

Historical and Modern Catalysts of the HK Refugee Dilemma

John Zekun Zhang^{1,a,*}

¹*Department of Sociology, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, 27514, USA*

a. johnz@unc.edu

**corresponding author*

Abstract: To explain the causes of local “anti-refugee” sentiment propagated throughout local Hong Kong, this article delves into historical deadlocks – notably the cultural revolution and influx of Vietnamese boat people – that led the city’s attitudes to transition from relatively lax policies into strict regulations and negative media portrayal still present today. Yet, the present-day Hong Kong protests are brought into context to explain the slight generational gap in refugee sentiment. Finally, the Hong Kong refugee dilemma is brought into context compared with similar deadlocks in Norway and Germany to suggest an optimal mode of action moving forward.

Keywords: refugee, Hong Kong, immigration

1. Introduction

As of today, Hong Kong’s refugee population of around 13,000’s journey to local integration has long been a process of difficulty and struggle under one of the world’s most stringent refugee application processes. According to the HK immigration department’s enforcement statistics, the rigorous screening system is laden with years of interviewing and validity checks; only 231 asylum seekers who applied for substantiation received it as opposed to around 22,737 total claimants in the last 11 years (1% substantiation rate) [1]. Meanwhile, the International Social Service states that refugees are prohibited from work and are forced to live mainly under minimal government subsidy (the monthly housing subsidy for refugees is \$1500 HKD, compared with the average subdivided flat rent being \$5000 HKD) [2]. Consequently, asylum seekers are often forced to work illegal jobs with a high risk of health hazards and face general discrimination when searching for cheap living opportunities. Yet, when we take into consideration HK’s historical role as a migrant refuge - from sheltering millions of Chinese refugees in the wake of the Cultural Revolution to being a central landing point for Vietnamese boat people- these drastically different attitudes towards the refugee population, and what led to the evolution of modern-day stigma, is undoubtedly a question to ponder. This paper attempts to analyze this question by considering the gradual change of attitude towards immigrants throughout HK’s historical events sheltering refugees and pairs this with perspective into current events, which may have also held a role in shaping stigma.

2. Regarding the Deadlock and Resolution to the Myriad Chinese Refugees Escaping to HK from the Mainland in the Wake of the Cultural Revolution

HK’s history of refugees wouldn’t be cemented without a few years after 1945, regarding the deadlock and resolution to the myriad of Chinese refugees escaping to HK from the mainland in the

wake of the Cultural Revolution. Mark Chi-Kwan summarizes the city's overall paradigm shift as transforming from ambivalence on whether to provide relief for the refugees to recognizing the "importance of turning rioters into responsible citizens" [3].

The period between the first influx of refugees in 1949 was marked by lax regulation and freedom of immigration in the British colony. From Chinese merchants to reformers immigrating to take advantage of economic or political opportunities, this went largely unchecked by the British colonial government. Governor Alexander Grantham, at the time, believed primarily in a laissez-faire welfare policy - believing that the immigrant issue would be temporary. He thought that once the situation on the mainland had stabilized, refugees would leave the colony for elsewhere, and, paired with a quota system at the time (used daily in an attempt to ensure the amount leaving the territory was equal to the amount arriving) would be enough to regulate numbers [3].

A prominent ideology in that period that seemed to persist till the modern era was the refusal to offer "large-scale relief measures" in the fear that it would encourage more refugees to come and existing ones to stay. Given that "there was no reason for turning Hong Kong into a glorified soup kitchen," according to Governor Grantham, provision of social welfare to new residents was kept to a minimum, despite pressure from Whitehall for improvement - care was only given to the most vulnerable members on an ad hoc basis. Chinese refugees were expected to look to private voluntary agencies for help. The refugee deadlock wasn't taken seriously until the mid-to-late 1950s [3]. This certainly proved to be a mistake, in retrospect. After 1945 and the beginning of the Cold War and the coming of power of the CCP, the refugee influx jumped to approximately one-third of the overall 2.6 million population [4]. This was an overwhelming number of immigrants and was even described as a "Problem of People" by the HK Government's annual report as they pondered whether to treat the refugee population as an integral part of Hong Kong. Yet, in this part of history, this mass migration also provided a jumpstart in "colonial progress," according to Glen Peterson, where resulting investment in public housing pushed the economy forward and provided "capital," "entrepreneurial energy and cheap labor." Hong Kong's initial nonchalance provided certain benefits that justified their attitude [4].

