

How can return migrants' everyday lives inform progressive immigration policies in Hong Kong?

Executive Summary

- Given the aging demographic profile of Hong Kong, return migrants are an important group to study and attract to the city.
- Return migrants develop new standards for consumption and quality-of-life while living overseas and bring these back to Hong Kong.
- Return migrants can face frustration when adapting to Hong Kong life again, for example in terms of leisure provisions.
- The long-term retention of return migrants in Hong Kong will depend on government policy related to non-immigration issues.
- Investigating the material goods stored by migrants in different countries could help to estimate their likelihood of remigration.

Introduction

This briefing highlights key results from a one-year qualitative study of Hong Kong return migrants. The aim of this small-scale study (11 participants, 22 interviews) was to explore new ways of thinking about migration that recognize the importance of material objects to everyday practices, migrant adaptation, and quality of life. We considered how everyday objects and changes in everyday life affect how and why people migrate, as well as their potential to integrate into new places or migrate again in the future.

As Chan has noted, Hong Kong has a long and complex immigration history, and given this history there are important reasons why social and cultural issues should be integrated into progressive immigration policies.¹ Though policies have often focused on overall statistics of migrant flows, and how these might be controlled or limited, future challenges including projections of a rapidly ageing population suggest the importance of innovative approaches to attracting and retaining talented migrants in Hong Kong. This study suggests that devoting further attention to migrants' everyday lives could valuably inform future planning.

¹ Chan JMM (2008) Immigration policies and human resource planning. In: Siu HF and Ku AS (eds.) *Hong Kong mobile: making a global population*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 149-199.

How can studying return migrants help inform progressive immigration policies?

Return migrants are a unique population in Hong Kong. As recent articles in the South China Morning Post have highlighted, though many Hong Kong residents left the city between 1981 and 2011, up to 153,000 may have returned from Canada alone during this period.² A lack of information about this group provides considerable challenges for policy because this return flow can affect schooling, housing, and health care in the city. Building up a picture of these return migrants is therefore important, as for many reasons this population remains an ideal one for bolstering Hong Kong's population in future.³

While return migrants, along with children of Hong Kong permanent residents who were born overseas, are a valuable population for the city's economic and cultural prosperity – bringing both expertise from overseas and cultural knowledge of Hong Kong's business environment – they do not always return to previous ways of life upon return to Hong Kong. Attracting and retaining these migrants is therefore not without its challenges, because these often well-educated and prosperous groups can face unique adaptation issues upon return to Hong Kong.

What kind of adaptation issues do return migrants face in Hong Kong?

Though returnees don't face the same language or cultural problems as migrants from other places such as Mainland China, they must adapt upon return. The middle- and upper-middle-class migrants in our study discussed significant changes in their everyday and leisure practices upon return to Hong Kong. In some cases, they found that it was very difficult to continue preferred leisure pursuits, such as golf, gardening or hosting BBQs, after coming back to the city simply because the necessary infrastructures were too limited, inconvenient to access, or expensive. While career or family often prompted returns to Hong Kong, dissatisfaction with the city's leisure provisions was a significant frustration for some.

If attracting and retaining return migrants, or second-generation migrants is to be an important component of future immigration policy, it will be crucial to think about the implications of this for not only economic productivity, but also leisure infrastructure and policy. Return migrants may have quality-of-life and consumption priorities that differ considerably from non-migrant local populations.

How can the long-term retention of return migrants in Hong Kong be encouraged?

While some participants intended to stay in Hong Kong for the rest of their lives, others acknowledge the possibility of leaving at some point in the future. Their reasoning highlighted that while immigration policies are often focused upon controlling flows over the border, life decisions can cross many areas of policy. Many participants missed the clean air and spacious housing available in countries such as Canada, and felt that as they aged these issues would become more important to them. Others also noted the difficulty of getting good school places for children in Hong Kong. Therefore, the long-term retention of migrants could depend significantly upon how Hong

² <http://www.scmp.com/news/hongkong/article/1245494/tens-thousands-hongkongers-return-canada-post-finds>

³ <http://www.scmp.com/news/hongkong/article/1247617/hk-vancouver-and-back-migrants-who-came-home-home>

Kong creates progressive environment, housing, and education policies that meet the expectations of those who have lived in other countries.

Some might argue that losing migrants to other countries near the end of their working life is not overly detrimental to the city, as they will cease to be productive in the economy. However, since the migration of parents and children are often tied together, this could also lead to the loss of young workers who are just beginning their most productive years. Considering these life-cycle and family-based dynamics therefore highlights the importance of having immigration policies that are joined up with other areas of policy and planning.

How can we further develop means of assessing the likelihood of remigration?

Though it is impossible to be certain whether return migrants will stay in Hong Kong, or later leave again, progressive immigration policies would be helpfully informed by a richer set of data on this issue. In addition to surveys addressing people's intention to migrate, this study has discovered that the possession of basic material goods might be another indicator of potential to re-migrate. Several participants who had emigrated to Canada continued to maintain personal property there after their initial return to Hong Kong. It wasn't until their circumstances changed, and they became more certain of the permanency of their return, that they sold these belongings and any housing they owned abroad. Future studies could therefore investigate whether maintaining household goods in another country relates to the potential for re-migration. Moreover, research could explore whether the ability to store possessions in Hong Kong while living abroad has any relation to the likelihood of return.

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