

Colonial Hong Kong's Migrant Workers in its Newspapers

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Introduction

The history of Hong Kong is the history of its migrant workers. When the British first captured this island off the coast of southern China in 1841, a population of only some five thousand was recorded.¹ In just a decade as migration grew following the opening of its port and trade, that number had already risen to over 30,000—and by the start of the next century—tenfold of that.² Apart from the very small group of individuals that could trace their ancestry back to those few thousand souls, none of the seven million people who now reside in Hong Kong is native to this place. Instead, for two centuries, generation and generation of migrant workers from all over China and the world came—trekked, sailed, flew—here, and built Hong Kong from the barren rock it was to the global metropolis it is today.

Yet, discrimination against migrant workers has always persisted in Hong Kong's public discourse. Even in the infant years of colonial Hong Kong, European elites were already regularly expressing antagonism towards the migrant Chinese population with both racialised discourse and class prejudice. The birth of the local Chinese elite at the turn of the twentieth century complicated the matter, with classism further compounded with national politics and various social issues. After 1949, as Hong Kong became progressively disconnected with Mainland China and a local Hong Kong identity began to emerge in its population, localist xenophobia began to take shape, its appearance sharply increasing in the leading up to 1997, finally dominating the public discourse in the twenty-first century.

As demonstrated, the dynamic of intolerance was always shifting and multifaceted. It was also deeply intersectional, with race, ethnicity, class, nationality, political beliefs, gender and religion all playing a role in the construction and propagation of its rhetoric. Thus, this project

¹ *Historical and Statistical Abstract of the Colony of Hong Kong* (Noronha & Co., 1911), 1.

² *Ibid*, 2, 6.

asks: How was discriminatory rhetoric against migrant workers constructed? How does changes in Hong Kong's social, economical, and political landscape affect the representation of migrant workers in public discourse over time? How does the dissemination of othering create and perpetuate power for some while marginalising others? In this study, I attempted to answer these questions through colonial Hong Kong's newspapers throughout its history.

Methodology

Much of the methodology of this research centres around a comparative literary analysis on sampled newspapers in three different time periods across colonial Hong Kong history, including 1841 to 1860, 1946 to 1962, and 1978 to 1997. The focused periods were selected in consideration of the unique migratory trends, development of the press, and local power consolidation found in each of them.³

Newspaper was chosen to be the main medium of this research as this project's aim is to trace the genealogy of public opinion. Public opinion, especially in a city as multifaceted as Hong Kong, is bound to diverge from any official government views or institutional positions. Nor was it ever unison, as even at its most infant stage of development, various interest groups were already present within any ethnicity or social class of Hong Kong's population.⁴ To this end, newspapers proved to be an excellent way of surveying public discourse. To ensure a comprehensive view during the initial source selection, key issues that characterised the

³ For the development of Hong Kong's press, see Li Kwok Sing 李谷城, *A Comment on the Press of Hong Kong* 香港報業百年滄桑 (Ming Pao Publications, 2000).

⁴ Christopher Munn, "'Her Majesty's Chinese Subjects': Government and People in Early British Hong Kong," in *Anglo-China: Chinese People and British Rule in Hong Kong, 1841-1880* (Hong Kong University Press, 2009).

development of Hong Kong's press at each focused period were identified, and newspapers representative of opposing views were located.⁵

Newspapers from periods outside the three main focuses were also supplementarily consulted for context and the identification of long-term trends, namely 1860 to 1900, 1920 to 1941, and 1962 to 1978. Similarly, both English- and Chinese-language newspapers were included. In total, 12 newspapers were reviewed:

Name	Language	Years Active
<i>The Friend of China and Hongkong Gazette</i>	English	1842-1860
<i>The China Mail</i>	English	1845-1974
<i>Chinese Serial</i> 遐邇貫珍	Chinese (Classical)	1853-1856
<i>Hong Kong Daily Press</i>	English	1857-1941
<i>Chinese Mail</i> 香港華字日報	Chinese (Classical)	1872-1946
<i>Universal Circulating Herald</i> 循環日報	Chinese (Classical)	1874-1959
<i>South China Morning Post</i>	English	1903-Present
<i>Keng Sheung Daily News</i> 香港工商日報	Chinese	1925-1984
<i>Wah Kiu Yat Po</i> 華僑日報	Chinese	1925-1995
<i>Kung Sheung Evening News</i> 香港工商晚報	Chinese	1930-1984
<i>The Tien Kwong Morning News</i> 天光報	Chinese	1933-1941
<i>Ta Kung Pao</i> 大公報	Chinese	1938-Present

Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were employed in this study. The majority of newspaper issues studied were located using digital keyword searching, followed by

⁵ Examples of “key issues” include pro- or anti-government reforms in early English newspapers, and pro-Taipei or pro-Beijing in postwar Chinese newspapers. See Li, *Comment on Press*.

individual close reading of each applying historical and rhetorical analysis. A preliminary database of newspaper articles concerning migrant workers has been constructed following the collection of materials. Ultimately, priority was given to newspapers more prominent at each of the focused periods. This also implies that long-running newspapers were given varied levels of priority at different periods in proportion to their relative popularity and influence. For instance, the *Universal Circulating Herald* is sampled extensively for its content in the late nineteenth century as it was one of the two main Chinese newspapers at that period, but is given secondary priority in later periods as newer publications grew more prominent.

In total, approximately 2,500 newspaper issues between 1841 and 1997 were sampled and reviewed throughout the study. 146 articles in-specific were thereon selected and studied with historical rhetorical analysis. They are documented at the aforementioned preliminary database with relevant background information and excerpts. No use of Generative AI was involved in any stage of this study.

Scope and Limitation

Due to the timeframe of this study, the scope of this research is limited to that of Chinese immigration to Hong Kong, that is, ethnic-Chinese workers who emigrated to Hong Kong mostly, but not limited to, Mainland China. While this group has always been the most numerous among migrants in Hong Kong history, it is important to recognise that the migrant worker population of Hong Kong was never monolithic.

A key limitation of the research is that owing to the methodology's dependency on online databases, newspapers not archived digitally were excluded from the study, as well as certain issues of long-running newspapers yet to be digitalised. Currently, digitalised issues of Chinese-language newspapers in Hong Kong Public Libraries are only available up till

December 1991; only English-language publications were therefore studied between 1992 and 1997. Due to digital archival unavailability and various considerations, commercialised tabloids post-1989 such as *Apple Daily* were not examined.⁶

Note on “Migrant Worker” and sources

Before presenting my findings, a definition of the term “migrant worker” must first be outlined. The United Nations’ 1990 *International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families* defined a migrant worker as “a person who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a State of which he or she is not a national.”⁷ In its core the term is a culmination of two statuses: the “migrant” and the “worker.” This distinction however, should not be understood as the difference of one being a purely social and the other an economic issue. As my findings would demonstrate later, both “migrant” and “worker” have social, economic, and political indications in their own right.

I am outlining these definitions here as while discussion about migrant workers—the group that formed the majority of prewar Hong Kong’s population and a large portion of its postwar working force—is readily available in newspapers across the colonial era, the contemporary concept of “migrant worker,” as we understood today, was largely absent from public discourse in most of Hong Kong’s history. The term “migrant worker,” or *ji gung* in Cantonese,⁸ only started appearing in English press around the 1960s and 70s, while in Chinese

⁶ A definition of “new commercialised tabloids (‘完全市場化’報刊)”, epitomised by *Apple Daily* and *Next Magazine*, was given in Li, *Comment on Press*, 211.

⁷ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families* (United Nations, 1990). In the context of colonial Hong Kong, this definition requires some reinterpretation: “State” may refer to a territory under the administration of another government, while “nationality” could be understood as legal residency.

⁸ 移工. Note on romanisation: this research uses the Jyutping system to romanise certain Chinese terms in instances where a customary form of romanisation has yet to exist.

press up until 1997 the term was never in regular use.⁹ Instead, most articles sampled and studied were discussions of issues that can be described as chiefly belonging either to the sphere of the “migrant”—such as immigration and refugee waves, or to the sphere of the “worker”—such as working conditions and employment. Either way, in the context of Hong Kong a complete separation of these two issues is impossible—in most articles concerning “migrant,” one is bound to see a discussion of “labour” within it or vice-versa. Therefore, while on the surface many sources may appear to belong to two separate areas, when read together I believe a full picture on “migrant worker” could nevertheless be painted.

