



Title	Space and Personal Contacts: Cross-Group Interaction between Mainland and Local University Students in Hong Kong
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Space and Personal Contacts:**Cross-Group Interaction between Mainland and Local University Students in Hong Kong****Xiaoli Tian**The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong¹

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Abstract

Despite sharing physical space which supports contact with out-group members and institutional arrangements that encourage cross-group interaction, many university students still congregate within their own groups. To explain this phenomenon, this study examines the micro-level social processes that prevent or facilitate intergroup interaction. A qualitative study of Mainland Chinese and local university students in Hong Kong reveals that students lack opportunities for mutually engaging experiences across multiple points in time due to fragmented daily living space, defended interpersonal space, and politicized online space, which contribute to the absence of cross-group interactions. Cross-group friendships depend on external forces to remove inhibitions, which then allow emotional bonding. This study contributes to the

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understanding of cross-group interaction by pointing out the importance of daily routine activities and mutually engaging experiences in influencing cross-group interaction among students.

Key words: Homophily, cross-group interaction, intergroup contact theory, international higher education, university life, space, social media, China

Introduction

With increasingly more international students on university campuses, some applaud global education endeavors for cultivating “global citizenship” and promoting diverse perspectives and greater acceptance of cultural differences (Findlay, King, Stam, & Ruiz-Gelices, 2006; Madge, Raghuram, & Noxolo, 2009). However, many empirical studies have demonstrated instead the lack of interaction between international and local students (Brooks, Byford, & Sela, 2015). International students commonly interact with other international students, but rarely do they interact, develop relationships and engage with the host society (Collins, 2008; Fincher & Shaw, 2009; Waters & Brooks, 2011). Students may study in a host country for several years, but only form friendships with those from the same country (conational friends) or with the same cultural background (Harrison & Peacock, 2010; Hendrickson, Devan, & Aune, 2011; Rienties, Heliot, & Jindal-Snape, 2013; 2015), or interact with other international students (Kashima & Loh, 2006; Kashima & Pillai, 2011; Gomes, 2014).

Some researchers argue that this lack of cross-group interaction between international students and their host society is caused by cultural differences, perceived discrimination,

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language barriers and institutional factors (for a review, see Waters & Brooks, 2011). While language and perceived discrimination might explain why some ethnic minority students in Western countries tend to stay within the realms of their conational community, they cannot explain the universal lack of interaction between international and host society students. For example, white British students in North America also self-segregate even though they would not have language barriers or experience discrimination (Waters & Brooks, 2011). This segregation is perplexing as many universities provide institutional supports for cross-group interaction. Why then do students still tend to stay in their own groups despite sharing a physical space with many opportunities to meet others from a different social group?

The tendency to socialize with others of a similar background—or homophily—has long been studied by sociologists (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Homophily rests on different factors, including socioeconomic status. Homophily is not formed solely by psychological preferences but multiple social processes (Wimmer & Lewis, 2010). What, then, are the micro-mechanisms that facilitate the formation of a group defined by student origin rather than other factors, such as study major?

To explain this phenomenon, I focus on two groups of undergraduate students in Hong Kong: local Chinese who are raised in Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese who moved there to study.² Even after the transfer of Hong Kong back to China in 1997, the city retains independence in many areas, such as law. In official government policies and regulations, Mainland Chinese students are considered the same, or very similar to international students from other countries. Therefore, they are all considered non-local students, pay more tuition,

² Both Hong Kong and Mainland China have multiple ethnic groups. For example, 8% of the population in Hong Kong is non-Chinese (Hong Kong Census Bureau 2016). However, my focus is on students who are all ethnic Han Chinese.

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cannot work over 20 hours a week, and fall under different fellowship requirements.³ Since 1997, Mainland Chinese student enrollments have increased, and the total student population, including undergraduates and postgraduates, is now 11,376 (6,521 undergraduates), and increasing.⁴

Despite the growing presence of Mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong universities, one widely recognized phenomenon is that mutual interaction between Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong students is rare and superficial, even though they share campus life by attending classes together, living together in university dormitories, and sharing common areas (Chiu, Lau, & Zhang, 2014; Tian, 2016). The universities address this issue by imposing institutional arrangements, such as assigning non-local and local students as dormitory roommates to encourage cross-group interaction; however, self-segregation prevails.

