

**Im/materializing Cross-Border Mobility:
A Study of Mainland China–Hong Kong *Daigou*
(Cross-Border Shopping Services on Global Consumer Goods)**

XIE ZHUOXIAO

The Chinese University of Hong Kong, China

The mobilities facilitated by copresent modalities of media have attracted increasing attention. Despite noting multimode mobilities, existing studies rarely specify in the digital context how physical, digital, or virtual mobility and the meanings created by the mobility can be two sides of one coin of mobility politics. This article depicts mobility practices of mainland-China-to-Hong Kong cross-border shoppers known as *daigou*. I adopt mediated corporeal mobilities to understand the apparatus of uneven mobilities—which refers to the broad emergent cluster of ways of performing and signifying corporeal mobilities in which the mobility of people, material artifacts, and data are themselves experienced and articulated through mobile technology. I argue that mediated corporeal mobilities anchor the unbalanced power relationship in *daigou*, which manifest in the differential performance of corporeal mobilities and hierarchical classification of people’s corporeal mobilities.

Keywords: mediated mobilities, daigou, cross border, mobility practices, mainland China and Hong Kong, mobility politics

Attending to mobile communication and digitization, an increasing number of researchers are concerned with the mobilities facilitated by copresent modalities of media while engaging with material practices and discursive formations of mobile media devices (Keightley & Reading, 2014; Polson, 2016; Urry, 2000; Wallis, 2012; Wang, 2016). Despite noting the multimodes of mobilities, existing studies rarely synthesize discussions specifying in the digital context how various physical, digital, or virtual mobilities and the meanings created by the mobility can be two sides of one coin of mobility politics—the depreciation of one’s mobility (e.g., spatial mobility, or virtual mobility online) may influence one’s capability to acquire one or more forms of mobilities, and vice versa.

In China, a type of cross-border shopping service—*daigou* (代购)—flourishes, which serves as a channel for purchasing global consumer goods in other countries or regions to cross-market barriers and regional price gaps. *Daigou* practitioners profit from exchange-rate variation, or from taking advantage of differential tax policies. *Daigou* activities have gradually led to the formation of a niche consumer market of

Xie ZhuoXiao: ebbyxie@hotmail.com

Date submitted: 2017-12-05

Copyright © 2018 (Xie ZhuoXiao). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

global commodities in China. *Daigou* services currently include consulting, livestreaming, off-line shopping trips, and the delivery of goods.

Turning to Hong Kong *daigou*, this article complicates existing frameworks of mobility politics by combining two distinct foci into one case. The differential mobile capabilities and the socially constructed meanings of mobilities are not new. The new argument is that the differential performance of corporeal mobilities in *daigou* and hierarchical classification of different *daigou* practitioners' corporeal mobilities interrelate and simultaneously contribute to social inequalities in the mobile communication and digital context. In what follows, I focus on both forms of corporeal mobilities and the meanings created in/of them as relevant factors of mobility politics in *daigou*. This research thus illuminates the theoretical significance of synthesizing two aspects of corporeal mobilities—the forms and the meanings of the forms—to understand mobility politics.

Conceptualizing and Contextualizing the Politics of Mobility

Conceptualization of Mobility

Mobility geographically refers to the ability to move and be moved between different locations. In a social sense, mobility is also described as “the idea of an act of displacement that allows objects, people, and ideas—things—to get between locations” (Cresswell, 2001, p. 14). Mobility therefore signals socially produced motions, which not only manifest the abilities of displacement but also other perceived abilities such as flexibility, fluidity, and connectivity, which are realized through the acts of displacement (Cresswell, 2006). The speed potential of societies and human mobilities cannot be reduced to mere progressive and neutral facts (Bauman, 1998; Cresswell, 2006; Massey, 2005). Human mobilities, rather, connect with complex social experiences, such as displacement, connection, and networking, and act as vectors of social structural inequalities (Kaufmann, 2002; Sheller, 2016; Urry, 2000).

The existing work on mobility politics has two distinct foci. The first looks at how mobility develops in its various forms—as experience, situation, or status in human motion. This approach centers on some material foundations of mobility, which include vehicles, goods, human bodies, and technologies that produce various forms of mobilities (Büscher & Urry, 2009). Scholars thus argued that these foundations in material or virtual forms are sources of social inequalities (Kaufmann, 2002; Kaufmann, Bergman, & Joye, 2004; Larsen, Urry, & Axhausen, 2006; Polson, 2016). The second focuses on the significance of socially coded mobilities (i.e., meaning making in and of people's motion through mobility practices or significations). Mobility here is understood by meaning making in people's movements, such as the performances of resistance in a protest (Cresswell, 1993) or by the socially constructed discourses of forced migrants (Witteborn, 2011). In this approach, the connotations of different conditions of mobility signify and effect an unequal power relationship (see Cresswell, 2006; Sheller, 2008; Wallis, 2012; Witteborn, 2011; Yuan, 2014). Yet most work on mobility politics overlooks how mobility develops in various forms of motion and how people's motion and mobility create different social meanings could be two sides of one coin in the constitution of social inequality.