Regarding the second significant refugee inflow of Vietnamese people, Hong Kong's overall change in refugee sentiment is mainly exemplified by its legislation. To house the first batch of 11 thousand Vietnamese boat people in 1975, Hong Kong opened temporary 'open centers' where freedom of movement and work outside the center was allowed. Their refugee status, at the time, was 'seldom questioned'; a more significant surge of around 70 thousand refugees ensued in the following year [5].

As the refugee population drastically increased through to 1979, Professor Chan Kwok Bun of the National University of Singapore marked a drastic turning point in attitude where "incoming Vietnamese would no longer be automatically considered as 'genuine refugees' with an automatic right to resettle," as exemplified by the HK government's new screening procedure [5]. New legislation required refugees to be remanded in interrogation centers. Authorities would interrogate them; those who qualify would be sent to refugee camps for resettlement, while those who wouldn't stay in detention centers for repatriation to Vietnam. This process was notably slow: Between 1988 and 1989, only 1500 cases had been screened, and 170 were accepted as refugees (which drew parallel to government 'estimates' that only around 10% of arrivals were genuine refugees) [5].

3. The Influence Between Public Sentiment and Legislative Changes

These harshening legislative changes, though, were consistently correlated by a background of negative public sentiment. Professor Chan Kwok Bun notes this period as being filled with reports that "[kept] the issue in the limelight." Movies focused on the "adverse effects" of criminal behavior caused by Vietnamese refugee street gangs, radio stations put on "phone-in and talk shows" for the

general public to express their anger towards the Vietnamese, and local newspapers-based content on “taxpayers” complaints of the refugees. Despite being estimated that refugees caused 10% of all crimes in HK, average residents rarely interacted with the population. Yet, their prejudice was welcomed because of the “discriminatory editorializing by the media” that attached their faces to news stories [5]. There were two main impressions local Hong Kongers held that established the resulting stigma: that most refugees were ‘economic immigrants’ solely seeking a better life and that they were over-taxing government resources and exerting pressure on social service (despite very few local service organizations working with the group, when the system itself was underfunded and stretched thin) [5].

Numerous parallels are drawn from those historical experiences to the shaping of modern law. Public sentiment of Vietnamese refugees eventually transitioned into legislation, where, according to Michael Ramsden, modern HK refugees are legally “regarded as over-stayers whose presence is merely tolerated until their resettlement,” with a lack of effort to integrate them into current society. Current screening and refugee claim mechanisms have long been known for their inefficiency, with “several thousand [asylum seekers]” still awaiting a decision on their refugee status determination [6]. Despite it being known that most persecution cases are likely to have “inevitable similarity” due to the commonality in situations in which refugees flee, a common understanding locally and legislatively is that delays in claim processing have still encouraged individuals “with no genuine claim” to take advantage of Hong Kong for their own “economic advantages” [6].

Furthermore, Professor Isabella Ng of the Education University’s study analyzed the framing of modern asylum seekers in the media. This was based on prior research that the media has the power to “affect the construction of a social reality” by choosing topics to emphasize and exclude, which can wound up influencing “political decision-making [processes]” and people’s perceptions of issues. Despite Hong Kong’s fame as a “multicultural and pluralistic cosmopolitan identity,” Professor Ng concluded that its sentiment towards refugees has never been so in the modern age [7]. Since 2016, news reports about asylum seekers and refugees began appearing after WhatsApp audio messages based on “killings and robberies committed by asylum seekers” began circulating (though this was later proven as fake). The topic of HK refugees since then has not only become a focus in legislative council debates on securitization (which even led to the justification of inhumane measures, such as bringing back detention camps) but also in reports that “fake refugees” were still coming solely for economic measures and committing apparent crimes [7].

