

“Language and Culture Differences” and the “Real University Life” - Identity and Interaction Among students from Hong Kong and Mainland China at a University in Hong Kong

By

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Despite the aura of being “Asia’s World City”, a multicultural haven for people from all over the world, Hong Kong shows many signs of cultural segregation. In my time as an exchange student at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in the fall of 2012, I noticed that most of the students fit into one of two groups, Hong Kongers and mainland Chinese, and most members of one group do not tend to associate with members of the other, outside of when they are forced to in class. Most students attribute this lack of interaction to “language and culture differences” however, upon further inspection, mainland Chinese and Hong Kong people share more language and culture than they would like to admit. This research project attempts to measure the extent to which this separation exists, as well as to explore some reasons as to why it exists, including identity construction and language use, as well as differing ideas of what it means to “study abroad”. I have conducted nine interviews. three with mainland students, three with Hong Kong students, one with an exchange student from the United States, and two with university administrators. One each of the Hong Kong students is a postgraduate student; the rest of the students are undergraduates. For this paper, I will be using the British English terminology of “postgraduate” student to refer to someone who is pursuing an academic degree above a bachelor degree, as this is how the students themselves in Hong Kong used the term.

### **Very Brief Background on Hong Kong**

Hong Kong was first established as a colony of Britain in 1842. In 1899, Britain secured the lease of what is now known as the New Territories for 99 years from the Qing government of China. In the 1980s, Britain began negotiating the eventual return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty. On July 1, 1997, Hong Kong was officially returned to China, and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) was established, under the “One Country Two Systems”

Principle, which allowed for the autonomy of Hong Kong for the next fifty years. There is still a border crossing between mainland China and the Hong Kong SAR, and the SAR issues its own passports, which are a special type of passport of the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC). Hong Kong has never placed restrictions on Chinese citizens entering from mainland China, even when it was under British rule. The only restrictions were put in place and enforced by the government of the PRC. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the PRC government has put various quotas into place, but there have also always been people crossing the border illegally. Immigration, particularly from mainland China, has always been very important in Hong Kong (Siu, 2008). According to the 2001 census, 93.3% of the population was ethnic Chinese, and 35% of the population had been born in mainland China, and 64% had been born in Hong Kong (Hong Kong 2001 Population Census - Main Report - Volume I). Throughout all of Hong Kong's history as a territory separate from mainland China, there has been a large amount of immigration from China.



Figure 1 - Map of Hong Kong's position within Asia

## **Background on The Chinese University of Hong Kong**

The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) was founded in 1963 to serve as a counterpoint to the long established University of Hong Kong (HKU). As the second university in Hong Kong, CUHK brought together three private post-secondary colleges in its formation. The primary reason behind the creation of this second university was to “bridge the gap between the East and West”, by “preserving the past while exploring the future” (Annual Report, 2013). A major part of this is preserving traditional Chinese culture. This is evidenced in their award-winning Chinese language learning center, as well as in the requirement of Cantonese language class for international students, including those from mainland China. Like all universities in Hong Kong, courses are taught in English; however, CUHK does offer many courses in Cantonese as well. While HKU was originally intended to educate civil servants for the British colonial government, CUHK was founded to increase the number of positions available at Hong Kong universities, to enable education to be accessible to more people. The “Chinese” in Chinese University of Hong Kong refers to Chinese culture, not Chinese language. In Hong Kong society, HKU occupies a more elite status, similar to Harvard in the United States, while CUHK is seen as a more mainstream school, and offers more majors and degrees of study. There are now eight institutions of tertiary education funded by the University Grants Committee in Hong Kong, with the other six having been granted university status between 1991 and 1999.



Figure 2 - This map shows CUHK's geographic location within Hong Kong. HKU is located on Hong Kong Island, where most of the British colonists, as well as elite locals lived. CUHK however, is located in the New Territories, which is mainly populated by ethnic Chinese.

## Methodology

I conducted one-on-one and small group informal, unstructured interviews with students from both groups. I began with the same set of questions, but adapted to where the discussion lead. I mostly talked with undergraduate students, but I also included one postgraduate student. I was particularly interested in the perceived “language and cultural differences” that almost every student mentions as the reason for the separation. I also looked at the students' reasons for choosing to attend a university in Hong Kong, to see if that plays any role in their social interactions. I selected interviewees first from people I knew, and then used snowball sampling by finding out who they interact with. This helped me look at the interactions as a network, and see if the people one interacts with has the same ideas as them or not. I also interviewed two administrators at CUHK, both of whom had attended university in Hong Kong as undergraduates, although at the University of Hong Kong (HKU). I conducted these interviews for two main reasons. First, I wanted to get some historical context for education in Hong Kong,

and the differences among the universities. Second, I wanted to see if these issues between mainland Chinese and Hong Kong students existed or how significant it was at the time when they were students. Third, as administrators at CUHK, I wanted to see how they see the issue now, and what they are doing to change the situation, and if they deem any action necessary.

### **Reflexivity - A Brief Background on the Anthropologist**

In any anthropological research, it is important to understand the anthropologist as well as those being studied. Where the anthropologist is coming from can influence what they see and the conclusions they draw. Even the identity of the anthropologist can influence what they observe and learn from those they observe and talk with. Therefore, I will include a brief background of myself as related to this research project. I am a fifth year senior in the Sociocultural and Linguistic Anthropology track at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I am a white American man, and I was born and grew up in the Champaign, Illinois area. I am an outsider to both groups I researched, and it was clear to me that students in Hong Kong perceived me as an “other”, which I was reminded of many times as I was called a “foreigner”, or when people were surprised when I knew something about Hong Kong. I have studied abroad in Asia four times. Freshman year I did a two week program that visited universities in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and meeting students there is what first interested me in Asia. I also did two summer exchanges; one in Taiwan and one at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, in the summers of 2011 and 2010 respectively. Finally, in the fall of 2012, I studied abroad at CUHK again, this time for a full semester. I have been learning Mandarin Chinese on my own ever since my first trip to Taiwan; however I am not comfortable enough to conduct anthropological interviews in Chinese, therefore all my interviews were conducted in English.

Although I was somewhat familiar with Hong Kong and its culture before my fall 2012 study abroad, I took an anthropology class on the culture of Hong Kong with Professor Wai-Chi Chee and a class on ethnic groups, ethnic relations, and identities with Professor Paul O'Connor while I was at CUHK, and both of these courses helped me greatly with my research. I am still very interested in Hong Kong and its culture, and I am planning on doing more research on this topic in the future. Being perceived as an outsider had its benefits and negatives. Students from both groups were comfortable in talking with me, because non-ethnic Chinese students are often seen as not being involved in these tensions. They are just “there”, and have friends in both the local and mainland Chinese groups. On the other side, since I didn't speak either of their native dialects, they sometimes had trouble finding the best way to express their feelings in English. However, in the end, I believe that being an outsider gave me the best opportunity to talk to students from both groups.

