

Chapter 7

Work-life (im)balance and existential (im)mobility:

Hong Kong professional migrants in Australia

Yvette To

Abstract

This chapter discusses the experiences of professional migrants from Hong Kong who have chosen to settle in Melbourne, and other places in the Victoria State of Australia, in the hope of pursuing a better life. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 14 highly skilled individuals, this study reveals the strategies and capital they used to facilitate their relocation to Australia, their adjustment to the Aussie way of living, and the new dilemmas they faced as skilled migrants. The chapter adopts the theoretical lens of existential (im)mobility to explore the motivations for emigration amongst these aspiring professionals, and to explain the ways in which new frustrations have emerged due to differences in work culture and conditions between Hong Kong and Australia. Their “privileged” way of migration also illustrates the intersection of migrant human capital, professional networks, and the host government’s talent acquisition and immigration policies. The case study provides fresh material to enhance understandings of contemporary skilled migration.

Introduction

Research on the recent outmigration of people from Hong Kong (hereafter “HK”) has focused on general migrants, their motivations for migrating, migratory trajectories, and life experiences (Chan & To, 2023). This is evident in several surveys done on HK migrants (Hongkongers in Britain, 2021; Kan et al., 2023; Yue, 2023) and a number of studies on the settling experiences of these migrants in different destinations, including the UK (Ho, 2023; To & Chan, forthcoming), Australia (Lui & Lee, 2023), and Taiwan (Li & Liao, 2023). While these analyses offer valuable insights into the migratory trajectories and practices of recent HK migrants, they have yet to show how migrants’ experience could vary with their skills, expertise, and class. In what ways are migrants’ mobilities affected by the skills and social capital they possess? How are their intentions and experiences of moving linked to efforts of foreign governments to acquire much-needed talent? Do the privileges they enjoy increase their satisfaction with their lives abroad?

This chapter discusses the experiences of highly skilled professionals who have left HK for Australia since 2020. Some have settled in Melbourne — Australia’s most liveable city and the world’s fourth most liveable city, according to the Global Liveability Index 2024 (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2024). Others lived in different places in the State of Victoria. While the UK has drawn the most numbers of HK migrants in recent years through its largely non-selective HK British National (Overseas) (“BN(O)”) visa scheme, Australia, which has adopted proactive policies to lure foreign skilled labour and talent in strategic sectors, has emerged as a preferred destination for highly skilled professionals from HK. Between 2020 and 2023, over 2,600 professionals from HK were drawn to Australia through the country’s most competitive Global Talent (GT) scheme (Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, 2021a, 2022, 2023). In 2022–2023, HK ranked second (just behind India and ahead of mainland China) in the top three destinations receiving the competitive GT visa (Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, 2023). The Australian government also granted permanent residence permits to over 10,000 HK citizens between 2021 and 2023 (Mak & Imahshi, 2024), a significant increase from pre-2021 levels. Drawing on in-depth interviews with a group of highly skilled migrants working in the medical, infrastructure, and finance sectors, this study reveals the strategies and capital they used to facilitate a largely seamless process of emigration to Australia. Their “privileged” way of migration illustrates the intersection of migrant human capital, professional networks, government talent acquisition policies, and the “flexibility required by the capitalist system” (Salazar & Smart, 2011, p. v). I adopt the concept of “existential mobility” to analyse how migrants’ sense of existential immobility at the place of origin, coinciding with external contingencies, has become an important driver for emigration. These skilled migrants have used migration as a strategy to chase a better work-life balance and a more meaningful and fulfilling life. The initial phase of settlement was smooth and unproblematic for these high-earners. Yet, as their migration journey proceeded, some found new meanings and purposes while others struggled over divergences in work culture and life priorities between HK and Australia, resulting in new dilemmas.

Who are professional migrants?

To comprehend the migration motives and experiences of the professionals examined in this chapter, it is crucial to understand the characteristics of professional migrants. Professional migrants are one group of migrants that is less politicised in public and political discourse (Weinar & Koppenfels, 2020). As high-earners with specialised skills, they are perceived to be valuable members of the host society. Existing literature employs various terms such as skilled migrants, professional migrants, and expatriates to describe skilled workers who work and live abroad. However, these terms are often used interchangeably across different contexts and for diverse purposes, leading to ambiguous distinctions (see Andresen et al., 2014; Weinar & Koppenfels, 2020). In this study, I draw on Andresen et al.'s (2014) analysis and categorise all my participants as professional migrants. These individuals embody a combination of attributes that characterise migrants, high-skilled employees, and expatriates. Their highly sought-after expertise, migration motives, and the emphasis on career advancement in their migration decisions set them apart from general labour migrants.

With respect to professional skills, these individuals are highly educated, equipped with specialised knowledge and managerial experience that employers highly value. Their talents and social capital typically afford them greater mobility than lower-skilled workers, presenting them with more choices of locations and job opportunities. This disparity often leads to perceived inequalities in mobility (Hidayati et al., 2021). For this group of individuals, the reasons for migration can range from the pursuit of better economic prospects and escape from political unrest to the desire to experience life in a foreign country and to adopt a specific lifestyle (Benson & O'Reilly, 2015; Özyurt, 2023). Unlike general migrants, for whom occupation may not be a prerequisite for their migration (except in the case of labour migrants), career ambitions and professional growth are important considerations of professional migrants when they decide their movements. All participants in this study relocated with their spouses and children. They have the dual objectives of achieving professional development and obtaining permanent residency and citizenship in the host country. This sets them apart from some expatriates (Koveshnikov et al., 2022; Leonard, 2010) who may work overseas for a temporary period without seeking permanent settlement.

