

Academic capitalism and the spread of English



In 2009, I contributed [a chapter about the social inclusion of migrants in Australia](#) to [an edited book about immigration policy](#) published in Japanese in Japan. The book is doing well – a second edition has just been published – and that piece of my research writing is more widely read than some of my English-language peer-reviewed work. However, when it came to recording my 2009 research “output” for my university, the paperwork for entering a non-English publication proved formidable, and I had the record returned to me three times with queries for additional documentation and evidence – that I’d really published the piece, that the publication was really legitimate, and even because I had put the translation of the title in the wrong line on the form ... Now, I have to admit that I resent the paperwork associated with documenting my “output” at the best of times. With all that extra hassle I was tempted to just skip recording that particular chapter. Fortunately, my PhD students took over and took on some hardcopy-and-signature -ferrying errands, which ultimately got the record of that chapter and all the associated documentation into the university’s research inventory.

Why am I telling this story of bureaucratic tedium? Because no one ever made an explicit policy decision that research publications in languages other than English are less desirable than those in English. However, mundane bureaucratic practices – such as making record entry for a publication in a language other than English more difficult – conspire to have exactly that policy effect. In this way many decisions that seem to have nothing to do with language end up as implicit language policy decisions – the fact that English-language journals dominate the academic rankings is another example from academic publishing.

This point about the naturalization of English as the language of choice in international academia is well-made in a case study of a language controversy at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) published in the *Journal of Education Policy*. The author, Po King Choi, shows how a far-reaching language policy decision – to teach a larger share of courses in English – was initially not made as a policy decision at all but through a series of internal notices, directives and instructions at various levels of bureaucracy.

CUHK used to be the only university in Hong Kong with Chinese as the principal medium of instruction. It was originally intended to take the students from Chinese-medium secondary schools, and it was also meant to place a high value on the promotion and development of Chinese culture and of Sino-Western exchanges. In 2005, a significant increase in the use of English as the medium of instruction resulted in a language controversy and, eventually, a language policy that accorded English a much higher status than had previously been the case.

Po King Choi explores how the expansion of English was naturalized through a simple equation between English and internationalization. CUHK administration put forward an argument where “English” was equated with “internationalization,” “academic excellence” and “career success.” The author explains the fallacy inherent in this argument with a metaphor: in the same way that water doesn’t start to flow if all you do is install a tap without having the plumbing in place, you don’t get excellence by simply switching the language of instruction.

[T]he CU administration insisted on using English because the use of English served as a useful label, a sign indicating that this was a first class university. There was no need to demonstrate or to explain how the use of English would give rise to a cosmopolitan mind-set or ‘international vision.’ In the market where higher education is bought and sold as a commodity, more for its exchange than its use value, [...] (p. 245)

Anyone interested in how English spreads in higher education by piggy-backing on the spread of academic capitalism needs to read this paper.



Choi, P. (2010). 'Weep for Chinese university': a case study of English hegemony and academic capitalism in higher education in Hong Kong *Journal of Education Policy*, 25 (2), 233-252 DOI: [10.1080/02680930903443886](https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930903443886)