

Asylum Seekers as Symbols of Hong Kong's Non-Chineseness

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ABSTRACT: This article discusses the situation of asylum seekers in Hong Kong and how it has changed in recent years. Hong Kong treats asylum seekers relatively well compared to some other societies, but at the same time, the chance of being accepted as a refugee is virtually zero. Although it is illegal for asylum seekers to work, it is virtually impossible for them not to work given the miniscule government support they receive. Amidst government neglect, asylum seekers have emerged as heroes among some Hong Kong young people after the Umbrella Movement. Whereas in years past, asylum seekers were generally ignored or looked down upon by Hongkongers, among some youth today, asylum seekers have emerged as symbols of Hong Kong's non-Chineseness.

KEYWORDS: asylum seekers, Hong Kong, Chinese influence, racism, Hong Kong's non-Chineseness.

Introduction

China has in many respects transformed Hong Kong over the past two decades, as the other articles in this special issue of *China Perspectives* attest; but China has apparently had little impact on the treatment of asylum seekers in Hong Kong. The most significant change in the treatment of asylum seekers occurred in 2014, when the Hong Kong government took over from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in evaluating claims of asylum seekers in Hong Kong. However, this change took place not because of the influence of China, but because of the necessity for Hong Kong to handle its asylum seeker cases rather than outsourcing them to the UNHCR: the "one country two systems" formula has meant that Hong Kong handles its own policy towards asylum seekers in the territory.

Nonetheless, if there has been little direct impact of Hong Kong's return to China on Hong Kong's treatment of asylum seekers, there has been a significant indirect impact. In this article, after a discussion of the situation of asylum seekers in the world and in Hong Kong, and an examination of how the Hong Kong government's treatment of asylum seekers has changed over the years, I examine how asylum seekers in Hong Kong have been embraced by some of Hong Kong's young as symbols and representatives of Hong Kong's non-Chineseness.

In the massive academic literature on asylum seekers globally, books (for example Marfleet 2006; Agier 2008; Khosravi 2011; Kingsley 2017) and articles in journals such as *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, and *Refugee Survey Quarterly*⁽¹⁾ portray asylum seekers in an overwhelmingly bleak way, depicting asylum seekers in their sufferings in their home countries, their perilous passages overseas, their maltreatment in various countries on their route, and their eventual slow and often painful integration into the society in which they finally settle. In particular, in the academic literature, asylum seekers are rarely depicted as having much agency in their host society—they may speak out about the harsh conditions under which asylum seekers live (as they do in Hong Kong: Vecchio and Beatson 2014), but they are not portrayed as having influence on the

society in which they have arrived, at least not until they have become refugees and then citizens.⁽²⁾

The lives of asylum seekers in Hong Kong too are generally portrayed as being bleak in academic writings (see Vecchio 2015 for the only book-length account in recent years on Hong Kong asylum seekers; see also Vecchio 2016; Mathews 2011: 78-83, 169-194; Mathews 2014; and for a legal perspective, Loper 2010, among other writings). These portrayals were published too long ago to have depicted how asylum seekers have recently become embraced by segments of the local population in Hong Kong. Up until recently, Hong Kong attitudes towards asylum seekers were overwhelmingly negative, and this remains the case at present for many Hongkongers, although the evidence from recent opinion surveys in Hong Kong is mixed.⁽³⁾ But as I discuss in this article, there is indeed today a welcoming attitude towards asylum seekers felt by some young Hongkongers,

