

# **The Hong Kong Diaspora – Acculturation and Identity**

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September 2023



# Introduction

## Theoretical background

Acculturation is an inevitable process within the migration experience: migrants undergo a culture change after direct and ongoing interaction with the dominant cultural group in their country of settlement. Berry (1992) proposed a model with four acculturation strategies which are associated with two dimensions to predict the outcome of migrant adaptation, with the consideration of other variables on both group and individual levels. The first dimension involves the preservation or dismissal of the migrant's home culture and identity, while the second dimension considers the acceptance or rejection of the receiving culture. Among the four strategies: integration, separation, assimilation, and marginalization, the first two will be the focus of this project because they are likely to be adopted by Hong Kong migrants who value the maintenance of original cultural identity. Integration within this model, contrary to the general belief of solely adjusting to fit into the host society, also entails one's desire to retain their original cultural identity. On the other hand, separation occurs when the dominant culture is rejected to preserve one's original culture, which is a possible outcome given the strong bonds within certain Hong Kong migrant communities (Berry, 1992).

## Context of research

The context of migration differentiates the adoption of the above strategies, and is largely influenced by group and individual-level variables including political context, migration motivation, economic and education status, and the attitudes and support within the society of settlement (Berry, 1992). I hypothesize that such differentiations in context and outcome can be found within the Hong Kong diaspora, which comprises migrants from two major exoduses: an outflow of over 300,000 Hong Kongers from 1984 until 1997 following the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984, and the recent and ongoing wave of emigration from 2020 after Western countries lowered barriers for Hong Kongers to immigrate in light of Beijing-imposed National Security Law following the political

instability in 2019 (Yue, 2023). The UK government introduced the BN(O) visa scheme on 31 January 2021 which allowed Hong Kongers who held a colonial British National (Overseas) passport to apply for UK residency for up to five years, with the possibility of extension and permanent residence (British National (Overseas) Visa, n.d.). 176,407 BN(O) visas have been granted up until 30 June 2023, two and a half years since its introduction (Summary of Latest Statistics, 2023). This has made the UK a new 'home' for a majority of the new generation of the Hong Kong diaspora.

The systemic difference between the BN(O) visa scheme and the traditional routes to migration prior to handover resulted in varying abilities and attitudes among migrants of two distinct generations. With the lowered barriers of immigration, BN(O) migrants come from a more diverse background, as opposed to the generally high economic and social status of the pre-1997 migrants, typified by upper-class groups or civil servants due to the highly selective criteria for British citizenship under the British Nationality (Hong Kong) Act 1990. As a result, the overall readiness for migration is seen to be weakened in the new generation of migrants, with many prone to struggle financially and with assimilation into local society due to a lack of understanding of British culture.

## Politicized Collective Identity and other obstacles for integration

Politicized collective identity is a common dual identity found among migrants and was argued to be counterproductive to societal development and has a negative impact on acculturation outcomes (Barbera, 2015, p.2; Simon & Grabow, 2010). However, such politicization usually occurs among migrant communities within the country of settlement after experiences of discrimination and inequality of rights, which forms an awareness of shared grievances within the ingroup and creates an antagonistic relationship with the local society (the outgroup) which discourages assimilation (Simon & Grabow, 2010; Simon & Klandermans, 2001). Hong Kong migrants, on the other hand, are likely to share a politicized collective identity *prior* to migration as shared grievances were built upon the power struggle during the anti-extradition bill social movement in 2019, followed by drastic legal and political changes that struck the core values of Hong Kong. While politicized collective identity does

not apply to all Hong Kongers from different political stances, the political factor was found to be the most significant reason for migration among BN(O) migrants with over 50% of respondents identifying as pro-democracy (Yue, 2023), which supports my hypothesis on the presence of politicized collective identity among BN(O) migrants. Such politicization did not exist among the pre-1997 migrants deduced by their context of migration and supported by the differing attitudes towards re-migration back to Hong Kong between Pre-1997 and BN(O) migrants. Despite large outflows of citizens after multiple crises in Hong Kong during colonial times, around 500,000 immigrants have re-migrated back to Hong Kong since 1997 (Sussan, 2010, p.6). However, 61.3% of surveyed BN(O) migrants are certain that they will never relocate back to Hong Kong permanently (Yue, 2023). The difference in attitudes reflects the fundamental differences between these two groups of migrants, likely to be caused by the politicization of identity among the recent migrants.