Data and method

This study uses qualitative methods, including interviews and ethnographic observation, to collect and analyse data from professional HK migrants in Australia. Fourteen migrants were interviewed between August 2023 and April 2024. Knowing that the Australian government had increased immigration quotas and launched new schemes to draw professional migrants, I targeted those professionals who had entered Australia on various types of skilled visas. I recruited my interviewees through referrals. The 14 participants covered a variety of sectors and different levels of expertise, including medical and healthcare, infrastructure, education, and finance. They included doctors, physiotherapists, senior engineers, project managers, a dentist, a university teacher, and a fintech specialist. A majority of them (eight) were on the GT visa and the rest were on employer-sponsored and independent skill visas. Those who were

on the GT visa and independent skill visa had already gained permanent residence status. The participants were aged between 37 and 63, and had 15 to 38 years of experience in their respective fields. All of them brought their immediate family members to Australia; among them were 20 children aged between 2 and 18 years old (two were born in Australia). The earliest arrived in Australia in February 2021, just after Australia opened borders to international travel after the COVID-19 pandemic. The most recent one landed in February 2023. They lived in Melbourne, and other places in the State of Victoria.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted via zoom or telephone calls, lasting between 1 hour to 1.5 hours. Interviewees were asked about reasons for moving to Australia, their work and family life before and after migration, their social circles in the destination country, and their medium- and long-term plans. All interviews were conducted in Cantonese and were transcribed for content analysis. Additionally, I also visited some of these families in Melbourne in April 2024. I joined their Hong Konger gatherings and talked to old and new HK migrants. I observed their routines, such as shopping and driving children to school, to understand their daily life. All names are replaced by pseudonyms in order to protect the identity of the interviewees.

Existential (im)mobility and migration

Anthropologists have used the concept of existential mobility to capture people's inherent eagerness for a better, more fulfilling self. People chase a better life as they see limitations in their present conditions and they long for change and progression (Bloch, 1995; Jackson, 2011). Existential mobility is regarded as an important aspect of existential well-being (Salazar, 2021). People feeling existentially mobile generally consider themselves able to move forward and achieve certain cherished goals in life (Hage, 2005; Jackson, 2011). In contrast, people who experience existential immobility find themselves stuck in certain environments, therefore unable to move on to attain some desired goals. To overcome such "stuckedness" (Hage, 2009; Pettit & Ruijtenberg, 2019), some choose migration as a means to escape existing traps. Such physical movements are underpinned by the presence (or lack) of existential mobility. As Hage puts it:

We engage in the kind of physical mobility that defines us as migrants because we feel another geographical space is a better launching pad for our existential selves. We move physically so we can feel that we are existentially on the move again or at least moving better (Hage, 2005, p. 470).

Existential studies of im/mobility have contributed to various understandings of border regimes, inequality, and exclusion across space and time (Ellis, 2023). Migration and mobility research have shown that people pursue this kind of physical mobility to overcome existential stuckedness in a particular place (Grill, 2012; Pettit & Ruijtenberg, 2019). In particular, Pettit and Ruijtenberg (2019) argue that aspiring and actual migrants, whose decisions about migration are driven by a sense of existential immobility, often experience a continuous emotional oscillation between hope and depression pre- and post-migration. The authors illustrate this with the experience of Egyptians migrants in the Netherlands who, while pursuing

a better life and manhood to provide for their family, are inevitably caught in alternating ups and downs in their pursuits. The pursuit of a better future, associated with cross-border movements, is not complete even after relocation has successfully been attempted. Thus, migration, the authors conclude, is an act that “offers the possibility of overcoming, but also reinforces, existential stuckness” (Pettit & Ruijtenberg, 2019, p. 730).

In this study, I draw on Pettit and Ruijtenberg’s analysis of existential immobility, physical movements, and their association with ongoing, fluctuating hope and disappointment to explain the experiences of migrants. Different from Pettit and Ruijtenberg, whose study subjects are of lower socio-economic status, relying on marriage to emigrate to a desired, developed country, I show that those of higher socioeconomic status, despite the ability to overcome border barriers, also suffer from a sense of existential immobility, pre- and post-migration, and for different causes. Without encountering restrictive border regimes, professional migrants emigrate to pursue an alternative lifestyle, a sense of fulfilment, and career prospects in a foreign place. While this wish for an alternative lifestyle and work opportunities bring satisfaction to some, it also generates new disappointment to others, producing feelings of existential immobility. Before moving on to detail the experiences of professional migrants, the next section explains the immigration schemes through which these professionals enter Australia, highlighting their privileged position compared to general migrants.

Trawling global talent: the “HK Stream” and the Global Talent scheme

In response to the Chinese government imposing a national security law on HK in 2020, the Australian government introduced two new pathways to permanent residence in Australia, designed for HK residents, in November 2021. Open for application in March 2022, the new immigration pathway for HK residents was expected to “attract skills and talent and build business links, helping to boost productivity and create further job opportunities for Australia” (Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, 2021b). Collectively known as the “HK Stream”, the scheme offers a five-year temporary visa to graduates of eligible tertiary programmes and those who are employer-sponsored under the Temporary Skill Shortage visa. Visa holders can apply for permanent residence after continuously residing for three years in a designated regional area or four years in a cosmopolitan area. In other words, Hong Kongers who enter Australia under a temporary skill visa or temporary student visa can now apply for permanent residence after staying and working in Australia for a certain number of years — an arrangement that was absent prior to 2021.

The “HK Stream” (coined “safe haven scheme” in Chinese) is a preferred route for Hong Kongers who choose to (or can only) enter Australia via a student visa (Yiu, 2022) or an employer-sponsored work visa. For professional migrants, it is the country’s GT scheme which offers the most benefits and flexibility. Launched in 2019, the scheme aims to attract exceptional talent from around the world to live and work in Australia (Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, 2024).¹ To qualify for a GT visa, an applicant needs to be a highly skilled individual earning at least AU\$167,500 (~US\$112,000) a year,² and with internationally recognised expertise in one of the ten target sectors. These are: resources; agri-

food and agriculture technology; energy; health industries; defence, advanced manufacturing and space; circular economy; digital technology; infrastructure and tourism; financial services and financial technology; and education (Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, 2024). The applicant also needs to be nominated and endorsed by an Australian national specialised in the field stated in the application form. The perks of the GT scheme are multiple. A successful applicant is given instant permanent residence upon landing in Australia, entitling the visa holder and his/her family members to free education, with no restrictions on where to work and live in Australia. There are no asset or investment requirements. Applicants only need to provide proof of functional English. Even though the scheme aims to attract “high-earning individuals in future-focused sectors” and to create “opportunities for Australians by transferring skills, promoting innovation and creating jobs” (Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, 2024), successful GT visa holders are not required to work in the sectors in which they are specialised. Nor do they need to secure a job in Australia before the visa is granted. GT visa holders can apply for citizenship after residing in Australia for four years (being away from Australia for no more than 12 months), compared to six years under the UK’s HK BN(O) scheme.³ Table 7.1 compares the UK BN(O) scheme and various skilled immigration pathways of Australia which are popular among HK migrants.