Drawing on in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations, I argue that the lack of mutually engaging experiences, i.e., engagement in the same activities with the same group of people over a prolonged period of time, and mutual contact at multiple points in time, leads to the absence of cross-group interaction. Specifically, the lack of daily social/personal contact causes group segregation. There are three contributing factors: fragmented daily living space, defended interpersonal space, and politicized online space. Mainland Chinese students rarely interact with locals because they hardly share any form of space that would allow for mutual engagement. Through a close examination of everyday lived experiences, the empirical cases here will provide a better understanding of the micro-mechanisms of group homophily and the intergroup contact theory. The key to potential development of cross-group friendships lies in

³Some fellowships are only available to Hong Kong permanent residents, while others are open to both local and non-local students.

⁴There are three main categories of university students in Hong Kong: local, Mainland Chinese, and international students. The latter two are usually considered “non-local students”. This population increased from 1,239 to 14,510 between 1996–1997 and 2013–2014. During that time, the percentage of non-local students also increased from 1% to 15%. According to University Grants Committee (UGC) statistics, there were a total of 99,257 university students in academic year 2015/16; among them 15,730 were non-local students (15.85%). Among the non-local students, 11,894 were from Mainland China (75.61% of all non-local students).

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organizing daily life routines because they provide opportunities for prolonged and all-encompassing contact with others to facilitate emotional engagement.

In the following, I first provide a brief review on homophily and the intergroup contact theory. After discussing the data and methods, I outline how recent changes in university life have resulted in the absence of mutually engaging interaction among students, followed by discussing the unique ecology of Hong Kong. I discuss how online space does not provide a channel for student interaction due to the sociopolitical context of the recent conflicts between Mainland China and Hong Kong. I then discuss some occasions in which social boundaries can be crossed and inhibitions eliminated, which result in long-term friendships cultivated with the “others”. I conclude with general contributions, policy implications, and limitations of this research.

Homophily and Intergroup Contact Theory

Sociologists have long examined homophily, a social phenomenon better known as “birds of a feather flock together” (McPherson et al., 2001). Mutual attraction takes place between those who share the same demographics, interests, and attitudes (Montoya, Horton, & Kirchner, 2008). This similarity-attraction effect is supported by convincing empirical evidence (Byrne, 1971; Byrne & Rhamey, 1965; Berger, 1975), and “one of the most robust relationships in all of the behavioral sciences” (Kaptein, Castaneda, Fernandez, & Nass, 2014, p. 343).

Homophily is based on factors like socioeconomic status (McPherson & Smith-Lovin, 1987) and usually leads to group homogeneity. Wimmer and Lewis (2010) analyzed how racial homogeneity of a student group at an elite American university is produced and found that while individual preference for homophily is important, other attributes aside from race, such as physical propinquity (e.g., sharing a dorm room), can also be contributors. The implication is

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that group homogeneity is not purely created by a psychological preference for the same race; rather, it may be generated by the numerous possible processes of individual tie formation. Thus, to better understand “love of the similar”, we need to understand micro-level social processes.

The local Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese students are not racially different, yet they only have superficial contact. The latter may have physical and social proximities to local students, such as the same classes, but consistently socialize with other Mainland Chinese students both online and offline, who are mostly living elsewhere and studying a different major. In theory, homophily could be built on many social categories, but here, all the other categories become subordinate types of homophily, so that origin comprises the single most important factor for group formation. To explain this, we must unravel the micro-mechanisms of the processes that form homophily in Hong Kong.

One such social process is cross-group interaction. The intergroup contact theory explains why contact with outgroup members leads to friendship in some settings, but intensifies conflicts and prejudice elsewhere (Allport, 1954). Allport (1954) stated that prejudice between social groups can be reduced with interpersonal contact under optimal preconditions, such as equal status, without which very little is learned about each other and cross-group friendships never materialize. Numerous empirical research following Allport confirms that the conditions under which contact occurs are vital. Positive contact leads to reduced prejudice and cooperation. Conversely, negative contact results in increased tension and hostility (Bloom, 1971). The factors that reduce prejudice and increase friendships (positive factors) include: status equality (Hewstone & Brown, 1986), intimate and personal contact, common goals that cannot be achieved independently (Johnson & Johnson, 1992; Schofield, 1995), support from recognized authorities (Schofield, 1995; Patchen, 1982), and favourable social climates for inter-group

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contact and harmony (Bochner, 1982). The factors that increase prejudice and intergroup anxiety (negative factors) include unequal status, unpleasant and involuntary contact, group competition (Sherifs, 1970), and social norms that promote or encourage racial inequality (Bochner, 1982).

