Mahjong as interstitial cultural practice: Displacement, liminality, and social formation among mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This ethnographic study examines how Mahjong functions as an interstitial cultural practice among mainland Chinese taught in postgraduate students, living off-campus at a Hong Kong university. Through eight months of participant observation and in-depth interviews with 25 students (2022–2023), the research reveals how these students navigate multiple forms of liminality—between educational stages, cultural contexts, and institutional incorporation. Analysis demonstrates that Mahjong operates through three key mechanisms: (1) strategic utilization of spatial heterogeneity across institutional, domestic, and commercial environments; (2) exploitation of structural conditions including academic temporal flexibility and spatial-economic constraints; and (3) deployment as socio-material infrastructure facilitating social relationship formation and maintenance. Rather than a mere recreational activity, Mahjong emerges as a boundary object enabling social incorporation while preserving cultural continuity. The study also examines how digital platforms reconfigure Mahjong's social dynamics, creating parallel, but distinct, modes of engagement. This research contributes to anthropological theory by illuminating how embodied cultural practices mediate educational migration experiences and constitute alternative forms of sociality within contemporary cross-border educational contexts.

KEYWORDS: interstitial cultural practice, liminality, materiality, cultural adaptation, boundary objects, educational migration, digital remediation

Introduction

The ethnographic investigation of cultural practices in contexts of displacement illuminates recursive negotiations between continuity and adaptation, revealing how subjects navigate experiential tensions while actively constructing meaningful social worlds. These micro-political processes operate not through predetermined frameworks but through intricate negotiations that recursively shape both spatial and social relations. This study examines Mahjong—a traditional Chinese tile-based game—as what I conceptualize as an "interstitial cultural practice" among mainland Chinese taught postgraduate students residing off-campus at a major Hong Kong university. Drawing on extended ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2022 and 2023, this research positions Mahjong not as mere recreational diversion but as embodied engagement that mediates liminal experiences through strategic orchestration of material objects, temporal structures, and social relationships.

The theoretical framework emerges from Turner's (1969) concept of liminality to position mainland Chinese postgraduate students as subjects navigating threshold states characterized by multiple forms of in-betweenness: between educational stages, cultural contexts, and institutional incorporation versus residential externality. This conceptualization builds upon Turner's insights regarding transitional phases where individuals exist "betwixt and between" established social categories and structures. Within this liminal condition, Mahjong operates as what Bourdieu (1990) terms a "structured and structuring structure"—simultaneously shaped by and constitutive of the social worlds these students inhabit. The integration of these theoretical perspectives facilitates examination of how cultural practices function within cross-border educational contexts to mediate experiences of displacement and belonging, revealing governance not as monolithic institutional structures but through granular interactions that constitute broader systemic logics.

This investigation addresses a significant lacuna in anthropological scholarship on cultural practices within cross-border educational migration contexts. While existing research has examined Mahjong in stable domestic environments (Wang, 2018; Zhang, 2014), virtually no ethnographic attention has addressed how traditional practices operate within educational migration contexts among younger populations navigating institutional and cultural transitions. The positioning of Hong Kong as a Special Administrative Region creates a particularly compelling research site where mainland Chinese students encounter cultural familiarity juxtaposed with institutional and social differences—conditions Turner (1969) identifies as conducive to liminal experiences. Unlike

contexts where cultural discontinuity might be more pronounced, Hong Kong offers a calibrated environment where practices like Mahjong operate within subtle registers of similarity and difference, creating productive ambiguity that enables complex cultural negotiations.

The central questions driving this inquiry interrogate: How do cultural practices like Mahjong mediate displacement experiences among mainland Chinese postgraduate students? In what ways do traditional games function as sites of agency within transitional educational contexts? How do subjects strategically deploy and reconfigure traditional forms to address emergent social conditions? These questions illuminate not merely individual adaptation strategies but the relational constitution of cultural citizenship through embodied practice. The research contributes to anthropological theory across three interconnected domains. Firstly, it advances understanding of cultural adaptation within cross-border educational contexts by examining how displaced students actively construct social worlds rather than merely adapting to institutional environments. Secondly, it extends theoretical discussions of materiality and practice by analyzing how objects (Mahjong tiles) and embodied actions (gameplay) function as constitutive elements in the production of sociality rather than solely reflecting pre-existing social structures. Thirdly, it provides preliminary insights into digital transformation processes, documenting how technological mediation reconfigures traditional practices while revealing the continuing significance of embodied co-presence.

Mainland Chinese taught postgraduate students living off-campus in Hong Kong constitute an ideal population for examining interstitial cultural practices due to their distinctive positioning within multiple dimensions of liminality. Hong Kong's "One Country, Two Systems" framework creates a socio-political context where mainland students encounter familiar yet institutionally differentiated terrain, generating what might be termed "calibrated displacement" that enables nuanced examination of cultural adaptation strategies. The off-campus residential situation positions these students at intersections of institutional incorporation and spatial externality, creating what Bhabha (1994) terms "third spaces" where cultural negotiations become particularly salient and observable. The postgraduate status adds temporal liminality to this configuration, as students occupy transitional positions between educational stages and anticipated professional trajectories, creating multiple overlapping threshold conditions that render cultural practices particularly significant for identity formation and social world construction.

Methodology and literature context

Methodological approach

This research employed extended ethnographic fieldwork integrated with in-depth interviews to generate nuanced understanding of Mahjong's significance among mainland Chinese postgraduate students. Ethnographic access, a critical phase requiring careful negotiation of institutional and social boundaries, was pursued through university-affiliated mainland student associations and online forums popular among this demographic in Hong Kong. This strategy facilitated identification of key contacts and cultivation of rapport essential for sustained ethnographic inquiry (Spradley, 1979). Participant networks expanded primarily through snowball sampling, particularly effective for accessing specific communities navigating liminal institutional positions (Atkinson & Flint, 2001).

Over eight months from September 2022 to May 2023, I conducted participant observation of Mahjong sessions across multiple spatial configurations: university library spaces, students' off-campus residences, and commercial Mahjong parlors. This multi-sited approach enabled documentation not merely of verbal exchanges and explicit gameplay rules but also embodied dimensions of practice—rhythmic temporalities, spatial arrangements, and affective atmospheres generated through collective engagement. My positionality as both researcher and participant, learning Mahjong during fieldwork, enabled what Wacquant (2005) terms "carnal sociology," providing access to embodied knowledge constituting the phenomenological experience of gameplay.

As documented in field notes: "Today was my third Mahjong session with this group. The physical repetition of drawing, discarding, and rearranging tiles is becoming intuitive now. There's a rhythm to the game that doesn't translate into written rules—a bodily knowledge that seems central to how these students experience the social dimension of play." This embodied engagement revealed Mahjong's operation as more than recreational activity, functioning as socio-material infrastructure through which social relations are negotiated and cultural meanings circulated.

The ethnographic approach was complemented by 25 semi-structured interviews with mainland Chinese postgraduate students (14 women, 11 men), ranging from 23 to 29 years of age, representing diverse academic fields including business, engineering, and social sciences. Interview protocols explored participants' educational backgrounds, Mahjong experiences prior to and during Hong Kong residence, and reflections on the game's social significance. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin, audio-recorded with permission, and subsequently transcribed and translated for analysis. The analytical ap-

proach proceeded through iterative engagement with translated transcripts and detailed field notes, identifying salient patterns, recurrent topics, and key concepts emerging from participants' accounts. This recursive process enabled triangulation between observed behaviors, spatial arrangements, and participant narratives, constructing nuanced interpretation of how Mahjong mediates social relations within this student population.