[Insert Table 7.1 here]

Work-life imbalance and unmet aspirations

The professionals in this study earned an annual salary of HK\$720,000 – HK\$1,800,000 (~US\$92,200 – US\$230,000), owned private properties, and enjoyed various benefits offered by their companies, such as private medical insurance, while in HK. What drove them to leave for Australia? When asked about their decisions to emigrate, these professionals recounted that social instability in HK in 2019 and political changes in the city since 2020 were a push factor, though most of them were not active participants in the anti-government protests in 2019. Some left because they wanted their children to grow up in a more liberal environment. Besides, aspiring for a change in lifestyle was unanimously cited as an important driver. Most participants admitted living and working in a highly competitive HK had been stressful. Others felt that their career and life aspirations could not be met. They shared a sense of existential immobility (Hage, 2005) — the feeling of being stuck in an environment, unable to move forward due to social and institutional barriers. Despite having physical mobility (related to spatial movements) and enjoying social mobility (related to moving up or down the socio-economic ladder), they felt trapped in circumstances that limited their progress or pursuit of an ideal life. As Hage puts it, the sense of existential (im)mobility “does not necessarily coincide with lack of social mobility” (Hage, 2009, p. 98). Essentially, it is the sense of “going too slowly” or “going nowhere” (Hage, 2005, p. 471) that makes people contemplate movements. While the sources of emigration could be political oppression and economic downturn, for my participants, who generally enjoyed a good living standard (in terms of income level), political changes, dissatisfaction at work, and a work-life imbalance constituted the major sources of their sense of disillusionment, driving them to pursue (imagined) opportunities abroad.

HK is known for its vibrancy and high efficiency. It is also notorious of having a workaholic culture that emphasises punctuality and respect to authority. People in HK generally work long hours. A Gallup poll in 2022 ranked HK as the most stressful city in East Asia (The Standard, 2022). In sectors such as healthcare and infrastructure, which support people's daily work and commuting, workplace stress comes from the demanding nature of the profession, which is often complicated by inadequate resources.

Derek (senior engineer, 38 years old) described his work at a company which provides underground and train services in HK as highly pressurised, fuelled by the increasing demands from customers and scrutiny by the media. He recalled:

An important part of my job involved responding to emergencies and investigating incidents. However, over the last few years there were unrealistic demands for error-free and delay-free train services. Even though I did not have to be in the office 24/7, mentally I was 24/7 prepared for work. I once spent 48 hours continuously in the office and on site in order to complete an investigation.

Richard (engineering team head, 56 years old) commented that social instability in HK between 2019 and 2020 triggered human capital outflows from his department. "It takes five to six years to train a junior staff member to become an engineer capable of carrying out independent, more complex tasks. When they leave, I can't find replacements easily," explained Richard. As experienced staff on his team left for various reasons, and the workload continued to grow, he anticipated intensified work pressure. Explaining his decision to leave the company after more than 30 years of service, Richard responded: "I was completely burned out ... I needed to take a break and find new meanings and purposes in life."

As these professionals recalled their pre-migration life in HK, "the lack of work-life balance", "having limited time with family", "increased work pressure and stress" were repeated themes. Dominic (infrastructure consultant, 37 years old) lamented that demands from work left him little personal time:

I played football with my mates on weekends. This is one of the ways to relax myself from the stressful job. While others chatted among themselves during breaks, I would check and respond to work email. I had several work-related WhatsApp groups. If you do not respond to these communications on weekends, you would be considered laid back and not committed.

The pressure associated with children's education constitutes another source of work-life imbalance in HK. In order to be successful in a meritocratic, exam-oriented education system, HK school children not only compete in grades but also in co-curricular and extra-curricular achievements. After-school tuition and additional lessons during holiday breaks are common among HK students. Young people also spend out-of-school hours equipping themselves with a range of skills and capabilities, such as learning musical instruments to high standards and engaging in competitive sports. These pressures are associated with high suicide rates among school children (Lau, 2024) and low inclination of HK couples to have children (Yip & Yiming,

2023). Many parents also experience the stress associated with having school children in HK. Janet (physiotherapist, 38 years old) commented that after a long day's work at her own clinic, she would focus herself on supervising children's schoolwork, organising children's multiple extra-curricular activities, and navigating competitive admission processes of elite schools. It is not surprising that several participants in this study explained that they moved to Australia in the hope of giving their children "a happier childhood" and getting "more quality family time together", both of which are hard to realise in HK.

Apart from work-life/study-life imbalances, some professionals found that their aspirations were constrained by social and institutional arrangements in HK, prompting them to look for opportunities elsewhere. The two doctors interviewed in this research abandoned their high-paying jobs in HK to chase non-material satisfaction. Colin (50 years old), a family doctor with over 20 years of experience, entered Australia on the Skill Independent visa. Colin, who moved with his wife and two children, opined that his role as a family physician (more commonly known as a general practitioner ("GP")) in HK fell short of delivering what he was trained to do. Colin commented that the "family doctor" concept is vague in HK. Individual members of a family tend to see different doctors for consultations, for reasons of convenience. For example, one may visit a clinic that is close to the workplace this time while opting for another doctor in another clinic closer to home next time. Doctors of family medicine, though trained as specialists, are only permitted to perform a limited scope of medical investigations and treatments.⁴ Most GPs in HK are reduced to treating minor illnesses such as colds and flus, issuing sick leave certificates, prescribing medicine, examining health check reports, and arranging patient referrals to other specialists. However, for Colin, a GP is trained to assume a much bigger role that provides "more comprehensive care" and fosters "connection and continuity". In other words, GPs should maintain strong connections with all members of the family and other medical specialists, and takes care of the family's medical and healthcare needs in a continuous, rather than an ad hoc, manner. Because of how the family doctor system is organised in HK, Colin's aspirations could not be realised.

