

# **Transborder habitus in a within-country mobility context: A Bourdieusian analysis of mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong**

## **Abstract**

This paper contributes to the updating of Bourdieusian sociology by proposing the notion of ‘transborder habitus’, a necessary extension of ‘habitus’ in a transborder context. ‘Transborder contexts’ refer to spaces that belong politically to the same country, share a deep level of historic cultural and/or ethnic entanglement, but can be ideologically, linguistically and socially divergent. Such transborder contexts present empirical challenges that notions such as ‘habitus’ and ‘transnational habitus’ cannot adequately address. First, the national borderline delineation presumed in ‘habitus’ and ‘transnational habitus’ can no longer account for the intricate and complex within-country border diversities. Second, although dissonances between border-crossing agents’ habitus and their original field have been sparsely noted in existing empirical work, few attempts have been made to offer theoretical accounts for habitus-field dissonances along the axes of religion, ethnicity and ideology. Drawing on in-depth interview data from an ongoing longitudinal study that explores the identity trajectories of 31 mainland Chinese students at a Hong Kong university, this paper argues that ‘transborder habitus’ can effectively redress these two identified gaps and will show how it can offer a more adequate explanation in empirical contexts.

## **Key Words**

Bourdieu / habitus / transborder / Hong Kong / within-country / mainland China / mobility

## **Introduction**

This paper will attempt to update the Bourdieusian sociology by proposing the notion of ‘transborder habitus’, which is a necessary and important extension of ‘habitus’ in a transborder context. While border studies are a contested terrain plagued with disciplinary and definitional debates (Newman, 2003), in this article ‘transborder contexts’ refer to spaces that belong politically to the same country, share a deep level of historic cultural and/or ethnic entanglement, but can be ideologically, linguistically and socially divergent. Some of the more obvious transborder contexts include those between the four nations of the United Kingdom (Tindal, Packwood, Findlay, Leahy, & McCollum, 2015) and those between mainland China and the various greater China areas which include Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan. Such

transborder territories can be marked by carefully controlled within-country border checkpoints, and/or local devolution governments that clearly demarcate the political and often ideological lines (Greer, 2009). Therefore, such borders not only exist in their physical forms, but also pertain to imagined and perceived social borders (Donnan & Wilson, 1999) or ‘mental boundaries’ (Breitung, 2009: 104), which tend to construct border-crossing agents in binary duos of ‘us’ and ‘other’, ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ (Delanty, 2006), as reinforced by the lack of information beyond the border. Such within-country border contexts present unique theoretical challenges and empirical dilemmas that notions such as ‘habitus’ or ‘transnational habitus’ (Guarnizo, 1997) cannot adequately address. In particular, as I hope to demonstrate, such transborder contexts render the geographically-implied national borderline delineation of Bourdieu’s ‘transnational fields’ (2000: 98) too crude to account for the within-country border diversities, especially the complex mechanism of capital conversion and exchange across fields. Empirically, such transborder contexts and the myriad cross-border movements that they facilitate, demand a conceptual tool that can readily recognise the more fluid, rather than homogenous, relations between the habitus (especially its constant revisions) and ‘the cosmos in which it evolves’ (Wacquant, 2016: 64), ie the *field of origin*. Although dissonances between border-crossing agents’ habitus and their original field have been sparsely noted in existing empirical studies, few attempts have been made to offer theoretical accounts for habitus-field dissonances along the axes of religion, ethnicity and ideology (Kelly & Lusic, 2006: 845-846). Transborder habitus, then, addresses both of these gaps more adequately.

To facilitate a comprehensive introduction of ‘transborder habitus’ and to demonstrate how to apply it in an empirical context, in this paper I will draw on data from an ongoing longitudinal study (2013-2017) that explores the identity constructions of 31 mainland Chinese (MLC hereafter) students at a Hong Kong university. The Hong Kong-mainland China nexus, operating under the principle of ‘One Country, Two Systems’ (Hui & Lo, 2014), is a typical transborder context that can sufficiently illustrate the specificities of a within-country border environment and serve as a catalyst for wider applications of the concept. This paper will aim to address the following questions:

1. How can ‘transborder habitus’ account for the complex capital evaluation and conversion across within-country border contexts?
2. What opportunities does ‘transborder habitus’ afford in understanding the incongruence between habitus and *field of origin*?

### **Habitus, transnational habitus and transborder habitus**

When Bourdieu (2002: 27) recalls the definition of *habitus* as ‘a system of *long-lasting* (rather than permanent) schemes...of perception, conception and action’, he places emphasis on its dynamic and transformative nature. This has been echoed by Reay (2004: 434-435), who argues, ‘while habitus reflects the social position in which it was constructed, it also carries within it the social genesis of new creative responses that are capable of transcending the social conditions [ie field] in which it was produced’. Bourdieu (1993: 72) conceptualises a *field* to be a structured social space with a complex nexus of positions which can serve to distinguish and/or exclude. The hierarchical nature of the field is sustained through its ‘sets of constraints, inscribed in the very reality of that world, which governs its functioning in a durable way, determining the chances of success for practices’ (Bourdieu, 1986: 242). Within each field, therefore, agents occupy either dominant or subordinated positions, dependent on the amount of resources deemed as useful.