The contact hypothesis has been met with mixed empirical evidence, mainly because it is ambiguous whether these factors are necessary or sufficient conditions for positive intergroup contact. For example, physical proximity allows personal contact, but does not necessarily lead to intimacy or promote integration (Moody, 2001). As empirical evidence recognizes and supports, cooperating to achieve a common subordinate goal facilitates harmonious inter-group relations. Indeed, extracurricular activities provide important opportunities to mix with other students (Quiroz, Gonzalez, & Frank, 1996; Moody, 2001), but on Hong Kong campuses, segregation is also prevalent in extracurricular activities such as student associations. Existing evidence also shows that cross-group friendships can be developed through endorsement from authorities, especially school authorities, which is strong in Hong Kong universities because they all have various policies, regulations and other organizational arrangements to increase the diversity of the student body and facilitate mingling. Yet segregation prevails. Therefore, it is necessary to identify the key features of the processes of intergroup interaction, such as the conditions under which intergroup contact reduces and abates anxiety or uncertainties.

Personal Contact, Affection and Friendship Building

The importance of personal and intimate rather than casual and superficial interactions has long been emphasized by the contact theory (Allport, 1954; Amir, 1969). Emotion and affectivity are considered mediating processes by which contact can reduce bias. Indeed, the major factor holding friendship ties together is affectivity (Litwak & Szelenyi, 1969, p. 469).

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Ultimately, intimate and prolonged contact provides sufficient information about another person, which helps overcome initial group prejudice.

This emphasis on personal and intimate contact points to the importance of emotions in intergroup contact (Pettigrew, 1998). Negative emotions, such as anxiety during initial encounters, can spark negative reactions (Islam & Hewstone, 1993; Stephan, 1992; Stephan & Stephan, 1992; Wilder, 1993a, b). However, positive emotions, such as affection, can improve attitudes toward the entire outgroup (Batson et al., 1997; Finlay & Stephan, 2000).

The importance of emotion or affection is particularly true given the *guanxi* culture in Chinese societies (Barbalet, 2015). Chinese interpersonal relationships emphasize the establishment of *guanxi* with others (Qi, 2012), which is defined by Barbalet (2014, p. 4) as "...a form of asymmetrical exchange of favors between persons on the basis of enduring sentimental ties (*renqing*) in which enhancement of public reputation or face (*mianzi*) is the aspirational outcome". Certainly, building *guanxi* ties is a volitional and calculative process (Benford, 2011; Lee, 2010) as they are an investment intended for social exchange, and there are considerations, such as the potential returns (Benford, 2011; Lee, 2010).

However, because *guanxi* also means long-term relationships and commitment, it entails emotional attachment and reciprocating obligations (Barbalet, 2015). For example, in South Korea, strong particularistic ties are based on kin, educational institution (school/university) and region (Horak, 2014, p. 87) because they provide tolerance, mutual understanding and trust (Kim, 2000, p. 179). The strongest *guanxi* are familial ties of sentiment and obligations, kin, regional origin-based, and pseudo-kin university/school ties (Fei, 1992; King, 1991).

Thus, social relations formed in schools are very meaningful to university students in Mainland China. Hong Kong university students realize the necessity of building relationships

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with fellow students, both ingroup and outgroup, but strong ties can only be built under particular conditions. Since many students merely have superficial contact, we must ask: what are the conditions that facilitate intimate contact? How would positive emotions and feelings about others emerge during the contact processes?

Data and Methods

To answer those questions, I collected data from four public universities in Hong Kong (hereafter referred to as U1, U2, U3, and U4). They were chosen because they have different student bodies and Mainland Chinese student community size. The latter is key because existing research finds that a cohesive and large minority group is more likely to separate from local society, and the members tend to demonstrate reluctance to learn the local language (Schumann, 1986).

I interviewed eighty students (twenty from each university with ten Mainland Chinese and ten locals), who were recruited through a combination of snowball and quota sampling. They were selected through individual networks, public recruitments, and university administrative offices. The non-random sampling was driven by theoretical assumptions. Even though this is exploratory qualitative research, the sampling process includes respondents from diverse backgrounds: students of various academic disciplines with various levels of participation in student associations, and living on or off campus.

The interviews aimed for a detailed understanding of whether students interact with outgroup members and why. Daily life and online activity information were solicited, so that the interview questions included those on basic demographics, social network composition, social media activities, daily university life routines (both on and off campus) and social activities, and attitudes toward other students. I illuminated the patterns of university life, interaction and social

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media use through the interview data with special attention given to the interaction details.

