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# **Student Migration and Polymedia: Mainland Chinese Students' Communication Media Use in Hong Kong**

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## **Abstract**

Drawing on qualitative data obtained from mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong, this research uses polymedia theory to analyse the social implications of media use and interpersonal communication by migrant students. It looks at how migrant students use media to communicate with family members and friends in mainland China compared with Hong Kong locals. When communicating with family and friends, their media usage is intense, close and emotion-oriented, forming a warm and supportive virtual network that provides familiarity, a sense of belonging and emotional attachment. In contrast, their media usage to communicate with Hong Kong locals is limited, functional and study-oriented, and although it becomes a platform for practical help, it also demonstrates deep contradictions and conflicts with members of the host society.

**Keywords: Student migration; polymedia; communication media; mainland Chinese students; Hong Kong**

## **Introduction**

Over the past two decades, student migration has become a global phenomenon. Migrant students are those who leave their places of origin to study in a country or an area where they do not hold citizenship or permanent residency (Samers 2010). The number of international students has increased from 1.3 million in 1990 to 4.5 million in 2012 (OECD 2010, 2014). Economically developed countries with better educational opportunities and resources, such as the US, UK, Canada and Australia, are the most common destinations for students, with the majority originating from Asian countries, such as China, India and South Korea. As the largest source country, China had sent over 3 million students abroad by 2013 (China Education Online 2014). In recent years, there have been numerous studies on student migration (e.g. Carlson 2013; Collins 2008; Collins et al. 2014; Li and Bray 2006, 2007; Waters 2008). The majority of these have focused on students' motives for migration, migration channels/mechanisms and adaptation/acculturation after migration. These studies concentrate primarily on 'the students as the object of study' (King and Raghuram 2013, 134). However, as King and Raghuram (2013) point out, migrant students have multiple identities and roles: they are at once students, family members and even citizens. To better understand student migration it is thus necessary to investigate this multiplicity and explore the multifaceted identities of migrant students, their diversified experiences and their complicated relationships with people in different social contexts.

Due to globalisation, migration no longer necessarily means a loss of connection to one's country of origin. The rapid development of transportation and increased penetration of information and communication technology (ICT) enable migrants to easily maintain networks and connections with their home country. In-depth studies on international migration (e.g. Castles de Haas, and Miller 2014; Dreby 2006; Madianou and Miller 2012) have demonstrated the important role that ICT plays in providing valuable information for

migrants, maintaining their cross-border connections and developing transnationalism. Although ICT usage is widely defined as using media and technologies for information searching and sharing, social contacts and relationship maintenance, work and study, and entertainment activities, most migration studies have focused on how migrants use communication media and technologies to maintain social connections and interpersonal relationships. Specifically, they have concentrated on how migrant workers use communication media to maintain their relationships with family members who have been left behind. In contrast to this rich research on migrant workers' media use, there has been little discussion on communication media use by migrant students, who are also intensive users (Collins 2009; Hjorth and Arnold 2012). To address this gap, this study examines communication media use by mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong, a destination that is both external and domestic for the students. It compares their communication practices with people from different societies.

### **Polymedia and Migration**

Communication media use has become an indispensable part of most migrants' lives. Migrants' geographic mobility results in their physical separation from family and friends, increasing the demand for long-distance communication. With the proliferation of low-cost communication technology, the use of communication media has become more frequent and extensive among migrants. This results in complex consequences, such as transnational social bonding and constructing hybrid identities across societies (e.g. Dreby 2006; Horst 2006; Kang 2009; Madianou and Miller 2012). To better understand the association between social relationships and media use, and its social implications for migrants, Madianou and Miller (2012, 2013, 170) proposed the theory of polymedia to argue that the proliferation and increased convergence of new media create an 'environment of communicative opportunities that functions as an "integrated structure" within which each individual medium is defined in

relational terms in the context of all other media.’ Rather than simply providing more communication options, polymedia enables the affordances of different media usages to be explored and negotiated by the users in terms of their emotions and relationships and for the social implications of different media to be interpreted in different contexts (Madianou and Miller 2012, 2013; Madianou 2014). By navigating various media and selecting one specific medium over another in a particular relation or context, users construct social meanings of their media use, manage their emotions and relationships, provide interpretations of the interplay between the social and the technological, and even create new social divisions and distinctions among and through media. Madianou and Miller (2012, 2013) emphasise the social, emotional and relational consequences of media use through their concept of polymedia. Applying it to migrant parents, they explain how Filipino and Caribbean transnational families maintain cross-border family bonds via communication media, and the social consequences of these transnational communications. For example, by using instantaneous telecommunication, migrant parents can participate in the daily lives of their left-behind children, perform their parental duties from a distance and maintain their role and position in the family, despite being physically absent (Madianou and Miller 2012, 2013). The question arises whether the same telecommunication occurs between parents and children in cross-border families where the children are the ones who migrate. Although Madianou and Miller (2013) note that some young migrants from Trinidad use polymedia to contact their parents and friends, migrant children’s media use should be further explored to compare nuanced differences in their use.