Literature context and theoretical positioning

This study intersects with anthropological domains examining how cultural practices mediate displacement experiences and operate as constitutive mechanisms in social world-building. Existing scholarship on Mahjong reveals multifaceted sociocultural dimensions that illuminate the game's polyvalent significance across diverse contexts, though with notable gaps regarding educational migration contexts.

Zhang (2014) conceptualizes Mahjong as a vehicle for Chinese cultural transmission, embodying societal values of solidarity, co-operation, and mutual aid that transcend recreational function. It is important to acknowledge China's profound ethno-cultural diversity, with 56 officially recognized ethnic groups contributing distinct customs and languages to the nation's cultural tapestry. References to "Chinese culture" in widespread practices like Mahjong often pertain to dominant cultural repertoires, particularly those associated with Han Chinese traditions and Mandarin-speaking communities where the game holds significant historical prevalence (Fei, 1989). Zhang's analysis demonstrates how gameplay material practices simultaneously encode and reproduce cultural logics shaping intersubjective relations, rendering Mahjong a repository of embodied cultural knowledge.

Liu (2015) elucidates how Mahjong tables function as nodal points within community networks, creating spatiotemporal frameworks wherein participants engage in affective exchanges that reinforce social bonds while alleviating isolation experiences. This interpersonal function proves particularly significant among elderly populations seeking refuge from social marginalization. Huang et al. (2021) deploy grounded theory to examine how immersive Mahjong experiences contribute to subjective well-being and identity consolidation among middle-aged and elderly participants, identifying psychological needs, motivational structures, and contextual affordances that shape how practice fosters social interaction and self-conceptualization.

Critical analyses simultaneously reveal Mahjong's ambivalent implications. Peng (2016) documents how Mahjong proliferation catalyzes transformations in traditional spatial practices, as Chengdu teahouses undergo semiotic flattening through Mahjong's spatial dominance. Li (2015) examines Mahjong's complex role in rural social formations, where gameplay facilitates relationship maintenance while reproducing existing power structures. Tao et al. (2017) identify structural constraints circumscribing Mahjong's capacity for substantive interpersonal connections, as spatially confined character and absorptive qualities privilege competitive engagement over meaningful intersubjective exchange.

This literature reveals a significant research lacuna—existing scholarship privileges rural contexts and older demographic cohorts, leaving unexamined how Mahjong operates within cross-border educational settings among younger populations. While Wang (2018) documents Mahjong practices in stable domestic environments, virtually no ethnographic attention addresses how this cultural practice reconfigures through educational migration and cultural liminality experiences. The present study addresses this gap by examining how mainland Chinese postgraduate students strategically deploy Mahjong as an "interstitial cultural practice" mediating their threshold positioning between educational stages, cultural contexts, and institutional incorporation.

The theoretical framing draws on several traditions while synthesizing them into a coherent analytical framework. From Turner's (1969) liminality work, I adopt "betwixt and between" concepts characterizing mainland Chinese postgraduate students' threshold positioning navigating multiple transitions simultaneously. This liminality creates what Turner terms "communitas"—temporary suspension of hierarchical social structures enabling alternative sociality forms. From Bourdieu's (1990) practice theory, I incorporate understanding of practices as simultaneously structured and structuring—both shaped by existing social arrangements and constitutive of new social formations. This dialectical conception illuminates how Mahjong reflects pre-existing cultural dispositions while actively reconfiguring social relationships within novel cross-border educational contexts.

From material culture studies, particularly Miller's (2005) work, I draw insights regarding how objects function as mediators in social relationships rather than passive cultural meaning reflections. This approach highlights how Mahjong tiles and material gameplay configurations actively participate in sociality constitution rather than merely symbolizing cultural attachment or nostalgic orientation. This theoretical synthesis offers a framework for understanding how cultural practices operate within displacement and belonging interstices, illuminating complex ways subjects navigate educational migra-

tion experiences through strategic deployment of embodied cultural knowledge. The framework enables conceptualization of Mahjong not merely as recreational activity but as interstitial cultural practice functioning as an agency site amid academic migration, revealing governance through granular interactions that constitute broader systemic logics of cultural adaptation and social incorporation

The Spatial Heterogeneity of Mahjong Practice

Ethnographic evidence reveals that Mahjong practices among mainland Chinese postgraduate students manifest through distinctly heterogeneous spatial configurations that function as more than neutral backdrops for gameplay. These spatial variations—encompassing institutional spaces, domestic environments, and commercial establishments—constitute active participants in sociality production and cultural meaning-making. The spatial context of Mahjong play inflects intersubjective dynamics, temporal structures, and cultural significances emerging through gameplay, producing distinctive modalities of social interaction that reflect broader patterns of cultural adaptation and identity negotiation within cross-border educational contexts.

Ms. W[1], who completed undergraduate studies in mainland China, regularly orchestrates Mahjong sessions within the early morning Learning Commons of the university library. This strategic appropriation of institutional academic space for recreational activity constitutes what de Certeau (1984) theorizes as spatial "tactics"—the art of re-appropriating spaces defined by institutional "strategies" for users' own purposes. During a campus interview, she explained:

> We come here around 5 AM when almost no one is around. It's quiet, spacious, and we can talk freely. We bring a foldable Mahjong set—it makes less noise than traditional tiles. Sometimes we play for two hours before our 8 AM classes.

Her statement reveals calculated site selection and timing, aimed at minimizing visibility while maximizing functional benefits. Participants comprise former undergraduate classmates maintaining social connections through postgraduate transitions. My observations revealed multi-modal interactions, with Mahjong play alternating with coursework discussions, shared undergraduate memories, and smartphone video viewing. Such repurposing of formal academic spaces for informal needs represents documented phenomena among university students seeking "third places" fostering community and well-being (Gumprecht, 2007; Oldenburg, 1999).

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[1] All participant names were anonymized using single letters to protect their privacy.

The temporal positioning during early morning hours constitutes strategic inversion of conventional academic temporalities. By occupying the Learning Commons during minimal institutional surveillance periods, Ms. W's group establishes what Scott (1990) identifies as a "hidden transcript"—semi-private domains where subordinate groups articulate practices that evade dominant cultural norms while minimizing direct confrontation. For mainland Chinese postgraduate students navigating liminal positions between the home culture and the Hong Kong academic environment, this practice signifies not an overt resistance but a proactive strategy for cultural maintenance and psychological comfort. During one observed session, a security guard passed without intervention—a moment prompting visible participant relief. As Ms. W later explained: "They know we're not causing trouble. We're just students finding ways to feel at home here." This sentiment underscores the place-making dimension of their actions, creating pockets of familiarity within institutional environments to ease adaptation (Gustafson, 2001).