During the interviews, attention was paid to how respondents explain and conceptualize their daily social interaction with others from different categories (classmates, roommates, local versus non-local, close friends, acquaintances), and special attention was given to episodes of online and offline encounters with others. These allow for a general analysis of the relationship between their daily life and how and with whom they form friendships.

The interviews were semi-structured to ensure consistency, that is, a list of the interview questions were prepared to guide the interviews. However, each interview did not have to follow the same order or structure for smooth and natural conversations. All students were interviewed in their mother tongue with Mainland Chinese students in Mandarin, and local students in Cantonese. The interviews were usually conducted in an office space on campus to ensure privacy and audio recorded with consent. The recordings were then transcribed into Chinese by research assistants. Data analysis was conducted on the Chinese transcripts. I translated the quotes into English.

I also interviewed university faculty and staff members. They included the dean of student affairs at all of the universities and 4 residential hall wardens on their observation of student interaction patterns and living situations, and 2 university registry staff for enrollment details, curriculum arrangements, and the number of undergraduates enrolled in exchange or study-abroad programs. I also reviewed existing data from the university registry's offices to achieve an overview of the organization of college life and its transformations over time. Data obtained include basic undergraduate demographic information and curriculum arrangements.

Offline observations on how students mutually interacted in public spaces took place on campuses from October 2012 to September 2015. I made multiple visits to the residential halls

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that lasted from 30 minutes to 4 hours where I asked both sets of students about dorm life and their daily interactions. During the offline observations and visits to student residential halls, I also informally interviewed students and hall wardens. Field notes were written immediately afterwards, including for example, information on when the students wake up or eat their meals.

The arguments presented here use a combination of thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012) and analytic induction (Goldenberg, 1993; Katz, 2001). Thematic analysis allows new patterns and ideas to develop from observations. The findings presented here, such as the importance of “daily routines”, emerged from long-term observations and analysis of the interview transcripts. Current theoretical ideas on intergroup contact, such as “personal contact”, “support of authority” and “equal status” were used as the tentative analytic frameworks. I verified the research findings against the analytic frameworks and found that surprisingly, even when the students frequently met and contacted outgroup members, they remained within their own social group. However, at times, the boundaries suddenly vanished and cross-group bonding occurred, which facilitated long-term friendships and change in views of the outgroup members in general. Then, through analytic induction, I identified similarities to develop new concepts or ideas (Ragin and Amoroso, 2010), such as the importance of space and daily routines. I “named” these patterns as “fragmented daily living space”, “defended interpersonal space” and “politicized online space”. The terms were validated against the data and revised to better capture the situation of the students. Next, I discuss some of the alternative explanations for this phenomenon, before presenting my own arguments.

Language, Discrimination, and Motivations

While the four universities differ in many respects, such as ranking and housing options, all demonstrated segregation between the Mainland Chinese and locals. I noted in my

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observations and field visits that self-segregation prevailed despite imposed institutional arrangements.

Like many other contexts (Ochs, 1986), language is an important factor in Hong Kong. However, many of the interviewed Mainland Chinese students (Mandarin speakers) did not cite language as the primary factor that segregates them from Hong Kong students (Cantonese speakers). For example, some with inadequate Cantonese skills still engage in-depth with local students by using Mandarin, Cantonese and English simultaneously. However, others from the Canton area who speak Cantonese well still only fraternize with Mainland students.

Another important factor is discrimination. While discrimination against the Mainland Chinese in Hong Kong is increasingly prevalent due to the Hong Kong–China conflicts, the local students admitted during the interviews that their Mainland Chinese peers at the same university are different from tourists or new immigrants. In fact, the locals highly regard them as diligent students with high academic aspirations who are also financially well off. Moreover, many other international students (such as those from the US) also feel segregated from the locals. Ladegaard and Cheng (2014) found that non-local international students live completely separate lives on campus and do not work together, let alone socialize, with local Hong Kong students.

Another possible explanation is that Mainland Chinese students lack the motivation to interact with local students. However, the vast majority of interviewed Mainland Chinese students (90%) indicated that they are strongly motivated to build local *guanxi*. They understand *guanxi* with locals is important especially if they pursue employment in Hong Kong after graduation. However, many admitted that they were more interested when they first arrived in Hong Kong than afterwards. Thus, the lack of motivation is an effect, not a causal factor. This

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echoes Klineberg (1982) who found that study abroad substantially contributes to a less favourable opinion of the country of sojourn.