There has been a recent proliferation of academic discussion on young migrants and migrant students, in particular. While some scholars (Benson and Osbaldiston 2014) have noted quality of life or a different lifestyle as reasons why young people migrate, others (Collins et al. 2014; Knowles 2015; Olwig and Valentin 2015) cite education purposes as a main

motivating factor. They document the complexity of the student migration experience and explore the motives and aspirations of migrant students, their multiple identities in different places and relations, and the opportunities, obstacles, and struggles they may encounter in the migration process. Despite significant findings, discussion on the intersection of student migration and communication media is nascent in the existing literature. There are few studies that examine the role of communication media in students' migration and their post-migration lives. For example, Collins (2009) argued that while the imagined online communities constructed by Korean migrant students in New Zealand through Internet communication offered them a meaningful space for attachment and a sense of belonging, they also functioned as virtual panopticons. Hjorth and Arnold (2012) furthermore discovered that Chinese students who had mainly migrated from economically less-developed regions to Shanghai used QQ to maintain their kinship ties with their hometowns and alleviate their feelings of loneliness in the new host city. These pioneering studies reveal the complicated role that communication media plays in the lives of migrant students and the need for further investigation. Moreover, the existing literature on the interplay between migration and media has mainly focused on how migrants adopt communication media to maintain long-distance relationships with those at home. Little attention has been paid to their media usage in making new connections with people in the host society and there are even fewer studies looking at how migrants use media to communicate with those at home compared to in their host society.

To address these gaps, this research draws on qualitative data obtained from mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong to compare their communication media usage with families and friends at home and with Hong Kong locals. Using polymedia theory, it reveals that a polymedia environment enables migrant students to navigate various media, and grant differentiated implications to their media usage in different relations and social contexts. On

the one hand, when using communication media with their parents and friends in mainland China, the experience is intense, close and emotion-oriented, and consists of a warm and supportive virtual network providing familiarity, a sense of belonging and emotional attachment. On the other hand, when communicating with Hong Kong locals, their media usage is limited, functional and study-oriented: it becomes a platform offering practical help, but also reveals deep contradictions and conflicts with members of the host society. These findings contribute to existing literature on communication media and student migration, and add to theoretical discussions and the empirical application of polymedia theory to a specific group, migrant students.

### **Mainland Chinese Students Migrating to Hong Kong**

International student migration is often regarded as the result of economic globalisation, with the internationalisation and industrialisation of higher education at the macro level, and the pursuit of better education resources and related economic, social and cultural capital by students at the micro level (Li and Bray 2007; Xiang and Shen 2009; Waters 2008). Closely related to rapid economic reform and corresponding social transformations, China is emerging as the largest source country of international students. In post-reform China, education regained its status as the post-Mao government revived the emphasis on credentialed cultural capital (Kipnis 2011). In a fiercely competitive market, education also grants valuable human and cultural capital, which can be converted into economic and political capital, and facilitate upward social mobility (Fong 2011; Xiang and Shen 2009). As a result of the implementation of China's one-child policy in 1979, most urban children born after the economic reform are in single-child families. With the hopes of the whole family consequently focused on urban singleton children, they are expected to be winners and are socialised to aspire to upward social mobility, often achieved by educational success (Fong 2004). The expansion of higher education in post-reform China grants these children more

opportunities for further study, yet it also results in the inflation of credentials by Chinese universities (Fong 2011). The devaluation of domestic university degrees, along with the globalisation and commercialisation of higher education in more economically developed societies, leads ambitious parents from newly rich families in mainland China to believe that overseas credentials will provide extra advantages for their children in a fierce and competitive job market, in turn granting access to greater social and economic privileges in a rapidly transformed society (Fong 2011; Xiang and Shen 2009). As a result, there is an increasing number of parents in China who send their children to study abroad, leading to a mass student migration out of the mainland.

As both an external and a domestic destination, Hong Kong is a special case. Due to its colonial history and status as a Special Autonomous Region of China, Hong Kong differs from mainland China in many respects, including its economic, political, education and cultural systems. Hong Kong's higher education system was established in the colonial era. It was modelled on and still retains many similarities with the British higher education system. Thus, it differs significantly from that of mainland China in its curriculum, academic staff, international connections and primary medium of instruction. Many mainland Chinese parents believe that these differences can equip their children with better human and cultural capital, and will give them a valuable international perspective (Li and Bray 2006, 2007). Furthermore, compared with other destinations such as North America and Europe, Hong Kong is both geographically and culturally more accessible for mainland Chinese given the relatively short distance, same time zone and assumed fewer cultural discrepancies. After the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997, various new connections with the mainland have developed. In 1999, the Hong Kong government began to allow mainland Chinese to pursue full-time undergraduate studies in Hong Kong. With the aim of developing Hong Kong into an Asian regional education hub, the government has since then gradually relaxed entrance

barriers to migrant students, predominantly those from mainland China, Macau and Taiwan, and offered studentships to outstanding migrant students. Mainland Chinese students constitute the largest number of non-local students in Hong Kong, with a massive increase from 916 in the 1997/1998 academic year to 10,956 in the 2012/2013 academic year (Chiu, Liu and Zhang 2014).

