Political habitus in cross-border student migration: A longitudinal study of mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong and beyond

Abstract: This paper contributes to the understanding of how shifting time, space and subject positions can impact on the *political habitus* of border-crossing students. Employing in-depth interview data from a longitudinal project involving 31 mainland Chinese students whose higher education journeys converged in Hong Kong, it argues that it is often unintended outcomes such as the development of a *political habitus* that can have lasting effects on students' longer-term life trajectories. This paper's systematic exposition of these students' *political habitus* formation redresses Bourdieu's relative neglect of the shaping of the *political habitus* of 'non-professional' political agents, in contrast to his emphasis on that of the 'professionals', such as politicians. This paper also moves beyond existing literature's focus on social agents' experiences in static and unified *political fields* at specific times by foregrounding the experiences of these mainland Chinese students moving across conflictual *political fields* over time.

Introduction

There has been growing consensus that university campuses can be important sites for the politicisation of higher education students (Brooks, Byford, & Sela, 2016), understood as 'an experiential learning process rather than being formally acquired through instruction' (Loader, Vromen, Xenos, Steel, & Burgum, 2015, p. 821). This informal acquisition of a 'political self' through unconsciously developing habits, attitudes and emotions constitutes a 'political habitus' that can be considered as the outcome of political socialisation across university campuses. Political socialisation, in this sense, can be understood broadly as students' experiences of both formal political activities, such as protests and party elections, and informal everyday interactions with peers and the like. The contemporary university students can therefore be 'reflexive individuals who engage with politics on an ad hoc basis according to how it relates to their life projects at that time' (ibid. p. 825).

To date, however, little is known about how higher education experience impacts on the politicisation of border-crossing students, whose physical mobility seems more readily assumed while political autonomy and conditions are less researched (Madge, Raghuram, & Noxolo, 2009). While it is axiomatic to assert that mobile students cross borders to pursue higher education in pursuit of cultural and social capitals (Waters, 2012), this paper argues that it is often unintended outcomes such as the development of a political habitus that can have

lasting effects on their longer-term life trajectories. However, snap-shot style interviews that are often adopted in qualitative studies in this field cannot sufficiently capture such longer-term effects.

To this end, this paper employs data from a longitudinal project (2013-2017) that is situated within the border context between mainland China and Hong Kong, which demarcates two distinctive hierarchical political spaces (Xu, 2017a). Analytically approached through Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus, field, doxa, illusio* and *symbolic violence*, the in-depth interview accounts of these mainland Chinese (hereafter MLC) students' experiences between 2009 and 2017 demonstrate how shifting time, space and subject positions shape their political habitus. This is an important addition to existing literature that tends to focus on static and unified political fields at specific times (Harrits, 2011), instead of on the experiences of individuals moving across conflictual or even antagonistic political fields over time.

In this paper, I will explore, firstly, how the border context between mainland China and Hong Kong impacts on the political habitus of these MLC students and secondly, how the political habitus of these students has evolved over time across various political fields. As such, this paper contributes to the Special Issue by demonstrating the complex ways in which political dispositions of these border-crossing students have been impacted upon by shifting time, space and subject positions.

Political field, political habitus, doxa, illusio and symbolic violence

Bourdieu (1993b, p. 72) conceptualises a *field* as a 'relatively autonomous social microcosm' structured around a complex nexus of positions which serve to distinguish and to exclude. Since each field has its own immanent laws that govern the hierarchy of social positions occupied by agents, it is only natural to expect that different fields may demand different sets of 'dispositions and expectations' from new entrants. Such dispositions are referred to as *habitus*, defined as 'systems of *durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures* predisposed to function as *structuring structures*' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72, original emphasis). As 'structured structures', the habitus is shaped by the past trajectories and social position within the field to which the agent belongs. The objective structures, such as the field rules, are internalised so that the agent is oriented to perceive certain things as probable and reject others as unthinkable. Therefore, as 'structuring structures', the habitus is a 'past which survives in the present and tends to perpetuate itself into the future' (ibid., p. 82).

