

Thinking about Hong Kong/China with Public/Private: Two Chinese Migrant Activisms in Hong Kong

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Abstract: In this article, I describe both the Hong Kong/China divide and the public/private divide in two Chinese migrant activisms in Hong Kong – the Right-Of-Abode (ROA) movement and the advocacy group of some Chinese migrant mothers. By pinning down their experiences, I argue two dimensions where the current contentious Hong Kong/China geopolitical divide could be explored creatively. First, Chinese migrants’ experiences should be taken seriously, especially when the migrants attempt translation across the border. Their experiences under examination reveal the plurality of ‘the other’ in the geopolitical divide. Second, the geopolitical divide could gain inspiration from other well-developed discussions, such as in this article, those around the public/private divide. If the public/private divide can be analyzed as ‘indexical’ and ‘unstable’, could the geopolitical divide be conceptualized with less rigidity and more reflexivity?

Introduction

This article seeks to talk about the China/Hong Kong geopolitical divide with two Chinese migrants' activisms in Hong Kong and inspirations from the public/private divide. The China/Hong Kong geopolitical divide has derived from the separation of the two political entities, but extends well to represent political ideologies, cultures, and identity politics, sometimes in contestation. The two activisms include the Right-of-Abode (ROA) movement and an advocacy group of Chinese migrant mothers in the city. The elders in the ROA movement who are now mostly in their 60s or 70s. They were themselves immigrant to Hong Kong in the 1980s and 1990s, during which they gained their permanent residency. They are now fighting for their children in mainland China to also have permanent residency in Hong Kong. Meanwhile, the advocacy group involves mainland Chinese mothers who are blocked from obtaining legal citizenship in Hong Kong. They gave birth in Hong Kong from 2003 to 2013 and their children are Hong Kong permanent residents. Currently, the mothers live in Hong Kong with their children, but do not have permanent residence status.

Both the ROA movement and the advocacy group are squarely located in the two divides. In the ROA movement, the geopolitical divide has prevented the mainland Chinese children from joining their parents in Hong Kong. With the mothers, the geopolitical tension has caused considerable distress on their existence in Hong Kong. On the other hand, it is out of the public/private divide that the elders and the mothers build their claims and make sense of their experiences. Here, 'the public' means where the state extends its control and where the resources and space are limited to members of certain legal status in the society, whereas 'the private' can easily be understood as the opposition, individual or familial.

It is my intention to show in this article that these border crossing experiences offer an intriguing lens to think about the geopolitics between the two seemingly parallel and symmetrical political entities. Border crossing has multiple senses here – physically migrating across the border, figuratively pushing against the existing immigration regulation as a conceptual border created by governments, and struggling

with their identities that lodge between mainland China and Hong Kong. Meanwhile, I also attempt to contribute to the discussions around the geopolitical divide by linking the public/private divide in these two activisms.

Because of the extradition controversy, the geopolitical divide between Hong Kong and China has drawn massive attention in 2019. Hong Kong has erupted from its paradox, or pathology, borrowing Hon Lai-chu's imagery in her poem ("tumor that needs to be cut off") created after one early violent conflict (2019)¹. In a sense, such paradox is embedded in the city's politics, and its persistence has led to the pathology. Under "One Country Two Systems" – the coexistence of 'one' and 'two' in the name has revealed much about the paradox itself – Hong Kong has maintained its political organization which derived largely from its British colonial past after the Handover to Chinese rule. On the one hand, in Hong Kong's relation to mainland China, the set-up has been the *inter*-national: people or goods of the two polities do not move freely; visas or other special permits are required. Through these 'inter-national' norms, Hong Kong has remained "unchanged" and "Two Systems" are preserved. Thus, Hong Kong has its own executive, legislative and judicial bodies, distinct from, and ideally, independent from mainland China. Its long official name, the Hong Kong *Special Administrative Region*, indicates this independence.

On the other hand, as the first half suggests, the two polities belong to "One Country" – the 'two' must somehow paradoxically converge into 'One'. Simply put,

¹ From Hon Lai-Chu's facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1624902234308921&id=100003674815299 retrieved on April 11, 2020
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ultimately, China has sovereignty over Hong Kong. In practice, many complications arise. To name one relatable example here: the Standing Committee of National People's Congress in Beijing reserves the right to interpret Basic Law of Hong Kong, the constitution of this supposedly independent polity. In other words, the Standing Committee remains outside and yet superior to the whole legislative and judicial systems of Hong Kong.² Ideally, such interpretation remains exceptional. Since the Handover in 1997, five interpretations of the Basic Law have been issued. Unexceptionally though, each of them has led to public outcry about encroachment on Hong Kong's autonomous status in China.

Overall, the design of "One Country Two Systems" might embody flexibility, which was an important element in understanding the early post-Reform Chinese politics. Aside from the differences in political ideologies and systems, Hong Kong exists as a buffer zone between the two ideological camps. However, many have equally pointed out the stiffness entailed in the very design. As "One Country Two Systems" promises, Hong Kong shall 'preserve' its proper political system and way of life for at least 50 years after the Handover. Thus, "preservation" has been an important keyword in understanding post-Handover Hong Kong politics. However, the core question might be, could the city really remain unchanged? Or, has the rhetoric of "unchanged" been serving to only permit and justify certain changes, particularly, those related to economic development and success? By any means, does the logic of "unchanged-ness" circumscribe our imagination for the city?

² Similar legal controversies include the recent National Security Law in Hong Kong. Hong Kong Anthropologist. Vol. 10, 2020

Furthermore, what does the rhetorics of “preservation” and “being unchanged” imply? Timothy Choy provided an intriguing response: endangerment. In *Ecologies of Comparison: an Ethnography of Endangerment in Hong Kong* (2011), he threads creatively and persuasively the narratives of “endangerment” in ecological preservation, urban and tourism development, and political vision in Hong Kong. The “endangerment” that he documents summarizes nicely the subtle “threats” in Hong Kong – threats to its way of living, to its values, and to its political system.

With all these threats or narratives of threats, could the city still remain unchanged? The rapidly shifting political landscape in Hong Kong has shown us a sound no. Localism/nativism has emerged conspicuously³, initially in the political realm and later developed into stand-offs in almost all realms⁴. In 2019, such emergence gained unprecedented momentum in separating and polarizing the population in the city. If I am to trace the word’s meaning and origin, localism is a prevalent ideology, centering on a discrete “Hong Kong identity”, in opposition to either soft identification of ethnic “Chinese”,⁵ or hard-sell Chinese nationalism. Hong Kong culture and values, exhibited as admiration and pursuit of liberal and democratic values, are emphasized, which some have termed as “post-materialist” (Chan 2017:22; Jones 2015:209). Meanwhile, these accounts, though stressing a

³ Generally, nativism is more radical than localism in demanding political independence. A third phrase is “Hong Kong nationalism”, focusing more on a kind of “nationality” within Hong Kong identity. Their differences are not important for my argument here. For more detailed differentiation, read Loo (2017)

⁴ After 2019, buzz-phrases like “yellow store/economic” signal that, even economic activities, need political/ideological scrutiny.

