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Domesticating transnational education: discourses of social value, self-worth and the institutionalisation of failure in 'meritocratic' Hong Kong

Introduction

> 'The institutionalized values school instils are quantified ones. School initiates young people into a world where everything can be measured, including their imaginations' (Illich, 1971, p. 40)

> 'the labor of the child caught up in the culling process of school admissions and test scores and the labor of the parents to provide the child with the resources to be successful in these endeavors…have become emblematic of the production of value…' (Anagnost, 2004, p. 191)

In this paper, we focus specifically on the ways in which the spatialities of education are being transformed through internationalisation. The internationalisation of education has habitually been regarded as a process of spatial extension; the reaching *outwards* of educational institutions and pedagogies, or an externalisation process (cf. recent interventions by Raghuram, 2013; King and Raghuram, 2013; Madge et al., 2015, problematising 'the international' and discussed below). In contrast, here we argue the ostensible opposite: that internationalisation increasingly represents the *internalisation* of foreign education – what we have called 'domestication'. Through the process of domestication, we assert, international

credentials are increasingly a central and normalised feature of local educational markets, with implications for how societies are governed and reproduced. This represents, *inter alia*, an important and necessary shift in perspective on internationalisation (of education); away from a neoliberal focus on its economic implications, towards a more responsible, ethical and engaged interaction with its effects (Madge et al., 2009).

Kang and Abelmann (2011) refer to domestication when discussing Pre-college Study Abroad [PSA] in South Korea. PSA involves the out-migration from South Korea of thousands of young children, for schooling in North America, every year. Two key concerns drive PSA: one, is the desire for very particular (embodied and institutionalised) cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) – notably English-language skills and Western credentials. The second is an earnest imperative to escape what has been described as a 'hellishly' competitive local education system (see Waters, 2008; Waters, 2015), in a feverishly academic, exam-oriented environment (Seth, 2002). In relation to this, Kang and Abelmann (2011) have written:

> 'PSA is no longer depicted as a discrete, foreign education field, but instead an extension of the highly stratified and competitive domestic South Korean education market. "Domesticated," PSA has come to play by the same rules as the South Korean education game. Education abroad then becomes but another piece of the education puzzle as South Korean parents attempt to prepare their children to prosper in an ever more competitive and globalized South Korea and world.' (p. 90)

Indeed, there is a growing and substantive academic literature on international student mobility as a key feature of the internationalisation of education (e.g. Collins, 2010; Findlay et al. 2012; Geddie, 2014; King and Raghuram, 2013). And yet, globally, we find that

students are differentially located when it comes to their interactions with international education. Many engage with international education in life-defining ways, *without* any attendant mobility, and this is particularly true for students undertaking transnational qualifications (or TNE). The voices of TNE students are seldom heard within the burgeoning academic literature on international students.

Definitions of TNE are varied and sprawling - it is often discussed as a multi-million pound global industry (BIS, 2014), and in the broadest sense represents the export of educational services. Here, however, we adhere to a more specific and conventional definition of TNE: formal academic programmes 'in which learners are located in a country other than the one in which the awarding institution is based' (McBurnie and Ziguras, 2007, p. 21). This necessitates a more 'decentred' perspective on learning than the tendency to focus on 'national' education systems allows (Madge et al, 2015).

Typically, students undertaking TNE programmes are young, less privileged 'locals', for whom options - when it comes to studying for a degree - are generally circumscribed. Although international in name, these qualifications are acquired at home. These students are *non*-elites, and this paper contributes to wider debates on the educational and employment experiences of 'ordinary' young people in different parts of the world (Brinton, 2011; McDowell, 2012; Leung and Waters, 2013; Cheng, 2015b; Woronov, 2016). To date, research on international education has tended to privilege the choices and mobilities of an advantaged minority (Ong, 1999; Findlay et al., 2012; Waters, 2008; although cf. Fong, 2011, whose monograph starts at the point at which young people have failed to access a college place in China). Non-elites, and those who follow alternative educational paths (see arguments made in Kraftl, 2015), have generally been neglected. TNE's role, in providing educational opportunities for a sizable number of academically-unexceptional locals

following an ostensibly unconventional route through the education system, makes it an especially compelling case, conceptually, as we aim to demonstrate.

More broadly, internationalisation has recently transformed from an issue of largely peripheral interest for governments and higher education institutions (HEIs), to a mantra for survival (Bone, 2010; BIS, 2011). The widespread withdrawal of state funding for higher education has led to the strategic implementation of internationalisation, providing a potential panacea to HEIs (particularly in the 'West') – fees from international students often amount to a significant proportion of universities' total income (BIS, 2011). There are presently over 4.5 million international students at tertiary level (OECD, 2014). Growth in international student mobility is paralleled by a trend towards the off-shoring of qualifications through TNE (the UK, US and Australia are actively engaged in this). At particular overseas locations (such as Singapore, Malaysia, Dubai and Hong Kong), so-called 'non-local' degrees have today become part of an unremarkable suite of options available to young people seeking higher education (HE), embedded, as they are, within a complex post-secondary educational landscape. TNE can be conceived as part of the neoliberalisation of contemporary higher education – the withdrawal of state funding for HE and an increasing reliance by universities on private and external sources of revenue. It can also be seen as part of a bigger trend within certain East Asian countries/cities towards the creation of knowledge- or education-hubs. The term education hub refers to the tendency of certain states to encourage actively the involvement of foreign educational providers within its territory, and concomitantly to attract an increased number of international students into their education system, in addition to providing more options for local students (Knight, 2011; Sidhu et al., 2011). TNE in Hong Kong can be seen to offer a somewhat contradictory but nevertheless interesting perspective on this strategy, as explained below.

