

Children's bodies are not capital: arduous cross-border mobilities between Shenzhen and Hong Kong

Abstract

This paper foregrounds and unpacks the significance of education in the migration of children in contemporary Asia, drawing principally on research undertaken in Hong Kong and across the political border with Mainland China (Shenzhen). Using the example of cross-boundary schooling, the paper explores the role played by children in emergent transnational topologies and reflects on the significance of this for understandings of 'migration'. In this paper, we argue that whilst children are harbingers of future migration and their mobilities appear, on the surface, to function seamlessly, in reality their experiences of mobility are very immediate and embodied: corporeal, emotional and invariably arduous. The arduousness and corporality of everyday mobilities for education are rarely explored in the extant literature and we therefore attempt to highlight this important aspect of children's experiences here.

Key words: Educational migrations; cross-boundary schooling; transnational topologies; arduousness; Hong Kong-Shenzhen; children and young people

Introduction

‘As we approach the Hong Kong-Shenzhen border, we are overwhelmed by the sight of dozens of school children moving towards us in crocodilian fashion, wearing matching uniforms and tags around their necks. They are moving, as they do every day, over the border from Mainland China to Hong Kong, to attend school. Twenty years ago, such mobility was rare – the few children that did this were exceptional. Today it is more like mobility on an industrial scale, involving highly choreographed movements and the necessity for docile bodies’ [Taken from fieldnotes, June 2018].

For many children, cross-border mobilities transpire not as an exception, novelty or aberration, but as a ‘way of life’. Mobility forms part of a young person’s ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu, 1984) – a taken-for-granted form of socialisation that occurs, within a household, from birth. Over the past 15 years, we have been undertaking research with young people in and from Hong Kong, some of whom could be classified in this way, as intrinsic movers, originating from families who have, in living memory, always ‘moved’¹ (see Skeldon, 1994). Aihwa Ong (1999) describes the Chinese in Hong Kong as:

‘[a] rather special kind of refugee, haunted by *memento mori* even when they seek global economic opportunities that include China...Hong Kong people are driven by the memory of previous Chinese disasters and shaped by their status as colonials without the normal colonial expectation of independence. They are people always in transit, who have become “world-class practitioners of self-sufficiency”... For over a

century, overseas Chinese have been the forerunners of today's multiply displaced subjects, who are always on the move both mentally and physically' (1999, p. 2).

What does it mean to be 'always on the move'? Our latest project, on cross-boundary schooling (CBS), involves a sample of children – born in Hong Kong but resident in Mainland China - who appear to embody just that. We begin with a fictionalised anecdote, taken from our recent fieldwork, to illustrate some of the key aspects of our arguments in relation to children's everyday mobilities.

Lily is eight years old. She was born in Hong Kong but lives with her parents and sister in Shenzhen, Mainland China, 50 minutes' drive from the Hong Kong border. Her sister attends school in Shenzhen, a short walk away, but Lily must engage in a daily commute of around two hours each way, over the border to Hong Kong for school. She rises every day at 5.30am to undertake this journey by bus, disembarking at the border with other children her age, crossing the boundary (passing through a check-point), and continuing on her journey to school. Frequently, she falls asleep on the bus and feels perpetually tired. She arrives home from school around 8pm, must then complete any homework and go to bed. She was born in Hong Kong, her parents tell us, for two main reasons – one to by-pass the one-child policy enforced in China at that time and, two, to be able to access a 'better' education system, opening up possibilities for her future (global?) mobility. Her sister, she reports, has a far easier (less tiring and strenuous) life. But Lily likes her school in Hong Kong – she has made good friends, many of whom also undertake this daily cross-border commute along

with her. She has also become rather fond of the nannies employed by the bus companies to take care of the children during the daily drive.

