

Post-2019 Hong Kong Migration to the United Kingdom

Drivers, Identity, and Change

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Abstract

Driven by socio-political changes in the city and favourable immigration citizenship pathways offered by several foreign governments, Hong Kong (HK) has been experiencing massive human outflows since 2019. Amongst the various destinations that HK people have headed to, the United Kingdom (UK) remains the most popular. What makes Hong Kongers opt for a new yet uncertain life abroad? Do these recent emigrants form a distinctive diaspora in the UK? This chapter examines post-2019 emigration of HK people to the UK. We explore various drivers that propelled Hong Kongers to set off for the UK and investigate how social networks facilitate and condition migrants' adjustment to the new environment. We also examine how members of the new HK diaspora grapple with their evolving identities as they confront challenges in their new lives abroad. In so doing, we add to emerging scholarship on post-2019 HK migrations with an account of the migratory processes, post-migration experiences, and identity formation of new HK immigrants in the UK.

Introduction

Hong Kong (HK) was ceded by the Qing court in China to the British colonizers under the Treaty of Nanjing signed in 1842. In 1898, the colony was extended in land area via a 99-year lease of the New Territories. As a diasporic Chinese society ruled by a British colonial system, HK was often described as a "borrowed place in borrowed time" (Hughes 1976). With the establishment of China's Communist regime in 1949, the differences between HK and mainland China increased. In the decades that followed, HK society continuously evolved in response to its changing socio-political relationship with China. From the 1980s to the late 1990s, political uncertainties and the impending return of HK's sovereignty to China in 1997 sparked massive outflows of people (Skeldon 1994b; Sussman 2010). Since late 2019, a new wave of emigration among HK people has emerged as more than 200,000 residents have applied for schemes that would lead to permanent residency abroad (authors' calculations from various sources of media reports). These new movers targeted places where the host governments have offered special immigration routes for HK people. The UK Government, in particular, renewed its British National (Overseas) ("BN(O)") scheme to allow HK people who

hold BN(O) passports to move to the UK with few conditions (UK Government 2022), making the UK the most popular destination for HK leavers in the current emigration wave. Hong Kongers born in HK before 1 July 1997 (the handover of HK to China) were eligible to apply for the BN(O) passport before 1 July 1997. By the end of 2023, a total of 191,158 BN(O) visas had been granted to HK people and 140,300 people had arrived in the UK since the scheme began on 31 January 2021 (UK Home Office 2024).

Migration is not uncommon among middle- and upper-class families in HK. Ever since the 1980s, emigrating and securing a second citizenship has become a common living strategy for those who have the resources to accomplish it. However, HK has also experienced waves of returning migrants at times when political, economic, and social conditions have improved. What makes Hong Kongers opt for a new yet uncertain life abroad? Given the political backdrop of the 2019 social unrest, do these recent emigrants form a distinctive diaspora in the UK? This chapter examines post-2019 emigration of HK people to the UK—the destination that has drawn the largest number of HK migrants. Going beyond exploring migration intentions of aspiring migrants (Chan et al. 2022; Hongkongers in Britain 2020; Kan, Loa, and Richards 2023; Lui, Sun, and Hsiao 2022), this study is one of the earliest attempts to study the experiences of post-2019 HK emigrants in the UK (Chan and To 2023). This chapter examines the challenges that emigrants faced in their early settlement and how they mustered resources and garnered mutual assistance to deal with such challenges.

We explore various drivers (Van Hear, Bakewell, and Long 2018) that propelled Hong Kongers to set off for the UK. Additionally, we examine several Hong Konger-led mutual support groups and show how social networks facilitate and condition migrants' adjustment to the new environment (Boyd 1989; Ryan 2023; Ryan et al. 2008). We also examine how members of the new HK diaspora grapple with their evolving identities as they confront challenges in their new lives abroad. In so doing, we add to emerging scholarship on post-2019 HK migrations (Chan and To 2023; Li and Liao 2023; Lui and Lee 2023) an account of the migratory processes and experiences of those who have settled in the UK.

Data and Methods

The data of this study come from two main sources: (1) in-depth interviews with new HK emigrants to the UK; and (2) research and content analysis of the websites and social media platforms of mutual help groups and organizations set up and run by new HK migrants in the UK. Between April 2022 and May 2023, we conducted 26 semi-structured interviews with Hong Kongers who had moved to the UK via the new BN(O) visa scheme. Our data include 26 informants who range from 28 to 50 years of age; 21 of them have children and had emigrated as a family. Their monthly household incomes range from HK\$80,000 to HK\$220,000 (US\$10,300 to US\$28,300), so they are classified as middle class. In terms of educational level, 20

hold an undergraduate and/or postgraduate qualification. Most of the respondents reside in large cities and areas popular with HK people, including London, Manchester, Birmingham, Nottingham, Leeds, Bristol, Sutton, and Oxford. The profile of our informants is largely in line with findings of several surveys conducted on new HK migrants in the UK: most of the new arrivals are married with children and educated to the tertiary-level, and many held professional jobs in HK (Hongkongers in Britain 2023a; UK Home Office 2022; Yue 2023). For example, a survey on 1,310 new HK migrants in the UK revealed that 37.4% of those surveyed were in their 40s; 78.4% had received tertiary education; and 54.3% had children (Yue 2023). To protect the identity of the interviewees, all personal names in this chapter are fictitious. Interviewees were asked about (1) their reasons for emigrating to the UK; (2) how they chose amongst different UK cities/towns; (3) their experiences of forging new social ties and dealing with daily challenges; and (4) how they identify themselves in their destination country.

We also examined the activities of HK migrants and their interactions with different networks and groups in the UK. These include Hong Konger—only neighbourhood networks, Cantonese-speaking churches, and non-profit organizations that campaign for the welfare of HK migrants. We conducted research and content analysis of the websites, publications, and social media platforms of these entities. The data drawn from these outlets supplement the information provided by the interviewees, together substantiating the arguments made in this chapter.

