

## **Mainland Chinese students at an elite Hong Kong university: habitus-field disjuncture in a transborder context**

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### **Abstract**

Drawing on in-depth interview data from 31 mainland Chinese (MLC) students in a Hong Kong university, this article conceptualises MLC and Hong Kong higher education as two dissonant but interrelated subfields of the Chinese higher education field. The article argues that these MLC students' habitus, one that possesses rich economic, social and cultural capital, prompts a strong sense of entitlement to anticipated privileges. However, this sense of entitlement is disrupted by the differential capital valuations across these fields. There is thus notable habitus-field disjuncture, which, exacerbated by the hysteresis effect, gives rise to a sense of disappointment and ambivalence. This article demonstrates how the Hong Kong education credential, which these students initially set out to pursue as a form of capital, can become a disadvantage at multiple levels; the article illustrates that capital valuation and conversion in a transborder context is not a straightforward, but rather a complicated and sometimes contradictory, process.

**Keywords:** Bourdieu, habitus, field, hysteresis, Hong Kong, mainland China

### **Introduction**

With the People's Republic of China's economic development and growing political influence on the international stage, there has been a steady increase in Chinese students stepping outside China's borders to pursue HE. In 2014, of the 4.5 million international students worldwide (OECD 2014), more than 690,000 tertiary-level students were from the People's Republic of China. In Hong Kong, the past decade has witnessed a 10-fold increase in the number of mainland Chinese (MLC) students pursuing undergraduate studies at Hong Kong's higher education institutions (HEIs) (University Grants Committee 2015).

Examining student flows from mainland China to Hong Kong, an intra-state yet border-crossing case, would appear to be an intriguing and important addition to the

existing literature on international student experience (Brooks, Waters, and Pimlott-Wilson 2012; Fong 2011). In recent years, more research attention has been paid to intra-state student mobility, with the excellent example of Tindal et al.'s (2015) study on student flows between Scotland and England. Such intra-nation student mobility, as Tindal et al. pinpoint, is in effect tightly enmeshed with globalisation forces, given that domestic students are increasingly competing with mobile international students in a globally differentiated HE system.

It is perhaps axiomatic that student mobility provides the mobile student with 'distinction' (Bourdieu 1984), as much research in the geographies and sociology of international student migration has confirmed. Such 'distinction', or symbolic capital, consequent on acquiring international (usually Western) credentials, is usually rewarded in the mobile student's domestic labour market upon their 'return trip' (Waters 2012, 130). Nevertheless, as Waters cautions, 'the "value" attached to mobility is not always transparent or easily "read off" an individual's international experiences' (2012, 128). Indeed, it remains unclear whether this necessarily applies in contexts where destinations are not in the global West (Brooks et al. 2012), but rather at the periphery of the system (Altbach 1989), such as Hong Kong, an emergent HE destination. In this article, I expound the nuances which demonstrate that not only is such 'value' attached to mobility itself not straightforward and transparent, but also that mobility can sometimes 'backfire', upsetting and disrupting the perceived advantages usually associated with, or assumed to be part and parcel of, cross-border student mobility.

Furthermore, in intra-state border-crossing situations, such as moving from mainland China to Hong Kong, the unique relationship between the two sides of the border constitute a special transborder context, which may give rise to distinctive social conditions that mediate student experiences (Tindal et al. 2015). Research has shown that depending on the relative positioning of destination countries in relation to countries of origin, this assumed distinction can be problematic. Brooks, Waters and Pimlott-Wilson (2012, 289) demonstrate that British students may sometimes find their HE degrees obtained overseas 'impede job prospects' back in the UK. Li (2013) and Xiang and Shen (2009) also note that certain overseas qualifications may no longer serve MLC students well in the Chinese labour market.

However, this seems paradoxical in the case of Hong Kong. Hong Kong's HEIs have successfully branded themselves as 'best picks for smart, ambitious, internationally-minded higher performers in the mainland school system' (Shive 2010, 5). Opting for Hong Kong as a HE destination was considered a strategic move only accessible to a small fraction of top-scoring students in *Gaokao*<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, as student participants in this study revealed:

When I was applying for universities, Hong Kong HEIs were the most popular among applicants; you could constantly read in the newspapers about how many *Gaokao* top scorers accepted scholarship offers from Hong Kong. (Yuhan, second-year, business)

The heated social discourse...promoted Hong Kong HEIs as THE best choice for top students like us. (Miusi, graduate, social sciences)

In 2011, for instance, around two-thirds of top-scoring applicants (i.e. *Zhuangyuan*) were declined by the University of Hong Kong as they were not considered to possess the desired potential and overall ability (Wu 2011). Such a high positioning of Hong Kong HEIs may easily engender the assumption that academic credentials obtained in Hong Kong can reap high rewards in the MLC labour market. In view of the cautions about the problematic nature of such assumptions, a question thus arises: How far can the assumed distinction obtained through a Hong Kong degree be portable across the border?

