norms of Western experiential education and the norms of traditional Chinese culture. This issue is of prime importance to OE practitioners and participants in Hong Kong and China.

Generally speaking, Hong Kong people do not want to expose themselves; they tend to be very concerned about what others think and are guarded in everyday life. Maintaining harmonious relationships is a priority and open conflict between group–members is usually avoided (Bond, 1986), which often leaves important interpersonal and task–centred issues unexplored. This embedded cultural trait is incongruous with outdoor education approaches that ask participants to share their feelings and opinions about themselves, the group, or their employer.

A typical school classroom has up to forty well–behaved, uniformed students, who regard their teacher as a master they dare not challenge. It is common to be spoon–fed with information, follow instructions, and memorise facts to be regurgitated on exam papers. Despite the government's urging to explore experiential approaches to learning, teachers' attempts are "frequently stymied by local culture" (Watkins & Biggs, 2001, p. 15). Learning through experience is a stark contrast to centuries old Chinese ways of gaining knowledge. The Eastern education model conflicts with two widely accepted premises of experiential education: groups figure it out for themselves and participants feel in control. An Eastern style of instruction sees mistakes in a negative light, whereas Western experiential education theory views mistakes as positive opportunities for learning and growth.

This difference in educational paradigms suggests that Western teachers and OE providers (the authors included) need to take great care when promoting experiential learning to a culture that is not their own. Learning by being presented with the problem first and searching for one's own solutions is altogether "un–Chinese". We are intrigued by trainers and academics who refer to Confucius' quote "I hear...I forget, I see...I remember, I do...I know", as this vaguely suggests that Confucius "invented" experiential learning. Extensive searching of translations of Confucius' work and conferring with two Confucian scholars leads us to believe that the great man probably never said this at all. Confucius may have said something along the lines of "literary acquirements are useless without practical ability" (Legge, 1866, p. 265). Whether he said it or not, this idea did not survive to 20th and 21st century mainstream Hong Kong Chinese educational culture. The parental push for achievement is exacerbated by intense competition for relatively few university places. Young people are under enormous pressure to learn the "right answers" in order to overcome examination hurdles, which often leads to high levels of anxiety and even mental illness (Cheung and Lee, 1984). The following diagram (Figure 1) illustrates the incongruence between the norms of experiential education, as developed in the West, and the norms of Chinese culture.

Figure 1. Incongruence between experiential education and Chinese culture.



It is not surprising that course participants expect to be given facts and answers and local instructors find it hard to resist giving them. As academic expertise is traditionally valued more highly than practical expertise, experiential educators running programmes with a strong practical element are faced with considerable challenges. Some successful trainers have accommodated the cultural challenges by providing a blend of facts and theory, small group discussion where individual ideas can be presented discretely, and fun, high action activities (Brown, 2003).

Shorter and Easier Courses

A second feature of Hong Kong's outdoor programmes today is that they are shorter and less physically demanding than they once were. Organisations offering multi–day expeditions into

the mountains, jungles, and islands are now a rarity. One–day sailing and kayaking courses for adults are on the rise, as are children's residential programmes (Brown, 2003). Similarly, in the OMD market the trend has been toward shorter, adrenaline–filled programmes with questionable educational benefit. These so–called "firework" courses are part of a corporate training culture where organisations want a quick fix to problems they have spent many years creating. Training companies desperate for business have become willing accomplices, despite knowing that quick fixes are not feasible.

Another factor that may account for shorter corporate courses is the e–business culture prevalent in Hong Kong and throughout Asia, in which all parties expect fast responses to requests for information. This new business culture cannot tolerate people being out of the office or away from e-mail for a week or 10 days on an OMD course.

Apart from the trend towards shorter courses, the outdoor education market in Hong Kong also seems to have said "we don't like it tough". In the OMD sector this non-tough message has, in some cases, come from junior training administrators with a mission of keeping people happy, rather than from people with the desire to develop a workforce full of resourceful, self-reliant people who are comfortable with adversity. In the schools sector the non–tough message has come from head teachers fearful of the safety risks. The demand for less adventurous courses has lead directly from the increased demand for shorter courses. As it is often impractical to plan months in advance for a weekend sailing or hiking/camping course, it is centre–based courses that are planned and sold, as most of their activities can be run in inclement weather.

