

# An Anthropological Study of International School Students in Hong Kong Universities

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## Introduction

Most students in Hong Kong enter Hong Kong universities through the Joint University Programmes Admission System (JUPAS), having entered and passed in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examinations (HKCEE) in Form 5, and the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examinations (A-Levels) in Form 7. The JUPAS is organized to centralize and help Hong Kong students in their applications for university. It is similar in function to the UCAS system for universities in the UK. However, some students also enter through the Non-JUPAS system, using qualifications other than local examinations, with examples like the International Baccalaureate (IB) or General Certificate of Education Advanced Levels (GCE A-Levels). These students have been educated in a different education system to the majority at university with a different culture of education. Students with these types of qualifications are either educated overseas, resulting in what is generally known as ‘international students’, or from international schools in Hong Kong, with students known as ‘international school students.’

In 2007, there were 800 students admitted under the Non-JUPAS scheme at the University of Hong Kong, 15 per cents of the total students admitted. This figure includes students who were admitted under Associate Degrees, High Diplomas and qualifications other than HKALE, and therefore does not represent the number of international school students admitted; the number of international school students would be a lot lower than ones entering through Associate Degrees and High Diplomas. Compared with the majority Chinese students admitted through the JUPAS scheme, the international school students, who enter the university through the Non-JUPAS scheme, is undoubtedly a minority, despite the fact that they are also come from Hong Kong.

As an international school student myself, I would like to understand the experience of students like myself, issues and problems they encountered, how they resolved the issue and the general experience they have of adjusting to university life. Through my research, I also hope to offer some possible solutions to future international school students at universities in Hong Kong, making their transition maybe a little easier. While the number of international school students at Hong Kong universities is still small, this trend will change over time as more parents opt for their children to be educated at international schools and continue their tertiary education in Hong Kong, making this a very worthwhile research for the future.

## Methodology

Most of my research was based on interviews with international school students that have already entered universities around Hong Kong. The main criterion I made for possible informants is that the informant must have received the last portion of their secondary school education at international schools in Hong Kong, with qualifications that deem them as Non-JUPAS students at universities. Many students that have been educated for the local examinations but took their A-Levels in the UK, entering university as a Non-JUPAS student<sup>1</sup>. On paper, these students are like international school students, yet their experience is different. One of my informants, Catherine at Chinese University, put it as “I do not consider them as international school students. They are often not even international at all.” These students do not fit my criteria because most of their education was under the local school system, which makes them more accustomed to the culture of students in local schools, and less likely to be affected by the differences as a result of their university

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<sup>1</sup>Many children with parents who work in the Hong Kong Civil Service have been educated at international schools overseas, especially in the UK and Australia. Their parents receive a government allowance, known as the Overseas Education Allowance (OEA) for their children’s education up to the secondary level, giving them the opportunity to study abroad. However, the allowance does not cover the costs for tertiary education, resulting in the students coming back to study at Hong Kong universities because their parents cannot afford the overseas university tuition fees.

application differences. Also, the education from overseas may affect them in a different way to those who studied at international schools of Hong Kong.

The majority of international school students receive their tertiary education overseas, in countries like Great Britain, United States of America, Canada etc., with only a handful that remain in Hong Kong. Reasons for remaining in Hong Kong vary, but the two most popular reasons are that the parents wanted their children (my informants) to stay in Hong Kong, or that they cannot afford the tuition fees for tertiary education overseas. The convenience of using professional degrees from Hong Kong such as ones in law, medicine or teaching for the future is also a popular reason for staying in Hong Kong. Professional careers like those in medicine, law and accounting requires qualifications issued by the Hong Kong government. Many students would rather stay in Hong Kong for their professional degree because they will be trained more in the direction of passing such qualifying exams. One such example is the PCLL examination conducted by the University of Hong Kong for solicitors and barristers.

To network with possible informants, I have talked to all my friends and acquaintances from secondary school and at Chinese University, and asked if they know other people who could meet my requirements and act as my informants. I interviewed fifteen informants, generally students in their second or third year, with a few freshmen. I found that the possibility of experiencing the greatest culture shock is when the students have just experienced it and it is fresh on their minds, while as the shock has mellowed out by the third year and after graduation. On top of these fifteen informants, I have also interviewed three local school students and two exchange students in order to find some different opinions, allowing some possible comparisons to be made and get a fuller picture on the issues discussed. Pseudonyms have been used for informants and the people they mention to protect their privacy throughout this research.

Some abbreviations have been used when referring to different universities around Hong Kong. The abbreviations are as follows:

CUHK - The Chinese University of Hong Kong

HKU - The University of Hong Kong

PolyU - The Polytechnic University of Hong Kong

UST - The University of Science and Technology, Hong Kong

## **Brief Background on the International Schools in Hong Kong**

In Hong Kong, there are 22 international schools at the secondary level up to Form 7, while there are another 5 which are starting their secondary levels of education at varying degrees. These international schools offer different curriculums of which among the most popular are the IB (International Baccalaureate) and the GCEs (General Certificate of Examination). The ESF (English Schools Foundation), a government-aided organization that manages a chain of international schools around Hong Kong, manages 5 out of the 22 international schools, while the others are independent.

School fees range from HK\$80,000 to around HK\$160,000 per annum depending on the institution and whether the school has any government subsidies. The ESF schools have government subsidies and generally cost less to send children to, making them a popular choice among many parents.

There has been a recent increase in the demands for education for foreign exams, and the Education and Manpower Bureau (2008) has offered the Direct Subsidy Scheme for many local schools in Hong Kong. These DSS schools have more control over what curriculum is taught in their school and can charge school fees that are becoming similar to those of international schools. Some of these DSS schools have even turned to foreign examinations on top of the regular Hong Kong-based examinations, to offer more opportunities to students. This move to accommodate foreign academic examinations has blurred the boundaries between international schools and local schools and will continue to do so in the future. But for the purpose of my study, I will only base my research on the international schools that are promoted and popular among the expatriate communities of Hong Kong.

The make up of international schools, has a majority of ethnic Chinese students, depending on the international school in question. An example is the Chinese International School mostly made up of ethnic Chinese students, while schools like German Swiss International or French International would have more foreigners. The numbers of ethnic Chinese at international schools is increasing as more parents can afford to pay the school fees.

## Findings and Analysis

Informants have received international school education at varying degrees. Some have been at an international school since kindergarten, some after primary school, others at Form 3-4 and some even at Form 6. The so-called 'internationalization' therefore not only depends on the informants' background and their involvement within the culture, but also how long they have been in the international environment.

The informants each have their own unique experience acclimatizing to the new culture. Although this is largely a personal experience and factors like their own personality have a play in how they adjust to the new environment, there are some common themes and situations which all the informants have experienced to varying degrees.

From the interviews that I have carried out, I have found five main topics which are most central to the discussions about any problems of adjustment. These topics are the (1) problems of language, (2) making friends, (3) maturity, (4) social class and wealth, and (5) identity. In language, I will talk about how the quality and the medium of language communication acts as a barrier for communication, making it more difficult to mix with other local students. This leads to making friends, how the students have to make new friends with people they have a somehow similar, yet different background to. Friendship groups may have to be constructed from scratch and although the personalities of individuals have some play in the success of constructing friendships, there are some other problems which I will discuss. Another topic of interest is the discussion about the maturity of students in Hong Kong, and in particular how the maturity of international school students differs from that of local school students, producing another difficulty in mixing with the new school environment. As part of the maturity discussion, I will also talk about interests and activities out of school, and how these affect students fitting in as well. Social class and wealth are directly linked together because the wealthier you are, the higher the social class in Hong Kong. At universities, there is a mix of the social classes because the Hong Kong Government provides loans and grants to students who need it; if you have a lower-class background but your academic achievements are quite good, the government will give you a grant or a loan. Coming from an international school having paid annual school fees that are greater than the school fees at university, the social class of international school students also has an effect on how they fit in at university. Finally, I will discuss the topic of identity, how the students identify themselves within the school and within Hong Kong, as well as how other people identify them. It would also be interesting to look at whether these students are "Hong Kong people", if they are currently not will they ever become, or if the society will accept them as Hong Kong people.

Apart from these five main topics of interest, I will try to draw some comparative values between the two school systems judging from what I have learnt in my interviews and literature reviews. I will look at the successes, disadvantages and possible failures of the two school systems, as well as providing some information from interviewees that have voiced opinions about the different educational systems.