Existing literature on MLC students in Hong Kong HEIs has highlighted the phenomenon of privileged classes deploying different forms of capital to maintain intergenerational advantages, while peasants are largely marginalised in such cross-border HE pursuits (Li and Bray 2006). Lam's (2006) study explicates differing orientations of MLC students, who identify more closely with the national identity, and their Hong Kong counterparts, who exhibit a more salient regional Hongkonger identity. Gao's (2010) data foreground students who are subject to constant 'active' and 'forced' exclusions, and who are caught between the local Hong Kong student community and the dominant MLC student community. Gu (2011) and Gu and Tong (2012) reveal how speakers of Putonghua, Cantonese and English are accorded different symbolic power and how they utilise their multiple linguistic repertoires to project multi-layered identities.

One issue, however, has been neglected in the afore-mentioned body of literature. That is, how do border-crossing students' understandings of these two social contexts that border one another inform/misinform practices? Inversely, how do cross-border HE pursuits shape the cultural and social identities of these students? Indeed, the interrelations between practices and identities have seldom been theorised in the existing literature. Therefore a second purpose of this paper is to propose a conceptual vocabulary to provide a means of explanation. In what follows, I firstly introduce my research methods, then explicate the field characteristics and specify the habitus of MLC students in this study.

## **The study**

To adequately address the questions of ‘how a transborder context in itself informs/misinforms the practices of border-crossing students’ and ‘how these students’ border-crossings shape their social and cultural identities’, I selected the University of Oceania<sup>2</sup> (UO), a top English-medium research-intensive university in Hong Kong, as the site of investigation. Fieldwork took place between September 2013 and May 2014. Posters advertising details of this study were put up around the UO campus to recruit MLC student participants. Attracting more interested participants than originally intended, an online questionnaire was used to collect demographic information that informed a screening process. Because it was anticipated that factors such as students’ length of stay in Hong Kong (as directly reflected in their year of study), gender, place of origin and subject may have influenced how they perceived their experiences in Hong Kong, efforts were made to ensure a relatively balanced representation of participants in the screening process. At a later stage, as initial analysis pointed to potential distinctions between current students and recent graduates (i.e. those who pursued undergraduate studies in the UO and were working in Hong Kong at the time of investigation), the snowball sampling strategy was utilised to recruit such recent graduates.

In total 31 participants, comprising 25 current undergraduates and six recent graduates, were recruited. All except for seven who could not make the second round of interviews, participated in two rounds of individual interviews. To triangulate their interview accounts, participants’ written accounts, such as blog entries were collected. As some of these blog entries were not originally intended for this investigation, consent was obtained from the participants prior to access. Additionally, seven focus groups involving nine MLC participants and 18 of their friends (including both MLC and local Hong Kong students) were conducted.

## **Subfield characteristics—two dissonant fields**

In Hong Kong, 95-98% of the population are ethnic Chinese. Many of them were previously refugees fleeing from natural and political disasters in mainland China. Memories of such disasters coupled with Hong Kong’s colonial past and no clear promise of real independence shape a ‘transit’ mentality (Ong 1999, 2) among the Hong Kong people. Mathews (1997, 3), for instance, posits that on the eve of the return of Hong Kong’s sovereignty to China, the Hong Kong people began to ‘define themselves as having autonomous cultural identity’. This identity as ‘Hongkongers’, Mathews contends, involves ‘Chineseness plus English / colonial education / colonialism’, and ‘Chineseness plus democracy / human rights / the rule of law’.

Since its reversion in 1997, following the ‘One Country, Two Systems’ principle, Hong Kong has been a Special Administrative Region, being guaranteed a high degree of autonomy in running its internal affairs (Chan and Clark 1991). However, there has been a discrepancy in the understanding of ‘One country, Two systems’. Whereas people of Hong Kong tend to emphasise the practice of ‘two systems’ - that is, maintenance of a high degree of autonomy and upholding distinct cultural, political and civil liberties - the Beijing government and the pro-Beijing camp in Hong Kong place more weight on ‘one country’, emphasising the country’s interests and unity (Flowerdew and Leong 2010). Such a discrepancy is widely observed in Hong Kong’s public discourse and is constitutive of what I argue later to be the ‘anti-mainlandisation discourse’ prevalent in Hong Kong (see Xu 2015).

