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“I Wish I Were a Plumber!”: Transnational Class Re-Constructions Across Migrant Experiences Among Hong Kong’s Professionals and Managers

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Abstract

This study examines processes of class construction within a transnational community of professionals and managers who are emigrants, returnees, and non-migrants. Building on Bourdieu’s class analysis and literature on transnational migration, we examine how class statuses are supported by moral claims based on varying transnational mobility strategies. We draw our results from qualitative interviews with 45 Hong Kong respondents in Hong Kong and Canada. We find that despite Hong Kong emigrants’ loss of economic capital due to de-professionalization, their cultural and symbolic claims frame an alternative set of norms about their life successes. Returnees claim to have the best of both worlds having amassed economic capital, while making social distinctions from stayers in terms of their globalized cosmopolitan imaginaries. Stayers appear envious of emigrants’ and returnees’ flexibility and seek to accumulate economic capital for future retirement migration or to send their children abroad. Respondents’ moralizing discourses reveal a social field defining within class distinctions apart from hyper concerns of upward mobility through material gains. Nuanced class distinctions articulate values around freedom of space, time, and expression not readily accessible to residents remaining in Hong Kong.

Keywords

transnational migration; social class; Bourdieu; moral discourses; children’s education

Introduction

> We wanted to emigrate so badly. It’s not easy for us. My husband, Dan [a financial analyst] always said, “I wish I were a plumber.” [*laughs*] He figured that our professions are not on the list of “skilled migration” for Canada, but a plumber is. (Vivian, 37-year-old, solicitor, Hong Kong resident who never moved)

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Although Dan was probably joking, his statement resonates with half of the college-educated residents who want to leave Hong Kong (Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, 2019). Many college-educated professionals, like Dan, find that salaries are not keeping pace with Hong Kong's cost of living (Lui, 2014). The traditional professional or managerial route to class reproduction is not guaranteed, making residence in Hong Kong less desirable, especially for those with children (Lui, 2014). Decades of social and political movements reinforced a sense of entitlement to freedom, rule of law, and open and fair competition for advancement (Lui, 2003; So, 2014). Yet, the Hong Kong government appears more closely aligned with that of authoritarian China and this undermines confidence in Hong Kong's future (Cheng, 2016). The Canadian-Hong Kong migration connection is long established. The flows have waxed and waned over the last forty years, but it remains among the largest migration streams for Hong Kong (Hong Kong Information Services Department, 2000–2016; Ley and Kobayashi, 2005; Sussman, 2010). We investigate the heterogeneous nature of class status among migrants in this transnational migrant network by comparing one-time and repeat "movers" to Canada, "returnees" who came back to Hong Kong, and "stayers" who never left.

We focus on professionals and managers, defined by Ehrenreich, Ehrenreich and Walker (1979), as highly trained, but not owners of capital or labor. In Hong Kong they are called the "new middle class" and emerged in the 1980s to early 1990s, in contrast to earlier middle class members who were mostly self-employed and small employers. This new middle class comprises 21% of the class structure (Lui, 2014). While entrepreneurs and wealthy class members in Hong Kong are flexibly mobile (Ong 1999), the new middle class is not resourced for that mobility. For them decisions around migration for economic mobility are costly. In their study, Salaff, Wong and Greve (2010) describe their respondents' emotional costs from splitting up the family – with fathers returning to their jobs in Hong Kong in order to sustain a middle-class way of life. Hong Kong's professionals and managers with elite or bourgeois aspirations who find their pathways to greater economic and political capital narrowing are problematically situated and represent an interesting case for a study of class strategies.

We adopt Bourdieu's approach to studying class formation through analyses of symbolic systems (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) invoked by professionals and managers who move, return, or stay. We compare their creative strategies of distinction (Ibid., 1992). Distinctions are the symbolic transformation of de facto difference drawn from social judgment (Bourdieu, 1991). These choices serve as vehicles to symbolize social similarity and social differences (Bourdieu, 1984:243; Skeggs, 2013). Most research on class distinctions focuses on contestations *between* classes (Bourdieu, 1984). Even though Bourdieu mentions the importance of "capital composition structure" – the relative balance between economic and cultural capital – in marking differences *within* class, those clarifications are confined to differentiations between "occupation groups" (Honneth, 1986). We expand the concept of distinction in relation to migration statuses and their legitimation to reveal how the compositional balance between economic and cultural capital can be made and re-made to nuance meanings to contest better positioning *within* class.

