Geographies of education: cross-border schooling between Shenzhen and Hong Kong

Johanna Waters (UCL) & Maggi Leung (Utrecht University)

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Abstract

In the context of increasing disciplinary interest in 'geographies of education', this paper looks at the particular phenomenon of 'cross-border schooling' (CBS), wherein children are involved in daily boundary crossing for education and engage in a (usually) arduous commute. Here, we draw upon a recent research project involving CBS at the Shenzhen-Hong Kong border. We consider three aspects of this border-crossing that were significant in our project's findings: the materialities of the border, the importance of routine (and rhythm) and the daily experience of tiredness and relentless exhaustion. The paper highlights the themes of 'Changing Places' (especially how they are known and experienced) and 'Globalisation'.

Introduction

Every week day, an estimated 30,000 children and young people cross the border between Shenzhen (People's Republic of China) and Hong Kong to attend nursery and school. At the end of the day, the children return, crossing the border once again (see Figure 1). The trip can take up to 4 hours per day and most have done this 'commute' since they were three years old. Cross border schooling happens over the boundaries of many countries around the world, such as Mexico and the US, Malaysia and Singapore and France and Switzerland. It is a

feature of contemporary *globalisation*. This type of commute is one version of the kinds of mobilities and migrations that children and young people undertake for education around the world. This is the focus of our paper.

Figure 1 here.

Figure 1: the Hong Kong - People's Republic of China (PRC) border.

There are a number of reasons why children are crossing the border between Shenzhen and Hong Kong in this way. The first is that, despite living in Mainland China to Mainland-resident parents, they were born in Hong Kong (pregnant woman crossed over the border to give birth to a second child as a way of by-passing China's then 'one-child' policy). Until recently, Mainland China had rules on who could attend state-funded schools in the country. It was not possible to attend state school in China if you were born in Hong Kong because you lacked 'hukou' – a means of identifying individuals as part of a household registration system the PRC uses to adjudicate various 'rights' (to work, access health care and schools, and so on). Second, many families in the PRC claim that Hong Kong's schooling system is 'superior' and that, by attending school there, their child is receiving a 'better' education, with more possibilities for international mobility in the future (for example, for higher education). The children who were born in one place and go to school elsewhere is an example of *changing places* - and illustrates how different places are known and experienced as well as the factors that contribute to the character of places. In this paper, we report on a recent project we have undertaken on cross-border or cross-boundary schooling. The follow

observation is taken from our fieldnotes, and gives a sense of the appearance of cross-border schooling (CBS):

> *'As we approach the Hong Kong-Shenzhen border, we are overwhelmed by the sight of dozens of school children moving towards us in crocodilian fashion, wearing matching uniforms and tags around their necks. They are moving, as they do every day, over the border from Mainland China to Hong Kong, to attend school. Twenty years ago, such mobility was rare – the few children that did this were exceptional. Today it is more like mobility on an industrial scale, involving highly choreographed movements and the necessity for docile bodies' [Taken from fieldnotes, June 2018].*

Our project has involved, amongst other things, in-depth interviews and ethnography with 12 families living in Mainland China and undertaking (or having recently undertaken) CBS in Hong Kong (parents and children). We have also conducted observations at various ports in Hong Kong during commuting hours (when our photographs, below, were taken) and have interviewed teachers and border officials.

Children's mobilities for education

It is apparent that children and young people are increasingly moving across state boundaries in order to access educational opportunities. A lot of the literature has been focused on university students, classified, globally, as international students (Brooks and Waters, 2011). Younger students tend to be missed by migration statistics because they often move with their parents as 'dependents' within a household and not under an independent visa category. The

wider literature would suggest that many children, at different global sites, have been socialised into accepting mobilities: into perceiving mobility for education as ‘normal’ and anticipated.

The literature documents some of the more ‘extreme’ examples of educational mobilities. For example, there are the transnational household formations labelled ‘wild geese’ or ‘kirogi families’, originating from South Korea. These have been defined as ‘families that are separated between two countries for the purpose of children’s education abroad’ (Lee and Koo 2006, 533; Kang and Abelmann 2011). For many years, in South Korea it was an expectation amongst middle-class households that children go overseas for schooling, usually at a young age (for primary education). Other research has considered the educational mobility of older children, termed ‘parachute’ or ‘satellite’ kids, found in North America, New Zealand and Australia (Waters 2002, 2003). In these households, the whole family emigrates, initially, overseas, before the parents return to East Asia to work. The reasons for migration, researchers have shown, are often multifaceted, but almost always encompass an overriding concern with children’s education (Kobayashi and Preston 2007; Waters 2002).