### Language

The first and most-mentioned in my interviews is the problem of language. My informants found some difficulty in communicating with students of a local school background as well as the medium of instruction at university.

At international school, everyone has to speak English because it is the medium of education and exams, aside from foreign language classes. This also allows for students of different nationalities to have a common language for communication. As a result of this, all students are fluent in English and generally communicate in English. The longer a student has been educated at international schools in English, the more likely they are to think, read, write and speak in English. All my informants speak and write fluent English without any Chinese accent.

My informants are also mostly Chinese by nationality; there is one who has a Caucasian father and a Chinese mother, but all other informants have parents who are ethnically Chinese. As part of the school curriculum, most students study a foreign language, often Mandarin but also French, Spanish, Japanese etc. Cantonese is not on offer as a subject, and the level of Mandarin studied is relatively simple and not compulsory, so any Chinese learnt is through these classes. Some parents may choose to have their children attend extra-curricular classes like private tuition in Chinese. This results in the level of Chinese being generally lower than of local schools; informants may be fluent in speaking Chinese, but reading and writing is limited.

Having described the language background of international school students, the difficulty in communication can be seen more clearly. Local school students tend to converse in Chinese and are often reluctant to speak in English. Students

from schools of higher bands may be more accustomed to using English, but there is generally little practice for English outside of the classroom, resulting in a relatively lower level in the quality of English.

On the social level, international school students have difficulty in communicating with local school students outside academic studies because they are used to communication in English. They may try to converse in Cantonese with the other students, but being accustomed to English, they are less fluent in communicating thoughts and ideas, as well as facing difficulties in understanding jokes and humor that is in Chinese. Jane, a student of HKU, said "If I talk in Chinese, there are some words that I don't know and have to use an English substitute, sometimes consciously but often subconsciously. The [Cantonese] words are on the tip of my tongue but I can't seem to say it, so English comes out instead."

This constant conversion between the two languages is necessary if the person is used to thinking and conversing in English. The person may not be aware of what language comes out because they are focused on the concept that they are trying to communicate, without noticing the language that it comes out in. Another informant, Madeleine, who studies at PolyU, said, "I'm talking to them in Cantonese, and then I might let slip a few English words or phrases without knowing. They [local school students] then look at me strangely and often laughingly tell me to explain what I had just said. Or sometimes they repeat what I said in English. Then do I realize I spoke in English?"

This situation is common among all my informants when conversing with local school students, but this is only a slight hiccup in the communication process if done in a relaxed atmosphere, like when conversing with friends. If everyone is just chatting with a fun, intimate atmosphere, it is just laughed upon and forgotten, sometimes even adding to the humor and jokes if a blunder has been made.

One example of an experience like this is given by a student from CUHK, Catherine: "I was talking about the warmth of the sun, speaking in Cantonese but referring to the sun in English. Everyone mistook my English 'sun' to mean 'body' in Chinese [the pronunciation of 'sun' in English is equivalent to a Chinese word meaning 'body' (like human body)]. As a result, no one understood what I was talking about but they didn't let me know that they didn't understand, until I referred to arms and legs in the conversation. It was as if switch had been turned on and there was continuous laughter for the rest of the conversation."

It is small blunders like these in communication which can be problematic but also a way in which relationships can be constructed with a common experience and an effort from both parties to make this communication viable. The effort made in trying to make the conversation work is touching to the international school student because these are people who care about the message that is trying to be communicated, and have not given up due to language problems and difficulties.

However, not all of this is well-received among the local school students. One local school informant, Renee from CUHK, has said that "When I hear them [international school students] speak English [when the conversation is in Chinese], I want to tell them to go study elsewhere [meaning at overseas universities]. This is Hong Kong, they are Chinese, so why can't they speak Chinese like us? They're just trying to show that they are of a better [more wealthy] background, studied at an international school and are better than us."<sup>2</sup>

Although Renee later said her views of the international school students after she got to know them better and realized they weren't putting on an act but really couldn't help slipping in the occasional English phrase, many local school students hold this view of the international school students. Madeleine said her group of friends at university thought she was really stuck-up at first because she always spoke using English.

For a more harmonious experience and for saving face of the international school student and their own, local school students tend not to voice their dislike for the dropping of English into the conversation. However, Jane's experience takes this to a different level.

Jane joined a drama society which had to hold regular meetings for preparing, during and evaluating their drama productions. These meetings are serious affairs with minutes taken, and last late into the night. Tempers are easily lost due to the stress and the intensity of issues discussed regarding the drama society. Meetings are held in Cantonese, which is not a problem for Jane, but when she wants to put forward an argument, the occasional English word slips in. Students at the meeting tended to ignore her when she spoke in English, and on one occasion, actually told her to either "shut up or speak in Cantonese." As a result of this, her experience with the drama society has not been a happy one. Jane feels that

<sup>2</sup>Hong Kong was an ex-colony under the British rule until 1997. As a result of this there were some bad feelings towards foreigners, because foreigners were generally of a higher social class. If a Chinese-looking person cannot speak Chinese and speak only English, they are viewed as conceited by other Hong Kong Chinese people, saying that they are 'worshipping' or trying to emulate the Westerners.

they have not considered the expediency of her contributions but rebutted her in quite a rude manner based on the fact that she cannot communicate solely in Cantonese. From her point of view, it is the other students' incompetency that is the problem of their communication as she is fluent in both English and Mandarin.

The problems of communication however are not as serious for every one of my informants. Yang, studying a double degree in English and Education at HKU does not have much problem in communicating with his friends and classmates. Studying English, most of the students have a good command of English and therefore most conversations are carried out in English. For Kelvin studying Global Business at UST, the standard of English used is high. It is therefore not unusual to carry out a Cantonese conversation with the occasional English phrase because the effort needed to change between the two languages is less.

Apart from the language used in communicating with other students, there is also the problem of the language which lectures are taught in at universities. This also depends largely on the subject that the informant is studying (i.e. when studying English, the course will be in English). For students studying major professions like medicine, law and accounting, the language of instruction is in English would not pose a problem for international school students. Business students like Kelvin and Christina have classes conducted in English as well, so there are no language problems there.

However, some courses may use course materials written in English, but the professor conducts the lecture in Chinese, either Mandarin or Cantonese. For Madeleine who studies Fashion Design this poses a problem. What the professor is talking about may be the same in meaning as the lecture notes, but she cannot write down what the professor is saying word for word it would mean writing in Chinese, of which she is not that skilled in, and also because exams and papers are conducted in English anyway. As a result of this, Madeleine has to translate in her head what the professor is saying before writing notes in English, with the possibility that there are errors in her translation. This adds an unnecessary hurdle to her education because she has to translate what could have been taught in English back into English.

This is also the case for Catherine's elective courses at CUHK. Taking a university elective course on the philosophy of death and immortality, the concepts taught were entirely of the Western schools of thought, but some of the notes and the lecture were conducted in Chinese. Catherine therefore had to translate the lecture and notes into English to understand Western concepts that were originally in English.

As a result of such experiences in the classroom, both Madeleine and Catherine try to take courses that are taught in English, so as not to go through the translating process in lectures.

The issues that international school students experience in their adjustment to university life in Hong Kong are often related to language, although the problems may vary in intensity and seriousness. International school students tackle these problems in different ways, with some people like Jacky, studying History at CUHK, trying to improve on his Cantonese and speak with classmates only in Cantonese so as not to be labeled as snobby. Others, like Madeleine speak a mixture of both Cantonese and English without giving much thought to it, or some are like Yang speaking only in English with classmates. Their approaches to the handling of language can also be related to Goffman's theory of face-work and their self-presentation skills (Goffman 1967). Jacky is very conscious in his face-work, because not only is he trying to save his own face in preventing people labeling him as snobby as result of using English, he is also saving the face of his audience. The audience (i.e. Jacky's friends and classmates) may not be as proficient or as confident in their English, and therefore feel inferior to Jacky's fluency and command of English. Jacky saves their face when he tries to use Cantonese, so that the audience will not have the opportunity to be embarrassed if they do not understand his English. While Madeleine and Yang both use English when conversing with their friends, it must be under the precaution that their friends have a good command of English such that they can be comfortable in listening if not verbally responding in English. Therefore the method in which international school students approach their language problems can be a result of their methods in handling face-work.

## **Friends**

Most students who enter universities in Hong Kong know at least one other student who is either already at the university, or is entering the university with them. In the case of larger faculties like Business Administration, friends may enter the same department and therefore take the same classes together. Students therefore have a companion through this transition process, someone who understands what they are going through and are on hand to help if there are any problems or queries.