Hong Kong as a Mobile City

A Refugee Society?

Before the establishment of the Communist regime in China in 1949, HK was considered an unseparated part of China. The open border between mainland China and HK facilitated easy flows of human and economic capital, which helped maintain HK as a vibrant free-trade port. The official figures show that the population of HK jumped from around 230,000 in 1901 to around 900,000 in 1931 and 1.6 million in 1941 (Chan 2014, 116). According to historian David Faure (2005, 28), the majority of HK residents in the mid-1930s had lived in the city for less than ten years (Faure 2005, 28). This shows the fluidity of cross-border flows and the effects of the open border between China and HK. After the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took over China, migration relations between HK and China slanted towards a one-sided flow from mainland China to HK; HK thus became a sanctuary for voluntary and involuntary mainland Chinese migrants. Many fled China as political and economic refugees. According to a report submitted to the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) (Hambro 1955), HK received a total of 885,000 refugees from China from 1945 to 1954. At least 350,000 people

entered HK in the two years of 1949 and 1950 (Lam and Liu 1998, 8). From the 1950s to 1980, the population of HK increased multiple times to reach 5 million. Besides the impetus of the post-war baby boom, regular and irregular entries from China were a major source of the population increase.

Starting from the 1950s, HK and China experienced very different development paths. Intense industrialization in the 1960s and 1970s and the rapid development of the city as a world financial centre in the 1980s brought HK unprecedented prosperity and fame. Whereas HK stood side by side with the other three Asian tiger economies (Taiwan, Singapore, and South Korea), a series of campaigns led by the CCP resulted in social unrest and dire poverty in China. The Great Leap Forward economic campaign (1958–62) failed to transform China into an industrialized country and ended in deadly famines. Between 1966 and 1976, a CCP-led political campaign which targeted capitalists and intellectuals, known as the Cultural Revolution, led to violence, social turmoil, and economic stagnation. An exodus of around 360,000 people was reported during the last two years of the 1970s (Lam and Liu 1998, 12). Indeed, even with a border closure policy since 1950 and strict border patrol, influxes of refugees from China continued until 1980, the year the HK government abandoned the “touch base” policy and implemented strict repatriation of illegal migrants from the mainland (Ku 2004).

With a substantial portion of its population being made up of refugees and migrants who had escaped from political and economic disasters in China, HK was described as a “refugee” society whose people carried with them a “refugee mentality” and considered HK a lifeboat (Lau and Kuan 1988). It was believed that this mentality had produced an “apolitical” attitude among HK residents who were striving to earn a better livelihood for their families and focusing on HK’s economic development. The post-WWII decades witnessed HK speedily developing into a relatively stable society with a prosperous economy, in stark contrast to the mainland. HK people often took pride in these achievements. Compared to China, HK was a free society (despite the lack of democracy), and alongside its modern urban development, the city gradually cultivated its civic cosmopolitan values and local cultural identity.

The 1997 Exodus: From Zau Naan (走難) to Wui Gwai (回歸)

As already mentioned, many mainland Chinese sought to escape calamities (*zau naan* 走難) to reach HK, whether through legal or illegal means. But no sooner had they settled in HK to pursue a stable livelihood than a new threat emerged—the pending return of HK’s sovereignty to Beijing (*wui gwai* 回歸). In the 1980s, China and the UK held a series of political negotiations to determine HK’s political future. The signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984, which stipulated the handover of HK’s sovereignty to China in 1997, churned up immense anxiety among Hong Kongers. Many worried about the prospects of the city’s social, economic, and political developments after 1997, despite the CCP’s promise to

preserve HK's prevailing ways of life for 50 years. Amid uncertainties and scepticism, migration became the first response of many Hong Kongers. The crackdown on the democratic movement in China in 1989 prompted more emigrations from HK. The outflow peaked in the early 1990s (over 60,000 emigrated each year in 1990, 1991, and 1992) (Skeldon 1994a, 30). From the early 1980s to 1997, there were continuous emigration waves from HK to the West; almost 800,000 people left the city during this period (Sussman 2010). Some called these emigrants from HK "reluctant exiles" (Skeldon 1994b). However, before 1997 a majority of these emigrants (between 500,000 and 700,000) had returned to HK for work or for family reunion (Ley and Kobayashi 2005; Ma 2011). Even using the conservative estimate of 500,000, the number of returning migrants represented 83% of all those who emigrated before 1997, who had amounted to 7% of the total population (Sussman 2010). The return of the migrants drew increased attention (Kobayashi and Preston 2007; Salaff, Wong, and Greve 2010; Waters 2002, 2006). Many of these families established a pattern of "transmigrant living," with the husband returning to HK for a better-paid job and flying frequently between homes, and the wife and children staying in the destination country. In the late 2000s, a second layer of this phenomenon of transmigration/return migration emerged, as some of the second-generation in these families began returning to HK for jobs.

The Evolving HK Identity

Although HK was a colonial society, the collective identity of Hong Kongers was never defined by the UK's colonial rule. Instead, HK identity was founded on a local consciousness of the differences between mainland China and HK (Lau Siu-kai 1982), and this consciousness continued to evolve in connection with the city's cross-border politics. According to sociologist Lau Siu-kai (1982), who conducted the first systematic research on HK identity in the early 1980s, well implanted within the collective "local identity" of the HK people was a self-proclaimed superiority over the mainlanders springing from the wide disparity in the level of development between HK and mainland China. During the three decades from 1950 to the early 1980s, China remained a closed country while HK experienced tremendous economic growth. Between 1985 and 1995 (two years before the handover of HK to China), the proportion of Hong Kongers who expressed a "strong" or "very strong" sense of belonging to HK jumped from 55.1% to 79.5% (Lau Siu-kai 2000, 257). The core elements forming the HK identity were multifold: (1) the separation of HK and China after the establishment of the socialist regime in China; (2) the opposite development paths of HK (pursuing laissez-faire capitalism) and China (promoting collectivism and communism); (3) HK's local popular culture development, with songs sung in Cantonese and TV programmes

and films produced in the local dialect; and also (4) the fact that many residents who had fled to HK to escape the political and economic turmoil in China nourished a strong sentiment against the socialist regime in China (Lau Siu-kai 2000, 257). The stark contrast between the development of HK and mainland China before the 2000s constituted a sense of conceit among HK people who looked down upon the “country bumpkin” mainlanders visiting HK (Chan 2014).