Domestic space and recreational intensification

Private domestic spaces offer contrasting contexts characterized by greater autonomy and potential for recreational intensification. Mr. H, whose undergraduate education occurred in Canadian institutions, transforms his residential accommodation into a regular Mahjong site. The home evolves beyond a dwelling into a significant socio-spatial hub, enabling personalized environments for social connection away from institutional constraints (Mallett, 2004). During an apartment interview, he gestured to the foldable table while describing events:

> Every Wednesday around noon, people start showing up. We play Mahjong until early evening, then switch to drinking and poker. It becomes a whole day thing. Since I live near Hung Hom, friends from other universities come too—it's become known as "H's Mahjong Wednesday."

These events follow structured temporal progressions, beginning midday Wednesdays and extending into nocturnal hours, with afternoon Mahjong transitioning to alcohol consumption and poker games. My participant observation of three gatherings revealed progressive social dynamics transformation: relatively structured afternoon competition gradually giving way to more boisterous, emotionally expressive evening interactions facilitated by the private setting's enabling relaxation of social inhibitions (Vohs et al., 2018).

Domestic space utilization maximizes autonomy while minimizing institutional constraints. Within rental accommodation privacy, Mr. H orchestrates extended recreational sequences impossible within institutionally regulated spaces. As he explained:

> In the university, you're always aware of being watched or judged. Here, we can be ourselves completely. People can stay overnight if they drink too much. We can be loud. The neighbors are mostly students too, so they understand.

This perceived freedom from surveillance contrasts sharply with "frontstage" demands of public institutional life, creating "backstage" environments where students feel they can "be themselves completely" (Goffman, 1959).

The trans-institutional character incorporating participants from multiple universities illustrates how domestic recreational spaces facilitate social network formation transcending geographical and institutional boundaries typically structuring student sociality. Mr. H's residence functions as a "nodal point" within broader mainland Chinese student networks, creating possibilities for expanded social connections beyond institutional affiliation constraints (Granovetter, 1973).

Commercial space and specialized sociality

Commercial Mahjong establishments foster more specialized sociality centered on technical execution and competitive gameplay aspects. Mr. Y, who completed undergraduate studies in Hong Kong, described regular patronage of such venues:

> I go to the Mahjong parlor in Mong Kok about twice a week. I prefer professional tables and proper equipment. There's something about the atmosphere there—everyone takes the game seriously, which I appreciate. It's mostly mainland students from our university, both undergrads and postgrads.

Fieldwork at two commercial establishments confirmed relatively homogeneous participant composition—predominantly mainland-originating students. Unlike multi-modal interactions observed in institutional and domestic settings, commercial sessions displayed greater gameplay focus, with less peripheral conversation and minimal engagement with other activities. Commercial space utilization constitutes recreational specialization privileging technical gameplay aspects over broader social dynamics. This aligns with "serious leisure" concepts where participants invest significant effort in acquiring and expressing skills in chosen activities (Stebbins, 1992).

Within these establishments, spatial configuration, equipment standardization, and ambient environment optimize specifically for Mahjong play rather than accommodating multiple sociality forms. During one observed session, a participant repeatedly checked smartphone updates to online strategy guides, occasionally sharing insights—a practice never witnessed in more socially-oriented library or domestic settings. As Mr. Y explained: "At the parlor, we're there to improve our skills. The social part is secondary." This explicit skill development focus defines the "specialized sociality" emerging in commercial Mahjong spaces.

Cultural logics of spatial selection

These divergent spatial strategies embody what Bourdieu (1990) conceptualizes as "habitus"—deeply internalized dispositions generating and organizing practices. Spatial selections represent culturally meaningful strategies reflecting distinctive orientations toward sociality, privacy, and cultural identity rather than merely pragmatic decisions. Ms. W's Learning Commons utilization exemplifies spatial "tactics" enabling cultural continuity within institutional constraints, reflecting orientation toward "communal sociality" resonating with Chinese social organization's emphasis on collective engagement (Fei, 1992). This aligns with anthropological literature on place-making among displaced populations, where subjects actively transform institutional environments into culturally meaningful spaces (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992).

Mr. H's domestic space transformation reflects spatial logic prioritizing "intensive sociality" through extended temporal sequences enabling deeper social bond development. This strategy aligns with analyses of how migrants create "home spaces" enabling cultural practice reproduction under displacement conditions (Ahmed et al., 2003). The trans-institutional character demonstrates how private spaces function as "contact zones" where different social networks intersect and new community forms emerge (Anderson, 1991).

Mr. Y's commercial establishment preference represents spatial logic oriented toward "specialized engagement" reflecting experience commodification where commercial environments provide optimized conditions for specific activities (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). The homogeneous participant composition creates "symbolic boundaries" maintaining cultural distinctiveness through spatial segregation, resonating with analyses of how immigrant communities utilize commercial spaces creating "ethnic enclaves" preserving cultural practices while adapting to new economic environments (Zhou, 1992).

These spatial practices collectively illustrate "cultural flows" transcending territorial boundaries and creating new belonging forms (Appadurai, 1996). Participants' strategic deployment of different spaces demonstrates agency in constructing "traveling cultures"—mobile cultural identity forms adapting to local conditions while maintaining core practices and meanings (Clifford, 1997). Rather than representing simple cultural preservation or linear assimilation, these practices embody "cultural hybridity"—creative recombination of traditional practices with new spatial and social conditions producing novel cultural expression forms (Bhabha, 1994).

Structural and affective dimensions of Mahjong practice

The prevalence of Mahjong among mainland Chinese postgraduate students reflects complex convergences of structural, material, and affective factors creating what Leisterer-Peoples et al. (2021) conceptualize as "cultural affordances"—environmental conditions that both constrain and enable specific cultural practices. This analysis extends beyond functionalist explanations to examine how the game's material properties, temporal requirements, and emotional dynamics operate as constitutive elements within broader processes of cultural adaptation among displaced student populations, revealing governance not as monolithic institutional structures but through granular interactions that constitute broader systemic logics.

Contemporary anthropological research emphasizes games' roles as "socio-temporal infrastructures" organizing collective experience beyond entertainment (Watson, 2023). Postgraduate students navigate educational schedules characterized by significant flexibility and discontinuity, creating structural conditions particularly favorable to Mahjong practice. During focus group discussions, participants articulated this structural alignment:

"As a master's student, my classes are only Tuesday to Thursday. Sometimes just Tuesday and Thursday. The other days are completely free for research or whatever you want," explained Ms. C, a finance student. "The professors assume we're studying or working on projects during those free days, but honestly, there's a lot of downtime," added Mr. W, with others nodding in agreement.

This compressed scheduling produces distinctive "rhythmanalysis" (Lefebvre, 2004)—temporal ecologies privileging certain recreational modalities through extensive "interstitial periods" (Turner, 1969). These temporal interstices remain largely unregulated by institutional surveillance, creating structural affordances conducive to practices requir-

ing synchronous multi-participant engagement over extended durations. The game's structural requirements—typically demanding three to four participants for several hours—align precisely with postgraduate academic schedules' distinctive temporal affordances, creating what Giddens (1984) conceptualizes as "structuration"—recursive relationships between social structures and human agency wherein temporal arrangements both constrain and enable particular social practices.

However, critical engagement reveals potential disciplinary dimensions. Following Foucault's (1977) biopower analysis, recreational activity concentration within institutionally designated "free time" may reinforce distinctions between "productive" academic time and "leisure" cultural time, potentially constraining rather than enabling genuine cultural autonomy. Yet ethnographic analysis reveals participants deploying tactical temporalities subverting these distinctions, as exemplified by early morning library sessions representing "temporal tactics" (de Certeau, 1984) that creatively appropriate institutional time structures for divergent purposes.

