

Hong Kong Movers and Stayers

Narratives of Family Migration

Janet W. Salaff, Siu-lun Wong, and Arent Greve

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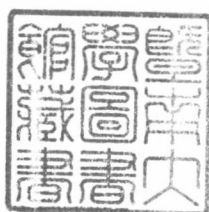
HONG KONG MOVERS AND STAYERS

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JANET W. SALAFF,
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PREFACE

This book evolved from the jostling of diverse interpretations of the international furor in Hong Kong in 1991 over the colony's pending reversion to the People's Republic of China (PRC). Migration is an integral part of our lives. But as the number of emigrants swelled in response to the great pressure of those events, it was hard for observers and participants to assess how migration was structured. By looking at the lives of nine Hong Kong families over time within a neo-institutional framework, this book shows how social structures at different levels underlie emigration and how these change over time.

In 1995, *Fortune Magazine* pundits pronounced "The Death of Hong Kong" (Kraar 1995). Between the inking of the agreement between Britain and China in 1984 to the actual reversion in 1997, many Hong Kong residents applied for foreign papers and an estimated 500,000 left. Then, several years before the handover itself, many returned. Wasn't the source of this popular movement obvious? Voting with their feet, people left Hong Kong due to political anxieties ascribed to the impending handover, and when fears receded, they returned.

But what everyone thought they knew was challenged when we began this study. "We didn't emigrate because of 1997," Uncle Chou (chapter 4) proclaimed, when we met in 1992. But Francis Kwong insisted (chapter 5) around the same time, "I want my son to live in a liberal land!" This book emerged as our answer to what motivates people to consider migration and what contributes to its realization.

Ten years after the handover there has been surprisingly little evaluation of the exceptionally large movements of people leading up to Hong Kong's reversion to China. In this book we evaluate the diverse migration stories of nine Hong Kong families whom we have known since the early 1990s,

some having left for Canada and others staying in Hong Kong. Over this significant period, these families responded in different ways to the immense sea change of the reversion of Hong Kong to China. Their migration experiences give us a window into their shared and distinct responses to institutional changes.

We learned that the social structures around them strongly influence whether families can or want to leave Hong Kong. We analyze their diverse responses using a multilevel neo-institutional framework that helps us understand the experiences of families remaining in Hong Kong, migrating, settling, or returning. At the broadest level, globalization and large-scale legal and economic forces underlay their moves, successes, and failures. At the intermediate level, social relationships spark motivation to emigrate. Finally, people develop interpretative schemas around these structures that prompt or discourage leaving.

Studying how the position of these families in relation to migration changes over a significant period of time brings into relief even more the key social structures in the migration process. We find that institutional structures affect those with the same kinds of resources in a relatively similar manner. But each family creatively interprets what moving or staying means to them. The materials in this book provide a rich source of understanding how families make, change, or avoid decisions to emigrate.

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Above all, we are grateful to the families in our project for sharing their lives with us. We thank them all, and accept responsibility for our erratic memory and interpretations.

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CHAPTER ONE

INSTITUTIONAL THEORY AND FAMILY MIGRATION

At midnight on June 30, 1997, the red flag was raised over Hong Kong as Britain's most profitable colony was returned to China, marking the end of 156 years of Colonial rule. Hong Kong, long renowned as a great trade and financial center, was a gateway linking the West to China. In search of business and jobs, Hong Kong's cosmopolitan populace had become the leading edge of the Chinese diaspora, which settled in the major cities of the world (Skeldon 2003; Wang 1989). Hong Kong's hardworking people, its traveling managers, trained professionals, family firms, and capital-generating financial institutions had spearheaded China's emergence into the market economy. The handover to China marked the political integration of this global city with the world's largest developing Communist nation, a nation long isolated by the Western world. The joining of two more contrasting places was hard for many to imagine. Yet for others, reunification was their chance to reclaim their Chinese roots.