4. The Influence Between Modern Refugee Sentiment and Historical Background

Current events should also be considered in conjunction with historical background to understand modern refugee sentiment. The late 2014s to early 2016, when refugee issues entered the limelight of the media, was also correlated with an increasing rise of the Umbrella Movement in the City. Nationalism, and the preservation of Hong Kong’s independence, carried massive importance, especially in the early years after the 1997 handover. Where the government sought to “instill” more “patriotic education” and “acquiesce to China’s insistence” that the Chief Executive elections should not be democratic, large-scale protests led to as many as 100,000 people occupying the main roads outside of the legislative building in 2015. With these ideological changes finding young people fighting for their independence, professor Gordon Mathews notes a distinct cleavage in ideology that has seemed to form. Within his interviews with local Asylum seekers, some speaking profusely about racism while some detail the conversations they’ve had with local students, Mathews saw a generational divide, with “younger people more accepting of different ethnicities than their elders” [8]. Considering the elders’ unique experience regarding Hong Kong’s earlier history with refugees, this certainly makes sense. In particular, though, the young political activists were just as likely to oppose China as to reach out and understand how the government was mistreating asylum seekers.

Mathews doesn't deny the prevalence of racism among these young citizens; however -he describes them as lacking disdain for those that aren't mainland Chinese. This presents a drastically different perception of refugees to the historical norm. However, it seems to underline a bias behind the young people's positive attitude - refugees are still being presented as devices to further the Hong Kongers' cause [8].

Hence, what should Hong Kong's future course of action be in a city where the underworkings of history and modern nationalism heavily influence legislation and sentiment? A study by Professor Henning Finseraas of the Institute of Social Research conducts an experiment where he tests how majority-to-minority contact could control anti-immigration emotions in Norway. He tried this in the setting of a military training camp, randomizing roommates to see how exposure to ethnically minority soldiers would affect the sentiment of Norwegian soldiers. Results showed that despite some soldiers possessing a negative bias that immigrants kept poorer work ethics, direct contact and exposure to an immigrant updated these views [9]. However, it was also a clear result that exposure to immigrants did not necessarily improve the Norwegians' perspective on welfare duality: those who didn't believe immigrants deserve equal treatment in welfare remained with the same views. One of Finseraas's possible explanations was that a truly significant change in Norwegians' view on welfare depends on the quality of contact they established with immigrants - potential negative relationships based on the immigrants may have worsened existing bias [9].

On the other hand, Professor Jürgen Meyerhoff of Technische Universität Berlin conducted a study to test how accepting refugee and migrant homes in citizens' vicinities can change over time. While "welcome culture" was painted as the sentiment by the media toward the "hundreds of thousands of refugees" arriving after the Syrian civil war in 2015, this sentiment quickly shifted as immigrant arrivals almost reached one million that year, and till 2017 became a controversial debate of setting "refugee ceilings" and the "refugee crisis" throughout parliament [10]. The study was conducted in November 2015 by surveying citizens on certain attitudes towards migrant homes in their vicinity and repeating the study a year later after "overwhelming media attention" provided more knowledge on the refugee issue. While most initially found to have been disapproving of refugee homes in their vicinity saw their attitudes remaining unchanged, the minority (around 20%) of the initially welcome population of citizens saw their moods fluctuate, possibly affected by debates and immigration events. This suggested that the "welcome culture" painted by the media wasn't necessarily present in German society - Meyerhoff explains this as potentially Not-In-My-Back-Yard beliefs, where a general sentiment of refugees could differ from the local level in the same vicinity. But overall, the study does contribute to the causation between negative media sentiment and worsening general attitudes in initially welcoming citizens [10].