In relation to such general features of internationalisation, Madge et al. (2015) urge geographers to consider the categories of analysis used. This includes attending to

> 'the great diversity of international students, the multiple and hybrid ways in which students are involved in international education, and how the global eduscape is also populated by the varied mobility practices and policies of different institutions and academics' (p. 683).

In their paper, Madge et al. (2015) 'unpack the concept of the international' to provide a geographically 'decentred' view that takes into account education's multiple-located-ness (p. 691) and 'which challenges simplistic dichotomies of here/there and unsettles the spatial imagination away from thinking about 'the international' and about pedagogy solely in relation to (largely unmarked) European-American-Australian centres, and instead explicitly locates itself as coming out of, and to, multiple locations' (p. 692). Very little work has attended to the complex spatial dynamics of TNE – how it is multiply located, and yet at the same time dis-located; how it can be conceivably both detached from the local education system, and yet also at the same time profoundly implicated in localised processes of social reproduction.

In what follows, we begin with a discussion of our theorisation of international education and its 'domestication' in East Asia. We then consider the implications of this conceptualisation for existing structures and hierarchies of education and value. Focussing on the production of social value in East Asia (e.g. Stafford, 1995), through the symbolic violence enacted by an education system that venerates the principle of meritocracy, we then proceed to illustrate these concerns, drawing upon our extensive qualitative fieldwork in Hong Kong. Our data explore the presence of British universities in the territory and the part

they have played (and are presently playing) in reproducing social hierarchies, generating self-worth, and reifying social differentiation through education. Some counter-narratives offer possibilities for redefining dominant discourses through everyday practices – in the penultimate section of the paper, we explore these alternative discourses and how they may contribute to debates around 'biopolitics from below' (Anderson, 2012) and 'socio-material sites of resistance' (Kraftl, 2015). We conclude by reflecting upon how these insights can inform more expansive understandings of education and society.

Biopolitics, subjectification and transnational education

> '[T]he representation of value has undergone a reorganization in the realm of the biopolitical in which human life becomes a new frontier for capital accumulation' (Anagnost, 2004, p. 189).

The theoretical argument pursued in this paper, denoted by the term 'domestication', concerns the role played by TNE in broader systems of classification (such as meritocracy) in contemporary East Asian societies. Using the ideas of Foucault (1977) and others (e.g. Anagnost, 2004; Woronov, 2016), we understand meritocracy to represent a pervasive mode of governing, which creates, through its associated discourses of success and failure, self-regulating, self-effacing subjects (Foucault, 1977; Anagnost, 2004; Legg, 2005). In what follows, we examine, firstly, the role of schooling and examinations in creating value within contemporary East Asia and the predominance of discourses relating to meritocracy; we then consider how this situation might be understood theoretically, applying Bourdieu's (1984) concepts of capital accumulation and symbolic violence, Foucault's (1977) ideas around

biopower, and finally more class-based political-economy approaches, which conceivably challenge ‘culturalist’ explanations of educational desire in Asia.

As has been widely observed in both media and academic circles, public attitudes to education and schooling in East Asia reflect something of a regional obsession (Waters, 2015). Concerns over success in education have ‘infected’ the entire population and are an example of the very successful ‘management of life’ characteristic of contemporary biopolitics (Rose, 2001, p. 26). Parents invest heavily in their children’s education, including out of school tutoring and extra-curricular enrichment activities. Children face such pressure to succeed, that some schools have been introducing ‘anti-suicide’ barriers to elevated areas around the time of key exams (Phillips, 2015; Liang, 2010) – examinations are frequently articulated in (biopolitical) terms of ‘life-and-death’. In fact, there is a very long tradition of formal examinations in many East Asian societies (notably, China); they are public, results are widely displayed, and success is deemed essential, in the truest sense of the word (essential to one’s very being). Crucially, however, there are pre-defined limits (set by government) on the number of successful individuals, and there are also few resit opportunities. In China, for example, the pass rate for the final high school examination (*gaokao*) is around 60%, meaning 40% of youngsters will inevitably fail, to be excluded from many career paths for life (Liang, 2010). In Hong Kong, the number of young people able to access domestic higher education straight from school (also on the basis of examination results) has remained for some time at around 18%; consequently, a significant number of young people who want to attend a local university are prevented from doing so. Bregnbæk’s (2016) recently published monograph provides a fascinating perspective on China’s young educational elite (the successful). Intriguingly, she notes the precariousness of their success. In this paper, however, we are keen to consider the fate of those students who have failed: what are their options? More specifically, how does failure define them?