However, far from being an ideal host society, Hong Kong has become an increasingly unfriendly environment for mainland Chinese students as conflicts between mainland China and Hong Kong have intensified in recent years. The causes of these conflicts are complex, but include Hong Kong's colonial past, the transformed global economic status of both regions, Hong Kongers' concerns over the fierce competition for limited resources with mainland Chinese migrants, and the differences in institutions, cultures and norms between these two societies. An anti-mainland-Chinese sentiment has recently emerged in Hong Kong and intensified since 2012. Overt discrimination against mainland Chinese has been observed in some local media and collective street actions have openly humiliated mainland Chinese. For instance, in early 2015, street protests escalated, with some becoming violent<sup>i</sup>, further contributing to an inhospitable environment for mainland Chinese. In this context, investigating mainland Chinese students' media usage with different people provides a valuable comparative case for student migration in other parts of the world, and further demonstrates how migrant students' media usage is shaped by different social contexts.

### **Research Method and Data**

In-depth qualitative interviewing is widely used in the social sciences as it enables researchers to obtain detailed data on people's opinions, experiences, feelings and daily practices, uncovering the meanings behind people's lives and behaviour (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). In-depth interviewing was the predominant method used in this research as it

enabled migrant students to reflect on their migration experiences and articulate their understanding of migrant life and media usage in their own voice. Moreover, through follow-up questions in the interviews, this method helped the researcher to gain valuable insights into the meanings that the students attached to their media usage and how it was associated with their migrant life and relational dynamics. The voices of mainland Chinese students, as migrant children, shed new light on the relationship between migration and communication media. In 2014, 29 mainland Chinese students from three public universities and one private university in Hong Kong were interviewed. Initial contact was made via personal referrals and from a research assistant and two student helpers from mainland China currently living in Hong Kong. The initial participants introduced their friends and classmates as potential interviewees. As a former mainland Chinese student in Hong Kong, the researcher found it relatively easy to build a rapport and share migration experiences with the participants. By conducting interviews in cafes, student dormitories, canteens, public learning zones and leisure areas at the four universities, the researcher could also observe the participants' study and living environments. The face-to-face interviews in Mandarin were recorded with the participants' permission and fully transcribed<sup>ii</sup>. The interviews lasted from 1 to 4 hours and were guided by a semi-structured interview outline, covering questions about the participants' migration history, media usage, lives and experiences in Hong Kong. In the interviews, many participants voluntarily shared their WeChat/Facebook profiles, communication records with families/friends and shared pictures and videos via communication media with the researcher. Although the article focuses primarily on the data generated from the 29 in-depth interviews, the analysis of these students' migration experiences and media usage is also informed by the researcher's observations of the students' online and offline lives and daily interactions with mainland Chinese students while working as a university lecturer in Hong Kong. Data and information from multiple sources enable the

researcher to develop a better understanding of the complexity of student migration (Collins and Huang 2012).

The 29 participants included 17 undergraduates, 4 research graduates and 8 self-funded taught Master's students. The participants' gender, age and amount of time spent in Hong Kong were also considered in the sampling. Their ages ranged from 19 to 28 years, with approximately 83% of the participants aged between 20 and 24 when interviewed. There were 14 female and 15 male interviewees. All of the participants interviewed had been in Hong Kong for less than four years, except for one student, who had migrated to Hong Kong during high school. Four graduate students were funded by university studentships and were economically independent. Others relied on their parents for financial support. Their tuition fees ranged from HK\$50,000 (US\$6,448) to HK\$110,000 (US\$14,186) per year and their annual expenditures ranged from HK\$50,000 (US\$6,448) to HK\$80,000 (US\$10,317). Taking this diversity into account helps to avoid findings that are potentially biased as a result of collecting qualitative data from an over-homogenous group. Not all of the factors considered in the sampling had an explicit influence on the participants' media usage. However, certain factors, such as the amount of time spent in Hong Kong and their different cohorts, did have a bearing on how students communicated with their family members and friends in mainland China. This point is elaborated further in the following discussion.

ICT has developed rapidly in mainland China over the past decade. All of the participants used ICT before migrating and many were already intensive users. Eight participants used ICT for over 10 hours per day, 15 for 3-9 hours per day and 6 for less than 3 hours per day. Their monthly expenses on ICT ranged from HK\$68 (US\$8.8) to HK\$300 (US\$38.7). The students' high usage, but relatively low expenditure can be attributed to Hong Kong's convenient and affordable ICT infrastructure. In 2013, the penetration rates of household

broadband and mobile phones in Hong Kong were 85% and 231%, respectively (The Commerce and Economic Development Bureau of Hong Kong 2013). While there is a variety of service charges in Hong Kong, many people enjoy mobile and Internet use for less than HK\$200 (US\$25.8) per month. In 2013, free or almost free Wi-Fi services were provided by around 10,000 Wi-Fi hotspots at over 5,400 locations in Hong Kong (The Commerce and Economic Development Bureau of Hong Kong 2013). All universities in Hong Kong provide free Wi-Fi and Internet use on campus.

