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Bourdieusian Boundary-Making, Social Networks, and Capital Conversion: Inequality among International Degree-Holders in Hong Kong

Anson Au

Department of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

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Abstract

Sociological research richly documents the many ways through which education becomes a form of convertible capital, but focuses less on the cultural schemas that graduates possess and use to respond to disruptions of capital conversion processes. Using the case of international degree-holders in Hong Kong, this article draws upon Bourdieu's theory of practice to interrogate the cultural schemas that valorize international degrees when their conversion pathways to economic capital are subjectively perceived to weaken. This article unearths the role of social networks in embedding cultural schemas and their effects on relations within the *field*: when faced with diminishing economic returns, international degree holders hold fast to their schemas vis-à-vis fellow international graduates and reconceptualize their degrees as symbolic capital to cope with the loss by enacting symbolic violence against domestic degree holders. Class boundaries are ultimately entrenched when international degree graduates valorize their cultural capital gains and legitimate their economic capital losses. Doing so compromises their class interests by forcing themselves into an interstitial position between different *fields*: though they occupy *dominating* homologous positions in the cultural *field*, they choose to overlook their *dominated* homologous positions in the economic *field*.

Keywords: Bourdieusian boundary-making, capital conversion, inequality, Hong Kong higher education, social networks

Introduction

Sociological research on education richly documentS the many ways through which education becomes a form of capital. A degree is widely recognized as a means for upward mobility through elaborate conversion pathways, yielding returns in economic capital through finding a better job and social capital through networking with higher-status contacts (Lareau & Weininger, 2003).

In pursuit of the many forms of capital that education is known to yield, individuals are motivated to obtain a degree, and even cross borders to obtain it (Xu, 2017). This conversion between forms of capital lies at the heart of Bourdieu's (1986) assertions about the indispensability of capital convertibility in connection to education (p.242) and foregrounds considerable work on education, classic and ongoing, as a *field* and site of inequality (Curl, Lareau, & Wu, 2018).

Beyond the accumulative empirical evidence, however, there is a shift among scholarly work toward questioning the meanings behind international students' choices to return home vis-à-vis the meanings that motivated their departure, and the cross-border contexts in which they are embedded (Lo, 2015; Xu, 2017; Yang et al, 2020). This is particularly important in modernized contexts with increasingly competitive job markets – how is education as capital conceived when it is exchanged for lower job benefits than before in a *field*?

Empirical work in advanced capitalist markets has taken stock of a shift in the graduate premium or the wage increase that a graduate would acquire with a degree compared to not having a degree. The baseline for a graduate premium, as Bathmaker and colleagues (2013, 2016) point out, is shifting upward to a Master level. In other words, the premium is slowly disappearing as the labor market saturates with more and more Bachelor degree holders (see also

Tholen & Brown, 2017). In a recent cross-national study of Europe, Green and Henseke (2021) find that growth in the relative supply of graduates (e.g. a higher proportion of the population with tertiary education) is gradually becoming associated with rising underemployment rates, a trend that continued from 2005 to present.

Indeed, while much research has been dedicated to examining outcomes of higher educational attainment, less attention has been devoted to understanding the cultural schemas that graduates themselves possess, especially among those with non-elite university degrees whose economic returns may begin to falter. Addressing this lacuna, this article inquires into the meaning-making in international student migration and the perceived value of an international education degree when its ability to convert into economic capital is disrupted in such a fashion. This article taps into post-return contexts, which gain salience against the backdrop of massifying education trends in Asia that make international degrees more common (Collins et al, 2017).

Drawing upon semi-structured interviews with non-elite international degree graduates based in Hong Kong, this article theorizes how cultural schemas stand still and symbolic violence is enacted among graduates against other degree holders in the wake of diminishing economic returns. The danger behind symbolic violence lurks in the ways that worldviews, beliefs, and paradigms percolate into negative evaluations of victims that exclude them from social integration and general life chances for upward mobility (Goffman, 1959:13-21).

In what follows, the context Hong Kong is briefly discussed. Then, the literature on the meaning-making processes that afford an international degree its capital is reviewed, on the basis of which Bourdieusian concepts are drawn from his theory of practice to interrogate symbolic violence. Distinct from most prior studies, this article considers symbolic inequality (symbolic

violence) enacted on the scale of education as a *field* and suggests it is undergoing a moment of shock and change. This article parses out how an international degree's conversion to economic capital weakens, how participants relationally and interpretively make sense of this disconnection to strengthen links to symbolic capital, and the varieties of symbolic violence born of these dynamics in service to entrenching class boundaries.

The Hong Kong Context

Hong Kong is an ideal context to examine the meaning-making of international education as a form of capital for several reasons. First, it embodies a long-standing tradition that strongly conceives of education as cultural capital and treats it by connecting it well to other forms of capital. Foreign university degrees, particularly Western degrees, in Hong Kong have traditionally been conceived as symbols of status and prestige between the 1980s and early 2000s as wealthy Chinese families began to partake in international student migration during China's period of reforms and engagement with the West (Choi, 1992). Dissatisfaction with limited local tertiary education provisions also pushed some parents to look abroad (Li et al, 1996).

Second, Hong Kong is home to a particularly strong tradition of international education, having established flows of students to and from Western countries through institutional linkages that have stood for decades. Historically, migration to Western countries satisfied a need for cultural affinity and linguistic symmetry, in appeal to an ideology that praised Western knowledge, in homage to Hong Kong's colonial ties (Choi, 1992). Correspondingly, from the 1980s to the 2000s, foreign university degrees generated remarkably higher economic returns and success in seeking job employment in Hong Kong. A booming Hong Kong and Chinese economy in the 1990s, coupled with economic recessions in major Western destination countries

around the same time, precipitated a spike in return migration (Skeldon, 1994). In response to mounting economic pressures in the nation and governmental cuts, host Western universities also broadened their intake of foreign, wealthy students in bids to obtain funding (Li et al, 1996). International education has thus massified (Collins et al, 2017), prompting aspirant middle-class families to reshape their interpretive evaluations of their degree.

Third, Hong Kong has historically been home to occupational discrimination and inequality based on (international) education. The schemas that valorize international education are rooted in the postcolonial history of Hong Kong as a global Asian metropolis and former colony. Discriminatory policies instituted in the era of British colonialism segregated white workers from ethnic Chinese through statutory zoning and restricted civil service roles requiring university qualifications to Commonwealth degree-holders (Lai, 2011).

This racial/ethnic legacy of colonialism has since precipitated cumulative disadvantages for non-white workers in the labor market, even among ethnic Chinese.

---Insert Table 1---

Table 1 shows the racial/ethnic discrepancy in median monthly incomes across major ethnic categories, where white workers out-earn locals by over double, according to the latest 2016 Census.