Similar to Lau Siu-kai’s HK-identity research structure, the Public Opinion Programme of the University of HK has since 1997 (the year of HK’s handover to China) continuously traced HK people’s changing attitudes towards their cultural identity, by asking whether residents of the city consider themselves Hong Kongers or Chinese. During the first decade after HK’s return to China, the resulting figures fluctuated among Hong Kong people. From 2004, the number of those identifying with the Chinese identity increased gradually, with 2008 (the year in which Beijing hosted the Olympic Games) reaching the peak (51.9%). After that, those who identified with the Chinese identity dropped significantly (Chan 2014). The decade of the 2010s concluded with the rise of “*zung gong maa u teon*” (China–HK conflict 中港矛盾), a new catchword in the local news media. Hong Kongers found themselves competing with mainland Chinese for limited local resources. These included infant formula (due to the Chinese “milk grab”) (*China Daily* 2011; Stuart Lau 2013), public and private hospital beds (due to the influx of pregnant mainland women) (*BBC* 2012; Wang 2018), and school places (due to mainland children entering HK for schooling) (Park 2013). Besides, HK witnessed huge influxes of mainland tourists since 2003. Thanks to the post-SARS Individual Visit Scheme that relaxed the entry regulations for mainlanders from selected cities, the number of mainland Chinese tourists in HK increased tremendously to reach tens of millions in the mid-2010s. This phenomenon had upset the locals who found that many places were overcrowded, and some Chinese tourists displayed bad manners (Chan 2016). All in all, there was no lack of antagonistic interaction between “intrusive mainlanders” and Hong Kongers, who often worried that local resources would be unfairly depleted by the mainlanders.

As shown above, the HK identity is not a static concept. The essentials of what constitutes a Hong Konger have evolved along with changing social conditions, particularly in response to HK’s relations with China. Despite HK’s return to China in 1997 and China’s economic progress since the 1980s, HK society in general holds onto a “social border” that distinguishes HK from China (Chan 2014). Several factors have contributed to the persistence of such a border. First, the “one country, two systems” principle provides constitutional legitimacy for maintaining political, social, and economic differences between HK and the mainland. Second, there has been a continued consciousness among Hong Kongers who opt for a distinctive local civic identity and moral superiority. Such rifts were exacerbated by activists who organized events and protests against any policies and social phenomena that suggested Chinese infiltration and Beijing’s interference in HK

affairs. Since the mid-2010s, some have also organized large-scale social movements to campaign for HK's democratic development (Ma and Cheng 2019).

Post-2019 Exodus from Hong Kong: Migration Driver Complexes, Migrant Prototypes, and Migrant Networks

In 2019, HK gained international media attention due to massive social protests against the government's proposed amendments of an existing extradition law. The proposed amendments, if passed, would have given the HK government the power to hand over criminal suspects to jurisdictions with which it does not have an extradition treaty, including China, Taiwan, and Macao (Li 2019). The controversial bill fuelled social discontent and opposition. Almost six months of anti-government protest and police crackdowns paralysed HK society, leaving it extremely polarized between the anti- and pro-establishment camps. The HK government finally withdrew the bill in October 2019; however, social protests continued as protesters requested other demands to be met (including full democracy in HK) (Lum, Chung, and Lam 2019). The movement came to an end in early 2020 with mobility restriction and crowd control due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The promulgation of the National Security Law on 30 June 2020 (*South China Morning Post* 2020) provided the government a legal tool to prosecute protesters and tighten political control. This situation also prompted some foreign governments such as the UK (UK Government 2022), Australia (Australian Consulate-General Hong Kong 2023), and Canada (Government of Canada 2023) to introduce favourable immigration schemes for HK people—offering pathways to permanent residency and citizenship with few conditions. Going beyond the popularly reported political factors (i.e., HK's changing political situation), we will show how multiple forces are at play for the mass migration.

Classical migration studies have long applied the “push-pull” model for the analysis of migration motivations (Carling and Collins 2018; Hare 1999; Khalid and Urbański 2021; Parkins 2010). However, there have been increased critiques of this traditional model. First, the classical push-pull model often presumes that migration involves aspirants from low-income countries striving to move out of poverty, as seen, for instance in the worldwide South-North migration pathway (Benson and O'Reilly 2009; de Haan 1999; Harris and Todaro 1970). Second, although it offers a list of push-pull factors, the model fails to provide a satisfactory explanatory system (Skeldon 1990 cited in Van Hear, Bakewell, and Long 2018). Third, the model is too simplistic and static because it considers migration to be a one-time decision and action, rather than a process in which migrants may make ongoing changes about motivations, routing-plans, and destinations (de Haas 2011). To better understand migration, it is important to “distinguish between predisposing, proximate, precipitating and mediating drivers” and to understand

how these drivers shift across time and space (Van Hear, Bakewell, and Long 2018, 927). Based on their studies of Afghan and Somali migrations, Van Hear and colleagues discovered what they call “mixed migration,” in which a combination of drivers is at work.

We used the driver complexes framework (Van Hear, Bakewell, and Long 2018) to analyse the recent migration movements of Hong Kongers. Based on our interview data and observations in the UK, we distinguish various drivers among HK migrants and delineate three migrant prototypes. It should be noted that the delineation of these categories is not always clear-cut, and some informants in this study may fall into different prototypes at one time or at different times. This categorization will show the diverse motivations of HK emigrants as they left for the UK.