To understand the power wielded by education in this regional context, it is necessary to reflect upon its role in the creation of value. For Bourdieu (1984, 1986), the value inherent in education can be equated to the institutionalised and embodied cultural capital it imparts. At the same time, the ability to accumulate cultural capital through the education system is dependent upon pre-existing access to capital, thereby explaining 'the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes by relating academic success […] to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class fractions' (1986, p. 242). The education system, Bourdieu argues, rewards the capital possessed by elites – this is a form of 'symbolic violence' enacted upon the less privileged members of society (Bourdieu and Passeron, 2000; see also arguments in Freire, 1970). In this way, education (institutionalised cultural capital) enables a system and hierarchy of privilege to reproduce itself. Katz (2008) develops these ideas in her exposition of the child as neoliberal 'accumulation strategy' – children's bodies become the foci for capital accumulation. Other writers have expressed a slightly different take on value and education, with specific reference to East Asia. Woronov (2016), for example, argues that in China, exam results have become 'more than just a qualitative expression of educational achievement; they condense and represent social value' (p. 13); failure is pathologised, despite the fact that it is also, statistically, the norm. Within public and government discourses, the notion of *suzhi* (quality) is widely deployed in discussions of population, and concerns about 'low-quality' youth (those who have failed purportedly meritocratic public examinations) are prevalent. According to Anagnost (2004), *suzhi* serves various ideological functions, including as a measure of the value of bodies as 'human capital'. She draws on Agamben's (1998) notion of 'bare life' to argue that *suzhi* is not seen as something that 'naturally' inheres in the body, but rather is something that must be added to it (a supplement to bare life) – an expression of 'qualified life'. Qualified life is achieved through 'intensified child nurture, educational

inputs, training' (Anagnost, 2004, p. 193): 'the politics of *suzhi* become a struggle for recognition as a body of value, in which some bodies are recognized as having more value than others and therefore more deserving of the rights of citizenship' (Anagnost, 2004, p. 194). Consequently, success in education frequently designates 'an individual's moral and personal value' (Woronov, 2016, p. 2; see also Stafford (1995); Chu (2010), Kipnis (2011) and Cheng (2015a)). This feeds directly into discourses around meritocracy – those individuals who try the hardest and put in the greatest effort will succeed – therefore, not to have succeeded is a personal failing, with potentially profound individual and social consequences.

It is our contention that the concept of biopower is a useful theoretical lens through which to apprehend these complex yet fascinating relationships between education, value, society and life itself. It is apposite to spend a few moments considering how geographers have recently understood and applied the notion of biopower, and with what intent. Anderson (2012, p. 28) equates biopower to the way in which 'life has become the 'object-target' for specific techniques and technologies of power.' Research on biopower power has shown us, he argues, that 'to protect, care for and sustain valued lives is to abandon, damage and destroy other lives' (Anderson, 2012, p. 28). In his paper, Anderson uses the concept of affect to understand the 'surpluses of life' that Foucault himself acknowledged – an aspect of living that 'constantly escapes' those techniques and technologies of power (Foucault, 1978, p. 143). We will return to this issue – the possibility for escape/resistance – below. In another example, Legg's (2005) discussion of biopower emphasises the intention of 'denaturalising' the present – particularly the ways of governing ascendant in the present (of which 'meritocracy' might be considered exemplary). The emergence of biopolitics as a method of governing has involved, amongst other things, the creation of self-regulating subjects. This is achieved, in part, through data gathering – the creation of knowledge that becomes seen as

truth. Schools and other educational institutions (and the examinations they administer) clearly serve the purpose of upholding discourses around educational meritocracy (Ball, 2013). Examinations are a key technology for the implementation of educational meritocracy: formal examinations and their role in governing became popularised during the 18th century and have expanded ever since. As Foucault (1977) has written:

> ‘the school became a sort of apparatus of uninterrupted examination that duplicated along its entire length the operation of teaching. It became less and less a question of jousts in which pupils pitched their forces against one another and increasingly a perpetual comparison of each and all that made it possible both to measure and to judge’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 186).

It is not difficult to see how formal examinations within East Asia have been fundamentally enlisted in the role of measurement and judgement (Bregnbæk, 2016; Woronov, 2016); how they are involved in subjectivation and the creation of categories of young people – the ‘successful’ and the ‘failures’. Some writers, however, have preferred exclusively ‘cultural’ explanations (emphasising Confucianism) to account for East Asian educational desire (see, for example, Kipnis, 2011). This can obscure the importance of class as a crucial and enduring category of social analysis.

We tend to concur with Woronov (2016), who argues that to focus predominately on culture serves to reinforce discourses of ‘students as pathologized failures’ and consequently leads us to ‘neglect the wider social and economic processes that produce social outcomes of failure’ (p. 8). Conversely, this paper attempts to shed some light upon these wider processes that *produce failure* with respect of transnational education, and the more extensive systems within which TNE operates, which includes paying due attention to the role of class and

class-privilege. Bemoaning the loss of 'class' from discussions of inequality, and a concomitant tendency to focus on culture, Skeggs (2004) explores the link between economic and moral value. She writes: 'assumptions proliferate about how individuals have equal access to the cultural resources for self-making, as if the self can be entirely divorced from the conditions which make it possible.' Conversely, Skeggs (2004) argues that 'the cultural resources for self-making and the techniques for self-production are class processes and making the self makes class' (Skeggs, 2004, p. 75; Skeggs, 2011). In other words, the making of successful and failing students in Hong Kong is ultimately dependent upon class positioning. The students that find themselves subjected to such discourses are those that lack the resources to remove themselves from the system. The students in our study had limited 'cultural resources for self-making' and have been subjected to the symbolic violence enacted by the local education system (Bourdieu and Passeron, 2000). In the next section, we turn to consider how transnational education fits within a broader educational landscape in contemporary Hong Kong.