Another factor leading to shorter courses is that fewer participants have the fitness required to go straight into an adventurous journey in Hong Kong's hot and humid conditions. Instructors are justifiably fearful of pushing people who live in a climate–controlled world into potentially dangerous situations. The benefit of the longer courses of the past was that mental and physical stamina was gradually built up, allowing people to take part in end-of-course expeditions that at first may have seemed impossible. The predictable, centre–based environment is relatively risk–free, logistically easier to manage, and does not require staff with a high level of training. Despite the softening marketplace, leading instructors have expressed a belief that there is a growing number of individual Hong Kong citizens hiking, kayaking, and climbing every weekend (Brown, 2003).

Should this kind of "super–protective" outdoor education take precedence over journeys into wilderness areas with real and natural consequences? This question leads into the issue of whether outdoor education is a business or a public service. If providers see the field as a business they will cater to market forces (easy courses, for example) and will be driven by profit. If course providers see their role as providing an educational service to public institutions and private corporations, they may offer more challenging courses. Courses like these may offer genuine experiences and consequences instead of the contrived and controlled environment offered by many residential programmes.

Lower Standards in Programme Design and Delivery

Instructors' facilitation and reviewing skills have not had a chance to develop in this market demanding shorter and easier courses. Less participant contact time and the fact that few instructors have engaged in formal soft skills training, perpetuate the cycle of low impact experiences. There has been a high emphasis on sales and activity design and low emphasis on the transfer of learning

practices that hallmark many powerful learning experiences as defined by Huczynski and Lewis (1980), Gass (1990), and Greenaway (1993). In the corporate training sector, it appears that many providers conduct little or no pre-course meetings or follow-up sessions with participants or their managers. As a result, most trainers do not understand the needs of the participants and the company (Brown, 2003). This results in the generalised, commodified, repetitious programme designs outlined by Loynes (1998), which ultimately limit the level of learning.

Corporate managers have reported how their staff "pretend" to be good team players during the training courses, but soon return to their self-serving behaviours once back in the work place (Brown, 2003). This example is an indication of how the corporate culture in Hong Kong perceives outdoor management development as "a jolly", with little learning that can be applied in day-to-day business operations either expected or delivered. As with Ibbetson and Newell's (1998) work, it appears that existing corporate cultures cannot support the mindset changes that OMD promotes. In this sense, OMD is not recognised by the mainstream training establishment in Hong Kong as a valuable approach to learning.

Our own experiences in corporate training reveal the common perception that participants have lost interest in outdoor courses, as they have seen all the activities before. They have literally "been there, built the raft, got the T-shirt, been developed" every year for the last five years. Participants are less invested in courses where the key ingredient of uniqueness is missing (McEvoy & Buller, 1997). Equally, many training providers bemoan the lack of new activities available to them and the growing "experience" of their participants. This is an example of how the educators need professional development as well as their clients.

There are currently no dedicated outdoor education degree programmes available in Hong Kong universities. Since the mid 1990s Hong Kong University's bachelor's degrees in physical education and recreation have included a three–day camp and a brief introduction to outdoor education. The bachelor's degree in Social Administration and Social Welfare has included a one semester course in the "theory and practice of adventure based counselling", with an emphasis on promoting multiple interventions over a long period. At an even more introductory level teachers and social workers can earn a "Foundation Certificate in Experiential Learning" at Hong Kong University's School of Professional and Continuing Education.

In response to a perceived shortfall in outdoor educators' theoretical grounding, a non–profit organisation called the Hong Kong Institute of Adventure Counselling (HKIAC) was created in 1998. The HKIAC was founded by a committee of local educators and trainers, conscious of the necessary and appropriate development of adventure–based programming in Hong Kong. They publish materials in Chinese and run courses principally for social workers and teachers. The HKIAC promotes academic research into adventure–based counselling in Hong Kong and run symposiums and workshops, in an effort to facilitate the exchange of ideas.

Future Considerations

What will the future hold for outdoor education in Hong Kong? We have three suggestions to offer Hong Kong's outdoor education stakeholders. These are a return to realness, educating course providers and consumers, and creating a governing body.

A Return to Realness

We encourage a return to non–residential courses. This involves creatively incorporating Hong Kong's beautiful and varied physical environment into more outdoor education programming. With good marketing, creative course design, and professional instructors, more adventurous journeys could become the norm, even if they are short in duration. Ropes courses and problem–solving activities based at the centres might play only a supporting role.

The outdoor environment should not be presented as a hostile environment to be survived, but as a wonderfully rich, life–enhancing arena for growth and discovery. Courses can be adventurous without being overly demanding and militaristic. Rigour can come in the form of unfamiliar, but appropriate, mental and physical challenges that stretch people's abilities within a supportive environment. The risks of the wilderness can be welcomed as genuine risks and a refreshing contrast to the perceived risks of a ropes course. Similarly, the constraints on the group can be replaced by the natural environment and not by manipulative instructors controlling the conditions to reach pre–determined outcomes.