Hong Kong's excellent and affordable ICT infrastructure, along with the students' comprehensive media knowledge, meets the three preconditions set out by Madianou and Miller (2013, 171) for the emergence of polymedia: 'access and availability, affordability, and media literacy'. Mainland Chinese students can easily incorporate multiple communication technologies and media into their daily lives. This polymedia consists of devices such as smart phones, desktop computers, laptops and tablets, along with software/applications such as QQ, WeChat, Skype, Facebook and WhatsApp. Although the participants used ICT for a wide range of purposes, including information searching and sharing, social connections, study and entertainment activities, this article focuses primarily on their communication media usage in social connections and interpersonal relations.

## **Emotional Support, Spiritual Communication: Media Usage with People in Mainland China**

### ***Getting Parents Online***

For most students, the decision to migrate to Hong Kong was a collective decision made with their parents. As young migrants and economic dependents, most students not only needed their parents' advice in the preparation stage of migration, but also required their financial support to begin the migration process and establish their student lives in Hong Kong. Many

parents, particularly those of undergraduates, played an active role in their children's migration, obtaining information about programmes and universities in Hong Kong, discussing the applications with their children and accompanying them to Hong Kong after admission. The active participation of parents in the migration process made them more concerned about their children's well-being in Hong Kong. Migrant students also wanted their parents' involvement, even in a virtual form, in their post-migration lives. The willingness of both parties to be connected with each other after migration created the demand for long-distance communication.

All of the participants reported regular contact with their parents in mainland China after their migration. They combined phone calls and text messages with video conferencing and voice messages for telecommunication. QQ and WeChat are the most popular communication applications in mainland China and were therefore most frequently used by migrant students and their parents. This polymedia not only offers students greater convenience in contacting their parents in mainland China, but also grants both parties the autonomy to select the most appropriate form of communication, depending on their availability and context. As they stated,

For a daily small chat, we use WeChat. For long conversations, we use phone calls. If both of us [Dong and her parents] are in our leisure time, we use video conferencing.  
(Dong, female, 20, undergraduate)

If there is something urgent, I call my parents. For our daily chat, we use voice messages via WeChat. When I am in my studio and cannot talk to them, they send me voice messages. I put on headphones to listen to them and reply to them by text messages via WeChat. (Chen, male, 25, Master's student)

Previous research on migrant parents (e.g. Dreby 2006; Madianou and Miller 2012) and media use among youth (e.g. McMillan and Morrison 2006) has reported that (migrant) parents are usually the initiators of media use. In contrast, this study shows that mainland Chinese students, as migrant children, are usually the facilitators of telecommunication with their parents and the adopters of communication media in cross-border families. About half of the participants reported that before or in the early stage of their migration, they encouraged their parents to purchase advanced devices (e.g. iPads), installed communication applications (e.g. QQ and WeChat) for their parents and taught them how to use these media. As Lee stated,

Before I came to Hong Kong, my parents didn't use those things [QQ, WeChat].... I set up a QQ account for them [parents] and taught them how to use it. In the beginning, they found it hard to learn those skills. Later, I bought them an iPad. They gradually got used to it. Now, they rely heavily on it. As long as you lead them to the beauty of these things, they will explore and get used to them. (Lee, male, 24, MPhil student)

While the parents may have been reticent in using new communication media initially, maintaining regular contact with their migrant children became a powerful motivator for them to overcome the obstacles and acquire new communication skills. Many students reported that their parents became regular users of these media only after they migrated to Hong Kong.

### ***Mutual Emotional Support via Telecommunication***

Regular telecommunication with their parents was important for migrant students as they relied on it for emotional support, to get advice on adjusting to life in Hong Kong and to discuss important decisions related to their study or future plans, especially during their first year after moving to Hong Kong. All of the participants reported experiencing a period of transition and adjustment in their first year. These young migrants encountered difficulties

learning a new language (Cantonese), adjusting to a new higher education system and adapting to the local food, culture, climate and social norms. For example, Zhang described his difficulties in his first year of study,

In the beginning, I had difficulties with my studies. I could not keep up with them....  
The teaching style here is different from that in mainland China. In mainland China, we seldom had the opportunity to do experiments. Here, we need to do a lot of experiments. We are required to write papers in English. I struggled at the beginning. (Zhang, male, 28, PhD student)

Zhang points to some of the common problems that migrant students encounter at the outset of their studies in the new host society. As discussed earlier, the difference in the higher education systems between mainland China and Hong Kong is one of the main motivations for mainland Chinese students to migrate to Hong Kong. This difference, however, also leads to difficulties for migrant students who struggle to adjust to their study. Hong Kong universities select non-local students based on their academic performance, rather than their families' economic status (Li and Bray 2006). Thus, most mainland Chinese students who are successfully admitted to study in Hong Kong, particularly undergraduates and research postgraduates who receive university studentships, are usually excellent students who have not usually encountered such difficulties during their previous studies in mainland China. For these students, the problems they face when studying in Hong Kong created frustration, worry and pressure, and their parents' encouragement and support consequently became particularly significant and meaningful. Many students communicated with their parents to alleviate these negative emotions and pressure. As Zhang stated, he shared the details of his study with his parents in their regular phone calls and received different feedback from each of them,

My mum usually comforted me while my dad encouraged me. My mum said: 'Don't worry. Take your time. Take care of your health', My dad said: 'Work harder. Make

greater efforts'.... Even if they could not provide any practical help with my studies, I felt much better and more relieved after talking to them. (Zhang, male, 28, PhD student)

By using telecommunication, migrant students felt emotionally connected with and cared for by their parents, even though they were living in a new and distant society. They admitted that although their parents were unable to offer solutions to their study problems, their emotional support was critical in helping them overcome problems and persisting through the adjustment period.