### **“Chinese”**

It is important to understand the many different meanings and connotations of the word and label “Chinese”. “Chinese” can mean many things to many people, and it takes on different meanings in different contexts. In my research, I have identified four common and important definitions of “Chinese”. First, “Chinese” is most commonly used to refer to people who are citizens of the Peoples' Republic of China. Secondly, it can be used to refer to people of Han Chinese ancestry, regardless of their citizenship or where they live. Third, it can also be used to refer to the traditional culture of this ethnic group. Fourth, “Chinese” is also used as the name of a language or group of languages. However, different people have different meanings when they are talking about the “Chinese” language. In Hong Kong, where Cantonese is the most widely

spoken dialect, people will often refer to Cantonese as “Chinese”, while in other places, where Mandarin is the more commonly spoken dialect, “Chinese” refers to this. Due to political and historical events over the last two hundred years, the term “Chinese” has taken on new meanings. One way students from Hong Kong differentiate themselves from students from mainland China is by calling themselves “Hong Kongers” or “Hong Kong Chinese”. Students from the Peoples’ Republic of China are referred to as “mainland Chinese” or “mainlanders”. Often “mainlander” takes on a negative connotation when used in the Hong Kong context.

## **Mainland Chinese Students in Hong Kong**

### **Getting to Hong Kong**

Secondary school students who want to attend university in mainland China take the Gao Kao exam, and then choose to submit their scores to their top five choices of schools. They may choose to include universities in Hong Kong in this list. If any of these universities choose to accept the student, they will contact that student. This process is different from the process by which local students from Hong Kong, as well as international students from other countries apply for school in Hong Kong. These other students follow an application process very similar to that in the United States. Mainland Chinese students who have done some education overseas also apply using the application process instead of through the Gao Kao system (CUHK Entrance Requirements).

According to the University Grants Committee (UGC) of Hong Kong, the advisory board responsible for advising the Hong Kong government on the development and funding needs of universities in Hong Kong, there were 911 undergraduates and 1,118 postgraduates

from mainland China at CUHK in the academic year of 2011-2012. This accounts for about 8% of the undergraduate student body, and 39% of the postgraduate student body. Compared to the academic year of 1996-1997, the first year for which the UGC made this data available, the rapid growth of mainland students in Hong Kong is amazingly apparent. In 1996-1997, there were zero mainland Chinese undergraduate students at CUHK, and only 118 postgraduates. In all of the eight accredited universities in Hong Kong, there were only 5 mainland Chinese undergraduate students and 785 postgraduates. In 2011-2012, there were 4,583 mainland Chinese undergraduates and 4,353 postgraduates.

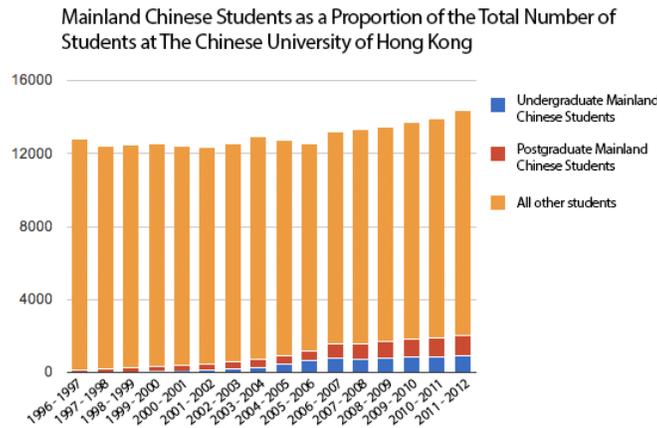


Figure 3 - Mainland Chinese Students as a Proportion of the Student Body at CUHK

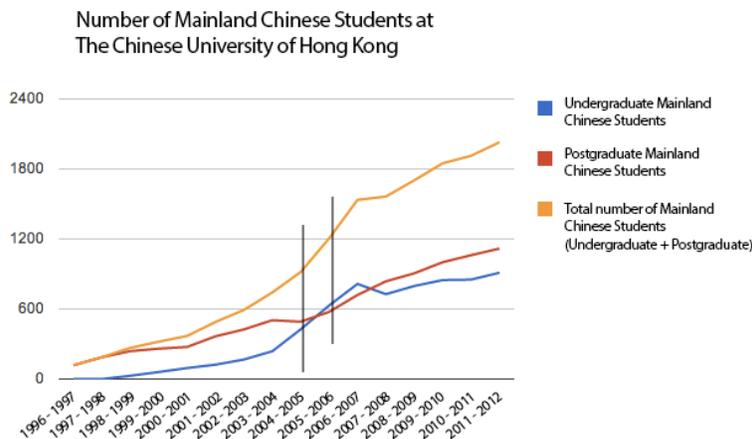


Figure 4 - This chart shows more clearly the sharp increase in the number of mainland Chinese students at CUHK after 2005

There are two primary reasons that the number of mainland Chinese students rose greatly after 2004 and 2006. The UGC, which regulates and provides funding to public universities in Hong Kong, began allowing universities to fill a quota of mainland Chinese students each year, beginning in 2006. As part of this plan, the UGC would provide scholarships and funding to a limited number of mainland Chinese students in this quota.

However, even before this, in 1998, the Hong Kong Jockey Club established a foundation to provide full-ride scholarships for students studying at the UGC funded universities in Hong Kong, as well as the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts. They offer twenty seven scholarships per year, and they are open to both local Hong Kong students as well as students from mainland China. According to their website, as of 2013, 343 students have been given scholarships, including 108 mainland Chinese students (The HKJC Scholarship Scheme).

Also around this time, then Vice-Chancellor of CUHK, Arthur Li, and Richard Ho, the Registrar, realized that there was a huge pool of talent in mainland China. In 2004, after the SARS epidemic, Richard Ho went to Shanghai and Beijing to recruit the best students to come to CUHK. As part of this plan, CUHK provided scholarships one year in advance of other universities which were waiting for the UGC funding. As a result, you can see the number of mainland Chinese students at CUHK began to rise sharply in 2005, one year ahead of the general rise across universities in Hong Kong. This also established CUHK's reputation and position in mainland China ahead of the other universities. The primary motivation for providing this scholarship one year early at cost to the university was to get the best of the best students from mainland China before the other universities in Hong Kong could get them. CUHK's administrators recognized that there was a large pool of talented students in mainland China, and realized that opening up to them would change the future of higher education in Hong Kong.