Such field-specific resources are expressed as *capital*, which can be viewed as social or cultural assets, the possession of which can enable membership to particular fields. Bourdieu conceives of three fundamental types of capital: *economic capital*, which can be recognised through or immediately converted into money and property rights; *cultural capital*, which can be *embodied* in the long-term dispositions of mind and body, *institutionalised* as forms of education qualifications and *objectified* as forms of cultural goods; and *social capital* which are social obligations convertible into economic capital or titles of nobility under certain circumstances (Bourdieu, 1986: 243). Every form of capital can function as *symbolic capital* so long as it is perceived as a sign of value and acts as a ‘force, a power, or capacity for...exploitation, and therefore recognised as legitimate’. When such structures change, or when the same agent changes fields, such as ‘transnational fields’ (Bourdieu, 2000: 98), where the rules of the game differ, the agent’s social position shifts:

Common sense is to a large extent *national*...The disorientation one experiences in a foreign country...stems largely from the countless little discrepancies between the world as it presents itself at each moment and the system of dispositions and expectations constituting common sense. The existence of *transnational fields*...creates specific common senses which call the national common sense into question (my emphases).

However, despite the mention of ‘transnational fields’, Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of habitus in relation to national borders is too crude, so that it does not account for nuances of transnational or within-country borders. His understanding of habitus has been problematised

by Kelly and Lusia (2006) as focusing too much on the absolute spaces and too little on empirical realities that are only discernible through transnational lenses. Guarnizo (1997), for instance, when exploring return migration of US-bound migrants from the Dominican Republic, finds that despite their subjective inclination to return permanently to the Dominican Republic, migrants keep moving back to the US due to uneven sociocultural, economic and political developments between the two countries. Guarnizo highlights that such circular migration can be explained best through the ‘transnational habitus’, which is defined as:

a particular set of dualistic dispositions that inclines migrants to act and react to specific situations in a manner that can be, but is not always, calculated, and that is not simply a question of conscious acceptance of specific behavioural or sociocultural rules (Guarnizo, 1997: 311).

Transnational habitus is a result of transnational migration between two unevenly developed societies. It links the country of origin and the country of destination in a complicated web of social, cultural and political fields, shapes the dispositions and actions of the migrants and informs their subsequent subjectivity.

In their study of Filipino migrants in Toronto, Kelly and Lusia (2006: 844-845) find that what is considered normal consumption in Canada can be ‘constructed as trappings of an “elite” lifestyle’ in a provincial Philippine context. The consumption gaps between the affluent, developed Western context and the impoverished rural Philippine context reveal an evaluation difference that can only be identified when placed within a transnational context. Similarly, they find that institutionalised cultural capital (eg higher education credential) acquired in the Philippines is usually devalued; meanwhile, embodied cultural capital (eg the caricaturing of ‘Filipino-ness’ as being caring and nurturing) can be mobilised to provide entry into nursing jobs in Canada. Focusing on the ‘transnational’ nature of the habitus thus facilitates an understanding of how different forms of capital can be ‘valued, devalued, exchanged and accumulated’ at a transnational level.

More recently, Darwin and Norton (2014: 112) explore the ‘transnationalised’ nature of the habitus of Filipino migrant students in Canada, which sustains ‘a process of valuation and exchange of capital’ across the countries of origin and of settlement and allows the migrants to ‘discern and act based on the interplay of dispositions structured by these distinct spaces’. They note: ‘What may be a loss in one site, can be a gain in the other’ (2014: 113).

All the aforementioned studies serve to accentuate the fluid and dynamic evaluation, conversion and exchange of capitals across national borders. However, this body of literature, first, offers insufficient theoretical explanation for existing variations among migrants before

border-crossing and, second, is caught up by the physical delineation of national border lines.

With regard to the first gap, for instance, Kelly and Lusia (2006: 845) acknowledge that they ‘neglected the differences between Toronto and the rest of Canada’ and ‘glossed over’ the variances between being a rural Filipino and an urban dweller. Consequently, issues of class, language and gender are relatively underdeveloped in their study. In Guarnizo’s (1997) and Darvin and Norton’s (2014) research, although they have teased out factors such as gender and class, they have not exploited the theoretical potential for ‘transnational habitus’ to account for such intra-group differences among the migrants. To redress this gap, Erel (2010: 643) draws on her study of skilled female migrants from Turkey in Britain and Germany to highlight how the cultural capital of migrants does not simply fit or miss-fit the country of migration. Instead, she proposes the concept of ‘migration-specific capital’, which can be creatively negotiated and constructed at the intersection of language and ethnicity. She cautions that such capital conversion cannot be taken for granted, due to social divisions inherited from the country of origin (ie Turkey). Erel’s fruitful engagement with capital points to a main purpose of this paper, that is, to move beyond merely assessing how various forms of capitals are evaluated, but also to investigate the underlying mechanisms of such evaluations. The need to be mindful of the structural issues in both temporal and spatial dimensions will be revealed in the Discussion section.