In some ways, CBS of the kind discussed in this paper seems less extreme, more mundane, less extraordinary. It doesn’t involve any long-distance migratory movement or the separation of parents and children for months at a time (Waters, 2003). And yet, in other ways, the grind of the daily commute typifies the extreme measures that some families would seem to go to, in order to secure the ‘best’ opportunities for their children. In this paper, we draw out both the extraordinary nature of CBS and emphasis is more banal elements.

In our project, we also explore the nature of the border crossed by CBS children. As can be seen in Figure 3, children experience a 'hard' border, by which we mean they undergo 'checks' and have to produce a proof of identity every time they cross. They cannot simply walk or ride across the border between Hong Kong and the PRC, despite the 'one country, two systems' policy. A more detailed account of the findings discussed in this paper can be found in Waters and Leung (2020).

Implications of border crossings for young people

There are three key themes we would like to highlight here in terms of what children, parents, teachers and officials told us about CBS and families' every-day lives. The first refers to the 'materialities' of travel; the second concerns 'routine' and the importance of routine in the practice of CBS. And the third issue, which all of our children and parents were keen to stress (and remarked about again and again) concerns their experience of tiredness and exhaustion. Such seemingly banal issues nevertheless frame large scale cross-border educational mobilities such as those described in this paper (between Hong Kong and Shenzhen).

Materialities of border crossing for school

The material nature of 'mobilities' (including mobilities for education) has been noted by Adey (2008) (see also Brooks and Waters, 2017). Various infrastructure accompanies mobilities, including such things as roads, vehicles, lights, walkways, runways and control towers. Boundaries, such as the Hong Kong-Shenzhen border, are places where mobilities, materialities and power converge (Burrell, 2008). The border is a place of 'control', where states coerce people to behave in particular, narrowly circumscribed ways. Control of people's spatial mobility is particularly stark at borders. In order to control large numbers of

children, the state has implemented new and designated ‘channels’ for CBS children, as described here by a border official:

> *‘Those CBS kids, they commute every day, putting a lot of pressure on and challenges to the port: the customs and border patrols. Normal visitors also feel the pressure. Because there are so many little kids [mixed] within the visitors, their safety is a big concern. The [Shenzhen] government asked the port to solve the problem. At that time, the port didn’t have the extra resources and staff to supervise the CBS kids. Moreover, kids are unlike normal adult visitors. Kids, you couldn’t beat or scold them, right? So the port tried to solve the problem by arranging a special channel for the kids.’ (Fieldwork interview with SX, government officer, Shenzhen customs, 2018).*

Other significant materialities include external ‘walkways’ (see Figure 2), the documents and ‘passes’ children carry in pouches around their necks and the scanners used by security guards and border officials.

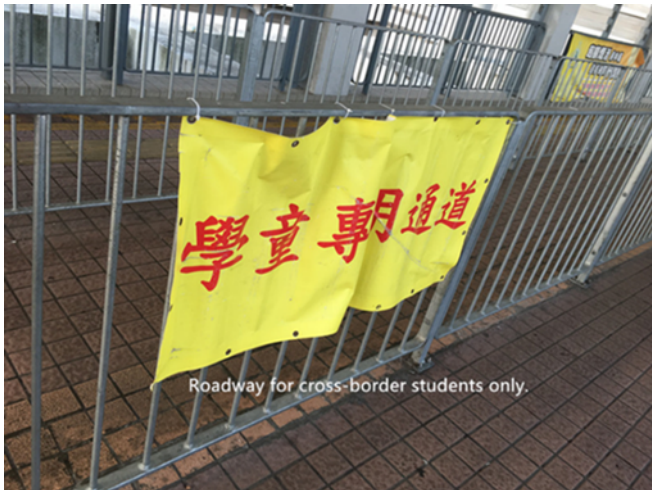

Figure 2: Designated external walkway for children. Source: authors.