In my research, the case of *daigou* would exemplify such an apparatus of uneven mobility in the context of online and off-line mobile communication. This research draws on the concept of mediated mobilities, naming “the broad emergent cluster of ways in which different kinds of mobility, including the mobility of people, the mobility of material artefacts and the mobility of data are themselves experienced and articulated through particular historically situated media ecologies” (Keightley & Reading, 2014, p. 286). The idea of mediated mobilities emphasizes the multilayered mediation processes facilitated by copresent modalities of media, such as their textual content, technological features, or material infrastructure. To complicate the power dynamics and sociopolitical implications of im/mobility, this study proposes mediated corporeal mobilities, referring to the broad emergent cluster of ways of performing and signifying corporeal mobilities in which the mobility of people, material artifacts, and data are themselves experienced and articulated through mobile communication technology (i.e., mobile phone, social media, and shopping services).

Contextualization of Mobility Politics

Scholars have brought attention to the discrepancies arising between the meanings of physical mobility, technological mobility, and social mobility in China (Qiu, 2009; Wallis, 2012; Wang, 2016; Yuan, 2014). For example, Wang’s (2016) online–off-line ethnography on the social media use of Chinese migrant workers suggests that migrants’ dual migration—simultaneously taking place online and off-line—presents a contradictory image of the social world. Wallis (2012) theorized the impacts of the mobile phones of female migrant workers in Beijing as “immobile mobility,” arguing that, on the one hand, the phones served as sociotechno means of surpassing spatial, temporal, physical, and structural boundaries for the workers, and, on the other the use of mobile phones was grounded in the concrete practices (such as texting, picturing, and socialization) and constraints of everyday experience.

As is the case with activities such as cross-border traveling, consumption, reselling, or smuggling (e.g., Ayimpam, 2015; Ip, 2015; Martin, 2017; Zhang, 2015), *daigou* activities too are interrelated with mobility politics in terms of the discrepant control, use, and representation of mobile people and objects in various contexts. So far, of particular interest for this article are two studies of *daigou* conducted in the U.S. (Zhang, 2015) and Australia (Martin, 2017). They addressed the relationship between the spatial and technological mobility of the Chinese people and their social constraints. Zhang (2015) depicted how the overseas Chinese *daigou* practitioners had reinvented prosumption as a cultural, technological, and economic solution to the contradictions in the competing demands of different gender regimes. However, despite acquiring considerable autonomy, flexibility, and mobility overseas, the Chinese women in the study are constrained by the structures of class, race, and nationality. Focusing on both gender and racial structures of mobilities, Martin (2017) illustrated mobility capital as the dialectic dynamics in microentrepreneurial *daigou* activities. She has demonstrated the relatively fixed, localized, and diasporic employment networks in Australia, and the relatively mobile, transnational, and digitally mediated trading networks among transnational Chinese people.

The case of *daigou* echoes with the above-described research in understanding the structured mobilities in specific contexts. Moreover, this research foregrounds the intersections between the production of mobilities and the social meanings conveyed in/by the mobilities in the context of mobile communication,

because the multilayered mediation processes of mobilities facilitated by copresent modalities increasingly play roles in shifting sociocultural experiences (Keightley & Reading, 2014; Sheller & Urry, 2006; Urry, 2000).

This research thus engages with three questions, which deal with the intersecting meaningful forms of mobilities and their impacts on *daigou*:

RQ1: *What are the features of daigou practitioners' cross-border mobility?*

RQ2: *How are uneven mobilities potentially related to bodily movement, virtual travel online, and the meaning construction of people's movement?*

RQ3: *What do uneven mobilities indicate about mobility politics within and beyond the mainland China-Hong Kong context?*

Global Linkages and Cross-Border Controversies in the *Daigou* Case

With popularity in countries such as Australia, Japan, and the U.S., *daigou* industry increases both global and inter-Asia flows of money, people, and consumer goods. The flexibility of overseas online-off-line shopping creates alternative patterns of cash flow, consumption, and commodity delivery in the resale of social-media-based Chinese transnational products (Martin, 2017; Zhang, 2015).