Regarding the second gap, Tindal *et al.* (2015) investigate how global forces impact on border-crossing students between Scotland and England, especially how these students interpret border-crossing in relation to their quest for social and cultural distinction. They point out that since higher education is free in Scotland but not in England, some Scottish-domiciled interviewees set themselves apart by dismissing their non-mobile or locally-mobile peers as being preoccupied by the ‘free’ option in Scotland. In this context, both Scotland and England are constituents of the UK, with strong shared historic, cultural and ethnic entanglements. However, the within-country nature of the Scottish-English border means that their differing higher education systems cannot be explained from a ‘transnational’ perspective. Nevertheless, as shown in Tindal *et al.*’s evidence, the qualitative differences in the contrasting higher education policies and the subsequent impacts on embodied experiences of individuals are empirically significant. This, then, poses empirical challenges for the notion of ‘transnational habitus’. To redress the above two gaps, I will propose the notion of ‘transborder habitus’ by employing data from an empirical study across the mainland China-Hong Kong border.

### **Transborder context between mainland China and Hong Kong**

The transborder context between mainland China and Hong Kong is marked simultaneously by a deep level of historic cultural and ethnic entanglement as well as a high degree of contemporary divergence in the ideological, religious and ethnic composition fronts. In Hong Kong, 95-98% of the population are ethnic Chinese, in particular Han Chinese. Many of them were previously refugees from mainland China fleeing natural and political disasters (Ong, 1999). Such close ethnic links between the two peoples across the border have understandably been manifested in the many shared cultural values and practices, such as Confucian cultural heritage, common Chinese written systems and traditional Chinese operas.

However, since Hong Kong's retrocession to the People's Republic of China in 1997, it has operated under the 'One Country, Two Systems' principle, which stipulates that Hong Kong's official ideology permits its continuation as a capitalist economy, in contrast to the communist regime in mainland China. Congruent with this ideological orientation is its freedom of religious practices (Kuan, 1990), freedom of speech and rule of law (Hui & Lo, 2014). In contradistinction, across the border there is said to be 'a state-sponsored atheism [that] has been imposed from above - sometimes with the use of extreme force' (Vickers & Kumar, 2015: 19) as well as regular ideological monitoring and speech censorship (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013). Notably, China's opening since the late 1970s has meant that mainland China has moved from Mao's socialist to an authoritarian capitalist system whereby the Communist Party elite has become 'the chief architect and beneficiary' of a socially unequal market economy (McGregor, 2012: vi). The lack of state regulation in China has allowed more space for individual manoeuvre, complicating the scheme of resource evaluation and creating more dynamic, fluid and possibly contradictory constructions of what counts as capital and as a liability within China, as will be shown later.

Regarding ethnic compositions, in mainland China, there are 55 officially recognised ethnic minority groups, such as the Uyghur, Mongolian, Tibetan and Zhuang (Postiglione, 2009). Traditionally, education of these groups has been rendered differently from that of the Han majority, due to their perceived lack of development in terms of economic productivity, cultural and educational levels and living standards (Yi & Wang, 2012: 65). To improve education qualities of ethnic minority groups, the Chinese government has implemented policies including the setting up of secondary boarding schools in Han-dominated regions to foster ethnic minority talent, called *neidi ban* (Yi & Wang, 2012: 66). However, research has shown that while such efforts may enhance the ethnic minority students' acquisition of Han cultural capital, they do not lessen the marginalisation that ethnic minorities suffer within the

national mainstream (Postiglione, 2009). In comparison, Hong Kong's ethnic relations are mainly framed around non-Chinese speaking groups, be they the White, privileged English-speaking 'expatriates' (Leonard, 2008) or the socio-economically disadvantaged South Asians (Gu, 2015). Little discussion, if any, has revolved around the ethnic minority groups identified in mainland China. In fact, as I will show, the average understanding of the 55 ethnic minority groups in Hong Kong seems minimal. Overall, the strong shared historic roots and divergent contemporary social characteristics of the two societies across the within-country border make the mainland China-Hong Kong border context qualitatively different from transnational ones.

### **The study**

The paper is based on findings from a two-phase longitudinal study (Phase 1: 2013-2015; Follow-up phase: 2016-2017) that explores the identity constructions of mainland Chinese students at one Hong Kong university. In 2013, posters about this study were put up around the university campus, attracting around 50 interested participants. These interested participants then filled an online questionnaire about their basic information, which was then used to select participants to ensure a relative balance in gender, place of origin, subject, and length of stay in Hong Kong. In total, 25 students pursuing undergraduate studies as well as 6 recent graduates were recruited to the study, aged between 18 and 27 years old. 11 had got full or partial scholarships, among whom only two reported that they could not afford the cost of living in Hong Kong. The remaining 20 self-sponsored students had to pay an annual tuition fee and maintenance of HK\$176,000 (£14,832). Two thirds had parents occupying 'middle-class' jobs, such as doctors and accounts, while the other third had parents from business backgrounds. It can be argued that most of these students are from well-off families.