Specifically, Hong Kong’s deeper and more frequent interactions with mainland China have triggered sentiments that Hong Kong is becoming ‘politically more dependent on Beijing, economically more reliant on the Mainland’s support, socially more patriotic toward the [mainland], and legally more reliant on the interpretation of the Basic Law by the National People’s Congress’ (Hui and Lo 2014, 1106). Socially, closer economic ties between the two entities have engendered a series of controversies, including notable cases such as the ‘locust’ dispute and the ‘maternity ward’ controversy<sup>3</sup> (Ma 2012).

Culturally, Hong Kong’s official languages include English and Cantonese, a dialect drastically different from Putonghua, the official language of mainland China. Since Cantonese is widely used in everyday life both on and off campus, it understandably becomes a point of tension, especially when juxtaposed with English as a global language and Putonghua as a national language. Research has shown that MLC students’ movement across mainland China and Hong Kong has indexed the varying values attached to these three languages, which become ‘emblematic of individual and group identities’ (Gu and Tong 2012, 502); that is, the mainland China identity and a Hong Kong identity.

In the HE sphere, from its colonial days through to its current Special Administrative Region status, Hong Kong HE has been different, separate and independent from that of mainland China. Hong Kong’s HEIs in particular have unique characteristics that distinguish them from HEIs in mainland China (Postiglione, 1998). In recent years, in view of the increasing number of MLC students enrolled in Hong Kong HEIs, Hong Kong taxpayers have questioned whether they should sponsor non-local students in government-funded universities when only 18% of local high school graduates get funded places (Gao 2014). As a response to such concerns, Hong Kong’s Education Bureau has proposed the withdrawal of the 600 annual subsidised places for non-local students in 2016/17, a significant proportion being MLC students

(Yip 2015).

As will be demonstrated in the following, crossing the border between mainland China and Hong Kong immediately subjects the MLC students to a position of having to struggle for legitimacy. This is a clear instance where the ‘effects of the field cease’ and another field, that is, a ‘relatively autonomous social microcosm’ takes over (Bourdieu 1993, 72). While these students were highly sought-after elite students on the mainland, their presence in Hong Kong became mediated by the host of social, cultural and political dissonances outlined. Such contrasting situations invoke Bourdieu’s depiction of a field: ‘a locus of a struggle to determine the conditions and the criteria of legitimate membership and legitimate hierarchy’ (1988, 11).

In this sense, I conceptualise HE in China as a field with ‘a high degree of autonomy in that it generates its own values and behavioural imperatives’ (Naidoo 2004, 458); the MLC and the Hong Kong HE fields are its two major subfields embedded in a complex political, social, economic and cultural entanglement. The UO, the case study site, can therefore be understood to represent a microcosm of the Hong Kong HE subfield. The types of capital recognised in this micro-field are influenced by the ‘specific stakes and interests’ (Bourdieu 1993, 72) of the fields within which it is embedded and those which surround it (the political and economic fields). The UO’s reputation, stemming from its international ranking and locally perceived prestige, demand of its prospective students a high level of scholastic capital (e.g. top *Gaokao* marks) and cultural capital. This presupposes that MLC students recruited in this study belong to a very selective subgroup of students from mainland China, possessing particular habitus and capital profiles, which I now discuss.

### **MLC students’ habitus**

Academically speaking, all 31 MLC students were among the highest echelon of *Gaokao*-takers in mainland China. While two of them were *Zhuangyuan* (top-scoring students in *Gaokao*), 17 received offers from elite universities, including Peking (PKU), Tsinghua (THU) and Fudan University. For the remaining 14, half did not apply to any MLC university but reported that their *Gaokao* marks qualified them for top-tiered universities nonetheless. Their *Gaokao* marks served as the most widely recognised form of academic capital transferable across the two subfields of HE. However, as Ruhua (second-year, business) suggested, apart from academic capital, the UO also demands cultural capital (especially ‘embodied’) (Bourdieu 1986), such as ‘English proficiency, but also the way you think and the way you talk’ (Ruhua’s words). In fact, these MLC students generally possessed rich resources of cultural capital. For instance, most had extensive travel experience within China and five had

travelled abroad before coming to the UO. Some of these students had strong training in aspects of classical (high) Chinese culture, such as Chinese painting and calligraphy and some had been exposed at an early age to Western literature, such as Shakespearean works.

