

## **Home away from home? A space and place perspective of Western-educated mainland Chinese doctoral students at a Hong Kong university**

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### **Research Domains**

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

### **Abstract**

The cohorts of doctoral students at universities in Hong Kong are increasingly made up of mainland students who have obtained their previous degrees in elite Western universities. However, In the context of COVID-19 and Hong Kong's changing sociopolitical environment, these students are facing a unique set of challenges. On the one hand, their "chineseness" becomes a barrier to their integration into Hong Kong, which ironically is a Chinese territory. On the other, their education in the West, which supposedly should help ease their transition to Hong Kong universities based on Western research and teaching models, only partially facilitated their psychological and academic adjustments. Taking education experiences in the West as a mediating factor, this paper applied a spatial framework to investigate mainland students' perception of the notions of ethnoscape and ideoscape, as they undergo the home(mainland)—host(West)—quasi-home(Hong Kong) transition.

### **Full paper**

International students' mobility in higher education (HE) has traditionally been considered unidirectional from their home country to their overseas host. Mainland Chinese students represent the single largest group of international students. Consequently, there is voluminous literature studying their mobilities from disciplines as diverse as education, cultural studies, sociology, psychology, and geography. Despite the varied theoretical frameworks these studies employ, they all, more or less, situate the participants in this dualistic world of home versus host. The globalization of HE has, in many aspects, altered the ways of obtaining a foreign degree. On the one hand, the phenomenal growth of transnational HE that has established joint-degree programs with Chinese universities or branch campuses in China means that students no longer need to travel abroad to receive a Western education. On the other hand, Chinese students do not necessarily stay in one overseas country for their studies as it has become increasingly common for students to carry out their studies in more than one host country. The changes in (im)mobility brought about by globalizing HE call for a rethink of students' education trajectory.

Our research seeks to expand the home-host spatial framework of student mobility by studying mainland students who have done their undergraduate/master's degrees (or both) at Western elite universities before embarking on doctoral studies at an elite Hong Kong university. In our conceptualization, the spatial framework is transformed to home-host-quasi-home/host. This picture is further complicated by the specialness of Hong Kong, which is simultaneously home and a host destination for mainland Chinese students. Hong Kong is a Chinese territory with deep Cantonese cultural roots. At the same time, it was a British colony for 156 years and thereby has assimilated many Western cultural norms. Politically, it is a different political entity from mainland China under the "one country, two systems" governance regime. During the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests, university campuses had become epicenters of some of the unrest. As a result, local and mainland students were inadvertently separated into two ideologically dichotomous camps.

Theoretically, this paper employs two of Appadurai's five scapes of

global flow, namely ethnoscape and ideoscape, to investigate students' multi-journey mobility. For ethnoscape, we explore why mainland students chose to study in Hong Kong instead of continuing their studies in the West and how their sojourn in the West facilitates or hinders their acculturation in Hong Kong. Ethnoscape allows us to trace the rationales of space-crossing and if and how a space is transformed into a place or even a community, which is a place occupied by people who share the same identity. In other words, we also want to understand if and how the space they come from and traverse becomes a place or community for them. Ideoscape refers to the flow of ideas, images, and their nexuses. Distinctive cultural, social, economic, and political differences exist between mainland China, the West, and Hong Kong. We investigate the ideas and values that mainland students ascribe to these spaces, such as the notions of "East", "West", "internationalization", "world-class" universities, and "society". We are also interested in understanding the ways in which their experience in the West shapes their conception and perception of these ideas. Finally, we try to identify the senses of connectedness, ambivalence, and disjuncture experienced by students between their different ethnoscapings and ideoscapings.

Methodologically, this paper is qualitative research. Thirty in-depth semi-structured interviews—each lasting on average over one hour—with mainland doctoral students were conducted to gauge their views and perceptions on their academic, cultural, social life in the Mainland, the West, and Hong Kong, as well as their reflections of the perceived similarities and difference of the aspects mentioned above across these locations.

We hope this paper contributes to Chinese student mobility literature in several ways. Theoretically, this study explores the cultural and spatial flows of globalizing HE through the multi-dimensionality of student mobility. In turn, it allows us to investigate the dilemmas or struggles faced by acculturating individuals as they navigate the connectedness and disjuncture across different spaces. Empirically, our study has practical implications for how mainland students' adaptation and educational experience can be ameliorated in Hong Kong, a city noted for its cultural hybridity and currently at a critical juncture of significant political and social transformations. The long-

term sustainability of Hong Kong's status as a leading education hub depends on the continual flow of talented mainland students who have already become the backbone of postgraduate research at its many universities

## **References**

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