In Phase 1, most participants joined two rounds of individual semi-structured interviews. Questions about their memorable experiences as non-local students in Hong Kong, adaptation issues and views on the socio-political contexts across the border were elicited. To triangulate their accounts, consent was sought access their blog entries and social media updates. Moreover, nine participants invited 18 of their mainland Chinese friends to participate in seven focus group sessions, in which similar interview questions were discussed.

Between 2016 and 2017, follow-up interviews have been conducted with 15 of these students and at the time of writing, two parents were also interviewed. Participants were asked about their recent developments in career and to share their new thinking about the key issues discussed during Phase 1. Parents were inquired about their considerations for sending children to study in Hong Kong and their understanding of their children's developments over the years.

All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

### **Transborder habitus in practice**

As Wacquant (2016: 64) cogently pinpoints, habitus ‘is not a self-sufficient mechanism for the generation of action’. Rather, to understand individual actions, there requires an exercise of ‘the mapping of the *system of positions* that alternately excite, suppress, or redirect the socially constituted capacities and inclinations of the agent’ (my emphasis). In what follows, I will unpick the ‘system of positions’ within the Hong Kong context that offers alternate evaluation of the economic, social, cultural and political resources possessed by the mainland Chinese students. This exposition will demonstrate how capital conversion and exchange can be adequately and meaningfully discerned in ‘transborder’ spaces (ie within a transborder habitus), thus addressing the first research question of this paper. Specifically, I will discuss how various forms of resources acquired by the MLC students become either 1) positively recognised (ie ‘excited’), 2) negatively sanctioned (ie ‘suppressed’), or 3) reconstituted and reinterpreted (ie ‘redirected’). I will showcase how disharmonies between the MLC students’ (and their family members’) habitus and the *field of origin* (mainland China) are reflexively critiqued, which is an important opportunity afforded by the transborder habitus, hence addressing the second research question of this paper.

#### ***1) Positively recognised: From negative asset to valued capital***

##### ***Case 1: Keqin’s religious capital***

In Chinese Communist Party (CCP)-ruled mainland China where atheist education is the norm<sup>1</sup>, Keqin’s (19 years old, law) Christian identity provoked significant parental concerns. Keqin suggested, ‘my parents saw my religious belief as a very bad choice because of its political implications’. Such political caveats could be sensed when Keqin felt that she could not legitimately join the CCP Youth League Secretariat (*Tuan Wei*) in high school. As CCP members are expected not to be religious (Finamore, 2015), Keqin’s Christian identity became an obstacle to her acquisition of coveted political capital in her *field of origin*:

During my first year at senior high school, *Tuan Wei* wanted to absorb me as a student leader of my cohort but I told them ‘I am not sure this would be proper in light of my religious belief’; they simply said, ‘no worries, it doesn’t matter, you just come to our meetings and help us out’.



While Keqin's capability was clearly impressive to the CCP Youth League in her high school, she could only be treated as a *de facto* member without being accorded the corresponding political status and symbolic recognition (ie a proper student leader of *Tuan Wei*). As her Christian identity was fundamental to her, it could be reasonably anticipated that had she stayed in her *field of origin*, she could not expect to accumulate future, valued, political capital.

However, intriguingly, Keqin's religious identity began to invoke positive recognition even when she was in mainland China, in a capacity that was relevant to Hong Kong. After Keqin received the offer from her Hong Kong university, she had to study for one preparatory year at a university in Beijing (TU hereafter). During this year, Keqin's religious belief and her identity as a Hong Kong-bound student (*gangpeisheng*) brought her to the community of Christians at the TU: 'In Beijing, I very soon joined the TU students' Christian Fellowship...all of them...were Christians from Hong Kong.' These Hong Kong students then introduced her to more Hong Kong Christian students at other universities. Through this channel, Keqin not only came to deepen her religious understanding, but also broaden her social networks, which would otherwise not be available. According to Keqin, due to the marginalised status of Christianity in China (Zimmerman-Liu & Wright, 2013), the Christian Community in Beijing was 'very well connected, supportive of each other and readily... absorbed new members, because they saw the need of it'. Through her Hong Kong Christian friends in Beijing, Keqin began to build a network of relations (social capital) that proved useful once she began her education in Hong Kong, as testified by the support they offered to Keqin after she arrived in Hong Kong. This kind of capital conversion and further accrument took place before she crossed the border, but was invoked by her Christian and 'Hong Kong-bound' identities. Through the lens of the 'transborder' spaces, such intricate capital conversion can thus be adequately acknowledged.

When Keqin arrived in Hong Kong, she found that her religious identity became formally recognised as cultural capital, which could be 'used as a power source...to facilitate access to organisational positions' (Lamont & Lareau, 1988: 156):

...upon my arrival, I [...] was not very...passionate about living a new life here...then I joined Christian Choir in November. This was where I found a real, valid sense of belonging to this city...I made a very important decision...that I would become an Executive Committee member of this Choir, which gave me a chance to serve and to contribute.