Regarding socio-economic status, 11 had been granted full or partial scholarships, among whom only two indicated that they could not afford the cost of living in Hong Kong. The remaining 20 self-financed students had to pay an annual tuition fee of HK\$146,000 (£12,304) plus around HK\$30,000 (£2,528) maintenance expenditure. Two-thirds had parents occupying typical 'middle-class' jobs, such as doctors, accountants and teachers, while the other third had parents from business backgrounds. In terms of self-reported household income, the annual household income was above RMB 360,000 (£37,431) for six of them, between RMB 60,000 and 360,000 (£6,325-37,431) for 24 and below 60,000 RMB (£6,325) for only one student. Therefore a majority of these students were from families with middle-class or upper-middle-class income levels<sup>4</sup>.

Since most of these students came from prestigious national or provincial high schools, they constantly talked of high school seniors or classmates in elite universities abroad or in mainland China. Some mentioned powerful family connections in government departments who 'made life easier' or rich family friends sponsoring trips abroad for them. Such social capital has the potential to engender a sense of entitlement, invoking the 'multiplier effect' that Bourdieu (1986, 249) talks of.

Generally these students possessed considerable economic, cultural and social capital, resonating with the image of 'mobile students' that Waters identifies:

...generally...internationally mobile students [] are financially secure; have the support (emotional and material) of family and friends (i.e. 'social capital'); have been raised in an environment that places great value on formal education and credentials; have highly educated parents; and have experienced overseas travel as a child (Waters 2012, 128).

However, this begs the question of why these students chose to come to Hong Kong, rather than mainland China or other popular HE destinations, such as the US, the UK or Australia. When asked this question, all 31 MLC participants consistently articulated what I argue to be their 'Hong Kong Dream'. Specifically, this 'Dream' bears three characteristics. The first is a desire to change, as manifested on two different levels: to break free from the familiar and mundane life on the mainland, what Longnu (third-year, sciences) described as a 'stable path, the end of which [she]

can anticipate'. The second level was evidenced in their desire to steer clear of the alleged corruption in society and unethical academic practice on university campuses in mainland China (Qiu 2010). The second characteristic rested in their yearning to capitalise on Hong Kong's close alignment with international practices and standards, its English-rich environment, abundant opportunities for exposure to cosmopolitan lifestyles and the chances to gain overseas experiences. The last characteristic was reflected in their rich imaginations of Hong Kong as a sophisticated and inclusive society, which mirrors what Fong (2011) describes as a yearning for the 'developed' world (Xu 2015). Importantly this Hong Kong Dream was enmeshed with these students' positioning of Hong Kong as a flexible space that would enable them to move with ease post graduation, whether relocating abroad, remaining in Hong Kong or returning to mainland China.

To a great extent, this Hong Kong Dream illuminated the 'scheme of perceptions' rooted in these students' past experiences (i.e. habitus), 'mak[ing] some possibilities inconceivable, others improbable and a limited range acceptable' (Reay 2004, 435). It underpinned these students' expectations and anticipated their likely strategising upon border-crossing. Put differently, these students needed to understand the internal workings, especially the conversion rates of forms of capitals between the two subfields. In view of the field dissonances discussed previously, it is likely that the habitus of the MLC students would encounter disjuncture. Therefore, in what follows, I present evidence to illustrate how these MLC students successfully or unsuccessfully converted/exchanged capitals in the transborder context.

### **Border-crossing advantages**

Some students referred to how their education experience in Hong Kong contributed to positional advantages. For instance, as students in the UO, all MLC students in this study had been issued with Hong Kong identity cards that marked their distinction in comparison with ordinary mainland visitors. Such a distinction was accentuated upon crossing the border between Hong Kong and mainland China. Lingshan (first-year, social sciences) described this experience vividly:

...it felt quite convenient to take the Hong Kong resident channel because mainland visitors had to queue in long, long queues. When I walked past them as a Hong Kong resident, I felt like this ID card...had given me lots of convenience, and it made me feel like a Hongkonger.

While MLC tourists are regulated, and (in a sense) disadvantaged by rules jointly set

out between mainland China and Hong Kong, MLC students like Lingshan can bypass such regulations because their academic (cultural) capital had been converted into an institutionalised form of cultural capital, that is, the rights to residency in Hong Kong. At the border, this new form of cultural capital is ritualised and accentuated overtly, to such an extent that it is turned into a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986, 245). To some, such recognition of the accordance of an elevated sense of symbolic capital appears to be an instantaneous sign of capital conversion; nonetheless, given the notable field dissonances discussed, acquiring such symbolic capital can entail a degree of convenience and social recognition. Zhang's (2013, 99) study on Chinese and Taiwanese tourists similarly posits that travel documents as such can enable the traveller to 'negotiate macro-political structures to her/his own advantage'. In some cases, such symbolic capital can enable the MLC students to evade public scrutiny in daily life. Lingshan recalled another incident, this time on her trip back home during the Chinese New Year holiday:

When we were passing through the border we all had to place our luggage on the bus. There was this (possibly) mainlander whose luggage blocked the way of the next passenger, a female Hongkonger. This woman complained, 'How come you mainlanders' *suzhi* [quality] is so poor?' That male mainlander started to defend himself, in Cantonese, 'I am not a mainlander; I am a Hongkonger'. The woman replied disdainfully, 'Then show me your ID card'. She repeatedly demanded this but the man did not show any such evidence in the end. Seeing this, I was really sad.

