

# RESILIENT RETURNEES: HONG KONGERS COME HOME

**By Nan M. Sussman**  
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*A good cook blends the flavors and creates something harmonious and delicious. No flavor is completely submerged, and the savory taste is due to the blended but distinctive contributions of each flavor.*  
---Zuozhan (a Confucian text)

By my estimation, nearly 500,000 Hong Kongers have returned home since their unprecedented emigration between 1984 and 1997. After the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration by the governments of Great Britain and the People's Republic of China, the looming return of Hong Kong to China's sovereignty prompted more than 800,000 to leave, equal to one-sixth of the entire population of the territory. The motivation was uniform—"handover anxiety"—and the response built to a crescendo by 1992. While more than 20 countries welcomed these middle class, well-educated and bilingual immigrants, 76% entered either Australia, Canada or the United States. In contrast to past migrations, this one often included multiple generations; 35% of them held professional and managerial jobs compared to 12% of the general population; 15% were university graduates compared to 5.2%.

The intent for many was to secure a new passport, not a new identity, although identity played a crucial role in the original decision to migrate and subsequent cultural transition experiences. Self-defined cultural identity had behavioral consequences. Notably, Wong Siu-lun and Janet Salaff reported that 60% of Hong Kongers identifying themselves as Chinese planned to stay in the territory after the handover while only 45% of those claiming Hong Kong identity intended to remain.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the 150-year period since the Opium Wars, Hong Kongers developed a complex and multi-layered cultural identity. Its core included values that emphasized filial piety and maintenance of social harmony through adherence to relational rules based on age, gender and rankings. Group loyalty and decision-making by superiors took priority over individual autonomy and interactions with outsiders. However, a pragmatic approach to problem-solving encouraged flexibility of behavior in response to the situational context rather than to immutable rules and precedence. A century and a half of British rule left a second identity layer, this time of

Western ideas and customs. These Western values gave priority to a sense of self that was distinct from the group, individual needs more important than family, and a focus on individual attributes as the motivation for behavior rather than the situation in which the behavior took place. Egalitarianism rather than unequal dyads (e.g. father-son, husband-wife, ruler-subject) was stressed in social relationships. By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, these two identities, Chinese and Western, spawned a uniquely Hong Kong identity characterized by hard work, group cohesion but also modernity and sophistication.

According to Michael DeGolyer of Hong Kong Baptist University, cultural identities of Hong Kongers are fluid, responding to current events (a form of social context).<sup>2</sup> From 1985 to 1996, they labeled themselves as either Hong Konger or Chinese with an increase in the latter identity as the handover approached. By 1997, a third identity, Hong Kong-Chinese, emerged with nearly equal numbers describing themselves as one of the three identity types. By 2003, with return migration in full swing, the percent describing themselves as Chinese dropped to a low of 20% while the Hong Konger identity rebounded, used to self-describe by half of the population. Although some Hong Kongers' behaviors contain the residue of Western values and norms, few people labeled themselves as British.

### **The Hong Kong Remigration Project**

Humans are a peripatetic species: they have always been on the move and not infrequently they return to their home territory. The Hong Kong return migration was unique in that it was arguably among the largest by population percentage and took place in a narrow window of time. The Hong Kong Remigration Project (HKRP) began in 2003 as an investigation into the psychological and identity consequences of this cyclical migration experience. In 2004, 50 returnees from Canada (35% of the returnee population) and Australia (24%) were interviewed in depth. In addition, they completed psychological assessments of acculturation into Australia or Canada, cultural identity, repatriation distress, satisfaction with life, and other demographic information. At the time of departure, the interviewees ranged in age from 13 to 47 and spent a minimum of one year in their place of migration before returning to Hong Kong. Some follow-up interviews took place over the next few years.

### **Immigrant Experiences**

As newcomers to Canada and Australia, many Hong Kongers came to learn about, respect and adapt to the customs and values of their new homelands. Parents gave their children more freedom and relinquished some decision-making authority. They admired the local commitment to protecting the environment and nature. One remarked to me that she slowed down her walking pace when her hurried gait revealed her Hong Kong origins to the Aussies. Another embraced the intricate rules of ice hockey and became an ardent Vancouver Canuck's fan. Hong Kongers were hiking in Melbourne instead of shopping, and spending evenings at home with their families rather than in the office. In the gradual way of cultural transitions, former Hong Kongers added another identity layer to their already complex one. Following several years in Vancouver or Sydney, a Canadian/Australia identity emerged. Psychological adjustments for the immigrants were relatively smooth, although not without a few bumps. Immigrants to Australia complained about the relaxed work style ("like a koala bear") and promotional ceilings, and those living in Canada about social liberalism ("too much discussion about sex in public"). But now they were returning home.