Domesticating transnational education in Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, TNE qualifications are known as 'non-local programmes' and the number of these on offer has grown substantially over the past decade. They are an integral part of the government's widening participation strategy: to increase considerably the number of young people participating in higher education *without* – crucially - expanding the number of places available at local universities (Hong Kong has eight domestic universities, which admit, as noted above, roughly 18% of secondary school graduates). TNE programmes have coincided with the growth and expansion of community colleges in Hong Kong (Cribbin, 2002, 2008; Lee and Young, 2003). The spatiality of the delivery of TNE is important - community colleges are often physically attached to domestic universities (their

administrative buildings are ‘on campus’), and yet they maintain an essential symbolic distance from them. They are known by a variety of acronyms - SCOPE (School of Continuing and Professional Education) at City University, SPACE (School of Professional and Continuing Education) at the University of Hong Kong and SPEED (School of Professional Education and Executive Development) at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University or ‘PolyU’. Significantly, however, community colleges in Hong Kong do not have degree awarding powers. It is only in collaboration with other institutions (such as foreign university providers) that degree qualifications may be awarded. Enrolling on a course provided by the continuing education arm of a local HEI is the nearest the majority of young people locally will get to ‘attending’ a domestic university, and for some, this is good enough. However, the teaching on TNE programmes often happens off-campus, at downtown sites (for part-time students with jobs, there is a practical access element to this), much to the despondency of students coveting a ‘real’ university experience. Some of these issues will be addressed, in more detail, in the empirical discussion below.

Through the growth and expansion of continuing education colleges and the introduction of a new qualification – the Associate Degree (AD) - the government of Hong Kong has been successful in its aim to provide higher education places for over 60% of secondary school graduates (Kember, 2010). Lee and Young (2003) provide a relatively benign interpretation of the government’s decision to introduce the new qualification:

> ‘Despite occasional criticisms from the media [...] there is no doubt that an increasing number of young school leavers are benefiting from this new endeavour [i.e. the expansion of community colleges and the introduction of the Associate Degree]. If not for this new development, most of them would have to spend their energy in repeating their F5 or F7 studies (and often not for once) or would be forced to seek

> employment in the job market. With an unemployment rate of over 7%, many of them would join the ranks of the unwaged, with all that it entails in Hong Kong (loss of confidence, drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, etc.). With the new AD programme, they are learning something useful and are growing up to become more mature, responsible citizens' (pp. 156 – 157).

However, the articulation rate – the ability to use an AD qualification to secure a place on a domestic university course - remains extremely low, and this has led to criticism, by the media, that the government has mislead young people (Kember, 2010) (there has been a widespread assumption that an AD was a stepping stone to a full degree locally). Many students graduating with an AD have been forced to seek a place on a course provided by an overseas university (Lee and Young, 2003). Here they are able to acquire bachelor-level qualifications by 'topping-up' a Higher Diploma or Associate Degree to degree-level in 1 – 2 years. This is the meaning of a top-up degree.

A complex relationship exists between national, international and transnational higher education in Hong Kong. Whilst our research has clearly showed that a domestic university place is the preferred option for the vast majority of young people, thousands of individuals continue to leave (for the UK, US, Canada and Australia) for study every year, which is a financially costly pursuit. Many of these travel overseas to escape the competitive educational environment at home, whilst some do so in order to acquire more valuable cultural capital in the 'West' (Ong, 1999; Waters, 2006). A *South China Morning Post* (2014) report noted a 'surge' in applications from Hong Kong to the UK, which it attributed to middle-class 'uncertainty' around educational reforms passed in 2012 (when a new Diploma of Secondary Education replaced the old HKCEE and HKALE). A main change, as a consequence of this reform, is that local undergraduate degrees now take four years to

complete, instead of three, making the difference between these and TNE qualifications (which can be completed in one – two years full time) even more stark.

British universities have a peculiar contribution to make in this emergent educational landscape (most certainly a legacy of colonial rule). There are around 587 degree courses run by 36 different UK HEIs in Hong Kong, chiefly at undergraduate (representing the majority of such programmes) and masters levels. A range of subject areas is on offer, although courses in business and finance tend to be over-represented (and humanities subjects almost non-existent). The UK has by far the largest share of the market when it comes to TNE within the territory; 80% of TNE offered in conjunction with a local HEI (delivered through the continuing education arm of a local university) is British in origin (Australia is the next biggest provider with only a 12% share in the market) (Hong Kong Education Bureau, 2015). Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data have shown that the number of students on these programmes are not insignificant; at the time of their survey there were 28,385 individuals studying for a British degree programme (over 24,000 at 'first degree' or 'top-up' level) in Hong Kong (HESA, 2015). Compare this to the 80,914 young people studying for a first degree at one of Hong Kong's domestic universities (Hong Kong Education Bureau, 2015) and the meagre 4,500 who actually travel to the UK to study: British HEIs are having a substantive local impact upon the domestic HE landscape.

As mentioned earlier, the growth of TNE in the territory over the past two decades could conceivably be understood as part of the development of a regional education hub (Knight, 2011). Unlike Singapore (Olds, 2007), however, which has actively promoted itself as a place for international HEIs and students from the wider region to coalesce, Hong Kong's stance on this issue has been far more ambivalent (Forestier, 2013; Postiglione, 2008). We observed that the presence of British universities and their association with domestic HEIs is not openly celebrated, nor is it treated as a potential way of attracting more

international students in. On the contrary, UK universities seem to have entered the Hong Kong education system almost by stealth, making the domestication argument (the way in which they have been co-opted into the local system) even more compelling.