Hence, while Hong Kong possesses a drastically different situation from the above countries, they all faced initial commonalities with negative sentiment towards immigrant equality and welfare. The role of negative media perception is undoubtedly likely to impact the perception of HK refugees similarly to Germany. Based on these case analyses, a potential step Hong Kong could take would be to increase the exposure to refugees, humanizing them in the general public's eyes - like the Norwegian army's gradual understanding of their immigrant comrades. This could be done with personal contact or through an original digital format. Still, a more positive experience directly with these refugees may become a starting point for a more nuanced understanding of them instead of media-propagated assumptions. When the general sentiment toward refugees' changes, this could create a ripple effect of legislation and media depiction shifts.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Hong Kong's history of sheltering refugees, from mainland escapees following the cultural revolution to the Vietnamese boat people, saw the gradual transition of attitudes from

acceptance and nonchalance (in part due to the economic benefits an increased population provided) to ambivalence and eventual negativity due to an overwhelming amount of immigrant arrival. This warranted the tightening of legislation while the media propagated public sentiment still present among the older members of today's society. While increased nationalism with current events such as the umbrella revolution may have led to the refueling of stigma against the refugee population in the media, it surprisingly also provided a source of polarizing support for the population among younger citizens, especially those resistant towards the mainland Chinese government. This indeed uncovers a greater context behind modern-day stigma towards a population of 13,000 and should be considered in future actions towards repelling it.

References

- [1] Hong Kong Immigration Department. (n.d.). *Facts and statistics*. Immigration Department. Retrieved January 6, 2023, from <https://www.immd.gov.hk/eng/facts/enforcement.html>
- [2] Administering and delivery of assistance for Non-refoulement Claimants. *International Social Service Hong Kong Branch* (n.d.). Retrieved January 6, 2023, from https://www.isshk.org/en/our_services/detail/21/#:~:text=The%20non%2Drefoulement%20claimants%20are,and%20submission%20of%20required%20documents.
- [3] Mark, C. (2007). The 'Problem of People': British Colonials, Cold War Powers, and the Chinese Refugees in Hong Kong, 1949–62. *Modern Asian Studies*, 41(6), 1145–1181. doi:10.1017/S0026749X06002666
- [4] Peterson, G. (2008). 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(2), 171–195. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086530802180924>
- [5] Bun, C. K. (1990). Hong Kong's Response to the Vietnamese Refugees: A Study in Humanitarianism, Ambivalence and Hostility. *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, 18(1), 94. <http://libproxy.lib.unc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/hong-kongs-response-vietnamese-refugees-study/docview/1311778323/se-2>
- [6] Ramsden, M., & Marsh, L. (2013). The 'right to work' of refugees in Hong Kong: *Ma v director of immigration*. *International Journal of Refugee Law*, 25(3), 574–596. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijrl/eet036>
- [7] Ng, I., Choi, S. F., & Chan, A. L. (2018). Framing the issue of asylum seekers and refugees for Tougher Refugee Policy—a study of the media's portrayal in post-colonial Hong Kong. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 20(2), 593–617. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-018-0624-7>
- [8] Mathews, G. (2018). Asylum seekers as symbols of Hong Kong's non-chineseness. *China Perspectives*, 2018(3), 51–58. <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.8132>
- [9] Finseraas, H., & Kotsadam, A. (2017). Does personal contact with ethnic minorities affect anti-immigrant sentiments? evidence from a field experiment. *European Journal of Political Research*, 56(3), 703–722. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12199>
- [10] Liebe, U., × Jürgen Meyerhoff, Kroesen, M., Chorus, C., & Glenk, K. (2018). From welcome culture to welcome limits? Uncovering preference changes over time for sheltering refugees in Germany. *PLoS One*, 13(8)<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0199923>