Julian (42 years old), another family doctor, echoed the mismatch between his vision of a GP and his actual role in HK. He explained:

I like talking to my patients, finding out more about their interests and habits, and establishing good relationships with them. However, in HK, due to limited manpower, I had to rush through every consultation and tried to squeeze in even more appointments. On average, I only had five minutes for each consultation.

Work-life imbalances and barriers to career aspirations in the workplace, alongside socio-political changes in HK, became the drivers of emigration among these professionals.

Smooth transition: Institutions, migrant capital, and existential mobility

As these professionals set out for Australia, most of them had a relatively smooth transition. All of them continued to work in their specialised fields after settling in Australia. With their skills, knowledge, and professional networks, they were able to overcome barriers and acquire

the necessary licences/qualifications to perform professional roles in Australia, such as medical doctors, dentists, physiotherapists, and university teachers, despite different regulatory requirements between the place of origin and the host country. They had access to different forms of emigration channels *and* the competence to recognise and make use of such access. Their relatively smooth transition in work, as opposed to the experiences of other migrants who suffered job losses and de-skilling (see Yue, 2023), was largely enabled by the human capital of these skilled individuals and the professional networks they engaged in. Julian (mentioned before), who had experience practising in the UK and HK, thoroughly researched the requirements for obtaining a licence to practise family medicine in Australia. He passed all the necessary qualifying examinations and training requirements before he left HK. He was then matched to an Australian employer by recruitment agents specialised in the medical profession. Colin (mentioned before) also landed in a local clinic without coming across many issues. His family physician fellowship, obtained in HK, was reciprocally recognised in Australia. He was recruited by an Australian doctor whom he had met at an international conference years before.

Several engineers in the railway sector interviewed in this study also secured job offers easily before they set out for Australia. Their relocation to Australia coincided with the Victorian State Government's quest for skilled labour to support its multi-billion-dollar infrastructure projects – Victoria's Big Build (State Government of Victoria, 2024). These projects involve upgrading road and railway transportation throughout the state, including constructing new underground and railway lines, major roads, and tunnels to improve connectivity (State Government of Victoria, 2024). In late 2021, Derek (senior engineer, 38 years old), through industry connections, was introduced to a company in Melbourne that ran a railway project as part of Victoria's Big Build. In need of experienced engineers and project managers to test, install, and operate new communication systems in the new railway network, the Australian company quickly offered a job to Derek, who had years of experience operating similar systems for the railway company in HK. The recruitment process was straightforward. In addition to a job application and submitting references, Derek had a 30-minute online interview with his potential new employer. An offer letter was issued within a month, followed by the issuance of a skilled visa to enter Australia. Derek subsequently successfully referred eight former colleagues, including his supervisor, to join the same project.

Having a permanent settlement status has eliminated uncertainties in the migration journey of these professionals. Eight participants of this study were granted the niche GT visa shortly after they arrived in Australia. HK professionals could also apply for, and be granted, a GT visa before they left HK, as the dentist and fintech specialist in this study did. When one is on a GT, rather than employer-sponsored, visa, one's permanent stay in Australia is not conditioned on securing local employment. Though GT is a niche scheme, the entry bars do not pose much challenge to most professionals in HK. For example, the applicant needs to be earning at least AU\$167,500 (~US\$110,000) annually at the time of application. This threshold can easily be met by professionals in HK where salaries are generally high because of high living costs in the city. Australia's border closures during the COVID-19 pandemic had resulted in serious labour shortages. When Australia re-opened its borders, the Australian government was desperate to recruit labour of varying skills and across different sectors. Success rates of GT

applications among HK professional migrants were high between 2020 and 2022, as reflected by the experiences of participants in this study and according to migration agencies based in HK. Data also showed that HK applicants accounted for 11% of the total grants of GT visas during this period (Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, 2021a, 2022).

With settled status and secure jobs, these professional migrants had a good start in their relocation journey. To some of them, the choice of moving to Australia was a wise one, as far as work-life balance was concerned. In 2021, Australia's median working hours added up to 38 hours per week (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022a), compared with 45 hours in HK (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, 2024). A typical workday starts at 9am and finishes at 5pm with one hour's lunch break; overtime is uncommon. After the COVID-19 pandemic, many Australian employers have adopted flexi-working practices. Several participants who worked on state infrastructure projects reported that they were officially permitted to work in the office for at least three days a week, with remaining days working from home. Yet in practice, in addition to the two official days of working from home, many colleagues would select to work from home on occasional Mondays and Fridays. There was no strict observance of the rules. Such flexible working arrangements, which would be inconceivable in HK, met the wishes of those who relocated to pursue a better work-life balance. They began to establish new routines that contrasted sharply with their previous ones in HK. Some of them finished work early and picked up their children from childcare or school before going home; others spent work-free weekends on community sports, hiking, and gardening. Johnathan (engineer, 38 years old), who has a 4-year-old daughter and a 2-year-old son, treasured the time he had with the children. The family spent reading time together every evening. Johnathan reportedly left the office at 4.30pm every day. Comparing this with his pre-migration work life, he responded: "Out-of-office hours did not exist in my previous role."

Work-life balance aside, for some, it is the extra space they have to realise their unmet career aspirations that matters. The two GPs mentioned earlier, who now earned two-thirds of what they had in HK, were content with their new and expanded roles in the Australian medical and healthcare system, which was underpinned by an ethos quite different from HK. GPs in Australia have clear, more defined roles. They are given more permissions to diagnose illnesses, investigate health issues, and treat patients. Colin explained:

I can perform certain procedures and minor operations, such as those related to skin cancer, in my clinic. I establish closer working relationships with other specialists ... I look after not only one patient but all members of the family in a continuous manner.

