OXFORD JOURNAL
OF STUDENT
SCHOLARSHIP

Belonging in Hong Kong: An Examination of Hong Kong's Fluctuating Immigration Policies and Their Effect on Chinese Migrants, 1949-1971

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ABSTRACT

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, many Chinese citizens fled the Chinese Civil War and migrated to Hong Kong. In response to this influx of Chinese migrants, the Hong Kong immigration laws changed several times in rapid succession. This paper examines this fluctuation in immigration policy, and how it affected Chinese migrants' sense of belonging and ability to assimilate to their new country. Through interviews with Bessie Woo (who migrated from Shanghai to Hong Kong as a toddler), and analysis of secondary and primary sources about the larger migration, this paper examines three phrases of Hong Kong immigration policy at this time. At the beginning of the Chinese Civil War, immigration policy was unrestricted; the Hong Kong government welcomed Chinese migrants with the justification that "all Chinese are Chinese." As migrants continued to flood into the country in response to the war, however, the Hong Kong government realized that this migration had no foreseeable end, and imposed a strict immigration ban. Suddenly, no Chinese people were permitted to enter the country, which had a stigmatizing effect on those who were already there. In 1971, the Hong Kong government found middle ground by limiting the number of Chinese who could immigrate, but establishing the "Hong Kong Belonger" status which granted residency free from the threat of deportation to those who did (and who were already there). This third law allowed Chinese migrants in Hong Kong to begin a new life with legal status, and enjoy a robust sense of belonging.

INTRODUCTION

Bessie Woo was barely two years old when she and her family boarded a plane to Hong Kong in 1949. She was too young to be aware of it then, but her family was fleeing the rapidly escalating Chinese Civil War in her home city, Shanghai. Even though they had just purchased a new house, her parents made the difficult decision to uproot their lives. Though they did not have legal immigration papers, Bessie and her extended family gained entry into Hong Kong and moved to a cramped apartment. Over the course of her

childhood as an outsider in the first home she ever remembered, Bessie changed her name,[1] learned a new language, and began to develop her identity as a "Hong Kong Chinese."[2]

Bessie Woo was only one in 1.2 million people who fled the Chinese Civil War, made this journey, and ultimately found sanctuary in Hong Kong.[3] However, her family's journey to becoming truly recognized as legitimate members of Hong Kong society was never simple due to the constant fluctuation in Hong Kong immigration policy.[4] From 1949 to 1971, the Hong Kong government vacillated between liberal and stringent border control, and repeatedly changed its definitions of and requirements for nationality, citizenship, and belonging.[5] The fluctuation in Hong Kong's immigration policies between open and restrictive led to a disorganized path to assimilation and an unstable sense of belonging for Chinese migrants fleeing the Chinese Civil War in the late 1940s; that path did not become legally stable and well-defined until the 1970s with the creation of the "Hong Kong belonger" status.

In order to understand the Hong Kong government's vacillating reactions to the influx of Chinese migrants escaping conflict, it is necessary to examine the aspects of Hong Kong that made it an attractive place for migrants escaping war, as well as Hong Kong's global connections during this time. For migrants fleeing instability in China, one of the major appeals of Hong Kong was occupational and economic opportunity.[6] [7] These opportunities offered Chinese migrants security and stability.[8] The fact that Hong Kong was under the colonial rule of the British crown, a global superpower at the time, offered an additional layer of protection from war.[9] It is important to note, however, that within the geopolitics of the time, Hong Kong was caught in the middle of Sinoamerican tensions, US and British political relations, and tensions between Taiwan and China.[10] Hong Kong was also part of a larger constellation of British colonies, such as Nigeria and Barbados, whose citizens were agitating for recognition from Britain as "British nationals," the term used to describe those who have the rights of British citizens, most

[1] When she migrated to Hong Kong and began schooling, Bessie introduced herself with her Chinese name: 包陪帝. However, when pronounced with a Hong Kong accent, this name sounded similar to the Cantonese word for "snot," and Bessie was bullied in school for it. Her father came up with a graceful solution, altering one character in her name, which changed its meaning to "resilient:" 包陪容. This is the name that she goes by today. (Woo, videoconference interview by the author.)

[2] Bessie Woo, videoconference interview by the author, New York City, NY, November 2025.

[3] Glen Peterson, "To Be or Not to Be a Refugee: The International Politics of the Hong Kong Refugee Crisis, 1949–55," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 36, no. 2 (2008): 180, https://doi.org/10.1080/03086530802180924.

[4] Woo, videoconference interview by the author.

[5] Agnes S. Ku, "Immigration Policies, Discourses, and the Politics of Local Belonging in Hong Kong (1950-1980)," *Modern China* 30, no. 3 (2004): 327, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3181313.