Material participation and affective economies

Mahjong sessions reveal complex material-affective dynamics constituting what Ahmed (2004) theorizes as "affective economies"—emotional circulation systems binding subjects through shared feeling states. These dynamics transcend conventional recreational engagement to encompass constitutive mechanisms of social incorporation and cultural adaptation. While monetary exchange is not intrinsically necessary, participants typically employ token economic systems using small-denomination chips with predetermined limits. As one participant explained during play: "We're not gambling for real money—just small tokens to make it exciting. No one loses more than 30 yuan in a day, but it's enough to make each game matter."

Fieldwork documented embodied dimensions of material engagements—physical reactions including triumphant fist-clenching, exaggerated disappointment sighs, and playful luck accusations—demonstrating affective intensity generated through minimal economic involvement. This calibrated economic element incorporation serves what anthropologists identify as "affective amplification" (Beatty, 2019), creating sufficient emotional investment for meaningful competitive engagement without reproducing exploitative gambling dynamics.

Regional variations in Mahjong practice modulate these affective dynamics, demonstrating sophisticated cultural competence in managing inclusive sociality. As one participant explained:

> Hangzhou Mahjong relies more on luck, so anyone can win occasionally. Sichuan Mahjong requires more skill and calculation. We switch between them depending on who's playing. With beginners, we play Hangzhou style to keep it fun for everyone.

This adaptive calibration creates what recent migration anthropology identifies as "affective hospitality" (Liu & Dong, 2019)—emotional labor creating welcoming environments for cultural newcomers while maintaining meaningful engagement for experienced participants.

During extended observation sessions, I documented emotional synchronization across participants—from initial focused concentration to shared excitement, collective disappointment groans, and synchronized laughter. As one student reflected:

> There's something contagious about Mahjong emotions. When someone gets excited about a good hand, everyone feels it. When someone has terrible luck, we all share in the frustration. It creates this shared emotional experience that brings people closer.

This synchronization demonstrates "emotional co-regulation" (Beatty, 2019)—processes through which collective engagement generates shared affective substrates facilitating social bonding beyond immediate gameplay contexts.

Spatial-economic constraints and cultural adaptation

Hong Kong's distinctive spatial economy creates material conditions demonstrating "spatial selectivity" (Low, 2017)—ways particular environments privilege specific cultural practices through material configurations. Extreme spatial density, limited residential space, and elevated cost structures create conditions differentially advantaging certain recreational practices. During apartment visits, I documented compact living arrangements with most students residing in shared flats where individual bedrooms measured less than 10 square meters. As one participant noted while setting up a compact set:

> This is perfect for Hong Kong apartments. It folds up completely, and we just need this small table. We couldn't play basketball or even card games that need a bigger table, but Mahjong works fine.

Mahjong's minimal spatial requirements position it as a "material mediator" enabling cultural practice persistence despite environmental limitations (Miller, 2005). This material flexibility contrasts with recreational activities requiring substantial infrastructure, revealing how cultural practices survive displacement through strategic adaptation to available material conditions rather than faithful reproduction of origin contexts.

Hong Kong's economic landscape similarly privileges Mahjong as "diversionary consumption" (Appadurai, 1986)—recreational practices providing meaningful social engagement without significant economic burden. Participants frequently compared costs of different leisure activities, revealing sophisticated economic calculations positioning recreational choices within broader resource management strategies:

> Going to karaoke in Hong Kong costs at least 200 HKD per person. Movies are 100 HKD. A night at the bar easily reaches 300-400 HKD. But Mahjong? Just a one-time purchase of a set for about 300 HKD that we all share. It's basically free entertainment after that.

These comparative analyses demonstrate navigation of "experience economy" dynamics through strategic avoidance rather than consumption practices (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Rather than purchasing commodified recreational experiences, participants create autonomous cultural experiences resisting commodification while maintaining meaningful social engagement. This positioning represents "hidden transcripts" of economic resistance—practices maintaining cultural autonomy through strategic disengagement from dominant economic systems (Scott, 1990).

Adaptive cultural assemblages and the micro-politics of spatial governance

This integrated analysis demonstrates how Mahjong's structural and affective dimensions contribute to anthropological theorizing about cultural adaptation under displacement conditions by revealing recreational practices as complex mediating mechanisms rather than simple preservation strategies. The convergence of temporal flexibility, material accessibility, and affective engagement creates "adaptive cultural assemblages"—practice configurations enabling cultural continuity through strategic reconfiguration rather than faithful reproduction.

These findings challenge binary cultural adaptation models opposing preservation to transformation, revealing instead how cultural practices persist through dynamic processes of contextual adaptation maintaining core cultural meanings while reconfiguring material expressions. The structural compatibility between Mahjong's participatory re-

quirements and postgraduate temporal organization creates conditions for "cultural flow" (Appadurai, 1996)—cultural practice circulation across geographical and institutional boundaries through creative adaptation processes rather than mechanical replication.

The ethnographic evidence demonstrates how cultural practices operate as active agents within social world-construction processes rather than passive reflections of pre-existing cultural attachments. Understanding cultural persistence under displacement conditions requires attention not merely to symbolic meanings but to material affordances enabling or constraining cultural practice within specific environmental configurations, revealing governance through micro-political negotiations that recursively transform both spatial arrangements and social relations.

Mahjong as interstitial practice in social world construction

The anthropological investigation of cultural practices in displacement contexts reveals how subjects strategically deploy traditional activities to navigate experiential tensions between cultural continuity and social integration. This analysis conceptualizes Mahjong as an "interstitial cultural practice"—embodied engagement mediating liminal experiences through strategic orchestration of material objects, temporal structures, and social relationships. Drawing on developments in migration anthropology and social identity theory, this section examines how Mahjong functions as a "boundary object" (Star & Griesemer, 1989) facilitating social incorporation while enabling multiple forms of cultural identification through micro-political negotiations that recursively transform both spatial arrangements and social relations.

Recent meta-analytical research demonstrates social identity formation as a crucial mechanism for psychosocial development among migrating populations, particularly for individuals navigating cross-border educational transitions (Hu & Cheung, 2024). Mainland Chinese postgraduate students experience what Turner (1969) conceptualizes as "liminality"—threshold states characterized by multiple forms of in-betweenness creating psychological vulnerability and creative potential for social reconfiguration. Contemporary migration studies emphasize how displaced subjects develop "hybrid identities" through strategic negotiation of cultural boundaries rather than simple assimilation to dominant institutional norms (Boland, 2020).

The structural conditions of postgraduate academic life create distinctive challenges for social incorporation that illuminate broader questions concerning identity formation

under educational migration conditions. Compressed cohort structures, specialized course sequences, and absence of shared residential experiences generate "institutional atomization"—conditions constraining opportunities for sustained social interaction within formal academic frameworks. As one participant articulated: "In undergraduate, you have the same classmates for four years. In master's programs, everyone takes different electives. There might be only 2-3 people taking exactly the same courses as you. You barely get to know people through classes."