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Analysis at the nexus of class and migration is not new, but most studies focus on socioeconomic outcomes of native-born and migrants or the trajectories of social mobility for migrants integrating into destination societies (Zhou and Portes, 2012). Understanding social class in material terms, these studies underplay symbolically accomplished statuses. Few studies examine class from a transnational perspective. The Marxist, Weberian, or even Bourdieusian literatures discuss class systems within a national framework, failing to capture class structural changes resulting from transnational migration (But see Rye, 2019). Some transnational studies examine how upper class members strategize the maintenance of class privileges, including acquiring foreign credentials from prestigious schools for their children, accumulating capital in overseas investments, and establishing transnational networks (Waters, 2015; Ong, 1999; Xiang and Shen, 2009). To date, we found no studies examining the process of class struggles among professionals and managers who consider using transnational mobility strategies to contest for a better social positioning with the closest rivals (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). In our paper, we ask: How does the transnational middle-class community that involves movers, returnees, and stayers make distinctions and compete for better class status among themselves and intergenerationally? How do these micro processes of distinction shape mobility strategies?

Mobility Strategies of Migrant Professionals and Managers

Most scholars of migration recognize that decisions to migrate are imbued with the imagination of a better future combined with realistic assessments of the advantages of going or staying. The realization of those aspirations is uncertain (Reyneri and Fullin, 2011) and understanding this variability is complicated by the dynamic nature of post-hoc reconstructions of meanings about mobility and relationships within destinations and towards origin places (Alberti, 2014; Bell, 2016; Bertaux and Thompson, 2017; Vallejo, 2012). Early research about migration focused on the downtrodden or the elite; there is now a consensus that most spatial mobility occurs among the middle class (Batnitzky, et al., 2008). Forecasts of troubled futures or the precariousness of the present can send managers and other professionals abroad, despite uncertainties (Bertaux and Thompson, 2017). Middle class migration shows considerable variability in pathways of assimilation (Zhou and Portes, 2012). Downward assimilation or segmented assimilation is well recognized among scholars (Ibid., 2012; Reyneri and Fullin, 2011). Yet, immigrants interviewed at their destinations notably shift characterizations of their status from occupationally anchored ones to lifestyle accoutrements, such as work-life balance, high quality of life, and a feeling of freedom (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009). Immigrant capacities to remake class in meaningful ways stems from the structural constraints they face. Their construction is relative to their memories of what they left in their hometowns (Alberti, 2014; Neckerman, et al., 1999). Easy communication, finance, trade, and transportation mean that immigrant lives can be lived at both origin and destination (Vertovec, 2009). Keeping feet in both worlds creates opportunities and remakes class construction (Alberti 2014; Bell, 2016). Various capital forms are valued based on the rules of the host country, but also the rules of their place of origin well after settlement (Grasmuck and Pessar, 1991; Kelly and Lusis, 2006). The variability of social ingenuity in the realm of class status making invites sociological insights, especially for studies of comparative accounts from the full spectrum of encounters within a transnational social field.

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Comparisons of transnational actors' construction of class position can occur within the constructs of deeper structures of a racialized global hierarchy (Kelly and Lusis, 2006; Neckerman et al., 1999). Adopting Western styles of dress, speech, and sometimes appearance, returnees who go back to their country of origin in the global south perceive themselves as cosmopolitans, unlike those who never left (Kelly and Lusis, 2006; Gu and Schweisfurth, 2015). Narratives of Eurocentric cultural capital resonate across places, immigrant communities and even into the second generation (Neckerman, et al., 1999). This holds true for Hispanic immigrants to the U.S. (Vallejo, 2012), Polish migrants in the U.K. (Bell, 2016), and Chinese migrants in Canada and Singapore (Huang and Yeoh, 2011; Waters, 2015). Affluent Chinese families emigrate in order to accompany their school-age children to study abroad and maintain their class privileges (Waters, 2015). While some families might not emigrate, Lan (2018: 77) finds that Taiwan parents seek "transnational references – class peers around the globe – to define the benchmark for security and to imagine their children's future." The literature points us towards an examination of class-making and its relation to migration beyond individuals' calculation because their children's well-being and perceived global competitiveness is another marker of "success" for the mobility project.

Class construction can involve shifting orientations across multiple fields from labor markets to family and citizenship (Erel and Ryan, 2019). Various mobility strategies may cause loss in one field and gains in another (Ibid., 2019). Set against the waves of political protests in Hong Kong since 2014 – a "historical time" (Elder, 1998 [cited in Erel and Ryan, 2019]) – we argue that the negotiation of a "better" class positioning among Hong Kong's professional and managerial community is intense and the value of foreign citizenship particularly salient. While we are using the lexicon of class struggles, we agree with Sayer (2005) that actors' struggles are not entirely instrumental, although achieving material goods and symbolic status often bring power, recognition and envy. Mobility strategies may derive from a pursuit of a way of life against the imposition of constructed class distinctions in Hong Kong's highly status-oriented and politically-restrictive contexts.

