

# “Language and Culture Differences”: Identity and Interaction among Students from Hong Kong and Mainland China at a University in Hong Kong

Christopher R. Nixon, Department of Anthropology // Advisor: Prof. Adrienne Lo, Department of Anthropology  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

## Abstract

Despite the aura of being “Asia’s World City”—a multi-cultural haven for people from all over the world—Hong Kong shows many signs of ethnic segregation.

In my time as an exchange student at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in fall 2012, I noticed that most students fit into one of two groups—Hong Kongers and mainland Chinese—and most members of one group did not associate with members of the other, beyond required classroom interactions. Most students attributed 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 acknowledged. In this poster presentation, I explore the extent to which this separation exists, and why. I include identity construction and language use as well as differing ideas of what it means to “study abroad” in my analysis.

## 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 at least one postgraduate student from each group. 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. Secondly, 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. Thirdly, 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.

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## Identity / Hong Kong Experiences

### “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”.

- 1 “Chinese” is most commonly used to refer to people who are citizens of the Peoples’ Republic of China.
- 2 To refer to people of Han Chinese ancestry, regardless of their citizenship or where they live.
- 3 To refer to the traditional culture of this ethnic group.
- 4 “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.

### Differing Experiences of University Life in Hong Kong

“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... 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.”  
- Hong Kong postgraduate student

“When I was in university, as an undergrad, I didn’t want to make friends. I was very depressed. I didn’t want to be doomed. I had to find something to support myself. I spent most of my time studying. This doesn’t mean that I didn’t make friends with my roommates, I just didn’t go out, step out to make friends with people outside of my circle. But it changes over time. What you think and see also changes. That’s why I think that some people just spend their time on studying. It’s not just limited to study, it could also be something else. Like you want to learn how to swim, so you focus your time on swimming. You are addicted to that. You just don’t focus your time on something else.”  
- Mainland Chinese postgraduate student

## 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?” 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:

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

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?”

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.”

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.”

Student 2: “It’s not related.”

Student 1: “It is!”

Student 2: “Only the richest people in China want LV.”

Student 1: “Only the richest people who are the least educated want LV.”

## Language Use

### Characters and Dialects

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.

愛 爱

Traditional versus Simplified Chinese Characters

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 regions, such as Hong Kong or Taiwan.

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.

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.

## Hong Kong as a Stepping Stone

Many mainland Chinese students I talked to said that they didn’t plan on staying in Hong Kong after graduation. Their plans were either to apply to graduate schools or find a job in the US, UK, Canada, or Australia, or go back to work in China. This, combined with the increasing numbers of mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong, is a major factor in why these students tend to not live the “Hong Kong way of life”. There are many students in the same position as them, from the same backgrounds, so they can continue living their own culture rather than integrating into the local culture of Hong Kong.

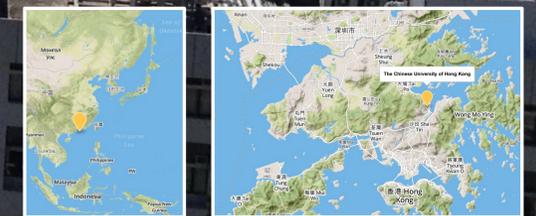
## Conclusion

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 many 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.

It is also important to look at the historical context of Hong Kong. It is only relatively recently, since 2006, that the number of mainland Chinese 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.

This is a complex situation, and is caused by a combination of a variety of linguistic, cultural, social, political, and historical factors.

## Where in the World is Hong Kong?



## A brief history of higher education in Hong Kong

1842

Hong Kong is established as a colony of Britain.

1887

The Hong Kong College of Medicine for Chinese is founded by the London Missionary Society.

1912

Hong Kong University, the first university in Hong Kong, is established by the British colonial government to train local people as civil servants.

1963

The Chinese University of Hong Kong is founded

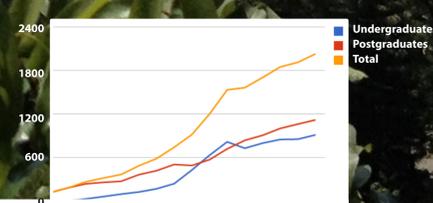
1997

UGC begins counting number of mainland-Chinese university students in Hong Kong

2006

UGC begins allowing a quota for mainland-Chinese students

Number of Mainland Chinese Students at CUHK



Mainland Chinese Students as a Proportion of the Student Body