In the realm of politics, Bourdieu frames the 'political field' as 'a field of strategic possibilities objectively offered to the choice of agents in the form of positions that are actually

occupied and stances that are actually proposed' (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 184). In his conceptualisation, there is a dichotomous relation between the professionals, e.g. politicians and political journalists, and the non-professionals, i.e. the 'ordinary citizens'. The former group is inculcated into a 'political habitus' (ibid., p. 176) that involves practical grasp of political discourses, oratory, and comportments that render them legitimate to represent the masses. These professionals are involved in the production of political products such as analyses and commentaries and can exert influence over what is 'politically sayable, thinkable, or unthinkable' (ibid., p. 172). In comparison, the non-professionals are distant from the centre of political production, and are inevitably reduced to the status of 'consumers' of political products made available.

It seems, therefore, that Bourdieu's political field falls into a 'narrow' definition of politics (Loader et al., 2015, p. 823), primarily concerned with 'mainstream political institutions (parties) and practices' (ibid., p. 824). Although Bourdieu has discussed the politically subjugated positions of the non-professionals, what seems missing is a systematic exposition on what their political habitus entails and how it is shaped. Little has been done to explore how the non-professionals 'consume' and/or respond to imposed political representation. Moreover, as Bourdieu's discussion is confined to one single political field, it remains unclear how political habitus develops across fields.

Aligned with Bourdieu's (1993a, p. 271) insistence that his concepts are 'intended for exercise, or even better, for putting into practice', 'political habitus' has been conceptualised differently in extant literature. For instance, in Haiti, Marcelin (2012, p. 256) integrates the element of violence into what he terms the 'political habitus of violence', which is 'a dynamic and open internalized and externalized system of dispositions about power relations, politics, and violence'. Loader et al. (2015) conceive of university students' political habitus broadly as cultivated through participation in student societies that provide 'the social organisation - conventions, habits, rules – which enable new members to occupy roles and engage in social action' (p. 823).

Specific to the current study, when the MLC students migrate to Hong Kong, they are confronted with a range of political 'products', discourses, identity labels (e.g. 'mainlanders'), political stances and stereotypes, which may or may not be familiar to them. Meanwhile these students embody political understanding and ideological stances (political habitus) internalised through their political socialisation in the mainland (Xu, 2017b). Therefore, I conceptualise the political field of China as encompassing two sub-fields, that of the mainland China, characterised by a so-called socialist, one-party political sphere, and that of Hong Kong,

featured by a semi-democratic, semi-representative and multi-party political arena (Lo, 2008). Each sub-field has its own *doxa*, which is a collective of beliefs, unquestioned presuppositions that are accepted and embodied by its members, who have vested interests in and commitment to both the rules and outcome of the 'game', known as *illusio* (Bourdieu, 1990b, pp. 66-68). As such, it can take considerable time and effort for new entrants of a sub-field to develop a feel for the *doxa*, a slow process akin to 'a second birth' (p. 68), which can engender habitus rupture, leading possibly to perpetual ambivalence, or habitus transformation.

An inherent nature of the political field is constant struggle for resources, with the dominant in a position to 'make it function to their advantage' while contending 'with the resistance…of the dominated' (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 84). The dominant may therefore exercise 'symbolic violence', which 'giv[es] an action or a discourse the form which is recognised as suitable, legitimate…that, if presented in any other way, would be unacceptable' (ibid.). Often, symbolic violence can present itself under the appearances of 'universality - that of reason or morality' (ibid.).

While (political) habitus operates mostly at an unconscious level, when individual actors confront situations where assumptions are challenged, the habitus can begin to operate at a conscious level, as enacted in self-questioning (Reay, 2004). Such more conscious interrogation of the habitus can lead either to the development of new facets of the self, should the novel conditions be aligned with the original habitus, or can lead to resistance and alienation of the habitus:

> a habitus divided against itself, in constant negotiation with itself and with its ambivalence, and therefore doomed to a kind of duplication, to a double perception of self, to successive allegiances and multiple identities (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 511)

In this study, the MLC students moved between two political subfields that are characterised by two contrasting sets of *illusio* and *doxa*. Such drastic differences can result in some profound self-questioning and induce strategies and reactions in their subsequent political socialisations.