From a global perspective, *daigou* businesses show how the Chinese population's consumption of global products shapes the nature of localized connections between mainland China and Hong Kong. As an answer to the Chinese customers' consumption patterns in the global supply chain, the real shopping economy in Hong Kong has begun to adjust transaction and communication patterns to satisfy customers' demands. Recently, nearly all staff employed in pharmacies and shopping malls in Hong Kong have begun using Chinese social media, such as WeChat and Weibo, and payment platforms such as Alipay, dubbed "the PayPal of the East." Through these online platforms they are attempting to expand their business markets to include mainland Chinese contacts, particularly those partaking in *daigou* activities. Thus, Hong Kong *daigou* is in part a testament to shifting business rationales in local contexts, which are becoming attenuated to global transformations.

At a trans-local level, *daigou* issues connect with the cross-border tensions between mainland China and Hong Kong. The flows of populations and commodities that directly or indirectly connect with *daigou* raise social controversies, among them the campaign against mainland visitors and antiparallel traders' protests. The physical movements of *daigou* participants directly affect the daily lives of Hong Kong residents and activists. In public discourse, cross-border purchasing activities are commonly associated with controversies surrounding parallel traders who operate between the two regions; they are often described as running smuggling operations and violating labor regulations ("*Zhian Bumen*," 2016). Controversies such as cross-border childbirth between mainland China and Hong Kong and the antimainland visitors campaign also reflect the politics of belonging related to the recent nativist movements in Hong Kong society (Ip, 2015).

Methodology

In this research, *daigou* practitioners refer to people who regularly engage with the cross-border shopping services of global consumer goods for mainland Chinese customers. I conducted both online and off-line observations of *daigou* practitioners between March and October 2016. Depending on the multiple-entry visa scheme between Hong Kong and mainland China, I offered my physical labor and mobility to my informants. I worked as an assistant of *daigou* practitioners and did not engage in any monetary business transactions. During the eight-month period, I spent an entire day each week with my informants at their places of business based in Tsim Sha Tsui (TST), a major tourist hub in metropolitan Hong Kong. At the end of the day, I accompanied *daigou* practitioners in crossing the customs border. Meanwhile, I also observed online activity on WeChat between my informants, their customers, and other *daigou* practitioners. Altogether, I observed 27 people on WeChat, all of whom were *daigou* practitioners in Hong Kong.

In this research, I identified four main types of *daigou* practitioners according to their labor division in the *daigou* commodity chain, which is made up of the network of *daigou* groups and individuals spanning mainland China and Hong Kong. The first type are carriers/border runners called *shuiké* (水客). Having no direct contact with either commodity suppliers or mainland customers, their primary work includes carrying commodities across the border, for which they charge 5 to 10 CNY (US\$0.7 to US\$1.50) per item. The second group of practitioners—which is also the largest—individually provides shopping services, including consulting, purchasing, and delivering goods to mainland customers. The third type of practitioners includes agents/intermediaries who liaise between *daigou* individuals and their customers. They mainly take online orders, outsource them to *daigou* individuals, and profit from the price differences between the buyers and the sellers. The last group are wholesalers, who sell commodities directly to customers or provide wholesale goods to intermediaries or *daigou* individuals. Instead of transporting commodities themselves, they legally hire customs clearance companies or illegally hire carriers.

Complex Mobilities: Three Intertwining Mobility Practices

“*Renrou daigou*” (人肉代购), which translates to “corporeal or bodily *daigou*,” is suggested to be the greatest advantage of doing business in Hong Kong. “*Renrou*” refers to the human bodies used for moving or carrying in the context of *daigou*. *Daigou* practitioners use the term to contrast the corporeal mobility—with which they shop, move, and carry commodities in person—with the mobility of online shopping. My ethnographic study, however, captured a more intricate relationship between the idea of *renrou daigou* and the online-offline practices of the practitioners, which alters the mobility politics in *daigou*. This section will focus on three practices that underlie the mediated corporeal mobilities: (1) intensive bodily movements at sites, (2) producing socially mediated online bodies, and (3) symbolizing corporeal mobilities.

