Identity and cross-border student mobility: The mainland China–Hong Kong experience

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Abstract
This article is drawn from research in an ongoing multiple case study of the identity constructions of tertiary-level border-crossing students from mainland China to Hong Kong. It begins by outlining the contextual and conceptual background of the study, followed by the presentation and discussion of the three aspects of identity being constructed, including contestation against place-of-origin stereotypical identification, passive resistance against power regulations exerted by the original context and critical critiques of the Hong Kong and mainland Chinese societies. This paper argues that, compared with the Bologna process, the parallel but inverse-directional characteristics of the border crossing between mainland China and Hong Kong have significant implications on student mobility across the internal and external European borders, which are greatly influenced by the global context, against a background of the internationalisation of higher education worldwide.

Keywords
Student mobility, cross-border, identity, China, internationalisation, higher education

Introduction
The border between the Chinese mainland and Hong Kong tends to soften or harden in line with political, socio-economic, and demographic changes on both sides...Since [1997], the border has opened up considerably, but it still operates in a manner more similar to that between nations than between territories within a state (Smart, 2005). The authorities see border control as necessary for the maintenance of one country but two systems. (Li, 2010: 320–321)

Both between- and within-country cross-border student mobility has been on the rise on a global scale (Altbach, 2010; Brooks and Waters, 2011; Chapman et al., 2010; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Powell and Finger, 2013). Among the many impacts that such intensive student mobility has on the

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‘student sojourner’ (Kiley, 2003; Ward et al., 2001) or the ‘student stranger’ (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002), the issue of identity constructions is brought to the forefront in literature about a diverse body of students across Europe, Southeast Asia and Australia (Kiley, 2003; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Powell and Finger, 2013). A growing body of research has investigated such impacts of mobility on both international and internal migrant students (Gu, 2011a, 2011b; Gu and Tong, 2012; Li, 2010; Li and Bray, 2006, 2007; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Powell and Finger, 2013). These studies have primarily focused on (1) the inequalities brought about by such mobility; (2) the push and pull factors that cause such mobility; and (3) the linguistic practices of migrant students and the implications on identities. So far, relatively little attention has been devoted to investigating the identity constructions of students who migrate in ‘sibling’ contexts or cultures (Gu and Tong, 2012; Zeng and Watkins, 2010), such as mainland Chinese students pursuing undergraduate degrees in universities in Hong Kong (Gao, 2010; Gu, 2011a, 2011b; Gu and Tong, 2012; Lam, 2006). Since cross-border student mobility is rendered one of the most important indicators of ‘internationality in higher education’ (Powell and Finger, 2013: 270), there comes a need to enrich academic understanding of the socialisation experiences of cross-border students in the host universities.

Since its reversion of sovereignty from Britain to China in 1997, Hong Kong has become a Special Administrative Region operated under the ‘One Country, Two Systems’ principle, retaining the political, social and economic systems inherited from its colonial past for a period of 50 years (Abbas, 1997, 2000; Chan and Clark, 1991). The complex linguistic, cultural and ideological differences between Hong Kong and China have been extensively studied in research (Baum, 1999; Brewer, 1999; Cheung and Kwok, 1998; Fairbrother, 2003; Flowerdew, 2004), all of which recognises the importance of bridging understanding of cross-border communications, including talent flows.

Although research on cross-border education interactions between mainland China (MLC) and Hong Kong has not attracted due attention, as that of the Bologna process in Europe has (Powell and Finger, 2013), implications drawn from this study can cast light on the Europeanisation process (Altbach, 2010; Altbach and Knight, 2007) whereby the boundaries between borders become fuzzier and yet the intricate differences between nations remain (Delanty, 2006), especially considering the rising centrality of Chinese higher education in the international arena (Hayhoe and Liu, 2010) and the crucial links between Europe and Asia (Brooks and Waters, 2011).