Regarding how migrants access and leverage resources to facilitate their move and settlement abroad, there has been much discussion on the role of migrants’ co-ethnic networks as social capital and the resources they can garner through transnational practices (Boyd 1989; Faist and Özveren 2004; Griffiths, Sigona, and Zetter 2005; Massey et al. 1993; Ryan 2004). According to Massey’s classic definition: “migrant networks are sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin” (Massey et al. 1993, 448). These ties may take different forms and produce different effects. Overall, these bonding and ties, whether among co-ethnics or not, often help migrants to obtain information, access employment, and integrate into local communities post-migration (Nannestad, Svendsen, and Svendsen 2008; Ryan 2011, 2023). Given the diversity of migrant networks, how these connections are constructed, their accessibility to new migrants, and their effects on post-migration experiences and long-term settlement remain a research agenda that requires ongoing exploration as transnational human movements continue. Drawing on the literature on migrant networks and their functionality, this chapter will elaborate on the emerging migrant networks of Hong Kongers in the UK, which provide much support to the new arrivals and are underpinned by a form of co-ethnic solidarity that is built around a particular HK identity.

New Hong Kong Migrants in the UK

In this section, drawing on the interviews we conducted with HK emigrants, we divide recent HK migrants to the UK into three analytical categories and describe some typical features of each category.

Avoiding Calamities and Migrants “On the Run”

As mentioned earlier, previous generations of HK people are said to have borne a

refugee mentality. When they felt threatened, they were quite ready to escape to a safer place to avoid imminent calamities. Several informants in this study echoed this perspective, describing their experience of leaving HK as though they had been “on the run” (*zau lou* 走佬) or escaping from calamities (*zau naan* 走難), rather than emigrants. Quite a number of the early movers left HK in a “rush,” making the decision to sell their apartment and go within weeks or a few months. Some proclaimed, “We did not really plan, we just packed and left.”

Such a depiction reflected the emotions and anxiety that some of the movers had experienced, especially the trauma of leaving behind most of their possessions, friends, and relatives, and the need to embark on an uncertain journey abroad. With little or no planning, they were to face many expected and unexpected challenges abroad. Some even hurried away before the official introduction of foreign immigration schemes for Hong Kongers, and thus ended up finding the destination unsuitable for themselves and their children and had to move a second time within a few months. Reflecting on why they left in such a hurried manner, some informants revealed to us that they could not bear the sight of a rapidly deteriorating HK. Furthermore, the government’s extensive arrest scheme had made many in their social circles feel unsafe.

Many of these emigrants had never been to their destination country before, and most of them did not have relatives there. For example, the Chung family, consisting of two adults in their forties and two children, aged 9 and 14, was determined to leave HK in late 2019, after witnessing escalating brutal confrontations between anti-government protesters and the police. Mr Chung was a civil servant while Mrs Chung was an accountant when the anti-extradition movement took place in 2019. Explaining her family’s abrupt decision to leave the city, Amy (Mrs Chung) pointed out:

I could not tolerate the injustice I witnessed in HK during those months of social protests. I felt pity for the young people who took to the streets to fight for justice and the values they cherished. My son was very confused about what was happening. It did not take us much discussion to decide to escape from the chaos (interview with Amy, who arrived in the UK in May 2021; WhatsApp video chat, 7 October 2022).

Their first destination was Canada, where they intended to apply for study permits (for both adults and children) after entering the country in January 2020 with short-term visit visas. The family had never been to Canada before and had no relatives there. It was through a WhatsApp group—which connected more than a hundred Hong Kongers interested in moving to Canada—that Amy became acquainted with a dozen HK mothers planning to settle in Winnipeg, in central Canada. The initial months in Winnipeg were tough. As Amy recalled in the same interview:

As “refugees,” we stayed in temporary rental properties. All we had were eight pieces of luggage and those people we knew, but had never met, in the Winnipeg WhatsApp group. We did not know what the future would hold for us, and we weren’t sure whether our study permit applications would be successful. We had to pay around HK\$150,000 (US\$19,280) for an agent to prepare the applications for us. It was a gamble.

Amy’s self-perceived “*zau naan*” experience reflected how desperate she and her family were in their quest for a peaceful life safe from HK’s social turmoil. Though legally they were allowed to enter Canada, they found themselves belonging to nowhere, and their next steps were at the mercy of immigration policies of the host countries. Several months later, the Chung family experienced *zau naan* a second time. Despite being granted study permits to remain in Canada, they decided to move to the UK, where a new BN(O) immigration scheme for HK people had been announced. Never having been to the UK before, the Chung family landed in Portsmouth in the south of the UK in September 2020, where a friend resided. They were given a six-month Leave Outside the Rules (LOTR) visa to enter the country, during which they had to apply for, and be granted, the new HK BN(O) visa in order to continue staying in the UK. In May 2021, the Chung family moved, again, to Birmingham, after deciding that Portsmouth did not suit them. By that time, Birmingham had started to receive a growing number of HK arrivals who came via the new immigration scheme. The Chung family was amongst the first batch of successful applicants for the new HK BN(O) visa.

For migrants like the Chung family who left “on the run,” it was a matter of leaving HK at all costs. Precipitated by the social protests in 2019 and the responses of the HK government to them, most of these Hong Kongers made an abrupt decision to leave, with little planning or preparation for their move. Our informants belonging to this category of migrants come from diverse backgrounds, including single persons in their late 20s, and parents in their 30s and 40s; there are accountants, teachers, social workers, and civil servants. Typically, they experienced months of temporary shelter and lived on their savings before finally settling in a place. Emotionally they were anxious and were eager to leave behind their disappointment and frustration.