[6] These migrants were fleeing a China in which the cost of living in July 1948 was 48 times higher than it was merely one year earlier — in other words, a world of immensely unstable economics. (Spence, "Chapter 18: The Fall," 501.)

[7] Jonathan D. Spence, "Chapter 18: The Fall of the Guomingdang State," in *The Search for Modern China* (New York: Norton, 1990), 501.

[8] Spence, "Chapter 18: The Fall," 504.

[9] Peterson, "To Be or Not to Be a Refugee," 172.

[10] Peterson, "To Be or Not to Be a Refugee," 171.

controversially the right of abode in the United Kingdom.[11] While there were many factors that made Hong Kong attractive to migrants, these tensions in which Hong Kong was entangled contributed to the later volatility of its immigration policies.

This paper draws on peer-reviewed journal articles, transcripts of oral histories, and legal documents from the period to support its broader argument. Together, these sources are used to create an understanding of the effects of the 1949 migration of Chinese people to Hong Kong from a legal, personal, historical and subjective standpoint. By discussing this migration from multiple perspectives, this paper hopes to find a nuanced understanding of this migration, and its effects on the people and government of Hong Kong.

There are many historical accounts of the migration and its significance for both Chinese and Hong Kong parties, as well as a wealth of records of this migration from the period itself. This paper adds to this long lineage of academic accounts by adding a personal, human perspective of this migration. By frequently quoting Bessie Woo, a current Hong Kong resident whom I interviewed and who was a part of this migration in 1949, this paper adds humanity to a historical event that often can be reduced to its unbelievable statistics.

ORIGINAL RECEPTION OF CHINESE MIGRANTS — BEFORE 1949

Before the Chinese Civil War began, Hong Kong immigration policy was free and open to Chinese migrants which created a sense of equality between Chinese and Hong Kong residents. Modern historian Agnes Ku explains that, beyond policy, there was an openness associated with the passage of people from China to Hong Kong. "Hong Kong took pride in her role as a safe and well ordered sanctuary and she welcomed all who sought asylum . . . indeed [there was] almost a tradition, to allow freedom of movement to Chinese across the border with China."[12] This welcome from the Hong Kong government created an "all Chinese are Chinese" sentiment that encouraged people to migrate. It did not differentiate between Chinese born in China and Chinese born in Hong Kong; instead, it prioritized ethnicity as the basis for identity rather than geographic origin. Though the stream of Chinese migrants became heavier at the very beginning of the war, the Hong Kong government maintained the open and welcoming reception it had always given migrants because it assumed that these migrants would only temporarily reside in Hong Kong, eventually moving back to their home.[13] Just like Bessie and her family, many Chinese citizens migrated to and sought sanctuary in Hong Kong for this reason. They were lucky to be one of the last groups to benefit from this liberal immigration policy and resulting welcoming attitude.

[11]Ku, "Immigration Policies," 342.
[12] Ku, "Immigration Policies," 333.
[13] Chi-Kwan Mark, "The 'Problem of People': British Colonials, Cold War Powers, and the Chinese Refugees in Hong Kong, 1949-62," *Modern Asian Studies* 41, no. 6 (2007): 1151, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4499816.

TIGHTENED RESTRICTIONS AND THEIR IMPACT ON BELONGING — FROM 1949-1971

As waves of migrants fleeing the Chinese Civil War continued to flood into Hong Kong and remain there, the Hong Kong government tightened its regulations on immigration, and began deporting illegal migrants from China, justifying these actions by creating an anti-immigrant narrative in the public sphere. For example, in 1949, the Hong Kong government amended its "Deportation of Aliens Bill" to explain its new policy of deporting illegal migrants by stating that "large proportion[s] of the immigrant population [is] incapable of being absorbed into useful occupation for any length of time or has no such desire."[14] By including this justification for deportation within the law, the Hong Kong government used stereotypes of migrants as lazy and uncooperative also to make it difficult for people to enter Hong Kong, and easy for officials to turn them away. Later in 1950, the Hong Kong government implemented a quota system on Chinese immigrants allowed into Hong Kong.[15] This was not only a regulation on immigration, it was also the first time that the Hong Kong government's regulations were specifically targeting "persons of Chinese race," referring to Chinese migrants.[16] This specification began to overturn the previous"Chinese as Chinese" sentiment, and marked the beginning of the deterioration of the sense of community between Chinese people from China and Chinese people from Hong Kong that had once been so prominent.