⁵ “Ethnic” here aims to disregard the difference in citizenship and emphasize on cultural identification

divide between China and Hong Kong in cultural and political terms, are deeply connected with threats of a dissolving border – real, perceived and/or imagined – along with the encroachment of mainland China into the city. In other words, the geopolitical divide, probably more salient than ever, has derived from the equally unprecedented danger of the dissolving border.

To approach and to understand the geopolitical divide, many have turned precisely towards the most salient symptom – the shifting political landscape and the emergence of localism. Most accounts about localism focus on its political appearance, origins and development (Loo 2017; Wong 2017; Veg 2017; Lau 2018). In terms of political structure, Kit Poon (2007) examines how the paradox of One Country Two Systems actualizes itself in the process of pre-1997 negotiation and into the structural predicament of the Chief Executive office. She delineates the contestation between Beijing and local democrats in Hong Kong around the boundary of the autonomy of the city, and shows how Chinese central government, in various stages of the establishment and development of Hong Kong SAR, has created and operated in political and legal nexuses which ensure its power over the politics in the city in the disguise of “autonomy” (2007:41-2). Also in terms of the existing political structure, Li Li and T. Wing Lo (2018) explore how mainlandization happens in the process of collusion between bureaucrats and businessmen, and how it changes local politicians’ perception about corruption and the role of ICAC⁶. They rightly point out the danger in overusing the term “mainlandization” for it tempts users to simply, in

⁶ Independent Commission Against Corruption in Hong Kong
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their case, explain the causes of corruption in an archaic sense of diffusion, and forget to examine the multiple factors at play, such as class conflicts (2018:1757).

Jurisdiction-wise, Waikeung Tam (2013) has theorized what he calls “legal mobilization under authoritarianism” and applied it to his observation with legal professions and local rights advocacy groups in Hong Kong. He highlights that in post-1997 Hong Kong, opportunities in both administration and legislation for political advocates for change and reform have been severely squeezed, so jurisdiction has become the vital ground for new political struggles, about which he coin the term “the judicialization of politics” (2013:171-3). This is important for us to understand how “rule of law” and judicial justice are, *and have become*, crucial in not only localist perception about what constitute Hong Kong, but very relevantly, how the elders in the ROA movement understand their own demands. To connect the picture of mainlandization and judicial struggles with the burgeoning picture of Hong Kong identity, Carol A. G. Jones (2015:39) argues that it is the irresistible encroachment of the Chinese state in the legal domain, or in short, mainlandization, that has stimulated and sustained the civil and cultural resistance in Hong Kongese, which has nurtured the prevailing Hong Kong identity.

Two factors put my work in conversation with these work about jurisdiction and administration systems in post-Handover Hong Kong. First, these works provide a general background and base line about the concerns and conflicts over the geopolitical divide, and delineate structural limitations and predicaments which have shaped the ROA movement and the advocacy group. Second, the experiences I

examine in these movement complement the emphasis on political process, highlighted by both Li and Lo (2018), and Tam (2015). Cross-border interaction happens with multiple actors, and any analysis lumping the process into simple diffusional terms like “mainlandization” would flatten my material. As I will show, my interlocuters’ strategies in their activism respond swiftly to the changing geopolitical tensions and divide. Their experiences complicate the ways Hong Kong/China divide is usually portrayed and thought about.

Apart from the political structures, the judicial systems and the contentious emergence of identity, another approach to the geopolitical divide is to study people who directly confront the divide, either because the gap is too wide or too narrow. Steve Kwok-Leung Chan (2017) studies how collective identity and values were made and reinforced *in* and *through* the activists’ opposition to the Hong Kong SAR government in delegation of Chinese central government and its developmentalist mindset in campaign against Sino-Hong Kong express railway among the localist activists. To take a radical spin, Ip Iam-Chong (2015) focuses on nativist activism, which also approaches the geopolitical divide with people who act proactively against what they perceived to be “mainlandization” and “invasion of homeland” with narratives of ethno-politics. To argue against the stigmatization of Chinese medical tourists and immigrants, Wai-Chi Chee (2017) presents another picture: their children of Hong Kong residency are denied access to public education in mainland China. Unable to pay for private education, these Chinese migrant mothers had to give up their life in China to accompany their children to live in Hong Kong, while they are

themselves denied access to work and thus live in economic difficulties. They are trapped by the infrastructural constraints which has once allowed their pursuit of mobility in the metropolis (2017:13).⁷

I also work with people who confront the geopolitical divide. The Chinese immigrants I work with confront the controversy and attacks directed towards their status as Chinese immigrant in Hong Kong either because of their claims or their life in the city. In this sense, my approach to the conflictual geopolitical divide is indeed similar to those who think with social movements on the ground. However, what distinguishes my work from the existing accounts is that the elders and the mothers, instead of fighting against the threats, laboriously try to work in and work with the geopolitical divide. The localist and nativist activists push hard against what they perceived to be invasion from the other side and sense the divide as an absolute truth. In my work, however, what I observe is not certainty, but rather, strategies to avoid aligning one's identity with either side, and a strong sense of confusion and uncertainty about the increasing antagonistic feature of the divide. Similar sense of confusion and uncertainty is found in a case of reverse migration around the same border: in her work with Hong Kong students in Chinese universities, Lingling Xu (2019) also highlights the prevalent sense of awkwardness and misplacedness of this group of migrants due to the political implications of their identity as Hong Kongese in China.

⁷ However, I would like to push forward Chee's argument (2017:12-3), which focuses on the structural constraints imposed on the mothers. I argue that these migrant mothers, though indeed trapped in their own circumstances, are savvy actors whose knowledge and skills to navigate in the Chinese context complement the work of Hong Kong-based activists at the scene .

Notably, in the shifting political landscape (and ecology), I find it increasingly difficult to foster effective communication and translation across the border, let alone understanding. The only active discussion seems to be how to “preserve” oneself (its value, its way of life) better in face of threats, but not how to *transform* oneself better. However, in my work with the two Chinese migrant activisms, I sometimes see cracks letting through light of alternative imagination and vision for the city’s politics.

At the same time, the China/Hong Kong geopolitical divide has been gradually limited to be only a political problem which involves political actors. While this judgement is not intrinsically wrong, I wonder if it is also possible to treat the China/Hong Kong divide as a rhetorical or conceptual divide, less stable than a geopolitical reality, but also operates on our perception of the reality. In other words, is it conceivable to have alternative perception from exploration of this pair of conceptual divide, which could be more imaginative or transformative?

Thus, my central argument is this: there are important lessons about how to translate and foster effective discussion over the Hong Kong/China geopolitical divide to be learned from these virtuoso players in the divides. To have effective communication, the calibration and demystification of ‘the other’ are important. I argue that the experiences and the reflections of these two activisms are productive in calibrating and enriching the analyses of interaction across the geopolitical divide.

Also, the much more developed public/private divide, which is equally prevalent in the two activisms, provides some theoretical inspiration for my discussion of the Hong Kong/China geopolitical divide. The elders in the ROA movement are keen to

translate across the public/private divide, using their medical records. Their approach of translation is indeed insightful. Meanwhile, Susan Gal's "fractal" model treats public/private not as stable entities, but rather, indexical devices which allows infinite divisions with one clear pathway. Is the China/Hong Kong divide not indexical and contextual? What are we missing when we wholeheartedly trace down one pathway and distance ourselves further and further from the original divide between China and Hong Kong?