---Insert Table 2---

Table 2 breaks this down by occupation, finding that about 90% of white workers are employed in high-paying and high-status occupations like managers and administrators and professionals/associate professionals, whereas only about half of working locals are employed in these occupations. These differences are magnified considering that white workers comprise less than 1% of Hong Kong's working population, whereas ethnic Chinese workers comprise close to

90%. It emerges that even Hong Kong's storied reputation as a financial hub blessed with high-paying professional jobs is subsumed into this unequal picture of racial/ethnic relations that valorizes whiteness.

This conflation of race and class, whiteness and occupational upward mobility, comes to inform a unique breed of white privilege in Hong Kong that extends to cultural constructions of education. Whiteness influences people's educational expectations (and ethnic perceptions) in a sociocultural sense (Lai, 2020), coming to construct whiteness as high cultural status and international education (in Anglo-American nations) as a superior artifact and form of capital. The choice of a degree is drawn into "cultural racism," discrimination on the basis of cultural differences associated with race, such as language skills and cultural knowledge, rather than on biological markers (Lamont, 2018).

Education in Hong Kong thus offers a particularly powerful crystallization of the form of cultural capital classically imagined in sociological literature: as a sign of prestige, of upward mobility, of distinction, and thus, of inequality. It also offers a clear context to examine what happens to such a *field* when international education is massified among the middle-class (Collins et al, 2017).

Simultaneously, recent years have witnessed the rise of novel pull factors for overseas universities. Overseas universities increasingly market to outflows of migrants from Hong Kong (and China) to attract international students, even during the COVID-19 pandemic (Yang et al, 2020). This capitalizes on the relaxation of immigration and visa guidelines by foreign governments like Canada, the U.S., and the U.K. for immigrants from Hong Kong in recent years.

In January 2021, for instance, the U.K. launched the British National (Overseas) visa that allows BN(O) status holders (those who were born under colonial Hong Kong before the Handover of July 1, 1997) and their family members in Hong Kong to move, live, and work in the U.K. By April 2021, another nationwide "Welcome" program was set up to facilitate Hong Kong migrants' integration into U.K. society by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Government of the United Kingdom, 2022).

Similarly, Canada set up a temporary refugee program for Canadian permanent residency that targets Hong Kong residents from June 2021 to August 2026. The program permits Hong Kong residents to circumvent the typical immigration points system that meritocratically filters immigrants using points allocated to their credentials. Instead, the new refugee program consists of two streams that encourage Hong Kong migrants to study at Canadian post-secondary institutions during their stay (Government of Canada, 2022).

Though the educational pathways for overseas students in these countries grow uncertain, as policymakers debate possible restrictions on elite university enrolment to prioritize local students above internationals, these policy changes nonetheless constitute relatively attractive pull factors for Hong Kong migrants to increasingly move overseas and study in higher education institutions post-migration.

Meaning-Making in Education

According to Bourdieu (1986), the essence of any capital itself is an institutionalized ability to be accumulated and, more importantly, to engender fluid exchanges with other forms of capital. He treats cultural capital as immanent to education, famously taking stock of the social distinctions it yields as a result of capacities to be embodied, transmitted, and institutionalized

(1986:244-248). An international degree is a powerful crystallization of cultural capital with its ability to convert into economic, political, and social capital, scaffolded by material and symbolic returns that are structured to replicate these conversions and enhance their gains (Bourdieu, 1979; Collins et al, 2017).

The status and prestige afforded to a post-secondary degree are legitimized by their quality of being institutionalized, which "[marks] cultural distance and proximity, [monopolizes] privileges, and [excludes and recruits] new occupants to high status positions" (Lamont & Molnár, 2002:172). This, in turn, assures their transmission across generations through sedimented patterns of interpretation and generational wealth needed to access further education (Bourdieu, 1986:243, 247). Education is, therefore, one stratifying social structure through which people are sorted into categories and toward which actors orient their decisions about jobs and networking in pursuit of greater gains (Curl, Lareau, & Wu, 2018; Lai, 2020; Lamont, 2018).

However, a major gap in the literature on capital conversions is the phenomenon of disruption. Implicated in the social structure of capital conversion is a theoretical assumption of stasis as actors habituate to well-trodden pathways. Little is known about what happens to cultural ideas held by actors when such capital conversions fail and their pathways break.

Empirical work on a sister idea, cultural change, sensitizes us to the resistance that people pose to transformations in the general social structure. Cultural change (e.g. attitudes toward homosexuality) happens significantly more across generations, when open-minded generations embrace new ideas, than within generations, when people refuse to relinquish their schemas (Vaisey & Kiley, 2021). Thus, the worth of an international degree as a cultural artifact is not just a set of values, but schemas about its worth and utility, unconscious habits of interpretation that guide action and inform social scripts (Bourdieu, 1979; Vaisey, 2008).

This article contributes to the study of capital conversions by examining the relational and interpretive cultural reactions to disruptions to the convertibility of an international degree into economic capital. These disruptions may be becoming more prevalent as jobs grow scarcer and international degrees are democratized among the middle-class (Bathmaker, Ingram, & Waller, 2013; Collins et al, 2017; Green & Henseke, 2021). The present article distinguishes itself from past work by interrogating how this social structural transformation animates a change in the set of fundamental beliefs, practices, and rules that make up education as a *field*.

As with every type of capital, the cultural capital that education represents and the other types of capital it can be converted into are what make it a valuable resource, but also a seedbed for inequality (Curl, Lareau, & Wu, 2018). As Lamont asserts, cultural capital consists of high-status cultural signals (i.e. attitudes, styles, tastes) used for social and cultural exclusion to maintain existing class-based social structures (Lamont & Molnár, 2002).

The Bourdieusian Theory of Practice

This section reviews several of Bourdieu's key theoretical concepts from his theory of practice in service of reconceptualizing the perceived value of international education in connection to inequality. To understand *practice*, Bourdieu (1977) offered a range of conceptual tools to articulate the dialectic between structure and agent. His tools offer a theory of practical embodiment useful for understanding differentiated social power relations; how, through our practices, we change or replicate the status quo in a given *field*.

The context of education itself represents a *field* of its own – a space with its own objective structures, like rules, positions, rituals, interests, ways of being, etc. According to Bourdieu (1998), a *field* is:

> "both a *field* of forces, whose necessity is imposed on agents who are engaged in it, and as a *field* of struggles within which agents confront each other, with differentiated means and ends according to their position in the structure of the *field* of forces, thus contributing to conserving and transforming its structure." (p.32)

In this study, each agent within education as a *field* is a degree holder and comprise individuals who dominate and are dominated and whose constant struggle is aimed at transforming or preserving the *field* (Hunter, Smith, & Emerald, 2016:8). Each agent, moreover, possessed a *habitus*, subjective beliefs and values about education from habituated discourses and practices in relation to social structures within the *field* (Bourdieu, 1990:56).