Julian, another GP, added that he was given more responsibilities and had greater job satisfaction in his new role. Amongst the various positive changes, he had more time with his patients and could build closer relationships with his patients and their families, which helped with diagnosis and treatment.

Shifting toward life-work imbalance and new existential immobility

Despite having a relatively smooth start in Australia, as these migrants settled in they began to confront culture clashes and experience inadaptation. While some continued to enjoy having more personal and family time, others started to describe their new experience as a transition from “work-life imbalance” in HK (with work being prioritised over life) to “life-work imbalance” (more life than work) in Australia.

“Australians place a lot of emphasis on personal and family well-being,” commented Paul (fintech specialist, 40 years old), “No one expects you to check and respond to work email after office hours and on weekends.” Paul once sent out emails during out-of-office hours (which is very common in HK); the next day his boss went to him to try to find out if he was stressed by work. In Australia, there is a strong culture that prioritises individual, including employee, rights and family well-being over other things. GP Colin cited an example: apart from the more common doctor’s certificates granting sick leave, there is also another leave called carer’s leave. This is given when, for example, a mother takes her son to see a doctor and, as a result, cannot turn up for work. Australian employers deal with sick leave with great flexibility. Generally, one to two day’s leave does not need to be supported by a doctor certificate. This contrasts with HK where employees are required to provide a doctor’s certificate for every sick leave.

Australians’ overarching emphasis on “well-being” and “individual rights”, coupled with the differences in institutional arrangements, organisation culture, and work ethic between Australia and HK, produced new challenges for some target-driven professionals from HK. For example, when problems emerged in the middle of a project, the general attitude amongst Australian colleagues would lean toward delaying the project altogether rather than stepping up efforts to address them within original timeframes. No one is expected to work extra hours to solve these problems, given the condition of a well-being-first environment in which staff are encouraged to raise workload issues with line managers. In large infrastructure projects, where there are strict procedures and timelines, the incompatibility in work culture between Hong Kongers and their Australian colleagues become even more evident. Many HK professionals working in large corporations are used to having formal meetings and reporting systems; there are also strict project deadlines and protocols. In contrast, their Australian colleagues operate in a less hierarchical work environment where informality, flexibility, and cultivating connections constitute the dominant work culture. The informal way of doing things also leads to what one participant called “a lot of chit chats but little execution” among colleagues and in meetings. Amy (project manager, 42 years old), who oversees the sustainability aspects of contractors of an infrastructure project, admitted that she found it difficult to adjust her work habits: “When my previous project was downsized, my colleagues automatically scrapped some of the reporting requirements. In HK, we observed a stringent system of reporting where there was little room for compromise. Here, people prefer flexible and ad hoc arrangements.”

In addition, working in a foreign environment characterised by a very different culture also constrained these HK professionals from contributing their knowledge to the fullest extent. As pointed out by several participants, in Australian workplaces, people rely heavily on human connections and relationships to solve problems. As newcomers, the HK professionals had yet

to build their networks. Oftentimes, their technical approaches, pace of work, and goal-oriented attitude did not fit well with the local culture. Frustration also stemmed from these professionals lacking sufficient room to utilise their skills. Despite working in a less hierarchical work environment, some participants expressed that sometimes their suggestions on how to improve workflow and efficiency were not taken seriously by local people. This, however, did not reflect any racialisation; rather, the locals did not see the need to alter their existing ways of doing things, especially when changing existing practices meant more work and procedures.

Given these limitations, some participants started to be concerned about their career prospects. Several younger professionals lamented “not learning anything new” and “the lack of progress” in their existing jobs in Melbourne. There was bitterness when they shared how some former colleagues who remained in HK, despite having less experience and little track record, quickly moved up the ranks because of skill shortages in the former company. “We worked so hard for so many years to get to the middle-manager grade ... it only took them months! They were my subordinates but I will be on the same grade as them if I go back,” said Derek.

Discussions and analysis

Australia has long been an immigrant country. More than half of the country’s population was born overseas or has a parent who was (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022b). Migrants in Australia have contributed significantly to the country’s workforce. For example, new migrants in Australia accounted for 41.4% of the 1.5 million additional jobs generated between 2018 and 2023 (Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic and Australia’s strict border policies had a lasting impact on the country’s economy. Australia closed its borders for almost two years at the height of the pandemic. Most non-citizens were blocked from entering Australia and the government imposed caps on total arrivals. Stringent border policies triggered mass departures of foreign students and immigrant workers, resulting in serious shortages of workers in businesses and public services. When Australia reopened in 2021, there were manpower gaps in many places waiting to be filled across the country. Combating persistent skill shortages, the new Labour government increased the country’s immigration cap by 35,000 to 195,000 in 2022 (Turnbull, 2022). Commenting on the rise in acceptance of permanent immigrants, Australia’s Home Affairs Minister Clare O’Neil admitted that “[We are] moving away from a system which is almost entirely focused on how we keep people out to one that recognises that we are in a global war for talent.” (Turnbull, 2022). The political borders and institutions constructed to organise spatial mobility have become more relaxed in post-COVID Australia. These friendly arrangements set the backdrop for the acceptance of HK professionals on the receiving end.

On the sending front, the professionals featured in this study embarked on physical migration to overcome what they considered as the condition of being trapped in an all-work-no-life environment and situations where they could not actualise their potential. Leveraging the Australian government’s favourable GT scheme and exclusive immigration pathways for HK skilled workers, they left their homeplace to seek future possibilities and existential well-being

(Todres & Galvin, 2010). Compared with general migrants who commonly experience loss of jobs, changes of occupation, and uncertainties of settlement and citizenship status, these professionals were in a much more secure position. With human capital and professional networks, they were recruited as experts in their fields by Australian employers. Some were given relocation packages and a starting salary comparable to what they had in HK. Together they demonstrated the power, resources, and the exclusive treatment of state-favoured migrants. They also actively navigated various social conditions in the host country as they pursued a purposeful life. What they encountered showed that experiences of mobility are continuously shaped by social and economic relations, or what Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013) term “regimes of mobility”, which also influence people’s existential well-being.