Although a politicized identity is not antagonistic towards UK society, its salience created a strong bond within the BN(O) community and may have driven them into adopting the separation strategy over integration. The fast growth of support groups and organizations catered towards recent Hong Kong migrants may be an early sign of this.

Language, specifically the lack of English proficiency and the niche Cantonese-speaking community, poses extra challenges for the Hong Kong migrant community compared to other migrants in the UK. It was found that only 41.2% of surveyed BN(O) migrants perceived themselves to be above average in their English speaking proficiency (Yue, 2023), significantly lower than 89% of other migrants in the UK who share similar proficiency (Kierans, 2021, p.5). Furthermore, Kierans (2021) demonstrated a positive correlation between English proficiency and labour market outcome, while employment has a positive impact on one's social life and can assist in adaptation. Therefore, the lack of English proficiency among Hong Kong migrants restricted their economic and social opportunities, resulting in a higher likelihood of experiencing acculturative stress.

## Primary Research and Qualitative Data

The circumstances faced by recent Hong Kong migrants seem unfavourable towards their acculturation journey in the UK. However, as one's experience can easily be influenced even by minor variables, interviews were conducted with migrants from both generations, categorized as pre-1997 and post-2020 migrants regardless of their visa status.

This project aims to collect detailed qualitative data to concretize abstract concepts of acculturation through specific personal encounters and examples as the limited existing research regarding this emerging exodus like Yue (2023) is unable to provide indicators for basic concepts like (self-perceived) integration.

## Methodology

To examine the differences and similarities in migration experiences between these two groups of migrants, four video-recorded interviews were conducted. Semi-constructed, conversation-style interviews were chosen as the primary research method to gather interviewees' personal experiences, opinions, and observations as migrants of their generation.

These interviews were filmed and edited to produce a 20-minute documentary presenting various perspectives on the emergence of Hong Kong communities in the UK, the social responsibility of migrants to assimilate, and the legacy and evolution of the identity of the Hong Kong diaspora. The documentary allows the audience to empathize with the protagonists through both the personal stories they share, and through observations of their non-verbal language. Moreover, the visual presentation of interviews reminds the audience that behind all group phenomena lie individual experiences that can differ even with the influence of the least significant variable.

To minimize errors, misinterpretations, and misunderstandings caused by language barriers, the interviewees were given the choice of either Cantonese or English as the primary language of the interview conducted. Both Post-2020 immigrants preferred Cantonese while one of the Pre-1997 immigrants requested English, with the other Pre-1997 immigrant choosing Cantonese after some contemplation. Although this facilitated effective communication, certain meanings and implications may be lost in translation to English. For example, the term ‘圍爐’ (wai4 lou4), has the literal meaning of surrounding a fireplace with family and friends, which is used to imply the act of ignorance in a social bubble with little interaction with the outside world. In this context, it refers to close-knit migrant communities which exclude themselves from local society. While there is no direct one-word translation for this Cantonese colloquialism and concept, I have translated it as ‘formation of exclusive cliques’ to maximize its connotation.

Due to compromised confidentiality in video-recorded interviews and the published documentary, the search for interviewees became challenging and limited the options for a diverse and well-represented sample of interviewees. With both Post-2020 migrants in their early 20s and Pre-1997 migrants born before 1970, the homogenous age group within each category made it difficult to differentiate whether certain values are formed based on their migration experience and context or simply due to generation gaps. However, geographical representation was partially achieved with one migrant staying in the northeast of Scotland who shared unique insights that differed from the others who are based in London.