The focus of my study on the changes in the education *field* calls attention to three other concepts: *doxa, crisis, hysteresis*. *Doxa* is a "set of fundamental beliefs which does not even need to be asserted in the form of an explicit, self-conscious dogma" (Bourdieu, 1997/2000:15). Between field and habitus, *doxa* represents intuitive knowledge of the rules of a specific *field*, embodied by agents and developed through continuous interactions in the given *field*. Changes in a *field* are dependent on upsetting and resettling its *doxa*, a state of a *field* wherein most agents share similar *habitus* (Hardy, 2008:125).

Correspondingly, the moment of transformation of a *field* constitutes a *crisis*. Bourdieu (1977:168-9) refers to this as a break in "the immediate fit between subjective structures [*habitus*] and objective structures [power relations and social structures]" within a *field*. In a stable *field*, the world makes sense. Actors know the game to be played and play it without friction. A *field* in *crisis*, by contrast, disturbs this equilibrium when taken-for-granted logics, beliefs, and interests are reconsidered and re-evaluated.

During the period before a *field* resettles after its *crisis*, its actors remain suspended in *hysteresis*, a state of misalignment between their subjective beliefs and the new *field* logics. Actors here are in static shock, still adapted to *field* logics no longer present, constituting "one of the foundations of the structural lag between opportunities and the dispositions to grasp them" (ibid:83).

Methods and Data

Semi-structured interviews with twenty Hong Kong participants (six males and fourteen females) recruited in 2018 using a non-random quota sampling method with the criteria of having completed at least a bachelor's degree at a foreign university, having returned to Hong Kong for at least two months and with the intention to work, and who were between 18 and 30 years old. 10 participants had attended universities in the U.K., 6 in the U.S., and 4 in Canada. All participants were aged 22 to 28 and came from middle-class families, whose parents had at least a bachelor degree and whose family incomes were HK$50,000 per month upwards. This age category is ideal for the study's focus on returning international student migrants given their frequent mobility (Xu, 2017).

The non-random sampling scheme was motivated by theoretical interests in obtaining the widest reach in the types of returning international degree holders. This research study is not representative of the entirety of Hong Kong degree holders, but targets the study of the phenomenon of international degree pursuit as it transpires within a subset of the population. The larger proportion of women to men also reflects similar proportions in Hong Kong, where university students and graduates have been disproportionately women (Statista, 2021).

The sampling logic follows Small's (2009) argument that sampling for depth is better suited to studying relational and interpretive mechanisms and lived experiences for a specific phenomenon, rather than conventional sampling for range, which means to produce statistical representation. This article thus examines the social processes that animate one societally important category of degree choice – non-elite international degrees – among a theoretically important and unique part of the population affected by it – new graduates.

No thematic differences in the findings emerged on account of reported differences between bachelors of arts and science, geographical origins of the degree, or rankings of the universities. All participants' highest degree obtained was a bachelor degree (11 bachelor of arts and 9 of science) from universities in Canada (which are renowned to be relatively flat in that there are no elite statuses or advantages for any one university over another in the Canadian labor market, see also Aurini, Missaghian, & Milian, 2020), public, non-Ivy League, R1 universities in the U.S., and universities not belonging to the Red Brick Universities or the Plate Glass Universities in the U.K.

There are differences in the three national university systems in terms of funding. Owing to the size of its financial market that eclipses those of the U.K. and Canada, the U.S. has a larger pool of potential donors than Canada and the U.K. from which its universities can tap into to invest in research and teaching programs. As such, Canadian and U.K. universities may tend to lean more on student fees for income. However, the objective of this article is not to parse out such differences by means of an institutional analysis, but to examine how, insofar as perceptions held by participants are concerned, their status in the global field are equalized. Indeed, themes from the analysis focused on the structural elements of a degree – the prestige of international degrees themselves as a status differentiator from local ones – rather than the subject of study.

Interviewees were targeted for their education in universities deemed non-elite in status according to Bourdieu's reading of the global *field* of education. Education is polarized between an elite subfield defined by scarcity of output and distinctions that rely on cultural status (effected through admissions, essentially), and a non-elite subfield defined by mass production that takes stock of economic capital and market demand (Bourdieu, 1993:38-39).

All universities reported in this study are thus non-elite, though reputable international universities that are publicly funded research institutions. These are qualified as non-elite because they more closely align with Bourdieu's classification as institutions that are "popular," admitting students more based on economic capital and market demand as sources of revenue. Even when they do appear to be elite, such as to admit on the basis of status, Bourdieu warns that this is only a regular attempt to renew themselves occasionally by adapting ideas from the elite subfield, but which never escapes the need to admit students for revenue to sustain themselves (Marginson, 2008). Unlike elite universities like the Ivy League that have a large endowment or donation base, typically amounting to a minimum of US$6 billion reaching up to over US$50 billion that relieve them from pressures to admit students as a source of revenue, non-elite international universities do not have this allowance because their endowments are substantially smaller.

Interview questions focused on what participants' motivations were to obtain a degree, reflections on how they performed in job searches when returning to Hong Kong, how they felt about their degree, what their international experience meant to them in connection to their future goals, and reflections on their education in comparison to local students' education. Each interview lasted around one hour and the project ended when thematic saturation was achieved.

Analyses of interview data relied on a cross-comparative coding framework inspired by Grounded Theory, where separate, interlinked phases of coding were developed for common themes in the data: (i) in the initial phase of open coding, all thematic similarities in the raw unstructured data were identified; (ii) then, in selective coding, new themes were co-constructed alongside data collection, refining initial codes by continually taking and measuring new observations against recorded ones; (iii) finally, in the last phase of axial coding, groupings of codes in the previous two phases were tied together to construct a global theme – a theoretical narrative that closely resonates with subjects' lived experiences whilst generating explanations for the larger patterns in which they are embedded (Charmaz, 2006).

Rationalizing Weakened Gains in Economic Capital: The Contours of a *Doxa*

All participants reported having difficulty finding a job after returning to Hong Kong. While no data exists to trace the trajectories of globally mobile students in Hong Kong and employment outcomes, the difficulties reported by participants are in tandem with the general rise of economic difficulties faced by workers in Hong Kong, most of all by young adults and fresh graduates.

---Insert Figure 1---

Figure 1 shows the performance of two wage indices over the past twenty years. While nominal wages appear to have grown by 63% from 2000 to 2020, adjustments for inflation reveal a pattern of stagnation in real wages, which grew by a mere 12% from 2000 to 2020. Annualized, real wages grew about 0.5% per year, a paltry level of growth compared to real wages in mainland China (18% annually) and South Korea (about 2.2% annually).

