'Diaspora at Home': Class and Politics in the Navigation of Hong Kong Students in Mainland China's Universities

Abstract

This paper draws on 'diaspora at home', a concept that encapsulates the unique dynamics between Hong Kong and mainland China, as an analytical tool to explore the cross-border experiences of 23 Hong Kong students at 11 universities in mainland China. It empirically ascertains how the made and imposed claims and identifications of these Hong Kong students resulted in inclusion and exclusion as their interactions with their mainland peers and institutions deepened. Specifically, it highlights how their 'diaspora at home' status offered exclusive access to privileged higher education opportunities, preferential treatments and opportunities for upward social mobility. Meanwhile, such a status also resulted in an overwhelming sense of political liability as they unwittingly became 'political tokens' and suspected political subjects amid the increasingly tense political atmosphere between mainland China and Hong Kong. This paper pinpoints the relevance of class and politics in understanding how diasporic groups engage with higher education.

Keywords: diaspora at home, China, Hong Kong, class, politics, higher education

Introduction

Within-country cross-border student mobility

In cross-border student mobility literature, a nascent body of research has begun to focus on movements within the boundaries of a single country, extending beyond the existing predominant focus on movements across nation states (Robertson, 2013; Waters, 2007). Tindal and colleagues (2015), for example, investigate how the contrasting higher education systems between Scotland and England, two nations within the United Kingdom, had motivated bi-directional cross-border movements among (mostly middle-class) students in a quest for social and cultural distinction. Such distinction is found to be achieved through access to the institutional prestige, subject reputation and cosmopolitan socio-geographic location of the chosen higher education institutions (HEIs). Similarly, in the case of mainland China and Hong Kong, research has shown that middle-class and academically high-achieving students from mainland China are attracted to Hong Kong's higher education because of its global outlook and high standing in international league tables (Xu, 2015a, 2015b). It is clear from this literature that middle-class families are prepared to reap distinction through cross-border education by investing substantial economic resources.

However, it is less clear what experiences students from working-class backgrounds might have in navigating such within-country higher education mobility. When resources are limited, what 'prices' do working-class students have to pay in order to achieve cross-border or even upward social mobility? To address this question, this paper evokes the experiences of Hong Kong students (mostly working-class) in mainland China's universities as a case in point. This case is situated within Hong Kong's class inequalities in access to higher education and the complex political nature of the Hong Kong-mainland China relations.

'Failures' or victims of education inequalities in Hong Kong?

Hong Kong has one of the world's highest Gini coefficient. In 2018, the city's wealth gap reached the largest in 45 years (Wong, 2018). Such a wide wealth gap has translated into stark education inequalities, especially in differentiated higher education access. Research shows that in 2013 'university degree enrolment rate of young people (aged 19 and 20) living in the top 10% richest families (48.2%) [was] 3.7 times that of those living in poverty (13%)' (O'Sullivan & Tsang, 2015, p. 460). Since only 18% of Hong Kong's local high-school graduates are offered degree-level government-funded places at public universities (ibid., p. 457), students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (i.e. working-class) are much more likely to be shunned from entering local HEIs. Admittedly, these working-class students could choose self-funded sub-degree or top-up degree programmes. However, research reveals that such programmes engender alienation and stigma, rendering these students as 'failures' and second-class graduates who are slighted by employers and government officials (Leung & Waters, 2013). This unequal higher education environment 'perpetuate[s] class distinctions' (O'Sullivan & Tsang, 2015, p. 460) and impels working-class students to become creative in crafting their educational paths, e.g. enrolment in mainland universities.

Compared with popular cross-border study destinations such as the US and the UK, mainland China may be regarded as less attractive due to the lower-ranking of most of its universities in international league tables (Te and Postiglione, 2018). However, over the past decade, the number of Hong Kong students applying to study in mainland universities saw a tenfold surge. Between 2011 and 2016, a total of nearly 15,500 Hong Kong students applied. In 2017/18, more than 4,300 Hong Kong students were recruited to around 90 universities in mainland China (Te & Postiglione, 2018). For the working-class students who are unable to get into Hong Kong's local HEIs, universities in mainland China become appealing due to preferential admission policies and treatments. These include lowering of admission scores and provision

of incentives such as low tuition fees, scholarships and better accommodation. Such preferential policies could be considered as politically motivated, underpinned by the disquieting Hong Kong-mainland China relations.