During the mid 2000s, many rich businessmen from mainland China who now live in Hong Kong formed philanthropic societies to give back to their home towns and provinces. Many of these societies also provide scholarships to students to attend universities in Hong Kong.

The sharp rise in students from mainland China in recent years, both in absolute numbers and in percentage of the student body contributes to the tension between these two groups. Many Hong Kong students see mainland Chinese students as taking up the limited spots that should be made available to local students.

### **CUHK students' perceptions of how many mainland Chinese students are at CUHK**

One interesting question I asked students from both groups was to estimate what percentage of CUHK students they think are from mainland China. I asked this question for several reasons, but mainly to see if their estimates are greater than or less than the actual number, and if this correlates with their personal experiences or feelings towards students from the other group. Remarkably, they were all very close to the actual percentage, which for the

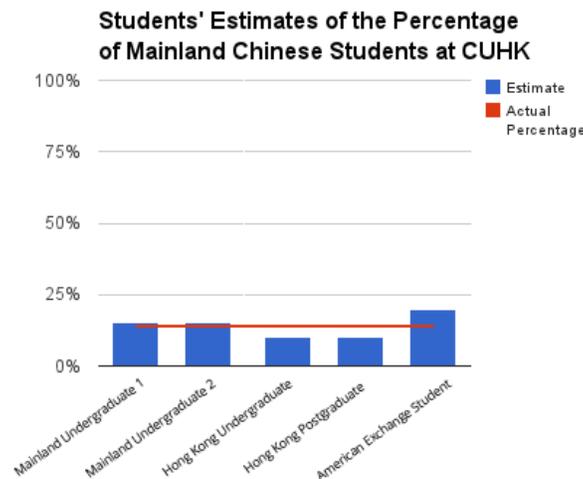


Figure 5 - Students' Estimates of the Percentage of Mainland Chinese Students at CUHK

2011-2012 academic year was 14%.

The mainland Chinese students were slightly over with both saying 15%, and the Hong Kong students were slightly under with 10%.

## **Identity**

I conducted unstructured open-ended interviews with seven students at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Three of these students are local from Hong Kong, three are from mainland China, and one is an exchange student from the United States. However, their identity is much more complex than this, and warrants a detailed examination.

Two of the local students say they consider themselves “Hong Kong Chinese”, but the third one, has a more complex and dynamic view of her identity:

*“I am Hong Kong. I come from Hong Kong. Maybe some years ago I would say I’m a Chinese in Hong Kong, but not now. Because these years, China is getting worse and worse, so if I can choose, I don’t want to be a Chinese. But Hong Kong is better than China, so I say I come from Hong Kong.”*

The three students from mainland China all agree that they are “Chinese”. The exchange student from the U.S., however, also has a more complex view of identity. When asked about her ethnicity and identity, she replied:

*“First and foremost, I consider myself Chinese. But since I immigrated to and grew up in America, I’m also American. But when I view mainland students and Hong Kong students, when I view their interactions, I still empathize with mainland students and I feel for my country.”*

These explanations show that ethnicity can be a complex thing, and people from different places and backgrounds can construct their identity in different ways. It becomes even more

complex when people are perceived as outsiders. This was explored in Gordon Mathews' book, *Hong Kong, China: Learning to Belong to a Nation*. Mathews found that often one's sense of national identity would become intensified when they were in a foreign country (Mathews, 2007). For the purpose of this paper, I will use "Hong Kong student" to refer to a student whose place of residence before university was Hong Kong, and "mainland student" to refer to a student whose place of residence was in the Peoples' Republic of China (excluding Special Administrative Regions), unless otherwise noted.

### **Hong Kong Experiences**

One of the Hong Kong students was a postgraduate, while the rest were undergraduates. All but two were women. All of the interviews were conducted individually, except for the two mainland undergraduates, who I interviewed together.

I began each interview by asking the student who they were, and what they considered their ethnicity and identity to be. After this, I moved into asking if they thought there was a difference between Hong Kong and mainland Chinese people. I then followed with the main question, "do you think Hong Kong and mainland students interact? How so?" Every student said that Hong Kong and mainland students don't interact any more than the bare minimum required in class. Outside of class, none of the students reported spending much time or having any close friendships with members of the other group. They all largely attributed this to "language and culture differences". This is similar to what Amin described in the housing estates of Britain. Here too, it seems as if Hong Kong and mainland students are living "parallel lives" (Amin 2002, 968).

According to my ethnographic research, it appears as if there really is a divide between

Hong Kong students and mainland students. While they take classes together, live in the same hostels, and eat in the same canteens, inhabiting the same physical spaces, they inhabit vastly separate social spaces. The students will interact together in class, engaging in discussions in tutorials, and even meeting outside of class to work on group projects, but will rarely become close friends. However, there are exceptions to this. One of the Hong Kong students gave an example where one of his Hong Kong classmates in physical education translated the coach's words from Cantonese to Mandarin for the benefit of his mainland classmates. Afterwards, they became friends. All the students attribute the separation between the groups to "cultural and language differences".

They explain that Hong Kong people speak Cantonese, while mainlanders speak Putonghua (Mandarin). However, I was able to conduct all these interviews in English, and had no trouble interacting with any of the students. For them, English is seen just as a language for communicating in class, and many mainland students aren't very confident in their English abilities. Most Hong Kong students have some level of Putonghua proficiency, but most of them describe themselves as being able to get their point across, but not being fluent. In Hong Kong, the linguistic capital of English speaking is very great. While it isn't used as a common language for informal interactions, it is often seen as the language of business and education, and one's English speaking ability is often used as a way to show one's education and class. Because of this, even Hong Kong students are sometimes not comfortable speaking English with someone they think might have significantly better English than them.

The cultural differences between the groups are more clear. The consensus among both groups is that Hong Kong students like to stay up too late and mainland students like to go to sleep so early. Hong Kong students are too noisy and mainland students are too quiet.

Mainland students care too much about studying, and Hong Kong students don't care enough about studying. But the important part isn't just that students believe these differences exist, it's how they interpret these differences. Students from both groups will often remark how students from the other group aren't living the "real university life". The postgraduate student from Hong Kong described this feeling:

*"Most of the Hong Kong students will not focus on studying but they will focus on activities and hanging out with friends, etc. They think this is the real university life; not just studying, but a balanced life. They need to hang out with friends, study, and sleep. Of course study is important, but it must not be the most important thing. It's just different from the mainland students who think studying is the most important element."*

She goes on to explain how she thinks mainlanders don't really care that they are missing out on "experiencing Hong Kong":

*"I think they don't care about that. It's not a loss for them. As long as they can get first class honor in CUHK, they are satisfied."*

One of the mainland Chinese undergraduate student has an interesting response to to this. She agrees that Hong Kong and mainland students want different things, but her ideas of what they each want is different.