---Insert Figure 2---

Figure 2 shows financial precarity, a collation of unemployment and underemployment rates (defined as precarious workers who are employed but working insufficient hours and remain in search of jobs). Precarity is consistently higher among young adults than average, especially most recently from 2016 to 2020.

Interviews with participants parsed out nuances in the lived experiences of this financial precarity and the schemas through which young adults rationalized their hardships, with respect to an international degree.

Brian, a 23-year-old man who had graduated from a university in the U.K. and returned to Hong Kong to search for work. He reported searching for a job on the job market for eight months before securing a job in corporate sales, but expressed doubts at the merits of an international degree in this respect.

> "I can't say that an international degree has made improved my chances of getting a job. Well, if I didn't have a degree at all, I might have taken even longer or not got a job at all. But I mean, it still took me a while to get a job."

Brian went on to evaluate the connection between the difficulties he experienced in searching for a job and the narrative associated with an international degree:

> " Brian: It is not what I studied [exercise science]. But I know it is hard to find a job in Hong Kong, let alone in [exercise science]. I think I was a bit desperate for a job after searching for a while. So it might not be what I want, but… the job is something to get me money.
>
> Interviewer: Did having an international degree set you up with the expectation for a better job?

> Brian: I think so [laughs]. I think, from what my parents told me when I was young and just general knowledge, that having a degree from Britain would make [finding a job] easier. But you know, you learn reality very quickly. Maybe it was easier in my parents' generation, when there were fewer graduates, but not now."

The "stereotype" Brian described had primed him with an expectation for better job prospects, which were later seemingly falsified by his experiences. Although he was initially (and potentially *still*) dissatisfied with obtaining a job outside his desired area, he adapted to this dissatisfaction by lowering his expectations and aligning them with "reality." He drew upon a new sense of satisfaction from the fact of just having a job, that he now had income at all, but which he disconnected from his international degree – that is, he no longer credited his international degree with his achievement of economic capital the way he would have in the past.

Brian's "stereotype" was also corroborated by Janet, a 22-year-old woman who had graduated from a university in the U.S. and had been searching for a job for eight months. When describing this narrative, she connected it to her own experiences of finding a job and how it shaped her own worldviews of international degree:

> "Yes, [an international degree] is seen as better… more prestigious. So people are more impressed, I think. But it does not get you all the way and does not guarantee a job. It gets you an interview probably, like for me, and then the rest of the way is up to yourself and your own abilities."

When asked about potential feelings of expectation and disappointment with how the prestige assigned to an international degree has shaped her own experiences, Janet further noted:

"Janet: Well, I am not really disappointed *yet*, since I have not been searching [for a job] for too long. But maybe I will be very disappointed if this continues [laughs]. I hope it doesn't!

Interviewer: Where do you think this narrative about international degrees giving you better jobs comes from?

Janet: From my parents, from my friends, from my parents' friends. From history. It's just something everyone knows and thinks about. I believe[d] them then, less now. But I don't blame them. People just don't know… what the job market is like. And maybe the world has simply changed from their time."

These themes of struggle and diminishing prestige with respect to broader generational changes in the field were echoed by Amy, a 26-year-old woman with a degree from the U.K. Like Janet, Amy had spent more time than expected – seven months – searching for a job and was now working in accounting:

"Amy: [An] international degree helps you gain more international experience that could be useful in a job. But I do not think it's a free meal ticket. I still had to fight and work hard there, even when I came back. In fact, there's so much competition now. To be honest, there are so many people who have an international degree… more and more people are getting one.

Interviewer: *Did* it make you feel special, in terms of finding a job?

Amy: [laughs] I think I am still special. Yeah, I thought I was going to get a job quicker or at least move upward faster. I think my degree helped, but not

> as much as before when maybe my parents' generation were students. It's taking a lot more time than I thought. Like I said, everything now depends on your own efforts."

Thus, there was a prestige assigned to an international degree sustained by conversion pathways to economic capital (job prospects) that were perceived to have worked well in the past, which had come to dominate participants' subjective beliefs about its value (their *habitus*) and fashion out of this unity a *doxa*. The potential offered by an international degree was simply the case, proven "from history" and which "everyone knows about," as Janet recounts.

But what happens when this link to economic capital weakens? Like Brian, Janet and Amy saw that an international degree retained some occupational merits, but had diluted the expectations they initially formed based on prestige. During their brushes with "reality," they felt that the returns they received were not what were promised. Where Brian needed to work in a different line of work entirely, Janet and Amy asserted the renewed need for agency: for actors to take matters into their own hands, born of a realization that the structural conditions that gave international degree its prestige and permitted its powerful conversion to economic capital seemed less reliable and had potentially begun to weaken.

Faced with poorer returns than anticipated, participants all needed to make concessions in their work ethic, but also in their subjective constructions of what an international degree meant. In relation to the changed meaning of an international degree and to the changing structures that originally sustained this meaning, which participants saw as grounded in increased competition from a growing influx of degree holders in Hong Kong (Collins et al, 2017), their discourses and practices tied to their degree began to change. Concomitant with these changes were

modifications to their *habitus*, laying the foundation for *doxic* change in a *crisis* within the *field* (Bourdieu, 1977:168-9).

Economic Losses, Symbolic Profits: A *Field* in *Crisis* and Meanings beyond Money

A *field* changes by entering a *crisis* when existing logics are challenged. From the previous section, we observe how the value of an international degree was perceived to depend a great deal on the economic returns it could generate in employment and earnings. Participants made sense of this weakened link by readjusting their expectations of their degree to make sense of the challenges they faced with employment.

In a further dialogue with Brian, he noted:

> "… My degree from the U.K. and my experience there are not about earning more money, it's about life. It gives me something more than money to think about. It makes me… reflect on the value of my degree in terms of something else. Getting a job was important, but not getting it made me realize money isn't everything. I think that changes how I think about jobs and other things as well. The value of… what's important [in life]."

Like Brian and others, John, a 26-year-old man who had studied in the U.S. and was now a legal clerk in Hong Kong, felt the value of his degree did not yield expected economic returns, but which forced him to focus on other gains:

> "John: I didn't get a job as fast as I thought. Actually, because of my degree, I actually had to go through more scrutiny. Some employers were cautious of me because they weren't sure if I would know the local law. So I

needed to take more exams and local qualifications. I needed to study a lot more after my degree [laughs]. But I don't regret it at all. I think what I got was a rich experience. It's so hard to leave Hong Kong and go somewhere else to live, since it's so far. Education was a good chance for me to [live abroad].

Interviewer: What about that experience abroad do you feel you're taking back home?