These institutional limitations create structural imperatives for alternative mechanisms of social incorporation operating beyond formal academic boundaries, positioning recreational practices as crucial sites for relationship development and identity negotiation. Mahjong emerges as "social infrastructure"—material and symbolic resources enabling meaningful social relationship construction within displacement and institutional constraint conditions. The strategic deployment among mainland Chinese postgraduate students demonstrates sophisticated cultural competence in managing "belonging navigation" (Tullah et al., 2024)—complex processes through which displaced subjects construct viable social membership forms balancing cultural maintenance with contextual adaptation.

Ethnographic documentation revealed pronounced preferences for recreational modalities characterized by economic accessibility, temporal flexibility, and participatory inclusiveness. A distinctive feature manifested in a fundamentally non-exclusionary character: social formations with permeable boundaries accommodating continual incorporation of previously unacquainted participants. As one student described: "Our Mahjong gatherings aren't closed circles. People always bring new friends. Someone who was a stranger last week is part of the group this week. That's how our network keeps growing."

Observational data confirmed progressive social expansion patterns, with 17 of 28 documented sessions including at least one first-time participant introduced through existing connections. This structural openness facilitated development of "bridging social capital"—connections transcending immediate social circles to create broader networks of potential support and collaboration (Granovetter, 1973). The recursive nature of Mahjong play generates conditions for "temporal intimacy"—social bonding forms emerging through sustained co-presence and shared attentional focus rather than deliberate relationship-building strategies.

Motivational heterogeneity and strategic cultural deployment

Ethnographic analysis reveals complex motivational orientation patterns toward Mahjong practice that illuminate broader questions concerning relationships between individual agency and collective cultural reproduction. Recent research on migrant identity formation emphasizes how displaced subjects deploy cultural practices to negotiate multiple, potentially contradictory, identification forms rather than maintaining singular cultural attachments (Tullah et al., 2024). Analysis reveals "motivational heterogeneity"—co-existence of diverse, potentially incommensurable, orientations toward shared cultural practices within single social assemblages.

For some participants, Mahjong engagement represents strategic deployment of "instrumental sociality"—utilization of the game's social affordances for network expansion and relationship development. Several students explicitly articulated this approach:

> To be honest, I don't particularly enjoy Mahjong itself. But it's an easy way to be part of a group, to meet new people. Everyone knows how to play, so you instantly have something in common with strangers.

This demonstrates "strategic cultural deployment"—calculated utilization of traditional practices for purposes beyond conventional cultural meanings, reflecting broader cultural adaptation patterns under displacement conditions.

In contrast, ethnographic analysis documented alternative motivational structures wherein Mahjong constitutes "passionate engagement"—intrinsic interest in ludic practice transcending instrumental social objectives. Mr. K's case provides illumination; during apartment interviews, he articulated qualitatively different relationships to practice:

> I've been playing since I was a teenager. There's something beautiful about the game—the strategy, the calculations, the psychological elements. I organize these sessions because I genuinely love playing. Finding enough people is always the challenge, so I've built a group that meets here regularly.

This motivational differentiation creates complex interactional dynamics within Mahjong-centered social formations. The co-existence of instrumentally-oriented participants with passion-driven players generates "collaborative tensions"—situations wherein different expectations regarding purpose and significance create subtle misalignments in behavioral co-ordination and emotional investment. During fieldwork, I documented occasional friction arising from divergent orientations—when socially-oriented players engaged in extensive conversation during gameplay, frustrating those focused on competitive engagement.

Social catalysis and relationship development

Longitudinal analysis reveals distinctive patterns of "relational escalation" illuminating how cultural practices facilitate transitions from casual acquaintance to meaningful social connection. Ms. C's trajectory provides ethnographic illustration. Through introduction during a music appreciation course, she encountered Mahjong practice for the first time, subsequently utilizing the game as foundation for expanding social networks. During interviews, she recounted this transformative sequence:

> I never played Mahjong before coming to Hong Kong. After learning in that first session, I started inviting dorm mates and neighbors to play in our common room. At first, we were just acquaintances playing a game together. But after a few weeks, we started having dinner before playing. Then we tried hiking one weekend instead of Mahjong. Now we're close friends who travel together during holidays—we just returned from a trip to Taiwan. Mahjong was just the beginning.

This developmental trajectory illuminates how Mahjong functions as "transitional cultural practice"—activities providing temporary structural support for relationship development but becoming progressively less central as social bonds strengthen through diversified shared experiences. The recursive engagement created embodied familiarity and mutual recognition enabling subsequent transitions into more varied collective activity forms. The shared experiential substrate generated through sustained encounters produced "affective synchronization"—alignment of emotional dispositions and behavioral expectations facilitating mutual recognition and social affinity.

Critical ethnographic analysis reveals that Mahjong's contribution to substantive relationship development operates through indirect rather than direct mechanisms. The practice functions less as an immediate catalyst for intimate social bonds than as "relational infrastructure" co-ordinating bodies in space, structuring collective temporal experience, and generating conditions of possibility for meaningful social connection. As one participant insightfully reflected:

> Mahjong itself doesn't make us close friends. But it creates the situation where friendship can develop. While playing, we talk about our lives, share meals, make jokes... these things around the game are what build real relationships.

Boundary objects and the negotiated production of cultural citizenship

This ethnographic analysis contributes to contemporary anthropological theorizing about cultural adaptation and identity formation among cross-border student populations by demonstrating how traditional practices function as complex mediating mechanisms rather than simple preservation strategies. The evidence reveals how mainland Chinese postgraduate students strategically deploy Mahjong to construct "flexible cultural citizenship"—belonging forms accommodating multiple identification while enabling meaningful social integration within institutional environments (Boland, 2020).

The strategic utilization of Mahjong as a boundary object illuminates broader processes of "identity work" through which displaced subjects negotiate complex tensions between cultural maintenance and contextual adaptation. Rather than representing binary choices between preservation and assimilation, these practices enable "cultural hybridity"—creative recombination of traditional forms with novel social and material conditions producing innovative cultural identity expressions (Bhabha, 1994).

The ethnographic evidence challenges functionalist interpretations reducing recreational practices to instrumental mechanisms for social connection, revealing instead how cultural activities operate as sites of "ontological experimentation"—spaces wherein subjects explore alternative possibilities for social identification and relational engagement. The motivational heterogeneity documented within Mahjong-centered assemblages demonstrates how single cultural practices simultaneously accommodate multiple, potentially contradictory, forms of cultural identification and social objective, revealing governance not as monolithic institutional control but through granular interactions that constitute broader systemic logics of cultural adaptation and social incorporation.

Mahjong and the configuration of interest-based sociality

The anthropological investigation of recreational practices within cross-border educational migration contexts reveals complex dynamics that transcend functionalist explanations of cultural activity. This analysis examines how Mahjong functions within what contemporary leisure studies conceptualize as "interest-based sociality"—collective association forms organized around shared engagement with specific practices rather than predetermined social categories (Wang et al., 2024). These formations emerge not through monolithic institutional structures but through intricate micro-political negotiations that recursively shape both spatial arrangements and social relations, revealing governance as a dynamic, contingent practice rather than a predetermined administrative framework.