Research Finding

Ultimately, my research finds that:

1. The presence of xenophobic exclusivism from earlier residents towards Mainland Chinese newcomers—what I initially postulated to be the most historically-prominent issue of migrant worker discrimination—was uncommon in public discourse for most of Hong Kong’s history. Instead, this sentiment largely only entered mainstream public discourse by the 1980s. Rather than pure xenophobia, the historical rationale of discrimination against migrant workers was shifting and heterogeneous. It was also deeply intersectional: multiple components, such as differences in race, class, gender, and political belief, could be connected together to craft a rhetoric for othering.
2. Public discourse of migrant workers in newspapers—albeit positive or negative, as well as the absence of them—should be fundamentally understood as an expression of interest among various groups represented by the press, a process in which migrant workers were

⁹ It must be noted that even in contemporary English newspapers, the term “migrant worker” is customarily used to refer to Southeast Asian domestic helpers.

not a direct participant in. In the context of newspapers studied in this research, these interest groups were elite to migrant workers, representing a higher social class or political entity. In practice, this meant that the “presentation” of migrant workers in the press was never a “representation” shaped by migrant workers themselves. Rather than genuine concern for migrant workers, elite-led public discourse posited the group as a passive subject, merely manipulated to illustrate issues concerned by them or as a vocal point for political contention.

Three themes in correspondence to each of the focused periods will be drawn to illustrate these points below.

1841-1860: Migrant Workers as Dehumanised Colonial Resource

In their framing of migrant workers, the early press essentially dehumanised the group into mere factors within elite calculations of colonial interests in newspaper discourse. Throughout the nineteenth century, English newspapers generalised the Chinese population of Hong Kong, regardless of geographic origins, under an umbrella term “native.”¹⁰ On the contrary, European elites perceived themselves as the outside migrants, as a 1848 article from the *Friend of China and Hongkong Gazette* described, “the latter [Europeans] are n [sic] migratory population; in twenty years, of those now on the island not one may remain.”¹¹ Given this elite self-perceived outsiderhood, xenophobia against framed “newcomers” was uncommon in this period. Rather, the framing of migrant workers in public discourse was done through the lens of elite rule and extraction, under which the group was objectified as resources within colonial ventures. Hong Kong’s Chinese population was framed with both racialised and classist language as an inferior

¹⁰ For examples for “native,” see Untitled, *The Friend of China and Hongkong Gazette*, February 28th, 1846, 1112; Untitled, *The China Mail*, July 18th, 1878, 2.

¹¹ Untitled, *Friend of China*, February 23rd, 1848, 65.

one composed of “outcasts” or “criminals.” This rhetoric was especially recurrent in public discourse over two issues related to British commercial interests and the maintenance of colonial rule: 1) the prospect of establishing a British colony alternative to Hong Kong at Chusan¹² and 2) the colonial government’s system of registration and poll tax of Hong Kong’s Chinese population.

Hong Kong’s Chinese population was repeatedly defamed with both racist and classist rhetoric as colonial elites spoke in favour of Chusan. In a grievance against British military retreat from Chusan, Hong Kong’s Chinese were described as “the lowest of the people” and “the dregs of the Southern population.”¹³ This directly contrasted with the description of Chusan’s population: “The better class of the Chinese—the northern inhabitants.”¹⁴ Three years later, an article described Hong Kong’s population to “comprehends many desperate adventurers and criminals, the scum of the adjacent islands,” whereas Chusan was praised for its “disposition of the people who are sober and well-conducted.”¹⁵ Essentially, in their discussion regarding another place, Hong Kong’s migrant workers were repeatedly derogated by the press, diminished as passive “supporting evidence” within elite political discourse.

Similar discriminatory rhetorics were also located in public discourse over the government’s repeated attempts to install a system of registration and poll tax of Chinese throughout the early 1840s,¹⁶ which the *Friend of China* supported “so that the native population be purged of the scum.”¹⁷ As one 1844 article lamented, “The number of labourers is altogether disproportioned to the demands of the colony, or many of them prefer idleness to work, as they

¹² Contemporarily known in English as Zhoushan, a city in the province of Zhejiang.

¹³ Untitled, *Friend of China*, June 29th, 1844, 416-7.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 417.

¹⁵ “China,” *Friend of China*, May 12th, 1847, 152.

¹⁶ Jung-fang Tsai, “A Frontier Settlement: The Chinese Community Under Alien Rule, 1840s-1860s,” in *Hong Kong in Chinese History: Community and Social Unrest in the British Colony, 1842–1913* (Columbia University Press, 1993).