This short story hints at the complexities of education-related mobilities, but especially their quotidian, immediate and embodied nature. Children experience these not as some seamless ‘flow’ or abstract migration strategy, but their whole young lives are shaped by their cross-boundary schooling practices. From this point of departure, our paper will make three main points within its broader argument: 1) that mobilities exist within the habitus of many young people within (E and SE) Asia; 2) that ‘education’ represents a primary discursive tool in the reasons given for/justifications of ongoing mobilities; and 3) that educational mobilities are often, in reality, difficult and corporeal: arduous, tiring, boring and dispiriting (drawing upon our empirical findings). This view challenges the tendency in the extant literature to depict children’s bodies in abstract as ‘body-capital’ (discussed below). Whilst we acknowledge that many children travel vast distances to attend school on a daily basis without crossing a border or boundary, as we hope to show, the act of border crossing and the trans-border habitus that exists in the region (Xu, 2017) makes CBS a particularly compelling case.

More broadly, the paper highlights the role played by children in emergent transnational topologies. Foregrounding children’s movement evokes the idea of ‘embodied statecraft’, discussed recently by Mitchell and Kallio (2017) in relation to Jennifer Hyndman’s (2001) work on feminist geopolitics, where states (and borders) are made through quotidian movements. Arguably, the daily border-crossing mobilities of CBS children help make and maintain the boundary between Hong Kong and the Mainland. Furthermore, children are harbingers of *future* migration. They are migrants ‘in the making’ and their educational

mobilities have longer-term implications: for themselves, their families and the geo-political landscape. Young people's mobilities in search of educational opportunities are increasingly prevalent, and links have been drawn between mobility for education and mobility later in life (Findlay et al 2012). And yet their movements are, for them, immediate (about the 'now' and not about the future); they are raw and felt with intensity. Over the past decade, research in social science on 'educational mobilities' has tended to focus more on longer term strategies (with the emphasis on strategizing) than short-term experiences (c.f. Forsberg, 2017a). This paper attempts to focus on both – considering how cross-boundary schooling is indicative of questions around transnational migration, global householding, geopolitics, the 'geo-social' and household social reproduction (Ho, 2017) as well as what it indicates for children's every-day, embodied experiences.

Educational mobilities in/out of East Asia within the *habitus*

According to Bourdieu (1990, p. 56), the habitus is 'embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history – it is the active presence of the whole past of which it is a product'. Consequently, 'the most improbable practices are therefore excluded, as unthinkable, by a kind of immediate submission to order that inclines agents to make a virtue of necessity, that is, to refuse what is anyway denied and to will the inevitable' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 54). Children are socialised into their particular (group) habitus. Through exposure to friends and family (occupying the same social group) they develop schema by which they learn to organise their thoughts and actions, resulting in the development of certain attitudes that appear 'natural' but are, in fact, a direct consequence of their upbringing. It is another way of conceiving the process of socialisation into a particular 'life-world', providing individuals with a sense of their place in the world ('knowing your place') and thereby

ascribing the range of necessities and possibilities that they attach to their everyday lives. For many young children in East Asia, mobility (for education) is seen as natural and necessary. And yet, whilst mobility (and the propensity to be mobile) *may* be part of children's habitus, how they respond to the situations they encounter through mobility is not; hence the mismatched expectations between parents and children that often occur in migrant households (particularly transnational households, where physical absence is common).

Habitus can also be used to indicate one's orientation towards a border or boundary: Xu (2017a, 2017b), for example, has considered the notion of habitus explicitly in relation to Hong Kong - Mainland China in her study of Mainland students in Hong Kong. Xu proposes the concept of 'transborder habitus' (2017b), where the border can indicate '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' (p. 2). Many of the children undertaking CBS will have been socialised to accept such a trans-border habitus.