Integration amid escalating tensions

In 1997, Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region of the PRC. As stipulated by its Basic Law, Hong Kong maintains its capitalist (instead of socialist) economy, freedom of speech and rule of law, governed under the 'One Country, Two Systems' principle for a 50-year period (i.e. up to 2047). However, the Hong Kong-mainland China relations have been fraught with escalating tensions of identitarian politics. Recent examples of conflicts include the ongoing protests triggered by the proposal of a controversial extradition bill that would allow Hong Kong to extradite criminal suspects to mainland China (Yuan, 2019) and the 79-day long Umbrella Movement in 2014, a student-led instance of civil disobedience that demanded greater democracy in electing Hong Kong's Chief Executive (Chan, 2015). These high-profile political movements in Hong Kong arguably epitomise the underlying tensions across the border.

On the one hand, Hong Kong's closer economic ties with mainland China have been accompanied by notable influx of Chinese visitors whose behaviour is often found to be at odds with Hong Kong's own. This triggers a 'surge of right-wing nativism' that is hostile towards 'China' while feeling threatened and fearing getting marginalised amid China's rise as the world's major economic power (Ip, 2015, p. 410). This situation has inevitably 'politicised the Hong Kong-China relationship in all aspects of everyday life' (ibid.), as enacted through mistreatments of mainland tourists and discriminations against mainland students in its universities (Xu, 2015b, 2017, 2018a, 2018b).

On the other hand, from the perspective of people in mainland China, this series of political movements has positioned Hong Kong as 'a source of instability' and the Hongkongers as 'ungrateful separatists and troublemakers' (Yuan, 2019, para 24). This unique context thus renders politics an important factor to consider when investigating Hong Kong students' experiences in mainland China's universities, in addition to the issue of class.

Therefore, this paper seeks to address this research question: what roles do class positions and political stances of Hong Kong students play their experience of mainland universities? To this end, I will now introduce 'diaspora at home' as an analytical lens for data analysis.

'Diaspora at home'

Diaspora is a conceptual tool with a long history. Initially deployed to portray catastrophic dispersal of victimised groups from an original homeland, the notion has subsequently expanded to encompass labour, trade, and cultural groups (Brubaker, 2005). Among these, the overseas Chinese diaspora has attracted considerable scholarly attention (Ong, 1999). Before Hong Kong's sovereign return to the PRC, the people of Hong Kong were categorised as part of this overseas Chinese diaspora. At that time, some students from Hong Kong joined other groups from Malaysia, Indonesia and Burma to pursue higher education in Taiwan, which acted as a 'surrogate homeland' for the Chinese diaspora (Lan & Wu, 2016, p. 744).

When Hong Kong returned to the PRC, overnight, the people of Hong Kong no longer belonged to the *overseas* Chinese diaspora. However, the legacy of colonial rule and Hong Kong's special status continue to mark Hongkongers' distinction from their counterparts in mainland China (Chan, 2015; Xu, 2015b). This is a typical example in which the border migrated over people (Brubaker, 2005, p. 3). Consequently, borrowing from Charusheela (2007, p. 295), Hongkongers 'were suddenly narrated into the experiential status that diaspora marks when coded as the stranger[s]-within. *They* may not have crossed the border. The border crossed *them*.' (original emphasis) Extending 'diaspora' to 'diaspora at home', in this case, seems fitting to capture the complex and multiple Chinese identities of the Hong Kong students who journey across the within-country border.