The participants in this study shared some common characteristics, particularly related to professional skills and career backgrounds. They all admitted having more personal and family time post-migration and experienced existential well-being in some regards. Overtime work has become history. That said, for some, feelings of stuckness did not disappear altogether after they crossed borders. Frustrations at work, not caused by incompetence but by differences in work culture, became the new source of existential immobility. The emphasis on “well-being” and “individual rights”, the preference for “flexibility” and “informality”, and the attention given to building “connections” at work in the destination country have constrained these highly-skilled people from fully contributing their knowledge and skills.

The sense of existential mobility/immobility is differently felt among family members of these professionals, and age also plays a role in shaping such feelings. Broadly speaking, amongst the participants in this study, older males (who are in their 50s and early 60s) were more tolerant of retrogression in their careers as they anticipated a more relaxing life toward and/or after retirement. They strengthened their sense of fulfilment by pursuing new interests in sports, gardening, and community work. Younger, more career-minded males (in their late 30s and 40s) who were also family breadwinners felt a stronger sense of immobility, compared with female members and young children in the family.

There was also a noticeable split among family members as these migrants assessed their new life in Australia. For example, children’s accounts were in stark contrast with their male parents’. Several young children (aged 6 to 13), whom I encountered at one of the family gatherings of this group of professionals, spoke positively about their school life – less (or even no) homework, fewer assessments, longer breaks, plenty of sports and outdoor activities, and no more heavy schoolbags. One mother told me that during holiday breaks her children counted the number of days to the start of term as they were so eager to return to school. Even the mothers found their life more fulfilling in Melbourne, despite the need to manage household chores in the absence of domestic helpers. Jenny (40 years old), who quit after being an engineer for 20 years, treasured her role as a full-time mum in Melbourne:

I enjoy every minute I spend with my three-year-old. I read him stories and take him to different play groups. Back to HK in the future? I don’t want my boy to receive education there ... so stressful ... both for children and parents.

Such bifurcated existential (im)mobility, experienced by different members in the family, brings new struggles. As children found themselves relieved of the stress and pressure of HK, adults were concerned about longer-term consequences. Worried about the competitiveness of their children, given the liberal, relaxed education environment in Australia, some planned to enrol their children in fee-paying religion-affiliated schools and/or private schools, which offer more challenging learning content than free state schools. Others considered sending their children to after-school tutorial classes to learn more challenging skills, such as the International Mathematical Olympiad, in the hope of boosting their competitiveness when applying for top-ranking universities in the future. All of this indicates that despite moving abroad, some pre-migration practices of these HK families, especially those related to enhancing their children's competitiveness, remained. Questions confronting these professionals include: What's next after obtaining Australian citizenship in five years' time? Will returning to HK be a possibility? Derek, the first in this study to arrive in Melbourne, admitted that it would be a difficult move. His narrative reveals that even the highly skilled may experience immobility:

I am not entirely satisfied with my work here but my wife and children prefer Australia to Hong Kong. Having experienced education here [in Australia], I don't think my son can survive in Hong Kong schools. Look at our house ... we have four bedrooms ... we can't afford such space in Hong Kong. Moving back wouldn't be easy.

Derek's comments reflect a narrowing of his sense of "temporal mobility" (Galvin & Todres, 2018), a condition in which one considers future possibilities. Pondering the future, instead of feeling socially mobile, he doubted if he could achieve progress in one of his valued projects — in this case, his career.

Two months after I visited some of these migrants, in April 2024, one family had decided to move to Sydney. Seeing limited opportunities with his existing company, the father had accepted a new job with a salary cut. As there are signs that the infrastructure project in Melbourne will face further budget constraints, other engineers in this study have started to look for opportunities elsewhere. Yet, they all expected a reduction in salary in their next job, given the high salary they started with. Their easy entry to Australia occurred against a backdrop of Australia's fight against COVID-19, the country's massive outflows of human capital, and Australian employers' demand for filling skill gaps. As the economic environment has gradually improved since 2021, these professionals will face a different job market.

Conclusion

This chapter uses the theoretical lens of existential (im)mobility to understand the migration motivation, trajectory, and settlement experiences of a group of highly skilled professionals. It places the experiences of these professionals within specific social and economic contexts, and explains how social forces and arrangements have impacted their existential im(mobility). It reveals both experiences of existential mobility and well-being, and also accounts of existential immobility and uncertainties, attributing these experiences to interactions between people, place, and culture in specific circumstances. Skilled migration across borders has raised debates

about brain drains in places of origin and brain gains in destination countries (Bhardwaj & Sharma, 2023). It is widely noted that HK has suffered from a brain drain triggered by the recent wave of emigration of professionals and their families to other countries. This case study showed that while these professionals left for what they anticipated to be a better life, new forms of existential immobility emerged after settling in the world's fourth most liveable place. Whether return migration and reverse knowledge flows will take place, especially after these professionals and their family members have obtained Australian citizenship, will depend on changing economic conditions and how they juggle career aspirations, lifestyle, and other family needs.