The wider literature would suggest that many children, globally, perceive mobility or border-crossing for education as unexceptional and anticipated. There has been a great deal of interest, for example, in the transnational household formations represented by so-called 'kirogi' families, originating from South Korea. These have been defined as 'families that are separated between two countries for the purpose of children's education abroad' (Lee and Koo 2006, p. 533; Kang and Abelman, 2011). Other work has considered the mobility patterns of older children – the 'astronaut' families and 'parachute-' or 'satellite kids' found in North America, New Zealand and Australia (Author 2002, 2003; Zhou 1998). The reasons for migration, research has shown, are often multifaceted, but almost always encompass an

overriding concern with children's education (Kobayashi and Preston 2007; Author 2002). This literature often hints at the difficulties faced by these children (caused, for example, by separation from parents) but rarely explores the daily challenges and the intimate and corporeal nature of physical movement (Finn and Holton, 2019). For these children, migration involves longer-term resettlement and not quotidian commuting. The physicality and materiality of travel, as well as the site of the border, have been insufficiently explained in educational mobilities (cf. Xu, 2017), and this is something we hope to redress in our research on CBS.

The complex meanings of 'education'

When it comes to migration, education is seldom about 'knowledge', 'content' or 'pedagogy'. The importance of education is largely symbolic (after Bourdieu, 1984; Goldthorpe 1996) and closely tied to capital accumulation strategies, inextricably linked to an elemental concern with social reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979, Bourdieu 1984, 1986, Mitchell et al. 2004). In the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, capital, in its various forms, is integral to societal stratification. He writes:

'the structure of the distribution of the different types and subtypes of capital at any given moment in time represents the immanent structure of the social world, i.e., the set of constraints, inscribed in the very reality of that world, which govern its functioning in a durable way, determining the chances of success for practices.'

(Bourdieu, 1986, p. 242)

Access to forms of capital, he suggests, determines the life chances of social groups, whilst the consequent distribution of life chances tends to be fixed and self-perpetuating. Capital has the propensity ‘to reproduce itself in identical or expanded form [...] to persist in its being [...] a force inscribed in the objectivity of things so that everything is not equally possible or impossible’ (Bourdieu, 1986, pp.241-242).

Recent scholarship on the contemporary Chinese diaspora references the social reproduction strategies of middle-class families as they endeavour to maintain or increase their capital through migration (Leung, 2013). Education is a key form of cultural capital. As Ong (1999, pp. 18 - 19) has written: ‘Chinese entrepreneurs are not merely engaged in profit making; they are also acquiring a range of symbolic capitals [including education] that will facilitate their positioning, economic negotiation, and cultural acceptance in different geographical sites’. Through CBS, households are attempting to secure the future social and economic status of their families through strategic investment in the cultural capital of their children.

Cindi Katz’s (2017) project on ‘childhood as spectacle’ (2008, 2011, 2017) articulates the ways in which children might be seen as: ‘accumulation strategy, as commodity, as ornament and as waste’ (2017, p. 3). She writes: ‘These kinds of practices smuggle with them an almost magical ‘investment’ in the child as oneself, one’s future, and *the* future’ (Katz 2017, p. 4). Here Katz draws on Foucault, also, to explain the ‘concerted cultivation’ (and its disciplining effects) that go along with the accumulation of cultural capital through the child:

‘The social reproductive practices associated with the concerted cultivation of children are labors of love, but they are also a means of cultivating parents in a Foucauldian sense. These cultural forms and practices of class formation make a space of conformity and competition, a realm of social life that parents often feel compelled to participate in so their children ‘stay in the game’. All the more so when the game is unclear’ (Katz 2017, p. 5).

Education and, specifically, forms of migration tied to education, are precisely about such ‘magical ‘investment’ in the child as...*the future*’ – their future, but also their family’s future.

As a form of cultural capital, education is more than just institutionalised credentials. Cultural capital also ‘presupposes embodiment’ (p. 244), involving a process of incorporation that, ‘insofar as it implies a labor of inculcation and assimilation, costs time, time which must be invested personally by the investor’ (Bourdieu 1986, p. 244). Education is also, therefore, assumed to reflect embodied competences. Recent scholarship on the spatial strategies of middle- and upper-class Chinese families has made reference to the deliberate and self-conscious fostering of cultural competences within children; Ong (1999, p. 91) has argued that the ‘would-be immigrant often acquires an intensified sense of him- or herself as body capital that can be constantly improved to meet new and shifting criteria of symbolic power’. Hong Kong Chinese families are *supposed to be* extremely knowledgeable about the types (and locations) of capital they covet. As Ong (1999) has written, these families seek:

‘the kinds of symbolic capital that have international recognition and value, not only in the country of origin but also in the country of destination and especially in the transnational spaces where the itineraries of travelling businessmen and professionals intersect’...