Overview of research methods

In Hong Kong, we wanted to ascertain the meanings (broadly conceived) attached to and constitutive of transnational education in this particular geographical context. This included understanding how transnational education operates alongside and within domestic forms of education and how, therefore, it may or may not contribute to the circulation of discourses around educational meritocracy and the creation of different 'types' of young people, through biopolitical processes of governing, as a result. Consequently, we undertook in-depth interviews with 70 young people with direct experience of British transnational qualifications. We sought to represent the whole range of qualifications offered by British universities, and our sample therefore comprised: 36 'top-up' (i.e. undergraduate) degrees; 22 Master degrees; 2 PhDs; 2 Bachelor of Law degrees (LLB); 10 certificates (i.e. conversion to LLB); and 1 diploma. In total, we examined 73 different tertiary-level programmes (3 individuals had studied more than one programme). Out of 70 interviewees, 27 were male and 43 were female, 32 were graduates and 38 were current students. The median age of the sample was 27 for graduates and 24 for students. The majority of interviewees were studying/had studied for a degree attached to (the continuing education arm of) a local university; a smaller number were studying/had studied at a quasi-government body (such as an institute of the Vocational Training Council). We achieved a good spread of universities in our sample –15 different UK HEIs and 5 Hong Kong domestic educational institutions are

represented. Most of these interviews were conducted in Cantonese and then subsequently translated into English and were double-checked for accuracy.

In addition to our student/graduate participants, 18 UK university ‘providers’ were interviewed, representing 16 different UK HEIs (pre- and post-1992). Most were involved with teaching on, and the administration of, these programmes. With the exception of one interview (in Hong Kong), all were conducted in the UK and in English. Three individuals, employed by local universities in Hong Kong but involved in the administration of UK TNE programmes, were also interviewed in depth. Finally, a small number (9) of employers in Hong Kong were interviewed. Our findings have been supplemented by information provided by the British Council in Hong Kong.

The interviewees we discuss in this paper were those that had undertaken - or were in the process of taking – a UK top-up (undergraduate) degree in Hong Kong. They had all failed to achieve a place at a local university directly, but all felt that to have a degree was ‘essential’ and without it, they would be destined to ‘clean toilets’ (as one research participant explained it). Having a top-up degree (topping up an Associate Degree or Higher Diploma) would allow them eventually to apply for graduate jobs, even if they got no further than the application stage. It was seen as a providing a potential ‘foot in the door’ (another phrase we heard on several occasions). This sub-set of our sample was not wealthy and most came from families with no history of higher education. Going abroad for education was certainly not an option for them. Many worked part-time to support their own further study (as elaborated below).

The creation of value and self-worth through (transnational) higher education

Without a doubt, some notion of 'education' is central to students' sense of self – their experience of the education system to date has shaped their identities in fundamental ways (Jeffrey, Jeffery and Jeffery, 2008). Amongst our sample, there are many examples of the ways in which individuals have internalised and accepted responsibility for their own 'failure' in public examinations, with no recourse to larger structures of inequality or injustice attributed to an unfair system. When asked about the growth of British TNE in the territory, students/graduates gave variants of the following answers:

> 'These programmes [are] for the bunch of people who did not perform too well in HKCEE [an examination taken at the age of 15], or their results might not take them to [a] local university directly... When I finished my form 5 – repeated form 5 – the HKCEE result was not too good. I wanted to continue to study, but the results were not good enough to continue to study at sixth form and A level, so I considered a Higher Diploma...The ultimate goal was to complete a degree...I knew that when I finished that programme [the Higher Diploma] I would be eligible to study a top-up programme' *(Peter Chan, age 27, attained a Higher Diploma and then completed a British degree in 1.5 years in Hong Kong. He now works repairing photocopying machines).*

> 'My results did not meet the local universities' requirements. Therefore, all I could choose was to study a top-up degree or to work.'*(Tom Tai, aged 23, completed an Associate Degree and then a UK BA attached to HKU SPACE. He now works in a bank as a teller).*

Indeed, everyone within our sample who had undertaken a top-up degree, had done so because they'd failed to achieve sufficiently high marks in either the HKCEE or HKAL, thus preventing them gaining entry into a local university directly. They openly acknowledged their failure, and blamed no one but themselves. Many simply claimed they had been too lazy (laziness was a commonly invoked trope); a handful remarked that they were not intelligent enough to succeed. Few, however, questioned the basis on which these value judgements were being made – most bought into the idea that the education system in Hong Kong was largely meritocratic in nature and to fail was one's own fault. The testing system was 'fair' and the 'best' people were rewarded as a result. The general uniformity in responses that we encountered during this research was striking, and indicative of the successful way in which ideas around educational meritocracy were being deployed by the state. This is not unlike the situation described by Cheng (2015b) for Singapore, Woronov (2016) and Kipnis (2011) for Mainland China, and Seth (2002) for South Korea, all places pronounced to be 'exam-driven' cultures. The implications of the persistence of these discourses for the young people who fail, however, in terms of self-worth and social worth, were profound.