Not only was Keqin's religious identity no longer maligned, but she was also able to now

find an institutional setting to legitimately claim membership of, and use this membership as a form of ‘social and cultural exclusion’ (Lamont & Lareau, 1988: 156) to gain rare organisational positions that were highly prized. Keqin underscored on various occasions how her involvement in the Christian Choir provided her with abundant opportunities to hone leadership and organisational skills. Her transborder habitus oriented her to capitalise on the differential capital evaluation systems across the within-country border, turning a degraded religious identity in mainland China into legitimate symbolic capital in the Hong Kong/Hong Kong-bound sphere (as in Beijing).

### *Case 2: Guoxiang’s ethnic capital*

Parallel to Keqin, Guoxiang’s (20 years old, social sciences) ethnic Mongolian identity brought her an accelerated journey of recognition in the transborder context. Coming from Inner Mongolia, a relatively under-developed area in mainland China, Guoxiang did not find her Mongolian ethnicity an issue of concern before university, ‘because everybody is the same back home’. However, as Guoxiang left home to start her university studies in Beijing (for her preparatory year before going to Hong Kong), she began to experience biases against her ethnic group. She observed that her Mongolian ethnicity was often stereotyped and associated with being ‘uncultivated’ (*bu kaihua*). Upon learning that she was Mongolian, people often asked whether she could ride a horse or was good at archery, nothing else. Guoxiang’s account points to the hierarchised nature of ethnic groups. As Bourdieu (1985: 726) writes:

The social world...may be practically perceived, uttered, constructed, according to different principles of vision and division - for example, ethnic divisions...ethnic groups [are] at least roughly hierarchised in the social space.

Guoxiang’s habitus was therefore shaped by the minority status and marginalised nature of her ethnicity, which engendered a sense of ‘powerlessness’ given her own perceived lack of resources to change such a status:

My ethnic group is facing such crises: many people treat us as barbarians, and our ethnic culture is not properly recognised in the world. However...I feel that there is little I can do...I have not even established my own footing, letting alone voicing my ethnic issues [to other people]; nobody will listen to me.

Guoxiang often avoided mentioning her ethnic background, wishing that people did not know about it. She said, ‘I felt as if I was trapped by my ethnic background, it’s like baggage, something that I must leave behind in order to move forward’. At this stage, therefore,

Guoxiang's ethnic background constituted 'symbolic deficits' (Ong, 1999: 91).

This situation, however, changed drastically after she came to Hong Kong, partially due to ordinary Hongkongers' 'lousy geographic understanding of China': 'When I told them that I was from Inner Mongolia, they would think that I was from Mongolia, that I was a foreigner, not Chinese'. To the Hongkongers, therefore, Guoxiang's Mongolian ethnicity became an exotic attraction that would usually evoke curiosity:

Being an ethnic Mongolian or somebody from Inner Mongolia in Hong Kong is a very exotic state of being. People are really curious [as] I have travelled across an entire China to Hong Kong.

Detecting such curiosity, Guoxiang 'grasped the possibility' of turning her Mongolian ethnicity into some unique identity marker. She suggested:

In Hong Kong, my ethnic identity is a good thing, whereas in Beijing it is something negative. I like to fashion myself into a unique being, different from everybody else, you know, a minority and this is something that makes me proud.

Guoxiang's shift from feeling powerless and burdened to harvesting pride in her ethnicity was most notably facilitated through the transborder context, in which two differential ethnic hierarchies are juxtaposed. What was deemed a problematic identity in mainland China thus became a rare quality that conferred undivided attention in Hong Kong. Noting the positive potential of her ethnicity, Guoxiang exploited it fully. For instance, during her internship at X Magazine in Hong Kong, Guoxiang manoeuvred her ethnicity as a bargaining tool to get assigned as the personal assistant to a famous ethnic Mongolian writer from Taiwan, Mumu:

When we held a meeting to decide on the assignment of interns to the dozen writers visiting Hong Kong, I understood that most other writers were not as famous as Mumu. So I told them that I was ethnic Mongolian: this was quite a utilitarian motive, and there was no doubt that the Chief Editor would take this into consideration.

Like Keqin's case, Guoxiang's ethnic identity became cultural capital that served to distinguish her from the 'crowd' of interns and was effectively utilised to beget further social capital, eg connection with a famous writer, a rare opportunity for an undergraduate student in Hong Kong. More significantly, Guoxiang revealed that her interaction with Mumu was a crucial catalyst for her critical reflection on her ethnic identity. Guoxiang recollected an important event: Mumu was giving a speech to more than 1,000 Hong Kong people about Inner Mongolia's culture and the protection of its grasslands. Guoxiang found the audience attentive,

taking notes and enjoying the speech. It was obvious that the audience admired Mumu. At that time Guoxiang hid in a dark corner of the stage, shedding tears and feeling all sorts of emotions: gratitude, shame and admiration. Guoxiang was amazed by the influence exerted over the Hongkong audience by Mumu - as an ethnic Mongolian icon. In Guoxiang's words, 'nobody would listen to me about Mongolian grasslands; but they all look up to Mumu in awe'. Therefore, if the curiosity of Hongkongers about Guoxiang's Mongolian ethnicity conferred on her superficial ethnic capital, Mumu's notable ethnic influence revealed a profound possibility for Guoxiang's ethnic future. The border-crossing to Hong Kong thus brought critical opportunities for Guoxiang to evaluate her ethnic self at a deeper level.