Right-Of-Abode Issue, Herald of Political Difficulties

The Right-of-Abode (ROA) movement started in 1999 in response to the controversy of ROA of mainland Chinese born of Hong Kong permanent residents.⁸ In most cases, these migrants came to Hong Kong in the 1980s or early 1990s through working contracts or kinship relations. After residing in Hong Kong for 7 years, they became permanent residents. With the official enactment of the Basic Law in 1997, they were hopeful that their children in mainland China could also become Hong Kong residents. According to Article 24 of the Basic Law, which includes the serial definitions of 'permanent residents' of Hong Kong.

- (1) Chinese citizens born in Hong Kong before or after the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region;
- (2) Chinese citizens who have ordinarily resided in Hong Kong for a continuous period of not less than seven years before or after the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region;

⁸ The whole ROA movement actually spans longer - it started in the 1980s with the ROA controversy of the mainland Chinese wives of the boat people (i.e. mostly fishing communities with complicated ROA on land) - and in 1997 includes more groups, such as non-Chinese ethnic groups in Hong Kong.

(3) Persons of Chinese nationality *born outside Hong Kong of those residents listed in categories (1) and (2)*; (emphasis added)⁹

The main controversy lies whether children born outside Hong Kong and before their parents became Hong Kong permanent residents are permanent residents in Hong Kong. On the 29th of January in 1999, Hong Kong Court of Final Appeal (CFA) concluded in the case *Ng Ka Ling v. Director of Immigration*, that these children shall be permanent residents. Thousands of interest-related people have come to Hong Kong, claiming their rights of abode. However, on June 26th 1999, the first interpretation of the Basic Law by Standing Committee of People's National Congress in Beijing, sought by the Hong Kong SAR government, has basically overturned the decision of CFA, stating that for a child to be born a permanent resident, either or both of the parents have to be permanent residents *at the time of the birth*.

It was indeed upsetting for lots of people expecting to gain citizenship after the rule issued in January 1999. In response, people of interests organized themselves into what would later become the ROA movement that I try to document here, holding high-profile protests and rallies with thousands of people attending. Throughout these years, one of the initiators, Kam Chai, a catholic father cum ROA activist who I worked closely with, has put on several hunger strikes on commemoration dates, like January 29th and June 26th. Their demand were simply the withdrawal of the interpretation and the restoration of the ruling of CFA – to grant their children rights of abode in Hong Kong. But overall, except for minor adjustments in the actual

⁹ Basic Law Chapter III Article 24. Retrieved from Hong Kong SAR government website on March 7 2020, at https://www.basiclaw.gov.hk/en/basiclawtext/chapter_3.html
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enforcement, the Chinese children involved have mostly been denied the citizenship. The large-scale withdrawal within the movement were documented in Chun Wing Lee's previous study of the movement from the perspective of actors' motivation and social movement strategy (2008).¹⁰

In 2009, a similar ROA controversy in Macau SAR was settled by granting ROA to the mainland Chinese involved, provided that they were not older than 14 years old when their parents became Macau residents. Subsequently, the ROA movement in Hong Kong became active again, using the case of Macau as a referential point, but also arguing to abolish the age bar. Finally, in 2011, the Hong Kong SAR government announced the agreement with China, and both sides started to process applications for the ROA of mainland Chinese born of Hong Kong residents. However, the age bar was retained. Thus, nowadays, the unresolved cases mostly involve those who were older than 14 years old when their parents become Hong Kong permanent residents.

Predictably, the year 2011 has seen the withdrawal of the majority of the participants in the ROA movement, given that they have achieved what they wanted. Due to reasons like severe illness and death, the number of people who are still active in the movement decrease continuously. The demand of the ROA movement has gradually shifted to lifting the age bar once the ongoing applications are completed. In the movement I mostly encounter parents in their 60s or 70s, fighting for their mainland children in their 30s or 40s. In two anomalous cases, it is the mainland

¹⁰ For more detailed account on the controversy around the turn of the century and its implication on the later deterioration of the "rule of law" in Hong Kong, read Chapter 7 in Jones (2015)

‘children’ in their 60s who fight for their own ROA, overstaying their visa in Hong Kong since around 1999. Some younger presence at the scene includes Teacher Chu, a volunteer responsible for collecting and sorting all sorts of documents in the formal communications with the different governmental departments, and Ching, who stayed in the movement after gaining her own ROA, and is responsible for liaising with related governmental departments.

Currently, the main activities in the movement include political petitions and letter communication with the Office of the Chief Executive, the Security Bureau and the Immigration Department, especially on important festive dates, such as the Mid-Autumn festival and the Chinese New Year, when ‘family reunion’ is the main theme. Elders meet up monthly to be informed of recent letter communication and occasionally, when required, to go together to the Immigration Department. I was introduced to the group as a university student to help with the paperwork and letters.

Medical Tourists Who Stay

In comparison to the ROA movement, the Chinese migrant mothers who show up on Thursday in a small meeting room in St. Joseph Church are less organized. The life of these Chinese migrant mothers in Hong Kong involves another legal dispute about ROA. In the 2001 case *Director of Immigration v. Chong Fung Yuen*, the main controversy involves paragraph 1 under Article 24 of the Basic Law on whether the citizenship status of the parents affects the citizenship status of the newborn in Hong Kong. CFA ruled against the Director of Immigration, concluding that Chong, born in

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Hong Kong of mainland Chinese parents, is a Hong Kong permanent resident. The case became the legal reference encouraging tens of thousands of mainland pregnant women to give birth in Hong Kong as medical tourists. Common motivations include, for example, to avoid 'One Child' policy in mainland China, and to let the child have Hong Kong citizenship, deemed more promising than the Chinese one.

In the following ten years, the legal case stimulated the growth of medical tourism for richer Chinese visitors, but also created considerable pressure to public medical services, not to mention the intensified conflicts in public education as these children turn school age. Due to pressure from public opinion, the entry of Chinese pregnant women into Hong Kong SAR was seriously deterred and restricted since 2013 through administrative measures.

This issue of mainland Chinese pregnant medical tourist is indeed important in the social history of the geopolitical divide after the Hand-over. However, it is worth bearing in mind that though these pregnant women were all described as 'mainland Chinese pregnant women', there were substantial regional and class differences within this group. Depending on their origins and financial situation, the border and the geopolitical divide have engendered difficulties and inconvenience of different levels. For example, mothers are generally advised to travel back to their places of household registration to apply for their visiting visa to Hong Kong valid for three months, which already create greater difficulties for mothers from northern part of China. Regarding the actual application procedure, different security bureaus have different requirements. For mothers from Fujian, it is particularly troublesome

because their children are supposed to be in Hong Kong when the mothers submit their application, which means the children have to be left in Hong Kong with someone else to take care of for a week or two, while the mothers are applying for their visa in mainland China. Some families mobilize grandparents where the adults take turn to take care of the children, while others form small groups to help one another out when one mother is out of town. Although the Chinese migrant mothers do not have many clear demands or goals shared by everyone in their participation, at least one clear demand for those who come from Fujian is to make the bureaucratic procedure in Fujian the same as in Guangdong, Zhejiang and Henan, to name some places where the procedures are known.