For many undergraduates, their migration to Hong Kong was the first time that they had left their hometowns and parents to live independently in an unfamiliar and distant place. Telecommunication with their family members, especially their parents, was an important way for these young migrants to deal with their unavoidable homesickness. As Ping, a 19-year-old female undergraduate, stated, '[when I was homesick] I called my dad, mum and grandma'. In addition to getting comfort and emotional support from their parents, migrant students, particularly undergraduates, also obtained practical help or suggestions from their parents about living in Hong Kong. Many migrant students are from single-child families and had little experience of doing housework. Migrating to Hong Kong meant that they must learn to live independently and parents were important in providing life tips via telecommunication. For example, both Lin and Wang reported that their mothers taught them how to cook via telecommunication.

My mum taught me how to make dumplings via email. She taught me how to make the meat stuffing and how to make the dumplings. She also sent me the recipe for braised pork in brown sauce via email. (Lin, male, 21, undergraduate)

For example, I want to cook a specific dish. My mum tells me how to do it step by step. She sends me a voice message to teach me how to cook it. (Wang, male, 20, undergraduate)

Teaching their children how to cook food via telecommunication helped Chinese mothers to reconstruct the nurturing relationship and maintain an emotional bond with their migrant children. While migrant students usually appealed to their mothers for help and advice related to their life issues, they asked their fathers for suggestions about their study plans. As Ping stated,

My mum cares about my life in Hong Kong.... For issues related to my study, I consult my father. For example, what kind of summer program shall I apply for? How do I book an air ticket and apply for a visa? I discuss these with my father [via WeChat voice messages]. (Ping, female, 19, undergraduate)

This communication pattern corresponds to the gendered division of labour in Chinese parenting, in which the mother is responsible for the children's physical care and emotional needs, whereas the father is responsible for discipline and supervision (Jankowiak 2011). Despite the physical distance between the migrant students and their parents, polymedia revived family relations across borders: migrant children were able to continue receiving their parents' love, care and nurturing, and left-behind parents could develop new parenting practices.

Students' telecommunication with their parents, however, was not always a one-way demand for parental support. Rather, a mutual sharing and support mechanism between students and their parents was facilitated by communication media. In their daily communication, the students also shared with their parents their happiness and interesting experiences in Hong Kong. For example, they sent their parents photos of places of interest in Hong Kong and updated them about their various activities.

Last time, my father planned to visit the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre to see the golden bauhinia statue [the emblem of Hong Kong]. But, due to his tight schedule, he couldn't visit it. When I visited it later, I took a picture of the bauhinia and sent it to them [via WeChat].... They commented: 'Wow, it is quite amazing'. (Chen, male, 25, Master's student)

Recently, I worked as a student helper guiding a campus tour for high school students visiting our university. This was my first experience of being a volunteer and talking in depth to the locals. I learnt a lot. I called my parents to share my special experience with them. (Liu, female, 26, Master's student)

The students also comforted and provided emotional support to their parents when they were unhappy or had conflicts with other family members. As Ting stated,

My mum lives with my elder brother and sister-in-law. She takes care of their little girl.... Sometimes, my mum quarrels with my sister-in-law. You know, the common conflicts between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in Chinese families.... When my sister-in-law is not at home, my mum calls me to talk about their quarrels. She needs someone to listen to her and share her feelings with. I comfort her and try to straighten her out. (Ting, female, 23, Master's student)

This mutual support mechanism enabled by telecommunication was essential for maintaining the intimacy between migrant students and their parents and created new family dynamics for these cross-border families. To some extent, communication media use has become a central part of familial relationships and dynamics and is closely associated with or engenders various emotions in these families (Madianou and Miller 2013).

### ***Creating Barriers, Filtering Information and Finding Alternatives***

While telecommunication with parents was mostly pleasant and positive, some students reported that it could also become a form of virtual surveillance (Green 2002; Baym 2015), causing a psychological burden on them and conflicts with their parents. Yan provided an example,

My mum wants to know what I do every second. Every day, when my mum wakes up, she starts to send me messages [via WeChat] and ask: ‘Do you have lunch? Do you have dinner?’ Nothing important. When she cannot reach me [via telecommunication], she worries something bad has happened to me. She makes blind conjectures. (Yan, female, 23, Master’s student)

Yan’s mother not only wanted to know all of the details of her life in Hong Kong, but also imposed curfews on her. She required Yan to be home before 10 p.m. and kept calling to check whether Yan had returned. Yan sometimes felt annoyed by her mother’s endless calls and messages. However, she could not refuse to take her mother’s calls because her mother would punish her by stopping their telecommunication for three days when she showed impatience with her parents. While Yan’s mother represents an extreme case, parents’ virtual surveillance was not uncommon among other students. As Lee stated,