This incident further testifies to the degree of symbolic violence this Hong Kong ID card can produce; the perceived and imagined hierarchy of ID cards (i.e. HK and MLC ID cards) translates directly into a perception of the 'quality' of their respective possessors. Elsewhere, I have discussed in greater detail how deeply such anti-mainlandisation sentiments in Hong Kong impacted on the daily life and concomitantly the self-perceptions of the MLC students in my study (Xu 2015). While Lingshan was made more aware of the strong currency of her Hong Kong residency capital in this liminal space, her short-lived happiness about feeling like a 'Hongkonger' was imbued with a deep level of uncertainty and unease, showing a conflicted habitus, one that was in transition.

### ***Lack of assuredness***

Thus far, the MLC students' habitus has been shown to be characterised by a cognisance of the intricate rules of two bordering fields. However, as Bourdieu

cautions (Reay 2004), habitus is formed on the basis of understandings and experiences that were available prior to border-crossing. This means the habitus cannot anticipate situations that have not occurred before. For the MLC students, their habitus assumed privileges and generated actions that would maximise capital conversion in the new field of Hong Kong HE. However, in what follows I show that when encountering the new field, these MLC students also confronted situations novel to their habitus, leading to a habitus-field disjuncture and resulted in the need to address difficult emotions.

Xue for instance, complained about perceiving in herself less of a sense of assuredness compared with peers attending PKU and THU, who considered themselves to be ‘God’s favoured ones’ (*tianzhijiaozi*). Having studied at THU for one preparatory year<sup>5</sup>, Xue recalled that the Deans or the President of THU frequently inculcated in the students such notions as ‘you represent the highest standard of the country’. Such inculcation, as Hansen (2013) astutely observes, reflects the Chinese Communist Party’s strategy of portraying elite university students for whom there is a high demand in terms of leading the nation.

In comparison, Xue lamented the lack of such a sense of assuredness at the UO. When questioned why, given that the UO has consistently fared better than top MLC universities in international university rankings, Xue suggested, ‘Hong Kong after all is a smaller place; even if you are the top among seven million people<sup>6</sup> you still don’t seem to have so many halos around you’. The drastic difference in scale, that is, being top of 1.3 billion people in comparison with seven million, engendered a sense of loss in Xue. Notably, Xue declined PKU’s offer in pursuit of her Hong Kong Dream. However, her habitus established on the mainland predisposed her to be more ready to perceive the social recognition accorded to students in elite MLC universities; in contrast, she was less able to recognise the level of symbolic capital accorded by the UO. As Bourdieu writes:

...capital exists and acts as symbolic capital...in its relationship with a habitus predisposed to perceive it as a sign, and as a sign of importance, that is, to know and recognise it on the basis of cognitive structures able and inclined to grant it recognition because they are attuned to what it is. (2000, 242)

In fact, there was a tacitly shared sense of loss over abandoning offers from prestigious MLC universities in favour of those from Hong Kong among MLC students on the UO campus.

In the first semester, I think everybody felt similarly...many people were really

low, not knowing why they came here. (Qingwen, second-year, sciences)

Compared with other international students who usually look up to the host university and culture (Montgomery 2010), 15 out of 31 of the MLC students spoke about this sense of loss resulting from having chosen Hong Kong. This may be related to the sceptical views prevalent in MLC media discourse which casts doubt on top-scoring MLC students' decision to come to Hong Kong while rejecting offers from top MLC universities (Dong and Wei 2015). More crucially, we can discern a mismatch between their habitus and the new field: it is clear that the MLC students still operated their durable dispositions (habitus) acquired in mainland China when they encountered the unfamiliar characteristics of the Hong Kong HE field; there is therefore a notable time lag between encountering the new field and the establishment of a transformed habitus. This delay is what Bourdieu and Passeron (1977, 78) term the *hysteresis* effect:

...as a result of the *hysteresis effect*...practices are always liable to incur negative sanctions when the environment with which they are actually confronted is too distant from that to which they are objectively fitted.