During my work with these Chinese migrant mothers, we tried to meet regularly, often together writing letters to the Security Bureau and interpreting their written responses. Occasionally Kam Chai encourages the mothers to collectively present petitions on Tuesday when the Executive Council has its weekly meeting and Carrie Lam, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong SAR government, meets with first the press, and then the petitioners.

To recreate the sequence of events during my work, the first section about the Chinese migrant mothers starts with the confusing first experience of petition, and ends with an unexpected success in network mobilization during the Covid-19 epidemic. I try to illustrate their life and confusion about the startling geopolitical divide. Then, in the second section about the ROA movement, I focus more on the public/private divide. Finally, how are the two divides linked together and reflected

each other?

Hong Kong/China: Hypersensitivity of Politics

Since the very beginning of the serial protests in early summer of 2019, there have been rumors in the Chinese migrant community about various consequences of participation of the migrants in the movement, spreading considerable self-disciplining suspicions. The migrant mothers' witness of the violence has severely aggravated their caution about their own political participation, including simply belonging to an advocacy group. Amid this suspicion, one best way to avoid controversy and reaffirm oneself one's legitimacy is to 'stay away from politics', to an extent where any conspicuous elements which could be possibly deemed political are censored and overreacted to. I call this caution and over-reaction 'hypersensitivity'. One incident around the petition letter I drafted might serve as an example.

My main work with both activism was to draft different letters to government departments or to other organizations. Since the instructions and feedbacks from the ROA movement were much more clearer than those from the migrant mothers, my way of writing gradually was shaped into connecting as much as possible news about the SAR government or Chinese government with the demands. Usually, the news I cited referred to the governments' proclaimed governance guideline and public opinions about some new policies. These letters usually deployed concepts such as justice and fairness to make the connections and the accusation about unjust policies.

Without much awareness of my way of writing, in early November, I wrote in a similar manner a letter for the migrant mothers. In part of a sentence near the beginning of the letter, in quite a stiff way, I connected the ongoing geopolitical tension with the migrant mothers' demands about their difficult situation in Hong Kong – both were caused by “unjust and unfair governance”. The sentence went:

Regarding the ongoing unrest and conflicts around the relationship between China and Hong Kong, we think it is the government's responsibility to start correcting its previous unjust policy decision by addressing our difficulties as Chinese migrant mothers in Hong Kong.

To my great surprise, although it was only a side part of a sentence that hinted on the ongoing protests, several participants in that gathering expressed strong concerns about the connections I made in the sentence with the ongoing unrest. Mrs. Lan from northern Guangdong first picked the sentence out and asked me to fix it:

I think we should not connect any other political things with our demands – we just need to make our own demands clear in the letter. We should not bother ourselves with what others on the street want!

Some other mothers echoed her concerns, insisting that we should not, in any manner, be it positive or negative, link our pursuit with the violence on the street. Some of them were actually very quiet in the gathering before I showed them this disturbing sentence. I promised to change it, and the discussion moved on.

In the end, Mrs. Hu, a migrant mother from southern Fujian who had just migrated to Hong Kong several weeks ago, proposed that we should share the draft in a larger WeChat group with a few hundreds of Chinese migrant parents in similar situations to invite more participation in our planned show-up in the Government Complex. I was not in this large group chat. Nonetheless, since there was no

opposition to her idea, Mrs. Hu proceeded to share the not-yet-edited file.

On my way back to campus, I received a sequence of long voice messages from Mrs. Hu and some screencap pictures. Someone in the large WeChat group, shortly after Mrs. Hu shared the letter draft, started to type in paragraphs to accuse her:

Dear brothers and sisters in the group, we should definitely not make more trouble to SAR government, like her, with inflammatory languages and malicious intention, especially in such a crucial time period of the social unrest and before the general election of district council members in late November... We should keep our own business together, and believe in the government's ability to ease the unrest!

I was shocked. I comforted Mrs. Hu, who was completely new to Hong Kong and unfamiliar with the complicated politics here, and explained that misunderstanding was inevitable, since the group was much larger and most people did not know what we were doing. Meanwhile, I was also surprised by how such a beginning of the letter – which was not at all inflammatory for its own sake – could lead to a complete misread of the whole letter: the responder connected it not only with the ongoing social unrest, but also the coming district council election, which I did not mention at all in the letter!

The hypersensitivity about political participation and expression revealed itself fully in such a short dramatic display of disagreement and confrontation. At first glance, the content of such hypersensitivity did not deviate much from what could be a typical political habitus in China: keeping one's business to oneself while believing in the ability of some other powerful actors ("the government") to deal with the problems in the society. It may be summarized into a kind of encouraged indifference towards politics, and its underlying assumption is that the indifference absolves one's

opinion or action of being “political”, when being political is deemed problematic. However, in this exclamation, the indifference was openly transfigured into a source of aid in coping with ongoing social unrests and the coming elections, both of which are undeniably political. In other words, the political habitus of indifference has mutated substantially, and its assumption was subverted – its misreading of the whole letter into separatism and its urging manner precisely *revealed* precisely how the purported indifference itself was also deeply political! In this sense, the hypersensitivity I illustrate here both derives from and differs from a mainland Chinese political habitus. The hypersensitivity includes substantial mutation, which in some circumstances exposes contradictions in the original habitus and assumptions.

During the latter half of 2019, the hypersensitivity about politics was intensely shared among Chinese immigrants in Hong Kong in different forms of expression. Some chose to avoid all kinds of discussions about the geopolitical divide between China and Hong Kong, in complete silence or in distorted forms of communication. Others did not necessarily refuse all political participation but were extremely cautious and self-aware in the process, like most of the mothers I met. In these cases, the hypersensitivity was directed towards a constant possibility, deemed dangerous and problematic, for the geopolitical divide to slide into separatism. Any expressions of opinion or actions around the divide therefore endure a constant danger of aligning oneself with, or colluding with separatism, which could attract severe accusations.

On the other hand, the eruptive and exclamatory expressions of the hypersensitivity is close to a kind of mysophobia about any minute details which

could be seen as references to the geopolitics. Sometimes, this kind of mysophobia also develops into paranoia, obsessively and compulsively linking the geopolitical divide with everything, and then wholeheartedly and enjoyably repudiating and denouncing the connection. In these exclamatory expressions, the mutation within the hypersensitivity from an original political habitus in mainland China is enlarged and exposes clearly essence and contradictions of the original political habitus.

Regardless of its form of expression, the hypersensitivity speaks to the instability in the position of Chinese migrants who live *in* the geopolitical divide, instead of either side of the divide. It is easily noticeable that the habitus of the Chinese migrant mothers in and around the political field was clearly derived from their Chinese background – they were still immersed in a mostly Chinese media environment even when they are in Hong Kong, and they maintained their caution about any public political expression, which is not uncommon in mainland China. In this sense, this kind of political habitus in China is the prototype of the hypersensitivity.