Political fields across the Hong Kong - mainland China border

Operated under the 'One Country Two Systems' principle (Chen, 2017), the border between Hong Kong and mainland China demarcates two political spaces that are inherently hierarchical:

The imbalance between China and Hong Kong, cast in a 'central versus local' relation, […] underlies the former nearly unilateral political influence over Hong Kong's political development in the aftermath of 1997 (Tse, 2007, p. 235).

Such 'unilateral political influence' of mainland China has, of late, been a main source of tension in Hong Kong. There have been continuous frictions between the so-called 'pro-China' and 'pro-democracy' camps. These two camps, despite many ideological overlaps (e.g. claim to patriotism), are distinguished by their orientations towards the directions and paces of 'democratisation' in Hong Kong. Whereas the former emphasises the country's harmony and unity and is keen to see greater political integration, the latter concerns itself with upholding Hong Kong's distinct cultural, political and civil liberties (Chen, 2017). This tension is, therefore, marked by the former's tendency to suppress political democratisation and the latter's aspiration for Western-style liberal democracy, such as representative politics and constitutional democracy (Choi, 2011). Recently, concerns about the erosion of Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy due to Beijing's increasing political interference brings about a heightened level of sensitivity in public discourse to guard against political infiltration from the Chinese government, engendering what is termed as the 'anti-mainlandisation' discourse (Xu, 2015).

For the MLC students in this study, it seems that their most frequent reference points are their local peers, i.e. university-age youths, who are said to have led the 2014 Umbrella Movement. As Kurata (2015, pp. 31-32) underlines, Hong Kong youth nowadays 'set great store in non-material values such as democracy, freedom, and constitutional government. They are more worried about the future'. Similarly, Macfarlane (2014, para 3) explains that Hong Kong students attending local universities:

come mainly from ordinary local families…these undergraduates have no Plan B. They need to make their future here. This is why many feel that they must make a stand for democratic freedoms before…it is 'too late'.

The Hong Kong students' sense of urgency in rescuing the city from its doomsday of democracy can contrast sharply with the MLC students in this study. For them, growing up in mainland China meant a different kind of political upbringing. As Hail (2015, p. 3) writes:

China's education system ensures that all students are well-aware of China's historical conflicts with 'the West.' In response to the mass protests of 1989, in the early 1990s, the Chinese government launched a nationwide 'patriotic education campaign'…that was

intended to…show why China's unique 'national conditions' make it an unsuitable place for the propagation of so-called…'Western style democracy'.

This observation was echoed in the identity struggles of an MLC student in Macfarlane's (2017, pp. 153-154) study:

Supportive as I was to the courageous act [i.e. the Umbrella Movement], I hesitated when invited to join the gathering on the street. My family reiterated that I had to be more than scrupulous on these politically sensitive issues, and never should I mingle with the 'ignorant youth' who were vulnerable to manipulation.

It seems the familial and schooling environment within which the MLC students cultivated their political habitus had discouraged them from involvement in politics (Fong, 2011). Compared with the Hong Kong students who were 'born into, and born with' (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 67) imaginations of Western-style liberal democracy, the MLC students were new entrants to the field. What appeared as 'unthought presuppositions' (ibid.) for the Hong Kong students could seem arbitrary to the MLC students' political habitus.

Methods

This paper draws on a subset of data from a larger longitudinal study of MLC students' identity constructions at a research-intensive university in Hong Kong. There were altogether 31 participants, including 22 females and 9 males. While the 25 current students were recruited through posters on the university campus, the six recent graduates were enrolled by a snowball sampling technique, as informed by initial data analysis which indicated the relevance of their experiences. All participants were from urban backgrounds and came to Hong Kong at the age of 18 or 19. All, except two, reported that they had no difficulty paying for an annual tuition fee of HK$146,000 (£12,304) plus around HK$30,000 (£2528) maintenance expenditure. More than two thirds had parents occupying typical middle-class jobs, such as doctors and accountants, while the remaining ones came from families of business backgrounds. It could be argued that most participants were from middle-class backgrounds. The participants came from a diverse range of disciplinary backgrounds, evenly spread across subjects including Social Sciences, Sciences, Law, Engineering, Humanities and Business.