John: Well, there's definitely something. I'm taking home the memories, the lifestyle, the values I learned. I think I'm more cultured now than before. I know American culture. I've seen more people. I know more about the world now."

Job difficulties, which participants felt had been made common, disrupted the link between international degrees and economic capital, but which prompted reflections on how to convert it into more intangible, symbolic gains. Anna, a 23-year-old woman who graduated from the U.K. and had recently been hired as a salesperson at Uniqlo, remarked on how a mediocre job hunt experience prompted her to rethink the importance of money:

"Yeah, I don't think money is everything for sure. Not getting a job for a while [it had taken her 5 months, and she was still looking for a different job] made me rethink things. I had a lot of fun in my years in the U.K. Now that I'm looking for a job, I've met roadblocks that challenge my thinking. I definitely don't think my degree is invincible. But I think it is more about the fun I had, and I'll remember it more for that, than finding a job."

Elaborating on the symbolic value of her degree vis-à-vis its economic value, Susan, a 28-year-old woman who had also studied in the U.S. and was now a graphic designer in Hong Kong, remarked:

> "People get a degree to find a job and make money. I do this too. But [pursuing an international degree] also made me realize so much about life as well. It helped me learn about how to dream, how to live, how to be a better person. I can connect with more people now."

Moving forward from less-than-hoped-for returns in economic capital, participants reported no tangible gains from their international degrees, but emphasized this as a criterion on which their degree was made *more* valuable in symbolic terms. Their degree became imbued with an ephemeral, symbolic value, whose intangible prestige reflected back upon their selves to remake them into "more cultured" people with a diverse array of experiences.

How participants imputed meanings to their degrees post-return changes the *doxa* of the *field*. The shift to the symbolic resonates with a recently documented rise in postmaterialist motivations for departure and return captured in studies of student migration, which indicate greater *expressive* motivations compared to instrumental ones (Collins et al, 2017). In a qualitative study of Chinese migrant students, Xu (2017) outlines the contours of a local "dream," a set of values, goals, and expectations with postmaterialist overtones, such as exposure to diverse outlooks, which informs the desire to pursue change through immersion in a cosmopolitan lifestyle thought to be inherent in English-rich locations. Thus, participants' subjective reassessments of their international degrees drew meaning from postmaterialist motivations for migration to enhance their degree's symbolic capital.

The present findings echo Tomlinson's (2008) observation that students who pursue post-secondary education do so on part of a "sense that higher education qualifications would open up a wider range of economic, occupational and social opportunities that might otherwise be limited" (p.52), but whose benefits also include "soft credentials" that refer to the "development of extra-curricular activities and skills" (p.57). This is consistent with a long line of empirical work demonstrating that cultural resources (knowledge about manners, etiquettes, arts, music, events, etc.) serve as interpersonal signals of worth that can abet or resist upward mobility in the job market (Erickson, 1996; Wright & Mulvey, 2021).

At the same time, participant accounts by Brian, John, Anna, and others advance our understanding of such resources in their references to the significance of social networks in lauding the value of their degrees. Such networks did not pose any formal help in finding a job such as through job referrals, but they sensitize us to the importance of relationality and networks in the entrenchment of cultural schemas about international education. Participants expressed resistance to changing their ideas about the general worth of their international degrees, and though they eventually rationalized its worth away from economic capital, their steadfast belief in the cultural status of their degrees were rooted in the institutionalization of such beliefs in their networks.

The relationality referenced in their rationalizations invigorate our understanding of cultural stasis (Vaisey & Kiley, 2021) by laying bare the role that networks play: schemas about the worth of international degrees are adopted by members of a network. And as participants go on to build new ties among fellow international degree-holders abroad, they deepen their embeddedness among these networks, such that they become reference groups from which they draw norms and expectations about how to behave. Reference groups are notoriously powerful in

upholding their boundaries and norms as members build identities around them over time and fear losing reputation and ties if they stray from established ideas (Godart & Galunic, 2019).

Thus, participants' reassessments of their international degrees signal a *field* in *crisis*. Participants re-evaluated the merits of an international degree in terms of its occupational, economic returns. But graduates' post-return efforts to lionize the symbolic capital of an international degree as a response to weaker economic capital returns indicate they are potentially in *hysteresis*, which also signaled a *field* in resistance to *doxic* change. That the weakening of an international degree's power to exchange for economic capital strengthens the symbolic capital assigned to its cultural capital means agents in the field were attempting to preserve schemas consistent with the prestige of the "stereotype" that Brian, Janet, and Amy referenced (the *old* logic of the *field*) and by creating a *new* logic that makes sense of economic losses as symbolic gains in (symbolic) capital.

Interpersonal Comparisons and the Inequality of Capital: Interstitial Homology, Symbolic Violence, and Class Boundaries

How do international degree holders compare themselves to domestically educated others, against the backdrop of the symbolic capital they afford their own degrees? For Michael, a 25-year-old man who studied in Canada and was now working as a business manager in Hong Kong, he distinguished himself from domestically educated students in terms of indirect work advantages:

> "Michael: I think I am… more experienced in life. I have seen more of the world and know more about worldly cultures. It helps me with knowing English and being familiar with other languages for my work.

Interviewer: What about economically?

Michael: Hmm… well, I don't think [having an international degree] automatically puts me in a place to earn more than [domestically educated] people here. I mean, my friend who just went to [Hong Kong University] makes more than me now, and he got a job right after he graduated because he already had contacts here. I even had to ask him for advice once [laughs]."

Similarly, Edward, a 24-year-old designer intern in Hong Kong who previously studied design in the U.K., yielded some indirect advantages for his line of work from the international experience itself:

"Edward: [The international experience] has certainly helped my work. It's given me a taste of what's available out there. My degree has given me useful knowledge about how international [designer] brands operate, which has been especially useful since Hong Kong imports a lot of these brands from places like London, Paris, or New York. I think I've cultivated a certain sense of *taste* that I wouldn't have now if I had studied in Hong Kong for sure.

Interviewer: Do you feel secure in your work?

Edward: Well, I still haven't made a lot of money yet. I don't know if I'll get a continuation in my contract. It's because of how Hong Kong treats local designers. You have to have large brands carry your work to make it. So, I don't know if I'll make it here. I might actually go back. But at least it's

given me awareness of how things work in London and I might go through with it."

Like Michael, Edward felt distinctions between domestic education and their own in terms of economic position and earnings were not apparent. But he did believe he held advantages over domestically educated others in terms of industry-specific information and cultural tastes, corroborating but expanding upon what Susan believed to be a general sense of being more cultured. Edward centered his internship and studentship experiences with Alexander McQueen, Katharine Hamnett, and other high street (luxury) brands while he was studying abroad in his reflections on the advantages of his degree.