'Diaspora at home' has been a productive analytical tool. In his research on Tamil migrant experiences in Bombay in 1970s India, Charusheela (2007, p. 296) argues,

> the types of exclusions and navigations the term [diaspora] highlights, the recompositions and fusions of identities it brings to our attention, can be found *within* a nation as groups move across it and transverse varied internal boundaries of regional and lingual identity. (original emphasis)

Charusheela emphasises that the religious minorities in India (e.g. Muslim Tamils) experienced 'intense forms of similar efforts and tensions around cultural identity' to 'the type marked by the concept of diaspora' (ibid.) even though they may have only moved within India (i.e. from

Tamil to Bombay), instead of moving trans-nationally, as the notion of 'diaspora' is most often understood (Brubaker, 2005).

'Diaspora at home' has also been applied to examine the experiences of Taiwanese migrants in mainland China. Lin (2011) investigates 16 Taiwanese who migrated to mainland China due to risk of unemployment at home. These Taiwanese migrants' identification with mainland China as their 'ethnic homeland' (Lin, 2011, p. 52) seemed pertinent, constituting a typical 'diasporic stance' (Brubaker, 2005, p. 13). Migrating to mainland China thus constituted a 'diaspora at home' experience, with them initially expecting effortless integration. However, 'they quickly realised that their Chinese knowledge was not only spatially disoriented but also temporally disembedded from the real China' (ibid.). There were considerable discrepancies between these Taiwanese migrants' 'imagined Chinese knowledge that they had obtained in Taiwan and the real Chinese experience encountered in China'. The Taiwanese migrants gradually rediscovered their 'Chinese' identification and repositioned themselves as 'not so Chinese' or 'not the Chinese Chinese' (ibid., p. 53). Employing 'diaspora at home' thus allowed the researcher to piece together the pre-migration imagination of the 'ethnic homeland' and the subsequent, often unintended, exclusions and frictions in mutual communication and integration efforts of the Taiwanese migrants and their mainland Chinese 'compatriots'.

When applied to the case of Hong Kong students in mainland universities, the issues of class and politics, as demonstrated above, play an important role. This focus is in congruence with migration scholars' call to avoid homogenising diaspora groups (Anthias, 1998; Kleist, 2008). Indeed, although Lin (2011) has acknowledged the economic motivations among the Taiwanese migrants, the potential impact of class on their diasporic experiences has not been fully explored. In Lan and Wu's (2016) research on Taiwanese students' experiences in mainland universities, they highlighted how these students were made more aware of the contrasting political values between themselves and their mainland counterparts, leading some of them to cherish the democratic progress made in Taiwan more.

Building on this literature, this article will explore the ways in which claims made by and about the Hong Kong students, members of a 'diaspora at home', 'might have political resonance and can be used as part of a political mobilisation' (Kleist 2008, p. 1138) amid the broader structures between mainland China and Hong Kong. Adopting 'diaspora at home' as an analytical lens, this article will consider how class and politics intersect to shape the experiences of these Hong Kong students in mainland universities.

In so doing, this article makes three main contributions to literature. Firstly, it examines an understudied phenomenon, the case of within-country student migration and adopts the lens of 'diaspora at home' to tease out the inherently political nature of such cross-border student migration. Secondly, it emphasises the crucial and embedded impacts of class in orienting these Hong Kong students to embrace the PRC's politically-motivated preferential higher education admission policies and to achieve upward social mobility. Lastly, by explicating the complex and nuanced political prices that these Hong Kong students had to pay in exchange for their upward social mobility, this paper joins a growing body of literature to expose the inherent inequalities and problematic nature of cross-border student mobility. Next, I will detail the research methods and participant profiles.

Methods

Data are drawn from in-depth interviews conducted between September 2016 and May 2017 with 23 Hong Kong students and graduates who were pursuing or had pursued undergraduate studies in 11 universities in mainland China, all except one in Beijing. There were 8 male and 15 female participants, aged between 19 and 27. The participants studied a wide range of subjects, such as Chemistry, Law, modern languages, History, Chinese medicine and Economics. As indicated in Table 1, only one participant (Stuart) managed to obtain an offer from a top-ranked university in Hong Kong, the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, but he chose Peking University (PKU) instead. Five other participants got degree offers from less prestigious universities in Hong Kong and opted for more prestigious mainland counterparts.