During the first phase of the project (2013-2016), the majority of participants were interviewed two to three times with a gap of at least five months between any two interviews. All participants joined the first round of interviews, in which they were asked about their border-crossing experiences in relation to their linguistic, cultural, social and political

observations. In the second and third rounds of interviews, general questions were added to seek confirmation or negation, and further elaboration on major themes. More 'personalised' follow-up questions were devised for individual participants, too. Due to data 'saturation' (Creswell, 1998, p. 56), not all participants joined all three rounds of interviews.

In the second phase (2016-present), 13 have joined another round of interviews at the time of writing. Participants have been asked to narrate their new thinking regarding the main issues discussed previously and report any novel topics of interest. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematic analysis was performed. I will employ Miusi's trajectory as the 'baseline' narrative as it spans the longest period of time and effectively encompasses the key prototypes of experiences among the participants. I will simultaneously interweave it with accounts of other students.

Miusi's trajectory (2008 - 2017)

When I interviewed Miusi (female, 24 years old, social sciences) in early 2014, she revealed her inclination to apply for the Permanent Residency (PR) of Hong Kong once she had fulfilled the seven-year period[1] by 2015. However, in our follow-up interview in February 2017, she suggested that she had not applied for the PR as she found the political environment in Hong Kong 'less and less friendly' and decided that 'perhaps the PR was not that important after all'. Miusi's shifting attitudes towards the Hong Kong PR was closely tied to what she perceived as increasing permeability of politics into her daily life amid the border dynamics, a key theme of this Special Issue. In fact, throughout her nine-year journey of 'love and hate' relations with Hong Kong, shifting time, space and subject positions have had a notable impact on her political socialisation.

Phase 1: From curiosity to aversion (2008 - 2015)

Miusi's experience in Hong Kong could be further divided into two stages: when she was a student at university (2008 - 2011) and when she worked as an MLC student recruitment officer (2011-2015). Stage one also coincided with what she perceived as a relatively harmonious society, which had triggered her curiosity about sensitive political issues:

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[1] As is stipulated by the Hong Kong Immigration Department (2012, para 4), Chinese citizens have to 'ordinarily reside[] in Hong Kong for a continuous period of not less than seven years' in order to qualify for the permanent citizenship. Since the length of undergraduate degrees is around three to four years, most MLC students in this study must stay in Hong Kong for another three/four years before acquiring the permanent residency.

I was not that antipathetic towards politics. One year, I even deliberately went to the Victoria Park Vigil to observe the 4 June[2] commemoration. I was willing to learn more about (some political issues).

This is a common trait among the MLC students (28 out of 31 shared similar experiences), whom were intrigued by the space to freely engage in debates of issues that are tabooed in the mainland. For instance, 25 out of the 31 students referred to the 'Pillar of Shame'[3] and the Democracy Walls[4] on university campuses when asked what they considered as the most striking environment in Hong Kong. The physical ambience and space for free expression of political views in Hong Kong seemed conducive to their general sympathy for the 4 June event or the Umbrella Movement. Guojing (male, 25 years old, engineering), for instance, recalled his first experience of joining a political rally:

> I felt that the environment can boil my blood…it is great that Hongkongers can bravely express their views: their craving for democracy and for freedom. They have high civic participation.

Yu (male, 18 years old, sciences) similarly commended the Hongkongers for their 'civic consciousness' during the Umbrella Movement and reflected:

> Why is China still not so democratic now, i.e. we do not have universal suffrage, and our expressions often encounter censorship, and yet why have I not expressed my views?

When first exposed to political freedoms in expression, most MLC students were eager to experience them and usually held high regard for such rights in Hong Kong. Their curiosity about politically sensitive topics could be considered as embedded in their political habitus during its initial formation, as Sayer (2005, p. 30) argues, 'the body already has aversions to…particular conditions, already has a sense of lack, before it gets habituated to a position within the social field' (ibid., p.34).

However, in stage two when Miusi began to work as a recruiting officer of MLC students, her subject position had experienced some notable alteration.