References

- Andresen, M., Bergdolt, F., Margenfeld, J., & Dickmann, M. (2014). Addressing international mobility confusion - developing definitions and differentiations for self-initiated and assigned expatriates as well as migrants. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 25(16), 2295–2318.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2013.877058>
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2022a, October 12). *2021 Census: Fewer Australians working 40 hours or more per week*. <https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/2021-census-fewer-australians-working-40-hours-or-more-week>
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2022b, June 28). *Snapshot of Australia*.
<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/snapshot-australia/2021>
- Australian Government Department of Home Affairs. (2021a). *Australia's migration trends 2020–2021*. <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-stats/files/migration-trends-highlights-2020-21.PDF>
- Australian Government Department of Home Affairs. (2021b, November 1). *New permanent residence visa streams for Hong Kong*.
<https://minister.homeaffairs.gov.au/AlexHawke/Pages/new-permanent-residence-visa-streams-hong-kong.aspx>
- Australian Government Department of Home Affairs. (2022). *Australia's migration trends 2021–2022*. <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-stats/files/migration-trends-2021-22.pdf>
- Australian Government Department of Home Affairs. (2023). *Australia's migration trends 2022–2023*. <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-stats/files/migration-trends-2022-23.PDF>
- Australian Government Department of Home Affairs. (2024, March 5). *Visas for innovation*.
<https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/working-in-australia/visas-for-innovation/global-talent-independent-program/eligibility>
- Benson, M., & O'Reilly, K. (2015). From lifestyle migration to lifestyle in migration: Categories, concepts and ways of thinking. *Migration Studies*, 4(1), 20–37.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnv015>
- Bhardwaj, B., & Sharma, D. (2023). Migration of skilled professionals across the border: Brain drain or brain gain? *European Management Journal*, 41(6), 1021–1033.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2022.12.011>
- Bloch, E. (1995). *The principle of hope. 1885–1977*. MIT Press.
- Chan, Y. W., & To, Y. (2023). In search of a greener pasture? Post-2019 migrations from Hong Kong. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 0(0).
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642231194300>
- Economist Intelligence Unit. (2024). *The Global Liveability Index 2024: The world's most liveable cities*. The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited.
<https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/global-liveability-index-2024/>

- Ellis, B. D. (2023). Fostering existential well-being: mobility, dwelling, and Undocumented Student Resource Centers in California. *Mobilities*, 18(4), 651–665.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2023.2213405>
- Galvin, K. T., & Todres, L. (2018). “Eighteen kinds of well-being although there may be many more: A conceptual framework illustrated with practical direction for caring. In K. T. Galvin (Ed.), *Routledge handbook of well-being* (pp. 324–338). Routledge.
- Glick Schiller, N., & Salazar, N. B. (2013). Regimes of mobility across the globe. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 39(2), 183–200.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2013.723253>
- Grill, J. (2012). 'Going up to England': Exploring mobilities among Roma from Eastern Slovakia. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 38(8), 1269–1287.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2012.689187>
- Hage, G. (2005). A not so multi-sited ethnography of a not so imagined community. *Anthropological Theory*, 5(4), 463–475. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499605059232>
- Hage, G. (2009). Waiting out the crisis: On stuckedness and governmentality. In G. Hage (Ed.), *Waiting* (pp. 97–106). Melbourne University Press.
- Hidayati, I., Tan, W., & Yamu, C. (2021). Conceptualizing mobility inequality: Mobility and accessibility for the marginalized. *Journal of Planning Literature*, 36(4), 492–507.
<http://doi.org/10.1177/08854122211012898>
- Ho, W. C. (2023). The settling experience of Hongkongers in London: Another Case of reluctant migration in fear of Beijing's takeover. *China Review*, 23(3), 245–272.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/48740213>
- Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department. (2024, March 27). 2021 Population census. <https://www.censtatd.gov.hk/en/scode600.html#:~:text=Median%20weekly%20usual%20hours%20of,work%20%28including%20all%20employment%29%2045>
- Hongkongers in Britain. (2021). *Challenges of integrating a high potential workforce: Survey report on work and employment for recently arrived Hongkongers in the UK*. Hongkongers in Britain. <https://www.hongkongers.org.uk/employment-survey>
- Jackson, M. (2011). *Life within limits: Well-being in a world of want*. Duke University Press.
- Kan, M.-Y., Loa, S. P., & Richards, L. (2023). Generational differences in local identities, participation in social movements, and migration intention among Hong Kong people. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642231192023>
- Koveshnikov, A., Lehtonen, M. J., & Wechtler, H. (2022). Expatriates on the run: The psychological effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on expatriates' host country withdrawal intentions. *International Business Review*, 31(6), 102009.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ibusrev.2022.102009>
- Lau, A. (2024, January 4). 9,240 primary, secondary students plotted suicide in 2023. *The Standard*. <https://www.thestandard.com.hk/section-news/section/4/259227/9,240-primary,-secondary-students-plotted-suicide-in-2023>
- Leonard, P. (2010). Organizing whiteness: Gender, nationality and subjectivity in postcolonial Hong Kong. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 17(3), 340–358.
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-0432.2008.00407.x>

- Li, Y.-T., & Liao, B.-J. (2023). An “unsettling” journey? Hong Kong’s exodus to Taiwan and Australia after the 2019 protests. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 0(0).
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642231192025>
- Lui, L., & Lee, M. Y. K. (2023). Hong Kong migrants’ divergent experiences in Australia: A multi-level spatio-temporal approach. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 0(0).
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642231192012>
- Mak, S., & Imahshi, R. (2024, February 27). In China's shadow, Hong Kong escapees urge Australia to raise visa game. *Nikkei Asia*. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Asia-Insight/In-China-s-shadow-Hong-Kong-escapees-urge-Australia-to-raise-visa-game>
- Özyurt, P. M. (2023). Moving lifestyle migration beyond the sun: A eudaimonic well-being approach. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 21(4), 484–500.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2022.2161908>
- Pettit, H., & Ruijtenberg, W. (2019). Migration as hope and depression: Existential im/mobilities in and beyond Egypt. *Mobilities*, 14(5), 730–744.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2019.1609193>
- Salazar, N. B. (2021). Existential vs. essential mobilities: Insights from before, during and after a crisis. *Mobilities*, 16(1), 20–34.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2020.1866320>
- Salazar, N. B., & Smart, A. (2011). Anthropological takes on (im)mobility. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 18(6), i–ix.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2012.683674>
- State Government of Victoria, A. (2024, June 17). *Victoria's big build*. State Government of Victoria, Australia,. <https://bigbuild.vic.gov.au/>
- The Standard. (2022, June 22). Hong Kong employees' stress index tops East Asia. *The Standard*. <https://www.thestandard.com.hk/breaking-news/section/4/192831/Hong-Kong-employees'-stress-index-tops-East-Asia>
- To, Y., & Chan, Y. W. (forthcoming). Post-2019 Hong Kong migration to the United Kingdom: Drivers, identity, and change. In M. Thunø & W. Simeng (Eds.), *Handbook of Chinese migration to Europe*. Brill Publishers.
- Todres, L., & Galvin, K. (2010). “Dwelling-mobility”: An existential theory of well-being. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being*, 5(3).
<https://doi.org/10.3402/qhw.v5i3.5444>
- Turnbull, T. (2022, September 2). Australia: Permanent migration cap raised for first time in decade. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-62762158>
- Weinar, A., & Koppenfels, A. K. v. (2020). *Highly-skilled migration: Between settlement and mobility*. SpringerOpen.
- Yip, P., & Yiming, B. (2023, August 24). Hong Kong’s low fertility rate shows urgency of creating a more family-friendly society. *South China Morning Post*.
<https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3231882/hong-kongs-low-fertility-rate-shows-urgency-creating-more-family-friendly-society>
- Yiu, W. (2022, November 12). More Hongkongers seek graduate work visas to stay in Australia after studies, with chance to become PR. *South China Morning Post*.
<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education/article/3199378/more->