Ethnographic analysis reveals intricate motivational patterns that resist reduction to singular explanatory frameworks, demonstrating how recreational spaces become sites for negotiated production of social authority through granular interactions. Among mainland Chinese postgraduate students, Mahjong engagement manifests through "motivational heterogeneity"—co-existence of multiple, potentially contradictory orientations toward shared practices within single social assemblages. These dynamics constitute productive ambiguity in social relations, enabling differential incorporation of participants while maintaining collective coherence.

For many participants, engagement represents strategic deployment of "instrumental sociality"—utilization of the game's social affordances for network expansion and relationship development. As one student explicitly articulated:

> To be honest, I don't particularly enjoy Mahjong itself. But it's an easy way to be part of a group, to meet new people. Everyone knows how to play, so you instantly have something in common with strangers.

Ms. L's case exemplifies this instrumentalized orientation. Her ludic socialization occurred within familial contexts prior to migration, establishing competence without generating passionate attachment. During interviews, she explained: "I don't find it particularly exciting, but I still join games here regularly. It's not about the game—it's about being included in the social circle. Through Mahjong groups, I've met people who've helped me with research, housing, even job opportunities. The game is just the entry point."

This strategic engagement exemplifies what Bourdieu (1986) conceptualizes as "social capital accumulation"—deliberate cultivation of network connections within educational displacement contexts. However, rather than simple instrumental calculation, these practices reveal reactive regulation as a governance technique wherein participants navigate institutional constraints through cultural practice deployment.

In contrast, ethnographic analysis documented alternative motivational structures wherein Mahjong constitutes "passionate engagement"—intrinsic interest transcending instrumental social objectives. Mr. K's case provides illumination:

> I've been playing since I was a teenager. There's something beautiful about the game—the strategy, the calculations, the psychological elements. I organize these sessions because I genuinely love playing.

Mr. K explicitly acknowledged the secondary nature of social relationships within his gaming practice: "I care more about maintaining enough skilled players than about who specifically attends. The game itself is what matters to me."

The co-existence of instrumental and passionate orientations creates complex interactional dynamics requiring continuous negotiation of social authority within gaming assemblages. This motivational heterogeneity introduces both integrative possibilities and collaborative tensions, as different expectations regarding purpose and significance generate subtle dynamics through relationality of encounters rather than predetermined hierarchies. During fieldwork, I documented occasional tensions arising from divergent orientations—when socially-oriented players engaged in extensive conversation during gameplay, prompting frustration from those focused on competitive engagement. As one serious player remarked: "Can we focus on the game? You can chat afterward."

Such moments illuminate how shared activities simultaneously connect and divide participants based on underlying motivational frameworks, revealing fault lines between different approaches to cultural practice. These dynamics demonstrate governance not as an external imposition but as an emergent property of micro-political strategies of claim-making within recreational spaces.

Boundary objects, symbiotic relationships, and social authority

Mahjong functions as what Star and Griesemer (1989) conceptualize as a "boundary object"—an entity sufficiently flexible to accommodate diverse interpretive frameworks while maintaining coherence for collective engagement. This flexibility enables "differential participation" wherein subjects maintain varying emotional investments while contributing to shared recreational activities, creating productive ambiguity that facilitates social incorporation across motivational differences.

For instrumentally-oriented participants, the game serves as a social infrastructure enabling network expansion and relationship development. For passionate players, it represents a strategic challenge and aesthetic appreciation demanding technical competence and competitive engagement. This multivalent functionality demonstrates how cultural practices operate as sites where recursive transformation of social space occurs through negotiated accommodation of multiple orientations rather than imposed uniformity.

The recursive nature of these accommodations reveals how interest-based sociality emerges through contingent negotiations rather than predetermined organizational logic. Participants continuously adjust behavioral presentations and expectations based on

emerging group dynamics, creating what might be termed "collaborative governance" wherein social authority develops through consensual navigation of motivational differences rather than hierarchical imposition.

The co-existence of instrumental and passionate orientations creates complementary dynamics enhancing cultural practice sustainability within cross-border educational contexts. Instrumentally-oriented participants contribute social expansion enabling practices to persist within novel environments, while passionate players provide cultural knowledge maintaining activity integrity and competitive standards. This symbiotic relationship demonstrates how cultural practices survive displacement through adaptive co-ordination between different forms of individual investment rather than uniform cultural devotion.

These dynamics challenge essentialist interpretations of cultural transmission processes, revealing instead how traditional activities persist through what might be termed "negotiated reproduction"—ongoing processes wherein cultural forms adapt to local conditions while maintaining recognizable continuity. The sustainability emerges not through faithful preservation but through strategic accommodation of diverse motivational orientations within shared practice frameworks.

The ethnographic evidence thus reveals interest-based sociality as a distinctive social organization form emerging through strategic deployment of cultural practices rather than predetermined categories. This enables displaced subjects to construct meaningful social worlds accommodating diverse motivational orientations while facilitating cultural continuity within cross-border educational contexts through micro-political negotiations that recursively transform both individual positioning and collective formations.

This analysis contributes to anthropological understanding of how recreational practices function as sites of social experimentation within displacement contexts. The investigation of motivational heterogeneity demonstrates how cultural practices enable social world construction that accommodates multiple, potentially contradictory, forms of identification while maintaining functional coherence for collective engagement.

The symbiotic relationship between instrumental and passionate participants reveals how cultural practices survive displacement through adaptive co-ordination rather than uniform commitment, challenging binary models that oppose cultural preservation to contextual adaptation. These findings illuminate how traditional practices become dynamic resources for navigating contemporary challenges of educational migration through governance mechanisms that operate not through institutional directive but

through granular interactions that constitute broader systemic logics of cultural adaptation and social incorporation.

Digital remediation and reconfigured sociality: Mahjong in the "internet+" era

The contemporary technological landscape catalyzes transformations in cultural practice modalities among cross-border populations, revealing how digital remediation fundamentally reconfigures, rather than merely supplements, traditional activities. Digital anthropology demonstrates how technological mediation creates what Miller (2018) conceptualizes as "digital-material assemblages" that transform social ontologies of embodied practices through granular interactions that constitute broader systemic logics of cultural adaptation. These processes operate not through predetermined technological determinism but through intricate micro-political negotiations wherein subjects strategically navigate between digital and material modalities to address diverse social and cultural needs.

Ethnographic investigation revealed widespread engagement with digital Mahjong platforms among study participants, with 19 of 25 interviewed students reporting regular use of online applications. As one participant explained while demonstrating mobile platforms:

> There are at least five popular Mahjong apps among Chinese students here. Some replicate regional variations like Sichuan or Cantonese styles. Others create completely new gameplay modes that wouldn't be possible with physical tiles.

Digital platforms eliminate fundamental spatiotemporal constraints characterizing embodied gameplay, creating what might be termed "liberated temporality" that enables cultural engagement transcending physical co-presence requirements.

Students articulated this transformation in comparative terms revealing how technological mediation restructures cultural practice accessibility: "I can play online Mahjong anytime—between classes, on the bus, late at night when I can't sleep. You don't need to co-ordinate schedules with three other people." Another participant noted:

> Sometimes it's too much effort to organize a physical gathering—traveling to someone's place, setting up the table and tiles. Online, you just open the app and you're playing within seconds.

This spatiotemporal liberation enables "asynchronous cultural engagement"—cultural practice transcending physical co-presence requirements while maintaining cultural continuity through technological mediation (Alinejad & Ponzanesi, 2020).