For the international school students however, the situation often results in the student entering university without previously knowing anyone else from the university. An example of this is Kelvin, Catherine, Madeleine, Yang and Jane all from the same secondary school and graduated in the same school year, but Kelvin is a student at UST, Catherine at CUHK, Madeleine at PolyU, while Yang and Jane are at HKU, but in different faculties. They therefore had different experiences and were generally on their own in the immediate adjustment to university. As a result of this, new friends have to be made at the university.

One local school informant, Anthea, studying at CUHK, said "I have entered a department which none of my friends had an interest for, so I am here alone in the department. However, they also study here [at the same university] and I can always meet up with them after class, just like we used to in secondary school. If I cannot make friends with people in my department, I do not feel bad because I have my other friends to fall back on. I'm not often seen at my department or with my classmates because I tend to hang around with my secondary school buddies, more than with other people." The pressure on making new friends is therefore less on local school students because they have childhood friends from primary and secondary school that they still hang out with outside of school, regardless of whether they are studying at the same university or not.

For an international school student, they do not have the friendship network from secondary school at their immediate disposal because most of these friends would have gone overseas for their tertiary education. The few that remain may only be acquaintances, and since everyone is entering a different university, my informants have said that it is difficult to keep in touch regularly. One example of this is Madeleine and Catherine, meeting up only in the holidays, when other friends from overseas have returned for their holidays too. Madeleine said, "We [Madeleine and Catherine] used to hang out a lot during secondary school. And then when both of us had to stay in Hong Kong for university, I thought 'Hey, that's great! We can meet up and hang out outside of school.' Since we're both in Hong Kong, you would think that we could meet up quite a lot, but that is so not true. With school work and extra-curricular activities, we only meet up during the Christmas and summer holidays, when our mutual friends come back from university in London."

Friends are therefore made at university through many different means. The first method in which international school students can meet potential friends is through orientation camps and orientation days. These functions can be organized by the faculty, department, college (at CUHK), student union or other societies within the university. The aim of these functions is to introduce the new students to one another through a medium where everyone is new, and it is assumed that no one knows anyone else. Freshmen are therefore encouraged to go to these orientation functions and have fun at a function held for the sole purpose of socializing and getting to know other people. Acquaintances made here at these functions have the potential to become friends after people get to know each other better, as described by Madeleine: "I couldn't go to the [university] orientation camp because when they [the university] informed me that they had accepted me, I was not in Hong Kong at the time. The orientation camp was not long after the registration date. They [the department] had an orientation lunch the day before school was due to start and I went to that instead. It turns out that I didn't miss much by skipping the orientation camp because only a few students from my department went to that, and they didn't have much to say about the experience apart from their lack of sleep. The two girls I sat next to, one of them has become one of my closer friends at school, after sitting next to her in classes because we met up at orientation lunch. The other girl doesn't talk to me, but I don't know why."

Some informants, like Jacky and Shane, both from CUHK, had the option of attending the orientation camp, but they chose not to because it was not all that appealing. The orientation camp was more for fun, rather than an introduction to the university itself, and they thought the activities were rather "lame", and opted out of it. Jacky said he regrets not going to the orientation camp because though it was not something he would have liked to attend, he wouldn't have had to spend so much time alone in the beginning of the semester because he didn't know the other classmates very well.

Informants have also made friends through their classmates, conversing with each other during class and sometimes working together on group tasks like presentations and projects. For Jacky, the first semester was spent in the company of exchange students, while in the second semester, he started to hang out with his classmates mostly of local school background because he had got to know them better through attending class together.

Another way in which friends can be made is through extra-curricular activities. For Kelvin, he was Vice-President of the orchestra at UST in his freshman year, making friends with fellow students in the orchestra through the organization of performances and the weekly rehearsals involved. Kelvin is also part of the UST English Debate team, holding meetings and debates with members of the debate team at least once a week. When asked about what friends he hangs out with most, Kelvin told me it was first his fellow classmates, then friends from the debate team because he has known them for longer.

Christina, who is also at PolyU has made friends with the girls from the women's football team at PolyU. Although she has friends from classes that she attends, she has also made friends with girls from the football team because so much time is spent on training. Aside from coming in contact with the girls during their training sessions or their football games, they also tend to hang out after a training session and have a mid-night snack together, or before competitions when they have nothing to do if they are too early. Joining extra-curricular activities is one way of making friends, but hanging out with them outside of the context of the extra-curricular activities makes this friendship last longer.

My informants tended to suggest the importance of hostel life as a part of making new friends. Living in a hostel with a room mate, students are forced to get to know another student, whether they like it or not, for a more harmonious atmosphere within the room. Students are also encouraged to get acquainted with their neighboring rooms in hall or floor activities. Although the effectiveness of such activities in making new friends has been refuted by all my informants, they nonetheless stress the relative ease in which they can make friends with students from the same hostel because they are all living together under the same roof. Kelvin suggested that hostel life can be used to get acquainted with people, not necessarily become friends with them, and this has been reflected in both Christina's and Jane's experience of hostel life because they found that living with their room mate posed some problems for them. These problems could be a result of their different backgrounds to the local school students, but from their descriptions of the problems, it seems more likely to be a result of personality differences that would occur regardless of background or culture. For example, Christina's room mate is a light sleeper, sleeps early and must not have any noise while she is sleeping. Another example is Jane's room mate who invites her boyfriend to stay the night without informing Jane about the decision. These are just a few of the problems the informants encountered with their room mates, but I feel that these problems are as likely to occur for local school students as they have occurred for these international school informants.

The informants that do not live on campus have mostly expressed their disappointment that they were not allowed to live on campus; these informants were not offered places in dormitories because they lived close to the university. Hannah from HKU said, "I really wanted to live on campus, but I live in South Horizon, only half an hour away from HKU. There is absolutely no way that I would be offered a place in the dormitories, and even if I was, my parents would not allow it, seeing as travelling from home to school is so close anyway. I think if I lived on campus, I would have thrown myself into the university life a bit more, and not spent so much of my first semester moping about."

Dormitory life may have made Jacky's transition to CUHK a little easier. Living in Tin Shui Wai, it takes him one and a half hours to get to school and he did not apply for dormitory because he thought it would be easier to live at home. As a result of this decision, he had less contact with people at the university, going home immediately after classes. He said that there were times when he just wanted to get away from the university because it was so awkward, and living at home facilitated that. Living at home therefore provided a haven for him away from the unfamiliar, but at the same time it did not help fitting into university.

Having described several ways in which informants have made new friends, the importance of old friends from before entering university cannot be forgotten. Friends outside of school could act as an emotional support in the absence of close friends from secondary school. For international school students, they could talk about issues they have of adjusting with other international school students provided that they knew other people who have or are experiencing a similar situation. Other friends could also be used as a contingent emotional support group, especially in the case of boyfriends and girlfriends. According to Jane, "I went to my boyfriend with all my troubles. I started going out with him after I entered university, but when I couldn't turn to people at school to resolve and problems I had, I could turn to him. When my room mate was being a pain in the ass, I would go over to his [her boyfriend's] house and stay the night there instead."

Another informant, Madeleine said, "I miss my high school days. I've made friends at university but it is not the same as the ones I made at secondary school. I'm not as close to my friends at university, and I think one reason why I'm still going out with Ken [her boyfriend from high school] is that he reminds me of those days when I was happiest. Everyone [university friends] has their own circle of friends outside of school so its difficult to become really close." International school students therefore feel the acute transition from secondary school to university and feel more comfortable when there are familiar people from high school that can act as their safety network in the new environment. Whether this familiarity is in the form of a boyfriend/girlfriend or someone from the same school, it is important that there is a person like that to help soothe the strangeness and unfamiliarity of the new education environment.

International school students may enter university on their own without any acquaintances, but friendship is needed to allow the students to fit in and have people that they can talk to or hang out with. As a result of this, students may hold onto old friendships, or find different methods to make new friends and acquaintances.

## Maturity

Maturity is a factor which affects the making of new friends. It has been suggested by my informants, both international school students and local school students, that the international school students are more mature than the local school ones and this has also been affirmed by my exchange student informants.

This is most evident in the activities and interests of the international school students in comparison to the local school students, although objectively, it is difficult to label activities 'mature' and 'immature' because these activities may just be a result of different interests.