Why leave their big homes in Richmond and the sparkling beaches of Queensland for the crowds of Causeway Bay? The economic, corporate and government lure of Hong Kong became too hard to resist when measured against the slumping economies of the West. Pundits labeled these early and intermittent returning immigrants tai kong ren or "astronauts" and, for a time, they were in fact working in Hong Kong but maintaining homes and families in their new abodes. Gradually, however, the decision was made to return to Hong Kong, mostly with families intact, but occasionally leaving behind college-aged children or elderly grandparents in their Toronto homes. More long-term strategic visions also influenced decisions. Parents, with an eye to the future, were determined that their children be fluent not only in Cantonese and English but also in Mandarin.

### **A Cultural Identity Model**

The experience of returning home is where Hong Kongers part company with the experience of returnees world-wide. My research over a 25-year period consistently showed that returnees were in psychological distress when they returned home. The Cultural Identity Model of cultural transitions is a paradigm that categorizes the returnee response into four types of cultural identities: Subtractive, Additive, Affirmative and Global, and

predicts the emotional response to each. Westerners in particular exhibit a Subtractive cultural identity: they no longer fit into their home countries and feel estranged from their compatriots. One American, on his return to the U.S. following several years in France, commented: "I just didn't fit any more in the US." An Italian college student returning home following a year of work in Peru complained: "My return has been more difficult than my adjustment overseas. I feel something, it's like my place isn't really here (in Italy) any more." A Finnish woman, returning home from Australia, commented: "Coming back home was more difficult than going abroad because I had expected changes when going overseas. During repatriation it was real culture shock. I felt like an alien in my own country."

### **Hong Kongers Return Home**

For a small percentage of all returnees, returning home strengthens and affirms their native identity and is coupled with relief at being home again. These "grateful repatriates" rarely made cultural adaptations while overseas and therefore did not experience identity changes. Among my Hong Kong sample, six of the fifty respondents were classified as having Affirmative identities. Most were men who had emigrated over the age of 40. In fact, many of them felt more Chinese than they had prior to emigration. One man commented, "When I left Australia after two years, my sense of belonging to be a Chinese is more than when I live in Hong Kong.... When we are in Hong Kong, our living style is Hong Kong and we see so many Chinese people. But when we go to Australia, Western living style, we begin to be interested in the things Chinese."<sup>3</sup> A woman returnee poignantly reflected, "Well, it's good for me in a way I went (to Canada) and I knew the experience. If I never go, and I never might I always have that yearning to go there. So now...this is where I belong, what I should do....It give me some experience, although it's a bad experience. But it really taught me something." As an unobtrusive measure of identity, returnees' self-naming conventions were categorized. More than 60% of the Affirmative identifiers used the "Chinese surname followed by the Chinese given name" style, the most typical Chinese type.

Global identifiers are a small group who are characterized as having had multiple international sojourner experiences prior to returning home. They describe themselves as world or global citizens, capable of moving and cultural adjusting rapidly and smoothly. In the Hong Kong sample, five returnees embodied this identity. As one returnee explained, "I can fit

myself into any society and any place.” Another commented, “I would say I am quite an international man. I think in the future, because of globalization, there are no country barriers.” Regarding naming styles, one-hundred percent of the Global identifiers used the “English given name followed by Chinese surname” style, in contrast with the Affirmatives.

The overwhelming majority of Hong Kong returnees exhibited an Additive response: they have added a layer of Canadian or Australian identity to their complex self-concepts and most have a positive emotional response to returning home. Thirty-one of the interviewees were categorized as Additives with another seven who combined Additive with another identity profile. On a psychological assessment of both identity and behavior, these Additives showed nearly identical Western and Hong Kong identities and similar sets of behaviors. That is, they maintained two cultural cognitive frames and ways of acting. As the Zuozhan quotation above suggests, no flavor is completely submerged. Overall, their return to Hong Kong was marked with a high level of flexibility in thought and action.

Their Hong Kong-Western bicultural identity allowed for a widened range of thinking and behavior that they shifted in response to the situational context. Working for a Western company? Be direct in communication and don't worry about face, express your opinions decisively, and do some errands alone during lunch time, at least occasionally. Working for a local company? Then work six days a week, 10 hours a day, keep your opinions to yourself and eat lunch daily with your co-workers. Paradoxically, most returnees were relieved to return to the lengthy work day, equating hard work with being a good employee despite the reduction in time spent with spouses and children. Many complained about the short work days abroad, attributing this style to laziness or lack of loyalty to the company.