However, this liberation simultaneously transforms Mahjong's fundamental social architecture through what might be termed "algorithmic sociality"—social relations mediated through technological infrastructure rather than direct interpersonal negotiation. Digital platforms typically employ algorithmic matchmaking systems assembling players through skill metrics or random selection rather than social invitation processes characteristic of embodied assemblages, creating governance structures that operate through technical protocols rather than cultural competence.

Reconfigured social dynamics and anonymized interaction

Digital platforms create "anonymized ludic encounters"—interactions wherein participants relate as abstract competitors rather than socially embedded subjects, revealing how technological architecture produces distinctive forms of social authority through technical mediation rather than interpersonal negotiation. Observational analysis revealed fundamentally altered interactional dynamics compared to physical contexts, as participants described:

> In the app, you're mostly playing with strangers. There's a basic chat function, but most people don't use it beyond saying "hello" or "good game." It's about the gameplay, not the social connection.

The transformation demonstrates how technical infrastructure constrains interactions within gameplay parameters, with limited opportunities for conversational exchanges enabling substantive social connection development. As another participant noted: "Physical Mahjong is noisy—people talking, laughing, commenting on each other's moves, telling stories between games. Online is silent except for the sound effects of tiles. It's completely different socially." This contrast illuminates how digital mediation creates what might be termed "disembodied competition" that privileges technical competence over social navigation skills.

When contrasted with co-operative online games requiring strategic co-ordination, these limitations become evident through recursive comparison of different digital sociality forms. Several participants noted:

> Games like Honor of Kings are actually more social than online Mahjong. You use voice chat constantly, co-ordinate strategies with teammates, and often play with the same group regularly. Online Mahjong is much more isolated.

This comparative analysis reveals how different technological architectures enable or constrain particular forms of social authority production through varied interaction protocols.

Functional differentiation and cultural hierarchy

Despite digital proliferation, embodied Mahjong gatherings maintain clear primacy within participants' recreational hierarchies through what might be termed "experiential stratification"—systematic privileging of particular practice modalities based on their capacity to generate meaningful cultural experiences. Interview responses consistently privileged physical engagement: "Online Mahjong is just a way to pass time when you're alone. Real Mahjong is a social event—it's about being together, sharing food and conversation, strengthening friendships." Another participant reflected:

> I probably play online more frequently because it's convenient, but physical gatherings are what I look forward to and what I remember afterward. The online games blur together, but each physical gathering is distinct in my memory.

This reveals systematic "functional stratification" within recreational ecologies wherein digital platforms serve primarily instrumental purposes—skill development, temporal occupation, casual entertainment—rather than substantive relationship building. As one student articulated: "I use online Mahjong to practice strategies and improve my skills for real games with friends. It's like training mode. The actual social experience happens in person." This instrumental positioning demonstrates how participants navigate technological affordances through strategic deployment rather than wholesale adoption, revealing agency in technological appropriation processes.

The continuing primacy of embodied practice reflects "embodied authenticity"—distinctive affordances of physical co-presence for generating meaningful cultural experience under displacement conditions that technological mediation cannot replicate. Digital platforms enable cultural maintenance and skill development but cannot reproduce the multimodal sensory engagement, spatial proximity, and temporal synchronicity characterizing physical assemblages, creating hierarchical rather than equivalent alternatives within broader cultural meaning systems.

The ethnographic evidence demonstrates how digital remediation creates "hybrid cultural ecologies" rather than simple technological substitutions, revealing governance not as monolithic technological determination but through granular negotiations between different practice modalities. The co-existence of embodied and virtual practices generates differentiated systems wherein students strategically navigate between modalities based on contextual factors and social objectives, creating what digital anthropology identifies as "polymedia environments" enabling strategic selection among communicative modalities (Madianou & Miller, 2012).

However, technological proliferation generates hierarchical rather than equivalent alternatives, with digital platforms occupying subordinate positions within broader cultural meaning systems. This challenges linear technological progression narratives, revealing instead complex ecosystems wherein subjects co-ordinate between digital and material modalities to address diverse social and cultural needs within cross-border educational contexts through micro-political strategies that recursively transform both technological appropriation and embodied practice.

Rather than simple technological supplementation, the contemporary landscape manifests as negotiated assemblages wherein cultural practices persist through strategic co-ordination between digital and material possibilities, revealing governance as an emergent property of technological-cultural negotiations rather than as a predetermined administrative framework. The continuing significance of embodied co-presence demonstrates how technological mediation operates through productive ambiguity that enables rather than replaces traditional cultural practice, creating conditions for recursive transformation of both digital and material modalities within broader processes of cultural adaptation and social incorporation.

Interstitial cultural practices and cross-border educational contexts

This ethnographic investigation has interrogated the multivalent significance of Mahjong as a cultural practice within cross-border educational contexts inhabited by mainland Chinese postgraduate students in Hong Kong. Through systematic theoretical integration and rigorous empirical analysis, this research demonstrates how traditional recreational activities function as complex mediating mechanisms rather than simple preservation strategies, operating as "interstitial cultural practices"—embodied engagements that actively mediate liminal experiences through strategic orchestration of material objects, temporal structures, and social relationships. These processes reveal governance not as monolithic institutional structures but through intricate micro-political ne-

gotiations that recursively shape both spatial arrangements and social relations within contemporary educational migration circuits.

The analytical framework developed across this investigation reveals how Mahjong operates through four interconnected dimensions that collectively constitute its significance as an interstitial practice. The examination of spatial heterogeneity demonstrates how cultural practices function through "spatial tactics" (de Certeau, 1984) that strategically appropriate institutional, domestic, and commercial environments to create conditions for cultural expression and social formation. The analysis reveals how mainland Chinese students deploy sophisticated cultural logics in spatial selection, creating liminal spaces within institutional constraints through negotiated production of institutional authority rather than direct confrontation with administrative frameworks.

The investigation of structural and affective dimensions illuminates how Mahjong's prevalence reflects complex convergences of temporal flexibility, material accessibility, and affective engagement that create "cultural affordances" particularly suited to postgraduate educational contexts. This structural alignment demonstrates how recreational choices reflect adaptive responses to specific configurational intersections of spatial, temporal, and economic resources rather than mere cultural preferences, revealing the material foundations underlying cultural reproduction under displacement conditions through granular interactions that constitute broader systemic logics of institutional incorporation.

The analysis of social relationship reconfiguration establishes how Mahjong functions as a "boundary object" (Star & Griesemer, 1989) that facilitates social incorporation while enabling multiple forms of cultural identification. The ethnographic evidence reveals how the practice operates as transitional infrastructure enabling relationship development beyond immediate ludic boundaries, creating conditions for "flexible cultural citizenship" among displaced student populations through recursive transformation of both individual positioning and collective formations.

The examination of motivational heterogeneity within interest-based sociality demonstrates how single cultural practices simultaneously accommodate instrumental and passionate orientations toward recreational engagement. This analytical insight reveals how traditional activities survive displacement through "adaptive co-ordination" between different forms of individual investment rather than uniform cultural devotion, challenging essentialist interpretations of cultural transmission processes while illuminating governance as an emergent property of micro-political strategies rather than a predetermined administrative directive.