Transnational Ties to Canada Among Hong Kong's Professionals and Managers

Hong Kong's middle class emerged with the shift from a labor- to an information-intensive economy since the 1980s (Lui, 2003). Economic development brought about labor market and class expansion, created white-collar jobs and generated the first generation of the new middle class. Self-effort within a stable laissez faire economy and an open and free competitive education system became their moral code (Lui, 2003). This moral code was disrupted by the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 and the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989 (Skeldon, 1994). Hong Kong residents worried about the consequences of the handover to China in 1997. With less restrictive migration policies in Canada, Australia, and the UK many professionals and managers emigrated during this time. Immigration from Hong Kong to Canada accelerated, reaching between 30,900 and 66,000 annually from 1990 to 1997 (Sussman, 2010).

Even before 1997 many of these middle class migrants returned to Hong Kong, having not found expected economic opportunities (Sussman, 2010). Migrants endured de-

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professionalization, substantial salary reductions, and an unattractive business environment, because most professions in Canada require “Canadian experience” (Ley and Kobayashi, 2005; Sussman, 2010). Some families split their households: one parent (usually the father) returning to Hong Kong, leaving the mother and children in Canada (Ong, 1999; Waters, 2006). Currently 300,000 Canadian passport holders reside in Hong Kong (Consulate General of Canada, 2018) and 230,328 Hong Kong-born emigrants live in Canada (United Nations, 2017).

While emigration stabilized in the early 2000s, recent sociopolitical changes have increased emigration intentions again (Lui, 2014). Economically, a change in the practices of Hong Kong organizations, such as delayering, outsourcing, and streamlining of the public sector means professionals, managers, and administrators face greater economic uncertainties, less stable employment conditions, and longer hours. Middle class members face growing uncertainties about promotion and achievement and worry about their children’s career prospects (Lui, 2014). Politically, the erosion of the Hong Kong Basic Law – a constitutional law endorsed by both the British and the Chinese government that highlights “one country two systems” and “a high degree of autonomy” – created sustained and substantial resentment against the governments in Hong Kong and China (Hui, 2015). These include the 2014 “Umbrella Revolution” (Hui, 2015) and the recent protests against the Extradition Law, which continue to date. The government’s failed responses struck a chord among professionals and managers who participate in framing Hong Kong’s core values as “freedom, knowledge, fair play, human rights, the rule of law, integrity and transparency, plurality and upholding professionalism” (So, 2014; Lee, 2019). Politically identifying with resistance, professionals and managers responded to these insecurities through investment in their children (Lui, 2014) and overseas properties (Ho and Atkinson, 2018).

Methodology

We focus on the Hong Kong-Canada transnational community to understand class construction through mobility. We recruited 45 respondents from June 2016 to April 2019 through snowball and theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006).[1] Nineteen are emigrants; six of them returned to Hong Kong and then re-emigrated to Canada. Nine are returnees from Canada, and 17 had never emigrated. Interviews lasted from 40 minutes to two hours. Most were face-to-face interviews, although some were Skyped. We restricted our sample to people in their late 20s to late 40s to emphasize mobility strategies in the prime working years.

Respondents are identified as professionals and managers through their education and occupation. We developed our sample in as many directions as possible across occupation and education experiences, so as to develop and test our emergent theoretical concepts. Our sample is different from mobile entrepreneurs in Ong’s study (1999) and millionaire migrants in Ley’s (2011). Migrants in our study have just enough economic resources to underwrite their moves. As one respondent stated, “If we buy a house in Vancouver, we will use up our savings and will start from square one again.” Since emigration would deplete their family’s resources, it heightens the salience of these mobility decisions.

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Emigrant-respondents and re-emigrated respondents left Hong Kong for Canada between 2007 and 2018. They are first-generation or 1.5 generation immigrants (i.e., the latter group first gained Canadian citizenship in their teens when their parents emigrated). This population fills an empirical gap, as most studies focus on emigrants who left Hong Kong before the handover. They moved to Canada through skilled migration, spousal reunion, Canada's investor program, and the Provincial Nominee Program. Returnees chose to return as adults. They are all 1.5 generation immigrants. Transnational community is composed of people who move or want to move, but we recognize that many others in a similar class group also choose to stay (Schewel, 2019). We did not purposively look for people who intended to move. Our sample includes stayer-respondents who had chosen to stay at the time of the interview. Our study is the first to include a complete comparison of movers, returnees, and stayers among professional and managers in Hong Kong.

