

The Impact of a Transnational Background on Family Migration Considerations Amid Political Uncertainty: Second-Generation Returnees in Hong Kong

Lucille Lok-Sun Ngan, Anita Kit-Wa Chan, Rami Hin-Yeung Chan, and Queenie Kwan-Yee Siu

Abstract

Recent media and some published studies have strongly linked the recent wave of emigration from Hong Kong to the changing political conditions caused by the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill movement and the enactment of the National Security Law. This article departs from that narrative to shed light on an alternative reality involving a segment of Hong Kong residents with privileged transnational mobility. Through in-depth interviews with 41 second-generation returnees from immigrant receiving countries of Canada, Australia, the U.S., the U.K., this study finds that concerns over political uncertainty were not the main driver prompting these returnees to consider (re)

Lucille Lok-Sun Ngan is Associate Professor and Associate Head in the Department of Social Science, The Hang Seng University of Hong Kong. Correspondence should be sent to lucillengan@hsu.edu.hk.

Anita Kit-Wa Chan is Associate Professor in the Department of Social Sciences and Policy Studies, The Education University of Hong Kong.

Rami Hin-Yeung Chan is Assistant Professor in the Department of Social Science, The Hang Seng University of Hong Kong.

Queenie Kwan-Yee Siu is a PhD candidate in the School of Sociology, The Australian National University.

migrating to their former host countries. Second-generation returnees are a unique group of Hong Kong residents who possess dual citizenship and can migrate with ease, a privilege provided by their parents who emigrated with them before 1997 in times of uncertain political change. Combined with their complex transnational sense of belonging, second-generation returnees were rather detached in their assessment of the precarious political situation in Hong Kong. Instead, parenthood priorities, particularly their concerns over the character of local education and affordability of international education in Hong Kong, not only overshadowed political concerns but also overrode the likely cost to their careers of relocating to the West. By paying attention to the impact of the transnational background of second-generation returnees, this article also underscores the importance of the life course perspective that considers the long-term implications of migration for family members across later generations when understanding contemporary Chinese migration processes.

Hong Kong has seen a new wave of emigration in the past few years. The net outflow swelled by more than five times, from about 20,000 in 2017 to 113,000 in 2022.¹ This surge in emigration has been strongly linked by the media to the social upheaval caused by the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) movement, which sprung up in 2019, and the enactment of the National Security Law (NSL) in 2020, which aims to safeguard national security and restore law and order. Media reports linking the emigration wave to political drivers are mostly sweeping generalizations, skewed toward the narratives of Hongkongers seeking to emigrate for the first time.² Little is known about the migration considerations and views toward the political situation of the estimated 500,000 Hong Kong residents (6.5 percent of the total Hong Kong population) who possess dual citizenship, which allows them the privilege of relocating to their host societies at any time without legal constraints.³

Since the early 1990s, the international movement of Chinese immigrants has gained scholarly recognition in the literature on transnational migration. This attention was due to the need to identify new ways of understanding the distinctive mobility strategies and logics of migration among economically privileged Chinese families from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China, who were emigrating to the traditional immigrant receiving countries of Canada, Australia, the U.S., the U.K. (and later New Zealand). Immigrants from Hong Kong acquired foreign