Failure and the impact on the sense of self-worth

Some of our sample had what could be called low self-esteem, tied, in their accounts, to their experience of failure in the Hong Kong education system. This sense of low self-worth was neither alleviated nor attenuated, however, by the possibility of acquiring 'a degree' through the opportunity afforded by TNE programmes, as we might have assumed. On the contrary, this sense of 'lacking' was ironically *compounded* by their experiences of TNE. This was particularly acute for those individuals studying through the continuing education arms of local universities, where their contrasting status (*vis-à-vis* local university students) was marked. In particular, TNE students experienced different treatment from

‘local’ students, despite the absence of fee differentials. Our research participants described how they suffered so-called ‘reduced privileges’, including restricted access, (*vis-a-vis* local students) to: computing/library facilities; halls of residence; sports facilities; social activities; overseas exchanges; and work experience/internships. They often described themselves as ‘second-class citizens’ and were spatially segregated from local university students (see Waters and Leung, 2013b). Peter Chan (aged 27, completed a Higher Diploma followed by a UK top-up degree) described this in the following way: ‘local students would borrow 10 books from the library, but we could only borrow 5 books; local students could borrow for 20 days, we could only borrow for 10 days...The resources they gave us were obviously less than the local degree students...’

TNE students were disadvantaged in other ways too, reflecting a disjuncture between the education that they appeared to be getting (on paper) and what their qualifications actually meant in practice. On paper, they receive a degree qualification for a programme taught and examined in English and delivered by British university staff, and conferred by the British HEI. In practice, most students have very poor English skills, and the majority of the teaching on the course takes place in Cantonese, delivered by local staff on temporary contracts. Several graduates reported having to field questions from prospective employers about why their English was ‘so bad’, given the fact that they were in possession of a British degree qualification. This would inevitably raise questions about the validity of their claims, and even their personal integrity. Relatedly, there was often an assumption made by employers and even family and friends that their degree qualification had involved some international mobility. In fact, most of the students/graduates we interviewed had never set foot in the UK, let alone spent some sizable time there. This creates an even sharper distinction between those students who are able to travel overseas for HE and those who are not. This discrepancy – between domestic university degrees, overseas university degrees and

TNE – reflects both the way in which international education is being domesticated and the way in which it is being *spatially fragmented* along class lines (see Waters, 2012).

The denigration of the self is worse for current students and *recent* graduates: one important observation is that the pathologisation of failure can and does seem to diminish as one attains some distance from the education system. George Lam here describes the attenuating effects of the passing of time:

> ‘At the very beginning, I used to label myself as the inferior who studies for a top-up degree instead of graduating from a local university. Your degree was merely an exchange of money. I had a very strong feeling like this, at that time...However, after these years of working, that kind of feeling has faded, gradually. Also the same regarding my self-esteem. I found working experiences to be worth more than that. The learning process actually starts only when you started working...Then, you’ll soon discover that the degree is not very important.’ *(George Lam, age 23, completed an Associate Degree and then a British top-up degree in two years. He now works as a programmer for a large corporation).*

The ‘self-labelling’ that George describes was common throughout our sample. Individuals adhere to (and help reinforce) top-down notions that the education system is ‘fair’ and labels are justified (the kind of self-regulation that is key to operative biopolitics – Legg, 2005). In this way, populations of young people are controlled, just as their fates are sealed. However, George also observes that over time, experiences at work can replace education as a marker of distinction and arbiter of self-worth, even in ‘exam-obsessed’ contexts. The discursive power of educational meritocracy to produce certain subject positionings is not necessarily total (and forever). However, it should also be noted that the work-related outcomes for our

graduate sample in possession of a top-up degree were mixed. Very few had found work in either the international and cosmopolitan financial services industry (the career of choice for internationally mobile Hong Kongers, see Waters, 2008) or in the civil service (a very desirable career path for less privileged, more locally-oriented individuals). These finding are supported by a recent survey on the employment outcomes for TNE graduates in Singapore (Sharma, 2016).

Failure, transnational qualifications and social worth

It was apparent, from our sample, that for some individuals a TNE qualification was 'better than nothing', whilst for others, the lack of social recognition granted to TNE was dispiriting and sometimes detrimental. Many in our sample did not have the financial or moral support of their parents and wider family, who viewed them as failures. The majority of young people we interviewed worked part-time to fund their TNE study; very few had their fees paid for by kin. Monica here gives some indication of the distain with which her qualifications are perceived, even by her closest relatives:

> 'Somebody aged 50 plus, like our parents, they do not recognise these are degrees. They would only think local universities are real degrees…What they thought is that we should go through the 'traditional' process – HKCEE, A level and then get into a local university, then it would be recognised. Even now, my parents do not think that I have completed a degree course…In their eyes it's not a degree…My parents thought I lied to them about studying a degree.' *(Monica Shaw, aged 25, successfully completed a one year British degree course in international business and management in 2008).*

This absence of social and institutional recognition was reinforced through the actions and attitudes of local administrators on TNE programmes. During one provider interview, we asked an employee of a local Hong Kong university about students' experiences of reduced privileges:

> *JW:* 'What is the reason for the reduced privileges of students on top-up degrees, if it is not a fee thing...?'
>
> 'It is not a fee thing. It is who they are! They are not university students! They are not enrolled in university. So you can't change it. But we actually feel that they don't get a bad deal' *(Lilly Ho, head administrator for 42 UK top-up degrees at the continuing education arm of a local (Hong Kong) HEI)*

The language deployed by Lilly Ho is instructive. Individuals on TNE programmes have assumed, and been *consumed by*, failure ('it's who they are'). They are 'not university students' – in other words, they have failed to acquire a place on a local degree programme. The fact that they will be graduating with a degree from a British university *identical* to one conferred to a British student in the UK (in fact, it is a Hong Kong government requirement that TNE programmes *must* be offered at the same time in the UK and Hong Kong), is irrelevant in this local context, and indicates a larger point about domestication – that local context is fundamental to how international credentials are received (and valued). Peter Chan (*aged 27, completed a Higher Diploma followed by a UK top-up degree*) made an almost identical point in his interview. He said:

> 'For some civil service jobs, they need you to hold a degree. Then, they would not treat you as a degree holder. They would treat it as the previous study before your top-up degree. So, in my case it would be a Higher Diploma...So, if I was going to apply for government jobs, I could only use my Higher Diploma. I could not use my degree identity to apply.'