For triangulation with our interviews, we analyze three popular online discussion forums, Facebook groups from 2016 to 2017 that focused on Hong Kong-Canada migration, and WhatsApp discussion groups from 2016 to 2017. Our analyses focus on comparing people's discourses across mover, stayer, and returnee status. We conducted both open and line-by-line coding of the verbatim transcripts.

During the interviews, class-related topics emerged spontaneously. Respondents discussed moving, moving back and forth, or staying as strategies for maintaining their own or their children's social status in an uncertain institutional context in Hong Kong. To capture respondents' references to class, we coded interview texts when respondents shared experiences of de-professionalization, and their emotions, aspirations, and comparisons of their life with that of their friends. They sometimes used metaphors to express their concern about class mobility and life chances. Moral claims were coded when value judgments were made between good versus bad, normal versus abnormal, and should versus should not.

Mobility and Motive: Class Disillusionment Among Professionals and Managers

Against the background of sociopolitical uncertainties, respondents felt Hong Kong was in turmoil. These political concerns were matched with anxiety about losing middle class status for themselves and their children. Heady, 32, was a designer for three publicly listed companies in Hong Kong. His anxieties about local people being marginalized and replaced by a growing number of educated Mainland Chinese led to a move to start a new life in Toronto. While working as a ramen manager when interviewed, he told us how he could achieve a middle class lifestyle in Toronto that was impossible for him to attain in Hong Kong:

> I can never buy an apartment or a car in Hong Kong. You know, Hong Kongers need to live twice to pay back one 400-sq-feet apartment. Now, I am using my savings from Hong Kong to buy these things here in Toronto. I just bought a car and I am looking for an apartment now.

Edith, a mother of two, viewed children's class mobility as the major reason for her to move with her husband:

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> Hong Kong is very different from the past when I was a child. Our parents told us that if we studied hard, we could climb up the social ladder. We might not be rich, but at least we could be in the near middle-class status. But I don't think it's true anymore. My children have limited chance for success there.
>
> (Edith, 37, registered nurse in Hong Kong, migrated to Toronto in 2016 and now a clerk)

Heady and Edith were both born in the 1980s when Hong Kong was transitioning to an affluent society and they moved up the social hierarchy through fierce competition within the local education system. Just like most of our respondents they relished images of 'old Hong Kong': a free, open, and competitive system of social mobility built upon prosperity and social stability (Lui, 2014). They perceived that sustaining a middle class status is more difficult in Hong Kong now. Twelve out of 44 respondents reported experiencing employment instability.

Even for those with a stable and prestigious job, respondents – movers, stayers, and returnees, alike – were uneasy about the organizational restructuring trend in Hong Kong. A chartered financial analyst mentioned the sudden dissolution of a department within her firm. A senior accountant manager observed that only two of 80 new accountants were able to stay within the firm. Another respondent, a senior solicitor, explained that commercial law firms preferred Mainland Chinese job applicants. A social worker mentioned the Social Welfare Department's attempt to certify China-trained social workers, which she perceived would increase competition. One respondent offered a poignant metaphor: "If I'm a piece of equipment in my company, my children may not even be a screw." Respondents' educational and professional accomplishments combine with political and economic precariousness *at present* and *in the perceived future*, generate strong identity cohesion among Hong Kong middle class (Lui, 2014). Nevertheless, there appear to be status differentiations and emergent fissures when considering migration.

Movers – Pursuing Cultural Capital for Self and Children in a "Classless" Country

Loss of Economic Capital, Increase in Cultural and Symbolic Capital—Most emigrant respondents experienced de-professionalization in Canada. Edith and her husband were registered nurses in Hong Kong, but since their move she works as a clerk and her husband requires retraining. Mavis was a school teacher and her husband a college lecturer in Hong Kong. In Vancouver, she runs a daycare at home and her husband is a part-time principal of an NGO-run Chinese language school. While Hong Kong professionals can apply for skilled migration, their employability in their profession depends on working experience in Canada and whether or not they have Canadian licenses or academic credentials. The process of accumulating such human capital can take years. Younger respondents usually took one to two years to complete an additional degree and while doing voluntary services to gain "Canadian experience." Many worked their way back to their original profession, but still had to settle for an entry level position in Canada that did not recognize their prior Hong Kong experience. Older respondents completely dropped the idea of retraining, even before they arrived in Canada. To come to terms with their de-professionalization, emigrants describe the changing meaning of social class:

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> In Canada, there is no class. Almost everyone owns housing and cars. Fresh air and natural sceneries are for everyone. In Hong Kong, you need to live in the Mid-levels (the most affluent area) to enjoy those. Canada has a good social security system. You don't need to be rich to enjoy good services. […] People also wear the same clothes for many years and no one cares how you look in Canada. Whereas in Hong Kong, people care. (Yan, 37, teacher in Hong Kong, migrated to Vancouver in 2018, now studying English)

Most respondents told us they emigrated for cleaner air, better food, a healthier environment, and a slower pace of life. They characterized Hong Kong people as overly materialistic, money-minded, and preoccupied by the prestige of a job or occupation. Canada, by contrast, according to our respondents, was described as an egalitarian country where people need not compare themselves to each other in terms of occupations and possessions. They treasured Canada for its respect for human rights and personal freedom, unlike their perceptions around increasing surveillance and shrinking freedom in Hong Kong.

This rhetorical shift is consistent with Oliver and O'Reilly (2010: 53). Class does not disappear; it is just re-articulated in other material and cultural terms. For example, some respondents describe housing in Canada as more spacious than in Hong Kong. Other emigrants contrast Hong Kong's culture of overwork with Canada's leisurely lifestyle:

> In Hong Kong, there aren't many places to go to: shopping malls, the cinema, and restaurants for meals. But here, I bike around the lake; and I drive to some vineyards. In winter, I go skiing. In Hong Kong, I sang karaoke with a group of friends, then left just after a few hours. We didn't even have time to talk. But here, we hang out with our friends and have barbecue at their place for the whole day. We park 10 cars outside the house. But in Hong Kong, we didn't visit one another. Our apartments were small with few parking spaces.
>
> (Peter, 39, manager in Hong Kong, migrated to Toronto in 1994, returned to Hong Kong in 2002, re-migrated in 2012, and now a lorry driver)

Most describe Hong Kong middle class life as "arduous" and "depressing," while leisure is limited, superficial, and short. They characterize leisure activities in Canada as "idyllic" and "slow and relaxing." They remarked on how Canadians and they themselves have control over space and time, usually the exclusive right of the haute bourgeoisie (Bourdieu, 1991[2018]). We infer from this discourse, precisely what Erel and Ryan (2019) suggest: while mobility strategies might cause one to lose in one field, there may be status gains and moral prestige in other fields.

Increase in Cultural Capital for Movers' Children

For parents, a moral claim was often made about which "education package" is "right." To many respondents, education in Canada enables their children to acquire multicultural experiences, community-oriented attitudes, exposure to world issues, independent thinking skills and proficiency in English. They celebrate the Canadian education system as relaxing, fun, homework-free, and not obsessed with ranking students based on grades. They observed how Hong Kong's middle class education system is more competitive, but

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counterproductive. Many respondents describe middle class parents feeling the pressure to push their children to enter prestigious schools and "win at the starting line." They worried that their children might lose interest in learning and could be trapped in a cycle of failure. Some migrants were willing to sacrifice a good job in Hong Kong for their children's future and happiness:

> I've accepted [the fact that I'm de-professionalized] because my daughter is more important than my job. This is what a mother should do. I've no choice because I want to provide a better learning environment for my daughter.
>
> (Kelly, mid-40s, senior manager in Hong Kong, migrated to Prince Edward Island in 2018, now an entrepreneur)

Kelly explained that her new business is a requirement in the investment migration scheme. The business is not profitable, but a good mother should prioritize a daughter's happiness. This echoes statements in social media forums. Some parent-movers even criticize stayers: "If you've children and can move out of Hong Kong but you don't, you're responsible for jeopardizing your children's well-being" (M Group's message, 9 June 2018 at 10:48). Jessica, a mother of two who migrated to Halifax explained,

> I share my experience in Canada with my friends when asked. I don't want to broach this topic because not everyone has a chance to emigrate. I wouldn't show off […] how great it is that my children don't need to study that hard, but can still be successful in the future. But I believe Hong Kongers know that Hong Kong's education system is too crazy.

While the children of stayers and returnees acquire some transnational cultural capital through attending international schools, schools abroad, or enrolling in exchange programs, emigrants believe that ***only their*** children can have a full-fledged happy learning experience, or what Reay (2000) has called "emotional capital", while also acquiring cultural and economic capital at the lowest cost. Similar to Erel and Ryan's (2019) multiple fields analysis of third-country nationals in Britain, parent-movers shifted the definition of middle class status from their own occupational attainment to their children's multiple forms of capital accumulation – cultural, emotional, and economic.