*"For them, they just want to get a job, and succeed in Hong Kong, and get money. For me, I just want to have fun, and try new things, and enjoy life. For sure I want some money, but not a lot."*

The mainland Chinese student went on to say:

*"I like to talk to people. I don't enjoy dem beats (demonstration beats, a chant and dance that students learn and perform in public. Each hall and college has their own unique dem*

*beat), or staying up late at night, but they do. That's fine. I don't enjoy it. They like to watch movies, go to karaoke, go to BBQ; those are normal things, I like them too. But some specific things, I don't like."*

It's interesting how she clarifies some things, the things that both groups enjoy, as "normal" things, implying that the things Hong Kong students enjoy that mainland students don't may not be "normal". What is normal is that people coming from different backgrounds may find different things enjoyable. The tension comes from the ideas students from both groups have about what the others like or don't like. Some mainland students simply don't enjoy the same sort of things that Hong Kong students enjoy, yet this doesn't mean that they aren't experiencing the "Hong Kong life". The same mainland Chinese undergraduate also said, "We are enjoying our Hong Kong life, but it's hard. I think there are still some mainland students who never go to LKF [Lan Kwai Fong, the nightlife district of Hong Kong]. That is a part of Hong Kong life, but we just don't enjoy it."

A very real manifestation of the separation between Hong Kong and mainland students at universities in Hong Kong is the existence of separate clubs, organizations, and sports teams for the two groups. This was very shocking to me when I first learned of it. One of the mainland students I interviewed is the captain of the mainland women's basketball team. She says that she used to play on the university team, but she was the only mainlander. After returning from a semester abroad in Canada, she joined the mainland team. It is important to note that there are lots of "club" teams at CUHK, and these are for recreation. There are not separate teams for any of the official university sports teams, although at least in the case of basketball, few mainlanders play. This student said that when she was on the university team, she had to get along with the Hong Kong students. But while they played together well as a team, their relationship didn't

hold up off the court. “But we weren’t so close, but all of them were close [to each other]. Even when we went out to eat lunch, or have sweet soup [dessert], we didn’t feel so close.”

In some cases, some mainlanders will join a Hong Kong student dominated organization. But in the experiences of the students I talked with, this rarely ends well. In one instance, according to a Hong Kong student, a mainland student joined one of the hall associations, which are responsible for organizing activities in the student hostels. However, this student often used studying as an excuse to not show up to meetings or to lead their assigned events, leading to animosity from the Hong Kong students. The Hong Kong postgraduate student commented on this turn of events, saying, “maybe those two groups of students can’t get together even in the same association; they just separate and do their own things.” The mainland students said that while not many mainlanders will join a club which is dominated by Hong Kong students, they will in some cases, and if the number of mainlanders starts to grow and become the majority, the Hong Kong students will leave. However, mainlanders take part in many Chinese clubs. Hong Kong students take their organizations, particularly the hall associations, very seriously, often staying up all night for six to seven hour long meetings. Some mainland students have a cynical perspective. Although acknowledging that clubs and organizations are something that is special about the Hong Kong university system, they think that “they spend so much time to pick the committee members, but then they disappear.” “Hong Kong people always want something like a president position on their CV. So they will strive hard to get the position, but after they are chosen, they won’t work hard to hold some creative activities. Just some of them.” Again, stereotypes pervade the discussion of how Hong Kong and mainland students behave, with both groups seeing the other as not being responsible.

University Orientation Camps, or “O’Camps” as they are affectionately called by

students, are a unique part of Hong Kong university culture. For a period of about four days and three nights during the summer before their first semester, incoming students live together on campus and do team building activities; they all wear the same t-shirts, learn cheers, known as “beats”, which is another very big part of Hong Kong university culture, and are introduced to the university. Almost every student in Hong Kong who I talked to, regardless of where they were from, told me that their closest group of friends came from the people who they went to O’Camp with. At CUHK, initially separate O’Camps were organized for students from mainland China. This was done for several reasons, and I believe it was well-intentioned on the part of the university. The primary reason was that they wanted to make sure the mainland Chinese students feel comfortable living in Hong Kong, so these mainland student O’Camps included more things, such as showing them how to ride the public transportation systems, a brief Cantonese lesson, and other things introducing them to Hong Kong. However, as most students make their closest friends in O’Camp, this led to students initial friend groups not including anyone from the other group. Separating the O’Camps even made the divisions between the groups even more strong, by segregating one of the biggest and most important parts of university culture in Hong Kong. However, after 2010, when Joseph Sung became the Vice-Chancellor of CUHK, the O’Camps began to include both mainland Chinese and Hong Kong students in the same camps. Vice-Chancellor Sung explained to me that his belief is that if mainland Chinese students are introduced to local students early on, even before their first semester starts, then not only will they begin to make close friends with each other, but they can also learn how to get by in Hong Kong from their new friends, thus killing two birds with one stone, with the result of more integration and less tension between the two groups.

The university does other things as well to promote interaction between the groups.

The Chinese University of Hong Kong is the only university in Hong Kong which requires all international students, including mainland Chinese students (except those from Guangdong Province, where Cantonese is a common native dialect), to take a semester-long Cantonese class their first year. Some mainland students see this as a very good thing, as it enables them to be able to better communicate with their classmates from Hong Kong. One of them even described the requirement by saying, *“CUHK is one of the best. CUHK offers cantonese class. So I can communicate and make friends with Hong Kong people.”* This student considers her Cantonese to be good enough to communicate well with Hong Kong students, and attributes her proficiency to the required course.

### **Food Stealing**

One of the most interesting topics that came up in the course of my research is the issue of food stealing. Although I never asked about or mentioned this, one Hong Kong student and two mainland students brought it up, and they both brought it up in response to the same question. For the Hong Kong student, I asked, “what do you think mainland students think of Hong Kong people?”, and for the mainland students I asked, “what do you think of Hong Kong people?” It is worth it to quote these answers in full. First, the response from the Hong Kong postgraduate:

*“I’m not sure, but maybe they think we are evil. [laughs] Maybe I am exaggerating. Because Hong Kong students will usually not be very nice to mainland students, and most of the time the mainland students are angry about that. For example, every time we lose something, we want to find out who is stealing something from us, we will first think of the mainland students. And then they will think that is not fair to them, that they are not thieves, they will think “why do*

*you think of me first?” Hong Kong students will associate every bad thing to mainland students. They will think that every bad thing that happens is related to the mainland students.”*

The mainland students, after complaining about how Hong Kong students are always loud, continued by discussing the food stealing issue:

Mainland Student 1: “...and worst, they are always stealing things from us; from the fridge.”

