

“HONG KONGERS” AND “NEW IMMIGRANTS”

By Helen F. Siu

Hong Kong society has had intimate links with mainland China due to many decades of border-crossing by their populations, and these movements have ebbed and flowed well into recent times. As late as 1996, almost 40% of Hong Kong’s population was born outside the territory.¹ Those who crossed into Hong Kong in the late 1970s and early 1980s were labeled “new immigrants” and treated with scorn by local residents. The 1990s brought a second wave of new immigrants, or “new arrivals” in official terminology, comprised mainly of their spouses and children.

These administrative terms and the labels used in popular parlance mask complex and changing processes of migration, marital unions, family formation, cross-border networks and maneuvers. This article attempts to address the definitions of these moving targets and examines the strategic engagement of Hong Kong’s present and future citizens.²

Hard Issues, Soft Data

In the wake of the Second World War and the Communist Revolution in China, Hong Kong saw volatile population movements across its borders. In 1950, however, its government negotiated a quota system with mainland authorities designed to control the flow. Hong Kong would accept all Chinese citizens given exit permits, while China would restrict and regulate their issuance. At the same time, however, waves of illegal immigrants fleeing economic hardship and political turmoil continued to be absorbed by the territory

Post-war decades saw border restrictions harden and soften with major political shifts in China, greatly affecting the shaping of Hong Kong’s human landscape. Two historical junctures were especially significant. During the radical decades of the Maoist revolution, when China turned inward and restricted cross-border traffic, a uniquely localized Hong Kong culture and identity emerged as a homegrown generation came of age. Postwar baby-boomers who constituted the territory’s upwardly mobile middle class were central to the formation of the Hong Kong person or “Hong Konger.”³ Then in the years from 1978 to 1981, when China began

to liberalize its economy and briefly relaxed border controls, some 500,000 immigrants, mostly illegal, found their way into the territory and eventually were granted legal residence.

Although Hong Kong has been a land of immigrants and emigrants, a new social ethos emerged in the 1980s that centered on discrimination toward this population influx. Those who identified with urban Hong Kong society perceived the newcomers as rural and desperately poor. For example, the media popularized the images of “Ah Chan,” (a country bumpkin from the mainland), and *Sheng Gang qibing* (criminal mercenaries from Guangzhou). As these newcomers arrived in overwhelming numbers, symbolizing a China reeling from decades of isolation and deprivation, anxious Hong Kongers labeled them as *xin yimin* (new immigrants) to mark their differences in cultural orientation, social status and economic well-being from people like themselves. Nonetheless, they also were absorbed into Hong Kong’s economy, often as workers on infrastructure projects. Overall, these newcomers achieved varying degrees of success, with many returning to their home villages in the late 1980s and early 1990s to acquire families.

Over time, both the criteria for granting exit permits and the numbers issued have changed. One-way permits have been based largely on family reunion reasons but the Chinese government has also granted two-way permits for holders to visit families or do business in Hong Kong, though many then overstayed their authorized terms. According to both government statistical profiles and media images, the new immigrants in the 1990s appeared to be mostly dependent women with few marketable skills and burdened by young children. Often, they are the spouses of certain categories of Hong Kong residents – the once-illegal immigrants granted residence in the early 1980s plus older working men who have increasingly looked across the border for affordable wives. Many of their children, born in the late 1980s to mid 1990s, also have waited for one-way permits to settle in Hong Kong. Upon arrival, they often were crammed into slum housing in the older districts of Kowloon or the less desirable towns of the New Territories.