However, the existing literature has tended to overlook the importance of a specific, geographically embedded market for these cultural competences and the frequent ‘failure’ of such strategies (Author 2015). It has also overlooked how difficult and challenging daily mobilities can be.

In sum, the literature has drawn three main points in relation to children’s educational mobilities within East Asia. First, education is understood as a form of embodied cultural capital and pursued as a strategy of household social reproduction. Children are seen to embody this capital – and yet, the literature pays scant attention to children’s embodied (corporeal) experiences of educational mobility – something we do in this paper. Instead, their bodies are ‘abstracted’. Second, and related, the literature stresses the future-oriented nature of educational migratory strategies – children’s ‘body capital’ is about *the future*. They are an investment now for some future ‘pay off’. In this paper, in contrast, we want to stress the immediate and present nature of children’s (and parents’) experiences of CBS. There is little concern with ‘the future’ – the present is all-encompassing. And a third point emerging from the literature concerns the apparent ‘ease’ with which Chinese families are able to border-cross and live ‘transnational’ lives. In contrast, as we will explore below, families stressed the difficulties they faced – how arduous CBS was and is.

A note on research methods

The project on which this paper primarily draws involves an in-depth qualitative examination of the daily mobility patterns of children, their families and the infrastructure surrounding the phenomenon of cross-boundary schooling (bus companies, homestays, schools and teachers). The field ‘site’ is the border between Hong Kong (Special Administrative Region) and Shenzhen (Mainland China) (Figure 1) and the area of travel between home and school.



Figure 1: the Hong Kong – Shenzhen political boundary

The project has involved in-depth interviews and ethnography undertaken with twelve households, residing in Mainland China with at least one child commuting daily to Hong Kong for school (either now or in the recent past). These households were selected partly

through personal contacts, partly by ‘snowballing’ and by participating in a WeChat group. We have also interviewed older individuals who undertook the commute for a while and ‘gave up’, other family members of these children, school teachers who have close contact with CBS children and border officials and have monitored public WeChat [social media] accounts and advertisements relating to CBS. Observations have been taken at different border crossing points and different times of the day and also during travel with families moving between their homes and the border. These data are consequently a mix of detailed ethnographic fieldnotes and interview transcripts which we have analysed thematically. We are interested in exploring the everyday realities of cross boundary schooling – how it is experienced (by children and wider family members). And also in understanding the *meaning* of ‘education’ in the context of such an ostensibly extreme daily routine and how children’s and women’s bodies are implicated in educational migrations.

Daily border-mobilities for schooling between Hong Kong and Shenzhen

The particular case of cross-boundary schooling provides a fascinating example of the intersection of mobilities, materialities and capital in children’s education (Ai 2017). In this project, we explore the daily ‘commute’ undertaken by tens of thousands of children who live in Mainland China and attend school in Hong Kong. Their experience rests on the differential rights granted to citizens/residents born on one or other side of the Hong Kong-Mainland border. As Chan and Ngan (2018, p. 145) note, ‘even after Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China in 1997, the Hong Kong-Shenzhen border continued to operate as an international, rather than an internal, border’. Cross border schooling (CBS), therefore, involves a materially complex form of migration, enacted on a daily basis.

In the decade between 2001 and 2011, the number of babies born in Hong Kong to Mainland parents increased from 620 to 35,000 (Chee, 2017). Chee (2017) notes the class background of mothers choosing to give birth over the border in Hong Kong. The early ‘wave’ was mostly from the middle-class whilst, more lately, mothers have been increasingly from working class and rural backgrounds. These children, usually born to Mainland resident parents, have no right to attend school in China (they lack essential *hukou*¹). They are Hong Kong residents (a status automatically granted to a person of Chinese descent born on Hong Kong soil since 2001) and their access to education, healthcare and other social services is tied to this. Fascinatingly, in the cases we have examined, it is usual to have siblings, within the family, with different residence statuses. One child will attend school in Shenzhen and the other will commute daily over the border, creating fascinating dynamics and differential experiences of educational mobilities within the household. There are currently an estimated 30,000 so-called CBS children moving in this way daily, although estimates do vary.