Mainland Student 2: “and they always think it’s mainland students who do that!”

Me: “So if someone steals something of yours from the fridge, do you think it’s a Hong Kong student?”

Mainland Student 2: “Yes. Probably. But sometimes it’s a foreign student. One time I caught them. But it definitely won’t be mainlanders. We all talk, and if they want something, they will ask for it. We won’t steal from each other. But one time, it was definitely a foreign student. She was the only one on the floor we didn’t know, and after she left, nothing else was stolen.”

This discussion elucidates many important factors. First, the mainland students feel a sense of camaraderie with each other. It also shows that the separation of these groups exists even in the student hostels, as the mainland students all talk with each other, and the only person on the floor they didn’t know was the one who was a foreigner.

When something of theirs is stolen, students from both groups will immediately attribute the theft to a member of the other group. They don’t even consider that it could be “one of their own.” This sense of culturally-based community was very strong, especially among the mainland students. Interestingly, although just admitting that mainland students will blame a non-mainland student if their food is stolen, one of the mainland students goes on to explain why she thinks Hong Kong students will always blame mainlanders. “They think that they have higher morality, so they can think things like this about mainland students.” Ironically, in the group interview with two mainland students, the opposite also appears true:

- Mainland Student 1: “If you are the top student in the province, how can you steal things? You have the education, you have the morals. If you want food, you will buy food.”
- Mainland Student 2: “It’s not related.”
- Mainland Student 1: “It is!”
- Mainland Student 2: “Only the richest people in China want LV.”
- Mainland Student 1: “Only the richest people who are the least educated want LV.”

This exchange illustrates a lot about how mainland Chinese and Hong Kong students construct their identity. Both groups claim the moral high ground, but for different reasons. Mainland students often state that they are better because they are the top students from their provinces. One of the two mainland students who I interviewed together even questioned Hong Kong students’ perception of their own superiority, saying, “I don’t know where this pride comes from. Because they don’t work hard in class, they get bad grades.” This statement demonstrates that mainland students have a lot of pride in their academic accomplishments, and this is the source for their own sense of superiority. Both groups use their perceived higher morality as a reason for why they would buy food rather than steal it. The reference to LV (Louis Vuitton) is related to a stereotype that is increasingly popular in Hong Kong since the 1997 handover. Many mainland Chinese tourists come to Hong Kong to purchase luxury goods, the most well-known being Louis Vuitton bags. It is really interesting that this student brought up the topic of LV during a conversation about food stealing. After the Mainland Student 1 equates good academics with good morals, and that if a mainland Chinese student wants something, they will buy it, Mainland Student 2 says, “It’s not related!”, thus bringing the conversation into the broader context of mainland Chinese consumerism. Mainland Student 2 then goes on to say that “Only the richest people in China want LV”, further separating mainland Chinese students from those nouveau riche mainland Chinese shoppers who are seen in a negative light. Mainland Student 1’s

response, “Only the richest people who are the least educated want LV” further solidifies this difference. Mainland Student 1 also said this at one point during our interview:

*“They [Hong Kong students] just assume mainland students are the same as all mainland people. But there are so many people in the mainland. There are some people in the mainland who don’t have western toilets or trash cans, so it’s natural for them to not throw their trash away. But it’s getting better. People in the city will do that.”*

This statement shows the frustration mainland Chinese students feel when they are the subject of blanket stereotypes about mainlanders. It further serves to differentiate the mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong from other mainlanders who may have negative stereotypes.

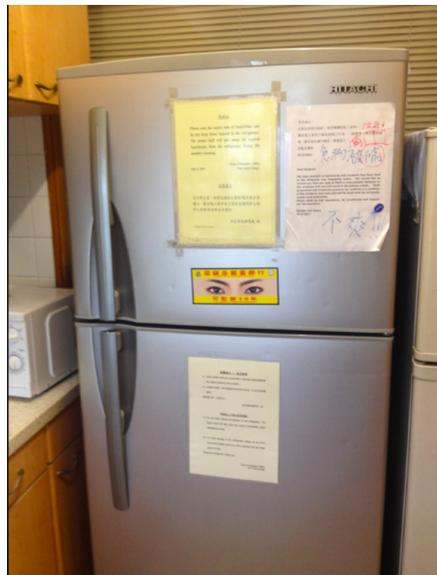


Figure 6 - The student hostel fridge - the site of “food stealing”

The division between these two groups is largely caused by how they construct their own ethnicity and identity in opposition to the other. Hong Kong identity is often largely described in terms of how it is different than Chinese identity. In the context of university students in Hong Kong, mainlanders will often describe their identity in how they see themselves as different

from Hong Kong students. For example, describing Hong Kong students as being proud and believing they are more moral than mainland students. This fits with what Anderson says; that is, community is constructed against the backdrop of a particular historical context (Karner 2007, 17). In this case, the very different histories of Hong Kong and mainland China over the past two years have shaped two very different ethnicities.

I had expected that since in the university setting, all people have in common the fact that they are students. However, this too generates some different feelings among both groups in terms of how they see each other. “We are the top students in China, so we already want to open our mind to different things, and that is one of the reasons that I wanted to come here.” “I don’t think you can compare with them. We are the top students from each province. They are just normal students.” These views of mainland students contrasts with views from Hong Kong students about how the goal of university is about more than just studying. Because they have different ideas about what university education is, it is hard for them to find common ground even as students.

One completely unexpected issue that came up in an interview with one of the mainland students was that of race, and biological differences between mainlanders and Hong Kongers. I had asked if she believed she was able to distinguish between Hong Kongers and mainland Chinese people at a glance.

*“Yeah I can. For most of them yes. But for some of them its hard to tell. If they’re fat, its hard to tell. Some of the Hong Kong people, they just came 20 years ago or so, so its hard to tell. But the ones who came to Hong Kong 50 years ago, they look strange. I think its because their mother and their father are so close. It’s not good to have babies with people whose DNA is too similar to yours, then the babies will be ugly. Its better to have babies with foreigners,*

*white people, black people.”*

I had never heard a biological argument about why Hong Kong people are different than mainland Chinese. I had expected to hear something about how they dress, or some other cultural expression. I only got this biological response from one student, so I don't know if it represents a belief that is widely held or not.