His degree identity is fluid and contextual and not universally acknowledged. These instances, taken from our data, exemplify the devaluation of TNE credentials within the local educational system in Hong Kong. Moreover, the Hong Kong government does not automatically recognise non-local degrees as degrees, and TNE graduates can only apply for (desirable) civil service jobs, where a degree is a requirement, if they pay a fee to have their qualifications 'independently assessed' by the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKQAAVQ). Graduates that we know of that have taken this route, have had their UK degrees devastatingly pronounced as equivalent to a Hong Kong High Diploma. George Law below describes how he and others deal with this lack of recognition:

> 'The organisers would not declare [that the government does not recognise top-up degrees], but people know that….Actually, many students intend to take another Masters programme in a local university after studying the top-up program, because we want to "wash file" [eliminate from record] our top-up degree qualification. However, the sad thing is that people in Hong Kong treasure and value the first degree most. So, I [would have] preferred to take a local degree instead of a top-up one.' *(George Law, aged 26, graduated with a British 'top-up' degree in 2005 in Hong Kong).*

In fact, and contrary to what this individual here implies, it is extremely difficult (almost impossible) for graduates of TNE programmes to secure a place on a domestic university Masters programme because, just like the government, local universities do not generally recognise non-local degree programmes as 'degrees'.

Counter-narratives to meritocratic failure: everyday practices

In his analysis of privately educated college students in Singapore, Cheng (2015b) has sought to demonstrate 'how students can 'act differently' from the dominant image of a calculative and strategic competitor in education' (p. 2), thereby revealing 'a more delicate picture of neoliberal marketisation and its effects on educational spaces and subjects' (p. 13). His account offers a distinct challenge to biopolitical renderings of the Singaporean state and the emplacement of young people within neoliberal discourses (Cheng, 2015b, see also Cheng, 2016). Indeed, one of the critiques of Foucault's theorisation of the role that education plays in society is the lack of room he gives to alternative, subjugated realities. Here, de Certeau's (1984) discussion of 'the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and make-shift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of 'discipline'' (pp. xiv – xv) is evidently apposite. In relation to our data, it was clear that whilst the vast majority of young people internalised notions of meritocracy and objective, abject failure and reproduced, through their personal narratives, related discourses, not all did. There were a few intriguing examples where interviewees *refused* to embrace *the narrative of their failure* in a meritocratic system. Although this was very much a minority view, it is useful to consider alternatives to prevailing discourses, when they *do* occur (see also Kraftl, 2015, on 'alter-childhoods' in the UK) – how those ostensibly excluded from

mainstream characterisations of a successful young person may be seen to offer up some form of resistance (Agamben, 1998) – a 'biopolitics from below' (Anderson, 2012).

Joseph Chan, aged 19, was almost at the end of a one-year top-up degree. He was unusual, he said, amongst his cohort in school – most of his friends 'became degree students'. 'I was the only one, should I say, that was unlucky?' His reference to luck in explaining his circumstances reveals a rejection of a pervasive tendency to embody failure and embrace the notion of meritocracy. He refuses, also, to 'confess', when asked, that he is doing a top-up degree, as that would be 'to look down upon myself' in a way that is unjustified.

> 'If people ask me whether I am going to be a graduate this year, or about my studies, or the university I studied at, I am going to tell them I studied at XX [a local university] for the degree in XX. I would not stress that my degree was a top-up degree and the university granting this degree is YY [UK university]. Neither would I tell them that I was not an official student of the XX...I would not choose to spell out all the facts because it might sound a little bit odd – like I was looking down on myself'.

Joseph was also unusually insightful about the process of neoliberalisation within Hong Kong; specifically, the influence of mercenary concerns on the expansion of TNE:

> 'nowadays the government is generalizing [democratising] tertiary education. You have to admit that these top-up degrees are operating like a business. They have to earn money. The local government subsidised universities also need to raise funds. The society trend is like this. Education is becoming more business-like.'

Not all young people embraced, uncritically, a neoliberal, biopolitical notion of value (as seen, for example, in Anagnost's (2004) discussion of *suzhi*). The devaluation, by employers, of top-up degrees was a bone of contention for Joseph. He said: 'if the employers decide to hire you only because of your educational background, the company is really simple-minded.' Whilst suggestive of an alternative politics, Joseph's self-assurance was nevertheless exceptional amongst our sample of students and graduates.

Another graduate, Peter Chan, also provided a critical account of the government's strategy vis-a-vis TNE and continuing education in Hong Kong. To paraphrase his response, he told us that the government encourages young people to keep studying through its stance on 'continuing education', despite the fact that they:

> 'don't recognise you as degree graduates. Very strange!...So they encourage you to continue to study, which delays your entry into the job market, so it seems the unemployment rate [has] improved. Also, it increases the number of degree holders overall in the market...They do not recognise you as civil servants, but they can use the figure for their purpose of 'what is the proportion of Hong Kong people who are degree holders...The overall numbers look better, making the quality of the people in Hong Kong look better. It may indirectly attract foreign investors, because this city's people are well educated.'