However, the word prototype also implies that the hypersensitivity has changed substantially. Their caution is rendered conspicuous and thus “hyper”, precisely because it is firstly misplaced in a Hong Kongese political environment, where the mothers are learning, despite the various deterrence and intimidation, to act as proactive political actors. In this sense, the caution is stretched and reconfigured by Chinese migrants in all these new experiences and circumstances to make sense of the increasingly sharp tension in the geopolitical divide which the original political habitus does not need to deal with in its original political field. To name a small

example: the sharp geopolitical tension was readily subsumed under the narrative of separatism in Chinese media authorities which reinforce encouraged indifference about politics, so practical demands, concerns, and their historical development ceased to matter to a Chinese audience, whereas, the hypersensitivity towards politics which I observed among the migrant mothers meant in the first place they had forfeited their rights of indifference and they had to carve out their own intricate line between politics and non-politics. In their attempt, the old political habitus is stretched and at times, reconfigured. Thus, it is in these stretches and reconfiguration in the 'hyper', that new awareness, reflection, and actions about the original habitus can potentially be nurtured.

Calibration from Collaboration

During the Chinese New Year holiday in late January 2020, the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan and its gradual spread in provinces with large migratory population like Guangdong and Jiangsu has caused great pressure to the Hong Kong government. Overall, the movement across the border was mostly deterred by policies such as compulsory quarantine. The closing border and the freezing movement have put families which span across the two regions at nerves about their organization of life, especially the part concerning bureaucratic procedures.

Mrs. Cai one day called for help in the WeChat group:

[attaching a phone number] This is the complaint hotline of the public security bureau in City A. My acquaintance in the system told me to call this number and file a complaint about the problems encountered when applying visiting visa to

Hong Kong. Again, my children must not be with me in mainland when I apply for visiting visa, but then what should I do now – my visa is expiring in March and my children are now all in China due to the virus. If we need to go back to Hong Kong later, I cannot go with them! Parents also from Fujian, please also call this number to file complaints. My acquaintance said it needs a number of complaints to officially start an investigation and response.

Mrs. Cai was a very decisive women who participated actively in the gathering in the summer. I had only seen her once after summer holiday, but had heard all about her – her business, how she argued with customs officers at the border etc. She is from southern Fujian, like a lot of the participants.

The problem she referred to in her message had been a long-lasting one. The Chinese migrant mothers are from different parts of China, with the two nearest provinces having the highest proportion – Guangdong and Fujian, but there are also mothers from northerner part. It had been obvious for me since the first day I worked with these mothers that, different provinces, and even different cities, have different procedures and protocols about how these migrant mothers apply for their visa in the public security system in China. Though most of the procedures are similarly troublesome and hassling, mothers in Fujian were specifically required to *not* have their children with them in mainland China when they apply. Mrs. Qian once told me what happened when she expressed doubts to one security bureau officer:

He gave me quite a nasty look and said, “your kids are in mainland China, who are you ‘visiting’ in Hong Kong?” He was so arrogant!

Imaginably, this has caused a lot of problems for mothers from Fujian, which were indeed accentuated by the coronavirus epidemic – a lot of mothers, like Mrs. Cai, were underprepared given how fast things around the border changed because of the virus. After she sent out this message, a few mothers replied in the group, and I

imagined she had also sent it out in some other larger groups.

Two days later, good news came that the complaint was responded by the public security bureau in Fujian. The requirement about the child staying in Hong Kong was lifted. For the time being, visiting visas can be successfully applied even if the children are in mainland China. One mother in the group asked whether it would be possible to extend such arrangement to ordinary times. Mrs. Cai replied:

It is still temporary, due to the urgent and dangerous situation now – think about it, otherwise I need to risk the safety of my children and me to travel to Hong Kong in early February before my visa expires! Anyway, it is a first step towards making this the norm!

I felt really happy for the worried migrant mothers in Fujian, but also for the whole gathering – this is the first time that we have achieved anything as a network for the Chinese migrant mothers. Meanwhile, I could suddenly see the limitation the advocacy group has unconsciously set on itself that we had previously only worked in expressing our concerns to the Hong Kong SAR government but never imagined the possibilities to do something similar to the Chinese counterparts. Such self-limitation could have different explanations. Indeed, it has something to do with the hypersensitivity and habitual caution towards any public expression of discontent with the government I discussed in the previous section. Not to mention that these migrant mothers come from different parts of the countries and it would be hard to appeal to each local branch of security bureau.

Most importantly, the self-limitation also came from the limitation in organizers of the advocacy group – namely, Kam Chai and I would not be able to lift up this limitation ourselves because we are not at all familiar with the local politics and social

networks in places where the migrant mothers originally lived. In this sense, I was happy because the advocacy group has shown, perhaps for the first time, signs of collaboration between organizers and participants across the border.

Furthermore, such a brief episode of collaboration among the mothers, Kam Chai and I, where knowledges of advocacy organization and local politics in both sides of the geopolitical divide were put together, also yields creativity in how the geopolitical divide can be reconfigured and calibrated. In face of the danger and urgency they perceived with a potentially closing border, the migrant mothers were motivated to mobilize their own social networks, both in Hong Kong and in China, and to confront directly their local bureaucracy. In the process, the generality and vagueness of “the Chinese government” as an *a priori* entity were shaken; meanwhile, the plurality inside the bureaucratic system is revealed, with different local offices operating in different protocols, and the vagueness was slightly wiped down in the process of negotiation and confrontation. In other words, the potential of a more engaged perspective about how the Chinese public security system actually works and how the migration between China and Hong Kong is regulated emerged in this exceptional case of political participation among the migrant mothers. This is what I call “calibration of the other” – to have an enriched picture about what is usually simplistically perceived to be ‘the other’ in the geopolitical divide.

Through a calibration of ‘the other’, a new possibility to translate across the border also emerges. That is, to operate in a political language recognizable to ‘the other’. In this sense, the mothers were encouraged by their network in Hong Kong to

demand a better arrangement in their visa application, and they combined such encouragement with their knowledge in their local bureaucratic systems. This small success thus points to the possibility of collaboration, calibration and translation.

In my opinion, such work of calibration and translation is much needed in the discussion about the geopolitical divide. With the experiences of these migrant mothers, who have social network across the border, I have only calibrated slightly the picture of “the Chinese government” – it is more plural and less steady than the term suggests. Certainly, thanks to Covid-19, I have managed to shake temporarily the picture with a temporary exceptional circumstance. However, such a temporary circumstances points to a new approach towards the geopolitical divide which requires more serious examination of the cross-border experience by attending to people’s experience *in* the contentious divide, moving back and forth across the border. In this sense, the instability of the positions of these migrants, entailing both vulnerability and strengths, promises translation across the divide and thus, yields productive possibilities to foster alternative perceptions, a calibrated perception of the geopolitical divide between China and Hong Kong.

Public/Private: Why the Immigrants Should Not Come?