We hope to see the Chinese cultural concept of harmony between people expanded to encompass harmony between humans and the natural environment. This could happen through eco–centric programme designs focusing on environmental conservation and sustainable living, and seeking to connect to nature in a spiritual context. Integrating creative activities such as drama, music, and art into courses helps to cater to people whose intelligences are not predominantly kinesthetic or linguistic (Gardner, 1983). Outdoor educators could ground their programmes in Chinese culture, tradition, and historical stories rather than in dominant Western discourse.

In OMD courses the onus can be on providers to ensure they are presenting programmes yielding outcomes directly applicable to the work place. They should not exaggerate claims of what eight hours of initiative tasks (even with creative reviewing) can achieve. One–day courses can be "real" if the participants engage in activities that are less contrived and they can have open dialogue about critical business and interpersonal issues. Furthermore, these courses need to be facilitated by professionals with suitable training and experience.

Instead of the older style, 1–3 week courses, we envision personal development groups coming together for one day a week per month, for several months. These encounters could incorporate a wide range of challenging activities and thought–provoking dialogue. Capable providers might grow by offering integrated, outcome–focused services, rich in transfer tactics, with multiple interactions over several months. Some of these courses can be outdoors and others in conference rooms, and both at lower prices than in the past.

Educating Programme Providers and Consumers

Consumers in both corporate and youth development sectors can be further educated about the power of outdoor education; not through the rhetoric found in glossy brochures and websites, but by sharing relevant academic theory during the planning phase and demonstrating best practices in delivery. This all begins by ensuring that programme providers have genuine competence in high quality facilitation and use varied methods grounded in theory. It is up to providers to educate their clients by making a clear and compelling case for the use of the outdoors as a learning tool. With an educated public, less than competent providers may leave the market. Outdoor education needs to be mission–based as opposed to profit–based or it will surely decline and disappear (Loynes, 1998).

We propose a professional development environment where Hong Kong Chinese and Western instructors are able to receive best–practice training in three areas:

1. Hard skills training such as: wilderness first responder; top–rope climbing site manager; mountain leadership; ropes course instruction, construction, and inspection; risk management; kayaking; sailing; and life–saving.

2. Academic courses specifically for outdoor educators that combine: the philosophy of experiential education; environmental impacts of outdoor education; learning theory; group management theory; transfer of learning; evaluation; consulting skills; business management; counselling skills; organisational behaviour; developmental psychology; and Chinese culture.

3. Soft skills workshops that include: reviewing; conflict resolution; programme design; initiative tasks; teamwork and leadership theory; presentation skills; cultural awareness; and facilitation.

All of the above courses currently exist to some extent and are developing steadily, although there is a dearth of people qualified to teach at a high standard. We strongly encourage a rise in opportunities for high quality, in–house staff training and lengthy apprenticeships, and universities to establish rigorous courses in experiential education.

A Professional Body

The third proposal we have for outdoor education in Hong Kong is the creation of a professional body. This organisation would serve as a resource for both practitioners and institutions so they might access publications, share ideas in forums and workshops, and establish consistent standards in all professional practices. We favour a new organisation with a council made up of representatives from all areas of the sector.

Although a central governing body will not automatically raise standards and solve issues, we believe such an organisation would provide a strong framework for outdoor education in Hong Kong to build upon. There is a need for established standards in all aspects of programme design and delivery, instructor competence, and institutional membership. Such long–term measures should enhance the field's professional status in the eyes of programme providers and participants.

A professional body might also serve to coordinate and fund research into Chinese experiential education. We have highlighted how experiential learning theory is incongruent with much of Chinese culture. This points towards a need for a community of researchers to develop a body of experiential education theory and best practices specifically for Chinese people. As it stands, outdoor education practice in Hong Kong is informed by a Western theoretical blueprint. The future of outdoor education in Hong Kong needs to be driven by Chinese, for Chinese.

Conclusion

We are passionate about outdoor education in Hong Kong, but we are not Chinese. This paper has been written with the hope of eliciting discussion about the direction that outdoor education in Hong Kong will take. We have offered ideas that might serve as a point of departure for some of this dialogue. These ideas include a return to demanding courses that embrace the region's spectacular

natural landscape, developing outdoor educators' skill levels, and uniting the outdoor education community. Hopefully, any debate arising from this paper will help Hong Kong to redefine its own outdoor educational path that is outdoors, educational, experiential, and above all, Chinese.

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