One of the most interesting findings of this study is that local students also do not interact with other locals at the same university, especially those who live off-campus or never participate in student associations. This finding will be discussed in a later section. Thus, language barriers, perceived discrimination, or lack of motivation cannot explain why Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong students do not interact. Rather, daily life routine prevents engagements with depth and substance.

Space Matters

The in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations revealed that group segregation is caused by little daily personal contact due to fragmented daily living space, protected interpersonal space, and politicized online space. This lack of shared space in any form hardly allows for mutual engagement. Moreover, the sociopolitical context in Hong Kong, especially the spatial density and the recent Hong Kong–China conflicts, has further led to protection of interpersonal space and politicization of online space.

Fragmented daily living space

Despite sharing a campus and dormitories, daily living space is fragmented because of the current arrangements of university life. The spaces are especially fragmented in a city-state like Hong Kong because locals have easy physical access to other social networks, such as family and high school friends.

Of course, the universities try to make remedies that mix the students. A dean of the student affairs office echoed other deans and wardens:

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Our current policy is to facilitate the communication of students from different groups as much as possible, especially in student dormitories. We make sure that there is one Mainland Chinese, one local, and one international student in each room. For a double room, we assign a local student with a non-local student together (Dean of student affairs, U2).

However, the effects of institutional arrangements are very limited, if not negative. In addition, the number of undergraduates in study abroad programs has steadily increased. Since fewer stay on campus for all four years of their study, community ties are weakened. Bonds could be established with roommates or classmates, but many indicated that the exchange programs have disrupted potential close relationships:

The first semester when I lived in the hall, my roommate was a year 2 student. But in my second semester, he went on an exchange. My new roommate was an exchange student from a Mainland Chinese university. It was hard for me to adjust to both of them and build close relationships in such a short time. (Local 11, male, U1)

Cross-group friendships are also inhibited because many local students are not interested in socializing on campus, regardless of their housing arrangement. They often continue to prioritize existing social and family ties, instead of developing new relationships. Many also live off-campus and commute. Even if they stay in the dormitories, they return home during the weekends. In fact, many local students admitted that they do not interact with any of the university students because their emotional attachments to their high school friends are prioritized:

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People say that it's hard to find real friends at university, so I'd rather work alone. I don't even try to work with others in a group or make friends. My friends are my high school friends. (Local 35, female, U2)

As echoed by many local students, friendships are not cultivated on campus because doing so is difficult. Additionally, very few of the respondents have classes with their roommates, or even their own friends.

I spent three years at U1, but didn't have much of a relationship with other students. Classes are in a big lecture hall . . . over 100 students. I don't sit with the same people. We have very different schedules, and take different courses, so nobody gets to know each other. (Local 16, male, U1)

Thus, few activities with the same cohorts is the primary reason that close friendships cannot be forged. High school affords prolonged interaction with the same group of students in mutually engaging encounters which form emotional attachments. Since these are lacking at university, many feel lonely and have little sense of belonging.

Even when the university deliberately encourages interaction, time and space constraints thwart their efforts. For example, group projects are coordinated online and not in person, as observed by a dean of student affairs:

There are many selective courses. Even students in the same major and cohort might have very different courses in a particular semester. So they have little opportunity to see each other in person . . . [and] lack a strong sense of belonging to the department. (Dean of student affairs, U3)

The situation is even more dire between Mainland Chinese and local students because their daily routines are so different. The former tend to eat dinner, sleep, and get up earlier than

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locals. Different daily life schedules were the most prevalent source of conflict for the hall residents, and many students blamed their different schedules for the lack of cross-group interaction.

My roommate in my second year was a local law major, but we had very different schedules. When I woke up, she was still sleeping. When I went back at night, she was still out. I hardly ever saw her in my first month. (Mainland 4, female, U3)

Consequently, great efforts would be required to socialize with members of other groups. This is also true for hall activities, in which not only different routine schedules, but also non-local status prevent cross-group socializing as Mainland Chinese students lack the built-in family support and social opportunities of locals.