Short on Sympathy

These new arrivals, mainly from the rural margins of Guangdong and Fujian provinces, have few personal support networks. They speak neither city Cantonese nor English, and their children have difficulty in schools. Significant age differences between husbands and wives add to marital

pressures. Until a few years ago, families were often “split” and made unstable by bureaucratic barriers and corruption in China. Single parents had to quit their jobs and apply for public assistance in Hong Kong, and public sentiment towards them was not sympathetic. Government and social service organizations have made tremendous efforts to provide help, but the immigrant families they target continue to face poverty and discrimination.⁴

At the same time, more-affluent Hong Kong residents take for granted the astronomical growth in the traffic of people, goods, services and cultural images between their city and the mainland. Increasingly, they retune themselves to “go north.” The movement of factories into China has been followed by technical support offices and eager consumers. Professionals and shoppers have joined businessmen, small factory owners, contractors, transport workers and school children as regular commuters. The real estate markets in Shenzhen and the Pearl River Delta cater to families from Hong Kong who seek affordable holiday or retirement homes. Daily commuter traffic has long blurred the border.

A trend worth noting is that the social profiles of “new immigrants” have also changed since 1997. Census records in 2006 shows that in the past decade cross border marriages have continued to increase.⁵ The number of marriages involving elderly husbands and young wives, however, has dropped. Today, the spouses are mostly migrants from different provinces who have worked in the urbanized delta region for years.⁶ They hold skilled industrial and service jobs. Many speak Cantonese and have frequently visited Hong Kong. Frontline community agencies find them networked and resourceful.⁷

But the “new immigrant” label has remained stuck in the minds of many Hong Kong residents, with a sensationalized media focusing attention on the worst cases of family abuse and poverty. An insecure middle class, caught in the painful structural transformation of the economy since 1997, is anxious about where Hong Kong is headed.

Debates on the right of abode issue and reactions to an arson attack on a Hong Kong immigration office in 2000 revealed the depth of local hostility towards these new arrivals. Understandably, sentiment flared in years of economic downturn and political uncertainty. Today, public attitudes often reflect the negative view that immigrants are not only different but also are a real and growing social burden.

A Cultural Language of Inclusion

When considering policies about the continuing flow of mainland Chinese immigrants, there is a need to challenge the popular and increasingly inaccurate view that they are only poor, rural, needy and maladjusted. It is also necessary to question the well-meaning but rather one-dimensional treatment they receive from government agencies—which may see them mainly as sources of social problems, targets of welfare and services, and objects to control and regulate.

The study of relevant data reveals a more complicated and differentiated history. A better understanding of that history would help the government work more effectively and strategically in matters of immigration law, family and welfare services, education and job training. In the future, there certainly will be more movement of family members across the Hong Kong-mainland China boundary during different phases of family formation and individual life cycles. We must rethink the meaning of “border” and “immigration” as analytical and administrative concepts.

In recent years, the government has used the term “new arrivals,” which in fact, may be very different from the public’s perception of “new immigrants.” The official term is based on legal and administrative criteria – and refers to those who have used one-way permits to enter Hong Kong and who have not resided in the territory for more than seven years. The government tracks them in two surveys, once when they cross the border and again when they apply for identity cards. This information is supplemented by census data and thematic reports.

Agencies and scholars thus share the view that there is a physical group of people who can be targeted as “new arrivals.” Sociological profiles can be constructed with hard data – gender, age, income, education level, occupation, marital status, etc. The surveys also ask about place of origin, generally in administrative terms (such as Guangdong, Fujian, Shanghai, etc.), and occasionally about dialects (to facilitate the children’s schooling). New arrivals who seek help from the government and non-governmental organizations after they cross into Hong Kong can generally be located through community centers, schools and social welfare agencies. This is the tangible part of the story.

The government's major concern is to make sure the new arrivals assimilate into society quickly. The underlying assumption is that adjustment problems will diminish with time and appropriate support. Scholars and social workers have suggested many ways to speed the process: working with schools to aid children with language barriers; providing short-term retraining programs for the unskilled; creating family services and community network for needy single parents. The government also has tried to persuade Chinese authorities to adjust the quota system to facilitate family reunions and enable earlier local education for immigrant children.