If I stay out late at night, they [the parents] urge me to return home [via QQ messages].  
(Lee, male, 24, MPhil student)

Their experiences indicate that ubiquitous contact and ‘ambient co-presence’, where people have increased awareness of the daily lives and ‘activities of significant others through the background presence of ubiquitous media environments’ (Madianou 2016, 183), blur the boundaries between parental care and control. Parents usually use their concern for their children’s safety to justify monitoring their activities and movements in a distant place and frame their virtual surveillance as ‘a mechanism of protection’ (Marwick and boyd 2014, 1061). As active agents, migrant students controlled the communication channels and

managed the information that they shared with their parents in their telecommunication to maintain some level of privacy and autonomy. Some students, for instance, intentionally limited communication media with their parents. Because they were usually the media enablers in their families, they were easily able to take control. For example, Ting decided not to teach her mother how to use WeChat, a more convenient communication medium compared to their regular phone calls and videoconferencing on Skype. She explained,

If I had taught my mum to use it, she would talk to me via WeChat every day and ask: ‘What are you eating today? When did you get up? When will you go to bed?’ It would drive me crazy.... I intentionally do not teach them. I want to preserve some freedom and autonomy. I do not want them to control me [via WeChat]. (Ting, female, 23, Master’s student)

The students understood that their parent’s virtual surveillance was derived from their love and concern for them. They argued that because they were young migrants, it was natural that their parents worried about their safety and well-being in Hong Kong. To ease their worry, many students chose to filter the information that they shared with their parents, particularly after they had gone through the initial adaptation period and had gradually adapted to their life and study in Hong Kong. They adopted a strategy called ‘sharing good news while concealing bad news’ (*baoxi bu baoyou*). They reasoned that in gradually becoming mature and independent, they were able to solve their own problems and did not want their parents to worry unnecessarily. As they explained,

If you have some unhappy experiences, they would worry about you.... They may not totally understand the situation. But, they are concerned for you so much that they worry. So, I like to share positive information with them. Let them know that my life in Hong Kong is good.... I don’t want them to worry about me. (Ping, female, 19, undergraduate)

What I share with my parents is good news, not bad. If I feel pressure, I choose to call them less frequently. My experience is that you need to overcome the difficulties by yourself. (Liu, female, 26, Master's student)

For migrant students and their left-behind parents, communication media can be 'a means of controlling' and surveillance at the same time as being 'a means of achieving independence and privacy' (Baym 2015,155). To put their parents' minds at ease, many students relied on another part of their telecommunication network for emotional support or pressure alleviation, such as good friends and old classmates in mainland China. They contacted them via phone calls, QQ and WeChat. Their contact with friends and old classmates was less intensive than with their parents and underwent a transformation over their time in Hong Kong. In their first year, most maintained a wide network of friends and old classmates and had regular contact with them. Their new life experiences and the novel things that they encountered in Hong Kong were the major topics of their telecommunication. After the first year, however, this contact became less frequent and the network narrowed. They explained that with the passing of time, more changes happened in each other's lives and they had less in common, and as a result their intention to communicate faded. In their narrowed network, the students maintained regular contact only with their best friends and old classmates with whom they had common languages and spiritual connections. Interestingly, despite their intimate friendships, most students reported that they seldom used videoconferencing with their good friends as they found it weird or uncomfortable. They seemed to reserve this visual instantaneous communication medium only for their family members and romantic partners, and identified it as the most intimate and private method of communication. Video conferencing, as synchronous communication, not only requires both parties to 'align their schedules in order to be simultaneously engaged' (Baym 2015, 8), but largely reduces both parties' possibility of simultaneously doing other activities as they can see each other through the webcam. Some students argued that they did not feel entitled to intrude on their friends'

life in this way and demand their friends to put their work or life aside to satisfy their needs. Moreover, videoconferencing may provide the opportunity for both parties to observe each other's physical surroundings via webcam. To maintain some privacy and to respect their friends' schedule and life, migrant students preferred to use messaging via WeChat and QQ to contact their friends in the mainland. Messaging allowed their friends to reply at their convenience or simultaneously engage in other activities while communicating with them. This differentiated media use reflects the boundaries of social connections, and the different expectations and obligations associated with different relationships (Baym 2015).

Despite this differentiation, for most students, good friends and old classmates constituted an alternative support network, in which they could open their hearts and share things that they were reluctant to discuss with their parents. As Yan stated,

Due to my limited time and energy, it is impossible to maintain contact with a lot of friends.... I contact only several best friends. When I was in trouble, I would not share the trouble with my mum, but would share it with my best friends... I talk to them [via WeChat messages] and they comfort me. I just need someone to listen to me. (Yan, female, 23, Master's student)

In summary, the main function of the migrant students' media usage with their parents and friends in mainland China was to satisfy their emotional need to share, support and communicate their experiences with others. Through multiple communication channels, these young migrants felt connected, cared for and supported by their families and friends. The emotional support and spiritual communication that these communication media enabled smoothed the process of adapting to study and life in Hong Kong for migrant students. Meanwhile, their practices of managing different communication media and information reflects their efforts in constructing boundaries in a media-networked context to frame and

differentiate relationships with people at home. While they enjoyed the love, concern and care that their families and friends provided, they also attempted to maintain some level of ‘networked privacy’, a privacy dependent on different relations, social norms and contexts in an online ‘networked ecosystem’, in their telecommunication (Marwick and boyd 2014, 1063).