[hongkongers-seek-graduate-work-visas-stay-australia-after-studies-chance-become-pr?module=hard_link&pgtype=article](#)

Yue, P. H. (2023). *A study report on Hong Kong migrants recently arrived in the UK*. University of Liverpool. <https://livrepository.liverpool.ac.uk/3171386/>

Chapter 7

Table 7.1 Preferred Australian and UK immigration pathways among HK emigrants (note 1)

Country	UK	Australia			
Immigration pathway	HK BN(O) visa	Global Talent visa (subclass 858)	Skilled Independent visa (subclass 189); State/Territory nominated visa (subclass 190)	Temporary Skill Shortage visa (subclass 482): requires nomination and sponsorship by an Australian employer	Temporary Graduate visa (subclass 485): requires completion of qualified courses (at least 2 years of full-time) at an Australian educational institution
Open for application	31 January 2021	2019	2017	2017; permanent residence pathway for HK people introduced in March 2022	2013; permanent residence pathway for HK people introduced in March 2022
Target applicants	General	Highly skilled, internationally recognised experts in one of 10 strategic sectors	Skilled workers who have an occupation on the skilled occupation list	Skilled workers	Young students and graduates
Visa type	Temporary (5 years)	Permanent	Permanent	Temporary (5 years)	Temporary (5 years)
Previous visas required	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Study visa
Age limit	Nil	18–55 (which may be relaxed for outstanding	Below 45 at the time of application	Nil	Below 50 at the time of application (note 2)

		international achievements)			
Income requirement	Nil	Annual salary of AU\$167,500 and above	Nil	Annual salary not less than AU\$70,000	Nil
Education level/work experience	Nil	Work experience in designated industries; internationally recognised with evidence of outstanding achievements; nomination by an Australian specialised in the same field as stated in the application	Points-tested (a score of at least 65), covering education level, English proficiency, skills assessment	English proficiency requirements; skills assessment; 2 years of prior work experience	English proficiency requirements; graduated from qualified courses offered by Australian educational institutions
Holder of specific passport	BN(O) passport	Any	Any	Any	Any
Right to work and live anywhere in host country	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dependents are entitled to free state school education	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Entitlement to national healthcare services	Need to pay surcharge: £5,175 per adult and £3,880 per child to cover a 5-year period	Entitled to enrol in national Medicare scheme	Entitled to enrol in national Medicare scheme	Entitled to enrol in national Medicare scheme	Entitled to enrol in national Medicare scheme
Pathway to permanent residence	Eligible to apply after holding the visa and staying in host country for 5 years	Immediate permanent resident status upon granting of visa and entering Australia	Immediate permanent resident status upon granting of visa and entering Australia	HK Stream (HK passport or BN(O) passport holders only) - Skilled Independent visa (subclass 189) - Permanent Residence visa (Skilled Regional, subclass 191) Eligible to apply for these permanent visas after staying/working for 4 years in urban areas (or 3 years in a designated regional area).	
Pathway to citizenship	Eligible to apply after staying in host country for one year as a permanent resident (i.e., 6 years from the start of the visa to being eligible to apply)	Eligible to apply after staying in the host country for 4 years	Eligible to apply after staying in the host country for 4 years	Eligible to apply after staying in host country for 4 years of which the last year must be of permanent residence status (i.e., 5 years (or 4 years for designated regional area) from the start of skilled visa to being eligible to apply)	Eligible to apply after staying in host country for 4 years of which the last year must be of permanent residence status (i.e., 5 years (or 4 years for designated regional area) from the start of graduate work visa to being eligible to apply)

Application fee collected by host government	A 2.5-year visa costs £180 per person; a 5-year visa costs £250 per person	From AU\$4,710	From AU\$4,640	Temporary Skill Shortage visa: from AU\$1,455 Temporary Graduate visa: from AU\$1,895 Skilled Independent visa: from AU\$4,640
--	--	----------------	----------------	--

Source: Australian Government Department of Home Affairs; UK Home Office; author's compilation.

Note 1: Information as of 30 June 2024. The Australian government has announced changes to some of these schemes to take effect in the latter half of 2024.

Note 2: This age limit only applies to holders of HK and BN(O) passports. Applicants of other nationalities must be 35 or below at the time of application.

Notes

¹ The GT visa will become part of the new National Innovation visa from 2025, see <https://www.fragomen.com/insights/australia-new-national-innovation-visa-to-replace-the-global-talent-visa-business-innovation-and-investment-visa-programs.html>

² This high-income threshold is adjusted yearly by the Australian Government Fair Work Ombudsman. See <https://library.fairwork.gov.au/viewer/?krm=K600486>

³ Applicants for citizenship are required to take a citizenship test which assesses English language and knowledge about Australia. Those below 17 and above 60 years of age are exempted.

⁴ To become a specialist in family medicine in HK, one has to complete a six-year training programme after graduating from qualified medical schools. The programme includes basic training with two-year hospital-based and two-year community-based components, and another two years of higher training involving independent family practice. The individual also needs to pass a fellowship examination.
