OPINION

GUEST COLUMNIST

ETHAN CHIU

What Yale's Hong Kong program taught me about freedom

In February, Hong Kong publisher Jimmy Lai was sentenced to 20 years under the city's National Security Law. His crime was journalism. Just weeks later, I visited Hong Kong for Yale-China's spring break Yale University-New Asia Undergraduate Exchange Program, or YUNA, which pairs Yale students with peers from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, or CUHK.

Standing inside the Legislative Council, where the People's Republic of China national emblem looms over Hong Kong's own seal, I understood that freedom is not just something to argue about in the classroom.

YUNA begins in New England, where Yale students host their Hong Kong counterparts. We hiked East Rock and walked Boston's Freedom Trail. Sharing familiar places with people whose own public spaces were shrinking made me notice what Yale students often take for granted: free speech, free assembly and the ability to walk through New Haven without watching what we say.

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Inside Hong Kong's Legislative Council, a pro-Beijing legislator explained that Beijing must approve the city's chief executive, and that same-sex marriage is not "culturally Chinese." When I brought up Taiwan, a "culturally Chinese" democracy and the first in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage, he paused, then moved on. The Hong Kong students in our group exchanged glances but stayed silent. Outside, we bumped into pro-democracy organizers who told us their party had been banned from the chamber.

Before the trip, I wrestled with whether it was naive to send undergraduates into authoritarian contexts, potentially helping legitimate oppressive systems. But YUNA's value lies precisely in that discomfort. What makes Beijing's national security regime so effective is its ambiguity. No one knows where the line is, so everyone draws it well before they need to. Our group of Yalies saw it in the small pauses in conversation and in the instinct not to say certain things too loudly.

The program showed me how Beijing was rebuilding Hong Kong in its image. CUHK tore down the "Goddess of Democracy" statue that once stood at its entrance, suspended fee collection for the student union and stripped union leaders of committee roles. In February, national security police detained CUHK student Miles Kwan over a petition calling for accountability after a nearby fire killed 168 people. He was expelled. Seven other Yalies and I also taught at a Hong Kong middle school where nearly all the students were from the mainland, educated about national security since age 6.

Earlier, we had sat across from a former secretary for education who mandated that policy, barred students from protesting and required teachers to report violations or lose their licenses. Meeting that system's architect and then walking into a classroom it shaped was disorienting. Our CUHK peers spoke about Yale with admiration: the public debates, the protest culture, the freedom to criticize one's own government without consequence. Their respect made me see the university as something worth defending.

At Yale, almost 300 students pack the Rise of China lecture, eager to understand a country reshaping the world. But my YUNA trip offered what that course cannot: the temporary experience of living alongside those living under Beijing's thumb.

These student exchanges deserve Yale's continued investment. They do not just teach you that freedom matters — they teach you what it feels like to have it and what it looks like when it is taken away, and that is the education that matters most. Jimmy Lai now sits in prison for freedoms we debate over coffee. YUNA made me understand what he lost.

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Letter: 'Don't buy too much stuff'

In the summer of 1967, at 18 years old, I suddenly found myself with nowhere to live and no parental support. For a college student faced with paying tuition, personal care expenses, eating and summer lodging, it was a desperate situation. I hid out in a friend's dorm room for three weeks and stashed my meager belongings in the dormitory basement. The college dean discovered me in hiding, got me a room in a boarding house and ultimately secured scholarships and jobs for me so that I could finish the remaining three years of university. She never asked me to move my "stuff" out of the basement, where it stayed until I graduated.