## **Functional Use, Experiencing Conflicts: Communication Media Use with Hong Kong Locals**

### *Digital Segregation and Functional Use*

Compared to their intensive and emotion-oriented media usage with people at home, the migrant students’ media usage with Hong Kong locals was limited, functional and study-oriented. They relied on a different set of media, mainly Facebook and WhatsApp, to contact their local classmates and friends. Many reported that they only applied for an account on Facebook or WhatsApp after their migration, because Facebook is blocked in mainland China and WhatsApp is unpopular. Their original intention in using these media was to make contact with Hong Kong locals. As Xie, a 28-year-old PhD student, stated, ‘I applied for a WhatsApp account to connect with local friends because the locals like WhatsApp’. Although they installed various applications on their communication devices, most students, however, observed a digital boundary or segregation between mainland Chinese and Hong Kongers in their polymedia. As they stated,

For contacting my mainland friends, I use WeChat. For communicating with my local friends, I use WhatsApp. (Dong, female, 20, undergraduate)

Even if some of my Hong Kong friends have WeChat, I still contact them via WhatsApp. Just like I contact my mainland Chinese classmates in Hong Kong via WeChat even if they have WhatsApp. It seems that WeChat is for mainland Chinese and WhatsApp and

Facebook are for Hong Kongers. I don't know why, but it is a habit. (Mei, female, 20, undergraduate)

This digital boundary or segregation partly reflects the different media usage habits across different groups or societies. As Facebook is blocked by the mainland Chinese government, the navigation and selection of media for mainland Chinese is somewhat constrained, in turn affecting their media usage habits. This digital segregation also indicates that media selection is not only shaped by different relationships and emotions, but also embedded in and constrained by specific social and political contexts.

Despite their intention of using Facebook and WhatsApp to contact locals, most students found that these media did not help them broaden their local networks in Hong Kong. While one student, Yan, had regular contacts with her local boyfriend and his friends, the other 28 students reported that they seldom used Facebook or WhatsApp to talk daily with their local friends and classmates. In their limited contacts with local classmates, text messaging via Facebook or WhatsApp was the main form of communication. Very occasionally, the students used phone calls, voice messages or instant messages to contact their local classmates. Their media usage with locals was largely functional or study-oriented as they used Facebook and WhatsApp to discuss group projects, assignments or exams with their local classmates. This form of communication was usually concentrated at the end of each semester. As they stated,

My communication with the locals via WhatsApp mainly focuses on academics. For example, we discuss our assignments. Before exams, we communicate some knowledge points, which may be covered in the exams. (Wen, male, 20, undergraduate)

Only when I do projects with local classmates do I use Facebook. (Zheng, male, 20, undergraduate)

Some students occasionally asked for information from local friends or classmates. This was usually related to local knowledge or norms. As Zheng stated,

Occasionally, I contact locals. For example, in the last Spring Festival, I contacted one local classmate [via WhatsApp messages] and asked him: ‘Do you know what kind of stores are open during the Spring Festival?’ He replied: ‘Those in Mongkok are closed. Others are open’. (Zheng, male, 20, undergraduate)

### ***Digital Segregation and Social Conflicts***

One may argue that the convenience of having the possibility for face-to-face conversation might reduce migrant students’ intention to contact local classmates via communication media. However, recent studies (e.g. Baym 2015; Madianou 2016) discovered that, with ubiquitous connectivity through polymedia being integrated into people’s daily life, people believe that face-to-face contact and mediated communication is not mutually exclusive. Many people use communication media to contact those whom they can meet face to face and tend to use more different types of media in their closer relationships (Baym 2015). In other words, the limited mediated communication by mainland Chinese students with the locals reflects their alienated relationship and largely derives from the deep cultural differences and social segregation between migrants and the locals. In addition to the different media usage habits between mainland Chinese and Hong Kongers, many students attributed their lack of daily communication with locals to their different backgrounds and subcultures. As Lu explained,

I know some locals, but we don’t have much deep or spiritual communication.... I think this is mainly because of our cultural differences. The second reason is the language. They speak Cantonese. Although I can understand Cantonese and speak some, my

communication with them is not fluent... We are different from them in many aspects, such as our timetable, our friends and our hobbies. (Lu, male, 27, PhD student)

Lu's words also partly explained the dominance of text messaging in migrant students' media communication with locals: on the one hand, it may enable them to avoid the embarrassment of speaking a language that they are unfamiliar with, and, on the other hand, it satisfies the different habits and schedules of both parties by allowing 'time delays between messages' (Baym 2015, 8).