Since tuition fees and maintenance expenditure are only around HK$6,000 (£586) per year, all participants indicated that this low cost was a major factor in choosing mainland universities. Regarding parents' occupations, about half were from typical working-class backgrounds, with both or either parents making no income (i.e. unemployed, retired, or having passed away) or occupying low-income jobs such as security guards and cleaners. In terms of household income, while some chose not to disclose details, at least half reported low levels of income, e.g. under HKD 20,000 (around £1,953) per month, in comparison with HKD40,000 (around £3,906), the median income level of Hong Kong households consisting of four members in 2017 (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, 2018).

<Insert Table 1>

Participants were recruited through the snowball sampling technique, with the researcher approaching colleagues working in mainland universities for recommendation. Participants recruited in the initial round then referred further contacts for participation. This sampling technique could be critiqued for a lack of coherence in recruiting participants (Noy, 2008), thus leading to an unrepresentative sample. For instance, there is an over-representation of certain HEIs such as the Chinese University of Political Science and Law (4/23) and Beijing Normal University (6/23). This means that my analysis had to be mindful of contrasting institutional practices and consequent lived experiences of certain students. Despite this, as this is a small-scale study that makes no claim for generalisation, inclusion of students from across 11 HEIs can arguably still guarantee sufficiently diverse institutional representation. Moreover, as Noy (2008, p. 327) emphasises, this sampling technique can facilitate discovery of the researched group's 'organic social networks and social dynamics'. For example, as I will demonstrate, this technique enabled me to approach a pocket of students who were active in the 'Hong Kong Student Association of Beijing HEIs', thus providing unanticipated and nuanced accounts about the advantages and struggles they experienced in organising activities for this Association.

Participants were interviewed between one and three times. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 120 minutes; all interviews were conducted online, via WeChat, either in Cantonese or Putonghua, depending on the preference of participants. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically using the qualitative data analysis software *Atlas.ti*. Only quotes that were used in this article were translated into English.

Employing virtual interviews via WeChat allowed me to overcome time and financial constraints and transcend geographical and mobility boundaries in accessing research participants (Janghorban, Roudsari, & Taghipour, 2014). As a full-time faculty member at a European institution with limited budgets for international travels, conducting virtual interviews meant that I could fit interviews around participants' busy schedules and my own work commitments. Admittedly, compared with face-to-face interviews, it was less straightforward for me to pick up social cues as conveyed through the immediate social ambience and participants' body language. Nevertheless, the multiple rounds of interviews (especially with key participants) facilitated an extended interrogation of my participants' situated social experiences. As a former mainland Chinese student who studied and worked in Hong Kong for nine years in the early 2000s, and as an academic who has researched identity issues of cross-border students for nearly a decade, I was able to sympathise with the

dilemmatic positions of my participants (to be elaborated) and establish rapport early in our interactions. My in-depth lived experiences in both mainland China and Hong Kong also provided 'thick' contextual understanding for interpreting the data.

A second chance: Class and upward social mobility

Academic advantages and career opportunities

Unlike the middle-class students in Waters' (2007, p. 486) study whose parents could send them abroad despite their 'failure' status in Hong Kong's education, my participants were constrained by their limited economic capital. One third of participants considered going abroad but gave up the idea due to inadequate funding. For these students, the prospect of upward social mobility thus became a pertinent factor for choosing to study in the mainland. For instance, Norman (low-income family, father retired, mother as housewife) believed that Hong Kong's class structure had been so rigid that it was impossible to achieve social mobility for students like him:

> I have a few good friends who have become unemployed as soon as they finished their post-compulsory education. It is hard to get a job…The first one studied for a top-up degree. Now he is unemployed. He tried to apply to be a police officer but failed. Now he works in McDonald's and convenience stores. The second one went to Sydney to study, got an overseas qualification, but once he came back to Hong Kong he found out that it is very hard to get a decent job. Now he still works in *Subway*, and does the same routine work day in day out.