Whilst there has been significant media coverage of CBS in both the Chinese and English-language press, fewer academic studies have explored this phenomenon, and those that have, tend to consider the psychological impacts on the children from a ‘social work’ or ‘policy’ perspective. Some exceptions are found in a handful of recent papers (Chan and Ngan, 2018; Chiu and Choi, 2018; Chee, 2017). Chee (2017) considers CBS from the viewpoint of Mainland Chinese mothers, whose original decision to give birth in Hong Kong has resulted in a life-time of being ‘trapped’ by incessant mobilities. This standpoint – seeing educational mobilities as entrapment rather than ‘freedom’ – is unusual yet enlightening. Interestingly, the paper focuses on the infrastructure of the border and border crossing, and the ways in which

¹ Hukou is the geographical system of household registration used in Mainland China. Possession of hukou determines access to jobs, healthcare and schooling for children.

infrastructures “circumscribe” mothers’ border crossing experiences, whilst at the same time their mobility is ‘compelled’. In this paper, mothers tended to accompany their children, who often lived in Hong Kong during the week, whilst they attended school. However, the mothers were only in possession of a temporary (3 month) visa which had to be renewed frequently, and this could take a few weeks to process. According to Chee (2017: 208), ‘these Mainland mothers see no end to their recurring border crossing ordeals’. The main conclusions drawn by this paper include an assertion about the enduring ‘power of the border’ (despite this being, in effect, an ‘internal’ border) and the ‘infrastructural assemblages’ (immigration, security, visas and policing) that shape the border and border-crossing experiences (p. 210). Chan and Ngan (2018), in contrast, focus more on the experiences of the CBS young people, in the context of family strategies, resources and constraints.

Cross-boundary schooling is experienced in various ways, not least through the physicality of transportation (the bus, on foot, by car) and the ‘hardness’ of the border between Hong Kong and the PRC (Author, forthcoming). Despite the fact that Hong Kong has, for over twenty years now, been a Special Administrative Region of China, the border remains writ large and imposing with check points, guards, customs, cameras, channels and signage. People are very much policed over the border – it is by no means a fluid zone of travel. That said, CBS children experience a more familiar, amenable border than many other ‘migrants’, using their electronic passes to scan themselves over in a fairly unproblematic way.

There are different ways in which young people travel to, and cross, the border. Older children travel independently, using public transport, and often meet up with friends at the

border to cross. We saw several smaller groups of older children during our observations at the border.

A group of older boys sat together on the seats, apparently waiting for something or someone. Although they were 'together', there was little talking amongst the group. Most of them were hunched over playing games on mobile phones. A smaller group (three) of slightly younger boys stood together away from the flows of people and talked, with their head down. One of them kicked the wall mindlessly. They looked bored and a bit dejected. [Taken from fieldnotes, June 2018]

Younger children are nearly always accompanied in some way – either by a relative on either side of the check point, by a Mainland parent on a visitor visa, or a Hong Kong resident parent. The most striking visual impression, however, is made by the children on the school bus – there are several licenced private bus companies offering services expressly for CBS children. These will employ a nanny ('aunty X') to accompany the children (keep them in line, keep them safe) and the children wear a name tag around their neck with the name of the nanny. The normality of CBS, however, does not mean children (or parents) find it 'easy'. On the contrary – our interview transcripts are full of lamentation on how 'hard' the whole process is/was. In what follows, we consider the extent to which CBS is part of children's habitus, before focusing on i) why CBS is pursued and ii) the physical strain it involves.