Assimilation Problems

There is also a less tangible story, more complicated and emotionally charged. If we apply a historical perspective that focuses on when, why, how and by whom a cultural language of exclusion is exercised, we may concentrate on a different target population. Those who fit the derogatory image found in public opinion may not in fact be the newest arrivals. Despite years of residence in Hong Kong, some have never assimilated due to their rural background and lack of education, and continue to be singled out by employers and the public as "new immigrants" even if they are not. On the other hand, some who have come from the prosperous and urbanized parts of the Pearl River delta blend in almost immediately after picking up their Hong Kong identity cards and hardly need public assistance. Still others are only statistics in government estimates; they qualify for entry but have decided not to move. In addition, some arrive by illegal means and face problems of adjustment, but never appear in official records or public assistance networks.

By looking at "new immigrants" this way, we see a group that cannot be defined by its legal right-of-abode status or by its date of arrival in Hong Kong. Furthermore, the length of their stays will not resolve the problems nor reduce public prejudice against them. Today, the progressive economic integration of Hong Kong with China, especially regarding the Pearl River delta region, triggers yet more new patterns of border crossing. This context is relevant when assessing Hong Kong's present and future human resources and, in particular, the family needs of new arrivals as well as the potential family contributions. The task at hand is to nurture a language of inclusion at a time when local residents feel insecure and threatened.

A culture of inclusion should, in fact, extend beyond the treatment of mainland immigrants. Business leaders have stressed repeatedly that looking north is important, but this must dovetail with Hong Kong looking globally. If the city is to enhance its position as a financial hub, it needs a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural workforce that appreciates the city as an encompassing space different from competitors in the region. Cosmopolitan professional practices and outlooks are what Chinese reformers urgently need to engage the global economy. Hong Kong, with its unique history and character, should be in a position to provide such resources. To prosper in the new Chinese century, Hong Kong must dare to be different.⁸

The territory has historically gained from being “a space of flow,” with the free circulation of commodities, talent, capital and cultural resources. In the process it has built healthy institutions as anchors. Whether to attract professional talent from abroad, or to nurture new immigrant children from China, it would be helpful if Hong Kongers learn to appreciate the circumstances that have allowed generations to face China and the world on their own terms.

This is in essence the “One Country, Two Systems” formula, historically and now. In today’s rapidly changing environment, knowing precisely where the line must be drawn, who the brokers are, what institutional and professional practices to encourage and what cultural horizons to explore are necessary when redefining a porous border. In macro-political terms, one must go beyond ideologically-charged categories to understand the differences between Hong Kong’s free market but colonial past and a socialist China that is proudly nationalistic. In everyday life, one needs to confront a cultural language of exclusion that has permeated common views about and treatment of “foreigners” or “new immigrants.” If openness is the goal, Hong Kong’s transparent, well managed and accountable institutions and business practices can provide an encompassing environment in which global talent can work and new immigrants are nurtured as are the locally born.

What is the Road Map?

If one considers active circulation of globally situated professionals and new arrivals as crucial factors in Hong Kong’s repositioning, there are two routes. One is structural, the other geographical and regional. The former has Hong Kong opening further to attract global talent, not only from North America, Australia and Europe, but also from India, Southeast Asia, and other

emerging economies.⁹ These multi-ethnic professionals have been Hong Kong assets in the past. Today, they can be encouraged to partner with the locally-born to link with China's increasingly affluent urban middle class to provide high quality services. The Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA), intended to foster strong ties among Pearl River Delta entities, will help accelerate that process at the professional level, such as for financial, logistical, legal, surveying and accounting services. At the moment, such urban synergy is concentrated in China's coastal cities like Dalian, Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou and Shenzhen. Cities in the inland provinces are catching up, and they offer tremendous potential for additional mutual and beneficial impact. The Pan Pearl River Delta concept is a case in point, and recent economic summits, aiming to coordinate Hong Kong's development plans with those of China, were held in the same spirit of maximizing the region's unique opportunity for integration. If China is to accelerate domestic consumption, not only of goods and hardware but also services, Hong Kong's institutional and professional resources will have a significant role to play.

