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When the Hong Kong Dream Meets the Anti-Mainlandisation Discourse: Mainland Chinese Students in Hong Kong

Cora Lingling XU

Abstract: This article looks at identity constructions of mainland Chinese undergraduate students in a Hong Kong university. These students shared a “Hong Kong Dream” characterised by a desire for change in individual outlooks, a yearning for international exposure, and rich imaginations about Hong Kong and beyond. However, when their Hong Kong Dream met Hong Kong’s “anti-mainlandisation discourse,” as was partially, yet acutely, reflected in the recent Occupy Central movement, most students constructed the simultaneous identities of a “free” self that was spatially mobile and ideologically unconfined and an “elite” self that was among the winners of global competition. This article argues that the identity constructions of these mainland Chinese students shed light on global student mobilisation and provide a unique, insider’s perspective into the integration process between Hong Kong and the rest of the People’s Republic of China.

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Keywords: Hong Kong Dream, integration, student identity, (anti-)mainlandisation

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Introduction

In recent years, universities worldwide have witnessed more intense global competition for high-quality and financially viable international students (Altbach and Knight 2007; Waters, Brooks, and Pimlott-Wilson 2011). Among these international students, a disproportionate majority come from Asian countries such as India, Malaysia, and South Korea (Belyavina, Li, and Bhandari 2013; British Council 2012). The People's Republic of China (PRC; to be used interchangeably with “mainland China” in this article) effectively dominates the scene of non-Western international student exportation “with its substantial and growing unmet domestic demand for higher education, and a seemingly insatiable desire for ‘Western’ experiences and credentials” (Brooks and Waters 2011: 45). While mainland Chinese (MLC) students are still consistently attracted to traditional destinations, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada (Barnett et al. 2015), newer providers of international education, such as Japan and South Korea, are “mov[ing] up to become ‘significant players’ on the world stage of higher education” (Brooks and Waters 2011: 121).

Among these new “players” in global higher-education provision is Hong Kong, the aspiring Asian education hub (Cheng, Cheung, and Yuen 2010) that has managed to attract top MLC students – that is, top-scoring students in the competitive National College Entrance Examination (高考, *gaokao*) (Li Chun 2013). The past decade has seen a record ninefold rise in the enrolment of MLC undergraduate students in Hong Kong higher-education institutions (HEIs), from 633 in 2002–2003 to 6,521 in 2013–2014. MLC students account for more than 70 per cent of the total non-local student population, which in turn makes up 11 per cent of total student enrolment in Hong Kong's government-funded HEIs (University Grants Committee 2014). Such a notable surge has, I argue, been motivated by the MLC students' “Hong Kong Dream,” which, as I explicate in detail below, is fuelled by rich imaginations of Hong Kong and beyond and is characterised by a desire for change and a longing to become international.

However, such a surge in MLC student enrolment has not been necessarily received favourably by Hong Kong society (Kan 2011; Lam 2013), because of the “anti-mainlandisation” discourse prevalent in Hong Kong. This discourse can be related closely to Hong Kong

people's troubled identity issues. In 1997 when Hong Kong was returned to China from its British colonial rulers, Mathews (1997: 3) posits that the Hong Kong people, or *heunggongyahn* (Cantonese pronunciation), began to “define themselves as having autonomous cultural identity.” This identity as “Hongkongers,” Mathews contends, involves “Chineseness plus English/colonial education/colonialism” along with “Chineseness plus democracy/human rights/the rule of law.” Hongkongers' identity fusion, some argue, stems from Hong Kong's 150-year colonial past, its development route – which began to significantly diverge from that of mainland China in 1949, and its disparity of development levels and living standards, which have given rise to a strong sense of superiority among Hongkongers vis-à-vis their MLC counterparts (Lau 1998). A series of surveys on identities (HKU POP SITE 2014) has revealed that people in Hong Kong who consider themselves as “Hongkongers” consistently outnumber those who self-identify as “Chinese.” “Hongkongers” and “Chinese” tend to differ significantly in their attitudes towards the PRC; interpretations of the June 4th Incident; and conceptions of freedom, democracy, and political reform. In brief, as Newendorp maintains, despite the reunification, Hongkongers “continue to see themselves as ideologically, socially, economically, and politically different from mainlanders” (Newendorp 2008: 11).

The most recent incident that revealed such dissonances is the case of Ye Lushan, a second-year MLC student, whose high-profile participation in student-election politics was met with scrutiny on the part of the Hong Kong public, which reacted negatively to her because of her alleged connection with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Youth League (Baldwin 2015). This scepticism about Ye as a CCP “proxy” or “pawn,” coupled with Hong Kong's public concerns about MLC students' exploitation of scarce educational resources, highlights the renewed suspicion of migrant students' “authenticity [...] as pure knowledge-seeking migrants” (Raghuram 2013: 149). Such suspicions have, as some claim, narrowed the possibilities and “room for survival” (生存空间, *shengcun kongjian*) of MLC students in Hong Kong universities (Chen 2015).

Parallel to the challenges in Hong Kong, 28 out of 31 MLC students in this study also encountered scepticism emanating from MLC media about their decision to come to Hong Kong while rejecting offers from top MLC universities, such as Peking University (Dong

and Wei 2015; Fan and Guan 2014). This controversy intensified after Liu Dingning's widely publicised withdrawal from university: Liu was a *gaokao* top scorer in Northern China's Liaoning Province in 2013. She then rejected an offer by Peking University to study there and took up a full scholarship from the University of Hong Kong. However, after merely one month, she withdrew and returned to her high school to repeat *gaokao*. In 2014 she once again scored the top marks and eventually entered Peking University (Amy Li 2013).