Taken for granted: daily mobilities and children's habitus

CBS is a ‘strategy’ pursued by families from birth, and even prior to conception, in many cases, as the following quotations from interviews indicate:

‘Even until the day I gave birth in Hong Kong, I was still hesitant and worried about the troubles and headaches later on...’ (YQ has two children; one born in China and one in Hong Kong).

‘She was born in Hong Kong...when she was three years old, many Hong Kong born babies went to Hong Kong for kindergarten, so we did that too’ (LSC has two daughters; the youngest was born in Hong Kong)

In 2017, the Mainland government changed the law to allow some children born in Hong Kong to attend Mainland schools. When the children in our sample were born, however, the only option for Hong Kong resident children was to commute over the border or to pay extortionate private school fees on the Mainland. Consequently, parents had known, from the time of conception of their second child, that mobility would (out of necessity) become part of their daily lives. The families live within what Xu (2017) has called a ‘transborder habitus’ – where the border is a feature in their daily lives in a way that has become almost normalised. Most of the young people we have talked to speak of the border in a matter-of-fact way. Some, however, saw their border crossing (especially those that have been doing it for more than a decade) as an ‘achievement’ and a marker of ‘resilience’.

Mobility is an undeniable ‘feature’ of their daily lives. For many of the younger children, the school bus is a significant place (representing far more than a mere ‘mode of transportation’) where they spend a great deal of time, over the school year. The seating arrangements on the bus, the way it is decorated, the playing of nursery rhymes over the loud speaker, the moments spent talking and more often sleeping, represent more than just ‘travel’ (Sheller and Urry 2006; Urry 2000; Adey 2006) – they are profoundly formative experiences in children’s lives (Gustafson and van der Burgt 2011; Author 2017; Ladru and Gustafson, forthcoming).

Several of the families we talked to had ‘given up’ with CBS, finding it too arduous, and instead put their child in (private) school in Shenzhen. This example from one family, in the interview transcript of a mother (YQ), makes this point very well:

The whole process was very tiring. My husband also understood that I am tired. Because he just got up early in the morning to send us to the port, he didn’t send the kid to school in Hong Kong. But he realized how difficult it was for me and for the kid.... By the end of 2017, around November, the weather was cooler, it was harder for the child to get up, and it is more tiring for him. Once upon a time, my son said to the teacher by himself, he said, “I am too tired, I don't want to go to school, I was so tired that I want to drop out, I won't come tomorrow”. Then, the teacher called me immediately. At that time, for some Fridays, he also went to interest [extra-curricular] classes in Hong Kong, it was like, every Friday, he got up around 6am, he finished all the classes around 4:45pm in the afternoon. I picked up him at school, then sent him to the tutoring centre in Hong Kong. Sometimes he was hungry, I will allow him have dinner first then go to tutoring classes. When we were back to port, it was around

8:00pm already. The child generally cannot get back home until 8:45pm, and he was particularly tired. A few times at the port, he lost his temper and cried.

Interviewer: It is very hard.

Indeed. He was extremely tired. Actually, it took only around 15 minutes from port to home, but you could tell, he was very tired when he cried. So that was the fourth time my husband said, let my son come back.

We will consider in more detail, below, the embodied experiences of CBS. Here, however, we want to consider some of the reasons why parents continued to endure CBS. As noted above, in 2017 the Mainland government changed its policy, subsequently allowing children with Hong Kong residency status (born to parents with Mainland hukou and property) to apply to public schools the PRC side of the border. Despite this shift in policy, however, many parents continued to send their children to Hong Kong for school. This reflects a general sense, amongst families, that schooling in Hong Kong is ‘better’ and the curriculum is preferred. More specific views were given by the parents we interviewed:

‘I like Hong Kong’s education very much...The teachers are very responsible and careful. And the class size is small. For instance, there are around 25 students in one class in primary school; in the Mainland there are 50 – 60 students in one class...My son, although he is not an excellent student, he has more opportunities to attend activities, competitions and international exchanges in Hong Kong schools. Besides

academic work, I think, it seems that Hong Kong's schools offer more chances for the kids to develop their abilities'. (ZYY, has two children. Her younger son has commuted cross-boundary for 5 years, since he was six years old).