Returnees: "I have to continue with the rat race, but I am different from stayers"

Accumulation of Economic Capital, But Culturally Competent—Some returnees are attracted by better job opportunities in Hong Kong. Entrepreneurs prefer the business-friendly environment of low taxation, the ease of setting up a company and consumers' ability to spend. Others move back for family reasons. While some plan to repatriate to Canada, again, for a better quality of life, others find this too costly because they or their partner are unable to easily transfer their prestigious job experience in Hong Kong to one in Canada.

Returnees cannot claim differences from stayers based on control of space and time. Nor can they make an anti-materialist distinction, although they view Canada as a "classless society." Like it or not, they anxiously continue striving for better occupational statuses in Hong Kong. They still distinguish themselves from stayers:

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> My local friends are afraid to communicate with foreigners. Once I introduced a foreign friend to two Hong Kong friends. One is a returnee like me; another totally local. [My local friend] felt so uncomfortable. But the returnee is different; she just talked non-stop. Returnees are exposed to the foreign world and are more comfortable with different social occasions. Hong Kong is too small and their views are local. (Chelsey, 30, migrated to Vancouver in 2000, moved back in 2011, now an assistant professor)

Returnees in our study believe they have more embodied cultural capital than stayers. Eric, 43, who emigrated in 1994 to attend college and returned to Hong Kong in 2008, explained:

"Canadians are much nicer than people in other countries. We take the time to thank one another. But in Hong Kong, people just force their way in while I am trying to hold the door for someone else." Notice his explicit identification with Canadians by saying "we take the time to." This identification with Canada invokes an expatriate inclination on his part.

> Deep down, I feel I'm a Canadian, although I can speak Cantonese. Say, I pick up newspapers like *Asian Expats*. In my son's school: there are Hong Kong parents and foreign parents, but I naturally join the foreign parents' group. In my workplace, I hang out with foreign staff. I don't know how to chat with Chinese people.

Although some returnees avoid Hong Kong stayers, most of them have to work with non-movers and people from China. Sophia, a 2004 returnee from Vancouver, is a senior accounting manager in a multinational corporation. Most of her colleagues and clients are Chinese. She resents having to act like Hong Kong stayers, who she characterizes as "stepping on others" and "pulling a fast one." These returnees claim they have no choice because they are stuck in their institutions, but they cling to their additional identity to survive. Caught in this identity and moral conflict, almost all returnees told us they eventually hope to re-emigrate to Canada.

Create a Cultural Cocoon, Simulate A Foreign Environment For Children

Migration decisions are even tougher for parent-returnees. They agree with emigrants regarding the merits of Canada's education system. All but one parent-returnee sends their children to international schools designed for the children of expatriates. While all respondents' children were born in Hong Kong and speak some Cantonese, returnees believe putting their children into international schools creates a "cocoon" that protects their children from "brainwashing," "rote learning," and an "exam-oriented mindset" they observe in Hong Kong's schools:

> […] International school students are better than local students in presentation skills, level of confidence, exposure, and soft skills. "Reciting" textbooks [*as in local schools*] is not necessary. The future society values curiosity that inspires innovation and knowledge creation. Furthermore, students in local schools learn to compete with their classmates instead of sincerely making friends with one another.
>
> (Sophia, 37, migrated to Vancouver in 1990s, returned in 2004, senior accounting manager)

Returnees tend to preserve a “foreign” identity and re-create a similar foreign environment for their children. They still emphasize the importance of learning *Putonghua* (Mainland Chinese language) for their children’s competitiveness. In other words, parent-returnees perceive international schooling as a way to obtain cultural capital for their children, while acquiring Chinese language skills for their economic future. These observations resonate with Lan’s (2018) discussions of how middle class Taiwan parents seek global pathways to prepare their children’s future. In our study, returnees utilize this strategy to negotiate between the economic benefit of staying in Hong Kong and the need to acquire cultural statuses for their children.

Stayers: Continuing the Rat Race for My Children’s Future

Accumulating Economic Capital Now, Emigration for Retirement—More than half of stayers in our study plan to emigrate in the future. Those who do not plan to emigrate soon are still dissatisfied with their Hong Kong life. They report tolerating the undesirable social and political conditions as long as they have a good job. They describe themselves as politically apathetic, coping by vacationing outside of Hong Kong.