How do MLC students in Hong Kong universities react to the dissonance between their Hong Kong Dream and the anti-mainlandisation discourse in Hong Kong? Have these students developed strategies to combat scrutiny from both Hong Kong and mainland China? What is gained or lost in their border-crossing pursuit of higher education, especially in view of globalisation? This article¹ attempts to address these questions by probing into these students' identity constructions.

Theoretical Lens: Cross-Border Student Identity

For Jenkins (1996: 20), identities are “thoroughly socially constructed” and can be generated in social transactions and interactions. Hall similarly maintains that identity construction is “a process never completed – always ‘in process’” (Hall 1996: 16–17). From this perspective, identities are fluid and negotiable. Importantly, identities are positions which social agents are “obliged to take up while always ‘knowing’ [...] that they are representations [...] constructed across a ‘lack,’ across a division, from the place of the Other” (Hall 1996: 19). Identity labels, however, when applied to group identities, such as the identity of mainland Chinese or Hongkongers, can be “inherently political” (Jenkins 1996: 102). Especially in cases in which an identity is imposed upon a group of people, there can be mixed responses: internalisation, resentful endurance, or resistance (Jenkins 1996: 102).

Identity constructions of border-crossing students, in particular, have been characterised by disjuncture, as the sojourner's position in

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time is disrupted by “a break with chronological linearity and by the discovery of the precariousness of his situation” (Murphy-Lejeune 2002: 16). Hence, extant research on cross-border student identity has explicitly focused on sojourning students’ adaptation strategies to the host contexts (Ward, Bochner, and Furnham 2001). Such an orientation, however, is criticised for positioning the border-crossing students as being in deficit in relation to normative social institutions of the host environment (Marginson 2014). Scholars have now focused on the “transformative power” (Brown 2009: 502), especially the “shift in self-understanding” resulting from “the geographical and emotional distance from the home environment” (Brown 2009: 517). This focus is echoed by Marginson (2014), who insists that international students are able to forge new kinds of hybrid identities by drawing upon multiple identity sources, ranging from those inherited from their home context to those from the host context.

Existing empirical findings on identities of MLC students in Hong Kong HEIs have revealed scalar relations between Hong Kong, mainland China, and the rest of the world. Among these relations is the dominated/dominant binary – that is, MLC students in Hong Kong being “dominated guests” as opposed to “dominant masters” (Xie 2009: 97) – along with the disputed language hierarchies expounded in Gu and Tong’s study (2012): Cantonese as local (vs trans-local), Putonghua as trans-local (vs local), and English as global. These are the important theoretical underpinnings of this study.

Methods

Informed by identity theories, this study adopted an ethnographically oriented approach to collect empirical data. Fieldwork was conducted between September 2013 and March 2014 at the University of Oceania (hereafter: UO), a pseudonym for a top, English-medium, research-intensive university in Hong Kong. To recruit participants, posters were put up around the university campus. Attracting more participants than originally intended, an online questionnaire was used to gather demographic information, which was crucial for a screening process. To better canvas diverse views of MLC students from different backgrounds, specific care was taken to ensure a balanced spread of year of study, gender, place of origin, and major among selected

participants. As themes emerged throughout the interviews, the snowball-sampling strategy was adopted at a later stage.

Altogether 31 participants were recruited, comprising 25 current undergraduates along with six graduates who had pursued undergraduate studies in the UO and were working in Hong Kong when this investigation was conducted. All but seven participated in two rounds of interviews. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Participants have been given pseudonyms. Moreover, as identity is fundamentally social (Jenkins 1996), seven focus groups were conducted to gauge

attitudes, feelings and beliefs [which] may be [...] more likely to be revealed via the social gathering and the interaction which being in a focus group entails. (Gibbs 1997: “Why use focus groups and not other methods?” section)

These focus groups involved nine MLC participants and 18 of their friends: all were MLC students except for one, who had migrated to Hong Kong in senior high school.

When I returned from my research position in Europe to conduct fieldwork in Hong Kong, my identity as a former MLC student in Hong Kong helped me to build trust among the participants. I was therefore able to elicit answers that would have been harder for the MLC students to reveal to researchers from different backgrounds – for example, their negative comments on Hong Kong society. However, conscious that I could take things for granted as an insider, I sought help from peer researchers, who reviewed interview transcripts that I had analysed. When we compared our analysis, I was alerted to my own assumptions (e.g. MLC students’ attitudes towards the June 4th Incident) and modified my investigative approaches strategically in the subsequent focus groups and second round of interviews; for example, I began to ask more open-ended questions, in addition to deliberately soliciting participants’ views on the June 4th Incident.

Additionally, to gain more balanced perspectives, I carried out two focus group sessions discussing similar topics with a total of 12 Hong Kong students. Each session included six students. I also interviewed a small number of administrators and academics. To avoid sensitising the local Hong Kong students to controversial issues related to mainland–Hong Kong relations, after securing ethical approval, I presented the topic of the focus groups as “peer relations on cam-

pus.” Concomitantly, the Hong Kong students discussed in detail their interactions with other student groups, such as European students and Asian students from Japan and Korea. Their discussion about MLC students was voluntary. Their comments demonstrated balanced viewpoints that were not devoid of remarks critical of the MLC students, a reality that could tarnish the fantasy image of the Hong Kong Dream held by the MLC students.