The halls have activities like hall cheers, watching football...But the [Mainlanders] think that [locals] spend too much time on those activities . . . which take place late at night. For example, we have midnight snacks, but they're like, "Eating at 3 a.m.? There's a class at 9:30 in the morning". So of course they don't come. Later when I went on an exchange, I had to do a lot of things myself, such as laundry and cleaning. Then I understood why they didn't ever have time. They had to fend for themselves. But we have family and can go home on the weekends. (Local 12, male, U2)

While mingling is considered important for friendship development, and opportunities are usually shaped by organizational features (Blau, 1977; Feld, 1981), there is little mingling afforded here as the students in this study occupy the same space but at different times, and engage in different activities on the same campus. This absence of mingling is due to differences in the organization of daily routine activities. Waters and Brooks (2011) also found that "local"

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students in an international diploma program in Paris returned “to their families” in the evenings, thus reducing potential social contact with international students.

Protected interpersonal space

The limited interaction that does take place between the Mainland Chinese and local students is at best restricted and difficult. The former constantly feel defensive because of the anxiety that comes from interacting in a highly dense city like Hong Kong and the current political climate. Living in a highly dense city, Hong Kong people are sensitive to actions that might cause others inconvenience. The Mainland Chinese students then worry about being judged, which negatively affects cross-group interaction.

People in Hong Kong have zero tolerance toward behavior that they think goes against the “rules”. But sometimes things are not done on purpose. For example, when we talk a bit too loud with friends on the MTR [Mass Transit Railway in Hong Kong] . . . I always feel judged by others. (Mainland 2, female, U3)

Another student, after spending the summer in the U.S., noted that social interaction in Hong Kong requires much more discretion:

There are few demands on people there [in the U.S.]. You can basically do whatever you want. But when I came back to Hong Kong, I always have to be very careful . . . there are so many rules . . . so I’m reluctant to talk to the locals. You never know if you’ve done something wrong. (Mainland 22, female, U2)

In addition, the Mainland Chinese students felt anxious about their language when interacting with locals, a worry that is less about incompetence and more about choice of dialect:

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I don't know when I should be speaking Mandarin, English, or Cantonese. When I speak in Mandarin, I have to talk slowly. I also avoid saying anything that [the locals] might not understand. (Mainland 17, male, U4)

Despite varying levels of fluency, many of the local and Mainland Chinese students felt less anxious with international students because English is the common language. Conversely, when Mainland Chinese students are talking to local students or vice versa, they often have to choose among Cantonese, Mandarin (this generation of Hong Kong students learn Mandarin at school, although their proficiency varies), or English (the official language of many universities in Hong Kong). They have to constantly defend their choice of language, and often feel the need to change the language when they can no longer defend their choice; either to others or themselves.

The political climate also contributes to the lack of free and open dialogue. When asked whether he socialized with local students, a Mainland Chinese student said:

Not much. Language isn't the only problem. Some of us are from the Guangdong Province and can speak Cantonese, but still don't feel that we have anything in common with the local students. It's probably political. Like for example, the Tiananmen Student Movement of 1989. Most of us are left wing about it to some extent. Here, they're pretty judgmental. You can't really talk to them without getting into a fight. . . . if we can be friends . . . it's likely . . . [with] the ones who are more easygoing [on political matters]. (Mainland 11, male, U2)

Thus identity is a social barrier that separates these students, and the different political standpoints contribute to identity. Indeed, twenty years after the return of Hong Kong to China, tensions continue to mount (Mathews, 2011) and are reflected in the local media, Facebook

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postings, and various Internet-infused protests against the Mainland Chinese (Chow, 2012).

Mainland Chinese students tend to have different viewpoints on events related to the Hong Kong-Mainland China conflicts, potentially causing strife in politically infused conversations.

Consequently, politics are taboo in interpersonal encounters:

With Mainland Chinese students, I don't have to worry that they might have different opinions about China, but [with] Hong Kong or Taiwanese students, I have to think twice.

(Mainland 33, male, U3)

This apprehension consequently prevents the development of relationships with depth and substance. These issues all contribute to a constant defense mechanism while engaging in cross-group interactions. The lack of open expression and resulting superficial conversations cause difficulties in engaging with others in a way that would reduce intergroup prejudice.

Politicized online space

Since social media is incorporated into daily routine, it could help transcend the physical boundaries of the offline world to foster cross-group interaction. However, the prevalence of political commentaries on social media in recent years, largely due to the changing political climate in Hong Kong, means that online spaces have become highly politicized. Conflicting political views are more visible and accessible than in offline encounters, which further prevent social interaction.

Interestingly, none of the students admitted to active political involvement. The sociopolitical context is not at the forefront of daily life. They referred to each other as “quite friendly and nice”, and both groups add each other as Facebook friends. However, since many of the anti-Mainland China discussions take place on Facebook (Adorjan & Yau, 2015), different

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viewpoints on the Hong Kong–Mainland China conflicts may then subsequently emerge. Thus, the Mainland Chinese students can be exposed to hostile discussions:

At first, I checked my Facebook, but now I feel that my Facebook friends are kind of extreme. I was interested in their views at the beginning, but then I stopped reading.