What one conceives as a structural route can be similarly applied to the geographical route. Strategic thinking requires a deeper cultural and historical understanding of the regions close to Hong Kong and which have provided the most new immigrants. First, the eastern and western parts of the Pearl River delta are, and were, different worlds. The growing urban belt is in the western part, along the West River (Xijiang), and includes cities like Guangzhou, Foshan, Panyu, Shunde, Zhongshan, Zhuhai and Jiangmen. In the east, the East River (Dongjiang) cuts through part of Dongguan and Huizhou. But Shenzhen and these eastern urban centers are not historically connected in commerce or culture, and are surrounded by rural Hakka hill areas.

Second, the two regions have different development orientations. Dongguan and Shenzhen are pointed to as economic miracles. Dongguan thrived on Taiwanese capital, a labor-intensive factory regime and cheap labor from China's inland provinces. Shenzhen, as a Special Economic Zone, has relied greatly on administrative intervention. The number of migrant workers can be staggering (in the tens of millions), the pursuit of wealth feverish and life on the fast track brash. But income disparity is wide, and local society is not productively engaged. Social problems are not given adequate attention. Beyond the modern-looking factories, highways, colorful billboards and golf courses, civil society is remote. The recent global financial turmoil reveals

the region's vulnerabilities. No doubt, Shenzhen will further integrate with Hong Kong due to intense administrative attention to its institutional and infrastructural development.

In addition, municipalities in the western delta have tremendous potential as future partners. They are historically linked to Hong Kong and Macao (and via the municipalities along the West River to southwestern China) by centuries of commerce, lineage, communal, linguistic and ritual ties. They have diverse economies, with thriving industries rooted in the region and serving national markets. Over the past decade, these municipalities have concentrated on building a modern transportation infrastructure. Turning to service industries that cater to an emerging urban belt, they compete for professional and technical talent that is scarce locally. Even the most economically developed cities realize they have been too focused on indigenous capital and domestic markets, and now seek global connections. City leaders have accelerated the integration of non-locals into the often highly-guarded urban sector. The provincial government and universities are sending many staff members overseas for training. Every layer of local society is engaged in and changed by the process. For example, in central cities such as Guangzhou, residents are using electoral and legal means to protect their property rights.

One should not overlook the life-style of the rising middle class in Guangzhou, where many are college graduates and independent entrepreneurs from northern cities. A dynamic force, they enjoy luxury apartments, supermarkets, private cars and weekend trips to country resorts. They also consume cultural images taken from the global media. Many are multi-computer and multi-cellphone families. Recently, they have joined other Chinese urbanites for shopping sprees in Hong Kong. Guangzhou has one of the nation's highest per capita disposable incomes, and the consumption demands have moved rapidly towards high-end cultural products and services. There seems to be room for fostering a common cultural language with Hong Kongers.

Analytical Implications

Various historical turning points have turned immigrants from China into Hong Kongers. Their lives, aspirations, cultural capital and strategic maneuvers have mingled to give substance to the human landscape of post-war Hong Kong. Their interwoven lives have contributed to Hong Kong's

success as much as they have deepened its vulnerabilities. Cross-border marriages will continue to shape Hong Kong's human resources for many years. Thus the categories policy makers use to define the population may not be adequate for capturing the complexity of these moving targets. If a new approach is important, one must ask how to define Hong Kong as a "place" and Hong Kongers as a "population" when rapid structural changes are constant. Perhaps the identities of Hong Kong residents, therefore, should not be defined by fixed physical or administrative boundaries. Instead, different generations have attached multiple meanings to Hong Kong as their legal abode, whether as a source of livelihood and advancement, as a salient site for depositing core values, family histories and memories, or as a springboard for moving on. These layers of history and emotion constitute the character of millions of residents who are entrepreneurial in their strategies, contingent in cultural constitution and vocal in aspirations for citizenship.