Leaving for the Sake of Children

A large number of HK migrants to the UK appear to have prioritized their children’s welfare over other considerations. The introduction of mandatory patriotic education and other revisions to the school curriculum, which directly affected their children, were cited as their biggest concern. Meanwhile, reduced freedoms in HK and the imposition of the National Security Law made them believe that there would be better prospects for their children elsewhere. Compared to the migrants

“on the run” described above, these migrants treated migration as a household strategy to better the lives of the next generation. They tended to be more strategic in their planning and decision-making, largely because they needed to balance different priorities, including financial demands, job opportunities, and the educational needs of their children. In addition to being financially sound, they also had networks (previous experience, friends, and relatives) in the UK to help them make more informed choices. Among those couples we interviewed, it was often the case that one of them had studied in a UK boarding school and/or university before, and several informants were returned migrants who had grown up in Canada or Australia before eventually returning to HK. Some were able to leverage these connections before they left HK; others quickly joined existing networks (such as church and neighbourhood networks) when they settled in their destination location. One informant reportedly attended more than 15 online talks about migrating to the UK, covering the property market, education system, and tax planning, before setting out for the UK with her family (interview with Sabrina, a mother of three, who moved to the UK in February 2022; WhatsApp video chat, 8 September 2022).

Reflecting on their motivations for emigrating to the UK, these informants typically cited political causes first, but then expressed that there were also non-political factors underlying their choice. The multiple reasons they cited demonstrate the complex drivers behind migration decisions. For example, several informants lamented the multiple pressures hovering over them in the competitive environment of HK: examination pressures for children and parents alike, little work-life balance, congested living conditions, and the exorbitant price of private housing, among other things. Despite their desire to improve these other aspects of their lives, many of these new migrants are unlikely to reach an income level in the UK commensurate with the one they had attained in HK. A 2022 survey on new HK migrants in the UK revealed that only around 30% of respondents reported having full-time jobs. A significant number of respondents admitted having moved from high-skill professions before migration to medium- and low-skill jobs after migration (Yue 2023). Nevertheless, some of these migrants believed it was worth making sacrifices to give their children better opportunities. One informant explained:

My children, at the age of 10 and 12, are overwhelmed by heavy schoolwork, never-ending tests, and exams with hardly any time for leisure. It is very stressful for them, and for me, too. I learned that education in the UK is not as competitive as in HK, and that it discourages rote learning. It is time for a change for my children and my family. I want them to be happy and have confidence in themselves—these are things that education in HK cannot offer (interview with Linda, a mother of two, who moved to the UK in November

2021; WhatsApp video chat, 12 September 2022).

Another informant, Victor, who graduated from University of Birmingham, lives in Birmingham with his wife and son. Victor fits the profile of a migrant who has prior experience in the UK as a student. A middle-ranking civil servant in HK, Victor admitted that he had given up his highly paid job for his children's future. Victor was working temporarily at a warehouse owned by Chinese migrants at the time of the interview. Despite the strenuous manual work, he noted the bright side of leaving HK:

We now live in a four-bedroom semi-detached house with a garden; for half the price of our flat in HK we get something double the size. Yes, we need to be prudent with our expenses as we are not earning much now, but we also have improved quality of life thanks to the extra space. The savings we have should be adequate for us to stay here until obtaining citizenship (interview with Victor, a father of one, who moved to the UK in November 2021; Birmingham, 10 November 2022).

Placing the interests of their children first, these HK migrants tend to be able to adapt to their new life. At the very least, seeing that their children are happy in a less competitive educational environment reassures them that their sacrifices have been worthwhile.

Capitalizing on the BN(O) Scheme

Not everyone who has left HK belongs to the anti-establishment camp. Some were neither supporters nor participants in the anti-extradition bill movement in 2019 and would be identified as “centrist” or as having no political affiliation (see Lee et al. 2019); rather, they moved because they were enticed by the new migration benefits for Hong Kongers. To these HK people, the privileges offered by their bespoke immigration pathway seem too good to pass up. Informants belonging to this category of migrant spoke favourably of the UK's dedicated settlement scheme for HK BN(O)-holders. With few conditions attached to it, the BN(O) scheme provides a fast-track pathway to permanent residency and eventual citizenship in the UK. After staying in the UK for five years (during which applicants can work, live, and study in the UK), an applicant will be given permanent residency status. One year after obtaining permanent residency status, an applicant is eligible for British citizenship (UK Government 2022). No English literacy assessment is required when applying for the visa. There are no minimum skills or job status requirements, and no quotas are set for the number of applicants.

In return, the benefits are multiple. Visa-holders have the right to work, study, and live in the UK, and their dependents are entitled to free education at state

schools. They can use the National Health Service after paying a medical surcharge. For a five-year application, the medical surcharge is GBP5,175 for an adult or GBP 3,880 for a child (UK Government 2024). Perhaps most promising is the chance to obtain a second citizenship after six years. Securing this additional permanent residency status serves not only as political insurance for HK people but is also a means to obtain more life choices. This tactic resonates with the practice of many Hong Kongers who left HK for the US, Canada, or Australia before the handover of HK to China in 1997. Many of these pre-1997 leavers continue to maintain two (or even multiple) homes in disparate locations, typically allowing them to enjoy warmer winters in HK and cooler summers elsewhere. These “monsoon” transmigrants leverage their mobility, networks, and accumulated spatial resources to help meet family obligations, retirement needs, and even the interests of their descendants. Migrants eyeing a transnational lifestyle are also among those who have left HK during this latest emigration wave. The much-depreciated value of the British pound and resulting investment opportunities in the UK property market have become added commercial drivers for some. Moving and settling in the UK has become less expensive than expected. One of our informants, Judy, an accountant who is single and in her fifties explained her strategy:

I have rented out my flat in HK so in case I return I have a place to stay. I have also purchased a flat in Manchester, where I am staying. I am confident about the property market in Manchester as there is a shortage of supply with rising demand. After I retire, I can spend time between HK and the UK (interview with Judy; WhatsApp call, 25 October 2022).

The informants in this research study show multiple drivers for emigrating to the UK. Some were prompted by socio-political changes in HK, while others chose to capitalize on the friendly immigration policies. Despite being faced with the same structural political and social changes in HK, Hong Kongers make different assessments of the city’s changing circumstances. The three types of migrants described here demonstrate how one’s political orientation, personal and family needs, changes in migration policies, and the interplay of these factors all contribute in various degrees to the varieties of emigration from HK. One thing is certain—the low entry-barrier of the BN(O) scheme means that most eligible HK people can easily relocate to the UK. While crossing the borders has been made easy, the real challenges for these emigrants lie in building new lives and forging new identities in a foreign place.