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[2] Also known as the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, this controversial event was a student-led series of popular demonstrations which took place in Beijing. It was suppressed by a military crackdown on student demonstrators on 4 June of that year.

[3] A concrete sculpture first erected in 1997 in Hong Kong to mark the eighth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989.

[4] Democracy Walls are physical platforms on campus for members of universities to post views on social issues, provided that they also supply their student/staff numbers when posting views.

To recruit mainland students, I must portray the environment in Hong Kong for those interested parents and ease their mind so that they could send their children to study here. In the beginning, I could still say that the students had freedom to choose (whether to get involved in politics), but gradually I felt that such space became less and less, because what was happening around us politically would inevitably impact on our life.

Miusi's concern is based on her understanding of mainland Chinese parents, who are generally concerned about their children getting involved in politics outside of China as this could damage their future (Fong, 2011). As Miusi revealed:

Having grown up in the mainland, both schools and parents have educated us to steer away from […] protests and demonstrations, and keep ourselves distant from politics to protect ourselves…They…depict politics…as extremely dangerous…and will adversely affect our future.

Well versed with MLC parents' concerns, Miusi was subject to the position of playing down the highly-politicised environment in Hong Kong on her job. She described such work as taxing 'conscience' work that caused considerable internal struggles and conflicts, experiencing a 'divided habitus' (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 511). Such internal conflicts have led to disenchantment and conscious 'de-politicising' work on her part:

I sub-consciously rejected politics and de-politicised everything. When I had to present Hong Kong to people outside, I tried to avoid discussing politicisation in university life. I was rejecting (politics), because I was annoyed by it, it was like there was a conflict of interest…Because I was right at the centre of the conflicts, I instinctively tried to avoid it, so I *said no to all politics*.

When discussing the plight of ordinary citizens represented by politicians who do not necessarily reflect their political interests, Bourdieu (1991, p. 180) suggests that 'apoliticism', characterised by 'indifference and apathy' to politics, 'is fundamentally a protest against the monopoly of the politicians' (ibid., p. 175). For Miusi, due to the increasing tensions between mainland China and Hong Kong, the *doxa* of the Hong Kong political field was represented by an array of negative political suspicions, and connotations associated with her 'mainlander' identity (Xu, 2015). This seemingly hostile field *doxa* has resulted in her disenchantment with the political field and induced her total rejection of politics, which is akin to her 'revolt' against the political representation rendered on her. Miusi's antipathy to politics is therefore a result of her special subject position within the Hong Kong political field, rather than an inherent trait of her political habitus. Her aversion to politics, a clear manifestation of the repercussions of

political border dynamics, is shared by other students in this study. For instance, Guoxiang (female, 21 years old, social sciences) suggested:

> I really disliked the pan-politicisation environment in Hong Kong…I cannot stand it…I could not accept that every day my work was revolving around such political topics.

In fact, when Miusi began working in Hong Kong, she realised that her political inclinations could isolate herself from the solidarity base of a 'small circle' among her Hong Kong colleagues:

> I felt that they were in their own little circle, despite that fact that in a department like ours (i.e. China affairs office), we are not supposed to be politicised.

Feeling alienated by such everyday political 'othering', Miusi began desiring to 'escape Hong Kong':

> During the Umbrella Movement…the atmosphere at our office was extremely depressing…I knew that their private discussions were not targeting me, still I found some phrases they used uncomfortable. I felt sorry for myself: I did nothing wrong, and yet I could sense an antagonistic emotion. It was not meaningful to stay there anymore. I wanted to escape Hong Kong.

The emotional struggles that induced Miusi's political aversion was not overtly due to any systematic institutionalised exclusion, but was instigated through everyday encounters, 'countless little discrepancies' (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 98) and the sedimentation of affective and psychological transactions within the habitus (Reay, 2015). Miusi's decision to flee Hong Kong was paralleled by two thirds of the other participants in this study. While it is possible that leaving Hong Kong was but a planned step, for Miusi her problematic subject position as a 'mainlander' in Hong Kong appeared a critical catalyst of her 'escape'. Miusi described her 'escape' as 'fortunate' because she 'did not have to be in that chaos anymore'. Similar to Miusi, Guoxiang rejoiced that she no longer had to be involuntarily engulfed in Hong Kong's highly-politicised environment:

> After I came back to Beijing in late 2014, I worked as a…science and technology journalist and I…realised that as a journalist I could bypass political topics--this was something… utterly impossible to imagine in Hong Kong.