Boundaries shape social life by providing a frame of reference for classifying and ordering, and policy makers should use criteria related to cultural, historical and discursive factors. This is particularly pertinent if they are to target "new immigrants", whose families straddle borders, to enlarge Hong Kong's footprint by encouraging these families to circulate north, to track marginalized populations that can pose high public health risks and to network with Hong Kong's emigrant families in China and overseas.

The nature of world cities adds a dimension to the rethinking of borders and boundaries. The ability to connect globally also brings volatility. Hong Kong has a vibrant public culture that gives it character. One draws meaning from the architectural hardware as well as from the software of social activities – family and religious rituals, conspicuous consumption by locals and visitors, community festivals, the performing arts, film and media images and, last but not least, protest marches that show civility, orderliness and tolerance. These events intertwine to add color and rhythm to everyday life and project global visibility. The annual June 4 vigils in Victoria Park, the yearly July 1 protest marches and the orchestrated anti-World Trade Organization confrontations by Korean farmers on the streets of Hong Kong are but a few notable examples.

The government invests heavily in connectivity and is understandably anxious about issues of control and stability. The question is how to turn the

volatility of a global city into an arena that highlights its unique advantages. For Hong Kong to create a fair and open “space” for the engagement of talent requires institutional integrity and a culture of inclusion. These are the underlying principles for positioning Hong Kong’s diverse human resources – expatriates, students, guest workers, visitors, the locally born and new arrivals.

In sum, Hong Kongers’ must practice “flexible positioning” in its global reach – cultivating layers of Chinese resources when embracing the world and nurturing layers of its historical global outreach when marching north. Such repositioning can contribute significantly to China’s changing human resource map. Regionally, the differences between the eastern and western parts of the delta, and between the circumstances of new immigrants and the Guangzhou middle class, highlight the rural/urban gap as a challenging issue for China. The strategic moves of Hong Kongers (locally born or newly arrived) can help bridge that gap and nurture a civil, urbane and encompassing region for all concerned. Hong Kong at the moment may not have hardware as dazzling as that of Shanghai and may not have human talent as plentiful. The point to stress is its existing institutions. These can integrate the territory’s hardware and software to produce predictable results and pleasant surprises.

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Endnotes

¹ See Kit Chun Lam and Pak Wai Liu, *Immigration and the Economy of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press, 1998), p.1.

² For a fuller treatment of the topic, see Helen Siu, “Positioning ‘Hong Kongers’ and ‘New Immigrants,’” in Helen Siu and Agnes Ku (eds), *Hong Kong Mobile: Making a Global Population*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008.

³ See Helen Siu, “Remade in Hong Kong: Weaving into the Chinese Cultural Tapestry,” in *Unity and Diversity: Local Identities and Local Cultures*, eds. Tao Tao Liu and David Faure, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1996, pp. 177-97.

⁴ On the social profiles of this population, see Census and Statistics Department, SAR, December 2002, *2001 Population Census: Thematic Report – Persons from the Mainland having resided in Hong Kong for less than 7 years*. See also One Country, Two Systems Research Institute, 2002, *Neidi jumin yiju Xianggang zhengce xianhuan de jiantao ji zhengce jianyi*.

⁵ See 2006 Census of the Hong Kong SAR Government for the changing marriage patterns and cross-

border population flows.

⁶ For example, from 126,392 cases of one-way permits I collected from *Wenhui Bao* between January 2001 and June 30, 2004, the geographical origins of these new immigrants have clearly shifted to the urban, commercialized regions in South China. See Siu 2008 for a statistical summary.

⁷ Increasingly, community agencies and quality media have highlighted the resourcefulness of these mainland spouses. For example, see the highly acclaimed film by Ann Hui on the women in Tuen Mun, a new immigrant enclave.

⁸ See “Introduction” in *Hong Kong Mobile* (2008). The global orientations are particularly stressed by business leaders such as Victor Fung, David Eldon, and Po Chung.

⁹ An attractive environment will not be merely business and job opportunities, but quality of life issues such as reduced air pollution, affordable housing, international schooling for children, and other social priorities.