

Conclusion

Hong Kong migration: Continuity, change and controversy

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Abstract

The conclusion discusses the evolving Hong Kong diaspora and the transnational practices of new Hong Kong migrants. It sums up the major discussions in previous chapters and highlights foreign governments' exceptional immigration arrangements for Hong Kong people and argues that the post-2019 exit of Hong Kong residents is associated with policies driven by the material interests of foreign governments. It also discusses the impacts of Hong Kong migration on the destination countries and on Hong Kong, and proposes further research.

Migration is about escaping perils and/or seeking changes. The tensions and instability invoked by social and political events in Hong Kong (hereafter “HK”) around 2019 created new pressures and spaces for HK people to emigrate. The cross-border journey of some migrants entails few difficulties; others, however, may be entangled in different kinds of inadaptation and uncertainty. The decision to leave or stay, where to relocate to, and how to start a new life abroad are invariably influenced by the interrelated effects of policies, social structures, and personal circumstances. The personal accounts of migrants revealed in this volume illuminate not only individuals’ negotiations with their homeplace and new destinations but also the special interests that underlie changing migration rules and, in return, mediate people’s mobility and settlement. Post-2019 HK emigration has reconfigured the city of HK and its people. Places that have received HK migrants have also experienced multiple changes. The following sections will discuss several themes arising from previous chapters, including the HK diaspora, exceptional immigration arrangements for HK people, and the impact of emigration on HK and destination countries. A prospective research agenda will also be highlighted.

HK diaspora in the making

In this volume, we argue that the recent cohort of HK migrants has contributed to the formation of distinctive Hong Konger diasporas in different destinations, forging a global HK diaspora (see Chan in the introduction of this volume). One important manifestation of a Hong Konger diaspora is the host countries’ recognition of “Hong Konger” as an ethnic identity that is disaggregated from the broader Chinese identity. Noting the arrivals of Hong Kongers and their cultural and linguistic differences from mainland Chinese, foreign governments and institutions have added “Hong Kong” or “Hong Konger” as a separate category (or sub-category) from “Chinese” when collecting demographic data. This is noted in Canada’s 2021 census, where the option of “Hong Konger” (alongside Chinese) was provided under ethnic and cultural origins for the first time (Xu, 2021 and chapter 5 in this volume). Similarly, in the UK, some educational institutes have added “Hong Konger” as a new category to differentiate HK students from those from mainland China in order to provide the necessary support for different language groups. The Australian government’s data on cultural diversity in the country also differentiates Hong Kongers from those from mainland China and Taiwan (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

Several contributors in this volume have observed the formation and emergence of new HK diasporas following the recent emigration. Yan & Ng (chapter 5) show that post-2019 HK immigrants in Canada are more conscious of their Hong Konger identity; these Hong Kongers (including new emigrants and return migrants from HK) have forged the diasporic identity of the HK immigrant communities in Canada. Chan (chapter 2 and chapter 4) also notes the emergence of a self-conscious Hong Konger diaspora among recent HK migrants in the UK who differentiate themselves from previous Chinese and HK migrants. Meanwhile, a stronger HK identity is also supported by activities of newly formed Hong Konger civil groups in major destination countries, providing practical support to new HK migrants, campaigning for their rights, and promoting their integration into the local society. Many of these community groups strive to promote HK culture and traditions (including preserving Cantonese), contributing to a stronger subethnic-linguistic identity disaggregated from the broader Chinese identity. While some HK migrants prefer to stay within their own ethnic-cultural settings, others have chosen to be part of English-speaking communities and adopt local practices (see chapter 3).

Migrants in the age of migration (Castles & Miller, 2009) are not uprooted from their home of origin; instead, they are transmigrants maintaining various strands of ties across national borders (Glick Schiller et al., 1995). One aspect of the transnational practices of HK migrants is their connection with families and friends in HK. Links are created and maintained through people's physical movements, professional connections, capital flows, knowledge diffusion, information exchange, and transnational organisations. These multidimensional connections have been facilitated by advances in transportation and logistical infrastructure, and information and communication technology. While migrants connect well and frequently to HK, these connections may further trigger new migration from HK (chapter 10).