### **“Locusts” and “Dogs”**

In January 2012, Kong Qingdong, a professor in the Chinese department at Peking University, made a statement on an internet television talk show calling Hong Kong people dogs. The full text of his comments are as follows:

*“You [Hongkongers] are Chinese, right? But as I know, many Hongkongers don't think they are Chinese. They claim that we are Hongkongers, you are Chinese. They are bastards.”*

*“Those kinds of people used to be running dogs for the British colonialists. And until now, you [Hongkongers] are still dogs. You aren't human.”* (South China Morning Post, August 15, 2012).

As can be expected, this set off a chain reaction among both Hong Kong and mainland Chinese people, with many Hong Kong people reacting on the internet that mainland Chinese people are “locusts”, who swarm into Hong Kong and deplete all its resources. Adding fuel to this fire is the growing amount of “parallel traders” who travel between Hong Kong and Shenzhen, the neighboring city on the Chinese mainland, buying up milk powder in Hong Kong and selling it in China. This is due to mass amounts of distrust of Chinese milk powder because of an incident in 2008 where it was tainted with melamine. These parallel traders take the Hong Kong Mass Transit Railway (MTR), a subway system with direct connections to two land border

crossings into Shenzhen. They often take the MTR one stop into Hong Kong, buying milk powder at stores in Sheung Shui, causing these stores to run out of supply often, and driving up prices. Many local residents have been complaining, and in the fall of 2012, even staged a protest against the “locusts” at the Sheung Shui MTR station. Following this protest, the MTR pledged to enforce its rule limiting baggage size to dimensions of less than 130 centimeters of any one side (South China Morning Post, September 28, 2012). However, parallel traders are still a common sight on the East Rail Line of the MTR, causing it to be labelled by locals as the “Locust Line”.

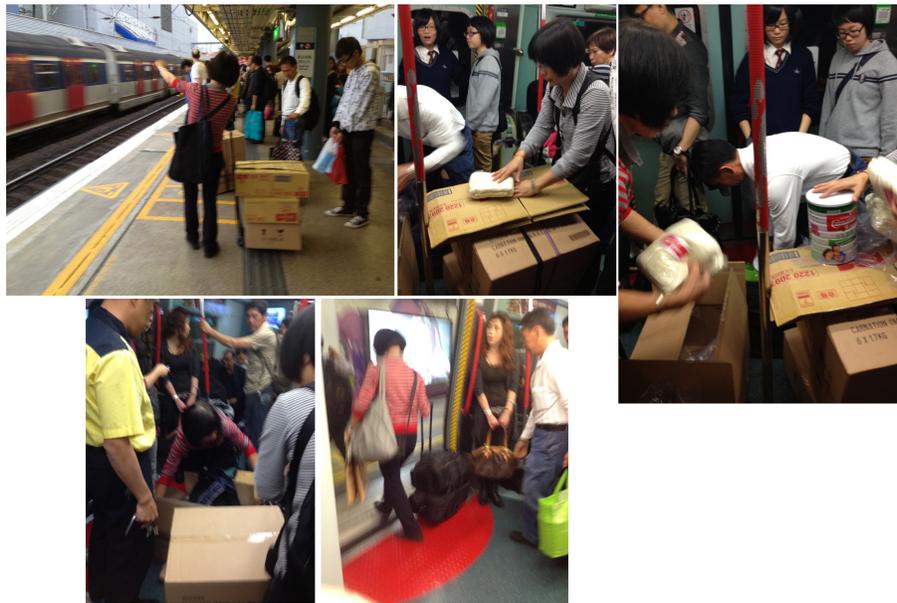


Figure 7 - Parallel Traders on the MTR East Rail line

One afternoon in December, I witnessed the parallel traders firsthand while taking the MTR’s East Rail Line back to my university. As I had always heard tales of these parallel traders from my Hong Kong friends, I was interested to actually see it for myself. There was a group of three people standing on the platform, with a dolly of large cardboard boxes. After we boarded

the train, they immediately set to work, repacking cans of milk powder into black duffel bags and backpacks. Their efficiency was astounding, as they quickly repacked several boxes and flattened the cardboard. As you can see in the photos, the Hong Kong people on the MTR were just watching with amazement at the sight before their eyes. For once, everyone's eyes were not glued to the latest TV-B dramas on their smartphones. As the parallel traders were occupying the large open space between two sets of doors, they were in plain sight of everyone on the train. Two stops later, at Sha Tin Station, an MTR worker on the platform spotted them, and kicked them off the train.

This labelling of one another as “dogs” and “locusts” shows how mainland Chinese and Hong Kong people often construct their identity in opposition to each other. Hong Kong people will often say they are not Chinese, or they are Chinese, but... .

This use of “dogs” and “locusts” labelling even occurs in the universities in Hong Kong. In October 2012, a mainland Chinese student at CUHK called Hong Kong students “dogs” on a Facebook event page called “Liberate Sheung Shui Station [光復上水]”. This page was used to organize several protests at Sheung Shui Station against the parallel traders. Many people commenting on the page used the term “locust” when referring to mainland Chinese people. This student made several comments, the two most relevant are translated into English below:

*“A group of low quality people only know how to call others locusts. They have never thought in terms of China! They only know how to use stupid c\*\*t actions to prove their democracy. Pathetic!!!! Pathetic!!!! In the looks department, Hongkongers are ugly; In the brain department, many of them don't think before they speak...Blindly worshipping the West!!! Even the U.S has realised the importance of China. Yet, this small Special Administrative Region creates chaos everyday!! Even the media is like that...Pathetic!!!! I can only call them “Hong*

*Kong Dogs”!!! Hong Kong Dogs!!!!”*

*“Compared with Tsinghua University and Peking University (these are considered the two most prestigious universities in mainland China), the degree of Hong Kong’s universities is not impressive. I have made a mistake for not going to there!!! It is useless to regret. Accept life as it is.”*

(Dictionary of Politically Incorrect Hong Kong Cantonese 2012b)

Local students responded by creating their own Facebook event, calling for the mainland student to go back to China if he didn’t like it in Hong Kong, and calling for a protest. The Vice-Chancellor of CUHK even spoke to the mainland student personally, asking him to think through the consequences of posts he makes online (Sung, Joseph 2012b).

### **Language Use**

A very interesting way to look at how social situations are constructed in Hong Kong universities is to look at language use. Almost all students are somewhat fluent in at least two languages; a dialect of Chinese (Cantonese for Hong Kong students and Mandarin for mainland students) and English (the language of university education in Hong Kong). Many students also have at least some competency in a second dialect of Chinese. Thus, a lot can be learned from which languages they choose to use in a particular situation.