As victims of Hong Kong's highly unequal education system, these students' effort to gain post-secondary education (i.e. sub-degrees) seemed to bring little return in their job searches. This is evident in the perceived inferior status of such qualifications among employers and by the society. These Hong Kong students (i.e. Norman's friends) are arguably confined in the working-class strata due to the lack of symbolic recognition that their post-secondary education could accrue. Their plight evokes O'Sullivan and Tsang's (2015, pp. 454-455) comment: 'Many young people in Hong Kong are now faced with diminished career prospects in a job market that offers little beyond soulless service jobs with stagnant wages'. Compared with Norman's enrolment in one of China's top universities, these friends of Norman's also lacked

the opportunity to seek jobs in a much bigger labour market, thanks to the opportunity and associated advantages provided by the mainland universities:

> In Beijing I am at least a university student. Once I graduate, I can get a more dignified job (*timian* 体面): becoming a lawyer. This is a *ladder* that can allow me to achieve upward mobility and pursue my dreams, but in Hong Kong this is hard to achieve because there is much less room to develop. In the mainland, if I cannot get a job here [in Beijing], I can use my [degree] certificate to look for positions in Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen--there ought to be a job for me, whereas in Hong Kong, can I get a job in Wanchai if I cannot get one in Mongkok? Hong Kong is simply too small and it is really hard to build my career there.

Unlike in Hong Kong where law as a discipline traditionally excludes working-class students like Norman (Waters, 2007), in Beijing Norman gained a clear pathway to becoming a lawyer. The institutional prestige of this top university in Beijing also bestowed on him the legitimacy to seek jobs in the large labour markets of China. In comparison, the drastically smaller economy size of Hong Kong, as further compounded by 'successive ways of recession', 'business restructuring' and 'corporate down-sizing', meant that fewer opportunities were available for the disadvantaged working-class youth (Ng & Ip, 2007, p. 68).

Exceptional access to accruing social capital

Upward social mobility was also achieved through exceptional access to a circle of top-level government officials and business elites from Hong Kong who would have otherwise been hard to reach for ordinary Hong Kong students of comparable academic calibre and socio-economic backgrounds to these participants. For instance, Catherine (low-income family, father retired, mother as housewife) revealed:

> The Office of the Government of Hong Kong in Beijing (BJO for short, *zhujingban* 驻京办) takes good care of us…Every year there are different orientations, dinner receptions, gatherings etc—such opportunities to be connected with the government are not available to other students…it gives us opportunities to get in touch with many Chambers of Commerce, and can potentially allow us to get jobs in the future…e.g. My current job (at a Hong Kong university), I got to know my current boss when they came to my university for an exchange.

The BJO had such official roles as facilitating exchanges and co-operation between Hong Kong and mainland China and providing practical assistance to Hong Kong citizens in mainland China. The BJO could be considered as a 'diaspora institution' (Kleist, 2008) which constantly creates occasions for Hong Kong citizens, such as the Hong Kong students and business elites based in Beijing, to socialise. Such opportunities are usually inaccessible to students studying in Hong Kong's own universities. Thanks to this special 'diasporic space' in Beijing, such unique access can engender substantial benefits. Vivienne (low-income family, father had passed away, mother as security guard) recalled:

> I once joined an activity organised by the BJO and added the contact of a top-rank official from Hong Kong's Immigration Office. I did not make any contact with him afterwards. However, in May this year I lost my 'Mainland Travel Permit for Hong Kong Residents' (*huixiangzheng* 回乡证), without realising it until one week before I was set to return to Hong Kong. At that time my air ticket could not be altered…It would normally take 2-3 weeks to get a temporary travel permit, and there was just not enough time. Then I asked that high-rank official for help and he recommended some personnel in the Immigration Office to me, e.g. asking about how I could use the emergency channels and the kinds of documents required for such purposes. Eventually I could return to Hong Kong swiftly.