Keqin (female, 19 years old, law), however, revealed effects of symbolic violence when narrating how her friendship with a close Hong Kong friend, Popo, suffered after they visited the Umbrella Movement site:

> I can certainly imagine why because she would see I am, although her friend, still an outsider because I do not have a permanent Hong Kong residency, I would not be trapped…if Hong Kong would be a mess…and she might even think that I was being condescending, being a mainland Chinese and saying that 'oh, you are doomed'.

Keqin and Popo had different views on the democratisation appeals of the Hong Kong people, largely aligned with the 'pro-democracy camp' for Popo and the 'pro-China camp' for Keqin. This division, arguably an externalisation of their respective political habitus, had led to their different opinions on the Umbrella Movement. Whereas Popo took it as a means to fight for democracy, Keqin was sceptical about it. When they visited the Movement site, Popo was upset at seeing the chaos created and saw her fate as tied together with Hong Kong. Keqin, in contrast, was perceived by Popo as an outsider-mainlander who did not need to be 'trapped' in the 'mess'. Compared with Popo, Keqin's subject position necessarily centred on her presumed lack of commitment to democracy in Hong Kong. In this process, Keqin's orientations towards politics and her scepticism towards the Movement was readily interpreted as a marker of her MLC political habitus. The challenge was that when Keqin expressed her different opinions towards the Movement, Popo presumed Keqin as disloyal to Hongkongers' political cause and distanced herself from Keqin for a year and a half before she confessed her thinking and apologised to Keqin. For Keqin, Miusi and Guoxiang, therefore, to flee the Hong Kong political field meant more than breaking free from politics in general, but rather, alleviating themselves from the symbolic deficits of their subject positions as mainlanders. As political subjects, these MLC students have been subjected to symbolic violence and exclusion in the Hong Kong political field.

Phase 2: Symbolic violence realised through a full circle (2015 - 2017)

An important feature of Miusi's political habitus development is the impact of her various cross-field movements over time. During the brief period after Miusi left Hong Kong and returned to her hometown in Northern China, Miusi experienced some intriguing 'caught-in-between' uneasiness:

> Once, I joined a gathering where a colleague of my Mum said to me, 'the students in Hong Kong are all crazy and the professors in Hong Kong are not good role models. Luckily

you have left Hong Kong, otherwise what would happen if you, too, are led onto the wrong path?' At that moment, I felt sad. I wanted to tell him that Hong Kong was not that bad, and everybody was not on strike. I could not feel comfortable on either side: although I was in the mainland I wanted to defend Hong Kong and when I was in Hong Kong I wanted to defend the mainland.

Examining British students who attend local universities while living at home, Abrahams and Ingram (2013: 4.21) claim of habitus that is not 'wholly attuned to either but to a third space' which is 'borne of the habitus rupture'. Miusi's ambivalence seemed to similarly stem from dissonances between her political habitus and the *doxas* of both the MLC and the Hong Kong political fields. Unlike Abrahams and Ingram's participants who resided in a 'third space' to 'navigate and reconcile the apparent incommensurability of the two fields', at this stage Miusi's habitus rupture seemed to result in profound ambivalence, typical of a 'divided habitus' (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 511) and was accentuated through her cross-field movement, i.e. from Hong Kong back to the mainland. Miusi's experience was echoed when Guoxiang found that the completely different political climate in Beijing meant that issues which appeared overwhelming in Hong Kong were almost non-existent:

> On 4 June 2015, if I had not read those posts by friends who were journalists in Hong Kong, I would have completely forgotten the 4 June event. There are two parallel time and spaces, in the mainland it was as if such issues do not even exist…I almost forgot about…the Victoria Park Vigils.