During the extended period leading up to reversion, substantial numbers of Hong Kongers left—mostly business people and professionals. The exit of so many elite families at once had an immense impact on Hong Kong and resounded beyond its borders as well. In their choice of destinations, Hong Kongers followed a pattern, forming large ethnic settlements and changing the face of major Western cities (Li 1992; Li et al. 1998; Ray et al. 1997). Canada received over half of these newcomers, an estimated 314,792 people between 1984 and 1996 (see Table 1). The flow rose from 16,170 in 1987, peaking at 44,169 in 1995 (Chiang 2001, 126). But within several years, half of them returned to Hong Kong (Aydemir and Robinson 2006, 44). Despite this return migration, Hong Kongers did not yield their presence in the West, with many (mostly husbands) becoming transnational migrants. The local

term for them was astronauts, because they spent so much time flying between their Hong Kong jobs and families abroad.¹ The many transnational migrants challenged Western assumptions that citizenship meant not only the right of abode, but actual residence, and called for understanding their moves in structural as well as human terms (Castles 2003).

Perspectives on Migration

During our study period, perspectives on migration have become multivariied accounts, rooted in structures. However, when we began this study in 1991, most explanations of migration were monocausal and ethnocentric. Observers were sure that one single factor, political anxieties, a version of the push-pull model of migration, had created the flight from Hong Kong. The push-pull paradigm reflects modernization theory. This posits that pulled by money or values, after weighing their choices, people leave a poor economic or political situation toward a better life—usually in the West. Arrival in the receiving country is considered to be the end of the migration process. People settle, and their norms, behaviors, and attitudes become similar over time to those of the locals.

This simplistic account of migration is not only ethnocentric (the West is best), it is premised on the outdated view that the migrants rationally weigh alternatives. Moreover, the role of gender in migration is undertheorized. Typically, women are seen as “tied” migrants (Lee 1966). If husbands move for better economic opportunities, their family members, tied to them, follow. In emphasizing the receiving society’s perspectives at the expense of the migrants,’ writers expect immigrants, presumed to be uprooted from their culture, to assimilate to local ways of life. If they do not, they are accused of being traditional. Key features of immigrant life, from living with extended

Table 1. Hong Kong Immigrants in Major Receiving Countries

| | Population ^a 1991 | Population ^a 1996 | Population ^a 2001 | Inflows ^b 1991-2001 | Percent remaining |
|-----------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------|
| Australia | 58,995 | 68,430 | 67,124 | 56,817 | 61.6 |
| Canada | 163,400 | 249,175 | 240,045 | 207,670 | 66.5 |
| USA | | | 239,000 ^c | 82,363 ^d | |
| UK | | | 96,445 | 29,509 | |
| Total | | | | 376,359 | |

Source: Migration Information Source, database, various years.

^aPopulation born in Hong Kong

^bLast place of residence is Hong Kong

^c1990

^d1990–2000

family members to marriage choice to forming identities, are regarded as caused by cultural preferences, disregarding underlying structural variations (Wong 2008).

Reviewing the main migration theories in 1993, Massey et al. (1993) found that push-pull theory dominated four of them. Classical economists posited that international wage differences stimulate flows of labor from nations with low-paid labor; after assessing the costs and benefits of the move, people travel toward a net gain in income. Somewhat revising this perspective, neoclassical economists argue that families often make migration decisions for their members and are motivated by other factors than income. Finally, in dual labor market and world systems theories, structural inequalities and global markets induce moves. Despite different assumptions, people are still pushed and pulled by economic forces. A theory of migration should explain why some people migrate while others stay despite being in similar economic or social conditions. Most people do not migrate, but some areas have more migration than similar others. This is one of the most serious shortcomings of the push-pull theory.

Other explanations of population movements are still monocausal and ethnocentric, although they veer from rational, economic-based explanations. Drawing on modernization theory, some propose that large-scale forces of a postmodernist global society weaken traditional social structures, norms, and values. As people's imaginings about who they can become and where they can go are set free, migration takes off (Giddens 1990).

In contrast, recent conceptual frameworks have emphasized social-structural factors in shaping family life (McLoyd et al. 2000). Network theorists locate features of many network characteristics in immigrant life (Lubbers et al. 2007). Segmented assimilation theory explains youths' identification with their own or another ethnicity by the structure of group contacts (Zhou 1997). These perspectives introduce complex, historically rooted processes, in which migration is rooted in structures and cognitive meanings. Multiple research methods have furthered complex theorizing. An example is the Mexican migration project of Massey et al. (1987; Palloni, et al. 2001) that surveyed and interviewed respondents and obtained their personal and community migration network histories.