In negotiating access to cross the within-country border, Vivienne's 'diaspora at home' status and practices became foregrounded: as a Hong Kong citizen, Vivienne needed the 'Mainland Travel Permit' to return home. Losing this permit therefore posed as a crisis in her attempt to negotiate macro-political structures between the two entities. Had she not had access to this top-rank Hong Kong immigration official, she would have had to delay her return to Hong Kong and go through a more onerous process of organising the replacement permit. In this case, Vivienne's 'diaspora at home' status firstly ameliorated her working-class status by offering her admission to the prestigious PKU, and further facilitated such exclusive social connections to the Immigration official, which subsequently became instrumental in her navigation to bypass the symbolic constraints posed by the border regime. There was a seeming full circle in which political implications of the 'diaspora at home' status became enmeshed with class. Indeed, Vivienne was acutely aware of the impossibility for her to gain competitive internships opportunities, as constrained by her lack of social connections. She recollected:

> If you rely on yourself to apply for internships, the competition would be really keen…It is better if you rely on Guanxi, because *he [a high-flying bank manager] is from Hong Kong, and you are a Hong Kong student*, he would feel that we are all *in an alien place* and he would do what he can to help.

Identifying as part of the Hong Kong diaspora in Beijing, 'an alien place', thus bound Vivienne together with this said bank manager, enabling her access to valuable social contacts. As Kleist (2008, p. 1130) suggests, 'claims of diaspora can […] be seen as reflecting political aspirations and identifications, aiming to mobilise and link people to certain […] community'. Vivienne's 'diasporic' positioning in Beijing begot her the much-needed group connection and recognition, the *Guanxi* which facilitated her access to highly coveted internships. In this diasporic space in Beijing, the 'diasporic' belonging and identity thus made up for the 'deficit' of Vivienne's class background.

Political and politicised: Ramifications

During the 2016 mainland Chinese higher education exhibition in Hong Kong, a Ministry of Education official made the following remark:

> The Ministry of Education actively improves policies, and works hard to create better study and living conditions for Hong Kong students, so as to *convey the care and love of the central government to Hong Kong youth*…our youth is the future of our country, the hope of our nation, it is mainland universities' unshirkable responsibility to cultivate the reserve talents for the development of the country and the long-term prosperity and stability of Hong Kong. (my emphases)

It can be argued that the admission of Hong Kong students by mainland universities was framed in this speech as a political means to 'convey the central government's care and love for Hong Kong youth'. Moreover, Hong Kong students recruited to mainland universities were constructed through their mission to sustaining the 'the development of the country and the long-term prosperity and stability of Hong Kong', i.e. their political values. Indeed, the PRC government's preferential admission policies have been politically motivated, as underpinned by what Lan and Wu (2016, p. 757) argue: 'a hidden agenda of nationalisation – seeking

political integration'. Such an inherently political nature of these Hong Kong students' cross-border education mobility had noticeable ramifications.

Political tokens

Firstly, as political subjects, the official and institutional special treatments rendered on them could attract public scrutiny among their mainland peers. For instance, while compulsory for mainland students, military training is exempted for students from Hong Kong. Honesty (middle class, parents as factory owners), who volunteered to join the military training, recounted how she was challenged:

> After the military training, I was interviewed and accorded the title of a 'model soldier' (*biaobing* 标兵). In fact, I was quite weak, so I was not sure how I got that title. Then I learned that it was because I voluntarily joined the military training. Some students began to ask why Hongkongers should have such privilege. I truly wanted to integrate, but instead other people conceived of me as abusing my privilege to gain public recognition. I felt a bit uncomfortable.

As a politicised subject, Honesty's voluntary participation in the military training created an opportunity for the institution to publicly reward her through the symbolic recognition of a 'model soldier' title. This was, paralleling Lan and Wu's (2016) comments on Taiwanese students' experiences, motivated by a political intention of reinforcing national integration. However, from the perspective of mainland peers, such a 'special' treatment became a catalyst for scrutinising the 'unfairness' and the privilege that Honesty enjoyed. From Honesty's perspective, her curiosity about military training did not necessitate her desire of becoming 'a model soldier'. Instead, she intended it as her means to integrate with her mainland peers. However, the institutional act of mobilising her 'diaspora at home' status to achieving political ends resulted in imposing such a title, the legitimacy of which inadvertently became a subject of scrutiny. Honesty's 'diaspora at home' status thus rendered her a 'sacrifice' in this seemingly benign political treatment. Her experiences were echoed by Christine (low-income family, father self-employed, mother as part-timer):

Many policies are not enforced on us, like joining class meetings or some general assemblies. They suggest that students from Hong Kong can choose whether to join. So, should I or should I not join? If I join, it seems I self-invite shamelessly. Sometimes I really don't know what to do.