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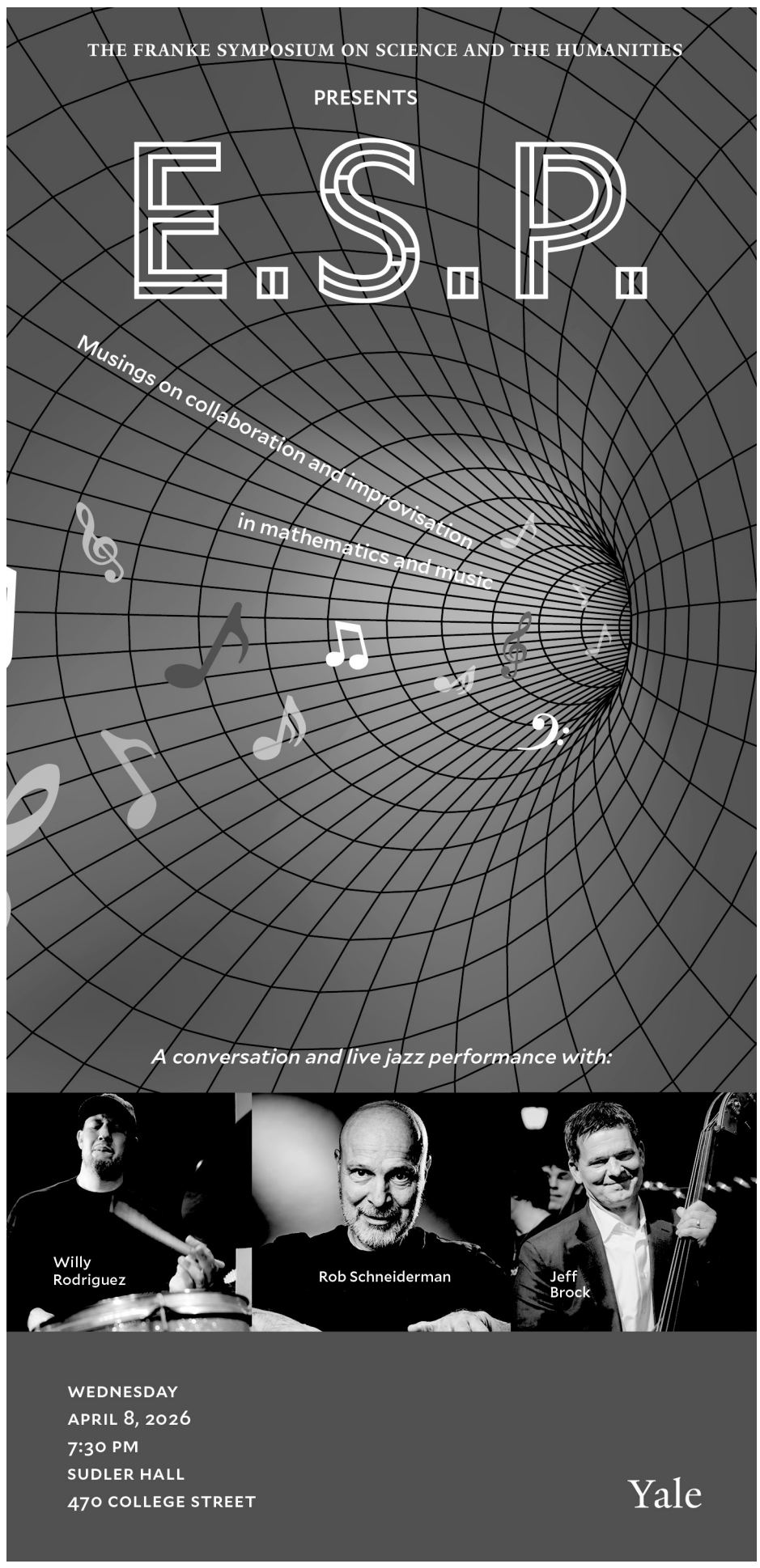
Yale has ended summer storage funding for low-income students. Yale College Dean Pericles Lewis, perhaps attempting to be humorous, instead seemed arrogant when he suggested that low-income students should simply not "buy too much stuff." Lewis apparently does not realize that those students don't have too much stuff; many have no money to move or store what little stuff they do have. If 20 percent of undergraduates are "low income," Yale would save roughly $300,000 by eliminating the storage supplement. Yale's endowment is around $44,000,000,000.

Yale's administrative staff has increased exponentially in the past decade. Some estimate that administrators now outnumber undergraduates. With apologies to Jonathan Swift, may I make a modest proposal? Yale might consider eliminating two administrative positions rather than recouping $300,000 from those community members least equipped to bear that burden.

Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore
Peter V. and C. Vann Woodward Professor Emeritus of History



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