The reversal of the Hong Kong government's previous welcoming policy eliminated the promise of stability, and thus did not contribute to a sense of belonging in the Chinese migrants who had already migrated to and were living in Hong Kong. Migrants residing in Hong Kong lived in constant fear of deportation and brutality. As a journal article written less than a decade later reported, during this time, Hong Kong migrants "almost daily read tragic stories of refugees crossing the border who are either killed by Communist border patrols or captured and prosecuted by Hong Kong Government officials."[17] These violent stories about Chinese migrants created a constant fear of deportation for those who had already migrated to Hong Kong, brought about barriers to assimilation and belonging, and forced migrants to hide in the shadows, fearing for their own safety. Not only were there violent stories circulating, there were also violent threats that intimidated migrants. Bessie Woo tells a story about seeing a sign outside one of the prominent Hong Kong banks saying "no dogs, no Chinese" as a child. This is just an example of one of the many ways in which migrants were made to feel lesser than in daily life.[18] Although regulations were put in place, migrants still crossed the border through illegal channels, consequently living in fear of persecution from the government.[19] Because of this, many Chinese migrants developed a sense of self-shame and others projected an association with criminality upon them.[20] This shame and criminality

[14] Ku, "Immigration Policies," 333.
[15] Ku, "Immigration Policies," 334.
[16] Ku, "Immigration Policies," 334.
[17] Hu Yueh, "The Problem of the Hong Kong Refugees," *Asian Survey* 2, no. 1 (1962): 31, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3023656.
[18] Woo, videoconference interview by the author.
[19] Yueh, "The Problem," 30.
[20] Ku, "Immigration Policies," 341.

hampered all attempts at assimilation and belonging because it defined a clear "us and them" relationship between migrants and citizens.

HONG KONG'S SHIFT INTO THE ERA OF THE "HONG KONG BELONGER" — 1971 ONWARD

The creation of a new immigration law — a moderate solution when compared to the extremes of those that came before it — put the migrants who had lived in Hong Kong for years at ease. In 1971, the Hong Kong government introduced the concept of a "Hong Kong belonger," a new legal identity for those settled in Hong Kong that granted them Hong Kong residency free from the threat of deportation from Hong Kong. Specifically, Chinese migrants who had lived in Hong Kong for at least seven years could become a Hong Kong belonger, ensuring their safety.[21] The Immigration Ordinance of 1971 that created this status deemed that "Hong Kong belonger means -- a) a British subject who was born in Hong Kong; b) a British subject by naturalization in Hong Kong; c) a British subject by registration in Hong Kong."[22] Many Chinese migrants fit into the second category listed as, after their seven years of Hong Kong residency, they could naturalize. By including the three categories of people eligible for the title of "Hong Kong belonger," the Hong Kong government was essentially equating the rights to which each category listed were entitled. As British subjects born in Hong Kong were not in danger of being deported, these Chinese migrants, listed directly after in the ordinance, were also safe from deportation as well.[23]

Although this new identity was marketed by the Hong Kong government as solely granting migrants security, the "Hong Kong belonger" status also created several unspoken benefits for the Hong Kong government. One of the major unspoken benefits the "Hong Kong belonger" identity provided the Hong Kong government was the fact that it simplified and brought clarity to immigration law, making it easier to enforce. As historian Albert Chen notes, this policy not only "collectively embraced almost all people resident in Hong Kong…[it also] consolidated and amended the existing deportation and immigration laws."[24] No longer were there so many labels and categories with which a person living in Hong Kong could identify (illegal immigrants, legal immigrants, residents, Chinese residents); instead, there was an overarching sense of organization.[25]

In addition to benefitting the Hong Kong government in an unspoken way, the new "Hong Kong belonger" status advantaged the governments of two other foreign nations as well. For example, the new Hong Kong belonger status benefitted the British government in that the law did not explicitly confer eligibility to claim abode in the United Kingdom on colonial subjects. Thus, the migrants were not

[21] Ku, "Immigration Policies," 346.
[22] *Immigration Ordinance 1971*, publication no. 1 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Government Gazette, 1971).
[23] Albert H.Y. Chen, "The Development of Immigration Law and Policy: The Hong Kong Experience," *McGill Law Journal* 33, no. 4 (1988): 643-644.
[24] Chen, "The Development," 643.
[25] Chen, "The Development," 643.

granted the right to reside in the United Kingdom, as other colonies had been granted in the past.[26] This omission benefitted Britain in that it minimized the number of its colonial subjects settling in the United Kingdom, thereby preventing overpopulation, while maintaining its concept of "pure Britishness," or the preservation of the primacy of white British familial lineage in Britain.[27] The United States government also benefited from this new status because its economic ties with China at the time were strengthening, and the Hong Kong belonger solution diminished the pressure of repatriating Chinese migrants who had long lived in Hong Kong, thereby preventing the reopening of a long history of US involvement in Chinese migrants.[28] In all, the Hong Kong belonger status not only benefitted migrants from China and the Hong Kong government, it also had ramifications in the international sphere.