Arguably, such preferential treatments placed these students in a state of 'limbo'. Nancy (lower-middle class, father as businessman, mother as housewife) resonated, 'Hong Kong [citizens in the mainland] are in an awkward position (*gan'ga* 尷尬), because we are Chinese citizens, but sometimes they would treat us differently, so I sometimes do not know how to position myself'. Such an ambivalent status, i.e. 'neither citizen nor foreigner', was paralleled in the experiences of Taiwanese students (Lan & Wu, 2016, p. 746) and induced friction and conflict. Some participants (e.g. Nancy) noted the political nature of their 'diaspora at home' status:

In many mainland universities, usually the Propaganda Office would organise tours that attract Hongkonger students…They typically would get a banner and take some group photos…I don't like such activities, because I don't think I need to proclaim my Hongkonger identity this way.

Nancy was sceptical of and actively resistant to the politically-driven display of their Hongkonger identity which was manipulated by university propaganda offices to convey political unity messages. As politicised subjects, Hong Kong students were often compelled to perform political functions, willingly or not. This resonates with Kleist's (2008, p. 1130) argument that diaspora (in this case 'diaspora at home') 'becomes a concept of a political identity nature that might at once be claimed by and attributed to different subjects and groups.' These Hong Kong students might have unwittingly entered a quasi-political contract with the mainland universities to fulfil their political tokenistic roles in exchange of their preferential admissions and treatments. As 'political tokens', these Hong Kong students 'seem to function as keys or signposts in a discourse of political justification' (Shanafelt, 2005, p. 3).

Potential political threats?

A second ramification was related to the negative perceptions and receptions of these Hong Kong students' assumed political orientations. As demonstrated in the Introduction, the rising tensions between mainland China and Hong Kong have bred right-wing nativism and high-

profile protests. While the number of Hong Kong citizens in support of such events may not be substantial (Kurata, 2015), when such protests are communicated through the sensation-capturing media in the mainland, negative impression can be easily forged among mainland university lecturers and students. For instance, Christine articulated:

> Just in the class next to mine, some mainland students said: 'I don't like Hong Kong, I dislike Hongkongers, you get out' to the face of a Hong Kong student. I was in deep shock--it was just over the top. Another Hong Kong student from my university felt uncomfortable about some biased views expressed by a mainland lecturer in a class and ended up having an argument with that lecturer…Seeing such incidents, I started to wonder if I should tell people that I come from Hong Kong.

It seems that the Hongkonger identity of these students became a marker that could easily trigger hostile confrontations on university campuses. This evokes what Kleist (2008: 1128) writes about the diaspora being used as a category to 'claim a unified political stance' of everybody who nominally belongs to the same group. In this case, the Hong Kong students were assumed to share a uniformed set of 'problematic' political beliefs. Catherine tried to challenge such impositions but was without success:

> If the lecturers verbally abused the Hongkongers in class, I would talk to them after class…after I spoke to one of them, he was in shock, realising that there were actually Hongkongers in his class…perhaps he would understand that not all Hongkongers think in the same way, politically, but this would not alter his bad impression of Hong Kong.

Mirroring what Kleist (2008, p. 1137) writes, the Hongkonger identity had, 'rather than a putative collectivity, [been] mobilised as an established and absolute political actor with shared intentions' in such situations, denying Catherine's effort to highlight the internal diversity among Hongkongers. The 'problematic' nature of these Hong Kong students' assumed political stance also engendered political surveillance. For instance, Catherine recalled:

> When we first started to organise this Hong Kong Student Association of Beijing Higher Education Institutions, it was quite sensitive. We initially did not elicit any support from the government, so there were a lot of constraints when we tried to organise any activity. The National Security Agency often checked on us, for fear that we would carry out political activities…One of the ways was to get support from the Chinese Liaison Office

in Hong Kong, to get lots of support from the government, and *ensure that there was at least one government official attending every single activity* that we organised. (my emphasis)