'I think Hong Kong's education is 100 years ahead of the Mainland. Maybe because of the UK's influence' (LXM has two children, both born in Hong Kong. Both commute from Shenzhen for school).

Unpack this notion a little, and the usual tropes around 'Westernised' schooling forms emerge – children are better schooled in the English language, they follow a preferred curriculum, teachers are better trained and qualified. Furthermore, children attain a less tangible form of cultural capital from spending time in Hong Kong, with other Hong Kong resident children. Despite recent massive development occurring in Shenzhen, Hong Kong retains an allure as a 'cosmopolitan', Westernised city and a spring board for future mobilities. According to Xu (2017a), Hong Kong people define themselves as having an 'autonomous cultural identity' involving (quoting Mathews, 1997: 3): 'Chineseness plus English/colonial education/colonialism' and 'Chineseness plus democracy/human rights/the rule of law' (Xu, 2017a, p. 3). When discussing Mainland Chinese (higher education) students opting to study in Hong Kong, Xu (2017, p. 5) rationalises their decision in relation to what she calls their 'Hong Kong dream'. This includes:

'their yearning to capitalise on Hong Kong's close alignment with international practices and standards, its English-rich environment, abundant opportunities for

exposure to cosmopolitan lifestyles and the chances to gain overseas experiences. The last characteristic was reflected in rich imaginations of Hong Kong as a sophisticated and inclusive society, which mirrors what Fong (2011) describes as a yearning for the ‘developed’ world (Xu 2015). Importantly, this Hong Kong dream was enmeshed with these students’ positioning of Hong Kong as a flexible space that would enable them to move with ease postgraduation, whether relocating abroad, remaining in Hong Kong, or returning to mainland China.’

A similar dream was articulated by our research participants.

‘I mean, many kids, in Mainland, they don’t have the chance to see a bigger world. They don’t have independent thinking...I don’t want my kids to become like that...I hope he will become a person with independent thinking....I think, now, China is developing so fast economically, but its education is quite centralized. When you implement the same education to different people, it will definitely cause problems. It is relatively easier to govern like this. And, at the same time, the system doesn’t want kids to have too many their own thoughts....so I say, China is still a good place for money-making, but I don’t want my kids to stay in this environment forever’ (TY has two sons – one born in Hong Kong, the other born in the United States).

Children are assumed to acquire, by osmosis, a more global, outward-facing outlook by attending school in Hong Kong, even though a large portion of each day is actually

(ironically) spent on a bus. One young man told us that by sending him to Hong Kong for schooling, his parents had assumed he would subsequently go ‘overseas’ (to a Western institution) for university (and he did, to Canada).

Arduous mobilities

Educational mobilities may often be future-focused strategies but they are also, for children, very much the present. It is therefore incumbent upon us to reflect upon the implications of educational strategies, described above, for children’s (and parents’) everyday, embodied experiences, emotional and otherwise. Very little literature on student mobilities has considered how difficult it can be (although see Abelmann and Kang, 2014; Author 2015). Rather, the focus of scholarship has tended to rest on the success of the ‘strategy’ (to what extent capital has been accumulated and status reproduced) (Ong, 1999). The privileged nature of students’ backgrounds is frequently foregrounded (Findlay et al, 2012). Other mobile children, however are not privileged to the same degree and some face challenging social circumstances. In her book *Children of Global Migration*, Parreñas (2005) explores what she calls the ‘dismal view of transnational households’. She recounts the common responses given to the question “What are the effects of overseas migration to [sic] the family?”:

“1. They are neglected. 2. Abandoned. 3. No one is there to watch over the children. 4. The attitudes of children change. 5. They swim in vices. 6. The values you like disappear. 7. They take on vices. 8. Men take on mistresses. 9. Like, with the children, when you leave, they are still small, and when you come back, they are much older.