Jacky from CUHK, first came into contact with the students at CUHK when the student union called him and asked him if he would join the orientation camp. On hearing that the most well-received event in the camp was the 'Big Water Fight', the maturity of Hong Kong university students came into question. For many international school students, water fights are things of the past, namely Form 2 to Form 3 at the latest at school camps. On hearing that this was popular among CUHK students, Jacky was surprised and wondered if these were really university students that he was meant to study with for the next 3 years.

From the local students' point of view, Renee said that the international school students are "bigger", meaning they act older, more mature and do more so called 'adult' activities. Examples he gave generally revolved around going to bars and clubs, drinking and smoking. It is the handful of exchange students however, that go clubbing a lot. Katy, an exchange student from France at CUHK said that the exchange students tended to go out clubbing almost every night of the week, apart from Monday nights. The reason for this is that the grades that exchange students get while on exchange tend not to be as important and they have fewer classes to attend. Their lifestyles at their own universities may also involve pubs and parties, which is not available at universities in Hong Kong (e.g. CUHK has a policy on no alcohol in dormitories).

There is, however, a misconception that many local students have because international school informants do not go to bars and clubs on a regular basis. All my informants said that they only go to bars and clubs when their friends from overseas come back to Hong Kong for holidays, and then everyone goes out at night for some fun. This so called 'adult' activity is not a regular occurrence among the international school students. One informant, Kelvin put it clearly, "They [the local school students] think all the international school students go clubbing a lot, but we don't. Not during the school term anyway. It's too tiring and there is no point when so few of your friends are in Hong Kong anyway. You see the same people in the same places, so we only go on special occasions such as birthdays or when people are back from school [overseas]."

The only explanation I can offer for this misconception on the part of the local schools students is that the majority of local school students do not go clubbing at all, and some may have never even step foot in a bar or club in Lan Kwai Fong or Wan Chai<sup>3</sup> before. For the local school students, the fact that these international school students go, even if occasionally, makes them very 'adult'.

For the international school students, they may feel that local school students are immature in the activities they do. For example, a popular past time for university students of Hong Kong is to go sing karaoke<sup>4</sup>. Some international school students do not understand why these students choose to do so, because for them to hang out means to have a chat in a coffee shop or café, have a couple of drinks or even just a nice dinner. They do not understand the pleasure of having a private room, and singing for several hours on end.

With regards to this past time, one explanation could be that local school students can be more relaxed behind the closed doors of the karaoke room. For them, it is also a place to perform as well as socialize. One reason that international school students might not find pleasure in singing is because of the music genres. In a karaoke outlet, the songs are generally Chinese (both Mandarin and Cantonese) with only a small selection of foreign language songs, such as in English, Japanese and even other Southeast Asian languages. These foreign songs are outmoded and few, which would not attract international school students to sing. Unless the international school student is familiar with the local Chinese music industry, it would be difficult for them to enjoy singing in karaoke outlets.

The most interesting element that international school students refer to when defining how local school students are immature is the fact that many local school students are fans of a particular cartoon character or anything that is deemed

<sup>3</sup>These are the two most popular clubbing areas for Hong Kong, both located on Hong Kong Island right next to and in the central business districts.

<sup>4</sup>The karaoke situation in Hong Kong is similar to those found in Taiwan and Korea, where customers can go to a chain store which has a number of private rooms. Paying a lump sum of money permits the customers to use the room for karaoke for a set period of time, often several hours.



'cute'. These are brands and cartoon characters like Hello Kitty, Disney characters like Winnie the Pooh and Marie, Sesame Street characters and Japanese characters like Cinamaroll and Little Twin Star. Some guys and almost all girls from a local school background have merchandise with some kind of cartoon character on it, and even go to the ends of collecting different types of memorabilia of these characters. To the international school students, this behavior is very immature because things like Disney and Sesame Street characters were from their childhood and they have outgrown them. According to Madeleine from Poly, "To watch these cartoons when you are young is one matter, but to squeal when seeing new merchandise and collecting them when you are in your early twenties suggests a certain level of childishness."

Attitudes towards maturity vary among international and local school students and this is evident from secondary school. International school students try to look more mature and dress in clothes that are generally European in style, with a more elegant and sophisticated look. From as young as Form 2, students try to pass off as being eighteen to be able to enter clubs and bars.

For local school students, they value people that look young, dressed in clothes that make them look younger with a partiality towards Japanese trends. The highest compliment one can pay to a girl is to say that she looks like she is in secondary school even if she attends university. As a result of this, it may seem that local school students try to act younger because they favour it, while international school students try to act more mature. This is clearly shown in a comment made by a user of the GeoExpat forum<sup>5</sup>: "I take my undergrad[uate] degree at HKUK but the students tend to lower the quality and level in all classes as people here aren't as mature when 18-20, not compared to western Europeans. Think pink shoelaces and small cute bunnies attached to their mobiles...ok, its maybe more culture than immature ppl[people], but still...very different, students tend to not analyze or think about stuff, just learn it...the teachers try hard to change the pattern, but it's hard" (Raz 2005).

On the other hand, many local school students are more mature in the way they handle money. Most of my informants had their tuition paid by their parents and received regular pocket money as well. If the informants needed extra money, it would often be given to them by their parents. However, according to my local school informants, many of them received grants and loans from the government because their parents could not cover all of their tuition fees. They would not ask their parents for pocket money, but would make their own through part-time jobs like tutoring children and working as clerks. As a result of this, local school students have to be able to plan how they make and spend money, whereas the international school informants are often given money when they want it, because their families can afford to do so.

The family backgrounds of the students play a very important role in the way they act, whether it is in a mature manner or not. The parents of my informants are all well-educated and have high-paying jobs, enabling them to give the support necessary for my informants when making decisions about schools and career choices. These parents have knowledge from their own experience and those in their social circles, as well as having the necessary social networks to help their children if help is needed. In this sense, the international school students have less pressure on the consequences of their actions in decision making because their parents can support them. They can also have more freedom in trying things out and don't have to worry too much about finding jobs because they have what is described by Pierre Bourdieu as social capital (Jenkins 1992). This utilization of social networks as a resource in gaining a particular end (like a potential job) is more effective because the international school students are more likely to have relatives, friends and acquaintances in relatively influential areas of employment. It has to be said that though these options may be open, it does not mean that the international school students do take up on offers of help, because in reality all my international school informants said they did most of their own decision making.

For the local school students, they do not have the same level of social capital that could be advantageous to their future careers. Often, the parents have not attended university before and do not know the education system well, therefore unable to assist their children when making academic decisions, such as what kind of subject to major in upon entering university. According to Renee, "My mum could not help me in choosing which university or subject. I had to explain to her how things are done and assure her that I was making the right choices and everything. The school fees and application for grants and loans was such a tedious process and required a lot of documents which I did not have<sup>6</sup>. But there was no point in turning to her [mother] for help because she didn't even know what the things were." The local school students therefore not only have to digest the information for themselves, but also for their parents and are held accountable for their decisions because their parents cannot offer help or advice.

<sup>5</sup>GeoExpat is a website offering a portal for people interested in Hong Kong to interact with each other, providing information about Hong Kong through forums and links. Users are generally expatriates providing information to the expatriate community in Hong Kong.

<sup>6</sup>The government grants and loans available to students at tertiary institutions involve a detailed application form and supporting documents that render the student in need of financial aid. The application process is long and requires proof of taxes and bank statements, making the application a very complex one. Details can be found on the government website. At <http://www.sfaa.gov.hk/eng/schemes/tsfs.htm>.

Although the two situations described above does not necessarily indicate that international school students are immature, the comparison shows that local school students must be more mature and responsible in their decision making if they would like what is considered a better future for themselves. Many of the international school informants say that the local school students have to be more mature because there is more pressure on them make way for their own future without the support of parents as a safety net.

Therefore although on first glance, both international school and local school students confirm that the international school students are more mature, this maturity is not absolute and varies for different components of their lifestyles. These differences in maturity and ways of handling situations may be a result of their socio-economic backgrounds.

## Social Class and Wealth

The international school fees as mentioned in the background can only be afforded by the upper middle class of Hong Kong society. This would make patrons of international schools among the more wealthy of Hong Kong society. The parents of my informants are mostly professionals, businessmen or from the tertiary sector, fluent in both English and Chinese with at least an education to the secondary level, but most completing tertiary education and even postgraduate degrees.

For local school students, most are from a middle class background, although individuals may vary among a scale because the government can provide grants or low interest loans for students that are in financial hardship. Parents may be from the manufacturing industries to other posts in the tertiary sector, but are generally competent only in Chinese, and more specifically Cantonese. The educational backgrounds of parents are often up to secondary school, with few completing tertiary education and even some having completed only primary school.