Recent emigrants from HK were not short of information furnished by various sources. Social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp, have been widely used by both emigrants and aspiring migrants from HK to strategise migration projects to meet their goals, including identifying possible destinations, navigating immigration policies, and adapting to the new environment. Suppliers of information include a rising number of HK YouTubers who introduce and comment on various aspects of life in the UK, Canada, Australia, and Taiwan. These include property agents marketing new properties in prime locations, education consultants advising on school selection strategies (To, 2023), chefs demonstrating how to use local ingredients to make Chinese dishes, and full-time mothers sharing the experience of gardening, interest classes for children, and other livelihood matters. Even purchasing or renting a house or flat overseas can be done remotely. Prevalent communication channels also shaped settlement experiences. Hong Konger groups (chapter 4), which actively use social media platforms to share practical information and promote co-ethnic activities, have smoothened the settlement of some new arrivals while fomenting Hong Konger communities.

Post-2019 HK migration and its exceptionalism

As Portes and Rumbaut (2014) have argued, migratory flows cannot simply be explained by the push-pull model; in fact, they are socially embedded, meaning that the relationships between the sending and receiving societies mediate these flows and experiences. Understanding the recent exit of HK people requires understanding the logic behind the immigration policies regulating these physical movements. Compared with the pre-handover emigration wave in the 1980s and 1990s, post-2019 emigration from HK has been influenced by new geopolitical tensions and post-COVID challenges. Migration policies have once again become an instrument to achieve foreign policy and domestic objectives. Ongoing rifts between China and other regions and places surrounding trade, technological rivalries, and national security might have motivated some governments to quickly provide an exit for Hong Kongers. In Taiwan, amid cross-Straits tensions, the initial assistance to help HK people settle in Taiwan earned the ruling administration a political dividend (chapter 6). Additionally, foreign governments also faced domestic and regional problems that could have promoted swift actions to draw “good migrants”. Benson (chapter 1) examines how the UK's HK BN(O) visa has been a product of post-Brexit geopolitics. She suggests that the rhetoric of “moral obligation” towards HK people has demonstrated the coloniality of the British visa scheme and how UK politicians, notwithstanding their political affiliations, have worked together to build the imagery of a global Britain.

The “HK opportunity” came at a time when the migrant-receiving countries faced severe labour shortages. The labour crunch in these countries had been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic when borders were closed to contain the spread of the virus, as well as an aging population. Rising demand for workers exerted great pressure on salaries and costs to train and retain employees. Relaxing immigration rules to draw qualified foreign labour thus became a key policy strategy of these countries. The Canadian government aimed to admit 1.2 million immigrants into the country between 2021–2023 to alleviate pressures on the job market and stimulate economic growth (Jadah, 2020). Similarly, Australia in the early 2020s had to combat persistent labour shortages triggered by border closures during the pandemic. The new Labour government increased the country’s immigration cap in 2022 (Turnbull, 2022). In the UK, a combination of the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit has led to the loss of foreign workers, who had returned to their home countries. Around the time of the announcement of the HK BN(O) scheme, the UK was experiencing a hike in job vacancies in all sectors (Clark, 2022). Shortages of labour to fill these jobs had affected the provision of public services and delayed economic recovery from the pandemic. For these countries, HK migrants, who are generally educated with post-secondary qualifications and have a good work ethic, became attractive targets.

Behind its moral claims, the British government predicted that the arrival of HK migrants would bring an additional £6 billion (~US\$7.9 billion) to the Exchequer over five years (UK Home Office, 2020). Albeit a small city, HK ranked third globally in average wealth (just behind Switzerland and Luxembourg), according to the Global Wealth Report 2024 (UBS, 2024). HK’s low-tax system has helped produce many wealthy individuals who spread their accumulated wealth through various overseas investments. Even before the recent emigration wave, Hong Kongers were amongst the top real estate investors in popular cities, such as London, Toronto, Vancouver, Sydney, and Melbourne; all of these are popular emigration destinations for HK people. The emigration trend that began in 2020 has accelerated such a buying spree. Hong Kongers are the largest group of foreign owners of residential properties in England and Wales (Arcibal, 2023), and the second largest group of foreign homeowners (just behind Mainland Chinese) in urban areas in Australia (Khadem, 2024). HK investors have also eyed properties in Canadian cities with 90% of immigrants from HK settling in Vancouver in recent years (Chan, 2022a). Property investments will contribute to destination countries’ tax revenue, benefit local businesses and create job opportunities in areas such as mortgage financing, renovation, and property management. Similarly, much capital from HK families has gone into the education sectors of these receiving countries. English-speaking education and world-rated universities in the UK, Canada, and Australia are favoured by HK parents. Besides state-run schools, a portion of HK migrant children also study in fee-paying private schools in the UK and Australia (Yu, 2022). The relocation of these families has generated job opportunities and revenue for education providers in the receiving countries.