Intensive Bodily Movements at Sites: Corporeal Mobility as Strategies

Qiu lives in Shenzhen, a coastal city that borders Hong Kong, and worked part-time as a *daigou* practitioner in TST. Her *daigou*-related income helped alleviate some of the financial strain of her mortgage and at the same time provided her with flexible working hours and a flexible mode of transaction without rigid

requirements for market access in *daigou* businesses. In her weekly trips to Hong Kong, Qiu did her shopping on the weekends. After collecting the customers' orders, she took a subway train to the customs in Lo Wu or Lok Ma Chau, or a minibus to Shenzhen Bay and arrived home within an hour or two. Usually, a *daigou* practitioner such as Qiu walks more than 20,000 steps (approximately 15 km) during each trip. This amount of walking accounts for the high physical demand of the labor involved.

Unlike unplanned visitors, experienced practitioners like Qiu strategically organize shopping routes and actions. She plans routes, adjusts her pace, and uses intensive physical mobilities. In buying more than 100 items, from milk powder and medicine to Chanel lipstick and Louis Vuitton bags, Qiu visits three types of stores in TST (see Figure 1): pharmacy and cosmetics (discounted and wholesale products), shopping mall (mass-label brand products), and luxury stores (high-end brand products). Qiu's shopping usually starts with collecting ordered items in pharmacies and cosmetics shops. In the three pharmacies in TST (indicated as A, B, and I in Figure 1), she, like other *daigou* practitioners, quickly collect items from store shelves, including branded perfumes, makeup products, milk powders, and medicines.



A: LC Pharmacy B: JY Pharmacy C: Sasa and Colormix cosmetics D: Mannings and Watsons E: HC Pharmacy F: The One shopping mall G: HK JEON Limited H: KK Pharmacy I: JL Pharmacy J: K11 shopping mall K: Retailer L: T Galleria By DFS M: Harbor City N: SOGO

Figure 1. Map of shopping sites in Tsim Sha Tsui.

Occasionally contacting the staff working in the pharmacies via WeChat in advance, she can simply collect the preordered goods once she reaches the store and check out at the counter. For most practitioners, shopping is a swift process, as they are familiar with the layouts of major stores and every shopping procedure there.

Although *daigou* practitioners attempt to save time in pharmacies, they linger in shopping malls and luxury stores (e.g., F, G, J, L, M, and N in Figure 1), in which they complete free trials, take pictures, send text messages, and converse with sales clerks. To facilitate business interactions, *daigou* practitioners “move around,” and simultaneously chat with customers—normally in mainland China—via instant messenger or social media platforms. With communication from a distance, *daigou* practitioners bodily act as substitutes for the customers by trying on goods, selecting items, and even making choices for them, as if they shop in Hong Kong in person. This role requires intense movement and corporeal mobility: The practitioners walk to the shops as required, and liaise with customers located elsewhere and with sales at the sites. An example of this would be a visit to the sport shop in which Qiu and I together selected leggings for a customer who was unsure of her choice. To help the customer make her decision, I personally tried on several pairs of trousers. Finally, the customer picked up the one recommended by Qiu.

These examples illustrate how corporeal mobility of moving bodies is used in *daigou* on-site practices. Obviously, the practitioners are familiar with a number of conditions, including shopping sites, local staff, jargon, and business tactics. Their familiarity goes hand in hand with the routine aspect of their movements—that is, routes, mobility patterns, and forms of interactivity. These invisible rules imply that cross-border *daigou* practices involve the long-term activity of building concrete knowledge and relationships with people and spaces in Hong Kong. As patterns and rationales of corporeal mobility are created, the moving bodies are purposely used by practitioners according to different occasions, either to speed up some procedures or to slow down and increase their visibility. In the next section, a *daigou* practitioner’s production of socially mediated online bodies will be explored as an example of this feature.

Producing Socially Mediated Online Bodies: Online–Off-line Presences of Daigou

Chen is a full-time *daigou* and is well-known among *daigou* practitioners for her ability to acquire additional customers and maximize business during her shopping trips. She documents almost every detail of her *daigou* businesses and private life on WeChat. Chen occasionally visits Hong Kong to collect relatively few previously established orders. She starts a live stream when she leaves home in the morning and continues it until she returns to Shenzhen at night. The most minute details of her trip, such as buying bus tickets, passing shops, having lunch, and sampling cosmetics or jewelry, are shared in real time via WeChat. She updates her location constantly while waiting for her WeChat contacts to reach out to her and order goods. The orders are posted in real time, allowing her customers to comment on the orders and exchange instant messages. She completes a shopping trip every week and almost always reaches her business goals. Besides *daigou* procedures, Chen regularly posts selfies, pictures of her family and friends, and even writes dairies about WeChat moments. Her easygoing and straightforward personality stands out among other practitioners.