Public/Private divide has been an important derivative battleground between immigrants and anti-immigrant narratives in Hong Kong. To understand how elders in the ROA movement fight against anti-immigrant narratives in Hong Kong, it is necessary to recount these narratives first. It is commonly argued that family reunion,

if taken as these elders' real intention, as put in their slogans, should be strictly private issues – they can go back to mainland China to join their children to achieve family reunion, which can indeed be facilitated, or even encouraged by the existing migration policy. If their stated goal can be entertained by private decision, it ceases to be a public issue and deserves no public attention. In contrast, ROA activists insist that the issue of immigration belongs to 'the public'. To Hong Kongers who are against immigration, the activist's placement of immigration in the public sphere is a strategy to conceal their real intentions, which is to abuse their citizen rights by exploiting already scarce public resources, such as public housing and medical care. It is still commonly recognized that these public resources in Hong Kong are more accessible than those in mainland China, which provides a reasonable incentive for mainland Chinese to migrate to Hong Kong. In this case, the public interest and order, which should put the rights of Hong Kong citizens over those of the migrants, should come prior to private interests of these cross-border families. Therefore, these specific groups of mainland Chinese should not be given citizenship.

The rationale of these anti-Chinese immigrant narratives pictures a specific division between the public and the private. Here, instead of putting 'private' and 'public' namely on the two ends of one single spectrum, I would like to use what Gal and Kligman propose (2000:51-2, 129; Gal 2002:81), treating the two as fractals, which in fact allows for indefinite orders of division in any given entity. In other words, within what can be classified as 'private' on the first order, a new public/private divide can always be found enacted on the second order. They rightly

point out that using a spectrum to conceptualize such a divide could be deceptive – it overlooks the multiple shifts of contexts on which the divide is enacted, wrongly assuming there is a universal measurement of ‘public/private’ across contexts. I find this conceptual model important in examining claims of both sides of the argument about Chinese immigrants – the elders and the common localist accounts – because it not only highlights the resulted differences in categorization, but also the causes in the different configuration of shifts and orders of division.

The fractal model can be applied to the contention around Chinese immigrants in Hong Kong. In the first order of division, it is agreed that immigration around family reunion is public, because it is collaboratively regulated by both governments. What usually get overlooked is that the decision about what constitutes ‘the public’ often also influences, if not decides, what constitutes ‘the private’. Thus, in this particular conception about public/private within immigration for family reunion, what constitutes ‘*the private*’ are different kinds of border crossing which are currently not recognized and facilitated by the immigration regulation. In the case of the ROA movement, it includes mainland children over the age of 14 when their parents became Hong Kong permanent resident; and mainland children who already have siblings being Hong Kong permanent residents – because supposedly, one child should be responsible enough for the need of care of the aging elders.

Alternative Configuration of Public/Private

How alternatively do elders in the ROA movement configure public/private to

counter the anti-immigrant narrative? On a weekday morning, having a late breakfast with Mr. Yip, I stood out as the only young person in the restaurant. In the table right next to ours, an elder and his domestic helper were having breakfast without exchanging a word. In the table behind Mr. Yip, an elderly couple were sharing their meal with the old man holding his newspaper high, cutting the space apart like a wall. Although the restaurant was almost full, everything inside happened quietly.

He wants his son to come to Hong Kong, to live with and take care of his wife and him. He moved to Hong Kong with his daughter in the early 90s, following his wife's migration, whose application was permitted because of another familial relation. His daughter lives with them, but *only for now*, he emphasized – she is getting married and moving out soon. He despises the logic of Hong Kong SAR government, which states that if an elder already has one or more children in Hong Kong, who, supposedly, undertake the responsibility of caregiving, his or her application for another child in mainland China to come would not be considered. In his view, working full time, his daughter does not have much time or energy for the two elders at home. The remedy to the problem, he stated, is to simply allow his son to come and live with them.

In the conversation with Mr. Yip, I tried to push his argument: can the lack of caregiver in his household really be solved by his son's coming to Hong Kong? It seemed to me at the time that caregiving was more an issue of organization of family and work in this metropolis than that of obstacles the border enforces. Granting his son Hong Kong citizenship is a public issue because it involves executive and

administrative procedures, whereas caregiving regarding labor distribution within a household falls into the category of private matter. Even if his son came, he would also have to work and then have no time left for his aging parents, which is not unlike what has been happening with Mr. Yip's daughter now. To deal with a caregiving issue by arguing for citizenship without changing the existing conflicts between labors inside and outside the household did not seem logical to me.

Mr. Yip got quite irritated. He was annoyed by the fact that I did not seem to share his core vision about the ideal family order, and his conceptual arrangement about the public-private divide.

For Mr. Yip, the issue of immigration for family reunion is public because it is regulated by the government. However, if we are to divide again within this public domain, the determinant relation between the public and the private is altered. Instead of taking other public interests into accounts when considering immigration, the divide should be based on an ideal family order which requires every member of the family to live together and take care of one another. This way of division would be more coherent with the origin of the whole public category – “immigration for family reunion” – which means the government should not differentiate between children and overaged children, or between siblings. In his case, the ideal family order has obliged his absent son in mainland China to be the main caregiver, and the current obstacle is caused by the incoherency and hypocrisy of the immigration policy.

In terms of the competition over public resources between immigrants and citizens, to Mr. Yip, these are matters to be regarded as ‘public’ in the next level of

public/private differentiation within the private household *after* the ideal family order is achieved – this time, within the domestic sphere, the public includes the inheritance of the public apartment unit he now lives in by his son and other benefits his son will enjoy after migrating to Hong Kong. Responding to my questions, he looked quite annoyed:

You have mixed so many things together all at once – we should take separate steps. In the current stage, our primary concern should still be family reunion. As for other matters, they are for future consideration! We don't bother ourselves with them.

What we see here, I would argue, is more than a misunderstanding between an anthropology novice and her informant, but a small open confrontation which reveals some fundamental differences between two different conceptions about the public-private divide in the issue of immigration for family reunion. The government's rationale allowing one child and one child only in Hong Kong to provide care for some elders suggests that the public can only facilitate the private to the extent that the public rids itself of some caregiving responsibility in this way. Unless made public through public welfare institutions, caregiving still remains a private matter – thus, none of the government's business! It is noticeable here that the divide is itself deeply political, and I use the term 'political' here following Saba Mahmood's argument that the configuration of the public/private divide is not an immutable decision and is always subjected to the consideration in governance and geopolitics. Through legal reforms and inventions in the Middle East in colonial governance, she shows that, in contrast with other universal law, the religion-based family law has been deployed to represent and preserve the essence and traditions of religious groups, and thus

substantially transformed the conception of ‘family’, ‘religion’, and ‘private’ (2016:118-22).

However, Mr. Yip conceptualized a very different ‘private’ within this huge public category of “immigration for family reunion”. He took the name and the purported mission of this whole public category seriously – it should primarily facilitate *all kinds of* family reunion without distracting itself with *other* consideration of public interests or opinion. On the other hand, what happened after his son come to Hong Kong, whether his son will actually take care of his wife and him, is none of the government’s business (and none of my business, in this sense) – it is a purely private issue – because the government can only enquire and intervene into his domestic life to facilitate the achievement of the ideal family order within this level of differentiation. Only when it comes to other domestic issues which are under state regulation, for example, future inheritance of his public housing, that the domestic/private is again divided into the public and the private. In his imagination, at least for the time being, the fulfillment of family order closes down the domestic sphere into an autonomy, whereas, before that happens, everything is still categorized in ‘the public’.