In many respects, HK people have received special treatment from certain foreign governments, which depict them as “desirable” and “good” migrants (chapter 1) who share special ties with the host countries. The UK government reiterated its “responsibilities” and “historic and moral commitment to the people of Hong Kong” (UK Government, 2021). Canada hailed the “long-standing relationships” between HK and Canada and the “outstanding contributions” that migrants from HK have made in Canada (Canadian Government, 2020). The Australian government

stressed that the new immigration visa scheme for HK people would build on the “already close family connections and economic ties with Hong Kong” (Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, 2021). After the initial launch of these schemes, these governments continued to relax eligibility criteria and smoothen application processes.

Hong Kongers are given dedicated immigration routes with fewer restrictions compared with other nationalities. In the UK, HK BN(O) migrants do not need to go through any points-based immigration systems that set entry bars for immigrants. The HK BN(O) visa, in principle, is a humanitarian visa; Hong Kongers are allowed to enter and remain in the UK under the “safe and legal (humanitarian) route” with a pathway to settlement and obtaining citizenship in the country (UK Home Office, 2024). In comparison, the UK humanitarian visa for Ukrainians — another major migrant group, alongside the Hong Kongers, received by the UK in recent years — does not offer a route to permanent residency and citizenship in the UK. Though HK BN(O) migrants have to pay for their “protections” in the UK (unlike Ukrainian refugees), they enjoy electoral rights that are not extended to all other immigrants. In the UK, as in many countries, the right to vote and to stand as a candidate is conditional upon an individual’s citizenship status. The British Nationality Act 1981 determines that HK people with BN(O) passports, despite not being classed as British citizens, have the status of Commonwealth citizens — a classification that gives eligibility for voting and standing as a candidate in all national elections (UK Parliament, 2021). The exceptionality of HK migration to the UK is thus, first, rooted in the UK–HK colonial ties, and second, produced by the British state’s conscious and cautious schema of selecting “good migrants”.

Under Canada’s new immigration scheme for Hong Kongers, HK students have become the only group of foreign students in the country who are entitled to apply for permanent residency immediately upon completing qualified Canadian post-secondary education courses. In an exclusive arrangement for HK applicants, the Canadian government has also scrapped the tertiary education requirement for those applying for an open work permit in Canada (Canadian Government, 2023). In Australia, Hong Kongers applying for a temporary graduate visa after graduating from tertiary education in Australia can be up to 49 years of age, while students of other nationalities face a more stringent requirement of having to be below 35 years of age (Australian Department of Home Affairs, 2024).

Overall, the different immigration routes of the UK, Canada, and Australia have classified and stratified the types of migrants entering their country. The UK’s HK BN(O) scheme facilitates HK people’s entry indiscriminately, with no conditions on educational background, English proficiency, income levels, and age. Consequently, it has drawn a diverse group of HK people of various socio-economic statuses and at different life stages. Quite differently, Canada’s dedicated immigration routes target HK’s young elites, requiring applicants to possess recent Canadian post-secondary educational qualifications and/or Canadian work experience. Applicants have to pass English proficiency tests when applying for permanent residency. As a result, those who have chosen to emigrate to Canada would be young graduates and those of working age who have attained a certain level of English proficiency. Like Canada, Australia also targets young people and professionals with its HK safe-haven scheme, general points-tested immigration schemes, and

a global talent acquisition and investment scheme (chapter 7). Thus, Hong Kongers moving to Australia, in general, are high earners and possess better educational qualifications.