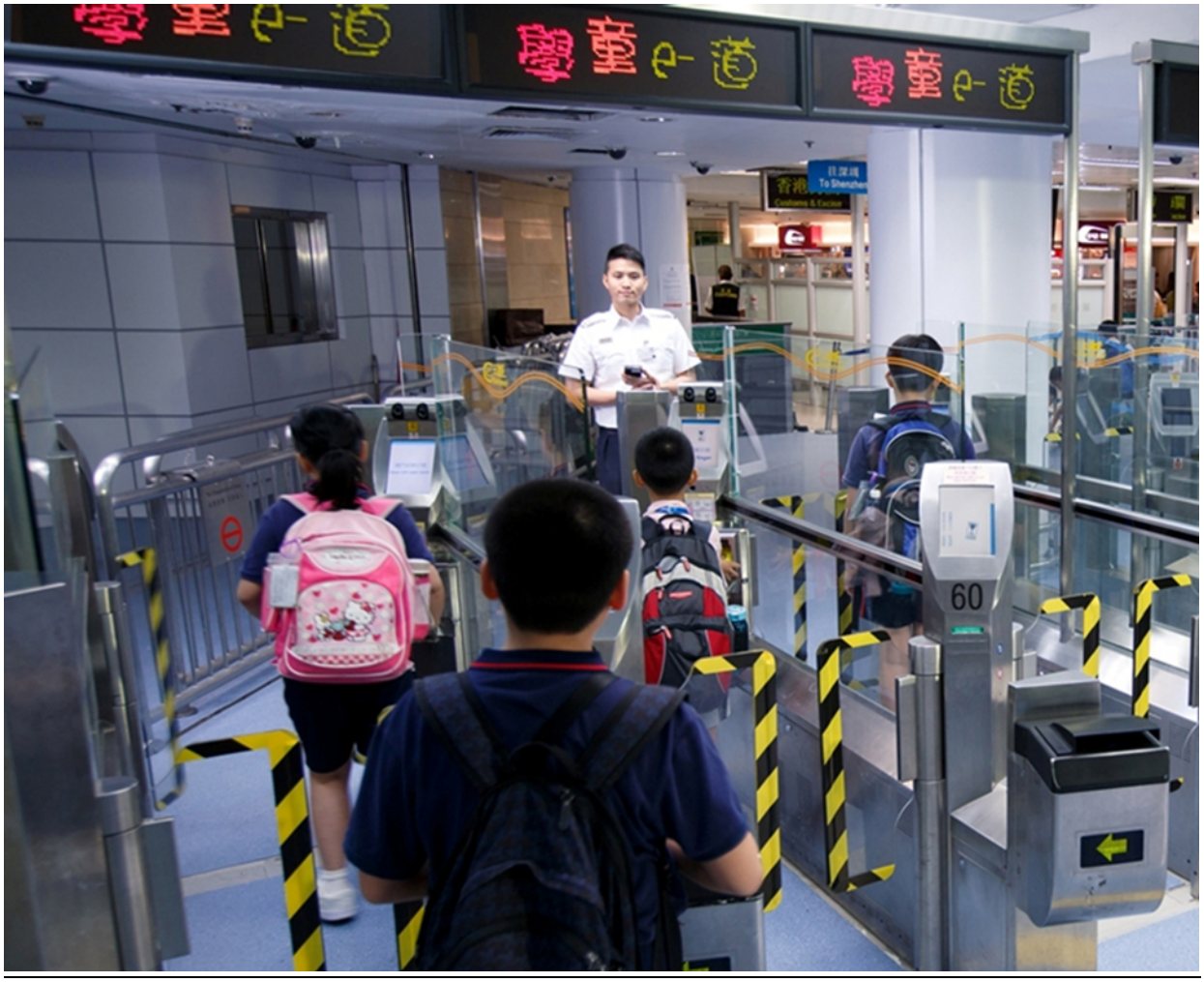

Figure 3: The border check point. Source: Hong Kong Government.