As with Michael's experience, these advantages were indirect and job-specific, and more importantly, helped to legitimate the symbolic capital they both afforded their international degrees vis-à-vis domestically educated others. These differences laid the groundwork for further distinctions in social settings.

"Interviewer: When do you feel these differences in cultural tastes are most visible?

Edward: Well, uh, they are visible outside jobs sometimes with what we watch and how we think. Like our tastes in entertainment and media are different, and what we understand about them is different too. Like they… watch Ariana Grande, but without really understanding her song. Sure, Hong Kong people understand the literal words, but they don't understand where it's coming from.

Interviewer: Can you think of an example?

> Edward: Hmm… I think Kelly Clarkson is something Americans enjoy, but Hong Kong people don't appreciate her as much because they see that she's fat and some of them focus on that. So, it's a difference in values too."

The postcolonial context of Hong Kong legitimates these cultural tastes in favor of the middle-class and disadvantages the working class. The British colonial project was not merely economic, according to Go (2018), but cultural: ethnonational identities were totalized and normalized into male whiteness, of which English fluency was a key part. In the wake of the Handover of Hong Kong, the aftermath of this legacy was to enable new forms of elitism as those who were able to draw proximal to English fluency were those with comparative economic wealth to afford international schooling (ibid). The symbolic capital inhered in English fluency predicts instrumental advantages and disadvantages.

To illustrate, the Law Reform Commission of Hong Kong (2023) mandates that in the event of discrepancies between English and Chinese versions of its notices, the English version will prevail. English fluency has correspondingly both structured and been structured by discrimination in the workplace, becoming a formal and informal criterion on which candidates are screened (Waters, 2006). Cultural tastes that embody English fluency, therefore, comprise a higher stock of capital for and which serves as a ground for symbolic violence against those unable to attain it. This is important in light of evidence that cultural resources play a role in shaping evaluation within peer groups at large. Knowledge about international music like Kelly Clarkson, like highbrow tastes, becomes a latent way for individuals to evaluate the worth of their counterparts (Au, 2022; Erickson, 1996).

Differences in values in social settings were also picked up on by Karen, a 28-year-old woman working in hotel management after studying in the U.S.:

> "For instance, I'm more open [to sexual minorities], whereas some locals are still, well, they're open, but they don't have much exposure to being in an open environment like the U.K. or Canada. And so they don't know much about it. This isn't the only case, but it's an example, and when that happens, I do think I'm a bit ahead – I know more. And that's because of my background and theirs."

Key to the growth of international student mobility has been the assertion that an international degree distinguishes international students from domestically educated students (Brooks & Waters, 2011). We observe these dynamics here, and how they lay the foundation for one important kind of symbolic violence.

Individuals domestically educated were seen by participants to be less worldly in their cultural tastes; their cultural knowledge and values were more homogeneous. Those with an international education assumed the role of the symbolically or culturally dominant to exercise symbolic violence upon those with a domestic education; a social distinction process which was presented under the guise of "universality – that of reason" (Bourdieu, 1990:84) and also served to legitimate participants' discourse about the prestige of their international degree… and "that, if presented in any other way, would be unacceptable" (ibid).

Thus, symbolic violence was enacted by international graduates on domestic graduates when the former did not attain the economic capital returns they expected in the same cognitive processes used to valorize the symbolic capital of their international degree – as a *coping* mechanism.

Networks once more played a significant role in reinking the boundaries that international graduates established between themselves and domestic graduates. As aforementioned, networks did not provide help in job searching, though did enable – and influence – participants to reconceptualize their international degrees as a means to effect social exclusion and to maintain these schemas. Though there was no material difference between international non-elite and domestic non-elite universities in terms of (diminishing) economic returns, international rationalized their superiority vis-à-vis fellow graduates in terms of amorphous references to being more "cultured" and worldlier.

In this respect, symbolic capital is akin to the concept of cosmopolitan capital identified in studies of globally mobile students. Where cosmopolitan capital "corresponds to feeling at home in the world and speaking foreign languages (especially English), being accustomed to travel and foreign cultures, having international social networks" among those "possessing prestigious academic degrees" (Bamberger, 2020:1367), the symbolic capital articulated in participant accounts extends these attributes to holders of less prestigious, non-elite academic degrees from abroad. Igarashi and Saito (2014) argue that cosmopolitan capital effects distinction and inequality in two ways: (a) "students who pursue higher education outside their home countries help structurate the hierarchically organized global field" (p.228), and so (b) cosmopolitan capital becomes an "institutionalized state of cultural capital… to effect social exclusion from jobs and resources" (p.225-226).

In a similar fashion to (a), participant accounts point to a normative core of Bourdieu's theory of practice that enriches our understanding of global mobility and networks: that advantages do not exist in a vacuum, but exist in polarity; that for advantaged groups to exist, there must exist disadvantaged groups.

However, the present study differs from (b) by capturing the reverse conditions of Igarashi and Saito's (2014) cosmopolitanism: it appears that the general social structure in the labor market has devalued non-elite international degrees, but that participants are the ones struggling to accept this and move on. Put simply, the cosmopolitan flair of international degrees lost its distinct advantages for job hiring, which international degree holders respond to by creating new grounds for symbolic violence in their social lives and personal networks.

These dynamics of symbolic violence ultimately entrench class positions, particularly since international graduates do not successfully dominate across all *fields*. As participants have emphasized, they are not economically superior to their domestic counterparts. Thus, international degree holders from Hong Kong better identify with the interstices between dominating and dominated homologies in different *fields*, coming to resemble an *interstitial homology* – or roles within interstitial *fields*. Invoking parallels with Bourdieu's (1986) examination of the interstitial positionality of intellectuals in the general social structure, international degree graduates in Hong Kong draw close to *dominating* homologous positions in the cultural *field*, but also identify with *dominated* homologous positions in the economic *field*, coming to strengthen *both* types of homologies in ways that entrench their positions.

In a further dialogue with Karen, she implies how doing so has essentially helped her justify her decisions, quickly noting that she would easily repeat her decision, despite its costs:

> "Yes, I would, if I had to do it all over. Because I think even though it's costly, there are some cultural benefits there. I was able to see things that I wouldn't have seen in Hong Kong, compared to my friends who only studied here."

Even Brian, whose yearning for job advantages from his international degree was met with disappointment and who was more hesitant than Karen, still remained positive about repeating the process:

> "Well… I think I might [do it again]. It was expensive and I feel bad for my parents for paying all that money, but… I have to be positive… there's a bright side to my degree, like the global experience… I wish I got the job I studied for though."

Despite the large discrepancy in expected and actual economic advantages participants obtained from their international degree, they defended their degrees and were willing to invest in them again, consistent with the new *doxic* logic of the *field* (the symbolic capital their international degrees provided) that arises from the weakening of the old one (conversion into economic capital).