¹⁷ “Ordinance No.7 of 1846,” *Friend of China*, June 30th, 1847, 206.

are to be seen loitering about in all directions."¹⁸ This was followed by a call for the colonial government to "rigidly carry out the registration plan [...] and permit no Chinaman to remain upon the island who cannot give security for good behaviour."¹⁹ Chauvinism against migrant workers was framed within administrative debates regarding colonial control of local people.

Whereas negative framing of Chinese labour was used by the press to illustrate elite issues, in the instances where Hong Kong's migrant workers were described in a positive light, it was nevertheless highly patronised by press discourse. The vast number of labourers available in Hong Kong was commended by the press through the lens of colonial exploitation. A report in 1842 proclaimed that "the life blood of a Colony—labour, will never be scarce in this settlement," remarking in racial prejudice "We need hardly say that Chinese emigrants, make far more useful and intelligent settlers than Hill Coolies from India."²⁰ The press also suggested and encouraged the "supply" of Chinese migrant workers from Hong Kong to the British colonies in Australia, stating that "We shall soon be able to give a regular supply of labour from hence to our Australian colonies and at a very low rate," and that "we shall ere long be the medium of affording an abundant supply of artificers, agriculturalists, and fishermen to our Australian Colonies."²¹ Ultimately, European elites of early Hong Kong saw the city's migrant workers not as their neighbours, nor even as subjects, but as mere, dehumanised resources to be exploited for the benefit of themselves and the colonial empire.

¹⁸ Untitled, *Friend of China*, June 22nd, 1844, 408.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Untitled, *Friend of China*, August 4th, 1842, 78.

²¹ "Moreton Bay," *Friend of China*, April 28th, 1842, 22.

1946-1962: Migrant Workers as a Cold War Battleground

The early twentieth century saw a fundamental shift in Hong Kong's migratory patterns. As Mainland China experienced prolonged political instability and a series of military conflicts, migration to Hong Kong became dominated by refugees.²² Concurrent to this development was the politicisation of the issue of migrant workers in Hong Kong's press. As newspapers found themselves aligned to different factions within Chinese national politics and the global Cold War, press discourse posited migrant workers as a vocal point of geopolitical contention. This was especially dominant in the Chinese press, where discourse of migrant workers effectively became a political battlefield between newspapers aligned to the Taipei-based Nationalists and Beijing-based Communists.²³

Rightist newspapers used the refugee wave from Mainland China as a political weapon to attack the Beijing government. In an article in 1956, *Kung Sheung Daily News* attributed Hong Kong's refugee issue to "the first five years of Zhu-Mao bandits rule in Mainland China," which "already have oppressed countless Chinese people's lives and property, and the Mainland people scared of this oppression consequently escaped Mainland China."²⁴ Political rhetoric of this sort extended even beyond Chinese national politics but into Cold War debate on the global scale. In an article on a United Nations meeting on providing relief for Hong Kong's refugees, the representative of the Soviet Union was labelled as "sadistic" and "frenzied" for rejecting such a proposal.²⁵ Similarly, comments made by states who opposed economic assistance for Hong Kong's refugees were similarly described as "foolish," juxtaposed with the "humanitarianism"

²² Edvard Hambro, "Chinese Refugees in Hong Kong," *The Phylon Quarterly* 18, No 1 (1957): 69-81, <https://doi.org/10.2307/273076>.

²³ Respectively known at the time within Chinese-language discourse as "Rightists (右派)" and "Leftists (左派)."

²⁴ "慕尼黑國際社會大會中中國代表報告香港難民現況 ('Chinese representative reports Hong Kong refugee situation in Munich International Convention')," *The Kung Sheung Daily News*, August 8th, 1956, 2.

²⁵ "聯大討論助港難民 蘇代表喪心病狂竟反對救助 ('United Nations General Assembly discusses help for Hong Kong refugees, sadistic and frenzied Soviet representative dares to oppose assistance')," *Kung Sheung Daily*, November 9th, 1957, 2.

shown by the British and American governments for their willingness to provide help.²⁶ By attributing the refugee waves to the Communist regime, using international debates over the issue to attack other opposing nations while expressing solidarity with Western powers aligned with the Taipei government, discourse over migrant workers effectively became a means for Rightist newspapers to disseminate pro-Nationalist rhetoric.