Navigating Life Abroad

Due to the political backdrop of the recent waves of HK's outmigration, HK migrants in the UK seem to have received an enormous amount of support and empathy from local communities there, including local residents, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and churches. Some of these groups are led by recent migrants to the UK, while others involve local people and Hong Kongers who have lived in the UK for many years. State funding also goes into some of these organizations. The presence and activities of these groups demonstrate the capacity of this generation of HK migrants to mobilize resources to create an extensive support network for themselves. This section examines how HK migrants adapt to their new environment by leveraging social ties. After this, we will explore their interactions with local people and how these new migrants perceive changes of lifestyle and their "new" identity in the UK.

Neighbourhood Networks

Migrants arriving in a foreign place need to deal with many daily challenges. Previous studies have stressed the role of migrants' networks in helping new migrants access information, work opportunities, accommodation, social services, and emotional support (Boyd 1989; Ryan 2023; Ryan et al. 2008). In the context of new HK migrants in the UK, neighbourhood social media groups are a valuable source of social capital. While new HK migrants generally join existing resident networks (which mostly include local people) as the first step, many also set up and/or join Hong Konger-only resident groups to share information and discuss issues of common concern. Facebook, WhatsApp, and Signal are the three most common social media platforms for HK people arriving in the UK. There are dedicated Facebook pages for Hong Kongers based on their geographical location, ranging from large regions such as the county of Kent or a major city such as Manchester to a local town as small as Farnham. An online search we performed found at least 80 such location-based Hong Konger groups set up across the UK. They are managed by Hong Kongers, and Cantonese is used for communication.

Many HK migrants to the UK use Facebook as a first step to make enquiries and get access to specific WhatsApp and Signal groups in which discussions are restricted to registered members. The sheer numbers of HK people living in some popular locations suggest that the level of support mustered is significant. An informant who lives in Kingston-upon-Thames, a London borough that has drawn a large number of HK migrants, reported having joined 16 (out of 25) dedicated WhatsApp groups set up by HK residents in her neighbourhood (interview with Doris, Kingston-upon-Thames, 8 April 2022). These groups cover school selection, job vacancies, taxation rules, local council-related matters, places to eat and shop, sports teams, property rental, car sales, and household repairs, among other things. Exchanges within these groups help new arrivals tackle daily challenges,

such as troubleshooting the intricacies of UK boilers or finding a reliable plumber or auto repair garage. Meanwhile, they also strengthen the HK migrant community by organizing social activities, such as general-interest classes and local sports teams. Importantly, these co-ethnic networks not only provide local information to new arrivals, but also serve as important sites of resources for aspiring migrants in HK, who may be deciding where to settle.

NGOs Run by Hong Kongers for Hong Kongers

In addition to location-based groups, new regional and national NGOs led by earlier HK arrivals in the UK have also flourished, with some receiving financial support from the UK government. Hongkongers in Britain (HKB), an organization set up in July 2020 by HK people in the UK, aims to provide assistance and advice both to HK people who are planning to move to the UK and to new arrivals (Hongkongers in Britain 2020). To date, HKB is the largest civil society group formed and operated by HK people in the UK, many of whom held professional positions in HK before emigrating to the UK. HKB has outreach teams set up in all nine regions in the UK—plus the three devolved nations of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland—and six of their outreach coordinators are former district councillors in HK, while one previously worked as a director of the HK Social Workers' General Union (Hongkongers in Britain 2023b). HKB receives funding from the UK Department of Levelling Up, Housing, and Communities, and works with regional and local partners to carry out flagship projects to build welcoming communities for HK migrants to the UK and encourage new migrants to contribute to UK society. It should be noted that UK government policies have traditionally encouraged support for ethnic-specific migrant groups as a means to help newcomers adapt to their new environment while alleviating the social welfare burden on the state. Advocacy is also a strong focus of HKB. The organization publishes regular surveys and policy papers to raise awareness of the challenges faced by HK arrivals and recommends policy changes and tailored assistance on behalf of new HK migrants. For example, a HKB survey on employment of HK migrants found that many encounter barriers in recruitment because employers are not familiar with the HK BN(O) visa scheme, and also because the UK government agency is slow in processing the National Insurance (NI) number for new arrivals. To remedy these problems, relevant government agencies are now recommended to provide clearer guidelines to employers and to speed up the NI application process (Hongkongers in Britain 2023a).

Another example is a registered community-interest company called Hong Kong Well UK, established by three HK mothers (two newly migrated to the UK and one who has been living in the UK for 20 years) (Hong Kong Well UK 2023). Dedicated to helping HK parents and youth with their mental health as they adapt to the new environment, volunteers at the organization provide free consultations and initial assessments in Cantonese (the Chinese language spoken by most HK people), in

addition to referral letters for follow-up by schools and medical doctors. If longer-term counselling and treatment are required, the organization also helps by providing contacts to Cantonese-speaking professionals, including social workers, counsellors, psychologists, and psychiatrists. Education outreach and raising awareness about mental health are important aspects of the organization's work. There are regular workshops and talks for HK parents and children on mental health, integration issues, parenting, and dealing with emotions. In 2023, Hong Kong Well UK received funding from the Kent County Government to offer HK families residing in Kent free triage assessment and mental health counselling with Cantonese-speaking professionals referred by Hong Kong Well UK, further reducing the financial burden on these families. Indeed, such NGOs and support groups run by Hong Kongers have been most welcomed by newcomers from HK. Staff and volunteers speak Cantonese and can emotionally understand the newcomers who contact them in search of help.