Not only does it provide scarce opportunity to alter one's material conditions, but the expensive, economically taxing qualities of the practice are masked by a claim to symbolic capital that only serves to inflict social divisions. Furthermore, these symbolic classification schemas of an international degree bulwark student migration in service to the economic gain of Western educational institutions. This gains credence from postcolonial literature that problematizes attachments to ideologies in Asia that benefit Western organizations (Vukovich, 2013), and expands it by suggesting one such pathway in the *field* of education through which such ideologies manifest.

In the cultural *field*, international graduates are the dominant group who use symbolic violence against domestic graduates to sustain the patterns of interpretation that protect the value of their degree. But their very efforts to protect the value of their degree serves to uphold social

structures in the economic *field* that, while capable of providing indirect benefits as with Michael and Edward, largely work to their disadvantage in a massified international education market by forcing them to expend great amounts of financial resources without the promise of commensurate financial returns (Collins et al, 2017). Within this *field,* international degree graduates actively continue to leverage this costly symbolic violence to simultaneously valorize their cultural capital gains and legitimate their economic capital losses from their degrees.

Discussion

This article delineates the role of networks in sedimenting schemas that motivate young adults in postcolonial Hong Kong to pursue international degrees and the resistance of such schemas to cultural change when, even faced with declining job prospects, they strive to recreate distinction by means of symbolic violence in response to the loss of economic capital.

Consistent with the old *doxic* logic of the *field* of education, participants believed that an international degree would offer greater job security post-return to Hong Kong. Instead, they were faced with the decline of an international degree's capacity to be traded into economic capital, which prompted them to strengthen schemas that uphold an alternate conversion pathway into symbolic capital. Shifting their attention from material to immaterial gains, participants began to classify international education as an improvement upon their cultural tastes, worldviews, and values that distinguished themselves. This was in part a *hysteresis*, a longing for an old logic in the *field* – that an international degree was superior –, which was revitalized by a new logic that simply framed this superiority in symbolic terms – that an international degree was still superior, albeit in different ways.

For the symbolic capital of an international degree within education as a field, this becomes a story of symbolic boundaries and, by extension, *symbolic violence* consequential for entrenching class inequality: to sustain the new *doxic* logic of the *field* and to legitimate the prestige of their international degrees, participants enacted symbolic violence against domestic graduates in the cultural *field*. The postcolonial class structure of Hong Kong has historically institutionalized such preferences into its legal frameworks, governing policies, and employment standards as well as peer evaluations in the workplace and peer groups (Go, 2018). Thus, cultural tastes like English music preferences constitute cultural resources that become latent values with which to exclude and disadvantage working class individuals without the economic resources to afford schooling necessary for English fluency (Waters, 2006). Through this symbolic violence, international graduates valorized their sense of symbolic capital to the extent of ignoring the economic costs an international degree inflicted upon them.

There was inevitably heterogeneity across fields of study, such as when designers like Edward emphasized proximity to high street or luxury brands in Europe whereas exercise science students could make no such claim, there was no distinction between them. That is, art graduates did not compare themselves to science graduates, but to other art graduates from local universities. There was structural homology in this sense as graduates from other fields of study did the same, totalizing their conceptions of their degree experiences into the international and local binary that they used to enact symbolic violence against local graduates.

The goal of this study is not to comprehensively sort out which breed of degrees leads to greater labor market success overall. Rather, this study points out how, when faced with *lack* of success, international degree graduates chose to aggrandize the international-local binary to justify their decision to study abroad and vindicate their prestige in contradistinction to those

who did not study abroad. That the location of a degree is chosen as grounds for symbolic violence thus taps into and shows the enduring appetite for age-old colonial conceptions of cultural capital in Hong Kong that valorize foreign (especially Anglo-American) credentials (Lai, 2011).

However, where international degree holders perform better than locals, it is likely to be disproportionately because of class, not cultural capital. Locals who perform worse than international degree holders are working class. Even meritocratic measures like academic performance are determined in no small part by economic resources that constrain and enable students to perform (Roksa & Kinsley, 2019). Working class locals, furthermore, do not possess the resources to leave Hong Kong to study abroad.

This is the core idea behind the interstitial homology (different positions in different fields, namely, dominating positions within the cultural field but dominated positions within the economic field) that international degree graduates occupy. They are distracted by their preoccupation with symbolic capital to the extent that they choose to overlook economic structures as an explanandum for instances when locals perform worse or when they themselves struggle to find a job.

Within this scope, though they may notice changes in the education *field* insofar as their degrees held diminishing returns, they were less quick to accept changing preferences in the labor market, such as Mandarin proficiency (Li & Liu, 2021). Part of participants' subjective disregard for these changing preferences was likely because they studied in Anglo-American societies, where Mandarin was not a commonly spoken language. However, a larger part was because of their choice to entrench, reinforce, and justify the schemas that led them to study

abroad in the first place. These dynamics of symbolic violence ultimately endorse postcolonial attachments to ideologies that service the hegemony of Western educational organizations.

Though this article does not capture experiences of graduates of elite universities, these processes are likely to play out differently for them, given these degree holders generally attract greater attention from potential employers, generate higher income, and move on to higher job positions. Part of this general trajectory of superior labor market outcomes, as this article has theorized, owes to the status and exclusivity that these elite universities preserve on account of their strong financial base that insulates them from dependence on student tuition as a source of income.

This article opens dialogue on future research in two ways. First, future research should examine the social mechanisms that enforce the schemas that motivated the prestige afforded to an international degree, and how the emotional and rational intertwine to make sense of an international graduate's interstitial homology. Second, the dynamics unearthed here call attention to potential disruptions and blockages in other forms of capital conversion that may occur (i.e. social capital), and the need to examine their consequences for the way education as a *field* changes.