## ***2) Negatively sanctioned: From coveted political capital to liability***

Between late 2014 and early 2015, an MLC student Ye Lushan took part in a student union election at a Hong Kong university. Her participation, however, was met with wide-ranging scrutiny on the part of the Hong Kong public, which reacted negatively because of her alleged connection with the CCP Youth League. Ye was accused of being a CCP 'proxy' planted to infiltrate the Hong Kong university (Baldwin, 2015). Ye's affiliation with the CCP Youth League, an almost universal mandatory membership among students in mainland China, became a point of contention in the politically sensitive transborder space in Hong Kong. Seeing Ye's experience, Miusi (24 years old, social sciences), whose parents are both Civil Servants and CCP members in mainland China, found it hard to relate to the hostility shown towards CCP members that cropped up in her Hong Kong friends' Facebook posts:

On Facebook, they all post things about ...their issue with the CCP and suggest that they are upset if anybody has a relationship with the CCP--when you see such things, you naturally will *activate your self-protection mechanism*.

While the CCP membership can be a useful political resource in mainland China where the exercise of political capital by the Party-state occupies a dominant and superior social position (Goodman, 2014: 29-30 and 178-179), in Hong Kong, Miusi's CCP connection became a potential source of suspicion, a negative asset that could jeopardise her prospects. Critically aware of this reverse political capital evaluation scheme in a transborder context, Yuhan (19 years old, business) chose not to pursue his full CCP membership, while clinging on to his probationary status during his stay in Hong Kong. Xiang (18 years old, business), too, kept her probationary CCP membership a secret from her fellow Hong Kong students, for fear that it would cause unnecessary trouble. Guojing (24 years old, engineer) discontinued his CCP

membership application altogether, but passed on this legacy by serving as a recommender<sup>2</sup> for his younger brother's CCP membership application. Their strategic approaches towards the CCP affiliation, again, seem best captured through the lens of a transborder habitus that is cognisant of the intricate rules of both border fields under the same sovereignty.

Intriguingly, the transborder context also facilitated these students' open expression of their critical reflections on practices of the CCP. For instance, these students commonly denounced the 'formalism' and dogmatic inculcation of the Party classes (*dangke*). Guojing revealed his critical considerations of the political situation: 'there are 80 million CCP members in China: this is an enormous group! If you do not join them you will be oppressed by them'. Such critiques evoke Sayer's (2005: 34-35) remark:

Certainly we can come to care about some of the things and relationships to which we are habituated, but there are also many...from which we would rather escape, despite having an appropriate feel for the game.

Although these students (or their families) had vested interests in the political capital recognition system applied in mainland China, personally speaking their transborder habitus prevailed to identify the dissonances between what they were 'habituated' to and what they would ideally enjoy.

### **3) Reconstituted / reinterpreted: Dissonances between habitus and field of origin**

While certain resources can be evaluated differentially in a transborder context, disjuncture between habitus and 'the cosmos from which it evolves' (Wacquant, 2016: 64) can be transmitted inter-generationally. Here I will draw on accounts of Lingshan (18 years old, social sciences) and Fei (20 years old, humanities) to demonstrate 'how tensions that already exist in their habitus affect how they negotiate misfits' (Aarseth, Layton, & Nielsen, 2016: 151).

Both Lingshan's and Fei's parents seemed to display notable discontent with the field rules in mainland China, which arguably motivated them to send their children to study in Hong Kong. For instance, Lingshan's father described himself as 'fallen nobility':

My family used to be well-off but later it was the Revolution era so all my family assets were confiscated, and we became the 'targets of revolution'. When I went to school, it was around 1970s, you can tell from literary works the kind of treatments that my family was subjected to.

In a similar vein, Fei's parents found mainland China too 'unfair' a society for Fei:

My Mum doesn't allow me to return to mainland China (after graduation). She told me, no matter what I do, I must 'die' in Hong Kong. My mum, and my Dad too, keep thinking that it is too unfair in the mainland.

Both accounts reflect what Atkinson (2012: 740) depicts as 'the suffering, conflict and resistance that render "habitats", or lifeworlds, and habitus far from homogenous or harmonious'. Both pairs of parents were also quite critical of the education systems in mainland China. Fei's parents, for example, tirelessly discussed with Fei how corruption and bribery in mainland Chinese universities could jeopardise Fei's academic future. Similarly, in senior high school, Lingshan's form teacher urged her to apply to the prestigious Peking University, but she refused to and chose Hong Kong instead. When asked about this incident, Lingshan's father confirmed that he advised Lingshan 'not to listen to her form teacher'. He further explained:

In senior high schools, some teachers would encourage high-achieving students to apply to the top universities, regardless of whether they stand a chance. If the students fail, their schools would encourage them to take the same exam the following year. Since these students usually score high marks, the school can gain reputational benefits from such students repeatedly.