But they do not recognize you as their real parents. And what they want, you have to

follow. They get used to having a parent abroad and they are used to always having money. 10. That's true. That's true.” (Parreñas, 2005, p. 43).

The children we have encountered in CBS households are undoubtedly cared for but are also, for the most part, compelled to undertake their cross-border commute against their will. One of our participants, now an adult, who undertook cross border schooling for 12 years, lamented that he was never, ever, able to play with friends after school (having to board the bus immediately) and his childhood was, consequently, less rich and fulfilled for that. Chee (2016) draws unambiguous conclusions about how CBS indicates a form of entrapment. However, our findings do seem to indicate that children who have undertaken CBS are relatively 'successful' in their schooling and subsequent university outcomes. More work remains to be done, however, in understanding more precisely the function of CBS in localised class inequalities and social reproduction.

One sixteen-year-old we spoke to had been commuting for 10 years. He described his commute during primary school:

‘From primary one to primary four I took the cross-border bus. From primary four to now I cross the border by myself....[taking the bus] it was very tiring and difficult during primary one....everyday I needed to take the bus around 6am in the morning, came back around 6pm in the evening. That was the hardest time, I think’.

He continued later: ‘It was hard. Exhausting. I just wanted to have more sleep. Maybe my other classmates, they lived in Hong Kong, or nearby, they had more time to play around. I had to be in the bus’. When asked how he had felt when he started to commute on his own, independently, he replied: ‘More freedom. Lonely.’ This perfectly captures the contradictions inherent in CBS – it is at once enabling and restrictive, liberating and highly exhausting. He described needing to drink coffee in order to stay awake in school.

Waking up early was a commonly mentioned aspect of CBS.

‘My son got up around 6.05. some people asked me, why your kid gets up at 6.05am. Most of the kids have to get up at 5.30 in the morning. I said because I think sleep is very important for kids’ (YQ, has two children. Her youngest, a son, commuted for 4 years before returning to the Mainland attend private school in Shenzhen a year ago).

‘I never complain to my kids about it. I never tell my kids how hard it is...She [daughter] is happy when she leaves home, she is happy when arriving at school; just not very happy during the trip’ (LXM, has two children born in Hong Kong).

All of the families we talked to described in detail how tiring CBS was and how this impacted on all aspects of their child’s life (friendships, school work, leisure activities), placing huge constraints on their ability to lead what parents described as a ‘normal’ life. A conversation with a group of younger children (ages 6 – 11) also raised the issue of sleep:

Researcher: Do you think you get enough sleep every day?

A: Almost.

B: Sometimes tired. On Mondays, quite tired.

C: I am a little bit tired, every day.

Conclusions

Far from being an issue of peripheral importance, the educational mobilities of children and young people are profoundly significant for understanding the contemporary world.

Education is becoming more – not less – important as a differentiator, identifier and giver of life chances and is ever more closely tied to migration, globally. Crossing borders for education has geopolitical and geo-social implications.

Education within the Chinese diaspora has been widely studied: the literature has tended to emphasise a number of aspects in relation to this. First, education is equated with cultural capital and social reproduction within the Chinese family/household. Second, children embody the accumulation of capital. And third, migratory strategies related to education tend to be successful and undertaken by relatively privileged elites. Consequently, there has been a need to redress some of these misleading assumptions, as we have done in our project on cross-boundary schooling over the Hong Kong and Shenzhen political border. Here we have focused on the daily commuting of children with Hong Kong residency status living with

their families in Mainland China. In this paper, we have considered the extent to which daily mobilities are part of children and young people's habitus and why education (specifically the difference between schooling offered in Hong Kong and Mainland China) is such an important consideration in CBS. We then focused on the corporeal realities of CBS, particularly how tiring and arduous young people (and parents) find it to be. With this, we wanted to stress that for young people themselves, the concept of 'body-capital' and the importance of the future in CBS has no meaning, when they are concerned with day-to-day survival. The importance of children's daily experiences needs to become more prominent, we argue, in work conceptualising educational migration.

Acknowledgements

[to be completed]

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