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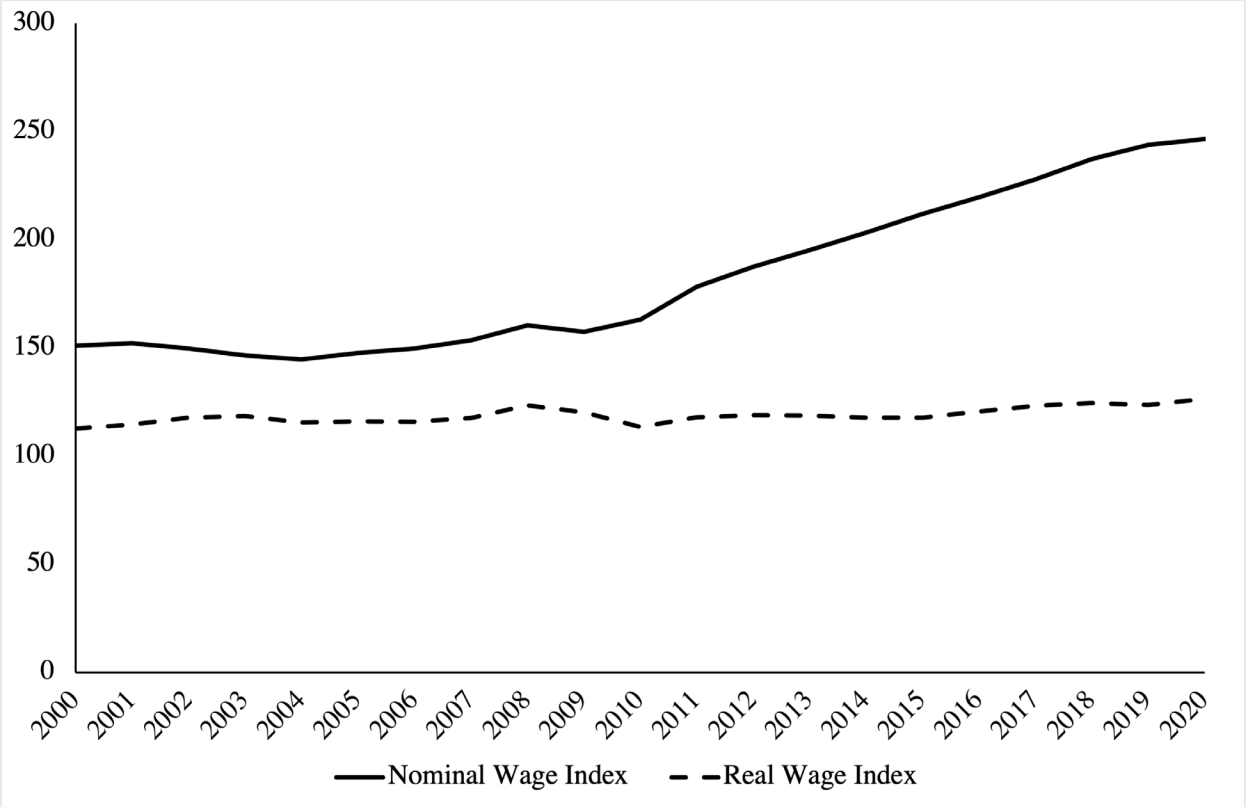
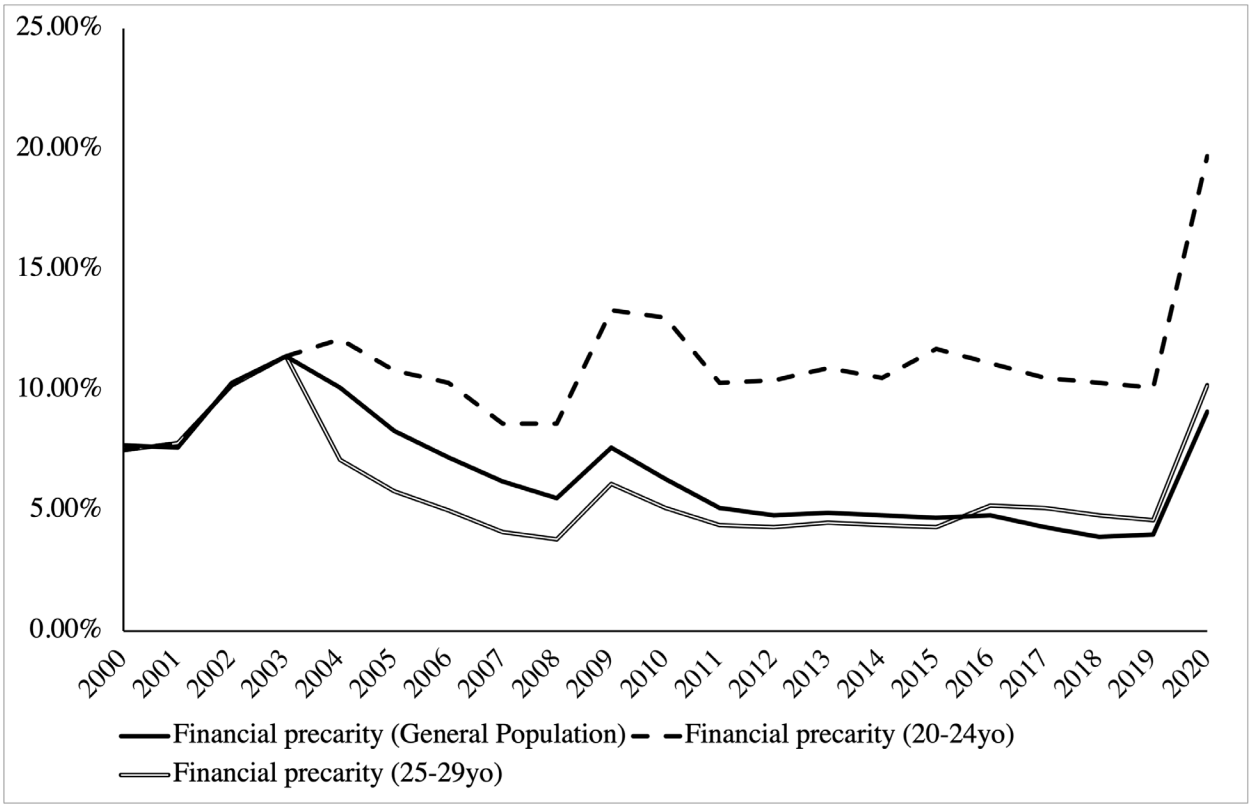
Figures

Figure 1. Nominal wage and real wage indices in Hong Kong (2000-2020). Baseline = 100 in 1992.



Source: Author's calculations using data from the Census and Statistics Department of Hong Kong

Figure 2. Financial precarity among young adults versus general population in Hong Kong (2000-2020).



Source: Author's calculations using data from the Census and Statistics Department of Hong Kong

Tables

Table 1. Median monthly income from main employment in Hong Kong dollars (HK$) across major racial/ethnic categories.

	Median monthly income
White	$50,000
Whole population*	$20,000

*Excludes foreign-born workers

Source: Author's calculations using data from the Census and Statistics Department of Hong Kong

Table 2. Proportion of working population by occupation across major racial/ethnic categories.

	White	Whole population*
Managers/administrators	36.7%	22.0%
Professionals/ associate professionals	51.7%	34.2%
Clerical support and sales	8.9%	25.6%
Craft, plant & machine operators	0.9%	5.5%
Elementary occupations	1.7%	12.5%
Others	0%	0.1%

*Excludes foreign-born workers

Source: Author's calculations using data from the Census and Statistics Department of Hong Kong