The divergent arguments about public policies often assume these elders to be ignorant or negligent about the public-private divide, mixing public matters with private matters. However, from what I have observed and tried to describe, the elders are fostering different visions about the public/private divide. Ironically, the elders in ROA movement also think their rivals are unclear in their mind, “mixing too many

things together at once”. Through registering every shift and order of public/private differentiation with Gal and Kligman’s model of ‘fractal’ (2000:51; Gal 2002:85), it became clear that the disputes about Chinese immigrants in Hong Kong do not center on where to draw the line between the public and the private – as a spectrum conceptual model might suggest. But rather, *when* and *how* the line should be drawn are what the participants in the ROA movement and their rivals argue about the most. In this sense, thinking the public/private as fractals, instead of spectrum, corresponds to what Mahmood tries to delineate with historical evidence that the public/private divide means more than separating – it is fundamentally *transforming* what are contained in both categories (2016:117). Different conceptions of the divide concern the whole picture where fractals are enacted in multiple levels of differentiation. Now, I turn to how the elders in the ROA movement support their vision of the public/private divide through medical records and needs of care.

Translating Public/Private

Apart from having a clear alternative configuration, the elders also need to bridge their conception of the public/private with the existing mainstream one. In this respect, every elder I have met in the ROA movement is keen on showing me how ill they are. In the public library of Tseung Kwan O, Grandma Lee pulled out her complete collection of medical records and led me through a brief tour of her medical history. Noticing the librarian’s attention, I was trying to tell her to speak with a lower voice but failed – she was describing to me excitedly what problem she has in her

knees and elbows, so that she cannot lift anything heavy, making her solitary life inconvenient. In that sunny afternoon, I greeted her by saying that she looked exceptionally modern with her sunglasses, which I regretted in my mind quietly when she spent excessive time explaining with self-repetition to me the whole process of her cataract operation and the suggestions from doctors to receive more care in life.

In a meeting in Mong Kok, I tried to talk with a quiet elder sitting next to me – I have sat next to him for several times in this space of Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS), where the ROA movement is based. Unfortunately, I have sat on the wrong side – his ear on the left could not hear anything, which is why he always sits on this side of the table, facing his right ear to Teacher Chu and Kam Chai, who usually host the meetings. After I explained to him I am a student helping Kam Chai write letters to the government, he pulled up his trouser bottom, stretched out his right foot in bandage, and complained that he had pain in his ankle and the medical center he went – which he found on newspaper advertisement section – was not helping. But that was still not the point. “They deducted points from my medical coupons, but refused to sign my medical records for visiting the doctors!” To prove to me the validity of his medical need, as if the foot wrapped in bandage was not enough, he pulled out a card, on which the information of the medical center was listed, “I have explained to them (i.e. the medical center) that I need medical records to hand in to the Immigration Department, but they insisted that the Department would call them, should there be any enquiry.”

These emphases on illness and their subsequent claims of care-needing,

specifically from their children in mainland, have been salient since my first day at the scene, to such an extent that it came off as a mere strategy to me at the first glance. (Using the word ‘strategy’, I do not mean to deny the truthfulness in the accounts from the elders about their troubles and pains). It was in my late breakfast with Mr. Yip in a restaurant full of elderly customers, that I was struck by the thickness of such emphases. After we talked about the uncompromising attitude of the Hong Kong SAR government in changing its age bar or granting exceptions, he responded:

If today I am seriously ill, to the extent that I might die very soon, maybe then, the government would process my son’s application. But we cannot be so sure now, since my wife and I are still able to walk around ourselves... But the illness also cannot be too acute, otherwise I will just die, then my son had absolutely no chance – he is supposed to take care of the aging parents here, if both my wife and I die, who should he be taking care of in Hong Kong anyway?

At the outset, illnesses and need of care are located centrally in their imagined family order which obliges their children in mainland China to be the most proper caregiver. (However, just look around the restaurant where we were, we could easily debunk such expectation about who proper caregivers should be.) Examined more closely, such claims based on illness, need of care, and most importantly, medical records, resort to “scientific rationality” in order to translate bodily suffering (e.g. pain, inconvenience) into the justification, or in other words, “social rationality” of their political demands. I use the two kinds of rationality following Abdelmalek Sayad here, where scientific rationality is the authority and leverage of and in medical institution, signifying positivist physical universality about body; and social rationality points to how reasonable and acceptable certain statements are to social

institutions (2004:186-7). In his account, North African immigrants in France who are hospitalized in labor accidents make claims which employers or labor dispute conciliation courts deem 'excessive' and 'irrational', and therefore are relegated to more medical examination for further supports or rejections. His description of the meticulously collected medical-related documents of the immigrants with illness reminds me of the many piles of documents I have seen in my work, usually the first time I meet someone when he/she is eager to explain to me their need of care (2004:186, 195). The elders I meet aim to connect the two rationalities in order to translate their private experience of pain into their public and political demands.

To understand how the elders push back against the official conception of the private/public divide, I find it important to examine why the need of care and medical records have become the central battle ground for the elders in the ROA movement. To recall, the core difference between the two conceptions is how, within the public issue of immigration for family reunion, the second order of differentiation is conducted. The existing regulation insists that the capacity of public resources – namely, too many Chinese immigrants will overburden the public sector, while allowing some mainland Chinese children to come can redirect the responsibility of caring back to the domestic sphere – should determine what kinds of family reunion are allowed or not allowed. For those immigration cases which are not allowed in the existing regulation, they are relegated into 'the private', for the families need to readapt their domestic life into the norm of separation – a purely private matter. On the other hand, what the ROA movement advocates for is to concentrate on one task

at a time – family reunion should be the sole consideration on this order of public/private differentiation: all kinds of family reunion should be in the public category, which means the government takes responsibility in the realization. The necessary concerns about public resources should be relegated to the next order of differentiation. In establishing validity of their vision about the public/private divide, the core task of the elders is to pull back the government attention to the realization of family reunion – what this whole public category about immigration for family reunion is purported to be about.

In this way, it is easily understood why the need of care and medical record become the central battleground – because they are situated precisely *between* the two conceptions about public/private divides. Through articulating their bodily pain and suffering and establishing their needs of care, they connect their ideal family order with how the government has calculated the public interests over the private about the limited capacity of public resources. In other words, the elders have tried hard to illustrate how the fulfillment of the ideal family order not only serve their vision of the public/private divide, but also work for the government’s concern about the burden on public caregiving institutions by an aging population. Through medical records, the elders connect scientific and social rationalities, and make their private experience of bodily pain and suffering public and established. In this way, they have achieved a translation from ‘the private’ to ‘the public’.