The lives of refugees were similarly used to propagate anti-Communist messages among Rightist newspapers. In a 1957 issue, *Kung Sheung* dedicated an entire page to “exiles in Hong Kong,” featuring multiple articles and anecdotes about various Mainland refugees in the city.²⁷ With the operations of the pro-Taipei camp declining since the 1956 Riots,²⁸ the celebration of Nationalist refugees effectively served as a way to transmit and retain political legitimacy within Hong Kong’s Chinese population. In the report, refugees were described as “fighting for freedom and their lives” by coming to Hong Kong in order to escape being “stepped over” by the Communist regime, while pro-Nationalist refugees on Rennie’s Mill were highlighted and praised for their loyalty to the Taipei government, labelled by *Kung Sheung* as “righteous heroes.”²⁹

In response to the Rightist weaponisation of refugees, the Leftist press chose to discredit the notion of a refugee crisis existing in Hong Kong, simultaneously propagating anti-Nationalist messages within their discourse. In the aftermath of the major migration in response to the Communist takeover in 1949-50, *Ta Kung Pao* claimed that such migrants were simply misled,

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ “逃亡人士在香港 (‘Exiles in Hong Kong’),” *Kung Sheung Daily*, December 5th, 1957, 10.

²⁸ Priscilla Roberts, “Cold War Hong Kong: Juggling Opposing Forces and Identities,” in *Hong Kong in the Cold War*, ed Priscilla Roberts and John M Carroll (Hong Kong University Press, 2016), 41-42.

²⁹ “調景嶺營內盡義士 (‘Rennie’s Mill camp full of righteous heroes’),” *Kung Sheung Daily*, December 5th, 1957, 10. Rennie’s Mill, a traditional pro-Nationalist migrant settlement, is contemporarily known as Tiu Keng Leng; the terminology of “righteous heroes (‘義士’)” draws similarity to “anti-communist heroes (‘反共義士’),” a term used by the Taipei government to refer to Mainland defectors and captured prisoners of war throughout the Cold War. For the politics of Rennie’s Mill, see Roberts, “Cold War Hong Kong,” 39-40.

explaining “some were afraid of the arrival of war, some were blinded by the Chiangist bandits' deceitful propaganda, which blurred our countrymen's understanding of this revolution...”³⁰ And instead of reporting on the dominant Mainland refugee migration into Hong Kong, *Ta Kung Pao* regularly encouraged and featured stories of pro-Communist Hong Kong residents moving to Mainland China to work for state-owned factories throughout the early 1950s.³¹ As refugee migration gradually escalated in the 1950s, leftist newspapers began brazenly discrediting the status of refugees in defence of the Communist regime. In reports regarding pro-Nationalist refugees in Hong Kong, the word “refugee” was placed within quotation marks by *Ta Kung Pao*, denoting a refusal to recognise their statuses.³² Similarly, when reporting crimes committed by labourers, *Ta Kung Pao* frequently used the term “Free Labour,”³³ a satire on a political slogan used amongst Nationalist workers, to refer to the perpetrators, even in cases where the political allegiance of the perpetrator was not confirmed.

Ultimately, in the major Refugee Wave in May to June 1962, during which nearly 80,000 refugees escaped into Hong Kong in the course of a month as a result of the Great Chinese Famine,³⁴ when news of the refugee wave dominated the headlines of nearly all major Chinese and English newspapers in the city, not one single report regarding the crisis could be located in

³⁰ “內地蓬勃發展 香港日趨蕭條 回到內地的同胞越來越多了 (‘The Mainland is booming while Hong Kong continuously declines; more and more compatriots returns to the mainland’),” *Ta Kung Pao*, June 22nd, 1950, 4.

³¹ For examples, see “又一批香港工人回廣州參加建設 (‘Another group of Hong Kong workers return to Guangzhou to join production’),” *Ta Kung Pao*, August 20th, 1958, 3; “活躍在珠江之濱的香港工人 (‘Hong Kong workers active on the banks of the Pearl River’),” *Ta Kung Pao*, October 4th, 1958, 3.

³² For examples, see “東華附近住戶 痛感「難民」騷擾 (‘Residents near Tung Wah deeply troubled by harassment from “refugees”’),” *Ta Kung Pao*, October 8th, 1951, 4; “「難民」鬧香港 爭奪殘羹三人逞兇圍毆乞丐其二被捕 (‘“Refugees” troubles Hong Kong—three people assault beggar fighting over leftovers two arrested’),” *Ta Kung Pao*, June 13th, 1952, 4.

³³ 自由勞工. For examples of Leftist satirical use of the term, see “自由勞工開賭失風 七度被毆賭徒成擒 (‘Free Labour arrested seven times for gambling’),” *Ta Kung Pao*, August 31st, 1952, 4; “自由勞工打人被打 (‘Free Labour gets beaten for beating others’),” *Ta Kung Pao*, September 2nd, 1952, 4.