**Background and previous research**

Research on cross-border student mobility and identity constructions has focused explicitly on adaptation and change strategies (Kiley, 2003; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002) and systemic policy biases that impede social mobility (Powell and Finger, 2013). In Murphy-Lejeune’s (2002) research on European students going on programmes, including the Erasmus and the EAP (Ecole des Affaires de Paris) programmes, she suggests that the student sojourner’s position in time is disrupted by ‘a break with chronological linearity and by the discovery of the precariousness of his situation’ (p.16). Hence, ‘the metaphorical figure of precariousness, must then learn to manage the discontinuities inherent to his path’ (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). Gewirtz and Cribb (2009) note that when human agents try to explore who they think they are, they are often positioned to either identify with one certain group or they construct themselves ‘through the notion of what [they] are “not”’ (Archer, 2003: 158). By actively negating certain aspect(s) of one’s identity (Torfing, 1999), the human agent achieves the formation of his/her favoured identity/identities. Hall (1996), on the other hand, contends that identities are often ‘positions’ (p.6) imposed upon subjects who knowingly accept that identities are merely ‘representations’ (Hall, 1996) that are ‘always constructed
across a “lack”, across a division, from the place of the Other, and thus can never be adequate – identical – to the subject processes which are invested in them’ (Hall, 1996). These are important theorisations of identity upon which this study draws.

Research context and method

The student sojourners in this study were from a multilingual university in Hong Kong, which began to recruit MLC students in 1998 but has significantly increased its student intakes from MLC since 2005 (Li, 2010; Li and Bray 2007).

This research project is a multiple-case study with an ethnographic orientation. The researcher spent six months in the research site, conducting two rounds of in-depth semi-structured interviews and around 10 focus group interviews (with between four and six participants each) with around 30 students, collecting their written accounts on social media sites, such as Facebook and Renren (Chinese version of Facebook), and visiting their social activities, for example lectures and dinner parties. The researcher made detailed field notes immediately after these social occasions. The interviews, written accounts and field notes constituted a plethora of data.

Data analysis was an iterative process operated in tandem with data collection. A three-stage analytical framework was employed to interpret the data. Firstly, a plenary reading of all transcripts, field notes and written accounts of participants provided a general background understanding for forthcoming analysis (Huberman and Miles, 1994). Then, individual chronological narratives of participants were constructed and put together for a recursive process of comparison, generating common patterns of themes (e.g. shared admiration of the international flavour of Hong Kong before arrival) as well as ruptures and inconsistencies (e.g. differential career aspirations), which constituted a collection of ‘hypotheses’ (Gu, 2011b). Thirdly, the transcripts, field notes and participants’ written accounts were surveyed again and literature was consulted for further confirmation, modification or rejections of such ‘hypotheses’.

Given space constraint and with a view to fully capturing the richness and nuances of data and accentuating the most critical issues that lie central to this study, in the following I will report on the narratives of five participants, while the data of other participants will serve as background understanding that is integral and crucial to the analysis. The findings revolve around three different aspects of identity, namely struggles over stereotypical place-of-origin labels, passive resistance and critical critiques. These findings are representative of major themes emerging across the entire dataset, taking into consideration the diverse demographic variances such as gender, length of stay in Hong Kong and major and provincial places-of-origin.

Struggles over stereotypical place-of-origin labels

Moving from MLC to Hong Kong for higher education, the MLC students’ disconnection from the past (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002) means that they are now conceived of in a new light. Essentially, some aspects of their identity are given more weight over others. For instance, representative across the whole data set in this study, Elly’s remarks of being looked down upon by labourers who are supposedly more lowly located, socially, is a telling indication of the change of ‘rules’ in the host context:

I had a strong impression that Hong Kong was always speaking about the weaknesses of mainland China. This is something that I often hear, e.g. some Nong Min Gong (literal translation: peasant workers, 农民工) would call us Da Lu Zai (mainlanders, 大陆仔). You would feel that they spoke with contempt.

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The renewed representation of mainlanders as a ‘monolithic collectivity of uncivilised masses’ (Ma, 2012: 177) is here again employed by lowly regarded menial labourers in Hong Kong to derogate Elly and her fellow MLC students as of an inferior status. What is at stake is that their mainland-lander identity overrides their other identities, such as her cultured upbringing, her status as an educated university student or even her multilingual abilities. This place-of-origin mainland-lander identity is taken up, here, by the local context as a predominant identity marker while her other identities are played down or ignored. Does Elly accept new rules as such? She suggested:

When I hear something like this I feel quite uneasy. I think, you yourself are a Nong Min Gong (peasant worker) – you don’t have any culture at all, and you are here to talk about what is good and what is bad in mainland China!