## Findings

### 1. Universal Experiences across both groups

Commonalities in the acculturation process were observed throughout the two generations of migrants despite the differences in their context of migration. The interviews began with an inquiry into the interviewees’ present identities, wherein all respondents retained their identification as ‘Hong

Konger’, albeit with nuanced variations like ‘Hong Konger in Britain’, ‘British Hong Konger’, and ‘both Hong Konger and British’.

The home identity was prioritized over British features among both post-2020 migrants, citing reasons like “My identity equates to my sense of belonging” and “I belong to the Hong Konger community and would like to contribute to this community”. On the other hand, although the pre-1997 migrants have “engaged with cultures from both sides”, culture shedding was identified through either limited Chinese proficiency or lack of awareness of Hong Kong’s affairs. Their identification as Hong Kongers stems from factors such as the sense of “empathy with Hong Kong people”, the feeling of exclusion within the local society, and the endearment for Chinese culture. The divergent interpretations of the Hong Konger identity support the notion that identity is a fluid concept, particularly among migrants. Such variations arise as their perceptions of home are reconstructed with the influence of selective memory, embellished with imagination and idealized sentiments rooted in nostalgia (Barbera, 2015, p.3).

However, research revealed that migrants’ sense of connection with their homeland eroded over time despite little changes in their identification with their host country, from almost 90% of migrants who have left home for less than five years valuing their place of origin, to less than 50% after residing in the UK for over 15 years (Kierans, 2021, p.10). Therefore, it will be valuable to revisit these post-2020 migrants in 10 years’ time to investigate whether their perception of the Hong Kong identity has evolved to understandings similar to the pre-1997 migrants’ currently, or if the politicization of their identity has preserved the salience of the Hong Konger identity, allowing them to escape the ‘destiny’ of a dilution of their original identity.

Another cross-generational agreement arose in the discussion on the role of Hong Kong communities in acculturation. Although there were no similar communities among the pre-1997 migrants, they recognized that such communities exist “out of necessity” and are for “mutual protection and interest” especially due to the more diverse economic background of these recent migrants enabled by the

loosened criteria of the BN(O) visa. A post-2020 migrant described the involvement of these communities as a “progressive milestone” towards integration due to its value in providing support for migrants to sustain their lifestyles before beginning assimilation.

## 2. Acculturation in real life and the Acculturation Model

The interviewees’ responses were analyzed to assess whether their behaviour and mentality reflected any of the acculturation strategies suggested by Berry (1992). Contrary to my hypothesis that post-2020 migrants are more likely to adopt the separation strategy, all of them had successfully adopted the integration strategy – “it is imperative to engage with cultures from both sides and embrace positive elements from both home and host cultures”. However, most migrants practiced adaptation to local society only in their public lives – “I act like the locals living around my neighborhood to blend in and to avoid seeming too much of an outsider.” while their home culture still dominates their private lives – “I am still certain that I am a Hong Konger, ..., but in terms of adapting to the UK society, I must *pretend* to be a British, or Londoner.”. The mismatch between their behaviors and mentality, suggests that these acts of assimilation are motivated by their sense of social responsibility rather than a growing sense of belonging to their country of residence.

Instead, constant exposure to UK society was unable to overcome the intrinsic cultural differences between Hong Kong and the UK but has reinforced their inherent identification as Hong Kongers – “Actually when you have lived here (London) for long enough, you are more aware of the differences between our cultures... a lot of my friends’ (home) identity became clearer as they aged”, said a pre-1997 migrant. Similarly, a post-2020 migrant stated that despite initial desires to learn about the new culture, “Hong Kong migrants will eventually fall back into these circles” when discussing the formation of Hong Kong communities.