Language use is also very important in the issue of food stealing. Mainland students reported that often Hong Kong students would leave notes on the fridge with messages like “don’t steal stuff”, written in simplified Chinese. This is very significant. Simplified Chinese came into wide use in the 1950s and 1960s in mainland China, however, it never came into

mainstream usage in other Chinese speaking places, such as Hong Kong or Taiwan. Thus, the common way of writing in Hong Kong is with traditional Chinese characters. Everything in Chinese, from papers to signs to official notices, is written in traditional characters. It is the norm. Hong Kong students actually protest when an official body (such as a university, as happened recently at City University of Hong Kong) use simplified characters (Dictionary of Politically Incorrect Hong Kong Cantonese 2012a). Traditional and Simplified Chinese characters are similar enough that if you can read one, you can read the other, but they are different enough that you can easily tell which type a character is upon sight.



Figure 8 - Traditional versus Simplified Chinese Characters, 愛, ai, meaning “love”

Thus, the use of simplified characters in a sign saying “don’t steal” is clearly sending a signal of its intended audience; mainland Chinese students. If a sign were written in traditional characters, its audience would be everyone. Signs in the residence halls are commonly posted in only traditional characters, often even English translations are not provided. Signs in simplified Chinese characters are thus almost always seen as targeting mainland students. A sign in simplified Chinese could possibly have been written by a mainland student, but as the students I talked to explained, mainland students will rarely blame another mainland student for stealing their food. Mainland students studying in Hong Kong can write traditional Chinese characters, and most likely would write in traditional unless they were specifically targeting a mainland

Chinese audience themselves, as they themselves know that choosing which writing system to use sends a clear message of their intended audience.

### **Hong Kong as a Stepping Stone**

Another factor contributing to the lack of interaction between mainland Chinese and local Hong Kong students is that of how study at a university in Hong Kong fits into their life plans and goals. Most mainland Chinese students I talked to are planning on going to graduate school or applying for jobs in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, or Australia after graduation, and a few are planning on going back to mainland China. Very few are planning on living permanently in Hong Kong. Because of this, they are mostly focused on their academics, and don't care too much about joining the local community, or adapting to local customs. Some students may be interested in gaining permanent residency in Hong Kong, for which the only requirement is continued residency in Hong Kong for seven consecutive years. Hong Kong permanent residency does not require giving up Chinese citizenship, but it allows one to get a Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Passport, which allows visa-free travel to 146 countries (Wikipedia 2013b), as opposed to the 21 countries allowed with a Peoples' Republic of China Passport (Wikipedia 2013a). Hong Kong permanent residency also enables one to take advantage of certain rights and privileges, such as being able to vote and live in public housing (Community Legal Information Centre). However, even with these opportunities, which only require three additional years of living in Hong Kong after graduation, (standard length of university degree is now four years) most mainland Chinese students I talked to are planning on leaving Hong Kong after they receive their degree.

## **Conclusion**

As has been demonstrated, Hong Kong and mainland Chinese students, although occupying the same physical space, occupy vastly different social spaces. Although they attend the same classes and live in the same dorms, they have very different experiences as university students in Hong Kong. This is caused by many factors, the most significant being the perception of “language and culture differences”, how they use language, and the fact that most mainland Chinese students are using Hong Kong as a stepping stone to other places, and aren’t planning on staying around after graduation.

These factors are also instrumental in how students construct their identity, which is often in opposition to each other. They are “Hong Kong Chinese”, or “Mainland Chinese”, and these definitions carry many connotations. This identity goes beyond ethnicity and nation. Hong Kong is part of the nation of the Peoples’ Republic of China. Even the most staunch “Hong Kong Chinese” people usually accept this, even if they don’t embrace it. By traditional categories of ethnic groups, the vast majority of the residents of Hong Kong are “Chinese” (the Hong Kong census does not differentiate among ethnic groups within “Chinese”). However, despite these commonalities on the surface, there are large differences between these two groups’ identities and expectations. This could be explained by Benedict Anderson’s ideas of “imagined communities”. Even though the people of Hong Kong may not interact with each other in person on a regular basis, due to their history as a separate entity from China under British colonial administration, they have come to see themselves as a separate and unique community. It is also important to look at the historical context of mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong. It is only relatively recently, since 2006, that the number of these students has risen dramatically. This very quick rise in the number of students is also causing tension as local students complain that

mainland Chinese students are taking their spots at universities.

Also complicating the situation are differing ideas about the university experience. Students from Hong Kong tend to value socializing and extracurricular clubs and activities along with academics, while many mainland Chinese students value academics above all else.

There is a lot of discussion and debate about “Hong Kongers vs. mainlanders” in the media these days, and although it may seem abstract and distant from real life, for students attending university in Hong Kong, these discourses are a very real part of their everyday lives. They encounter people from the other group on a daily basis, and are forced to live with them in the student hostels. The way they think about this issue influences how they behave. At this point in time, there is a significant degree of separation between these two groups, and this has led to more and more misunderstandings. As many of the students have said, if they really make the effort to become friends with someone from the other group, it can happen, but they emphasize that it really takes a lot of effort. The universities in Hong Kong should be making an effort to foster understanding between these groups; not by forcing some sort of integration, but by providing more opportunities for people to get to know each other, and by not having separate orientations. This is something that does indeed impact students’ from both groups daily lives. This is a complex situation, and is caused by a combination of a variety of linguistic, cultural, social, political, and historical factors. More research is needed on this topic, particularly how it is played out on university campuses within Hong Kong.

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## Appendix A - Data on the Number of Mainland Chinese Students Studying at all UGC Funded Universities in Hong Kong

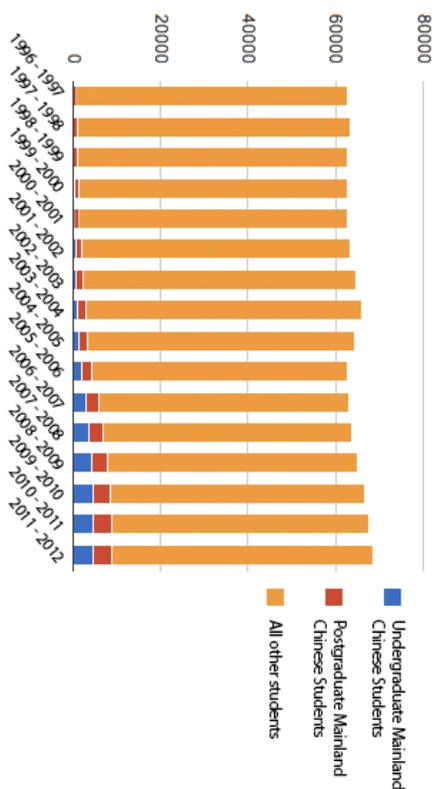
Total Number of Students from Mainland China at all UGC Funded Universities in Hong Kong