Xue's comment thus depicted a troubled transformation, in which her links with the original field had been disrupted and her identity as an elite student at an elite institution was being challenged.

### ***'Double-betrayal'***

#### ***Internships and jobs applications***

Apart from perceiving a lack of social recognition, some MLC students also reported the diminishing value of their education credentials acquired in Hong Kong when applying for internships and jobs both in Hong Kong and mainland China. This sentiment was conveyed by a majority of senior students, especially those in their third year of study or those who were recent graduates. Miusi, a social sciences graduate, spoke about feeling 'doubly betrayed':

When we turned down offers from PKU or THU, we actually had faith in the credentials of the UO. However, we realise upon graduation that Hong Kong employers have this mindset that 'a monk from outside chants scriptures better' (*wailaide heshang huinianjing*) — in this sense we are betrayed by the Hong Kong employers. Meanwhile, for those of us who return to seek employment on the mainland, we find that compared with peers from top MLC universities who

have already established extensive alumni and social networks, we are severely disadvantaged. I feel I am doubly betrayed.

When MLC students chose UO over top MLC universities, their durable dispositions anticipated that the institutionalised cultural capital acquired in Hong Kong would be highly prized in both the MLC and Hong Kong labour markets. This strong sense of entitlement, however, was frustrated when expectations were not met.

Firstly, as Waters's (2007, 493) study reveals, many Hong Kong employers have themselves been educated in the West so they prefer to recruit those similarly in possession of Western degrees. This has led to a devaluation of education capital acquired in local Hong Kong universities, whose graduates are unfavourably viewed as 'less competent'. Although Miusi managed to obtain a job in Hong Kong, the degree of competition she experienced when applying for jobs led her to perceive that her Hong Kong credential was negatively valued.

Xue similarly pointed out that her 'locally educated' identity had reduced her competitiveness in the internship market too, this time, when compared with peers from top MLC universities:

I realised that peers from PKU and THU got more internship positions and better welfare packages in investment banks in Hong Kong than us, that is, those 'educated locally'.

Xue perceived her position to be unfavourable when competing against peers whose universities' offers she had rejected previously. She added that these peers were favoured possibly because of their familiarity with the MLC culture and business environment, which is considered as an important form of cultural capital given that finance companies in Hong Kong nowadays have significantly more business interaction with MLC partners (Shen 2008). Xue's absence from her field of origin had unwittingly deprived her of a legitimate claim to familiarity with MLC business culture. As a result, Xue encountered both a devaluation of her Hong Kong education credential and a lack of legitimate claim to her MLC cultural capital.

Moreover, when competing against other Hong Kong students who were likewise 'educated locally' in Hong Kong universities, more than two-thirds of these MLC students felt they were lacking a competitive edge, mainly due to insufficient linguistic capital or a lack of understanding of the local context. For instance, Min, a final-year psychology student, suggested:

When I attended internship and job interviews in Hong Kong, the interviewers

usually enjoyed talking to me, but in the end they usually had concerns over my Cantonese and whether I could integrate well in their team. Once, I was one of the final two candidate[s] but they eventually picked the local candidate because of my Cantonese.

Not only did Min lack the prized currency in Hong Kong's linguistic market (Bourdieu 1991), Cantonese, the hiring managers' concern about whether she could fit into the team also reflected their reservations about Min's understanding of Hong Kong's local business culture. Min's perception is echoed in Gao's (2014) study which paints a revealing picture of how Hong Kong employers marginalised non-local applicants for similar reasons. Taken together, this lack of the locally prized linguistic capital and local level of contextual understanding can be considered as a lack of 'local cultural capital'.

Besides these, when returning to the MLC labour market, these students found that they lacked the social capitals accumulated through institutional affiliations that their peers in prestigious MLC universities possessed. These students frequently talked of 'missing out' on chances to establish social networks that were deemed crucial to obtaining a job. For instance, Min said in a focus group:

In undergraduate years they had loads of internship experience and accumulated substantial connections in the mainland that make job searches easier. For us, being in Hong Kong means it is not practical to get internships or part-time jobs back there. When we return we have no connection whatsoever and have to start all over from scratch.

Additionally, some students complained that the education credentials from Hong Kong were not as well recognised because employers in the MLC labour market were not experienced in assessing comparable qualifications from Hong Kong HEIs: this could be considered a *hysteresis* effect that MLC employers experience as it will take time for them to become familiar with the Hong Kong HE qualifications.