Chen is typical among *daigou* practitioners. Successful mobile livestreaming has attributed to her established online-off-line presence. As mentioned, *renrou daigou* (corporeal or bodily *daigou*) is perceived as an advantage for *daigou* practitioners. *Daigou* practitioners' corporeal mobility is not restricted to their bodily movements. This type of mobility is also produced and manifested online. Chen is skilled at creating socially mediated bodies online, or, more specifically, on social media websites, as a manifestation of her corporeal mobility. The production of embodiment online, "being online," is not done easily within dualistic real-virtual or being-representation models. This type of being requires certain recalibrations of bodies as they enter new forms of connectivity (Goodings & Tucker, 2014). Online self-representations also consist of tacit labor such as makeup, dressing, and photography, and the online bodies thus could be marketable as the participants become influencers on social media (Abidin, 2016). In such a context, mobility is not just explicit ability but also a part of knowledge production tied to the general understanding of the ins and outs of the *daigou* business.

Daigou practitioners' online bodies showcase their movements and routes between mainland China and Hong Kong. These frequent movements create virtual and imaginative mobility in real time for both their customers and audiences, because *daigou* practitioners facilitate their imaginative travel to Hong Kong by serving as bodily substitutes and coordinators between them and sales, or simply presenting vivid images of shopping trips. In this sense, the meanings and experiences of *renrou daigou* are expanded through social media, thus producing a sense of copresence of both virtual and real mobility experiences. In Chen's case, the online self-representation embodies the sense of personalities and personal connections. The socially mediated bodies also comprise a mixture of online-off-line activities, social connections, and images in *daigou* practices. In what follows, I will demonstrate how the mediated bodies and bodily movements make sense among *daigou* practitioners and their customers.

***Symbolizing Corporeal Mobilities:
Being a Renrou Daigou in the Digital Age***

Ed has twice been penalized by the Hong Kong customs office for carrying an excessive number of digital products and cosmetics. At the time this study was conducted, she had become a *daigou* agent (intermediary). "Now I do not carry goods myself. I know other *daigou* practitioners," she said,

I'm a delegate of one *daigou* practitioner. I get online orders forwarded to me, and the person helps me do other work. She is charged for my services based on 0.85 exchange rates between CNY and HKD while I charge my customers 0.95.

Her earnings are the result of the currency variation. Ed's customers are not aware that she no longer personally goes on shopping trips. On some occasions, for the purpose of maintaining the appearance of corporeal mobility, Ed and other agents use pictures of commodities, livestreaming, and shopping achievements posted by other *daigou* practitioners to directly or indirectly demonstrate their corporeal mobilities.

Ed's online mobility became a business resource. Why are evidences of corporeal mobilities of high importance? Aside from actual physical movements, an array of meanings is related to corporeal mobilities

in the routinization of *daigou* businesses. According to one *daigou* practitioner, her customers place high importance on corporeal mobility: "You do not know whether people really come to Hong Kong. . . . Many people sell fake stuff in Taobao [a China-based digital shopping platform, similar to eBay]." Thus, customers expect the sellers to physically visit Hong Kong to verify the authenticity of the product. This is, at the very least, the common claim among Hong Kong *daigou* practitioners. Customers believe that the practitioners shop and carry commodities in Hong Kong themselves, although this may not always be the case. For this reason, *daigou* practitioners are often required to demonstrate a number of credentials before starting their business—such as a Hong Kong ID, Visa, and visiting endorsements—to prove their cross-border activities.

This aspect of image confirms that being a *renrou daigou* in the digital age no longer includes simple bodily movement. This understanding implies a distinction between online-off-line copresence and purely online representation. Cross-border mediated corporeal mobilities, particularly with a series of online-off-line arrangements, are indispensable for linking consuming activities together based on the interdependent forms of mobility (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Corporeal movement does not build credibility in isolation—it is rather substantiated through the digital footprints of *daigou* practitioners.

Unevenly Mediated Corporeal Mobilities

So far, I have documented three intertwining features of practices in *daigou*, which together comprise the multilayered corporeal mobilities of *daigou* activities. In the next section, I will explore the uneven capabilities of the practitioners in manipulating corporeal mobilities and the connotations in their practices. Moreover, I will explore how the uneven mediated corporeal mobilities contribute to different social consequences in different cases.