Instead of subscribing to the dividing MLC–Hong Kong identity marker, Elly contested against such discriminations by emphasising the class distinction, that is, middle class (students like her) versus working class (the local Hong Kong labourers). She actively protested against the place-of-origin label that assigned her into a less well-regarded group – Da Lu Zai (mainlanders) – and clung closely to the more advantageous middle-class identity.

However, this strategy did not save her from further estrangement or forced ‘othering’ (Xu, 2011) when she realised the stark contrast between the two versions of Hong Kong – the real and the imagined:

Once I had a few friends from the mainland visit me in Hong Kong. I brought them to walk along the promenade at the Victoria Harbour. There were many expats there. People wore smart suits and all that. I felt there was such a big gap!…I think I like the Hong Kong Island more. But I think those people are too rich, too high up there, and they are so far away from me, so sometimes I feel isolated and deserted. It is as if when I want to chat with those people, I would feel that they have good jobs, like those jobs in the financial sector, and I would feel we don’t belong to the same world. But I find their life style quite an ideal one. I think they make a lot of money…I admire that kind of life. But then I feel, I feel that I may not be that type of people. I feel like I cannot make it there. I am not studying finance, not that kind of work. It seems the ‘local’ people are closer to me.

In her imagination, Hong Kong is a metropolis where people dress in ‘suits’ and work in high-paid jobs; in her reality, she is in close daily contact with working-class Hong Kong people. Her desire for social proximity, manifested by her attempt to ‘chat’ with those people in the desired Hong Kong is, however, precluded by her subject of studies. Here, ‘gap’, ‘high up there’, ‘far away’, ‘make it there’ and ‘closer’ all point to Elly’s acute sense of relative distances between her desired version of Hong Kong, codified by ‘the Hong Kong Island’ and the reality version of Hong Kong that she is immersed in, associated with ‘localness’, creating a seemingly insurmountable barrier. Elly is now made to realise that resorting to her middle-class identity alone is insufficient in countering the discriminations she has been subjected to. At stake here is the relative urban–rural divide within Hong Kong and her less advantageous position in the finely stratified middle-class division of the new context. Within her own construction of Hong Kong, areas such as some towns in the New Territories are considered less metropolitan; although she is of a middle-class background, she does not (and may well not be able to) live the more extravagant or high-end styles of life. Here, the location of her institution and the relative position(s) of herself in the middle-class division of the Hong Kong society seem to play a crucial part when she struggles to define who she is. In this new context, her relative positioning is regulated through a new set of rules: some of which Elly can contest against, but not others. It is in this process of contestation and realisation that she reaches a more nuanced and realistic understanding of her identities.
Passive resistance

For all MLC participants, coming to study in Hong Kong also opens new windows for them to be exposed to different information and worlds of values. However, what emerges strongly across the majority of interviews in this research is that, while acquiring new understandings, they find themselves in growing dilemmas because they realise that reality does not necessarily accommodate their new understandings. Evelyn, for instance, when referring to the Liu Xiaobo event, indicated that she had to ‘play it safe’ because events such as this one are far too sensitive. She contrasted the media coverage of Liu’s nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize in MLC (strict censorship) and in Hong Kong (a wide range of coverage) and suggested that she identified with the street demonstrations of the Hong Kong people. She accused the MLC government’s actions as ‘repressive means to prevent news from spreading out’ while she identified with the Hong Kong people’s anger and dissatisfaction with the way the MLC government handled this issue. However, she did not join the demonstrations because she was worried that if she did something too radical and subsequently upset the MLC government she might be banned from returning to MLC, which effectively means she would not be able to see her parents in China. Indeed, the MLC students’ ties with past histories still exert enormous influence over their decision-making and subsequent actions. This can partly be explained by the unequal power relationship between the two entities, that is, MLC and Hong Kong. The MLC government has emerged as the new power centre since handover and exerted considerable power over most important issues in Hong Kong, including how to interpret its mini-constitution, the Basic Law, appointing the Chief Executive of and controlling the pace of democratisation in Hong Kong (Chan and Lee, 2008). By merely disallowing some dissidents from crossing the border, the MLC government can successfully silence the MLC students, preventing them from taking ‘inappropriate’ actions. Hence, although these MLC students are provided with new channels and perspectives to critically examine what they used to ignore or perceive differently, the old power still regulates their behaviours.