The two completely different field *doxa* seemed to have displaced Guoxiang in a surreal two-space situation. The Victoria Park Vigils, staged annually to commemorate an event censored in the mainland, gave rise to Guoxiang's state of mind that was particularly associated with the time and space in Hong Kong. Her conclusion that she 'almost forgot about' it signified that in fact her transformed political habitus continued to remind her of it. The fissures of her habitus rupture seemed to have inadvertently healed, so much so that her account appeared more like a nostalgic reminiscence of the political baptism she had undergone in the Hong Kong political field.

Returning to Miusi's journey, as she moved further to study in the UK, she rekindled her interest in politics and became fascinated by geopolitical debates, which was in stark contrast to her complete rejection of politics in Hong Kong.

> In the UK, there, too, were many conflicts, and yet I was not at the centre of any conflict…I guess it was none of my business, so I could begin to engage in the discussion. We had a geopolitics module where we discussed the refugee issues… really interesting. It felt different.

No longer assuming a political position of 'at the centre of conflicts', Miusi could become a disinterested observer, an 'idle spectator' (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 67) in the new political field of the UK. Such a change of field position rejuvenated her curiosity about politics, which seemed suppressed in the Hong Kong political field where her political interests (i.e. *illusio*) were too much at stake. Therefore, within Miusi's political habitus, there was a fundamental interest in politics. Her universal rejection of politics when in Hong Kong was but a self-protection mechanism (Xu, 2017b).

Despite Miusi's reinvigorated interests in politics, when she returned to Beijing for her new job, she started to experience some painful disjuncture between her now partially transformed habitus and the *doxa* of the MLC political field.

> The political atmosphere in Beijing is suppressive; I am unused to it…Hong Kong's values have transformed me in many aspects…I quite like to be able to freely express my views, I can disagreeand dislike things. It is best if there can be some space, even just a corner, in this society where people can have different thoughts. However, I feel that…in the mainland, people cannot freely comment on national political issues…cannot articulate disagreements, openly. How can this even be possible? Yet, this is true.

Compared with the ambivalence borne out of her habitus rupture before Miusi went to the UK, the core values embedded in the *doxa* of the Hong Kong political field had now been sedimented and inscribed as new facets of her political habitus. However, once returned to the MLC political field where such beliefs/practices become anomalies, her transformed political habitus had become ill-aligned with the *doxa* of her original political field, engendering some further habitus rupture. Miusi's case mirrors Baxter and Britton's (2001) mature working-class students who had developed a middle-class habitus that distanced them from their working-class field of origin. Miusi's experience was shared by Guojing, who suggested that he could no longer think of his life in the same way as his peers in the mainland who seemed to be confined by the 'MLC ways of thinking'.

As Miusi re-entered the MLC political field, she now acutely noted the range of public activities and institutional spaces from which she was structurally excluded, especially in the realm of formal politics. It was not until this return-immigration stage did Miusi finally realise that the 'political import of doxa' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 74) of the MLC political field had long been exercising symbolic violence upon her. Ironically, she chose to 'escape' Hong Kong to be back in the mainland, only to now realise that she was 'trapped' again. Miusi's experiences evoke what Bourdieu eloquently phrased as a confrontation with her 'exclusion inscribed deep in [her] own bod[y]' (ibid.). When asked if she would venture further

away from the MLC political field, Miusi did not have an answer. However, as Bourdieu (1990a, p. 69) rightly asserts, 'it is because agents never know completely what they are doing that what they do has more sense than they know'. Miusi expressed her desire, however, for the MLC political field to resemble that of Hong Kong more:

> I hope that mainland China can develop more towards Hong Kong's institutionalised structures…Hong Kong's social order and its fair system greatly appeal to me.

From Miusi's trajectory, we can ascertain a political habitus that is undergoing constant revisions as a result of the shifting time, space and field positions, induced by multiple migration across borders. Miusi's narrative, together with the parallel trajectories of other participants, have marked the difficult positioning challenges confronted by these MLC students. While their political habitus is a product of years of political cultivation in the mainland, their subsequent exposure to political fields in Hong Kong and other parts of the world have inevitably brought partial revisions and inscribed added facets.