Most importantly, however, the "Hong Kong belonger" legal status benefitted Chinese migrants, creating a reality in which they could lay down solid roots and enjoy a new sense of belonging in what was now unquestionably their home country. Bessie Woo recounts the first time that her family could afford a car due to the fact that her father was able to establish a business and grow it during this time. She describes the feeling of success in taking a joy ride in her new car with her family: "I still remember our car. It was a big deal, buying our own car…Every night we all go to the train station. We all take a car ride in our pajamas. We hop into the car and Gong Gong [her father] would drive us around Hong Kong."[29] Because the Chinese migrants now were on equal footing with other residents, they felt empowered to assimilate to the Hong Kong culture and build lives within the burgeoning Hong Kong economy. More broadly, the Hong Kong belonger status that encapsulated the entire populace of Hong Kong created a well overdue sense of belonging for the Chinese migrants.[30] Bessie's story is simply a microcosm of how many Chinese migrants felt around this time when they were at last able to create a place for themselves within a society that finally welcomed them.

However, not everything about the new law was positive; there were some effects of the "Hong Kong belonger" status that did not benefit migrants seeking sanctuary in Hong Kong. The new 1971 immigration policy, in addition to the positive creation of unity among the people already in Hong Kong, also had the *negative* effect of decreasing the number of migrants attempting to enter Hong Kong. Specifically, in 1976, 800 illegal entrants from mainland China were arrested on arrival and repatriated.[31] This number, versus the 385,000 illegal entrants reported by the United Nations in 1955, is extremely low, emphasizing the decrease in immigrants coming to Hong Kong seeking refuge.[32] The unity that came with the new "Hong Kong belonger" status made it so that Hong Kong was no longer a sanctuary city for masses of Chinese migrants hoping to make lives for themselves outside of China.[33] As shown in the

[26] Ku, "Immigration Policies," 342.
[27] Ku, "Immigration Policies," 343.
[28] Ku, "Immigration Policies," 348.
[29] Woo, videoconference interview by the author.
[30] Chen, "The Development," 643.
[31] Chen, "The Development," 653.
[32] John P. Burns, "Immigration from China and the Future of Hong Kong," *Asian Survey* 27, no. 6 (1987): 663, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2644542.
[33] Ku, "Immigration Policies," 350.

above statistics, fewer people tried to cross the border without papers in the years following the enactment of the law. This marks the quiet reversal of the 1940s policy and common principle that "Chinese is Chinese." In creating the "belonger" status which unified Hong Kong identity, the Hong Kong government created a cultural gulf between Hong Kong Chinese people and mainland Chinese people which remains to this day.[34]

CONCLUSION

From an open immigration policy, to a restrictive one, and finally to a mid-way compromise between the two, the fluctuation in Hong Kong governmental policy made Chinese migrants' path to a sense of belonging inherently disorganized and chaotic. Despite major fluctuation in Hong Kong's immigration policy throughout the years, Bessie Woo and her family — as well as 1.2 million others like them — found a way to build a home and a sense of belonging in Hong Kong after escaping civil war and economic turmoil in Shanghai. The sense of specific nationality that the Hong Kong belonger status contributed to creating persisted among citizens of Hong Kong even long after the Chinese Civil War ended and China had reopened again. Bessie describes returning to Shanghai to visit her cousins who never migrated and feeling distant from their culture and identity. Her daughter, Jacqueline, remarks: "I always felt specifically 'Hong Kong Chinese.' Shanghai was never my home.'"[35]

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Mika Higgins-Woo is a high school senior at the Dalton School in New York, NY. She is interested in theater and history, particularly when these two disciplines are in conversation with each other such as the study of theater history, and dramaturgy. She plans to double major in theater and history in college, and hopes to pursue a career in the theater industry.

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[34] An anecdote Bessie Woo shared highlights this cultural gulf. She describes visiting her cousins (who did not migrate with her) in Shanghai after the war ended and feeling as though, after years of living in Hong Kong, she was now of a completely different culture and socioeconomic status. She remembers her cousins coming to visit her at her hotel in Shanghai mainly to use the toilet and shower as they had no indoor facilities at their home. She also recalls that after such trips she would return home to Hong Kong and have to dispose of her suitcase as it smelled so bad. Bessie's daughter, Jacqueline Woo, recalls visiting her cousins in mainland China when she was little and having to give them her toys because — she was told by her parents — they were not as fortunate as she was to have so many toys to play with. These are just a few anecdotes illuminating the cultural and economic schism between Chinese people living in China and Chinese people living in Hong Kong that stemmed from this "Hong Kong belonger" identity. (Woo, videoconference interview by the author.)

[35] Woo, videoconference interview by the author.

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