As a result of such socio-economic differences, many stereotypes are drawn from both types of students which all hinder the smoothness of making friends and interacting with each other.

When asked to describe their idea of a typical international school student, the first thing that came to mind among all three of my local school informants was "rich". Although I suggested that international school students may not all be rich, they all pointed out that to be able to pay the school fees for these schools makes them rich, richer than the majority of people in Hong Kong. This is evident in the annual school fees for international schools being higher than the annual school fees for university. But this attribute of international school students in itself does not have any negative nor positive implications. Instead, it is the qualities affiliated with richness that result in some negative attitudes towards international school students.

Other attributes related to richness include "having a lot of money to spend, spending money carelessly and being snobby about it," said Anthea. International school students have such a wealthy family background that they don't understand the value of money, spending it on brand names and other luxurious items. This has been labeled by my informant as a type of showing off.

Showing off is not only in the consumption of goods but also the way in which they speak and act. According to my local school informants, because international school students have a lot of money, they would feel that they are superior to other people, thinking that they are the best and act very 'cocky'.

Another attribute related to their richness is that international school students are born with a silver spoon in their mouths. According to Elaine, a local school informant at CUHK, "They [international school students] have been pampered all their lives, getting what they want whenever they want it because their parents can afford it. They have an easier, more carefree education experience and never had to really suffer. They don't know the harsh reality of the world."

The two references to the wealth of international school students could result in hostile feelings towards them and result in stereotyping them. The hostile feelings may cause the local school students to act less friendly towards the international school students.

Although international school students did not make any references towards the wealth of local school students, they did make comments on the frugality of the local school students. Catherine said, "I understand if their family backgrounds may not be wealthy, but I don't understand why they have to save up all the time. When I go to the supermarket with my

room mate, we may be buying something like canned soup, and she would choose the cheapest one, or the one on sale to save some money. But I don't even like that brand of soup because I don't think it tastes nice, so I don't see why we have to save money in that way. It's not all that different, just one or two dollars off and its not like that will make much difference. It got me frustrated and in the end we did our shopping with separate bills."

Another informant, Kelvin said, "It's always a problem if I go out to have lunch or dinner with classmates. We always have to choose a place that is relatively cheap, but the food isn't that great. I would much rather spend a little more on food that tastes better. Or if we go out to eat, we should treat it as a treat." These different concepts of where money should be spent appropriately resulted in many negotiations between international school students and their friends, resulting in the international school students succumbing to the general opinion because they are a minority in friendship groups.

However, the greatest consistency among my international school informants is that they do not take social class and background into account. For them, they do not think about the wealth and status of their families, nor the wealth and status of their friends, unless they are very famous ones. They therefore do not notice a difference in class or wealth when they mix with the local school students, unless in the form of their spending habits (as mentioned above), and these they attribute to their personal traits, rather than as a result of different socio-economic backgrounds. When asked if they notice any differences in family backgrounds, they say there isn't really and don't think of it as a factor in the differences between local school students and international school students.

Local school students however, are all capable of identifying the differences in socio-economic backgrounds. From my three informants and my friends of local school background at university, they all say that international school students are of a higher socio-economic class with a wealthy family background.

Related to wealth is the shopping habits of students, especially concerning fashion. International school students tend to shop at large scale shopping malls, such as Times Square, International Finance Centre, Elements and Pacific Place, offering goods that are normally mid-range to high-end pricing, imported from Europe, America or Japan. Local school students tend to shop in Mongkok or Kwun Tong, in more local shopping malls that offer goods from China, Taiwan, Korea and Japan. These differences in shopping locations are a result of their concepts of how and where to spend their money. International school students do not shop in Mongkok or Kwun Tong because they think the goods there are cheap and of a low quality, do not cater to their more Western tastes. This discrepancies in fashion taste is a very strong factor in first impressions, and it was the first hurdle that many international school students had to face when meeting local school students for the first time.

This is described by Jacky: "I did not go to orientation camp so the first time I met my classmates was when I first walked into class. Everyone stared at me because of the way I dress. I was in a loose-fitting band tee, cargo pants and trainers, quite casual and I would think compatible with the clothing worn by university students in the US. However, my [male] classmates were in shirts with sweaters and skinny jeans with Converse. Guys just shouldn't wear tight jeans; it looks camp. And what was with the sweater? It was really hot that day. This first impression was so shocking that I didn't know how to reduce the distance between us." While their tastes in fashion may differ as a result of their socio-economic status and the places in which they shop, it is not the sole reason because some of the shops in Mongkok and Kwun Tong offer Japanese goods that can be quite pricey. I will discuss the different conceptions towards what is fashionable later on when I summarize other issues that international school students encounter.

Another stereotype of international school students is their ability to afford luxury brands. When asked to describe international school students, the local school students would say that they are conspicuous consumers, consuming luxury brands like Louis Vuitton, Prada, Chanel etc. not necessarily in their clothing but definitely in their choice of bags.

The international school students however, are surprised at such allegations because they think that it is the local school students themselves who chase after brand names. While they acknowledge that international school students may own luxury-branded goods, these are often received as presents and seldom do the students save up money to buy these items. Instead, they see that the local school students save up on their money and buy new bags and clothes from luxury brands. These brands may not be of the more classical, Western couture like Louis Vuitton and Dior, but the more trendy ones in pop culture like Bathing Ape, the Y-3 line from Yohji Yamamoto and Vivienne Westwood. While these brands may not be as expensive as couture brands, they are costly in terms of the proportion of money spent. This conspicuous consumption is puzzling because while the local school students often talk about not having much money to spend (as a result of their family financial background and their own earnings from part-time jobs), they are able to purchase an array of bags and accessories from well-known brands. What is most interesting is that the local school students display their purchases, whereas the international school students do not.

Therefore though there is a general socio-economic difference between the majority of international school students and local school students, it is stereotypes mainly from the local school students which could result in prejudices against the international school students. These prejudices may not be detrimental to the social relations between these two groups of students, but it may form as a barrier or difficulty between them.

## Identity

The final area I would like to explore is about the identity of these students in the school and within the Hong Kong environment. The question is not only how international school students identify themselves, but also how other people identify them. In this identification process, there are three elements I would like to highlight on; identifying with their respective institutions, their international school backgrounds and with Hong Kong in general.

All of my informants do not proudly identify with their tertiary institutions in Hong Kong. Their overseas counterparts are all proud to say which university they are studying in, but the informants located in Hong Kong only identify that they are studying at a university in Hong Kong. When questioned why they do not proudly talk about their university to other people, they generally said that it was because it just a place for their tertiary education, not internationally famous; there is no point in clarifying the details of the institution because not many people know about these universities anyway. When compared to their friends at Ivy Leagues in the US and other famous universities in the UK, my informants feel that their universities are inferior and therefore do not like to associate themselves to with it. Shayne from CUHK said, "I feel like I have been dealt a bad card from the same deck as all my friends. They all have good cards for renowned universities, and I have lost out on the possible opportunities because I am studying at CUHK."

These attitudes change over time when my informants become more accustomed to their universities. For Catherine, it was easier to accept becoming a student at CUHK when her friend's mother asked her which university she was going to attend. On hearing that Catherine was to go to CUHK, the mother said, "Really? CUHK? Wow, that is really hard to get in! If only Anna [her daughter] would stay in Hong Kong, I would make her go to CUHK." Hearing these words, it made Catherine feel better that she was going to CUHK, even though she did not entirely believe that CUHK was difficult to get in. Other parents of her friends praised CUHK, either because they were alumni or because they thought the campus was great, all building up to make Catherine feel better about entering CUHK.

Another possible change in identifying with their Hong Kong universities is when the world rankings of the university goes up. HKU has recently been ranked 18<sup>th</sup> on the Times Higher Education Supplement, even higher than Cornell University, an Ivy League and Stanford University (Times Higher Education 2007). CUHK has been ranked a shared 38th with University of Michigan, higher than University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and London School of Economics (LSE). Although these rankings may not be fully accountable for the quality of education at the universities, these rankings can provide better publicity for the universities, and is more likely to be accepted by students in the world all over. The international school students are therefore less likely to be embarrassed about remaining in Hong Kong and are more likely to identify themselves as part of their university.

Outside of the institution, the international school students may identify themselves as part of the group belonging to the university. There may be differences in the individual's feeling of closeness to the university, but to the outsider, it would seem that they 'belong' to the university they attend.