Different Ways of Performing Corporeal Mobilities

Considering that the physical movement of practitioners and goods implies risks relating to governmental surveillance and control, *renrou daigou* can represent a so-called double-edged sword for businesses. Governmental regulations require the examination of the luggage belonging to suspected smugglers and restricted entry permissions for travelers from the mainland who are caught breaking customs regulations. Most regulations target the physical movements of people and the flow of objects. *Daigou* practitioners with permanent citizenship, work visas, or student visas have an advantage in terms of crossing the border between Hong Kong and the mainland more than once per day. Wen, a housewife and one of the participants in *daigou*, has acquired permanent residence and currently lives in Hong Kong. To reduce risk, she crosses the border often and usually carries only a few highly taxed items, such as gold or digital products.

Furthermore, some *daigou* practitioners can separate online self-representation of *daigou* activities from off-line shopping, border crossing, and transportation. Based on the division of labor in the business, *daigou* practitioners aim to adapt their capability for mobility to reduce risk. One way is outsourcing certain procedures in *daigou* activities to other practitioners. As was demonstrated above, the *daigou* agent Ed has online orders forwarded to her and then exchange the values of online mobilities with others' off-line corporeal mobilities.

Another way of eliminating risk is by separating the *daigou* process into transporting and purchasing components. Because the purchasing process involves more complicated physical and emotional human labor, individual *daigou* practitioners or retailers of *daigou* would rather personally make the purchases. Instead, to evade customs control, some of them, for instance, hire *shuike* carriers/border runners to carry the goods, or professional institutions to clear the customs process or engage in transactions at the customs entrance. Compared with other *daigou* practitioners, border runners rely on repetitively carrying goods across the border, so they may not be able to change their border-crossing strategies. Offering their work force and their physical mobility to their employers, they have neither the social nor the economic resources to run businesses as *daigou* individuals, and they are also not present online, which is fundamental to achieving virtual mobility.

Cross-border mobility practices in *daigou* businesses are therefore relatively flexible, shown by adjusting bodily movements and exchanging the value of corporeal mobilities. Through them, practitioners acquire and perform mobility in various ways. Only some individual *daigou* practitioners and retailers are able to transform one type of mobility into another. Such ways of performing corporeal mobilities demonstrate the ideas that mobility developing in its various forms is socially structured (Kaufmann, 2002; Larsen et al., 2006). In next section, I will analyze the other side of the coin: how people's motion and mobility create different social meanings and also anchor social inequality.

Constructing Corporeal Mobilities as a Marker of "Shuike"

Even though *daigou* practitioners attempt to evade examination at customs, risks are involved each time they cross the border. Therefore, *daigou* practitioners have come up with their own ways of grasping the risks, precariousness, tensions, and consequences resulting from their forms of mobility. None of the *daigou* individuals or intermediaries that I encountered described themselves as "*shuike*" carriers/border runners. In their own words, they try to avoid the label. Zi, a *daigou* practitioner, described the differences between *daigou* and *shuike* in the following way:

Strictly speaking, *zoushui* (走水, border runners) refers to carriers. . . . To earn enough money, these people carry goods multiple times per day. *Daigou* practitioners normally do so only once per day. *Shuike* are more commonly harassed by the Hong Kong residents.

Moreover, *daigou* practitioners commonly have stereotypes regarding the term *shuike*. People described as a "*shuike*" are typically poor elderly people, dressed in run-down clothing; they transport heavy boxes or bags with wheelbarrows; they come, in equal numbers, from the Hong Kong and Shenzhen area. "Normally, *shuike* are the first ones examined," Mo claims. "Customs officers are so experienced. They can identify *zoushui* easily." Individual *daigou* practitioners seldom include *shuike* as members of their group: *Daigou* and *shuike* do not have the same effect on creating tension between mainland China and Hong Kong.

For Hong Kong and the mainland government alike, the physical movements of *shuike* creates problems in Hong Kong's everyday life. Parallel trading, which is based on the use of corporeal mobilities, is also related to illegal activities, such as smuggling and illegal labor. These illegal activities are also based on the flow of people and goods ("*Zhian Bumen*," 2016). Chen (2015), in *People's Daily*, suggested that "A

shuihuoke crosses the border three, four, and even up to 10 times in a day. This has negative effects on the everyday lives of people in both of these places.” At the same time, Hong Kong newspapers and public discourses also criticize misconceptions that conflate different groups of mainland visitors, as *Mingpao* (“Guandian Yu Jiaodu,” 2015)—an influential newspaper in Hong Kong—pointed out:

In recent anti-*shuik*e social movements, it seems that activists treated *shuihuoke* and ordinary mainland visitors shopping in Hong Kong in the same way. . . . In 2014, there were 10,000 people travelling to Hong Kong more than 100 times. . . . *Shuihuoke* [*shuik*e] do not consume for ordinary purposes.