### **Both Steak and Dim Sum**

Linguistically, returnees switch between Cantonese and English at a high rate (e.g. 26 switches in a 400 word utterance, according to Hong Kong University professor of linguistics Katherine Chen).<sup>4</sup> Their culinary preferences are both steak and dim sum. While some remigrants returned to their former flats, temporarily occupied by relatives, many returnees sought to replicate their immigrant housing. They moved to the New Territories to larger homes with backyards and gardens. Regarding educational preferences, most returnees choose the English Schools Foundation, or the

Canadian or Australian Schools, expressing a clear inclination for pedagogy that favored critical thinking skills over rote memorization. However, they were determined that their children would maintain Cantonese fluency and learn Mandarin. Attitudinally, they have become more environmentally conscious and are more likely to believe that they can make a political difference by participating in June 4 or July 1 demonstrations, for example. And of course, they picked up their pace; no leisurely Melbourne-style strolling on Nathan Road.

One other significant departure from the reactions of Western returnees: no hand-wringing or existential dilemmas about how to live and work in Hong Kong. Despite my probing during our interviews for returnee discomfort, the re-migrants were experiencing high satisfaction with their lives and low repatriation distress. One male returnee from Canada summarized the experience of many others, articulating the flexible nature of Hong Kongers: “No, to me it’s okay. I am that kind of person. I can fit myself into any society and any place. That’s my thinking, never change the society or the world. You have to fit into it, and make others to fit into it.” There were two specific exceptions to the ease of adjustment, and both of these were short-lived: one was the density and crowds (pedestrian and vehicular) in Hong Kong; the other, the weather and pollution. Noted one male re-migrant from Australia: “I hate walking into a big shopping centre...every second on Sunday the whole place will go crazy with people. And I remember that just when I first got back I will try to avoid the crowd by ...avoiding level three, the level that actually links up with the actual railway concourse. I go one floor up and walk there because I would not be bumping into anybody.”

### **Future of the Hong Kong Identity**

Hong Kongers continue to be on the move, now to China rather than the West. In 2005, it was estimated that of a population of 6.9 million, 200,000 were living and working in China. More than 70% have moved for work-related reasons and another 11% for retirement. Still others commute daily to Shenzhen, Guangzhou and other Pearl River Delta sites. A survey by the Hong Kong Planning Department found that an additional 161,000 planned to move to the Mainland in the next decade.

Will cultural identity flexibility continue to be the psychological hallmark of these sojourners? Preliminary data confirms this pattern. A new study by David Zweig and his colleagues at the Hong Kong University of Science and

Technology reports that 29% of Hong Kongers working in the Mainland are assimilated or strongly integrated into a Chinese identity compared to their pre-departure (from Hong Kong) identity.<sup>5</sup> In fact, 22 of the sojourners (from a sample of 231) completely abandoned their Hong Kong identity. More importantly, 144 (62%) of the respondents reported a combined Hong Kong/Chinese identity, the primary trait of an Additive profile. Their change in attitudes and identity were influenced by several variables including their satisfaction with living in China, their willingness to learn Mandarin and their beliefs that income inequality in China was not significant. Of note is that approximately 50% arrived with a dual identity and maintained that while working in China.

Cultural identity flexibility characterizes Hong Kongers as they move across the globe. They easily add new identities without the psychological distress and angst plaguing many Western repatriates. In an increasingly internationalized workplace and education environment, cultural elasticity will serve the residents of Hong Kong well.

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<sup>1</sup> Salaff, J.W., Wong, S.L., & Greve, A. (2010). *Hong Kong movers and stayers: Narratives of family migration*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.

<sup>2</sup> DeGolyer, M. (2007). *Identity in the politics of transition: The case of Hong Kong, "Asia's World City."* In K.B. Chan, J. Walls, and D. Hayward (eds.), *East-West identities: Globalization, localization, and hybridization* (pp. 21-45). Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers.

<sup>3</sup> *The transcripts of Hong Kong participants are verbatim, thus without grammatical or lexical editing.*

<sup>4</sup> Chen, K. H. Y. (2008). *Positioning and repositioning: Linguistic practices and identity negotiation of overseas returning bilinguals in Hong Kong*. *Multilingua*, 27, 57-75.

<sup>5</sup> Zweig, D., Tjia, L., Yang, Z., Tran, E., & He, G. (manuscript in preparation, 2011). *Identity and politics among Hong Kongers living in the Chinese Mainland*.