Although Evelyn had to ‘play it safe’ in order to make sure she can return home, she had thought revolution within her:

I will not take to the street to declare what I am thinking, but I can have my own thoughts and ideas.

Restricted by the external regulating forces conveyed by the MLC government, Evelyn chose to engage in passive resistance, by means of which she exercised her free will of critical thinking, believing or disbelieving. To her, this event led her to experience moments of thought liberation. Her identity of being a critical thinker, possessing independent thoughts and free will, was, to say the least, in the embryonic form.

Crucially, her remarks are echoed by almost all participants. For instance, Ruhua, a second-year student from northern China, admitted that since she took a course on media operations in China, she began worrying about being deprived of her rights to return to her family. She found this a horrifying prospect but appreciated the opportunity to conceive things from a brand-new angle. She said:

It is important to have the chance to see China not from the perspective of a Chinese person, but of an international citizen… I have begun to consider the importance of political reforms in China, something I would have never given a second thought before. (Remarks made at a dinner party)

Elly added that after coming to Hong Kong, she had now truly understood the meaning of being dialectic because she was shown how to consider issues from different perspectives.
Clearly the MLC students in this study mostly embrace the opportunities offered to them to be exposed to new information (e.g. news about Liu’s Nobel Peace Prize), acquire new values and thinking skills (e.g. political reforms, critical thinking) and, most importantly, think for themselves. Such a newly acquired identity is celebrated with open arms, however constrained by the powerful regulations enforced by the MLC government in the political sphere, that is, they have had to restrain their ‘rebellious’ thoughts and beliefs in order to avoid disastrous political consequences.

Critical critiques

Prevalent among the MLC participants in this study is their frequently made comments about their Xiao Dian (i.e. humour points, 笑点) being different from and their lack of shared childhood memories with the local Hong Kong students, such as favourite cartoons, food, etc. Lacking in past connection with the present context pushes some MLC students to assert that ‘In Hong Kong, no matter what and how hard I try to adapt to it, I am not a locally born and bred; I am forever an outsider’ (Elly) and some proclaim that even if they acquire the permanent citizenship, they would always be a ‘sojourner’, just like a ‘hermit crab’ (Fei).

The lack of commonly shared experiences constitutes a deficiency of the newcomers, manifesting a sense of non-belonging. While some researchers may endorse the ubiquity of such feelings of alienation (Karenina-Paterson, 2013; Ward et al., 2001), an intriguing issue emerges from my data: when comparing Hong Kong with other countries that they have been to, for example during exchange programmes or internships, these students display much stronger allegiance to identifying with countries such as the USA, Canada and Korea. For instance, Fei considered it ‘repressive’ and ‘lacking in senses of freedom’ in Hong Kong while he felt much more at ease in the States. He said:

In the US, it is much freer… even though we often had to cook for ourselves, we felt we were in control; here in Hong Kong, when we cook for ourselves, we feel pathetic and sorry for ourselves. They just feel so different.

In his attempt to trace the root of such differences he felt between Hong Kong and the USA, Fei maintained that although Hong Kong claims to be a place where the East meets the West, the fusion of these two systems does not work well. He found Hong Kong people to follow rules in a rigid manner, as if they were robots. Hence, he declared that Hong Kong is a perfect example of Jiang Diao Le (literal translation: stiffed out, 僵掉了), meaning it is a failed combination of two different systems.

In a similar vein, Elly emphasised repeatedly that she was much happier in Canada and Korea when she went on exchange programmes, because the people there were friendlier and less ‘polite’; she found the US people more receptive, compared with the indifference of the Hong Kong people. Peter commended the academic atmosphere and diligence of students in the Canadian university he went to for his immersion programme. He was so fond of that university that he attempted to quit his study in Hong Kong and transfer to it, but failed due to visa problems.