All stayers have close contact with overseas relatives and friends. Most have thought about emigration and believe that Western countries are better places to live. A foreign passport, to them, is a privilege that brings flexible mobility when political conditions become unbearable:

> People who have a foreign passport sound “more advanced” or more “higher up.” I don’t know why. [*Laughs*]. Hong Kong passport is so crappy or too common (?) When someone suddenly revealed that they have a Canadian passport, I was like “Wow!” Maybe I feel this way because there is always a backdoor for them to escape when something bad happen here. They can decide where to settle depending on other personal factors, too. But I am stuck and have to bear with them.
>
> (Gloria, 37, public relations manager)

Stayers like Gloria perceive that people with dual citizenship are higher status, without knowing why. This perception is what Bourdieu calls “symbolic capital.” Having the ability to leave Hong Kong is an important asset because people with “flexible citizenship” (Ong, 1999) can navigate several political arenas, global business opportunities, and welfare services. Almost all respondents believe that Hong Kong residents have lost freedom of speech, a core value that middle class professionals greatly value. Having a foreign passport, movers and returnees enjoy this freedom, even as Hong Kong appears to be losing its “one-country two-system status.”

Recognizing the privilege of having multiple nationalities, some stayers acknowledged that they had heard about the possibilities of de-professionalization in Canada and they had decided that emigrants sacrificed too much. Learning from their relatives’ experiences, Annie (a university instructor) and her husband (an IT analyst) are concerned about being “downgraded” from a professional or managerial position to an entry-level position. They decided emigration is “a dream that is too risky to pursue.” Annie argued, “We are middle

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class professionals here, but if we go there we, including our kids, might become *dei dai nai* ("soil in the ground," a metaphor for the "underclass")." Instead of moving now, they plan to move at retirement age. Some said they planned to retreat to more affordable, freer countries, like Taiwan. Others said they would follow their children abroad. This includes preparing for their future retirement emigration by buying, or exploring to buy, overseas properties. Their attempt to strategize an economic and cultural capital balance is an inter temporal one. They forego the cultural capital accumulation for contemporary economic gain, planning to achieve some balance of cultural and economic statuses in the distant future.

Converting Economic Capital to Cultural Capital for Children

> I envy [the emigrants and the returnees]. [*Author*]*: Why?* They have a choice. People who have a foreign passport might decide not to go, but they have a choice. [*Author: But they could be puzzled about staying or leaving.*] It's a privilege to worry because they have options.
>
> (Annie, 39, a university instructor and a mother of two)

According to studies in the sociology of emotions, people feel envy when they make comparisons in domains that are especially important to how they define themselves (Clanton, 2006: 425). The expression of envy by parent-stayers constructs a more privileged status for emigrant-parents. These parent-stayers note emigrants' loss of economic capital, they confer veneration upon parents willing to sacrifice for their children. Parent-stayers cannot give up their jobs and most of them did not want to split up their families, they still prepared for their children's future overseas schooling.

> We always want to migrate, but can only go through investment, which is really expensive. I just close my eyes and not look at the changing sociopolitical environment. But I will not let my daughter stay here. I will definitely send her abroad. The current social system is distorted. […] China's influence is too serious. Mainland Chinese people are hired in profitable professions like i-banks, fund houses, and law firms, filling up the upper-middle class strata. I can foresee that my daughter will have a hard time competing because of the China-centered system.
>
> (Vivian, 37, a solicitor)

Stayers share movers' and returnees' concerns about the political environment and the fairness of competition in Hong Kong for their children. They also believe in the superiority of the European, North American, and Australian schools. Their strategy, though, is to save as much money as possible and send their children abroad.

Contesting Class Morality Among Movers, Stayers, and Returnees

In our study each type of respondent – mover, returnee, stayer – seeks to distinguish themselves from the other type. Movers' loss of economic capital makes the construction of symbolic capital more salient. Both returnees and movers have a foreign passport (symbolic capital). Movers distinguished themselves from returnees, criticizing them for getting "the best of both worlds," while being disloyal to both Hong Kong and Canada. Peter, 39, who moved back to Canada in 2012, said:

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> Canada’s government took good care of them, provided them with public education and welfare; yet they selfishly left for Hong Kong for more money.”

Stayers make fine distinctions among foreign passport holders. Although stayers envy returnees, they view second-generation emigrants who returned to Hong Kong for work differently from first-generation emigrants. The former’s “success (in getting a passport) hinges on the father’s deed,” so they have no reason to brag. The latter’s is an achievement (unless they acquired the passport through family reunion). The following comments were noted in an online forum. One of the replies in the thread used a kneeling icon “,” showing deference to the achieved. In so doing, participants create a discourse of achieved versus ascribed status.