Finally, given the large numbers of Hong Kong migrants, there are idiosyncratic cultural explanations for the flood of leavers. These posit that Hong Kong has long been a city of migrants. Hong Kong people under Colonialism were supposedly migration prone, living in a "borrowed place, [on] borrowed time," their moves contributing to the Chinese diaspora (Baker 1993; Hughes 1958). However, even in a city renowned for its population

mobility, particular social structures shape migration. Hong Kong's reversion to China meant different things to different people, and these meanings were rooted in people's experiences and embedded in structures. People in diverse structural positions experience situations that prompt migration and encounter other circumstances that confound their plans. Their origins also continue to define their way of life, even in a cosmopolitan setting (Lin 2002). These are not simple pushes and pulls. Nor do they result from structural breakdown or lack of norms. Strongly relational, Hong Kongers contemplate migration with the family group in mind.

To uncover underlying continuities and distinguish people's migration projects as they relate to social structure, we apply neo-institutional concepts to the migration trajectories of Hong Kong families. We drew our families from a two-tiered study consisting of a 1991 random population survey ($n=1,552$) and a qualitative panel study of a subsample of families ($n=30$). From these thirty, we chose nine for inclusion in this book (see "Meeting Our Families" later in this chapter).

A word is in order here about our use of the term *emigrants*, which we define as people who officially applied to immigrate to one of the major receiving nations, whether or not they were accepted, or even left. Our definition of emigrants as applicants emphasizes intent and actions taken rather than the ultimate place of residence. Migration is not a single act of leaving one place and arriving at another where migrants stay permanently. It is a process, a continuum, and many people go back and forth (Levitt and Nyberg-Sørensen 2004). Our focus on behavior further distinguishes those who were motivated enough to develop migration projects from the rest, even if their applications failed. Indeed, the reasons for success or failure are central to our analysis. We compare people with four different migration statuses: (1) those who applied to immigrate to a Western country and who settled there; (2) those whose applications were successful but do not live abroad; (3) those who applied to immigrate but were rejected; and (4) those who never applied to immigrate. In this way, we can better understand structures that motivate migration and those that inhibit it, and we can learn how migration fits into people's lives.

We focus on families because family-related migration is the dominant mode of legal entry in many nations, not only in family reunification but also in the human capital categories (Bailey and Boyle 2004; Kofman 2004). Globally, people consider migration with the family group in mind, even when their moves appear to bend the family contours by straining these relations. The family is particularly important for the Chinese, especially

those in the diaspora. In spotlighting the family, we focus on the choices of each family, what they do, and how they feel about migration. At the same time, we take into account the family's structural position at several levels of social institutions, some promoting and others blocking migration (Shuval and Leshem 1998). Since institutions originate beyond household walls, members have various roles and interests inside and outside the family. The family (especially when taking into account the extended family) is not a unified entity; its members can be diverse in occupations and status, gender, and life-course positions. Although we discuss what happens in a family unit, we heed the varied voices of its members regarding migration and take into account their differing institutional positions.

The neo-institutional framework provides us with tools to understand action within the settings in which it occurs. Neo-institutional studies are often comparative, showing how structures matter in different ways to diverse populations. Creative applications include comparisons in Brinton (2001) of married Taiwanese and Japanese women, which reveal how disparate structures shape women's work. Alba and Nee (2003) study two periods of immigrant settlement in the United States, showing how similar structures integrate diverse peoples, while revealing the importance of historicity. Our neo-institutional study is comparative in a qualitative way, observing shifts in the migration plans and comparing how institutional structures shape the emergence and realization of these plans of families of different class backgrounds. In addition, the conclusion takes up the possibility of comparisons with migration processes in other global locations.

In the rest of this chapter we develop our institutional framework for understanding family migration and describe how we did our research. Readers may choose to go directly to chapter 2 for the historical background of Hong Kong institutions, or to chapter 3 for the first example of family life.

The Institutional Perspective: Scope and Mechanisms

The stories that follow describe how migration activities of families are embedded in institutional structures as guidelines for social behavior. Institutions give stability and meaning to social life, and persist over time, in formal and informal, public and private forms. Following Scott (2001), we group institutions into large-scale structures, often with regulative powers; social and professional relationships surrounded by norms and regulations; and individuals' personalization of taken-for-granted cultural-cognitive elements.² Through regulations, norms about relationships, and cognitive

schemes people make sense of their social reality. These institutional groupings are deeply stratified and families from diverse backgrounds face different opportunities and limits.