The Hong Kong Dream

In my interviews, the notion of the “Hong Kong Dream” was initially brought up by Yingying (Anonymous 1b 2014):

Many MLC students come to the UO specifically for the Faculty of Business [...] because this can help them make a fortune, like fulfilling a “Hong Kong Dream” (香港梦, *Xianggang meng*): they feel that coming to Hong Kong means they are in a big international city to meet a fate (命运, *mingyun*) different from before. (Anonymous 1b 2014)

This Hong Kong Dream encompasses a desire to change (“meet a different fate”) and to be international (“a big international city”), along with a constellation of imaginations about Hong Kong and their future (making “a fortune”). The second instance where the Hong Kong Dream was mentioned unprompted was by Guoxiang (Anonymous 2b 2014), who discussed its simultaneous fulfilment and her disappointment in it:

The moment you realise your dream is also the time when the dream is broken (圆梦的瞬间梦也碎了, *yuanmeng de shunjian meng ye sui le*) because your imagination is torn down. (Anonymous 2b 2014)

This quote was recorded during a conversation between Guoxiang and her then-roommate about the unavoidable disappointment: realising the Dream also implies that there is no more space left to romanticise their colourful aspirations. As will be explicated later, this article seeks to depict the MLC students’ reactions and resistance to their perceived rejection by Hong Kong society that shattered their Hong Kong Dream.

The first common element of this Hong Kong Dream is a strong desire to change, which is manifested at two different levels. On one

level, it denotes a desire to move beyond the familiar, predictable, and mundane life they would otherwise be living had they remained in mainland China. This desire is premised on the mysteriousness of Hong Kong that clothes their journey as an exciting adventure:

Hong Kong seemed more mysterious to me, more international. If I chose PKU, it would be a stable path, the end of which I could anticipate (看得到尽头, *kandedao jintou*). [...] I wanted to try a different option. (Anonymous 3a 2013)

I wanted to change to a different environment for my university life, to go to a different city to have a different experience. (Anonymous 4 2014)

Hong Kong was really novel (新奇, *xinqi*); after all, it was so far away and it felt *adventurous*. (Anonymous 2a 2013)

On another level, this desire to change stems from their motivation to break free from both the alleged corruption in society and the unethical academic practice on university campuses in mainland China. This desire was expressly articulated in accounts of 21 out of the 31 participants and discussed or made reference to in all seven focus groups. For instance:

My mum felt that Hong Kong was better because there were fewer grey areas (灰色地带, *huise didai*) and corruption (走后门, *zou boumen*) here was less serious. Therefore, working in Hong Kong means I can create a future by relying on my own ability. (Anonymous 5 2013)

I think the Hong Kong governmental system is doing quite well, quite uncorrupt (清廉, *qinglian*). (Anonymous 6b 2014)

These together mirror Fong's depiction of transnational Chinese students who longed to "compete in a fairer system that operated in accordance with the rule of law and to escape the corruption they saw as endemic in China" (Fong 2011: 170). Specifically, MLC students in this study very often made reference to questionable academic practices and integrity (学风, *xuefeng*) in mainland universities:

There were frequent scandals about academic dishonesty (论文作假, *lunwen zuojia*) – these made me wonder if MLC university students were not very serious about their study (不务正业, *buwu zhengye*). (Anonymous 7 2013)

The UO [is desirable to me], no matter its academic freedom (学术自由, *xueshu zìyóu*) or other aspects. (Anonymous 8 2013)

While the accounts come across as hearsay, Yu's (Anonymous 9 2013) recounting of his mother's plight may provide a more personalised touch:

My mother is a university lecturer who values academic honesty highly, so she was determined to catch students who cheated. However, her actions made it look bad (脸上抹黑, *lianshang mobei*) for her superordinates (领导, *lǐngdǎo*), who subsequently gave her a hard time (穿小鞋, *chuān xiǎoxiè*). She was in such a dilemma that she said, "I feel that I am deeply humiliated (屈辱, *qūrú*) as a teacher." (Anonymous 9 2013)

At this level, therefore, the Hong Kong Dream represents these MLC students' ideal of academic integrity and signifies their resolute departure from the "shackles of their native community" (Pieke 1999: 16). Change, thus, simultaneously denotes a yearning for a transformation in the self – which expects nourishment from the mysterious, imminent adventure in Hong Kong – and a breaking loose from the predictability of life trajectories and the perceived faults of mainland China.

The second characteristic of the Hong Kong Dream is a notable thirst for exposure and access to an international and Westernised experience:

Hong Kong's educational resources are better: its alignment (接轨, *jiēguǐ*) with international standards, its degree of internationalisation. (Anonymous 10a 2013)

The English medium of instruction in Hong Kong is really attractive to me. (Anonymous 11 2013)

Hong Kong must be a seriously Westernised (西化, *xīhuà*) international metropolis that is full of foreigners. (Anonymous 12b 2014)

While Appadurai notes the "bottomless appetite in the Asian world for things Western" (Appadurai 1996: 29), Fong (2011: 41) argues that such a thirst can be explained by the global neo-liberal narrative, which positions "developed" countries at the top of the global social, economic, and cultural hierarchy, and "developing" countries at the bottom. Hong Kong's international allure therefore constitutes a pivotal part of this Hong Kong Dream, promising a greater degree of

international alignment, exposure to cosmopolitan lifestyles, and convenience in terms of prospective overseas ventures.

The third common thread of the Hong Kong Dream is the constellation of imaginations about Hong Kong, including its image as a centre of popular culture:

To me, Hong Kong connoted the Hong Kong-made movies and pop music – it was a Hong Kong on the screen (屏幕上, *pingmu shang*). (Anonymous 6b 2014)

Additionally, Hong Kong is imagined as a developed and sophisticated city that is open to immigrants and inclusive of all cultures:

I thought that Hong Kong was an orderly (秩序, *zhibixu*) and efficient (效率, *xiaolü*) place. (Anonymous 13 2014)

Hong Kong had its public facilities and welfare that promised a sense of security – for example, food security. (Anonymous 14 2014)

I knew it was a migrant city with a colonial history [...] and could accommodate (包容, *baorong*) all kinds of culture. (Anonymous 1a 2013)

While the above accounts may appear as fantasies, it would be wrong to ignore Hong Kong's instrumental role within the MLC students' imaginary about their future:

Hong Kong promises better prospects (有前途, *you qiantu*) [...] and] allows me space to move at ease (可进可退, *kejìn ketu*), no matter whether I decide to return to my home town, or stay in Hong Kong, or go to North America or Europe. (Anonymous 5 2013)

More than two-thirds of the MLC students in this study planned to go abroad after Hong Kong. Therefore, their Hong Kong Dream, as articulated and sustained across all the narratives of the MLC students in this study, encompasses both a romantic envisaging of Hong Kong as their immediate habitat and Hong Kong's role as a point of transit in their overall life plan. Hong Kong's mysteriousness, international flavour, and capacity to evoke rich imaginations appeal to MLC students of both genders and those from metropolitan backgrounds, such as Yingying, Fei, and Longnu (all from Shanghai), as well as those from smaller and more remote areas, such as Lingshan and Zhu (both from second-tier cities).

Appadurai argues for the pivotal role of imagination, stating that

the imagination has become an organised field of social practices [...] and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility. (Appadurai 1996: 31)

Following that, and Fong (2011), I maintain that this Hong Kong Dream is rooted in the MLC students' compliance with the globally defined neo-liberal order. This Hong Kong Dream continues to influence their adaptation and response to the Hong Kong context, which, as I expound in the next section, is characterised by the anti-mainlandisation discourse.

The Anti-Mainlandisation Discourse

Concerned about Hong Kong's becoming more akin to the mainland, Hongkongers are believed to be troubled by the prospect of Hong Kong 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)

In recent years, anti-mainlandisation sentiments have increased in severity (Ho 2013). Closer economic ties between mainland China and Hong Kong have led to a series of controversies, such as around the pressure on Hong Kong maternity services that occurred because pregnant women from the mainland flocked to Hong Kong's public hospitals to deliver babies in an effort to, as some believed, exploit the city's reliable medical services and social welfare. This constituted a burden for the city's public medical services and, to some extent, deprived local Hong Kong mothers of medical resources they felt entitled to (Ma 2012). The tensions between mainlanders and Hongkongers have escalated to such an extent that the Hong Kong Equal Opportunities Commission (2014) put forward a controversial proposal to review its current Race Discrimination Ordinance by adding protection from discrimination based on nationality, citizenship, or Hong Kong residency. The intention has been to protect both groups from mutual discrimination – for example, Hongkongers calling

mainlanders “locusts” while being demeaned as “dogs of British colonialists” in return (Ramzy 2013). Despite its arguably benign intention, this proposed change to the ordinance has been heralded by some as further “colonisation” of Hongkongers by the mainland “colonisers” (Ho 2014).

Moreover, suspicions have arisen about the changing governing style in Hong Kong – in other words, Beijing’s interference, especially the politicisation of the civil service and increasing instances of media self-censorship (Lo 2008). The most acute form of tension was unleashed in the student-led Occupy Central movement that lasted between late September and mid-December 2014. This civil disobedience saw tens of thousands of protesters lay siege to Hong Kong’s key commercial districts, demanding greater democracy in choosing their chief executive. While some consider this movement as the awakening of Hongkongers’ political consciousness (Beech and Rauhala 2014), others note the increased exhaustion and internal fractures that the city has been left to deal with (Buckley 2014). These controversies notwithstanding, it can be argued that Hongkongers’ fear of the erosion of political rights and freedom, which arguably differentiate Hong Kong from the rest of the PRC, has been on the rise since the mass demonstration in 2003 when Hongkongers voiced discontent over the MLC government’s controversial proposed national security law (Hui and Lo 2014).

In the higher-education scene, concerns over “mainlandisation” of Hong Kong public universities revolve around whether taxpayers should continue to fund tertiary education of “outsider” non-local students, particularly MLC students (HKUSU 2013) when only 18 per cent of local high-school graduates are offered government-funded places in Hong Kong public universities (Cheng, Cheung, and Yuen 2010). For MLC students pursuing undergraduate studies, their specific concern centres on the competition for both scarce education resources in universities and employment opportunities (Ho 2013).

In brief, the anti-mainlandisation discourse in Hong Kong appears to be an indispensable part of the MLC students’ experience in Hong Kong. It is as if they are involuntarily engulfed in a whirlpool of tensions between Hong Kong and mainland China, Hongkongers and mainlanders. Qingwen (Anonymous 5 2013), for instance, experi-

enced a distressing taxi ride shortly after her arrival in Hong Kong in September 2012:

The incident cast a shadow over my immature and naive soul (幼小无知的心灵, *youxiao wuzhi de xinling*). [...] I took a taxi with a few friends from [Victoria] Peak [...] and the driver suddenly became extremely outraged [...] as it turned out] that [...] before he drove us, he picked up two MLC tourists and they argued over the “anti-national curriculum” issue [...]. [I]n the end, the driver ditched them, calling them *communists*. Therefore, when he realised that we were MLC students, his anger surged again. (Anonymous 5 2013; emphasis added)

This incident took place during the height of the campaigns against Moral and National Education (MNC), in which thousands of people joined month-long street demonstrations in an effort to oppose “brainwashing” in the proposed MNC curriculum. The Hong Kong government eventually shelved the curriculum due to mounting public pressure (Liu 2012). Not at all acquainted with Hong Kong, Qingwen was dragged into the centre of this dispute that was a vivid expression of Hongkongers’ mainlandisation concerns. Such social tension thus accentuated her mainlander identity, which in this case caused the Hong Kong taxi driver to vent anger on Qingwen.