For the most part, parent-movers are proud of themselves and admired by returnees and stayers as good parents who gave up stable jobs for their children’s well-being. Such moral valorization bolsters their “better middle class” rhetoric, which is both highly guarded and often contested among parent-movers. Just like many professional and managerial class parents striving for social reproduction or upward mobility, parent-movers urge their children towards tutoring in extra subjects and using more advanced materials (purchased from Hong Kong). They want to ensure that their children are not losing academic ground to stayers’ children, while mastering the soft skills emphasized in Canada. Some anxious parent-movers maneuver their way into a good “school net” (network) in Canada. Such behaviors create fissures in middle class narratives among movers. For example, in a Facebook group, when a person shows concern about where to buy property given the falling ranking of a desired school, one response inveighed against the statement:

> [Translated from Chinese] Warning: Monster Parent Please don’t bring this “monster culture” into Vancouver. Many parents come because they want to escape from this, hoping to give their children a happy childhood. Your “monster” mentality disrupts this. There should be no ranking in education. Any school can raise a genius.

These expressions of tensions were common. Discourses around “good parenting” were tied to their Hong Kong class origins. While “tiger moms” are not exclusively Asian (Holme, 2002), respondents in our sample struggled within themselves as they navigated what it means to be a good parent and maintaining middle class statuses across multiple fields. Many of the movers in our sample resisted Hong Kong practices seen to undermine what they valued about having moved to Canada. They wanted to protect and essentialize the symbolic superiority of Canadian education, allowing them to lay claim to the cultural capitals made possible by moving to Canada.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our findings demonstrate a vibrant transnational social field among professionals and managers across transnational statuses of emigrants, returnees, and stayers. Through strong and weak ties, they are well aware of each other, sharing opinions and promoting status competition. Our respondents actively engaged with making distinctions among themselves, while assigning moral values to their mobility strategies. Our findings expand Bourdieu’s

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(1984) concept of distinction in terms of the capital composition structure – the relative preponderance of economic capital and cultural capital. Transnational contestations to be "better middle class" involve struggling between the relative balance of financial wealth (economic capital) and having the control of space and time, non-material pursuit of happiness, foreign citizenship, political freedom, and a global mindset (cultural capital). These are illuminated by our respondents through comparisons that highlight Canada's positional superiority over Hong Kong. For parents, an added aspect of ensuring middle class status is oriented towards their children's future, involving their ability to ensure children's happiness, political stability, opportunities through acquiring English language proficiency, moral comportment, and a cosmopolitan outlook (Waters, 2015). Our analyses of multiple forms of capital gain and loss for individuals poignantly reveal intersectional, transnational relational identities of work, reproduction, and citizenship to better explain variable spatial mobility strategies (Erel and Ryan, 2019).

Emigrants' narratives carefully emphasize middle class identity in Canada imbued with lifestyle distinctions far different from those experienced in Hong Kong. While both returnees and stayers agree with the value of cultural capital in Canada, all transnational actors express awareness of the de-professionalization risks. At times, emigrants sounded almost defensive in their responses, anticipating how those in Hong Kong might regard them as "lower class" due to the nature of their work. By pursuing different mobility strategies, returnees and stayers navigate the construction of their middle class identities in very different ways. For the returnees, they create cultural distinctions from people who never left Hong Kong and by despising Chinese-ness, emphasizing associations with fellow returnees and expatriates (Kelly and Lusis, 2006; Gu and Schweisfurth, 2015). For stayers, they accumulate economic capital, while planning for retirement migration in places where they can be freer and enjoy their leisure. Their capital composition structure is achieved over their life time and possibly into their children's.

The future-oriented aspect of middle class identities for parent-emigrants is less contested. Parent-emigrants take pride in a mobility strategy which has become externally validated, because they sacrifice their economic capital in exchange for their children's cultural capital. Returnees and stayers both valorize emigrants' moral claims, especially as their decision making synchronizes with Hong Kong's uncertain political future since 2014. The returnees try to reproduce this form of middle class identity by sending their children to international schools with the intention of insulating them from local education and local "contamination." Stayers articulate plans to send their children abroad to study and bring them closer to a more fully realized, multi-faceted middle class identity at some point the future. While each actively sought to distinguish their contemporary middle class selves from each other (mover, returnee, or stayer) they share a common interest for their children's middle class status – they all seek global pathways for education consumption that advances economic, political, and cultural capital for their children, just as Lan (2018) suggests. However, the within-class struggles, even in the dialect of the second generation is often contentious, as parent-emigrants continue to compare themselves with parent-stayers to ensure competitiveness and flexibility in future global labor markets.

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We project that the dynamics of within class distinctions may intensify across transnational statuses, as macro-political conditions become more salient in Hong Kong. The privileges of Canadian citizenship, in both symbolic and a political sense, are likely to be further validated. This idea resonates with Erel and Ryan's (2019) argument about the specificities of this "historical time." Future studies might analyze how the social construction of transnational class-making changes through time using longitudinal methods to uncover the malleable nature of multiple forms of capital across class and spatial mobilities with shifting contexts of political and economic dynamics at the local and global level.

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