While it is unclear whether the depiction above is accurate, Lingshan's father's scepticism about the instrumental orientations of schools in mainland China was readily discernible. These parents' perceptions of social ills of mainland China thus evoke Bourdieu's view (1993: 87-88):

When the objective conditions of its accomplishment are not present, the *habitus*, continuously thwarted by the situation, may be the site of explosive forces (resentment) that may await (and even look for) the opportunity to break out and which express themselves as soon as the objective conditions for this...are offered.

It appears that both Lingshan's and Fei's parents were unfavourably positioned in the objective structure of their *field of origin*, either politically or socio-culturally. To them, therefore, their children's transborder moves to Hong Kong were perceived as a long-awaited opportunity, an 'objective condition' to counteract the constrictions they endured in the *field of origin*. Therefore, the disjunctures they perceived were consciously or unconsciously transmitted to their children, as Lingshan revealed, 'My father...reads a lot of books about democracy; I read quite a lot at home too'. As Sayer (2005: 30) argues, in the initial shaping of the habitus, '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'. Both Lingshan's and

Fei's families' experiences demonstrate how the conflict between habitus and *field of origin* is accentuated within the transborder space, resonating with Aarseth *et al.*'s (2016: 149) study in which they elaborate how habitus-primary field conflicts are 'mobilised by social change and transmitted intergenerationally'.

Notably, however, there are indeed capitals that are similarly recognised or sanctioned across the Hong Kong-mainland China border. For instance, these students' academic capital, as manifested in their exceptional *Gaokao*, ie National College Entrance Examination, marks, has been positively evaluated and resulted in their admission to this prestigious university in Hong Kong. In comparison, the relative lack of economic and social capital has similarly hindered the developments of some participants across both fields (Author 2017).

## **Discussion**

In this globally-connected society, mobilities are becoming more complex. Newer forms of mobilities, such as within-country, border-crossing ones, need to be acknowledged and researched (Tindal *et al.*, 2015). However, existing theoretical tools, such as 'transnational habitus', do not adequately address the theoretical and empirical challenges posed. This article began with an aim to offer a new theoretical tool, the 'transborder habitus', to tackle the two identified gaps, namely, unpacking the capital evaluation systems and recognising incongruence between habitus and the *field of origin* in such transborder movements. To this end, this article used the empirical case of MLC students moving across the mainland China-Hong Kong border to demonstrate the specific features and functions of the 'transborder habitus' as a concept.

In addressing the first research question about how the 'transborder habitus' accounts for complex capital evaluations in this transborder context, this article demonstrates three patterns of capital conversion. In pattern one, through Keqin's religious identity and Guoxiang's Mongolian ethnicity, I have shown how identities marginalised and degraded in mainland China can be favourably evaluated in Hong Kong as cultural capital, which allowed both students to further accrue other forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). In pattern two, political resources deemed as pivotal in mainland China, such as CCP affiliations, were adversely received and publicly scrutinised in Hong Kong. The third pattern, as seen through the cases of Lingshan's and Fei's families, demonstrates how disjuncture between habitus and *field of origin* can be transmitted inter-generationally (Aarseth *et al.*, 2016). Together these three patterns exemplify how certain identities and resources are accorded differential currencies in

the transborder arena between mainland China and Hong Kong, hence addressing the first research question.

More importantly, I have moved beyond merely recognising how capital evaluation is exercised in the transborder context, to the point where it also offers an explanation for the rationale behind (Kelly & Lusic, 2006), hence addressing the second research question. To begin with, the transborder moves for Fei and Lingshan further allowed them to critically evaluate the dissonances that their respective families had with their *field of origin*. The transborder habitus of Lingshan, Fei and their parents therefore demonstrated their noted habitus-primary field disjuncture as well as an evolving critical orientation towards the *field of origin*.

Keqin's Christian identity and Guoxiang's ethnic minority status were both unappreciated in mainland China. The differential reception and recognition accorded to them in the transborder arena thence served to accentuate the contrast, and reinforced the dissonances between their habitus and the *field of origin* (Atkinson, 2012). While in mainland China Keqin became used to the idea of not being eligible for any political entitlement due to her religious belief, in Hong Kong (or indeed Hong Kong-related transborder Christian space in Beijing) she could legitimately 'cash in' her Christian cultural capital and acquire further social capital through it. Guoxiang, too, moved from a sense of powerlessness to taking pride in and even exploiting her ethnicity to accrue further social capital in Hong Kong. Both students thus developed a deeper and more critical understanding of the marginalised status (ie the disharmony) of their respective religious and ethnic positions in mainland China.

For Miusi, Yuhan, Xiang and Guojing, although they had access to the coveted political capital of CCP affiliation in mainland China (Goodman, 2014), the transborder context enabled them to openly articulate their critical reflections on practices of the CCP. While such criticisms might have been formed well before border-crossing, the relatively 'dominated' position that they occupied in Hong Kong alerted them to reflect on their 'misrecognition' (Bourdieu, 2000: 242) of the symbolic capital of the CCP affiliation. Examining these empirical accounts, it can be argued that the transborder habitus embodies a state of mind, a readiness to recognise and 'exploit' differential capital evaluations within the transborder context.