Such intense political surveillance could be argued to stem from an established concern about the potentially 'dangerous' construction of diasporas in policy circles (Kleist, 2008, p. 1127). It is also in line with the Chinese government's well-established 'authoritarian political control' over student organisations on university campuses (Yan, 2014, p. 493). Such experiences led to considerable emotional turmoil among these students, leading some of them to hide their Hongkonger identity. Frances (middle-class, parents as restaurant owners) and Nancy both confided trying multiple times to pretend that they were from Guangdong province, with an intention to be 'closer to the other mainland students'. Christine, Shane (lower-middle class, father as engineer, mother as accountant) and Laura (middle-class, father as manager and mother as housewife) all concealed their Hongkonger identity by relying on their Putonghua proficiency.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article examines an understudied population in migration studies – cross-border students who are neither international nor domestic but have a unique 'diaspora at home' status. Through the ambiguous status of such students, the paper examines a central research question: what roles do class positions and political stances of Hong Kong students play in their experiences of mainland universities? Furthermore, this article illustrates both positive and negative roles the 'diaspora at home' status plays in these Hong Kong students' educational and occupational navigation in mainland China. The paper sheds important light on rethinking the notions of border, citizenship, and nation-state in migration studies, and contributes to an expansive understanding of international students and cross-border education.

More specifically, I have drawn on data to argue firstly that the experiences of these Hong Kong students have been deeply politicised due to their 'diaspora at home' status; and secondly, that their class positions in Hong Kong have uniquely oriented them to take up the opportunities offered by the politically-motivated preferential higher education admission policies of the PRC government, due to the prospect of upward social mobility which was much less accessible in Hong Kong.

In navigating their journeys in mainland China, these students' 'diaspora at home' status interplayed with the special 'diasporic space' in Beijing and resulted in these students' exclusive access to an elite circle of Hongkongers made up of top-rank government officials and business elites. Such social connections would not have been possible had they stayed in Hong Kong, and enabled these students to accumulate social capital that facilitated subsequent competitive internship and job opportunities. Getting admitted to prestigious mainland universities also provided these Hong Kong students much-needed institutional and professional prestige and channels to secure 'dignified' employments, either in mainland China or in Hong Kong.

Meanwhile, the highly politicised nature of their 'diaspora at home' status has been characterised by their simultaneous roles as 'political tokens' for conveying political unity messages and as potentially 'dangerous' and 'suspicious' political others, subjecting them to intense public scrutiny, hostile political confrontations and surveillance on campus. While these Hong Kong students took advantage of the higher education and upward social mobility offered by the PRC government and institutions, they became unwittingly committed to serving as subjects (or indeed 'tokens') for fostering political integration. In these senses, the Hong Kong students could be considered as becoming 'political sacrifices' for the PRC government's 'state driven strategy…toward eventual political integration' of 'disarticulated political entities including Hong Kong' (Lan and Wu, 2016, p. 745).

Adopting 'diaspora at home' as an analytical lens has made it possible to tease out the nuances of the types of exclusions and navigations that these Hong Kong students as 'strangers-within' (Charusheela, 2007) have experienced, pertaining to politics and politicisation, and class and social mobility. As members of the 'diaspora at home', these Hong Kong students embodied and became impacted by many of the tensions and efforts that traditional diasporic groups have experienced when migrating abroad, e.g. exclusion and suspicion based on assumed and imposed political beliefs. Importantly, these Hong Kong students are dissimilar to their peers from middle-class backgrounds (Waters, 2007) and/or of higher academic achievement levels (Te and Postiglione, 2018); instead, their working-class background and/or academic standing inclined them towards such cross-border higher education moves. Distilling such embedded nature of class and politics thus allowed me to follow Brubaker's (2005, p. 13) argument and focus on their 'disaporic stances, projects, claims…practices'. Such an analytical orientation thus resonates with the consensus among migration scholars regarding the pertinence of

departing from methodological nationalism and becoming sensitive to internal heterogeneity of the diaspora groups (Anthias, 1998; Brubaker, 2005; Kleist, 2008).

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