In fact, all of the students in this study quickly realised that their mainlander identity was a negative asset that attracted unnecessary attention, even hostility, as in the death of Liu Han, a top-scoring MLC student. After graduating from a Hong Kong university, Liu Han worked in Hong Kong as an accountant. On 5 October 2013, she was hit by a delivery truck and died three days later. Her death triggered certain hateful comments and personal attacks online. Unsolicited, one-fifth of MLC students in this study expressed dismay at such attacks:

On Facebook, I can often read negative comments that are imbued with hatred (仇恨, *chouben*). I get quite disheartened (心寒, *xinhan*) because aren’t their hearts made of flesh too? (Anonymous 6a 2013)

When I read those comments, I wanted to smash the computer [...]. I was really angry. (Anonymous 1a 2013)

Hongkongers have a sense of panic which concomitantly gets reflected in some radical antagonism – for example, their reactions

to Liu Han's death [...]. I guess they treat us as savage (凶残, *xiongcan*) competitors. (Anonymous 7 2013)

After the Liu Han incident, I feel that local students who are oblivious of the facts (不明真相, *buming zhenxiang*) may accuse me of being a “locust” – of course I know my local friends are very nice, but there is something that separates us. (Anonymous 15 2014)

If Liu Han's death alerted some MLC students to Hongkongers' potential antagonism born out of misunderstanding and misconceptions, then confrontations in daily life on campus have brought them to the painful realisation of the existence of anti-mainlandisation sentiments. Xifeng (Anonymous 16 2013), for example, recalled a disheartening encounter:

In Causeway Bay, I have seen people demonstrate and advocate the importance of decreasing MLC students' places in Hong Kong universities, accusing us of robbing them of places that Hong Kong students deserve (抢学位, *qiang xuewei*). I actually saw UO students that I know making speeches there so I left the scene quietly. (Anonymous 16 2013)

Calls to reduce the number of funded places for MLC students resulted in the Student Union of the UO holding a campus debate in 2013, which was dismissed by some MLC students in this study as “ridiculous” and “incomprehensible.” As an arguably direct consequence of such a public sentiment, in 2015 the Hong Kong Education Bureau proposed the withdrawal as of the 2016–2017 academic year of the 600 places that are subsidised each year for non-local students (Yip 2015), implying that no more non-local students would be funded by the Hong Kong University Grants Committee.

Overall, most MLC students in this study agreed that the friction between MLC and local students has intensified over the years. Zi-long (Anonymous 17a 2013), for instance, noted the increased war of words on campus: in the context of “democracy walls” – physical walls upon which members of universities can post views on social issues – he said,

When I first came in 2011 there was no such nasty debate on democracy walls. However, it got worse afterwards. At that time I often had meetings in other Hong Kong universities and I noticed that many democracy walls were full of appalling (惨不忍睹, *canbu-*

rendu) posters from both camps, insulting each other (对骂, *duima*). (Anonymous 17a 2013)

For all of the MLC students in this study, what they have experienced in social discourse and daily life has all pointed to intensifying anti-mainlandisation sentiments among Hongkongers. Their mainlander identity is thus stigmatised (Goffman 1968) and renders them in a position of having to account for their presence in Hong Kong.

However, it should be noted that the local Hong Kong students in this study emphasised in the focus groups that while they feel antipathy towards the “uncivilised” behaviours of MLC tourists (Ma 2012: 179), they view their MLC peers in UO in a different light:

I dislike uncultured MLC tourists who come to Hong Kong to “rob” (搶, *qiang*) and compete (爭, *zheng*) for things. However, [...] when I see my MLC peers in the UO, I think of their excellence in academic studies. To me they are very different. (Anonymous 18 2014)

There was a consensus among the local Hong Kong students in this study that they admire the MLC students for their academic prowess. However, when it came to reducing academic places for MLC students, a majority of local students (10 out of 12) indicated their preference for non-local students from parts of the world *other* than mainland China, because they wanted their campus to become more “internationalised” (国际化, *guojihua*) rather than “mainlandised” (大陸化, *daluhua*). For example, Donald (Anonymous 19 2014) typically opined, “I trust that Hongkongers would welcome the idea of replacing all the MLC students on campus with students from the UK” (Anonymous 19 2014).

Such evidence testifies to the MLC students’ perceptions of anti-mainlandisation sentiments within the university. Besides this, there is also a shared concern among the local Hong Kong students over Hong Kong losing its strategic importance for China, which corroborates the MLC students’ perception that Hongkongers are panicking and conceiving of the MLC students as “savage competitors” (Zhu’s words [Anonymous 7 2013]):

Hong Kong’s importance to China has diminished a great deal [...] and] it has lost its previous glamour (往日光彩, *wangriguangcai*). (Anonymous 20 2014)

We are worried that Hong Kong's economy will get worse as many of its competitive edges are gradually losing out to MLC cities such as Shanghai. (Anonymous 21 2014)

In fact, this anti-mainlandisation discourse has been widely substantiated in existing scholarship. In a report on MLC professionals' adaptations in Hong Kong, Chan (2008: 19) notes that "local consciousness of Hong Kong society" has matured over the past two decades, so much so that Hongkongers have shown less tolerance when confronting their MLC counterparts. Chan's concern was echoed in Newendorp's (2008: 253) study about cross-border MLC migrant-wives in Hong Kong. Newendorp records that her participants were "taken off guard" by Hongkongers whose feelings towards them "ranged from grudging accommodation to open hostility" (Newendorp 2008: 25).

In view of such an anti-mainlandisation discourse in Hong Kong, it is not an overstatement to suggest that ordinary tensions associated with moving to a new environment (Svašek and Skrbiš 2007) were exacerbated for the MLC students in this study. In response to such a predicament, in the next section I will provide evidence to demonstrate the two identities constructed by the MLC students: the "free self" that is spatially mobile and ideologically unconfined, and the "elite self" that is a strong player in the global competition for talents.