The transborder habitus, therefore, differs qualitatively from the 'transnational habitus' in two important ways: temporally and spatially. In the temporal dimension, the transborder habitus recognises firstly the complex historic entanglements of the two border fields. Hong Kong's shared cultural roots with mainland China had engendered imagination and anticipation among the MLC students, who took commonalities for granted, only to be disenchanted in



multiple ways upon arriving in Hong Kong, eg the scepticism about the CCP. In comparison, in Kelly and Lusic's study (2006), the history between the Philippines and Canada was much less entangled than the Hong Kong-mainland China one. Thus, the Filipino migrants' imagination about Canada seemed qualitatively different from the MLC students'. The transborder habitus, moreover, takes into account the history, albeit much briefer, of the social agents' disharmonies with their *field of origin*, as shown through Lingshan's and Fei's cases.

In the spatial dimension, the transborder habitus is not confined by the typically drawn national boundaries, but also recognises within-country borders. Crucially, this spatial dimension widens our imagination about border-crossing: as shown through Keqin's experience in Beijing where she did not have to cross the border to be accorded recognition of her religious identity and Lingshan's and Fei's parents who embodied a state of 'transborderised' thinking and longing, which oriented them towards adept responses once opportunities to cross borders arose for their offspring. In these cases, the transborder habitus is enacted through but does not presume the actual border-crossing act.

Both the temporal and the spatial dimensions of the transborder habitus contrast sharply with the transnational habitus which, as portrayed in existing empirical studies (Darvin & Norton, 2014; Guarnizo, 1997; Kelly & Lusic, 2006), does not recognise the historic entanglements between fields of origin and settlement nor explain the habitus-*field of origin* disharmonies among agents, and requires the actual physical crossing of national borders.

In summation, the transborder habitus can be defined as a scheme of dispositions that inclines the social agent to perceive and act in a manner that can be, but is not always, calculated, and that is sensitive to the contrasting rules (including disharmonies) of within-country border fields. The 'transborder habitus' is about how the habitus takes effect in a 'transborder space', be it real, as in actual transborder migrations, or imagined/understood, as in the cases of Lingshan's and Fei's parents or Keqin's experience in Beijing's Christian community. Such distinctive functions of the transborder habitus appear to bear deep Bourdieusian roots.

### **Bourdieusian roots and applications**

Tracing Bourdieu's journey in developing the notion of 'habitus', it seems he conducted his early research in a 'transborder context' too. In his twinned ethnographic research in Kabylia and Béarn, the 'far-away colony and the mother country' (Wacquant, 2004: 387), Bourdieu revealed 'trans-Mediterranean' complexities in historic links (imperial ambitions and colonial struggles) and imminent futures (post-colonial realities). As Wacquant (2004: 392) suggests, Bourdieu's development of *habitus* as a concept allowed him to 'stress how the colonial system

lives in and through the discordant dispositions and jumbled expectations it instils in its subjects – and how it would thus outlive the ending of French rule and the establishment of an independent Algerian state.’ The paired ‘Kabylia-Béarn’/ ‘Algeria-France’ links can therefore be argued to manifest key characteristics of a ‘transborder context’. The two fields that Bourdieu operated within were historically and politically linked and continued to have complex entanglements despite the different social, cultural and economic divergences, due to de-colonisation. Such a transborder context bred Bourdieu’s paralleled portrayals of the French military’s ‘hopeless effort to contain the nationalist insurgency’ of Algeria (Wacquant, 2004: 390) and the shifting structural changes that rendered the rural men in Béarn ‘unmarriageable’. It could therefore be argued that Bourdieu himself was embodying a transborder ‘scheme of perception, conception and action’ (Bourdieu, 2002: 27) in his development of *habitus* as a concept.

This article has employed the mainland China-Hong Kong border as an empirical example to demonstrate the conceptual cogency of ‘transborder habitus’. However, its applications could be far broader. Apart from the four nations of the UK and the various regions of the greater China that fit the ‘transborder contexts’ definition neatly, other contexts that bear significant resemblance should be given empirical attention in future research too. These include, for instance, members of minority groups who regularly visit their ancestors’ countries of origin, such as American and European Jews in relation to Israel (Sasson, 2010); similarly, occupied countries and regions, such as the Palestinian territories of Gaza Strip and the West Bank (Roy, 2005), and long standing refugee camps, which are, effectively, semi-nationalised places of limbo; in Europe, despite the rise of nationalism and resistance to the current ‘soft borders’, the common laws and core values that bind the European Union effectively construct it as a unified political entity (Delanty, 2006). Understandably, substantial empirical work must be conducted to determine whether and how the notion of ‘transborder habitus’ can be applied in different contexts. It is hoped that this article can serve as a catalyst to inspire future Bourdieusian sociological work.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> China’s Constitution (1954) excludes religion from the education sector with the excuse that it would ‘disrupt public order’ and ‘impair the health of citizens’ (Zhao, 2010: 137).

<sup>2</sup> An important procedure for any CCP applicant to be considered is that they should be recommended by an existing member / probationary member.

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