Such statements basically use the frequency of physical movement to identify *shuik*e. The mobilities of *shuik*e/*daigou* practitioners, so to speak, are controversial in people’s discussions of cross-border tensions between mainland China and Hong Kong. The term *daigou*, however, is rarely mentioned in governmental and media reports. *Daigou* thus is relatively invisible in the debates of *shuik*e. The discourses from *daigou* practitioners, the general public, and the government denoted that the corporeal mobility of *shuik*e is the main cause of cross-border tensions. Corporeal mobility, whether deliberately or not, is used as a marker to frame only a specific type of practitioner (i.e., *shuik*e) and some specific aspects of *daigou* practices (i.e., carrying and delivering).

Instead of addressing the debates surrounding the issue of *shuik*e and exact cause of cross-border tensions, I want to discuss the assumptions of mobilities that underlie the discourses of *shuik*e, as they are the key to understand the confictions. In fact, it is difficult to distinguish between parallel traders and *daigou* businesses considering that, apart from *shuik*e, other practitioners also heavily depend on parallel trading and intense bodily movement. Corporeal mobility manifests in practitioners’ online bodies in different situations and under varying circumstances. Visible cross-border movements are only the tip of the iceberg in *daigou*. The vilification of *shuik*e among Hong Kong residents, governments, and some *daigou* practitioners may only differentiate and justify the interests of other actors such as retailers, online intermediaries, governments, and local residences. Such coding of corporeal mobility works, however, because “cross-border activities” still refer mainly to concrete and identifiable actions, while neglecting the fact that cross-border *daigou* activities comprise the interminglings of mobility sources.

Conclusion

This article depicts the practices of mainland-to-Hong Kong cross-border shoppers known as *daigou*. I adopt mediated corporeal mobilities to understand the apparatus of uneven mobilities—which refers to the broad emergent cluster of ways performing and signifying corporeal mobilities in which the mobility of people, material artifacts, and data are themselves experienced and articulated through mobile technology (see Keightley & Reading, 2014). I exemplified how mediated corporeal mobilities are made by intensive bodily movements, the production of socially mediated online bodies, and the symbolization of corporeal mobilities. This is an assemblage of bodily, technological, and semiotic elements combining the forms and socially coded meanings of corporeal mobilities into the idea of *renrou daigou* in the online-off-line mobile communication of *daigou* practices.

I argue that mediated corporeal mobilities anchor the unbalanced power relationship in *daigou*, which manifests in the differential performance of corporeal mobilities and the hierarchical classification of people's corporeal mobilities. This anchoring effect is first underlined by the differences between the relatively young, educated, media-literate owners of online-off-line *daigou* businesses, and the older, less-educated, and information have-less or have-nots (Qiu, 2009), the cross-border carriers in the network of *daigou*. The differentiation is also visible in how mobility is used to differentiate the social impacts of *daigou* practitioners and how corporeal mobility is adopted to produce the discourse on the issue of who ought to be blamed for cross-border tensions. For *daigou* practitioners with multiple mobility capabilities (bodily movements, digital travel, and power to construct the meanings of their mobilities), the mediation processes of mobile communication create multimodal and polysemic corporeal mobilities for *daigou* practitioners to shift between various types and values of mobilities.

This research thus extends existing frameworks of mobility politics by explicating how certain forms of mobility and the meanings created by people's mobilities are interwoven as factors of intricate cross-border mobility politics. How socially coded mobilities and multiple forms of mobilities, respectively, act as socially structural factors has been widely discussed in contexts such as gender and class (Cresswell, 2006; Qiu, 2009; Wallis, 2012; Wang, 2016), migration and migrants (Polson, 2016; Witteborn, 2011), labor, border, and governmentality (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). This study goes a step further in probing how they intersect with each other and shaping the consequences of multimodal and polysemic mobilities in contemporary globalization and digitalization contexts (Keightley & Reading, 2014). As such, I interrogate the power relations in the formation of multiple mediated mobilities as the cluster of ways performing and signifying mobilities.

This article also aims to problematize the assumptions embedded in debates of cross-border tensions, which excessively emphasize the visible physical mobilities or specific forms of mobilities while neglecting the mediation processes in changing social, cultural, and technological experiences of border crossing. The practices of im/mobility in cross-border activities showed in this research acts as a reminder that we need to carefully consider mobilities of border crossing and images and meanings of the mobilities in the context of mainland China and Hong Kong.

