Like Sons and Daughters of Hong Kong: The Return of the Young Generation*

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Abstract

Transnational migrants have been important resources in the global competition for skilled labour. Our qualitative research studies 24 transnational 1.5 generation adults who migrated with their families from Hong Kong to Toronto between 1985 and 1996, when they were aged 8 to 19. Their parents maintained their connections with Hong Kong; some returned. Ten years after the handover, having obtained overseas citizenship and education, these youths can choose to work and live in either Toronto or Hong Kong. We assess three main factors that contribute to their residency decisions: (1) Formal institutional factors: the ways that labour markets recognize their training, credentials, and experience; (2) Social relations: the family, social networks, and

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organizations that create transnational contacts; (3) Identity: their notion of home and personal belonging. Social relations most influence their relocation, and economic and identity factors are embedded in the social.

**Transnational Ties: The Economy or Social Relations?**

Transnational ties and social relations must not be presumed but rather carefully analyzed, and … structural as well as cultural aspects must be introduced in this analysis.¹

This paper discusses the residential decisions of 24 children who emigrated from Hong Kong to Toronto with their families on the eve of the handover of Hong Kong to China. Emphasizing large-scale economic and legal institutions, social relations, and cultural aspects underlying their choices, we analyse whether they remain in their adopted home, return to Hong Kong, or become transnationals.

Although transnational migration, of people with jobs, family, ongoing communications and activities in two or more nations, has existed throughout history,² and Hong Kong itself has been a centre of Chinese diasporic flows, key features of this historic political event prompted unusual patterns of migration.³ There were immense political-economic system differences between Britain’s most economically prosperous colony, with its self-proclaimed unfettered capitalism, and the world’s largest developing Communist country. Middle-class and business people, who had worked hard to build up their families’ economy, were reluctant to impoverish themselves by leaving.⁴ Yet they were encouraged to take advantage of global opportunities.⁵ The long time which elapsed between signing the agreement (1984) to the event itself (1997), unusual for a regime change, allowed them to mull over their actions. Despite assurances that their lives would remain “unchanged for 50 years” after reversion, the future was still uncertain. In this atmosphere, China’s unprecedented crackdown on protesters on 4 June 1989 (the Tiananmen incident) sparked a huge emigrant wave. An estimated 375,000 people exited Hong Kong owing to the uncertain future of their professions and habitual lifestyle, political concerns over their families’ security, and the hope for a better life abroad. Their compressed departure dramatically changed the character of the cities in which they settled. They transformed parts of Toronto, our study site, into entire Cantonese-speaking districts, with stores that had close personal and commercial ties to Hong Kong, and jobs serving the enclave populace.⁶