Moreover, the intensification of conflicts between mainland China and Hong Kong in recent years has deepened this digital segregation. As discussed earlier, an anti-mainland-Chinese sentiment has emerged in Hong Kong in recent years and escalated following the Umbrella Protests in 2014.<sup>iii</sup> This sentiment was reflected in various forms, ranging from harassing mainland Chinese tourists in shopping malls to insulting mainland Chinese migrants in Hong Kong as 'locusts'. This hostile environment made it more difficult for mainland Chinese students to assimilate into Hong Kong society and blocked in-depth communication, both online and offline, with their local classmates and friends. While many students reported intentionally avoiding discussion of the conflict and the relating social and political issues in their face-to-face conversations with their local classmates/friends, they were still faced with anti-mainland-Chinese attitudes in social media. As Dong stated,

On Facebook, some local friends discussed the conflict between mainland China and Hong Kong. Through this, I can see the huge difference between mainland Chinese and Hong Kongers. Some Hong Kongers really hate mainland Chinese.... They call us 'locusts'. I don't know how to refute it and feel powerless. (Dong, female, 20, undergraduate)

Many students chose to keep silent or ignore these discriminatory discourses on Facebook, even if they felt hurt or angry. Reducing the frequency of Facebook or WhatsApp use was in this sense a self-protection mechanism to avoid being affected by the anti-mainland-Chinese atmosphere in Hong Kong. As Yu stated,

I seldom use Facebook. Occasionally, I check my Facebook. [After reading those discriminatory comments,] I don't want to talk with them [her local friends]. I keep silent.... There is no use arguing with them. (Yu, female, 23, Master's student)

Some students did choose to confront these anti-mainland-Chinese discourses and argued with their local friends or classmates on Facebook or through WhatsApp. As Xie stated,

I argued these issues with one of my local classmates on WhatsApp.... Once, I read an online post against mainland Chinese students, which called us 'Little Locusts' and accused us of stealing local education resources. So, I sent WhatsApp messages to him [his local classmate] to tell him that I was unhappy about the comments. I know he may not be related to those comments, but he is a Hong Konger. I use this channel to let Hong Kongers know my opinions on this issue. He argued with me about the comments via WhatsApp.... After arguing with each other, we changed each other's opinions, although to a limited extent. (Xie, male, 28, PhD student)

All of the students claimed that while their local friends and classmates were nice to them to their faces, mediated communication created a different platform where these young migrants experienced deep conflicts and segregation between insiders and outsiders. Even if the limited communication media use of mainland Chinese students with Hong Kongers was a channel through which they got practical help, it also worked as an exclusion mechanism: it created obstacles to their assimilation into Hong Kong by exposing migrant students to social and cultural contradictions and conflicts with people in Hong Kong. By reducing the

frequency of particular media use and intentionally blocking negative information from these media, the migrant students attempted to protect themselves in the hostile context, yet this also reduced their motivation to have more face-to-face interactions with their local classmates/friends.

## **Conclusion**

According to Madianou and Miller (2013, 184), ‘polymedia is gradually emerging as a global phenomenon’. Thus, through an analysis of its heterogeneous consequences on different migrant groups, useful insights can be gained on the relationship between migration and the media. This study enriches the literature on polymedia and migration by taking the discussion beyond the familial relationships in migrant families to look at migrants’ relationships with locals in the host society and explore how communication media are selected, integrated and interpreted in the lives of migrant students, a previously under-studied group. By navigating the various media, and granting differentiated meanings to them, the young migrant students in this study found mediated communication to be both empowering and disempowering. While they relied on communication media to acquire useful knowledge, emotional support and practical help, they also regarded ubiquitous telecommunication as a kind of virtual surveillance imposed on them by their parents. Moreover, mediated communication with the locals in Hong Kong revealed conflict and mutual exclusion. Meanwhile, by creating digital boundaries, filtering information, selecting communication media and maintaining networked privacy, these young migrants actively managed multifaceted relations in their daily media use and constructed multiple identities in their migrant lives, as family members, friends and migrants. If their intensive mediated communication with families and friends back in mainland China redefined their intimate relationships in a trans-local context, their digital segregation with the locals in Hong Kong strengthened their identity as migrants. In other words, the integration of various media in their daily communication at once strengthened

their emotional connections with people in their home society and estranged them from locals, creating barriers to their assimilation into the host society. Their experiences further demonstrated the complicated dynamics of student migration and the embedded nature of media use in different contexts and relations. The lack of alternative voices from the left-behind parents in mainland China and locals in Hong Kong is a limitation of this research. Future investigation into the intersection of polymedia and student migration would benefit from taking these voices into account.

Note:

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<sup>i</sup> See related news reports: ‘Topics: Anti-mainland sentiments,’ South China Morning Post, available from <http://www.scmp.com/topics/anti-mainland-sentiments>; ‘Anti-Mainland Sentiment on the Rise in Hong Kong,’ The Diplomat, February 24, 2015, available from <http://thediplomat.com/2015/02/anti-mainland-sentiment-on-the-rise-in-hong-kong>.

<sup>ii</sup> All participants’ names are pseudonyms.

<sup>iii</sup> See news report: ‘Hong Kong “radicals” up ante in democracy push against China,’ Reuters, February 23, 2015, available from <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/02/23/us-hongkong-radicals-insight-idUSKBN0LQ0UO20150223>.

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