³⁴ Chen Bing'an 陳秉安, “六二’大逃港 (‘62 Major Hong Kong Refugee Wave’),” in *Da Tao Gang* 大逃港 (Hong Kong Open Page Publishing Co, 2016).

Ta Kung Pao.³⁵ In the postwar Chinese press, migrant workers were continuously framed as rhetorical devices within debates of ideological struggle and geopolitics. Whereby reports on migrant workers were abundant in this era, they were rarely acts of genuine concern but results of pure political calculation in which newspapers aligned to the two opposing Chinese governments and the global Cold War factions rallied their own camps and attacked the other.

1978-1997: Migrant Workers as Subjects of Xenophobia

Xenophobia from a self-identified local Hong Kong populace against Mainland Chinese migrants gradually grew in press discourse in the aftermath of Mainland China's "Opening Up" starting in 1978, during which economic migration replaced political refugee as the main source of migration to Hong Kong again.³⁶ In sharp contrast to earlier periods where the traditional Rightist press showed sympathy to Mainland migrants, a derogatory term *daai luk zai*,³⁷ or "Little Mainlander," began to enter regular use in these newspapers in the early 1980s.

Used in articles generally negative towards Mainland Chinese, namely in reports of crimes and concerns over their competition with local residents in employment, *daai luk zai* was essentially a stereotype used by local Hong Kong Chinese to patronise their Mainland counterparts. This phenomenon suggested a general departure of Hong Kong's press discourse from a broadly Chinese national outlook into a more localistic one, following the shift of perspective among local Hong Kong residents who increasingly began to view Mainland Chinese

³⁵ News of the refugee wave was reported on a daily basis across *Kung Sheung Daily News*, *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, and *South China Morning Post* throughout May to June 1962. In contrast, the word "refugee (難民)" was only located twice in *Ta Kung Pao* during the same period: one was on Pro-Nationalist emigrants to America which printed "refugee" within quotation marks in the aforementioned fashion (June 5th, 4), the other was a news on the Beijing government donating £3,000 to refugees in Algeria (June 14th, 1).

³⁶ Steve Tsang, *A Modern History of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 190-96. The term "New Immigrant" or "*san ji man* (新移民)" is customarily used to refer to these economic migrants.

³⁷ 大陸仔.

as a foreign outsider instead of fellow countrymen.³⁸ In practice, prejudice against Mainland migrants began to develop along the vein of a perceived semi-ethnonational difference, showing a clear breakage from earlier discriminatory discourse. This was evident in a 1983 report of an unresolved robbery, where the appearance of the perpetrator was highlighted to be in a “*daai luk zai*-like shape,”³⁹ suggesting the development of an arbitrary belief in a physical difference of Mainland Chinese from other Hong Kong residents.

Discourse of the *daai luk zai* also revealed a condescending view which placed Hong Kong above Mainland Chinese. In a 1980 report of a traffic accident involving a migrant worker commuting to work, the article was titled “Life in ‘Paradise’ isn’t easy! *Daai luk zai* injures forehead on first day of work.”⁴⁰ The framing of Hong Kong as a “Paradise” for “Little Mainlanders” denoted a superiority of the city, and in turn its “locals,” over newcomers who supposedly moved merely to enjoy it. Essentially, the framing of Mainland migrants who only came to “enjoy” the “Paradise” could be understood as a suggestive prejudice in which the group was invalidated as one who merely came to the city to exploit the wealth of Hong Kong without contributing to it. This was evident in an article reporting on the suicide of a teenage Mainland migrant, in which the death was attributed to the disappointment of their “dream” that they could “receive enjoyment in all aspects” and “not need to work hard at their job.”⁴¹ While the article sought to show sympathy to the migrant, ending with a condescending remark that “a Mainland teenager who dreamed to chase enjoyment, unexpectedly received an ending like this, makes one

³⁸ Tsang, “The Rise of the Hong Kongers,” in *A Modern History of Hong Kong*, 180-96.

³⁹ “大陸仔聲言「越境發財」用「人民幣」寫字行劫渣打銀行被掠五萬元 (‘*Daai Luk Zai* declares to “make money crossing border,” robbed Standard Chartered of \$50,000 using a note written on “Renminbi”),” *Kung Sheung Daily*, October 26th, 1983, 8. Renminbi, the currency of Mainland China was intentionally printed in quotation marks in Cold War Rightist newspapers to denote political illegitimacy.