	1996-1997	1997-1998	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012
Undergraduate	5	7	36	177	333	506	633	842	1284	2007	2973	3658	4348	4562	4638	4583
Postgraduate	785	937	962	1084	1129	1401	1596	2005	2074	2363	2781	3092	3363	3865	4084	4353
<b>Total</b>	<b>790</b>	<b>944</b>	<b>998</b>	<b>1261</b>	<b>1462</b>	<b>1907</b>	<b>2229</b>	<b>2847</b>	<b>3358</b>	<b>4370</b>	<b>5754</b>	<b>6750</b>	<b>7711</b>	<b>8472</b>	<b>8722</b>	<b>8936</b>

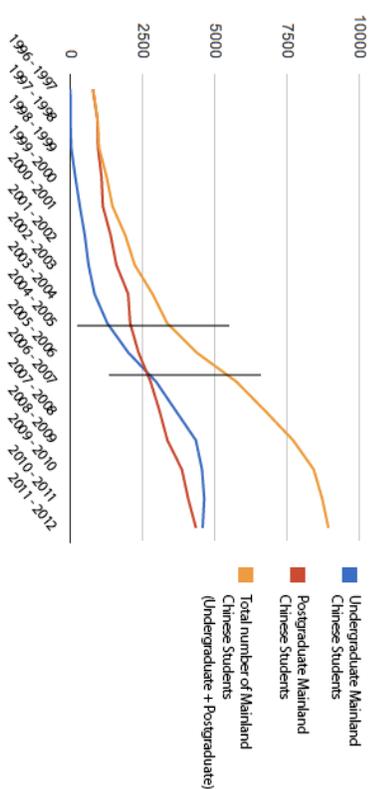
Total Number of Students at all UGC Funded Universities in Hong Kong

	1996-1997	1997-1998	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012
Undergraduate	48525	48345	47644	47467	47606	48054	49170	50129	50898	51625	52513	53359	55050	56610	57565	58412
Postgraduate	14159	14879	14978	15371	15217	15243	15392	15899	13322	11102	10384	10377	9910	9933	10040	10258
<b>Total</b>	<b>62684</b>	<b>63224</b>	<b>62622</b>	<b>62838</b>	<b>62823</b>	<b>63297</b>	<b>64562</b>	<b>66028</b>	<b>64220</b>	<b>62727</b>	<b>62897</b>	<b>63736</b>	<b>64960</b>	<b>66543</b>	<b>67605</b>	<b>68670</b>

Mainland Chinese Students as a Proportion of the Total Number of Students at All UGC Funded Universities in Hong Kong



Number of Mainland Chinese Students at All UGC Funded Universities in Hong Kong



Source: University Grants Committee, 2013. <http://www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/ugc/index.htm>

## Appendix B - Data on the Number of Mainland Chinese Students Studying at The Chinese University of Hong Kong

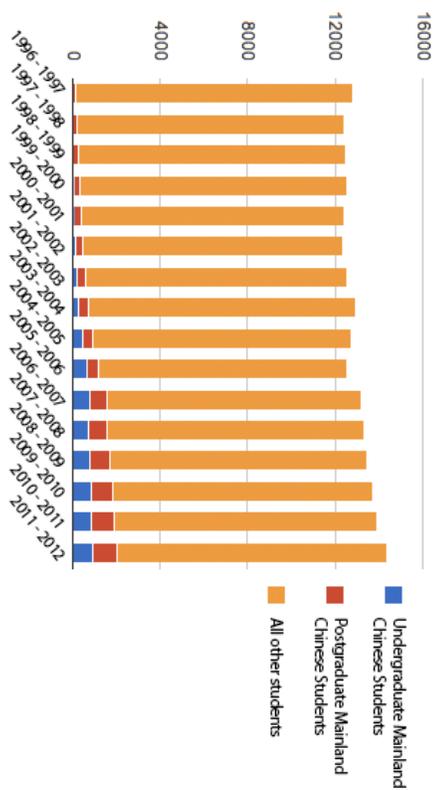
Total Number of Students from Mainland China at The Chinese University of Hong Kong

	1996-1997	1997-1998	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012
Undergraduate	0	0	28	60	94	123	167	238	426	630	815	727	797	848	852	911
Postgraduate	118	187	239	260	275	366	425	504	491	575	720	837	906	1001	1061	1118
<b>Total</b>	<b>118</b>	<b>187</b>	<b>267</b>	<b>320</b>	<b>369</b>	<b>489</b>	<b>592</b>	<b>742</b>	<b>917</b>	<b>1205</b>	<b>1535</b>	<b>1564</b>	<b>1703</b>	<b>1849</b>	<b>1913</b>	<b>2029</b>

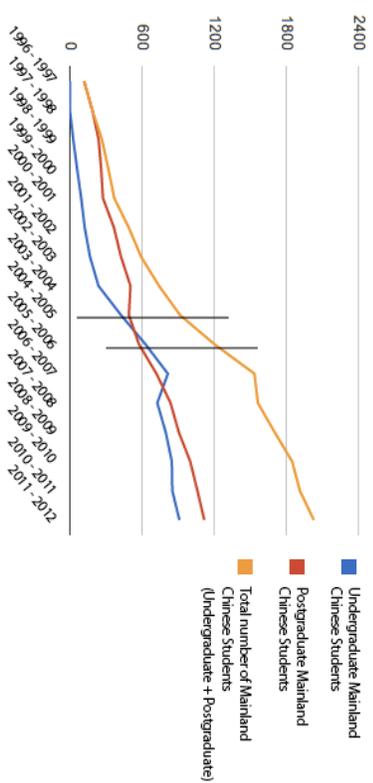
Total Number of Students at The Chinese University of Hong Kong

	1996-1997	1997-1998	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012
Undergraduate	10260	9639	9414	9333	9259	9387	9457	9456	9633	9993	10280	10367	10743	11012	11213	11504
Postgraduate	2521	2770	3081	3208	3127	2969	3100	3453	3074	2543	2909	2937	1701	2670	2701	2874
<b>Total</b>	<b>12781</b>	<b>12409</b>	<b>12495</b>	<b>12541</b>	<b>12386</b>	<b>12356</b>	<b>12557</b>	<b>12910</b>	<b>12707</b>	<b>12536</b>	<b>13189</b>	<b>13304</b>	<b>13444</b>	<b>13682</b>	<b>13914</b>	<b>14378</b>

Mainland Chinese Students as a Proportion of the Total Number of Students at The Chinese University of Hong Kong



Number of Mainland Chinese Students at The Chinese University of Hong Kong



Source: University Grants Committee, 2013. <http://www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/ugc/index.htm>