Figure 4: Children waiting in line at the port. Source: authors

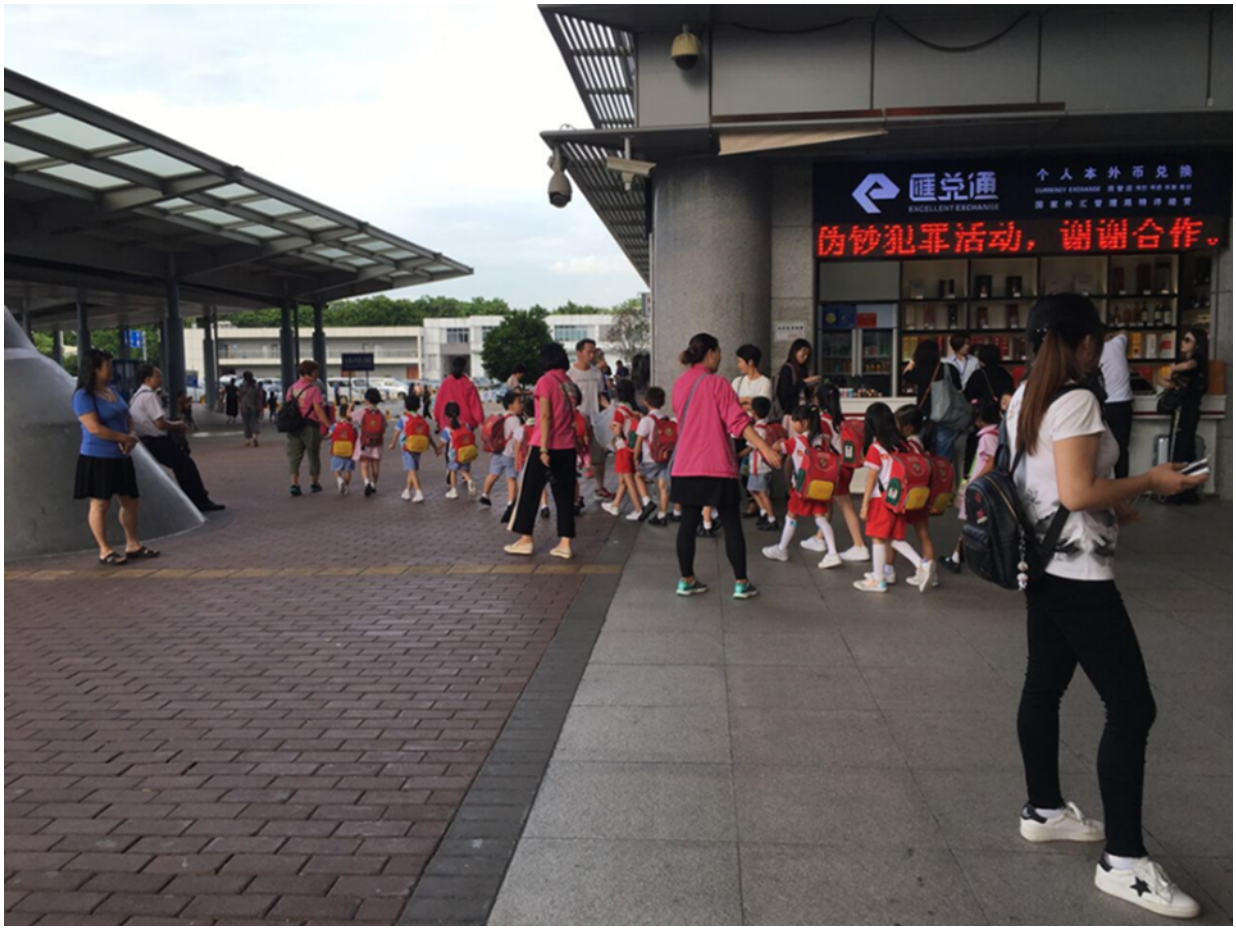

Figure 5: Nannies (in pink) leading the children to the school bus.

Routines and rhythms in CBS

Children's bodies move across the border, daily, according to particular rhythms, and the implementation of a routine is a crucial element of this. Geographers interested in rhythms often refer to Lefebvre's 'rhythmanalysis' (Edensor and Holloway, 2008; McCormack, 2002) to explore how our lives 'and the spaces we dwell in and move through are composed of a multitude of different rhythms, temporalities, pacings and measures' (Edensor and Holloway, 2008, p. 483). As mentioned above, the border is a place of state power, where 'power

attempts to order particular rhythms so they become habitual, embodied and thus difficult to knowingly contravene' (ibid., p. 483). The nannies (Figure 5) had a role in ensuring the habitual nature of children's obedience.