⁴⁰ “天堂不易居！大陸仔第一日開工 碰上車禍傷了額頭 (‘Life in ‘Paradise’ isn’t easy! *Daai luk zai* injures forehead on first day of work’),” *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, August 26th, 1980, 19.

⁴¹ “來香港享福誓死不再捱 大陸仔跳樓亡 (‘Came to Hong Kong to enjoy and swore to not endure hardship again, *Daai Luk zai* leaps to death’),” *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, July 24th, 1980, 12.

sigh!,”⁴² it inadvertently reaffirmed stereotypes against migrant workers as ungrateful and lazy, ultimately revealing a general sentiment of xenophobia.

The sudden breakage of Rightist newspapers from viewing Mainland migrants as “righteous heroes” to “Little Mainlander” may be attributed to two factors: 1) the political anxiety in fear of the 1997 Handover, and 2) the co-optation of the local middle-class, who began developing a unique Hong Kong identity, into a participant of press discourse.

In the lead up to 1997, Mainland migration was speculated to be a political weapon used by the Beijing government to “infiltrate” Hong Kong. In a 1984 opinion piece in *Kung Sheung Evening News* titled “20,000 Mainlanders infiltrates Hong Kong,” the writer claimed that approximately 2,000 out of the 20,000 Mainland migrants who worked in white-collar jobs in the city were “CCP high-ranking cadres.”⁴³ Written in between the drafting and signing of the *Sino-British Joint Declaration*, it claimed that the infiltration of “great amount of Mainland cadres” into “all classes” may be a “source of disaster,” and that they may turn the Beijing-promised “Hong Kong people administering Hong Kong” into “Beijing people administering Hong Kong.”⁴⁴ Retaining their historical anti-Communist stance despite the shift to a more localist outlook, Rightist newspapers began to view Mainland migrant workers through political anxiety. In fact, *Kung Sheung* would cease operation later the same month owing to the final signing of the *Declaration*.⁴⁵

Discriminatory rhetoric against migrant workers from newspapers of this period showed a clear difference from earlier periods in their incorporation of the perspective of a local middle

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ “二萬大陸人滲透來港 (‘20,000 Mainlanders infiltrates Hong Kong’),” *Kung Sheung Evening News*, November 5th, 1984, 1.

⁴⁴ Ibid. “Hong Kong people administering Hong Kong (港人治港)” was a guarantee of Hong Kong’s autonomy made by Deng Xiaoping, leader of the People’s Republic of China, during the negotiation for the 1997 handover.

⁴⁵ Li, “半個世紀來香港報刊創辦概況評介 (Overview of Hong Kong printing press for the past half-century),” in *Comment on Press*.

class. On the same 1984 issue as the previous article, another opinion piece titled “New Immigrants cause burden” blamed Mainland migration for “destroying Hong Kong's original community infrastructure, housing, welfare services” and ultimately “exploiting Hongkongers' interests.”⁴⁶ Whereas earlier discriminatory rhetoric largely only spoke on behalf of the interests of political and social elites, xenophobic discourse began to stem from concerns among the local middle, and even working class at this period. A 1988 report on a sailors’ *go-slow* after employers threatened to use “*daai luk zai* to replace their work” asked readers to “imagine” and sympathise with the sailors’ working conditions and the dangers of their work, expressing support for local workers against the threat of migrant replacement.⁴⁷ From a larger perspective, this extension of rhetoric could be understood as an essential expansion of the press power structure, in which a local middle class began to find themselves co-opted into part of the participants of press discourse, which for most of history remained elite-exclusive. This could also explain the gradual escalation of xenophobia among the Chinese press throughout the 1990s, which ultimately dominated public discourse in the twenty-first century chiefly through tabloids such as *Apple Daily* which held a distinctive local middle-class identity.⁴⁸

Conclusion

With an ill-informed presumption in-mind, this research originally sought to trace instances of xenophobia from “locals” towards “newcomers” in Hong Kong throughout its colonial history to see how it had evolved into its contemporary form. What it found was instead an absence of such a sentiment throughout most of the city’s history.

⁴⁶ “新移民造成負擔 (‘New Immigrants causes burden’),” *Kung Sheung Evening*, November 5th, 1983, 5.