Aside from the identity to the university towards the public, there is also the question of identity within the campus. These international school students find themselves in a very distinct category and are always labeled international school students. As mentioned in the previous sections, there are many differences between local school students and international school students which can cause obstacles in the inclusion of international school students in the same groups as local school students. The international school students may form good friendships with local school students, but they do not feel that they belong to that particular group and never feel fully comfortable or at ease in their interactions.

Speaking in fluent English with a different style in dress code, these international school students are easily recognizable among the local school students and are often mistaken to be exchange students. While my informants find that they can easily communicate with the exchange students and often form good friends with them, they feel that they don't really belong among the exchange students either. The exchange communities in universities of Hong Kong involve lots of overseas Chinese coming back to Hong Kong to "get in touch with their Chinese roots," as well as students from other ethnicities. The exchange students are often only in Hong Kong for a semester or a year, during this period they often

fly to other destinations in Asia for holidays. Aside from this, the exchange students have a lower workload and attend less classes, which further enables them to spend more time exploring the rest of Asia. The classes that the exchange students attend mainly consists of Chinese language classes, which enables the exchange students to mingle more among themselves. As a result of this, the opportunity for international school students to meet exchange students is less in the classroom setting. This segregation of exchange students varies in the policies among the Hong Kong universities, with HKU and UST providing more opportunities for exchange students to mix with the students in Hong Kong than in comparison to CUHK and PolyU.

While most of my informants spent their first semester making friends among the exchange students at their respective universities, this relationship did not last as long because the exchange students would leave after one or two semesters, and new friendship groups had to be established again. Jacky at CUHK said, "I hung around with the exchange students only in my first semester. It was easier to communicate with them and they accepted me better than my classmates because I talked and dressed like them. Our interests were also similar. But after that semester, I started hanging out more with the local school students partly because the exchange students had left, but also because I got to know my local school classmates a bit better during classes."

Jane said, "I used to hang around with the exchange students in my first year, but I changed to local school students in my second year. This was because I didn't feel like I really belonged to the exchange group, since I grew up in Hong Kong and was familiar with the environment. Some of the core Chinese concepts I understood, because I am Chinese and these may be new to the exchange students. I was like them in my interests and the way I talk, but I was also local because I had not lived abroad." This is a common dilemma in the identity of the international school students because they neither qualify as a local student nor exchange student in the group memberships.

The international school students therefore have trouble in finding a student group to 'belong' to and often find themselves stuck in the middle between the local school students and exchange students. With regards to Mainland students, the differences are even greater and the international school students seldom make friends among the Mainland students. Instead, the international school students find themselves moving between these two groups. After trying out their membership as a local student and as an exchange, they find that they partially fit in on both sides, but never completely. The international school students often find themselves acting as an intermediary between these two groups. One example is given by Natasha at HKU, "We have an Indian student in our class who doesn't understand Chinese. While my other friends chat among themselves in Cantonese because they feel more comfortable talking in their mother tongue, the Indian student often looks out of place and cannot understand. I find myself acting as an interpreter for her, translating the Chinese into English, and sometimes English into Chinese for the local students if they don't understand." While cases like these are common among my informants, it also depends on their own level of Chinese, because if their Chinese is not fluent, they themselves would have trouble in understanding.

International school students therefore do not have senses of group membership at university, towards the local school students and the exchange students. They may stand out by themselves, but it is difficult for them to form their own 'international school student' group because there are so few of them from the same school, making it difficult to come across others from the same backgrounds as themselves. In the end, most of these students are outcasts, or feel like outcasts when hanging out with the other students, which is something they have not experienced in secondary school.

Having said that the international school students do not feel like they belong to the same category as the local school students, one question was whether they had anything in common with these people at all. The similarity that was described by all my international school informants is that "we are all from Hong Kong", as in they are Hong Kongese, growing up and living in Hong Kong (though not necessarily born there). They all feel an affiliation with Hong Kong because they have lived here for most, if not all of their lives. Christina said, "I was born in Hong Kong and I have lived here all my life. Where else could I call home? Where else could I be from. Of course I am a *Heung Gong Yan* 香港人." My informants tend to use this term to present their distinctive Hong Kong identity against the foreigners and the mainlanders. While many international school students can be described as "Third Culture Kids (TCKs)" (See Fail 1995), my informants cannot be described in the same way as the traditional sense of TCKs, because of their Chinese descent and a sense of belonging in Hong Kong.

Another informant, Natalie who is Eurasian (father is British, mother Chinese) and looks Eurasian<sup>7</sup>, said "I don't look like the average Hong Kong person [look Chinese], yet I feel I am one. My father may be from England and I go back to our house in the UK every year, but I don't have a sense of belonging there. Hong Kong is my home; I live here, feel comfortable here, and I like it here." This attitude towards Hong Kong is common among all my informants, even if my

<sup>7</sup>Not all Eurasians look like they are Eurasians; some of them look like Chinese people with dyed hair

informants have lived abroad. While not all my informants want to live in Hong Kong for the rest of their lives, they all define themselves as coming from Hong Kong, as a Hong Konger.

However, this Hong Kong identity is not recognized among all of my local school informants. Although the interview was only conducted among 3 local school students and their opinions varied, the main consensus was that the international school students are not true *Heung Gong Yan*. Other research has also shown that it is unlikely for the other students to recognize the international school students as *Heung Gong Yan*.

I asked the local school informants if they thought international school students in general are *Heung Gong Yan*, and more specifically if their international school friends are *Heung Gong Yan*. Elaine said, after much thought, “No they are not *Heung Gong Yan*. (Is it because they can’t speak Cantonese very well?) This is partly a reason, but Catherine’s [my international school informant, Elaine’s classmate] Cantonese is ok. Betty’s Chinese is even better [Betty is another international school student] than Catherine’s, and you would only notice something wrong with their Chinese with their pronunciation of some words. They sound lazy, like they cannot be bothered to pronounce the word properly. What’s the English term for it? They have a drawl. They’re not *Heung Gong Yan* because they have not experienced the same things as us. (Not even living in Hong Kong? Is it because of their education system?) They haven’t suffered like us, because our families don’t have money to splash around. We live in different areas of Hong Kong and don’t often mingle. They even think differently from us; we’re more conservative. (Do you think they could ever become *Heung Gong Yan*?) I don’t think so, no, because we will always have these differences in experiences and thought. To be very honest, I think they are very full of themselves, though Catherine and Betty aren’t like that. They are localized international school students.”

Elaine focuses on many differences between the international school students and *Heung Gong Yan*. When asked to define what exactly makes her a *Heung Gong Yan*, she could not find words to describe it. When given several descriptions of different types of people and whether they could come under the group of *Heung Gong Yan*, this is what Elaine said, “(An Indian person who has lived in Hong Kong all their life but cannot speak Chinese<sup>8</sup>?) Definitely not [a *Heung Gong Yan*]. (A Filipino<sup>9</sup> who can speak Cantonese fluently and went to a local school?) Depends on whether they have a culturally Filipino family, celebrating Filipino festivals and rituals. (What about a *gweilo*<sup>10</sup> living in Hong Kong for most of their life, talking and living amongst other Chinese people?) Depends. I don’t think it is a matter of ethnicity, but the way they act. International school students may be ethnically Chinese and look no different to us, but there is still the difference in the way they act and think.”

Elaine was further asked regarding the scenario of an Indian receiving a Re-entry Permit to China. The Re-entry Permit is known as 回鄉證 in Chinese. It allows the people of Hong Kong to enter their ‘home-country’, China, without needing a visa each time. This permit was only previously available to people of Chinese descent in Hong Kong, and there was a breakthrough in 2002, when an Indian was successful in the application for this permit (Indian First Foundation 2003; Immigration Department 2008). When I told Elaine about this, she answered: “Really? She’s Indian but China is her home? I don’t know, but I don’t think she is a *Heung Gong Yan*, even if the government recognizes her as one.” Clearly, for Elaine, government definitions of being a Hong Kong resident, Hong Kong citizen and even nationally ‘Chinese’ is not enough to render a person as *Heung Gong Yan*.