Large-Scale Institutions and Migration

Large-scale institutional structures underlie both who tries to emigrate and who succeeds. The large-scale factors that most affect those we study determine who is eligible to emigrate. These factors are international market relations, state border controls, the spread of the British empire, professional regulations imposed on immigrants' right to work, and political shifts in the relationship between the state and its citizens.

Global institutions integrate parts of the world through their social connections and international markets, giving rise to population movements between countries. As large corporations invest in Asia, their flow of capital, products, work sites, and transportation integrate the region with Europe and North America economically and socially (Goss and Lindquist 1995). As a British colony, Hong Kong was internationalized as a place where raw materials were exchanged for finished goods. Today, many of its firms have intercity connections within the global system (Taylor et al. 2002). Continuous contact between global nodes makes it easier for Hong Kong's people to live elsewhere, particularly for those in close contact with global structures (i.e., people with the most resources) (Chan 1997).

Nation-state institutions patrol their own borders and control who may enter. Although the role of the nation-state in restricting international migration has changed through time (Gabaccia et al. 2004), state regulative institutions are important in the Chinese diaspora (Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004). Historically, government sanctions in receiving countries discriminated against Chinese immigrant workers, thus determining the social and demographic composition of the Chinese diaspora (Harris and Ryan 1988). During their early industrialization, settler countries (including Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand) brought in unskilled male Asian laborers to build railroads and work mines, but excluded their families. Eventually legislation blocked Chinese migrants entirely until the Second World War. Even after rescinding the exclusionary legislation, the major settler states limited the entry of those of non-Northern European ethnicity.³

Laws continue to regulate who may immigrate, with mature industrial nations shifting their policies to balance their demographic composition, fill skilled positions, promote investment, meet humanitarian goals, and allow residents to reunite with their families. At the time of the handover, countries competed for the Hong Kong middle class—prized immigrant con-

tenders. Canada relaxed its immigration policies, becoming the most liberal Western settler nation.⁴ Private immigration consultants helped Hong Kong entrepreneurs set up businesses and recruited professional workers (Hardie 1994). The proportion entering through family migration, the main avenue for the poor, shrank as the Canadian government favored the economic classes (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2006, 2).⁵

Shared membership in the British empire eased Hong Kongers' access to Canada. English-language schooling, Commonwealth scholarships, and acceptance of some of their professional degrees privileged the better off. Canadian churches, schools, and clubs extended their spheres of influence to Hong Kong (Waters 2000). A former vice principal of a prestigious Toronto private school recalled marketing their boarding facilities to Hong Kong parents in the mid-1990s.⁶ The number of pre-1997 migrants swelled along with the number of institutions connecting Canada and Hong Kong (Massey 1990).

However upon arrival, immigrants face major settlement problems, starting with local regulations that restrict their incorporation (Collins 1979). Institutional theorists commend Canada's policies for generously funding multicultural institutions aimed at integrating immigrants into the political system (Bloemraad 2006). Nevertheless, although the settler nations pursue professionals from Hong Kong, Mainland China, India, and elsewhere, they do not monitor the immigrants' access to the economic sphere. Canada is slow to curtail the power of the professions to control the qualifications that doctors, engineers, and others need to practice (Bambrach 2006; Boyd 2000). The numerous expatriates surely influenced professionals and business people to migrate (Skeldon 1997, 269). But many qualified Hong Kong immigrants were unaware of discrepancies in the rules of local professions under the umbrella of the British empire that excluded them (Findlay and Li 1998). This was a dilemma for the business people and professionals in our study.

Transformations in the state's relationship to its citizens, crucial in our study period, forcefully trigger migration. When the prospect of large-scale structural change threatens a way of life, emigration is a common response for those with resources to lose. Hirschman (1970) proposed that citizens react to the deterioration in the state's performance by exiting if they can or protesting if they cannot. For example, during the German Democratic Republic's final months of 1989 as living conditions became progressively worse people with human capital left, signaling discontent to others who could not leave (Pfaff and Kim 2003). Mass protests along with the loss of talent accelerated the regime's decline. In Hong Kong, massive emigration,