The investigation of digital remediation processes contributes crucial insights regarding how technological mediation creates "hybrid cultural ecologies" rather than simple substitutional alternatives. The analysis demonstrates how online Mahjong platforms generate "functional stratification" within recreational hierarchies, serving primarily instrumental purposes while embodied practices maintain primacy for meaningful cultural experience and social connection formation. This finding advances anthropological understanding beyond binary digital-traditional dichotomies toward recognition of complex "polymedia environments" (Madianou & Miller, 2012) wherein subjects strategically co-ordinate between technological and material modalities to address diverse social and cultural needs.

The continuing significance of embodied co-presence reflects "embodied authenticity"—distinctive affordances of physical interaction for generating cultural meaning under educational displacement conditions. Rather than linear technological progression, the contemporary landscape manifests as negotiated assemblages wherein cultural practices persist through strategic co-ordination between digital and material possibilities, revealing governance through productive ambiguity that enables, rather than replaces, traditional cultural practice.

Disciplinary contributions and methodological innovations

This research contributes to contemporary anthropological theory across three interconnected domains; firstly, it advances understanding of cultural adaptation processes among cross-border student populations by demonstrating how displaced subjects actively construct meaningful social worlds through the strategic deployment of traditional practices rather than passive adaptation to institutional environments. The concept of "interstitial cultural practice" provides an analytical framework for examining how cultural activities mediate displacement experiences while facilitating both cultural continuity and contextual adaptation through relationality of bureaucratic encounters rather than predetermined institutional programming.

Secondly, the investigation extends theoretical discussions of materiality and practice by revealing how objects (Mahjong tiles) and embodied actions (gameplay) function as constitutive, rather than reflective, elements in social world construction. The analysis of "cultural affordances" demonstrates how material properties of cultural practices operate as active agents within processes of cultural adaptation rather than passive constraints on cultural expression, illuminating governance through micro-political negotiations that recursively transform both spatial arrangements and institutional relations.

Thirdly, the research contributes to anthropological theorizing about boundary objects and social formation by illustrating how cultural practices enable co-ordination across motivational differences without requiring homogeneous commitment to particular interpretive frameworks. The analytical framework of "motivational heterogeneity" reveals how traditional practices accommodate diverse orientational approaches while maintaining functional coherence for collective engagement through differential incorporation of urban subjects rather than uniform institutional socialization.

The research findings illuminate broader patterns of cultural adaptation within increasingly complex cross-border educational circuits, revealing how traditional practices become dynamic resources for navigating contemporary challenges of educational mobility and institutional incorporation. The investigation demonstrates how recreational activities serve as crucial, but often overlooked, mechanisms through which international student populations construct viable forms of social membership that transcend formal institutional categories through the negotiated production of cultural authority rather than imposed administrative classification.

The analysis challenges functionalist approaches that would reduce cultural practices to instrumental tools for social integration, revealing instead how ludic activities operate as sites of "identity work" through which subjects explore alternative possibilities for cultural identification while maintaining meaningful connections to origin cultural frameworks. This perspective contributes to broader anthropological discussions concerning cultural citizenship and belonging within cross-border contexts, demonstrating governance as a dynamic, contingent practice rather than a predetermined administrative framework.

Limitations and concluding reflections

While this investigation provides valuable insights into cultural practice and social formation among mainland Chinese postgraduate students in Hong Kong, several analytical limitations warrant acknowledgment. The ethnographic focus on a single institutional context introduces constraints on generalizability across different educational environments and national contexts. Future comparative research examining similar cultural practices within diverse institutional and geographical contexts would enhance understanding of how environmental factors influence cultural adaptation processes through varied micro-political negotiations.

The temporal scope of this investigation, conducted during the late stage of the COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 periods, may reflect distinctive patterns of social interaction and recreational engagement that differ from pre-pandemic or future contexts. Longitudinal research tracing how cultural practices adapt to changing social conditions over extended temporal periods would contribute valuable insights regarding cultural resilience and adaptive capacity through recursive transformation processes.

This ethnographic inquiry reveals how Mahjong operates as a multivalent cultural technology through which mainland Chinese postgraduate students in Hong Kong navigate complex experiential terrain between cultural continuity and social adaptation. Rather than representing nostalgic attachment to traditional forms or linear progression toward cultural assimilation, the strategic deployment of recreational practices demonstrates continuing relevance of embodied cultural activities as resources for constructing meaningful social worlds amid challenges of cross-border educational migration.

The analytical framework of "interstitial cultural practices" provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how traditional activities function as mediating mechanisms within contemporary displacement contexts through granular interactions that constitute broader systemic logics of cultural adaptation and institutional incorporation. The investigation demonstrates how cultural practices persist not through faithful reproduction but through dynamic processes of contextual adaptation that maintain core cultural meanings while reconfiguring material expressions to address emergent social conditions through micro-political strategies of claim-making rather than predetermined cultural programming.

The enduring significance of Mahjong within this educational context reflects the fundamental anthropological insight that cultural practices serve as more than recreational diversions—they constitute essential infrastructure through which human subjects create meaningful worlds, construct viable identities, and establish sustainable forms of social connection across geographical and institutional boundaries through relationality of encounters rather than monolithic administrative directives. Understanding these processes requires anthropological approaches that attend simultaneously to material constraints, social dynamics, and cultural meanings within their complex interrelationships, revealing governance as an emergent property of micro-political negotiations that recursively transform both spatial arrangements and social relations within contemporary cross-border educational circuits.

AI disclaimer

During the preparation of this paper, the authors used Kimi to improve readability and language. The authors have reviewed and edited all content generated by this tool and take full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the publication.

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Povzetek

Dana etnografska študija preučuje, kako Mahjong deluje kot intersticijska kulturna praksa med podiplomskimi študenti s celinske Kitajske, ki bivajo zunaj kampusa Univerze Hong Kong. Na podlagi osemmesečnega udeležbenega opazovanja in poglobljenih intervjujev s 25 študenti (2022–2023) raziskava pokaže, kako ti študenti premagujejo večplastne oblike liminalnosti – med izobraževalnimi stopnjami, kulturnimi konteksti in stopnjami institucionalne vključenosti. Analiza pokaže, da Mahjong deluje preko treh ključnih mehanizmov: (1) strateške uporabe prostorske heterogenosti v institucionalnih, bivalnih in komercialnih okoljih; (2) izrabe strukturnih pogojev, med drugim časovne prožnosti akademskega dela ter prostorsko-ekonomskih omejitev; ter (3) vloge Mahjonga kot socio-materialne infrastrukture, ki omogoča vzpostavljanje in vzdrževanje družbenih odnosov. Mahjong se tako izkaže ne le kot rekreativna dejavnost, temveč kot mejni objekt, ki omogoča družbeno vključenost ob hkratnem ohranjanju kulturne kontinuitete. Študija obenem analizira, kako digitalne platforme preoblikujejo družbeno dinamiko Mahjonga ter ustvarjajo vzporedne, a jasne načine udejstvovanja. Raziskava prispeva k antropološki teoriji, saj pokaže, kako utelešene kulturne prakse posredujejo izkušnje izobraževalne migracije in sooblikujejo alternativne oblike družbenosti v sodobnih čezmejnih izobraževalnih kontekstih.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: intersticialna kulturna praksa, liminalnost, materialnost, kulturna adaptacija, mejni objekti, migracija, digitalne platforme

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