While Elaine was very certain that international school students are not *Heung Gong Yan*, my other two informants were less rigid in their definitions. Renee said, “Sure they can be *Heung Gong Yan* if they believe themselves to be. But they will not be *Heung Gong Yan* in the same sense as we [local school students] are. They have lived in Hong Kong and belong here, but at the same time they have incorporated Western concepts into their lives. That’s why we call them *gwei mui sing gak* (“personality like a young female foreigner”)<sup>11</sup>. Their roots are in Hong Kong, but they have adopted the traits of foreigners; they do not act like the average *Heung Gong Yan*. So they are *Heung Gong Yan*, but in a different way to us [local school students].” This difference in definitions of *Heung Gong Yan* for the local school students is similar to that described as “authentic Hong Konger” (Hui 2002). The definition that Renee gives for *Heung Gong Yan* allows for the loose incorporation of people as *Heung Gong Yan*, but within this large category of *Heung Gong Yan*, there is a smaller group that is more ‘average’, and therefore more representative of what is *Heung Gong Yan*.

<sup>8</sup>There are many Indians and Pakistanis in Hong Kong as a result of the colonial era. The social classes among the Indians vary, with some of them living amongst the poorest of Hong Kong families, while others may be among the richest of Hong Kong society.

<sup>9</sup>Hong Kong is home to a large number of foreign workers, particularly women from Southeast Asia (countries like the Philippines and Indonesia). These women work as domestic helpers to local families and some may establish their own families in Hong Kong. A large proportion of their children attend local schools here, becoming Hong Kong citizens and benefit from the policy for nine years of free education.

<sup>10</sup>This is a Cantonese term used to describe Caucasian foreigners in Hong Kong, literally meaning “devil person”. The original meaning and use of this phrase had negative connotations, but repeated use of the term has been popularized among the expatriate community so that it no longer is an insult.

<sup>11</sup>The term *gwei mui* is more affectionate than that of *gweilo*, because it refers to someone younger. In this sense, they are more playful and innocent, making them likely contenders for rule breaking, like those of social norms. The male equivalent of *gwei mui* is *gwei zai*.

Anthea's definition of *Heung Gong Yan* is similar to Renee's, but she says that the international school students have varying degrees of *Heung Gong Yan*-ness, where some may be more of a *Heung Gong Yan* than others. Anthea, who is also friends with Catherine and Betty, said that they are more like a *Heung Gong Yan* than the average international school student because they take part in activities popular among the local school students, like sing karaoke and listening to some Chinese pop music. Anthea also said, "They act in a way similar to us; they skive classes, try to keep a low profile in class, do the minimal work needed to get passing grades. This makes them easier to be accepted among us, because they are not showing off or acting overly active in class and they can blend in more. They are therefore more of a *Heung Gong Yan* than some other international school students." What is interesting is that Anthea's definition of *Heung Gong Yan* states an importance in maintaining the status quo and blending into the majority, an idea very popular in collectivist cultures. Chinese culture is known to be collectivist, and also provides the basic foundation on which the culture of Hong Kong is built upon. This could be the reason why Anthea's stress on blending on can be representative of what makes some one more Hong Kongese than others.

Natalie is the embodiment of Anthea's definition of *Heung Gong Yan* because although she looks like a Eurasian, she spent most of her primary school and early secondary school at local schools, and is therefore more accustomed to the practices of local school students. Her friends at university are surprised by her 'localness', when she doesn't look the part. Her role as an international school student is obvious in her physical appearance, but not in her actions.

While I have given many different interpretations on what makes someone a *Heung Gong Yan* and how the views of international school students towards their identity is not shared by the local school students, one very important point must be made. This is the language used by the international school students in describing the local school students. When describing traits of the culture of local school students, it is interesting that the international school students use the term 'local' as an adjective when chatting among themselves. While the international school students identify themselves as *Heung Gong Yan*, they also describe certain things as 'very local', and these are often phenomena that they are unable to explain but witness in the local school students. One such example is the description used by Shane on karaoke, "It's a very local past-time." This use of 'local' suggests that Shane is looking at this activity not as a local himself, because it is not an activity that he participates in nor understands. It therefore differentiates himself away from the 'locals' which contradicts with the assumption of a common *Heung Gong Yan* identity. I would suggest that the use of the term 'local' in contexts similar to those described for Shane is unconscious (therefore not consciously contradictory to the *Heung Gong Yan* identity that the international school students maintain they have), but illustrates how even the international school students differentiate themselves from the local students.

The *Heung Gong Yan* identity describes and accentuates what is local and unique to Hong Kong culture. While Hong Kong has often been described as a cultural supermarket (Mathews 2000), it is interesting that what defines the *Heung Gong Yan* identity is closer related to a certain "Chinese-ness" when comparing local school students to international school students, and closer related to "Western-ness" when compared with Mainlanders (Mathews 2001). While research has shown the meaning of being Hong Kongese with reference to Mainlanders, maintaining a more "Western" approach on the scale between "Chinese-ness" and "Western-ness", the opposite is true for comparing with international school students. This can be seen in the description of international school students with so-called "Western" characteristics (e.g. *gwei mui sing gak*). Yet it is precisely this idea of the cultural supermarket which enables these students to choose different identities, either for themselves or in their definitions of other groups.

## Other Features

One topic discussed by some of my informants is the concept and general opinions on appearance. While this was not described by all of my informants as an issue they felt worthy of discussion, it was highlighted by some informants. When Jacky described the tastes in clothing of his classmates, it demonstrates the different concepts in what is fashionable. The view held by Jacky and Raz (of the expatriate forum) can be magnified into this comment made by a tourist named Phil on his website describing his trip to the East, "Hong Kongese Fashion Sense...It doesn't exist'K I get lots of good laffs [laughs] just looking at all the outfits" (Phil 2004). While one man's words is not enough to say that the concept of fashion does not exist in Hong Kong, this idea is popular in varying degrees among some of my international school informants. While my informants acknowledge that many of the local school students like to emulate the fashion sense among the youth of Japan, they still maintain that it looks ridiculous and does not work in the same way as it does for their Japanese counterparts.

Another feature of interest is the love life of my informants. However, there was not much information that my informants could offer, because they were too focused on the pressing, immediate differences and problems at hand. While four of my informants (all girls) had boyfriends which they met outside of university, the other eleven are single. When

asking the eleven about their love life, they all said it was something they had yet to consider because they were still having trouble fitting in and making friends. To them, there was no point in establishing intimate, romantic relationships with the local students when they could not even mingle with them in comfortable friendship groups.

One final feature I would like to highlight is the stereotype that all international school students are active and assertive, like the exchange students. This is not the case for all my informants because their degree of assertiveness varies. Lucy who studies Medicine at CUHK would fit the stereotype because she participates as an active member in class, discussing things with the professors both inside and outside of class, as well as participating in a large range of activities. Kingson who studies Law, is not so active in class but takes part in social activities among classmates, like dinners and outings. The stereotype does not fit in Kingson's case and will fit even less so for Jacky, because he tried to stay away from CUHK as much as possible. Therefore while some students may be active, others are not so active, and the assertiveness is only a stereotype put forward by the local school students.

As a final question to all my informants, I asked them whether they would consider sending their children to be educated in an international school. All of my international school informants except for two of them, said yes, because the schools have better facilities and more opportunities available to students. On top of this, the reason is because my informants liked their secondary schools and would like their children to experience the same.

Hannah, from HKU had an interesting alternative. She said no, because she would like her child experiencing a completely foreign culture. What Hannah meant was to send her children overseas to public schools there, so that they would mingle with a homogenous culture from overseas, learning the customs and ways of a foreign culture. She said this way, they would become true citizens of the world, having experienced first hand the culture of another country that they themselves are foreign to. Hannah did not have faith in the Hong Kong education system and said it was unlikely she would ever send her kids there.

Natalie was the other international school student who said no to sending her children to international schools. Although her solution is less radical than Hannah's, it is also interesting. Natalie said she would like to send her children first to one education system (either public school or international school) and then switch to the other system halfway through secondary school. According to Natalie, this would allow her children to experience the best of both systems, in the same way that she enjoyed it herself.

My local school informants said that they would not send their children to international schools because they thought this was unnecessary; if they themselves survived the education system of Hong Kong, then so can their children. Although they acknowledged that international schools have better facilities, the situation for public schools in Hong Kong is constantly improving, so they won't have to spend so much money on quality education.

From all of my informants, it can be seen that they have their own opinions towards the different types of schools, largely dependent on their own experiences. While there has been research on the pros and cons of each type of school (Bray 1993), each system has their own set of supporters and will continue to produce students with differences in culture as a result of their education.