However, it is important to note that the translation is in fact predicated on a fundamental asymmetry in terms of knowledge and power. No one in the ROA

movement knows comprehensively how decision making is conducted inside Hong Kong SAR government or Chinese government – all their speculations are based on past experience which does not relate well to the changing geopolitics between China and Hong Kong. More notably, such translation attempts are most likely to be futile for most of the time, like stones thrown into the sea, only making some splashes but no meaningful response or change. Nonetheless, the insistence and perseverance of the elders in the ROA movement show that the only way to confront such huge asymmetry is to be persistent with the endeavor of translation, with piles after piles of medical records, and calls after calls into the Immigration Department.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have threaded the experiences of the Chinese migrant mothers and the elders in the ROA movement by the two recurring divides – the geopolitical divide between China and Hong Kong, and the public/private divide. Here in the epilogue, I would like to grab the last chance to explain how the two divides are related and connected with each other, apart from being co-existent in my observation. More importantly, in explaining the relation between the two, I would like to conclude with some inspirations for how discussions about the geopolitical tension could continue.

I have been driven by the tension around the geopolitical border to pursue this project. Over my 4-year stay in Hong Kong as a migrant student, the tension has

accumulated, transformed, and erupted. As a migrant from China in the city myself, I have to admit that the contention around the geopolitical divide has often left me baffled. If indeed, consolidation and dissolution (or encroachment) define and give rise to each other in an antagonistic form, what would be a way to get out of this antagonism? Thus, in this project I tried to learn from other Chinese migrants who are confronting the border openly and directly, hoping to configure an alternative way to think about the geopolitical divide.

To start with, I went on to flesh out my bafflement in describing the specific situations for the Chinese migrants – the mothers’ uncertainty and discomfort about their own participation in the advocacy group, the hypersensitivity I observed in my work; and in the ROA movement, as well as the attempted translation by both the mothers and the elders. I would like to answer the question descriptively: How are lives in the middle of the geopolitical divide like? That is, how are lives for these groups of Chinese migrants like in Hong Kong?

Apart from the descriptions, to configure an alternative approach, new inspirations and connections need to be drawn. In this light, I drew a lot of inspiration from another divide, the public/private divide, which is salient in both activisms around family union across the border and has been well-developed in feminist theories. In particular, I borrowed heavily from Susan Gal’s conception of the public/private as “fractals” (2002:80), which means the divide can always be applied to different entities in different orders. For example, what was differentiated as “private” previously can bear another order of division and have the inner distinction

of public/private again.

To think about the public/private divide as “fractals” accounts for the indexicality of the two labels and thus registers the shifts, or the orders of division, in one conception about the public/private divide. This sensitivity towards the shifts is particularly important when we deal with different and even contesting conceptions about the public/private divide. To analyze the difference, we need to attend to not only the resulting difference in categorization but also what has caused the difference in the first place – difference of shifts within each conception. This is precisely how I analyzed the difference between Mr. Yip’s conception about the public/private and that of a general anti-Chinese immigrant argument.

More importantly, the practice of “fractal” in analysis reminds us of the asymmetry and irregularity concealed as symmetry and regularity by the language of “public/private divide”, as reminded by Denis Riley in the introduction to a whole collection of essays devoted to the public/private divide (2004: 3-4). In other words, as a conceptual tool, it also lays out what remains unclassified and even unknown, as we have only traced down one or several paths out of all the other possibilities. Tracing shifts and different orders of division between the public and the private, one has gone further and further in the division; meanwhile, one has also gone farther and farther from what has been classified as “the other side” in the first few division, which might remain unknown and uninvestigated. To continue Gal’s example of a house, if my house is “private” and what lies outside is “public”, in continuing dividing parts of my house into either categories, I am reminded that in the process of

categorization, what lies outside has potentially been left unattended or uncategorized. Maybe the garden is “private” when pitted against the road, and my neighborhood could also be “private” against the whole town – all these are possible but until we direct our attention to such task of categorization, we simply cannot know.

This remembrance of “the other” and “the uninvestigated” foster new possibility for translation between the two domains, as illustrated by the salient medical records and need of care among the elders in the ROA movement. To translate “the private” into “the public” is hardly ever to demolish the distinction, but to find possibility to talk in languages and styles recognizable by “the public” – in the elders’ case, it is through the need of care proved by medical institutions. To learn the language, in this sense, is to restore substantial details into the previously unknown “public” – What does the government care about? Where and how to approach the government and formulate the demands? All these are salient in my participation of the ROA movement, where the actors are all tuned to political news and personnel changes in the Hong Kong SAR government, as well as keen to connect news with their demands and claims in their expression.

Bearing all these in mind, how can we think about the geopolitical divide with the discussions about the public/private divide? Specifically, what inspiration could be drawn from thinking about the public/private divide as “fractals”? How is the translation between “the public” and “the private” useful to the possibility of a kind of translation between the increasingly glaring geopolitical stand-off?

If the public/private divide is a topological categorization, could China/Hong

Kong, more than political entities, also be a topological categorization which usually operates in the realms of geopolitics and identity politics? I have described the ever-continuing and increasingly delicate application of the geopolitical divide to more and more aspects of life as suffocating and counter-innovative before – but it was in no way my intention to diminish the dedication and self-awareness involved in the process. Rather, I find it disappointingly suffocating because, as the geopolitical divide is applied with more and more orders of division to more and more aspects of life in one side of the border, the discussions are leaving farther and farther from the original division by the border. That is to say, less attention and energy are devoted to probe about the other side of the border, or the very division itself. Meanwhile, as more energy has been devoted to executing the geopolitical divide, the divide itself has become increasingly established and stable. In this sense, the “fractal” model rightly reminds us of the other side of the divide remaining as “not-yet-known” and “not-yet-investigated”.

More dangerously, just as the language of public/private belies the asymmetry of the actual operation of the divide, the language of China/Hong Kong divide also belies the huge asymmetry – certainly in terms of political power (which most discussions are pessimistically aware of) but also, and probably more importantly, in terms of knowledge about the two sides of the geopolitical divide. Discussions in Hong Kong about the divide seem to exhibit huge imbalance in how well China and Hong Kong are respectively known and understood, which sometimes I do find frustrating. This imbalance has caused some mystification of “a political other” and

inhibited a lot of meaningful discussion, if not leading to misunderstanding and conflicts.

Thus, to have a more balanced picture of the geopolitical divide, or at least, to hold audible and mutually comprehensible discussions, representations of ‘the other’ needs to be calibrated, as the first step of demystification, and its language need to be learned and translated. The Fujianese mothers’ attempt to approach and negotiate with Chinese bureaucrats that I documented is an example to show how such task of calibration and translation across the geopolitical divide could be done, and how Chinese migrants of certain group are suited for this task – if their experiences are examined with the special attention to the need for translation. Again, the success they achieved is small, exceptional, and probably ephemeral, compared to their lasting anxiety and hypersensitivity about political participation. Nonetheless, these small sparks of dissonance and incoherence in the picture might lead us to new directions of discussions about the China-Hong Kong geopolitical divide.

Last but not the least, I find it an important endeavor to think about the geopolitical divide with other well-developed discussions. If our goal is to transcend the geopolitical divide, in a sense, our manner to achieve so should be more or less consistent by reaching out to theorizations in other discussions for inspiration. I have only gone down one road in this article, that is, to connect the geopolitical divide with the public/private divide and apply one theory about the latter to the conceptualization and the reflection of the former. I hope I have illustrated how this way of thinking can bring new inspiration to the discussions about the China/Hong Kong geopolitical

divide. I also hope that my attempts in this article have added some imagination in the current discussion.

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