Sometimes [local students] unintentionally attack you. Most of them are really nice to me, but some talk very bluntly about these [political] issues on Facebook. Our friendship was originally OK, but now I don't feel so good about them. (Mainland 33, female, U2)

In fact, online space appears to be more politically infused than offline space:

A lot of the fights on Facebook are political. Many of the students are quite nice. But on Facebook, they are very [politically] radical. (Mainland 39, male, U4)

Conversely, Facebook postings by the Mainland Chinese also affect how the local students viewed them:

Their Facebook postings are really different from how they are in person. Sometimes they criticize Hong Kong but in a really arrogant way. They don't say those things in person. In person, we talk . . . and have a good time. (Local 25, female, U2)

Moreover, since technology and the interactional venue uncover or even amplify political differences, they obstruct cross-group interaction both on- and offline before real efforts can even be made. Thus, cross-group interaction is less desirable because of the extra effort:

Building relationships (*guanxi*) is an investment of time, energy and emotion. Even though I would like to make some Mainland friends at university, it requires extra effort. I do interact with them but only for group projects and similar activities . . . practical rather than fun activities. We get together for the task . . . never talk to each[other] again. That's not enough to be friends. (Local 39, male, U4)

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The students pointed out that collaborations do not form friendships and contact is superficial because collaborations are instrumental-oriented activities. Extra efforts are thus necessary to overcome the obstacles caused by defended interpersonal space and politicized online space.

Crossing Social Boundaries

Despite the prevalence of group segregation and prejudice, some close, cross-group friendships did form at all of the universities. This development is permitted by mechanisms that facilitate enrollment in multiple courses together, or going abroad or off campus together for programs. Social boundaries are removed when there is the opportunity for mutually engaging encounters for a prolonged period of time.

Taking multiple classes together during an academic year is very conducive to the formation of social relationships, especially in programs with more compulsory courses. When students need to enroll in the same courses for an academic year or even two, they meet not only to complete assignments but also to dine together, socialize, or even engage in conversations unrelated to class work. For example, translation major students take many core courses together, and tend to have more sustained and deeper inter- and intragroup encounters:

[We] have quite a few compulsory courses [in my major] so we see each other all the time. . . . [We have] “excuses” or opportunities to meet up so we keep in touch. . . . Some of my best friends are locals in my translation classes. (Mainland 32, female, U3)

While the exchange and internship programs at the Hong Kong universities inhibit cross-group interaction between students on campus, once students are actually abroad or begin their off campus internship, sustained cross group interaction is facilitated because the new context fosters mutually-engaging experiences. These intensive and prolonged encounters result in a greater likelihood of cross-group interaction.

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Opportunities for a common social life and contact at multiple points in time seem to be imperative for overriding social boundaries and cultivating cross-group relationships. The students form closer bonds when intergroup contact cannot be avoided, which aligns with existing findings that when participants have no choice but to facilitate intergroup contact, the mean effect size in reducing prejudice is slightly greater than in situations where there are other options (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

A reason that friendships develop under this condition is that the students learn more about others at the personal level, which reduces stereotyping (Kawakami, Dovidio, Moll, Hermsen, & Russin, 2000). Also, more information reduces uncertainty in interactions (Crosby, Bromley, & Saxe, 1980; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986):

I met my best Mainland friend in a program in Guizhou, China. Why did I become friends with her and not the other Mainland students? Lack of contact. At U4, I was a “hi and bye” friend, even with other local students. But in Guizhou, we spent over one month together. Guizhou isn’t very developed . . . (so) we faced similar difficulties and had similar complaints. We were together all the time . . . So we found out everything about each other. I found out that Mainland students have some great qualities. They are very generous . . . and forgive small things. In fact, quite a few became boyfriends and girlfriends . . . some are still in the relationship. (Local 16, male, U4)

Interestingly, experiencing common problems, or “suffering together” was also mentioned by at least 8 other students as imperative for establishing cross-group friendships.