#### ***Applications for postgraduate studies overseas***

Opting out of the MLC HE field meant that students' habitus was often in misalignment with the new field. This was evident in their complaints about feeling isolated when applying for postgraduate studies abroad, as Liwan suggested:

...it is easier for [peers in MLC universities] to find companions taking the same path. I have a childhood friend in Beijing who has formed a five-member group

for her postgraduate entrance exam preparation...in the UO we make our own applications. Therefore, our journey is lonelier.

The MLC students' habitus cultivated in mainland China found little echo in the field of Hong Kong HE. Instead, these students became aware of the less advantageous post-graduation employment trends in the UO as compared with those of top MLC universities. According to statistics released by the UO, only around one-fifth of its bachelor's degree graduates pursue further studies each year. Among its local Hong Kong students who continue further studies, only around 10% go abroad. In contrast, in PKU and THU, they annually record around 80% of undergraduates continuing on to further studies, with around 26-32% going overseas (Peking University 2014; Tsinghua University 2014). To these MLC students, therefore, the UO's institutional habitus characterised by a low level of applications for postgraduate studies stood in sharp contrast to the collegial atmosphere among peers in MLC HEIs. Their desire for what was not available at the UO arose from a disjuncture between their original habitus and the field of Hong Kong HE.

Meanwhile, these MLC students seemed to find little opportunity to tap into the institutional prestige of the UO, a prominent university with a considerable number of distinguished alumni overseas. Indeed, Liwan's account seemed to be concerned predominantly with the lack of available resources among the MLC-origin alumni of the UO. They did not benefit from the social capital conferred by local Hong Kong alumni, possibly because of their differing habitus, which was reflected in their divergent aspirations and dispositions. Rui, a second-year male business student, revealed:

It is much more convenient and comfortable to listen to somebody sharing experience in Putonghua than in English. Also, the graduation plans and issues of concern of MLC students are largely different from local students. This means information shared by [Hong Kong] senior students is not as straightforward, useful or copyable.

All of the participants in this study explained that normally they only sought advice from MLC-origin seniors, instead of local seniors. They therefore found it harder to draw on UO's institutional capitals in the same ways as their local Hong Kong peers could. While these students were able to benefit from the MLC-student networks in the UO, when it came to advice about employment or postgraduate application overseas, given the relatively short history, their social networks were unable to exert an equal level of influence as a strong Hong Kong social network could potentially

facilitate.

Specifically, the number of MLC students recruited to Hong Kong HEIs began to increase more significantly (e.g. by 56% in 2005-2006) from 2004 when Hong Kong HEIs began strategically recruiting more self-financed MLC students (Li 2010). However, as Hardy (2008, 138) posits, due to the *hysteresis* effect:

...the time lag between field change and the recognition of configurations of capital (*habitus*) that would support dominant field positions is always a long one, measured in decades rather than weeks.

It will take time for current MLC students and recent graduates to feed back their experience of internship and job-seeking or experience of applying for postgraduate studies to prospective MLC students. For the MLC students in this study, when they decided to choose the UO over leading MLC universities between 2007 and 2010, they did not quite anticipate the implied opportunity cost which they were currently experiencing.

Notably, while the accounts above underline the relative disadvantages of MLC students in getting support for postgraduate application for study abroad, it does not mean that none of them succeeded in being admitted by overseas universities. In fact, according to statistics released by the UO, more than one-third of the MLC bachelor's degree graduates in 2014 enrolled in universities abroad. Of these successful cases, at least half received offers from high-ranking international universities, such as the Ivy League universities in the US. Of the nine third-year students in this study, two obtained offers from prestigious HEIs in the US and Europe. In contrast, the collegial atmosphere to apply for postgraduate degrees in MLC institutions would not necessarily guarantee admission to elite institutions overseas.

In fact, as these students possessed rich academic, cultural and social capitals, obtaining a job or receiving offers from overseas universities ought not to be a formidable task for them. Rather more crucially, the *hysteresis* effect limited the power of these MLC students' capital in a transborder context. From a social justice perspective, these students were already in a privileged position. Their sense of double-disadvantage evoked the image of Reay's (2013) British middle-class parents who send their children to comprehensive schools. These middle-class parents, despite their advantageous social positions, still mobilise their middle-class *habitus* to justify their privileges and express a great deal of fear and anxiety at the prospect of not being able to retain such privileges. Similarly, these MLC students' fear of losing their advantage over students with similar credentials at top MLC universities was embedded in their sense of entitlement. Therefore, despite their privileged position,

they used their elite student status to justify their disadvantaged and disconnected position in the transborder context.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

In this article, I draw on the case of border-crossing MLC students at an elite Hong Kong university to demonstrate how the complex interrelations between the two neighbouring fields of Hong Kong and MLC HE have exerted considerable influence over transborder capital valuations. I have identified dissonances between these two neighbouring fields and expounded the MLC students' habitus. Their possession of rich capitals has engendered a strong sense of entitlement in their anticipation of experience in Hong Kong HE. In some ways, these MLC students' strategising has been successful. For example, some managed to ensure that their various forms of capital were recognised or to exchange them for other forms of prized capital in the new field. Nevertheless, due to the *hysteresis* effect, MLC students have experienced a mismatch between their habitus and the new field, as evidenced in, for instance, Xue's inability to appreciate the symbolic capital accorded by the Hong Kong HE field.