The term 'everyday' appears frequently in our interviews with parents and children, suggesting the extent to which CBS is routine and part of a daily rhythm. AL, aged 12, who had been commuting to school for six years said, matter-of-factly, 'we have got used to it'; and ZY, a mother whose 6-year-old has commuted for three years similarly said 'Yes, it [school in Hong Kong] is far away, but if you get used to it, it is OK.' DD, another mother who also has a 6-year old who has undertaken CBS for three years, told us: 'we have been like this for several years. We get used to it. At the beginning I was afraid of several difficulties – after all, the kids are so small. But now we have adapted to it. Just follow the nannies!' (see Figure 5). The following quote from a mother of a CBS child makes evident the importance of routine and rhythm to CBS:

> *YQ: I and my mother-in-law, we got up around 5.30am and 5.40am every day, making all the preparations. Usually my mother-in-law prepared breakfast. I helped my son get dressed when he still had his eyes closed, then dragged him to the washroom, brushing teeth etc. Sometimes he brushed teeth when peeing. Then he ate breakfast while my mother-in-law helped him wearing shoes and socks. I even bought an electric motorcar to save time. It usually took 1 – 2 minutes by electric motorcar from my home to the school assembly point. If I walk with him, it usually took 3 – 5 minutes.*

The routine is essential to CBS 'working' and precise timings are an important part of this. Being to shave two minutes off the commute, as YQ describes above, is considered significant. Several parents discussed dire emotional and practical consequences when buses were late or not running as planned.

Tiredness and exhaustion: everyday corporal experiences

In addition to the hard material infrastructure, ports are also 'affective space[s]' (Adey, 2008, p. X) where 'expressions of hope, fear, joy, sadness, and many others, as well as…mundane bodily motions…may not be as distanced from power and control as we expect'. CBS represents hope for the future – current hardship is tolerated for future benefits to the child. Children's fear when beginning CBS was also expressed. Other feelings and emotions were much more prominent in our interviews with parents and children, however. The most commonly expressed feeling was that of 'tiredness' whilst exhaustion, as an emotional state, was frequently implied.

Several of the families we talked to had 'given up' CBS because it was too tiring. This interview with a mother (YQ), captures these widely held feelings:

> *'The whole process was very tiring. My husband also understood that I am tired. Because he just got up early in the morning to send us to the port, he didn't send the kid to school in Hong Kong. But he realized how difficult it was for me and for the kid…. By the end of 2017, around November, the weather was cooler, it was harder for the child to get up, and it is more tiring for him. Once upon a time, my son said to*

the teacher by himself, he said, "I am too tired, I don't want to go to school, I was so tired that I want to drop out, I won't come tomorrow". Then, the teacher called me immediately. At that time, for some Fridays, he also went to interest [extra-curricular] classes in Hong Kong, it was like, every Friday, he got up around 6am, he finished all the classes around 4:45pm in the afternoon. I picked up him at school, then sent him to the tutoring centre in Hong Kong. Sometimes he was hungry, I will allow him have dinner first then go to tutoring classes. When we were back to port, it was around 8:00pm already. The child generally cannot get back home until 8:45pm, and he was particularly tired. A few times at the port, he lost his temper and cried.'

One sixteen-year-old we spoke to had been commuting for 10 years and described his experience of CBS during primary age:

'From primary one to primary four I took the cross-border bus. From primary four to now I cross the border by myself…[taking the bus] it was very tiring and difficult during primary one….Everyday I needed to take the bus around 6am in the morning, came back around 6pm in the evening. That was the hardest time, I think'.

He continued later: 'It was hard. Exhausting. I just wanted to have more sleep. Maybe my other classmates, they lived in Hong Kong, or nearby, they had more time to play around. I had to be in the bus'. He had to drink coffee in order to stay awake in school. Similarly, a conversation with a group of younger children (ages 6 – 11) raised the issue of sleep and tiredness:

Researcher: Do you think you get enough sleep every day?

A: Almost.

B: Sometimes tired. On Mondays, quite tired.

C: I am a little bit tired, every day.

To date, academic work on children's educational mobilities has tended to overlook its arduous nature – the fact that it is ***hard*** and particularly tiring. And yet, these feelings are a central and enduring feature of these children's lives.

Conclusions

A recent interest in 'geographies of education' has resulted in a range of fascinating scholarship, including work on the domestic and international mobilities of young people in the quest for 'education' (Brooks and Waters, 2011; Findlay et al. 2012; Beech, 2019; Finn and Holton, 2019). Less work has examined young children, whose mobilities frequently enlist several family members (including parents, siblings and often grandparents) and very few studies have explored children's *daily* cross-border travels for school (cf. Chee, 2017; Chan and Ngan, 2018; Chiu and Chow, 2018). This is what we explore in this paper, drawing on a recent research study on cross border schooling practices between Shenzhen (PRC) and Hong Kong. We draw out three particular elements of this large-scale daily movement of children (around 30,000 each day) – border materialities, the importance of routine and rhythm, and the importance of feelings of tiredness and exhaustion (which seemed to define CBS for most of our research participants).

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