Moreover, although these behavioural shifts met Berry’s criteria of integration, the lack of fundamental adjustments in one’s mindset may result in a higher likelihood of separation in the future,

especially among the post-2020 migrants. Those from this generation who were interviewed are in their early 20s, when adjustments in behaviour are more effortless compared to those at later stages in life (i.e. aged above 30), which accounts for over 85% of the BN(O) migrant population (Yue, 2023). With this majority, the post-2020 migrants, when viewed as a group, may still be prone to separation, although this assumption can only be confirmed in further research of post-2020 migrants from other age groups due to the lack of generalisability of this project. Furthermore, this proposition is backed by their distinct desire to retain their home culture and identity whereas their neutrality towards the host culture (neither accepting nor rejecting) suggests that their adoption of the integration strategy can easily be replicated in other countries of residence because they prioritized their identity as a member of the diaspora unbounded by geographical location over a resident of the host country. The UK was chosen as their temporary country of settlement due to the accessibility of the BN(O) visa coupled with its colonial history with Hong Kong, but a strong connection and sense of belonging with the UK's culture is not guaranteed even with the apparent assimilation in their public lives.

### 3. The Outlier

However, one of the pre-1997 migrants was an exception to the discussions above. Unlike other interviewees who relocated to London as young adults, he was raised in Scotland from a young age. His distinct original identity as a Hong Konger was fostered by his position as the minority in school “with no other ethnic children” around 50 years ago. Concurrently, his social skills and English proficiency, which can be acquired easily at a young age, along with the “welcoming” attitudes of locals from small and less diverse towns in Scotland, allowed him to immerse into the local society and culture.

As a child migrant, he demonstrated culture learning effectively but has compromised more Hong Konger traits than the others through significant culture shedding. The difference in acculturation outcomes between him and the others may stem from the age difference at time of relocation. While separation is expected to be a common strategy for post-2020 adult migrants, assimilation is a strategy

likely to be adopted by their offspring. Although Steven's experience may verify these migrant families' fear of their children rejecting their roots, the technology and strong Hong Kong communities present nowadays may generate a different ending, leading to a higher retention of the Hong Kong culture among these second-generation migrants.

## 4. Conclusion

Through comparison and analysis of the interviews, assimilation, integration, and separation are all possible acculturation strategies adopted by Hong Kong migrants. These strategies are considered based on various factors, with the age of relocation and politicization of identity being the two most prominent variables. However, it should be noted that acculturation strategies should not be viewed dichotomously. In this study, it was observed that all four interviewees employed the integration strategy, albeit with varying degrees of proximity to assimilation or separation due to different behavioral shifts. Furthermore, the heterogeneous interpretations of the Hong Konger identity also highlighted the highly individualistic and personal nature of the acculturation experience.

## Reflection

The process of conducting formal primary research is a new learning experience for me, as I was surprised by the immense preparation required prior to these interviews. As I applied for approval from the ethics committee, the emphasis on ethics in protecting the subjects in terms of privacy and consent challenged my pre-existing outlook on interviews, especially the way ethics in academic research differs from a journalistic approach.

The recruitment of interviewees was the major challenge for this project as I faced countless rejections due to reasons including busy schedules of public figures and the reluctance to be filmed due to compromised confidentiality. The lack of interviewees in the early stage undermined my determination to continue with the idea of a filmed documentary, but I persevered by adhering to the

primary intent of sharing these stories and ideas via this powerful medium. Although it would be ideal to include a wider variety of interviewees, especially from the post-2020 group, like teachers, entrepreneurs, ordinary families, and so on, I am immensely grateful for the four interviewees who have volunteered to participate in this project. Moreover, these rejections raised important reflections on the impact of Hong Kong's current socio-political environment on the post-2020 migrants. Despite physical relocation, they remained constrained by the social pressure emanating from Hong Kong, resulting in apprehension about expressing their opinions on what are considered 'sensitive issues' in public domains.

The editing process evoked reflections on potential improvements in my methodology for conducting filmed interviews to facilitate post-production. While I encouraged interviewees to elaborate on their views, I acknowledge the importance of rephrasing questions to elicit succinct responses suitable for the documentary. Although edits to their responses are essential for clarity, the originality of the documentary is lost. Furthermore, the visuals could be diversified by filming both the host and subject during the interviews whereas better audio control can effectively avoid distractions caused by extraneous environment sound and the overlapping of voices from both sides during the interaction.

These learnings have provided me with confidence in future research opportunities while the interview process has allowed me to gain invaluable insights into the Hong Kong diaspora.

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