Churches

Chinese (*waa jan* 華人) churches have a long history in the UK. There are different types of Chinese churches—some are dedicated to serving Mandarin-speaking members, while others, which tend to be of a larger scale, provide services in Mandarin, Cantonese, and English (see To and Chan 2023). With the arrival of HK people in large numbers, local Chinese churches for Cantonese speakers have expanded rapidly. The growth is also driven by the sizeable number of vicars and preachers who have left HK for the UK. In Barnet, London—a popular destination among Hong Kongers—a vicar originally from HK set up a local church in July 2021. Within a year, the church boasted a congregation of more than 150 (interview with Doris, Kingston-upon-Thames, 8 April 2022). Another local church in Kent reported a staggering growth in membership, from 10 in 2019 to more than 200 in 2022 (interview with the vicar of a local Chinese church in Kent, WhatsApp call, 1 November 2022). Such growth prompted the church to set up an additional service to meet the needs of the expanding congregation. Instead of having their own premises for worship, many of these newly formed Cantonese-speaking churches hire and/or share a venue with English-speaking churches.

In addition to preaching the Christian faith, these churches provide spiritual and material support to help HK migrants settle in their new home. For example, the Good Neighbour Church, run by Hong Kongers (including both newly migrated HK people and those already settled in the UK), spearheads a scheme that provides short-term free accommodation for young HK migrants to the UK who struggle with living costs. The scheme solicits HK families to offer a free bed or room in their homes for a young HK migrant's temporary stay. Its flagship food programme invites volunteers to offer free homemade meals for the needy. In addition to regular weekly worship services, the group organizes a variety of activities for HK families, including general-interest classes for children and parents' workshops.

As mentioned earlier, HK migrants to the UK have mostly been welcomed by British people, given the general belief that many of these migrants have fled to the UK because of increased authoritarianism at home. Some local English-speaking churches have also reached out to support Hong Kongers, introducing them to British traditions and showing them that they are welcomed in the country. One example is an English-speaking church in Kent that invites Hong Kongers to join their service on Remembrance Sunday and also explains the history and meaning of the day, which commemorates military personnel who died in war. There are also tea and coffee sessions to welcome newly arrived Hong Kongers. In fact, some HK migrants have chosen to attend English-speaking churches instead of Chinese churches, for the purpose of integrating with the local community. These migrants spoke of their experience of assisting with gardening, cleaning, and simple repair tasks at the local church; meanwhile, several retired church members had volunteered to teach them English.

The New HK Diaspora in the UK

Diversity, Identity, and Change

The HK migrant community in the UK is diverse, comprising people of different ideologies who move to the UK for different reasons. Abrupt socio-political changes in HK between 2019 and 2020, though important, are not the only forces responsible for provoking and sustaining the emigration wave that has occurred since 2019. This study has shown that recent HK migrants to the UK are propelled by different material and non-material motivations that intersect with their political orientation towards HK's governance. Though most of our informants developed their desire to migrate amid drastic socio-political changes in HK, their ultimate ability to move was aided by established social networks and favourable immigration policies of the UK. The various motivations for migration found among HK migrants reflect the workings of different driver complexes, including immediate unease triggered by political and social upheavals in HK, accumulated pressures of living and working in the city, aspirations for more liberal education and a better work-life balance abroad, as well as the simple strategic calculation of securing a foreign passport.

The experiences of HK migrants also foreground the importance of contingent historical and social contexts in facilitating and characterizing migratory flows. HK was caught in a broader geopolitical contest in which the West, led by the US and largely followed by its allies, criticized China's heavy-handed approach to HK. Technological rivalries between China and the US, which are closely linked to national security interests, have led to increased mistrust and scepticism between liberal democratic countries and China. These international tensions contributed to bipartisan support within the UK to relax immigration rules for HK people.

Meanwhile, public opinion in the UK pivoted toward great sympathy for HK people after the *BBC* widely covered the social protests in HK in 2019. As part of its welcoming programme for Hong Kongers, the government has created slogans including “UK welcomes you,” “Building solidarity,” and “Fostering integration” that have made HK migrants generally feel at ease in the UK. Hong Kongers, alongside Ukrainians (as the Russia-Ukraine War persists), were the two largest groups of immigrants to the UK through the humanitarian route in 2021–2022. Geopolitical contests and the UK’s economic interests have thus created the contexts for embracing contemporary HK migrants—in stark contrast to the pre-1997 situation, when demands from Hong Kongers for British protection materialized only after lengthy and hard-fought negotiations. At that time, the UK only granted British passports to a select group of HK people (including professionals and civil servants) and their descendants (Paul 1997). Contemporary experiences of HK migrants serve as a reminder of how opportunities and challenges of migration emerge from the wider structural contexts of global politics (Benson 2023).

While starting a new life in the UK, some Hong Kongers continue to rally for greater freedoms and democracy for HK. Their political orientation is reflected in social media posts and the website content of specific Hong Konger support groups. For example, the circulation of messages about memorials for the June 4 Tiananmen Square incident and the screening of documentaries on the 2019 social protests in the UK (Chow 2022) all indicate a pro--democracy, pro-social-movement stance. Meanwhile, there is a strong desire amongst Hong Kongers to foster solidarity as they grapple with the new realities in the UK. As we observed from social media platforms, the phrase “Hong Kongers, add oil” (add oil is a literal translation of *gaa jau* 加油, a Chinese phrase that expresses encouragement and support), which was commonly used by protesters during the anti-extradition movement in HK, is now used to galvanize the Hong Konger spirit by encouraging migrants in the UK to unite and overcome challenges together.

While this Hong Konger spirit may strengthen solidarity amongst some HK people in the UK, others are more willing to cast aside political issues in HK and start a new chapter in life. Several informants in this study spoke of their busy daily schedules, including doing household chores, providing childcare, working full time, and visiting other HK friends in the UK during the holidays. Some said they barely have time to follow news and developments in HK. Instead, dealing with the practical aspects of family life now captures most of their time and attention. We also found that an increasing number of HK migrants have made efforts in connecting with local groups through attending English-speaking churches, volunteering at local charity organizations, and joining general school parents’ groups (instead of those with HK parents only), and these connections help migrants integrate into the host society.