Impact of HK migrants on host societies

In the UK, the political consciousness and saliency of the post-2019 cohort of HK migrants has started to emerge. Major political parties in the UK have shown their interest in this new group of voters. Several HK migrants have won seats in local government elections, reflecting greater involvement of Hong Kongers in public office (Lam, 2024). HK BN(O) voters were considered to be able to swing election results in several constituencies in the UK general election in July 2024 (Lau, 2024; Rolfe, 2024). The UK's three major political parties — the Conservatives, Labour, and Liberal Democrats — all addressed HK migrants in their electoral platform, vowing to support and continue the BN(O) immigration pathway. The Labour Party's Manifesto declared that the Party “will stand with and support members of the Hong Kong community” (UK Labour Party, 2024, p. 112). The Conservatives pledged to maintain the visa scheme for HK people, alongside the Ukraine and Afghan settlement schemes (UK Conservative and Unionist Party, 2024). The Liberal Democrats vowed to fight for BN(O) passport holders' rights, and to extend BN(O) integration funding for Hong Kongers in the UK (UK Liberal Democrats, 2024). Several electoral candidates appealed to HK voters by pledging to review rules that would allow BN(O) visa holders to be entitled to benefits applicable to local people but otherwise unavailable to them at the moment, such as university fees at local rates.

Cities and towns in receiving nations are experiencing the impact of HK migrants. These new arrivals are not limited to metropolitan areas that have traditionally attracted ethnic Chinese migrants, such as Toronto and Vancouver in Canada, and Sydney and Melbourne in Australia; they disperse in disparate locations. Surging property prices in Toronto and Vancouver (Chan, 2022b) have pushed some recent HK migrants to settle in less-expensive locations, such as Alberta and Calgary in Canada. In Australia, those residing in non-urban areas can obtain permanent residency in three years, compared with four years in urban areas. The differentiated migration policy has prompted some Hong Kongers to choose alternative places, such as Perth in Western Australia, and Darwin in the Northern Territory (Lui & Lee, 2023). In the UK, while the majority of post-2019 HK migrants continue to favour London, Birmingham, Manchester, and Bristol — places that have a high concentration of Chinese migrant groups — an increasing number has opted for other cities, towns, and suburbs, such as Nottingham, Sutton, Reading, and Cambridge. Living costs, school catchment areas, and social ties shaped migrants' choice of location. The influx of children and young adults into schools and universities in the UK, Canada, and Australia has also changed the educational landscapes in these countries. Many would aim to apply for permanent residency after completing their studies.

Impacts of emigration on HK

Post-2019 emigration has resulted in the departure of more than 200,000 HK residents. This has had an immense impact on HK's population dynamics (chapter 8). The outflows of people have

resulted in a “brain drain”, threatening the city’s competitiveness. While HK government leaders have tried to downplay the issue of emigration, various government and organisational reports have indicated the severity of labour and skill shortages spanning the private and public sectors. The civil service vacancy rate remained high at 10% in 2024 (RTHK News, 2024), compared with 4.2% in 2018 (see chapter 8).

To address the talent crisis, the government has prioritised talent acquisition and retention on its policy agenda. It set up the HK Talent Engage Office to boost its institutional capacity to direct talent strategies and recruit talents. A slate of incentives was also implemented to draw highly skilled individuals. The launch of the Top Talent Pass Scheme (TTPS), for example, has created a new, swift route for global talents to work and live in HK. However, despite the official claim that the scheme targets professionals from around the world, mainland Chinese represent over 90% of the new recruits of these talent schemes (Hamer & Westbrook, 2023). HK’s political changes and stringent COVID-19 measures during the pandemic deterred expatriates from staying in the city (chapter 9). In the long run, whether HK can retain its status as an international hub for global talents remains to be seen. Moreover, although mainland Chinese talents arriving in HK have helped fill some skill shortages, whether these new migrants feel welcomed by local people, whether they can integrate into the workplace, and how well they and their family are supported by local services pose huge challenges (Now TV News, 2023).

Prospective research agenda

The emigration of HK people after 2019 has significantly changed HK and the receiving countries and their societies. It has also transformed the HK diaspora, giving it a distinctive identity, with multiple networks and linkages between home and destinations. One area for future research will be on return migration. Many Hong Kongers who left in previous waves of emigration have returned. Will we see another wave of returning HK migrants in a few years, following in the footsteps of their predecessors? Future research can examine what underlies Hong Kongers’ long-term settlement abroad and what drives some to return. Additionally, researchers can explore various aspects of the HK diaspora as it evolves. Comparative studies can be conducted on how HK migrant groups across major destinations are similar to or different from one another in terms of their political participation, socio-economic well-being, and self-identity. More research could also be done on specific groups among post-2019 HK migrants; for example, on the occupational mobility and adaptation among working adults in major destination countries and identity change among migrant children. Finally, an analysis of the transnational links created and deepened by the recent HK diaspora will shed light on how these networks shape transnational work, families, and practices.

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