Importantly, although the MLC students find their lack of commonly shared experiences with local Hong Kong students to be a crucial issue that impedes their integration into the Hong Kong society, their critique of the Hong Kong society indicates that the more fundamental reasons lie in their dis-identifications with certain aspects of Hong Kong systems. However, it appears that such dis-identifications often come into existence or becomes more salient after these students have opportunities to compare Hong Kong with other societies. The initial mobility achieved by their cross-border higher education pursuit becomes an enabler for their subsequent mobility, which is facilitated by the abundant opportunities to go abroad in Hong Kong.
Indeed, for most of the MLC students in this study, coming to study in Hong Kong has been a highly instrumental and strategic means for facilitating further mobility; in Peter’s opinion, coming to Hong Kong enables him to be in control of his final destinations, whether returning to MLC, staying in Hong Kong or going further abroad. Likewise, to Elly, Hong Kong has always been a ‘stepping stone’, ‘somewhere in-between’, before she reaches the next destination.

After gaining experiences overseas, MLC students return to Hong Kong, feeling more empowered with the critical capacity to examine Hong Kong from new perspectives, especially an international one. They are now much more mobile than before, for example Elly reiterated that she was ‘always on the move’, and she ‘would not stop’ because this was part of her. In other words, mobility, especially international mobility, has now been ingrained in her identity configuration as part of who she is. Because of such a new identity, she regarded Hong Kong as merely one of the many places she had been to, ‘a place I have spent four years of my life in’.

However, these students are remarkably aware of the instrumental role and importance of Hong Kong as a catalyst in making their subsequent mobility possible; for example, Elly commented that ‘if it was not for Hong Kong, I could not go to these many places abroad, not even in my dreams!’ The bridging role (Cheng et al., 2010; Li, 2010) that Hong Kong plays in sending these MLC students further overseas is significant in contributing to the overall identity configuration of these students. While these students take active ownership of their international mobility and construct themselves as critics of the Hong Kong social systems, they do not deny that such aspects of their identity originate from the instrumental contribution of Hong Kong.

Discussion

This paper critically engages with MLC students’ cross-border higher education pursuits in Hong Kong; it elucidates three aspects of their identities that showcase their passive and active contestation and resistance against stereotypical derogation of the host community and power regulations stemming from their original context, while referencing the broader international context when they turn back to critique the systems in Hong Kong and MLC. The fluid identity constructions process has been imbued with tensions, retreat, resistance and persistence. Compared with the Bologna process in Europe, which mobilises students of diverse ethnic backgrounds across national boundaries for the purpose of strengthening the Europeanisation process (Eder, 2006), the data illustrated in this paper indicates a parallel but inverse-directional process whereby students of a largely identical ethnic background move across a within-country (but de facto inter-nation, as indicated by Li, 2010) border between MLC and Hong Kong. In the latter process, issues pertaining to the intersectionality of class and place-of-origin identity, the importance of shared cultural experiences and influences of the global context play crucial roles in the identity constructions of these border-crossing students. Such parallel bi-directional contrasts may serve as an important point of reference for Europe, given the close links, both in terms of collaborations and competitions, in higher education between Europe and Asia. This paper argues that it is high time for Europe to take a closer interest in research on cross-border student mobility in the Asian context, especially considering the increasing impacts of globalisation on both within and cross-country borders worldwide (Delanty, 2006).

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Notes

1. 农民工（Nong Ming Gong）here means peasant workers, which is a term used in big cities like Beijing to refer to migrant workers from rural areas in China migrating to cities to take up menial and often lowly paid jobs. In Hong Kong, there is no such Nong Min Gong, but Elly here is in fact referring to those Hong Kong local labourers who have low-skilled jobs, for example construction work.
2. 大陆仔（Da Lu Zai）in this context is a derogatory term, showing contempt and disapproval of people originally from MLC.
3. The Hong Kong Island is considered by Elly as the ‘downtown’ area and centre of Hong Kong, whereas her own institution is in the New Territories, which is considered more rural and less metropolitan.
4. ‘Local’ people here means the grannies and grandpas who sell self-grown fruits and vegetables in wet markets in areas near her home institution.
5. Liu Xiaobo is a human rights activist who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010. However, news about his award was immediately censored in MLC. Liu is currently incarcerated in China.

References


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