Notwithstanding their political affiliations, recent HK migrants to the UK exhibit

a strong preference to be recognized as Hong Kongers rather than Chinese, deliberately distinguishing themselves from the mainland Chinese in the UK. All the informants in this study responded that they would let UK neighbours, friends, and taxi drivers know if they mistook their mother tongue (Cantonese) for Mandarin. This strong sense of being Hong Kongers rather than Chinese people is driven in part by the discontent among HK people over HK's "mainlandization" and the increased interference of Chinese authorities in HK's local affairs. Although they reported no outright confrontations with Mandarin-speaking students, co-workers, and neighbours, our informants expressed that as Hong Kongers, they cherished and upheld certain core values—including freedom and the rule of law—which were antithetical to the socio-political system in mainland China. Sometimes, these divergences have fomented tensions between old and new HK migrants, and between mainland Chinese and HK immigrants in the UK (To and Chan 2023). Meanwhile, the condition of being in a foreign land also gives HK migrants in the UK a sense of duty to promote and preserve distinctive HK culture and traditions—something that these migrants did not feel so strongly about during their time in HK. As a result, HK festivals and food fairs featuring traditional egg tarts, milk tea, and dim sum have taken place in London, Birmingham, and Manchester to showcase HK culture and lifestyle.

However, identity building is also contingent on a person's assessment of the situation. Proclaiming oneself to be a Hong Konger sometimes brings practical benefits. Several informants reported identifying themselves as Hong Kongers to preclude discrimination from local people, who are generally sympathetic to HK migrants. Furthermore, rising anti-Chinese sentiments during 2020 and 2021—mainly driven by the COVID-19 pandemic—meant that disassociating oneself from Chinese mainlanders offered some measure of safeguard against hostility targeted at China and the Chinese. Nevertheless, HK people can also be confused about their identity at times. One informant spoke about switching between multiple identities: a Hong Konger, a Chinese (ethnically), and a British National (Overseas) (interview with Mabel, who moved to the UK in March 2021; WhatsApp video chat, 12 November 2022). Switching from one nationality/identity to another is required when claiming certain rights in the UK. For example, to register as a voter in the UK, Hong Kongers on a BN(O) visa must register as a British National (Overseas). Some of our informants were already quite used to this interchange of identities, and felt it was simply a matter of convenience.

United or Divided?

HK identity has evolved historically. As discussed earlier, changes in China-HK relations have led to reconfigurations of HK identity in the past. One thing that remains largely unchanged is the tendency of HK to define itself in relation to mainland China. The fluid nature of the HK identity has been reflected in alternating periods of animosity and amity toward Chinese mainlanders since the

1980s. As hundreds of thousands of HK people settle in the UK, they have formed HK clusters across the country, with a higher concentration of Hong Kongers in big cities such as London, Manchester, Birmingham, Nottingham, Bristol, and Leeds. In addition to the sheer numbers of HK immigrants, campaign groups such as the HKB continue to raise public awareness of conditions in HK and the well-being of HK migrants in the UK. Other activities, such as trade fairs to promote HK food and culture, also mushroomed in the UK in 2021–2022. It is clear that in addition to a mainland Chinese population in the UK, there is a distinctive, growing HK diasporic community there.

That said, it is simplistic to assume the presence of a unified, undisputed HK identity in the UK. The Cantonese-speaking church mentioned earlier is explicit about its pro-social movement and anti-authoritarian political stance. While some migrant-led social networks and NGOs are run by those who identify themselves as pro-democracy and are concerned about HK's political changes, others purely aim at supporting new arrivals from HK and those families who have difficulties in settlement. The new HK diaspora remains entwined with the identity politics that have shaped the city's social and political development since the 1980s. HK migrants abroad continue the search for the authentic HK amidst conflicting representations of HK culture. This is demonstrated by two HK film festivals held in the UK in March and October of 2022. The one in March, called HK Film Festival UK, was organized by HK dissidents, artists, and filmmakers who have moved to the UK (Chow 2022). The event featured the British premiere of several HK-made documentaries and films that were not screened in HK due to their sensitive political content. Several months later, in October, other HK films were showcased at the London East Asia Film Festival, this time supported by the HK Economic and Trade Office, the highest governmental unit representing HK in the UK (HKSAR Government 2022). Seven HK films were presented at this festival, but none of them mentioned social movements in HK. It is expected that competing narratives and portrayals of HK, supported by Hong Kongers at opposite ends of the political spectrum, will continue.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the conditions and factors that drove HK people to settle in the UK after the political and social upheavals in HK throughout 2019 and 2020. Despite the many reports that have described HK's new migrations as politically driven, this description may oversimplify the situation. Based on interviews with actual migrants to the UK, we identified a few prototypes of migrants that we believe best describe the mix of migration drivers of the recent migration wave. Structural factors—i.e., the policies of the destination countries of these migrants—should in this case be considered an important facilitating driver.

Among the many migrants who have already left HK, many do not possess the qualifications for “usual” migration schemes (such as those for professional and family migration). Moreover, many made strategic plans because they were able to capitalize on the UK’s HK-friendly BN(O) scheme.

The findings in this research reveal a “mixed migration” (Van Hear, Bakewell, and Long 2018) that affected the movers’ decisions within a few short years. Such a migration grew from an environment in which HK, the city of origin, was battered first by political upheaval and then by a pandemic that resulted in extremely stringent health control measures. All these factors deepened both social divisions and citizens’ distrust of the government. The extensive support that new HK migrants received across the UK was also unprecedented. Some of the HK migrant networks discussed in this chapter were able to solicit financial and moral support from the host society, thus boosting their capacity to assist new HK arrivals to the UK. Furthermore, transnational ties remain a key feature of this cohort of HK migrants. The majority of those interviewed in this study still maintain certain assets, such as properties and investments, in HK; they have not ruled out the option of returning to HK after obtaining British citizenship. The decision to stay or return is likely to be contingent on HK’s development in the near future and on how well these new migrants find their lives to be progressing in the UK in the coming years.

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