I still remember the summer program in Africa with a group of students from U1. We all got sick. So we couldn’t go anywhere but lie in bed. There was no internet and we had nothing to do but talk . . . we became best friends. (Local, female, U1)

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Some students expressed that “shared common experiences”, especially negative incidents, are conducive to building friendships, but only likely to happen outside of Hong Kong because normal social ties are cut off and there are no shared problems or difficulties in Hong Kong. Common challenges arise when the students are abroad, so they spend much more quality time together with prolonged intimate and all-encompassing interactions which build the foundations of enduring emotional attachments. Moreover, with strong emotional attachments to a member of the other group, the other group is then regarded with more empathy and less prejudice.

Conclusion and Discussion

I have examined the phenomenon of why Mainland Chinese students do not socialize with local Hong Kong students. Group segregation is not intentional, due to lack of motivation, or attributed to homophily preferences that are psychologically innate. As Reay et al. (2007) demonstrated, even though there could be desire and efforts to engage in cross-group interaction, contextual factors may prevent success. One factor is the absence of mutually engaging experiences facilitated by current university arrangements and sociopolitical conditions in Hong Kong. The different distribution of activities in terms of space and time mean that members of different social groups cannot engage in personal interaction, or become fully engaged to develop emotional attachments. The current sociopolitical climate also puts students on the defense during cross-group interaction and is further aggravated by social media due to the recent politicization of online space.

This study validates the negative factors that limit the ability to carry out interpersonal contact which would reduce intergroup prejudice. If contact does not reduce anxiety or

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uncertainty, intergroup friendship will still not take place. It is in this manner that the sociopolitical context influences interpersonal interaction because it increases the uncertainties involved in cross-group interaction (see also, Allan, 1998). On the other hand, the observations in this study suggest that opportunities to overcome anxiety and form bonds are necessary to cross social boundaries. Therefore, space shared in classes does not ease the initial anxieties related to socializing with unfamiliar others, at least not as much as being situated together in a foreign place. Only through prolonged intimate and all-encompassing contact at multiple points in time will inhibitions be reduced, and cross-group relationships cultivated.

This study also asserts the importance of shared physical or abstract space during friendship development. Wellman and Wortley (1990) argued that the salience of localities in social life have diminished due to the wide use of information and communication technologies. While this argument is valid in that friendship networks are now more geographically dispersed, the findings here imply that a shared space with prolonged intimate and all-encompassing interactions is still most conducive to cross-group interaction, especially among groups that have mutual prejudices, mainly because emotional attachments are more likely to be created.

The empirical case here is an atypical case given the unique ecology and social-political context of Hong Kong. However, the findings can provide a better understanding of cross-group interaction in other contexts by foregrounding the importance of space and daily routines. I identify that fragmented daily living space, defended interpersonal space, and politicized online space contribute to the lack of mutual engagements. While defended interpersonal space is unique to Hong Kong, fragmented daily living space also exists elsewhere. While online space has increased in politicization given the recent Hong Kong-China conflicts, exposure to different ideological standpoints is not specific to Hong Kong. Instead, empirical studies show different

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political views online are very common (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015). Therefore, fragmented daily living space is the key issue here, but can be negotiated with prolonged and personal contact through cohabitation with out-group members and a common schedule of daily activities, thus facilitating mutual engagement.

The following recommendations for Hong Kong universities are based on the study findings. First, since prolonged intimate and all-encompassing interactions off-campus are most conducive to facilitating cross-group friendships, these can be encouraged by, for example, assigning students with different backgrounds to the same internship program, and designing programs with site visits that allow congregation for weeks at a time, during which tasks are performed during the day and socializing takes place in the evening. Second, the curriculum structure can allow for enrollment in more courses with the same group of others (of the same major and cohort) for a longer period of time (1 or 2 years). Last but not least, more space and opportunities can be provided on campus for facilitating non-instrumental activities. Thus, inhibitions may be reduced, which allow interactions to take place with ease.

The limitations of this study come from the data. The sample is not statistically representative because this is exploratory qualitative research. For example, local students in Hong Kong include non-Chinese individuals. It would be interesting to study the interaction between non-Chinese local students with Mainland Chinese students. Further research can examine if ethnic minority students, such as Mainland students from Hui, Mongolia, or other Chinese minorities experience cross-group interaction with local Hong Kong students differently. There are also Mainland Chinese students who receive their high school education overseas (Australia, for example) or in international high-schools in Mainland China and then go to Hong Kong for university. Such students thus have richer experiences of interacting with others from

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diverse backgrounds and might react differently in cross-group interaction. Also, the micro-level social processes identified from this research, such as the relationship between participation in off-campus programs and the possibility of enjoying outgroup friendships, can be further testified with quantitative research.

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