⁴⁷ “不滿僱主揚言以大陸勞工替代 帶水船水手今怠工 (‘Dissatisfied with employer’s threat of replacing with Mainland worker, sailors *go-slow* today’),” *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, December 10th, 1988, 4.

⁴⁸ Li, *Comment on Press*, 211.

Looking back at Hong Kong's history objectively, this result is rather logical—in a city fundamentally built by migrants, ruled by migrants, and for most of its history augmented by migrants—who constituted the “locals” and who constituted the “newcomers” was a question that needed to be redefined throughout different periods, and at times, was a question that simply did not matter. European elites of the 1840s recognised themselves as the outsider to the colony, naming all Chinese residents as “natives,” while Cold War newspapers candidly expressed their allegiance to Taipei or Beijing in their rhetoric, relegating local affairs to secondary importance. Yet, it was *Friend of China*, a British newspaper that began publication in Macau and ended in Shanghai, and *Ta Kung Pao*, a Tianjin-founded newspaper controlled by Beijing's state news agency, that determined the discourse of Hong Kong's migrant workers. Thus, the focus of this research shifted: What determines the discourse of migrant workers?

The early English press was a discourse platform practically exclusive only to the European elites. Yet with this monopoly of rhetorical power, they continued to concede their outsiderhood. In fact, the question of “local” and “newcomer” did not matter, as it did not stop English newspapers from dehumanising the “natives” into colonial resources, a term which virtually assumed a naturally derogatory meaning through their rhetoric. This shows that, as much as the contemporary Hong Kong press may like to believe, the meanings of “local” and “newcomer” carry no real weight or power in themselves.

The postwar Chinese press fought fiercely over the matter of “newcomer,” elevating it even into a vocal point of global geopolitics. Yet, discourse of this period also displayed an array of irony and contradictions: by relentlessly channeling their allegiance to Beijing, *Ta Kung Pao*, a Socialist newspaper founded to protect the interests of the working class, inadvertently situated itself on the opposite side of that, blatantly discrediting refugees and stigmatising workers out of

pure political factionalism; while *Kung Sheung*, a newspaper owned by one of the wealthiest families in Hong Kong and whose name literally implied its ties to capital and business,⁴⁹ found itself becoming a benefactor of migrant worker interests by propagating Nationalist rhetoric on behalf of a Capitalist dictatorship. This shows that, regardless of ideology or genuine concern, anything could be utilised and thereon manipulated in public discourse, suppose that it generates one political advantage over their adversaries.

The newspapers of the 1980s and 90s recorded some of the earliest instances of xenophobia from a “local” Hong Kong populace towards Mainland migrants. Yet, a deeper reading of any of these articles would inform one that even these discourses rarely stemmed from plain xenophobia: a *daai luk zai* did not become one simply because of their places of origin, but because they did something, or embodied an idea that proved worrisome to those that participated in press discourse, be that through crime, job competition, economic unproductiveness, or political infiltration. This shows that, contrary to the original underlying philosophy which informed this study’s incorrect presumption, discriminatory rhetoric hardly ever stems from pure discrimination. Instead, discriminatory rhetoric is born when those who take part in public discourse perceive a threat to their power, or find it imperative to further express them.

So, where do actual migrant workers fit within this picture? After all, that is the title of this research. Yet, after reviewing thousands of articles through two centuries, my most frank answer to this question is nowhere. From a dehumanised colonial resource, to a Cold War battleground, to a subject of Xenophobia, nowhere in colonial newspaper discourse did migrant workers ever leave their own voices for their own interests. Being one of the earliest places in

⁴⁹ The *Kung Sheung Daily News* and *Evening News* were both owned by the Hotung family and managed by General Robert Ho Shai Lai throughout most of the mid-twentieth century. “Kung Sheung (工商)” in Chinese literally means “trade” and “business.”

East Asia where Western journalism was introduced,⁵⁰ the participation of press discourse in Hong Kong has expanded greatly since the nineteenth century—first to the Chinese business elites, then to groups aligned to the various camps of national politics, and ultimately to the local middle class. Yet, migrant workers remained marginalised and othered throughout. Be that through discriminating, underrepresenting, and even through supporting the group, the press has persistently patronised migrant workers—their suffering, their contribution, their concerns—purely for elite power.

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⁵⁰ Ming Chen 陳鳴, *A History of the Press in Hong Kong (1841-1911)* 香港報業史稿 (Waa gwong bou jip jau haan gung si, 2005).