Conclusion

Responding to the first research question on how the MLC-Hong Kong border context influences the MLC students' political habitus, this paper has demonstrated three impacts, marked by shifting time. In their initial stages in Hong Kong, the *doxa* of the new political field illuminated curious possibilities for these students to engage with tabooed political topics and novel political activities such as rallies. The border context and the contrasting *doxa* of the new political field brought out 'aversions to' (Sayer, 2005, p. 30) certain political orientations buried within the inherited political habitus of the MLC students. However, as their political socialisation deepened and the political tensions between the two entities intensified (Xu, 2015), they began encountering the symbolic deficits of their mainlander identity. This identity subjected them to the 'centre of conflicts' in numerous daily encounters with their colleagues (e.g. Miusi's case) and friends (e.g. Keqin's friendship with Popo), leading to alienation and ultimately a total rejection of politics. Consequently, the negativity of their political experiences overrode their initial curiosity and appreciation for various political freedoms, leading to two thirds of them escaping from the Hong Kong political field. The third impact, interestingly, has been their transformation of political habitus, for instance, as manifested through Miusi's nuanced understanding of the pros and cons of both political fields when she discussed her 'uneasiness' during her brief return to mainland China. Miusi's ambivalence evidenced the 'constant negotiation' that her divided political habitus was grappling with. The

lasting impact of the border context, however, has been most powerfully encapsulated in Miusi's heartfelt realisation that she had got used to the political freedoms that she enjoyed in Hong Kong, when compared with the 'suppressive' political environment in mainland China upon her return-immigration.

In response to the second research question about how the political habitus evolved over time across political fields, building on my earlier work (Xu 2017b), this paper draws on substantial, new empirical materials on the extended period of time and multiple cross-field movements that were critical conditions in facilitating these students' political habitus transformation. It took Miusi nine years and three cross-field movements to realise the symbolic violence that the *doxa* of the MLC political field had been exercising on her. It took Keqin one and a half years to finally realise the political orientations that her Hong Kong friend Popo imposed on her. It took Guoxiang a year away from Hong Kong to realise that the Hong Kong political rituals had been inscribed on her habitus.

This paper brings the under-researched aspect of political socialisation among border-crossing higher education students to the forefront and demonstrates how their political habitus can have significant impacts on their longer-term life trajectories. Miusi's ultimate realisation of the symbolic violence that the MLC political field had been exercising on her, while painful, is a significant insight that only became accessible through her prolonged political socialisations and reflections. The critical orientation she now adopts towards her original political field is a result of her critical reflections on her subject positions both in Hong Kong and in the UK. The longitudinal accounts demonstrate that these students' aversion to politics was merely their mechanism for protecting themselves from the otherwise unfriendly field *doxa* in Hong Kong. Their curiosity about and fascination by politics remained a constant facet of their political habitus.

In existing research on MLC students' experiences in Hong Kong (Gu & Tong, 2012; Yu & Zhang, 2016), the political antagonism between these students and their Hong Kong counterparts has been repeatedly noted. However, few insights have been provided into how these students' political dispositions are shaped and transformed over time. In this study, despite the moderate sample size, the data has revealed solid evidence of such students' political socialisation and subsequent development of *political habitus*.

Overall, this paper speaks to the Special Issue on *Migration, Borders and Education* in two distinct ways. Empirically, this paper focuses on a special, within-country border context; it goes beyond engaging with the immediate influences of cross-border movements and reveals the longer-term, often neglected and yet important unintended effects of such movements on

the mainland Chinese students. Theoretically, it extends our understanding of two Bourdieusian notions, *political habitus* and *political field*. Regarding the former, this paper's systematic exposition of these students' *political habitus* formation redresses Bourdieu's relative neglect of the shaping of the *political habitus* of 'non-professional' political agents, in contrast to his emphasis on that of the 'professionals', such as politicians. Regarding the latter, this paper extends existing literature's focus on social agents' experiences in static and unified *political fields* at specific times by foregrounding the experiences of these individual students moving across conflictual *political fields* over time. To conclude, this paper contributes to the understanding of how shifting time, space and subject positions can impact on the *political habitus* of border-crossing students.

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