Inadvertently, Peter here offers some useful reflections upon the role that education (and specifically transnational education) is playing in biopolitics, and how this interacts with a neoliberal agenda, within Hong Kong. The government are directly concerned with the 'quality of the people' and how this quality is externally perceived. The more 'educated' the

population is seen to be, the greater the prospects for foreign investment. All the time, they are able to preserve the value of a domestic degree, by maintaining its exclusivity.

Conclusions: integrating understandings of domestic and international education

In Hong Kong but also in other East and Southeast Asian countries, there exists a powerful ideological commitment to the mantra of (educational) meritocracy. Formal, public examinations, which serve to rank, categorise and label young people, are a key technology deployed in support of this ideology, which is usefully conceptualised in terms of 'biopower' (Foucault, 1977; Skeggs, 2004; Cheng, 2015b). Discourses relating to exam success (which is seen to hinge on personal effort and commitment) are rife: the education system is generally viewed as fair and failure is 'pathologized' (Woronov, 2016). Young people who fail in the education system consequently have little or no social worth, and are seen as morally as well as personally flawed. This paper has considered the role that TNE – specifically TNE offered by British HEIs – is playing in this context, in Hong Kong.

TNE indicates some of the ways in which the spatialities of contemporary education are changing in response to internationalisation. In Hong Kong, as elsewhere in parts of Asia, transnational education is becoming domesticated. This domestication means, in short, that international qualifications have become an indistinguishable feature of the local education system – they bolster and support this system and enable it (and the discourse of meritocracy that it underpins) to persist. By supporting locally embedded notions of educational meritocracy, there are more than simply pedagogical issues at stake. TNE is complicit in a broader, biopolitical project of *governing,* involving the measurement, classification and demarcation of young people as either 'successful' or 'failures', with potentially life-defining consequences.

Over the past two decades, the government in Hong Kong has attempted to expand access to higher education (HE) in the territory, without conterminously expanding access to its domestic universities. Local universities are notoriously difficult to get into (around 18% of school leavers are able to access one), and limiting the number of places in this way serves

to preserve the value of the institutional cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) they impart. However, the government also wishes to preside over an 'educated' workforce (the notion of a 'knowledge economy' carries some weight) and has had to look elsewhere for the provision of HE to its young people. They have introduced and expanded continuing education (CE) colleges, but these lack degree awarding powers. Into this gap in provision has stepped the UK – British universities, frequently operating through the CE arms of domestic universities, are providing local students who have failed to enter university directly the opportunity to 'top-up' their Higher Diploma or Associate Degree to a degree qualification, over 1 – 2 years. British universities have enabled young people previously excluded from local HE the opportunity to study for a degree. As we have discussed here, however, in reality this opportunity does little to attenuate feelings of failure and, in fact, students' experiences on TNE programmes actually serve to reinforce the idea that they are socially and morally inferior. In short, these failures in the Hong Kong education system remain, for many years, 'failures'. They suffer from a lack of social and economic recognition and have internalised and accepted responsibility for their circumstances. The system is meritocratic, most have told us, and they have either been too lazy or stupid to get over the line. And yet, in this paper we were also able to uncover some intriguing examples of the emergence of alternative discourses or counter-narratives – a biopolitics from below (Anderson, 2012; Cheng, 2015a). These individuals proffered a critique of the system – what Pykett (2010) in her discussion of the 'pedagogical state' calls 'the reflexive and sceptical ways in which citizens act, re-act and co-construct the cultural practices of governing' (p. 617; see also Cheng, 2015b). de Certeau's (1984) work on everyday practices offered here a useful alternative perspective on 'biopolitics', reminding us that discipline is never total and, as we noted, forever. We are reminded, here, of a wider emergent politics amongst young people in Hong Kong, reflecting changing youth identities and a politicisation of youth culture (of which the recent student

protests and elections to the legislative council are exemplars – see Phillips and Cheung, 2016).

A further aim of this paper has been to expose some of the new spatialities of education as a consequence of internationalisation. The impact of internationalisation on education systems around the world is undoubtedly profound and yet extremely poorly understood. There is a growing literature on international students and student mobilities, but relatively little on those students who do not move, and yet nevertheless are wholly implicated in the internationalisation of education. We have also sought to contribute to wider debates on the social experiences of and outcomes for so-called 'unexceptional' young people (e.g. Jeffrey, Jeffery and Jeffery, 2008, McDowell, 2012). We have touched upon the ways in which TNE is indicative of neoliberal imperatives faced by HEIs around the world. We have not been able, in this paper, to discuss TNE from the perspective of the UK providers, including the economic concerns underpinning its expansion. Some other important issues have not been addressed, including the tendency of UK HEIs to display a lack of awareness of, and concern, for graduates of their TNE programmes, invoking debates in the extant literature around postcolonial responsibility and international education (Madge et al., 2009). We endeavour to address these issues elsewhere (Leung and Waters, in review). Our more substantive claim concerns the insights here rendered about the relationship between education and society. We call for a more *expansive* definition of international education (one which includes TNE) that takes account of a deep interrelation with domestic education systems and, consequently, modes of governing and the reproduction of citizenry. We need to recognise the role that international education is playing in fortifying local systems of hierarchizing and classifying individuals (perhaps for life, but probably just for a while).

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