## Conclusion

From my Findings and Analysis section, it can be seen that the international school students have much to say about their experience at universities of Hong Kong. Some international school students may have gotten used to university more quickly and smoothly than others, while some may never like it at all. This interaction between the two groups can be interpreted through Turner's theory of social drama<sup>12</sup> to demonstrate the cultural conflicts between these students. While not all of these social dramas were very serious in nature, they occurred nonetheless. They showed that though students may be studying at the same universities and living in the same city, they have differences as a result of the culture they learned from their educational background.

Though the problems differ in severity, it is the stage of redress which determines the way in which students from international schools establishes a social relationship with the local students. Some action can be taken to help reduce large problems to smaller ones, and remove small problems completely, to resolve the breaches of cultural norms.

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<sup>12</sup>Turner's theory of social drama categorized conflicts in four stages: breach, crises, redress, and reintegration (Moore 1997).



## **Suggestions for Institutions**

As I have discussed some problems with fitting into university and how my informants have coped with these problems, it is also evident that the university systems do not support the international school students. Students may have problems fitting in at university in terms of their attitudes and behavior, but the universities themselves are not that welcoming to them and add to the burdens of the international school students.

The international school students do not qualify for JUPAS requirements, yet they do not receive assistance from the administration like exchange or international students. These institutions are inflexible in categorizing their students, where the international school students come under neither of those categories and are left alone and ignored. An example is the orientation camps organized for freshmen; many of these occur before international school students receive their results of their high school examinations and their acceptance of admission into the university. Yet the international school students are not allowed to attend the orientation camp for international students that are held just before school starts because they are not from overseas. As a result of this, the international school students receive no orientation process and are left to make their way into university. Such inflexibility on the part of the administrative units at university adds to the difficulties of settling in at university.

Therefore I would suggest that universities create a special administrative unit that specializes in the cases for international school students and other local Non-JUPAS students to support this minority in universities. It would be impractical to create a unit just for international school students because there are so few of them, but there should be a few staff specialized in the possible needs of Non-JUPAS students. This has already been initiated at CUHK in the Chinese requirements for Non-JUPAS students, as a group of specialists have been given the task of placing the Non-JUPAS graduates into appropriate Chinese classes depending on their individual Chinese proficiency. This move has been necessary as the number of Non-JUPAS applicants increase in the future.

Orientation activities should be organized so that international school students have the opportunity to participate. If they cannot attend the general orientation camp due to the later publication date of A-Level results, the students should at least be offered the chance to participate in other orientation camps, like those for exchange students. If that is not possible, a day camp could be organized just for international school students to get in touch with their university, their school for the next three years.

Aside from this administrative group, it would be helpful if more information is made available online to the students when they make the applications to universities. While information for local students and international students are clear and precise on websites, there is little information for Non-JUPAS students, and these students have to find other means of getting such information. These inconveniences may be small, but when they are accumulated for an international school student, it would add to their wariness of entering universities in Hong Kong.

I think it is important that institutions take action in improving the services available to Non-JUPAS students because they are also students of Hong Kong. International school students have a right to the benefits of tertiary education in Hong Kong just like their counterparts at local schools. Though they may be minority in comparison to the overall student body, this should not be an issue. The attitude institutions take should not only accommodate the needs of the majority, but treat all students equally.

Institutionalization (Berger and Luckmann 1967) of measures to help international school students can only occur when the universities realize that there will be increases in the number of international school student applicants in the future. The universities should also set an example in accepting these students because if they are categorized as a different or special unit of student body, the students themselves will feel this way and further enact these differences to a greater degree.

## **Suggestions for Students**

Having described ways in which institutions can help the transition for international school students, it is also important that the international school students also make an effort to make things work. The suggestions I make are similar to those offered in student guides to exchange programs or studying abroad, like *The Exchange Survival Kit* by Bettina Hansel, and *The Study Abroad Handbook* by Anna Lidstone and Caroline Rueckert. This is because the situation for international school students is very much like the cultural exchanges that exchange students experience.

The first suggestion I can offer is to keep an open-mind and be willing to try new things. In a strange environment, one cannot hold steadfastly onto the familiar, but must manipulate the familiar to help them grow accustomed to new things. International school students may have an advantage over their friends who study overseas because they are living in Hong Kong and have access to their families. While students studying abroad may feel homesick, international school students can still go home, something that is contingent with what they have experienced in their secondary schools, like a safety blanket.

Related to trying new things is to take part in a variety of activities. Through these activities, my informants made new friends more quickly than the informants that were less active. While this may require some bravery and extroversion which may not be qualities everyone have, it often pays off in the social relationships that are established. Many local school students also join activities to make new friends, making them more willing and likely to accept differences among people, more willing in creating new social relationships.

While improving Chinese proficiency is not a must, it will reduce many of the problems related to language. I devoted a lot of discussion on the problem of language, and improved Chinese proficiency can help to alleviate them. This point is highlighted in another forum by user kkkkk, "I suppose if you can't speak Cantonese it's harder to mix around with the locals. And there are a number of international students so don't worry you can't make friends!" (kkkkk 2006) I think this comment is precise in the need for learning Cantonese, yet providing another option if it fails.

A fourth suggestion is trying to talk to people about their experiences. The unrest that my informants felt could have been reduced if it was shared. Everyone, including local school students, experience culture shock upon entering university. This move from being a teenager to being a young adult, from secondary school to university is a change in culture. The social norms and rules change from one setting to the next, so everyone has to adjust to the new situation. While some students may feel the impact more than others, the truth is that everyone will experience it. In sharing these problems and difficulties, the international school students can form more social ties through these dialogues, which could assist them in making new friends.

My final suggestion is to be patient and not to try and force things. Getting used to the situation takes time and may not always work out. While international school students are at Hong Kong universities, they might as well make the most of it, rather than groveling in their own pains and despairs. But if things really don't get better, than other measures may be taken and there is no point in forcing oneself to become assimilated into the university culture. Habitualization (Berger and Luckmann 1967) of ways in which social interaction can occur can work both ways, either making successful harmonious social ties or causing more problematic conflicts. The difference is whether one accepts the situation or moves on to continue with contentment.

There will always be differences between people, whether they are from the same culture or not. Culture shapes the way in which we act, but on the most basic level, we are all humans and should all have some degree of similarity between us. But whether an international school student becomes a part of the local university system is a matter of whether they accept the differences and whether they are comfortable with having these differences.

## Overall Conclusion

Despite having difficulties in mingling with each other, the habitats of meaning (Hannerz 1996) for both the international school students and the local school students have expanded upon the interaction with each other. Previously, local school students may not have had the opportunity to mingle with local ethnic Chinese that do not speak fluent Cantonese. International school students may not have had the chance to mingle with people who exist in the same spatial area, side-by-side with them, but maintain such a different lifestyle. Therefore international school students entering local universities provide an opportunity for students of both groups to come into contact with the unfamiliar and expand their horizons and experiences of Hong Kong society.

The problems of language, friendship, maturity, social class and identity have demonstrated that there are indeed differences between international school students and the local school students. However, they have all entered a new stage in life, comparable to an interpretation of liminal periods as described by Victor Turner (Moore 1997) on a very micro-level. The tertiary educational system provides for a situation where students of different sectors of society to co-exist in preparation for their transition to the real, social world upon graduation. I think the importance is to acknowledge these differences but construct new social relationships based on similarities between these students in this opportunity to shed one's social background. One informant, Josie, an exchange student from Norway at HKU discussed three levels of

making friends. On the first level, you see differences between people and you push them away. Her example is students seeing that she is not Hong Kong Chinese, but from Norway that they just don't talk to her and try to stay away from her. On the second level, you see the differences and are interested to know about the differences. From her experience, these are the inquiries into what it is like Norway, the differences between Norway and Hong Kong etc. However, aside from these questions which are good-intentioned because people would like to know her better, there are no other topics up for discussion; if they have exhausted their supply of questions for the exoticness of Norway, the conversation ends on dead air. Finally there is the third level where you have acknowledged the differences and are looking for similarities that provide a link above stereotypes. The time spent together is no longer on small talk, but other conversations like their view of the future, family, what they think of a movie etc. For Josie, she found this in the form of one of my international school informants, Hannah also at HKU.

From Josie's discussion, I think this is very important that both the local school and international school students interact at the third level. Although from my interviews I have a lot of feedback that the local school students may stereotype international school students, I think it is also important for international school students to recognize that they are no longer at secondary school and that they can either try to fit in or make things their way. But what comes to matter most is that they become a part of the university without differentiation between international school students and the local school students.

This therefore undermines the most fundamental element of this research paper because I have here differentiated between the two. What is most successful, would be the fact that everyone is a university student regardless of their educational background.

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