The "Free Self"

Spatially Mobile

The vast majority of MLC students interviewed (28 out of 31) frequently contrasted their own spatial mobility with that of their Hong Kong peers and students in mainland Chinese universities who remained confined to their locality. For example, they typically regarded Hongkongers as "localised," which echoes Appadurai's (1988: 37) observation that the natives are often considered "somehow incarcerated or confined, in those places." Xue (Anonymous 3b 2014) commented on Hongkongers' "myopia": "Ordinary Hongkongers have very limited scopes (眼界, *yanjie*), to the extent that it is self-confining (固步自封, *gubuzifeng*)" (Anonymous 3b 2014).

Xue's remark was made in the context of her discussing some Hongkongers' unfounded sense of superiority. She found these same Hongkongers actually had a much narrower vision than she did. Zhu likewise observed, "Hongkongers tend to fixate their attention on provincial affairs" (Anonymous 7 2013). Similar comments were made by almost all participants in this study and are echoed in Gu and Tong's (2012) study of MLC students at another Hong Kong university. While Hongkongers are positioned as indifferent about global affairs, Xue, Zhu, and other students construed MLC students as having "broader perspectives" (Anonymous 22 2013) and being more concerned with affairs of global importance. Xue asserted, "Our presence in Hong Kong provides a novel possibility of invigorating the native Hong Kong students" (Anonymous 3a 2013).

Comparisons were extended to their peers who studied in MLC universities. While Wen (Anonymous 23 2013) considered her peers in MLC universities to be "not as competitive" because of their weak English proficiency, Guoxiang (Anonymous 2a 2013) and Keqin (Anonymous 24 2013) implied that peers in MLC universities often looked up to their international exposure: within one summer holiday, Guoxiang travelled to Nepal, Thailand, and Shanghai for voluntary teaching and journalistic interviews, while Keqin journeyed across Taiwan, Korea, and Beijing for law camps and internships. Mingyan's (Anonymous 25 2013) account summarises this consensus:

Their thinking is rather *limited* (局限, *juxian*). Very often [...] they would think of getting a job in their *current* place [...] but for me, I want to visit different places in the world [...]. Perhaps they once had similar thoughts as me but in the end they are *limited* to just one place [...]. [T]hey do not want to *change*, whereas for me if I see a better direction, I will *change*. (Anonymous 25 2013; emphases added)

In Mingyan's eyes, although his peers in MLC universities might once have had ambitions akin to his, they are ultimately tied to the immediate environment, becoming content about settling for "less." In contrast, Mingyan portrayed a transformed self in pursuit of a career on the world stage. Similarly highlighting this transformed self, Guoxiang confided: "I don't have strong emotional attachments to any country" (Anonymous 2a 2013), a familiar claim that conjures up the image of global elites – as Cynthia Barnum puts it: "I belong anywhere I am, no matter who I am" (cited in Friedman 2002: 27).

Mirroring the “intra-ethnic othering” displayed by American Korean students in Abelmann’s (2009: 161) study, these MLC students have reacted to both challenges from the anti-mainlandisation discourse, which questions their worthiness, and the scepticism promulgated by MLC media about their choice to come to Hong Kong.

Ideologically Unconfined

In addition to spatial mobility, the MLC students consistently (25 out of 31) highlighted their ideological openness when commenting on the political freedom available in Hong Kong, which allowed them to achieve transformations. Ruhua, for instance, developed a new capacity to see things in a fresh light:

When you are inside the bubble (气泡, *qipao*) you really cannot [...] tell whether there is any problem, but after you get out of [...] it and [...] look back in, you realise that the thin layer has filtered out (反射掉, *fansbediao*) many things. Yeah, truly I feel that [...] what is lacking in mainland China is truth. (Anonymous 10b 2014)

While the environment in mainland China is analogous to the “bubble” that used to prevent her from seeing the “truth,” coming to Hong Kong symbolises her break away from the confining bubble, and gaining a new means to reach the “truth.” Other students gave similar accounts. For example, Guojing (Anonymous 26 2013) celebrated his new ability to discern comments on the internet that are made by the “Fifty-Cent Army” (五毛党, *wumao dang*), internet commentators who are said to be paid 50 cents (CNY) by the PRC government for every pro-government post that they write. Ruhua’s and Guojing’s new critical perspectives find ready echoes in Fong’s documentation of a 35-year-old small-business owner who had left China to work and study in Australia for 14 years:

It’s like how once you go abroad, you notice how everything in China is red. If you are in China all your life, amidst all the red, you don’t notice it, because you think it’s normal. When you’re abroad, you realise it doesn’t have to be that way. Going abroad gives you a better, truer perspective. (Fong 2011: 164)

Additionally, they noted the newly acquired international perspectives which allowed them to develop an “international identity.” Ruhua,

for example, articulated her desire to become an “international citizen” at a dinner gathering:

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 to before. (Xu 2015: 69)

Nevertheless, although MLC students in this study consistently noted the political freedom available in Hong Kong, there were notable discrepancies between different fractions of the MLC students, especially with regard to their attitudes towards the notion that the CCP was “brainwashing” (洗脑, *xiniao*) them. Three of them actively recognised and condemned the brainwashing intention of the education they had received in mainland China. Xifeng complained,

We are old enough to have our own thoughts, to tell right from wrong and decide whether we want to believe or to simply ignore. However, if you make us take exams on it [...] we will take them in a perfunctory manner [...]. I really loathe (讨厌, *taoyan*) such thought-education classes (思想教育课, *sixiang jiaoyu ke*). You keep preaching to me how good socialism is, but what exactly is so good about socialism? (Anonymous 16 2013)

While Xifeng disliked the inculcation that disregarded her critical capacity to have her own thoughts, Lingshan observed that most MLC students in the UO are conservative due to the brainwashing education they have received:

In the mainland it is so blockaded (太封锁了, *tai fengshou le*), hence many MLC students [...] received the “red and expert” (又红又专, *youbhong youzhuan*) education which taught us to love the party and the government. Therefore, although MLC students who come to Hong Kong may usually seem more open, still, in my opinion, they are seriously brainwashed [...] and their political views are more conservative. (Anonymous 12a 2013)

Echoing Lingshan’s view, Yuhan compared some of his MLC friends (studying in MLC universities) to the “castrated generation”:

My high school classmates who now study in Beijing came to visit Hong Kong, and I told them about the Pillar of Shame (国殇之柱, *guoshang zhizhu*) [a concrete sculpture first erected in 1997 in Hong Kong to mark the eighth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square

protests of 1989]. The girl asked, “What is this?” She had no idea what it was about. Her boyfriend was speechless and he said the girl was brainwashed and she belonged to a “castrated generation” (被阉割的一代, *beiyang de yidai*).

(Is her boyfriend a Hongkonger?)

No, her boyfriend is also a mainlander, but he had heard of it before. (Anonymous 27 2013)

However, unlike Xifeng, Liangshan, and Yuhan, eight other MLC students in this study voiced their rebuttal:

I know that there are brainwashing intentions in my education, but we realise it and don’t believe everything in the books, whereas the Hongkongers [...] may have been brainwashed without realising it. (Anonymous 7 2013)

This argument is made on the premise that a genuinely brainwashed person does not realise that he/she has been brainwashed. These MLC students thus dismissed some Hongkongers’ indiscriminate anti-CCP bias (i.e. opposing whatever the MLC government upholds) as a sign of Hongkongers being “reverse-brainwashed by the MLC government” (Anonymous 28 2013).

No matter whether they believe they had been brainwashed or not, the commonality between the two camps is that they construct this image of being receptive and able to negotiate divergent cultural, political, and ideological perspectives (Jeffrey and McFarlane 2008). For them, no longer taking for granted the doctrines inculcated through schooling and starting to “question such beliefs” (Xue’s words) signifies their ideological departure from the confinement of being local. Indeed, these MLC students capitalise on a self-definition as winners of global competitions – that is, as the “fittest” within the game of “survival of the fittest.” They render competition on a global scale as “natural” (自然, *ziran*) and “irresistible” (不可抗拒, *buke kangju*). For instance, in response to the campus debate on reducing the number of non-local students in the UO, Wen argued,

If this university aspires to be top-class, its student body has got to be diverse [...because the] competition is at least pushing them [i.e. the local students] to do better. [...] I think this is a sure trend (必然趋势, *biran qushi*). You either flourish or perish; this is survival of the fittest (适者生存, *shizhe shengcun*) [...]. There is no alternative. (Anonymous 23 2013)

Emphasising the merits of competition brought about by the presence of MLC students, Wen's account was echoed by Professor K, a Hongkonger academic at the UO:

Hong Kong students ought to understand how keen the competition is [...]. [I]t is now so globalised that any qualified engineer, accountant, and lawyer can come to work in Hong Kong. It's "survival of the fittest": you survive only if you are strong enough. (Anonymous 29 2014)

As Barth (1969: 14) argues, social actors can choose to take up certain identities as "signals and emblems of differences" while playing down others. Here, by downplaying their mainland association and focusing instead on their global orientation, the MLC students actively focused a critical gaze on their own identity as a subgroup of global talents (i.e. their favoured identity) who can legitimately compete for resources and jobs in Hong Kong.

Thus far, in response to the anti-mainlandisation discourse in Hong Kong, the majority of MLC students constructed an identity of a free self that is spatially mobile (28 out of 31), ideologically unconfined (24 out of 31), and a winner in global-scale competition. During this process, they displayed a marked tendency to place the global as superior to the local.

The "Elite Self"

This "free self" is further substantiated by the "elite" identity, which is another important tactic to combat the anti-mainlandisation discourse. Xue spelled out the elite status of the MLC students in a focus group:

MLC students [in the UO] are elites (精英, *jingying*) among all MLC students. After all, you need to have the grades and performance in admission interviews [to get in] [...]. I think we commonly have good thinking ability, a holistic vision [...]. More open, willing to accept different ideas rationally. (Anonymous 3b 2014)

Such an elite positioning becomes a powerful "weapon" to combat the anti-mainlandisation discourse, as Zilong explicated:

We are the elite class [and] every place should welcome elites. We are not here to buy off their infant milk powder, are we? [...] [E]ven if I decide to work here, I would be making contributions

to Hong Kong, right? We are high-end talents (人才, *rencai*). (Anonymous 17b 2014)

Instead of succumbing to the discourse that accuses them of exhausting public resources, the MLC students constructed their presence in Hong Kong as one that brings “reputation and competitiveness to this university” (Anonymous 5 2013), and they considered themselves as representing social networks for the local students since these MLC students are highly mobile global elites who are here to make a contribution (Gao 2014).

Congruent with their elite self-positioning is their “cliquey” socialisation pattern – that is, sticking to circles of Putonghua-speaking MLC peers (Gu 2011). Chris, a second-year Hong Kong student, remarked that the MLC students were “establishing a mini-mainland in Hong Kong” by staying in cliques that were effectively an “insoluble mass” (Anonymous 30 2014). Conscious that they may be seen as self-segregating, a syndrome deemed endemic among border-crossing students (Abelmann 2012), the MLC students actively justified their actions:

I have [...] experienced and understood what life is like in Hong Kong; but I don’t have to force myself to mingle with local students just for the sake of mingling. (Anonymous 31 2014)

Consistent with their Hong Kong Dream in which Hong Kong serves as a stepping stone for their further global exploration, almost all MLC students in this study conveyed the view that coming to Hong Kong is about accumulating the necessary experience and understanding of Hong Kong that are not normally accessible to outsiders:

Most people can see that Hong Kong is a prosperous Asian financial centre, but they may not know anything about the country parks or the personal touch (人情味, *renqingwei*) on Hong Kong streets. (Anonymous 32 2014, Ruhua’s mentor)

Qing’s (Anonymous 32 2014) appetite for local Hong Kong culture evokes Thompson and Tambyah’s (1999: 237) observation about professional expatriates in Singapore who devoted much effort to becoming more cosmopolitan through “seeking to be sufficiently adaptable and adroit to ingratiate themselves into the local culture.” However, this interest stems more from an instrumental concern than a genuine interest. Xue confided,

The local and international students' function is more like when I want to enlarge my social circle, or satisfy my curiosity (猎奇, *lieqi*) [...] then I will try hard to converse with them, but not because I truly want to communicate with them. (Anonymous 3b 2014)

Similarly, Qing bluntly conveyed his understanding about learning Hong Kong culture:

I can choose to understand their culture or not. It doesn't do me harm if I know more about them, but I do not suffer either if I know less of them – my life goes on. Therefore this becomes dispensable (可有可无的, *keyou kewu de*). (Anonymous 32 2014)

These MLC students' limited interest in engaging with the local Hong Kong culture mirrors “the cosmopolitans” who are marked by “a limited interest in engaging ‘the Other’” (Vertovec and Cohen 2002: 7). In comparison, remaining in the MLC-only student community seemed an effective guarantee of access to a well-endowed pool of resources. Qingwen revealed,

Since there have been so many batches of MLC students before me, I can tap into the wealth of experience and expertise accumulated and get advice on almost everything I want to try. (Anonymous 5 2013)

Remaining in the MLC-only club promises not only ordinary connections, but global and transnational connections. As a matter of fact, nearly 40 per cent of senior MLC students in the UO go abroad upon graduation, according to the university's graduate statistics in 2014. However, it appears that the self-exclusion congruent with this “elite self” is often “the lesser of two evils” instead of an active choice. There is a common sense of withdrawal after initial “failed” attempts to engage with the local Hong Kong community. For instance, Wan and Xue confided,

(Wan): I think we are *totally isolated* – it's not like we were determined to self-segregate right from the beginning. (Anonymous 33 2014).

(Xue): When I first came I really wanted to join some community service such as helping low-income Hongkongers. However, they seemed to have an arrogant (高不可攀, *gaobukepan*) mentality that rendered us [MLC people] inferior to them. This pushed my initial interest away. (Anonymous 3b 2014; emphasis added)

Wan's and Xue's accounts resonate with the sentiments of almost all MLC students in this study (30 out of 31), who recalled initial curiosity and effort in making connections with the local Hong Kong community. However, they commonly found it hard to become accepted, for reasons such as what they perceived as local people's sense of superiority, as well as their own inadequacies. For instance, Bei admitted: "Actually I am also trapped in a clique, only socialising with MLC students, and I don't want my child to be like this" (Anonymous 34 2013).

Similar to Abelmann's (2009) American Korean students who were burdened by their singularly ethnic social life and tended to bemoan their "self-segregation," Bei clearly perceived her cliquey social life as an indication of her failure to become more open to different cultures. In this sense, the elite club may well be just a defensive measure that the MLC students deploy to protect themselves because this MLC student-only community

allow[s] the sojourner to re-establish primary group relations and maintain familiar, traditional values and belief systems while minimising psychological and behavioural adjustments. A protective function is served whereby psychological security, self-esteem, and a sense of belonging are provided, and social stresses are reduced. (Church 1982: 551)

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed how MLC students in one Hong Kong university reconciled the disjuncture between their Hong Kong Dream and the anti-mainlandisation discourse. This discussion is rooted in the broader context of integration between Hong Kong and mainland China as well as the escalating controversy over these MLC students' decision to reject offers from top mainland universities.

I argue that these MLC students responded to the anti-mainlandisation discourse by constructing an "elite" identity which positions them as players in a global competitive game. Responding to doubts about how wise their decision to go to Hong Kong was, these MLC students portrayed a "free" self that is spatially mobile and ideologically unconfined. Central to all these identities is an understanding that the global is superior to the local. I maintain that these MLC students' global aspiration is the root of their Hong Kong

Dream, and that it continues to affect their sense-making after entering Hong Kong.

Additionally, this article exposes the self-protective nature of the “elite” identity by demonstrating that their ostensibly active self-exclusion is actually “the lesser of two evils,” foregrounding the rejections these MLC students have encountered when trying to integrate with Hong Kong society. Their self-perceived sense of inferiority, which has been arguably provoked by what they consider as the “arrogance” and “self-importance” of local Hongkongers, has pushed them to confine themselves within the protective zone of an “elite MLC student” identity.

From an integration perspective, therefore, these MLC students’ Hong Kong Dream typifies the fantasised imaginations held by many mainlanders before they set foot in Hong Kong (Ma 2012). This Hong Kong Dream, however, is not (fully) fulfilled because of what the MLC students perceive to be Hong Kong’s unjustified rejection of them, exemplified by anti-mainlandisation discourse and sentiments. The process whereby these MLC students struggle to respond to this social climate is characterised by tensions, retreat, negation, and defensiveness, illustrative of the pains underlying the integration process between Hong Kong and mainland China.

With regard to cross-border student identity, this article recognises a prevailing need among these MLC students to “manufacture” (Waters and Brooks 2011: 576) identities that are deemed necessary to protect both their much-challenged legitimacy in terms of staying in Hong Kong and their often-questioned decision to abandon top MLC universities. Therefore, there is some degree of self-authoring capacity (Marginson 2014), but it is tempered by the dissonance between their Hong Kong Dream and the anti-mainlandisation discourse.

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