Specifically, in the Hong Kong labour market, they perceived triple 'disadvantages', including being considered as 'educated locally', losing legitimate claim to MLC cultural capital, and lacking 'local cultural capital'. In the MLC labour market, they missed opportunities to accumulate social capital and their Hong Kong education credentials were not rewarded properly.

However, I do not intend to paint a bleak picture of these MLC students' experiences. On the contrary, I emphasise that these students are highly privileged individuals who consciously or unknowingly used strategies to gain greater advantages in HE and labour market through border-crossing. The undermining of their sense of entitlement to privileges can therefore be considered as the opportunity costs of their initial strategising. This therefore has broader implications for aspiring MLC students contemplating the prospect of studying at Hong Kong HEIs.

A Bourdieusian lens has been critical for understanding the complex capital valuations in these two neighbouring fields, especially in cases in which capital conversion becomes complicated due to changing inter-field relations. These MLC students found that they could not simultaneously embody the cultural (elite education) and social (alumni network) capitals necessary to achieve privileges enjoyed by their elite counterparts owning 'native membership' in either field (Bourdieu 1990, 66). These students thus felt trapped in their cultural distance from the Hong Kong elite students and their social and physical distance from elite students in MLC universities. Such a 'tricky' situation, I argue, is the consequence of two levels

of habitus-field disjuncture.

The first level is that their habitus etched in the MLC HE field made it difficult for them to mobilise resources available in the Hong Kong HE field. They did not have adequate access to the range of academic and social capitals in the unfamiliar new field in the same way that their Hong Kong peers did.

The second level of disjuncture is that their 'Hong Kong education credential', the newly-acquired institutionalised cultural capital, had become an added layer to their original habitus. This new layer bestowed on them the identity of being 'educated locally' while also implying a critical 'absence' from mainland China. Being 'locally educated' was perceived as a deficit, devalued in the Hong Kong employment market. Meanwhile, their 'critical absence' meant that they lacked social capital accrued in mainland China, or recognition comparable to that accorded to elite MLC university graduates in the MLC job market. These two levels of habitus-field disjuncture had become intensified due to the time it takes for habitus to adapt to a new field, that is, the *hysteresis* effect.

Clearly, these MLC students were not 'disadvantaged' in an absolute sense. Their perception of being 'disadvantaged' was not an amalgamation of various disadvantages. Rather, it was striking that what they initially set out to pursue as an advantage, a capital, namely the Hong Kong education credential, could, in a transborder context, become a disadvantage at multiple levels. This complication added to the nuances of their identity constructions, and also demonstrated that in a transborder context, the conversion or valuation of capital forms is not a straightforward, but rather a complicated and, at times, contradictory process.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> *Gaokao* refers to the National College Entrance Examination.

<sup>2</sup> This is a pseudonym, as are all the student participants' names in this article.

<sup>3</sup> The 'locust' dispute refers to discriminatory name-calling acts between Hong Kong and MLC people, e.g. some Hong Kong people refer to MLC counterparts as 'locusts' who exhaust Hong Kong's public resources, while they are called 'British dogs' in return.

Maternity ward short supply is about mainland mothers flocking to Hong Kong public hospitals to deliver babies. Such behaviour is considered as exploitation of Hong Kong's welfare system, leading to inadequate space in maternity wards for Hong Kong's local mothers.

<sup>4</sup> In 2005, China's National Bureau of Statistics categorises the annual income of a middle-class household as between 60,000 RMB to 500,000 RMB (£6,325-52,711)(Wang, 2008, p. 58). *The Economist* suggests that Chinese urban households with an annual income between 40,000 and 100,000 RMB (£4,217-10,542) are 'upper-middle class', while those with an income of between 100,000 and 200,000 RMB (£10,542-21,084) are 'mass affluent' households (Gürüz, 2011, p. 321).

<sup>5</sup> Before 2012, the UO had an agreement with seven top MLC universities to allow MLC students to spend a preparatory year in one MLC university before going to study in the UO..

<sup>6</sup> The population size of Hong Kong.

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