References

- Abidin, C. (2016). "Aren't these just young, rich women doing vain things online?": Influencer selfies as subversive frivolity. *Social Media and Society*, 2(2), 1-7.
- Ayimpam, S. (2015). Informal trade, cross border networks and contraband of Asian textiles from Brazzaville to Kinshasa. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 30(3), 395-403.
- Bauman, Z. (1998). *Globalization: The human consequences*. Oxford, UK: Polity Press.
- Büscher, M., & Urry, J. (2009). Mobile methods and the empirical. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 12(1), 99-116.

- Chen, R. (2015, February 3). Zhuabu yuegang liangdi shuihuoke 1877 ren [1877 "Shuihuoke" between Guangdong and Hong Kong were arrested]. *People's Daily*, p. 11. Retrieved from http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-02/03/c_127450281.htm
- Cresswell, T. (1993). Mobility as resistance: A geographical reading of Kerouac's "On the road." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 18(2), 249–262.
- Cresswell, T. (2001). The production of mobilities. *New Formations*, (43), 11–25.
- Cresswell, T. (2006). *On the move: Mobility in the modern Western world*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Goodings, L., & Tucker, I. (2014). Social media and the co-production of bodies online: Bergson, Serres and Facebook's timeline. *Media, Culture & Society*, 36(1), 37–51.
- Guandian yu jiaodu: Fan shuihuoke shiwei jihua maodun [Viewpoint and standpoint: Anti-Shuik protest flare-up confections]. (2015, March 19). *Mingpao*. Retrieved from http://www.mingpaocanada.com/tor/htm/News/20150319/HK-gfj1_er_r.htm
- Ip, I.-C. (2015). Politics of belonging: A study of the campaign against mainland visitors in Hong Kong. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 16(3), 410–421.
- Kaufmann, V. (2002). *Re-thinking mobility: Contemporary sociology*. London, UK: Ashgate.
- Kaufmann, V., Bergman, M. M., & Joye, D. (2004). Motility: Mobility as capital. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 28(4), 745–756.
- Keightley, E., & Reading, A. (2014). Mediated mobilities. *Media, Culture & Society*, 36(3), 285–301.
- Larsen, J., Urry, J., & Axhausen, K. (2006). *Mobilities, networks, geographies*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.
- Martin, F. (2017). Rethinking network capital: Hospitality work and parallel trading among Chinese students in Melbourne. *Mobilities*, 12(6), 890–907.
- Massey, D. (2005). Power-geometry and a progressive sense of place. In J. Bird, B. Curtis, T. Putnam, G. Roberstson, & L. Tickner (Eds.), *Mapping the future: Local cultures, global change* (pp. 59–69). Retrieved from <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/e/9781134912919/chapters/10.4324%2F9780203977781-12>
- Mezzadra, S., & Neilson, B. (2013). *Border as method, or, the multiplication of labor*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Polson, E. (2016). *Privileged mobilities: Professional migration, geo-social media, and a new global middle class*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

- Qiu, J. L. (2009). *Working class network society: Communication technology and the information have-less in urban China*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Sheller, M. (2008). Gendered mobilities: Epilogue. In T. Cresswell & T. P. Uteng (Eds.), *Gendered mobilities* (pp. 257–267). Farnham, UK: Ashgate.
- Sheller, M. (2016). Uneven mobility futures: A Foucauldian approach. *Mobilities*, 11(1), 1–17.
- Sheller, M., & Urry, J. (2006). The new mobilities paradigm. *Environment and Planning A*, 38(2), 207–226.
- Urry, J. (2000). *Sociology beyond societies: Mobilities for the twenty-first century*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Wallis, C. (2012). *Technomobility in China: Young migrant women and mobile phones*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Wang, X. (2016). *Social media in industrial China*. London, UK: UCL Press.
- Witteborn, S. (2011). Constructing the forced migrant and the politics of space and place-making. *Journal of Communication*, 61(6), 1142–1160.
- Yuan, Y. (2014). *A different place in the making—The everyday life practices of Chinese rural migrants in urban villages*. Bern, Germany: Peter Lang.
- Zhang, L. (2015). Fashioning the feminine self in “prosumer capitalism”: Women’s work and the transnational reselling of Western luxury online. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 17(2), 184–204.
- Zhian bumen lianshou daji shuihuo huodong [Security departments work together fighting against parallel trading activities]. (2016, August 20). *Hong Kong Government News*. Retrieved from http://archive.news.gov.hk/tc/categories/law_order/html/2016/05/20160504_141517.lin.shtml