1. An asylum seeker is one who has fled one's home country but has not been formally recognised—one whose "claim for refugee protection is yet to be definitively evaluated" (Vecchio 2015: 12). A refugee is one who has been formally recognised, enabling one to eventually attain citizenship in a host country. In the academic literature the term "refugee" is usually preferred over that of "asylum seeker" because the term passes no judgment as to the validity of asylum seekers' claims. I stick to the term "asylum seeker" because Hong Kong recognises almost no asylum seekers as refugees. To call the people described in this article "refugees" would ignore the crucial fact that almost none will ever be formally recognised as "refugees."
2. There are exceptions to this in the literature. See, for example, a recent article on North Korean resettled teenagers in South Korean secondary schools, who can provide their South Korean fellow students a window into life in the North while themselves becoming global citizens (Cho, Palmer, and Jung 2016). There is also a number of recent articles describing how asylum seekers protesting against inhumane treatment by the host government gain widespread support and sympathy in the host society, as in Belgium (Willner-Reid 2015). More commonly, however, recent academic literature describes how host societies around the world have become less welcoming towards asylum seekers (for example, Reilly 2016).
3. A 2016 survey by Dr. Isabella Ng of the Education University of Hong Kong showed that "Only 4.7% of Hongkongers View Refugees Positively but Almost Half Admit Ignorance Over Issue," *Hong Kong Free Press*, 30 August 2016, <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2016/08/30/only-4-7-of-hongkongers-view-refugees-positively-but-almost-half-admit-ignorance-over-issue-study/> (accessed on 28 May 2018). A 2018 survey, also conducted by Dr. Ng, showed that over half of respondents say that children of asylum seekers should have right of abode in Hong Kong, and over a third of respondents say that asylum seekers who have been in Hong Kong for five years or more should have the right to work. See Rachel Carvalho, "Racism is Alive and Well in Hong Kong, But There's Growing Sympathy for Refugee Children," *South China Morning Post*, 19 April 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/law-crime/article/2142397/racism-alive-and-well-hong-kong-theres-growing-sympathy> (accessed on 28 May 2018).

as linked to the alienation they feel towards China and the Hong Kong government in the wake of the Umbrella Movement. The conjunction of long-term asylum seekers seeking linkages with locals, and youth alienated from their government and the country they are told they should love, has created a resonance between young Hong Kong Chinese and asylum seekers that is unprecedented in Hong Kong and unusual in the world. This is a resonance between attitudes towards asylum seekers and concepts of societal identity: does Hong Kong, as part of China, exist for people of Chinese ethnicity and nationality, or can anyone in the world become a Hongkonger—except, perhaps, for mainland Chinese?

This article is based in large part on my interactions with asylum seekers over the past 12 years, during which I have taught a weekly class of “Current Events and Debates” in Chungking Mansions.⁽⁴⁾ This class has had some 60 asylum-seeker students over the years, mostly from African countries, but also from South Asia, the Middle East, Russia, and other countries, with some attaining refugee status overseas, some returning or being deported to their home countries, and some remaining in Hong Kong during all the years of the class. The class has also had numerous Hong Kong participants over the past several years, mostly university students but also teachers and professionals. For this article, I have interviewed 15 long-term asylum seekers in Hong Kong and 12 Hongkongers who have attended the class, from which the quotations in this article have been transcribed.

Asylum seekers in the world and in Hong Kong

Asylum seeking in its contemporary global form began with the 1951 Refugee Convention, arising from Western countries’ guilt over human rights abuses in Europe in World War II, and particularly the Jewish genocide at the hands of the Nazis. Frelick (2007) analyses how attitudes have shifted over the decades since then. From the late 1940s to the late 1980s, Western countries actively encouraged flows of asylum seekers, especially from communist countries. After the Cold War, asylum seekers were viewed less favourably; and after 11 September 2001, they have come to be viewed with fear, as potential terrorists. Societies in Western Europe such as Germany have been overwhelmed in recent years by asylum seekers, but societies such as Japan have few asylum seekers arriving at their borders, almost all of whom they reject. Hong Kong, with a liberal visa regime to encourage tourism, admits a larger proportion of asylum seekers in proportion to its population than societies such as Japan or China, but the number is still quite small, and almost none are accepted as refugees.

Hong Kong’s population is largely made up of those whose families fled China; the “touch-base” policy in the late 1970s, whereby escapees from mainland China who arrived in Hong Kong urban areas without being detained were given Hong Kong ID cards, is indicative of Hong Kong’s welcoming attitude in that era (see Law and Lee 2006). The dominant recent historical memory of asylum seekers in Hong Kong is that of the Vietnamese boat people detained in camps in Hong Kong in the 1980s and 1990s (McCalmon 1994; Chan 2003), creating much popular unease in Hong Kong (Lam 1990). South Asian and African asylum seekers began coming to Hong Kong in the wake of 9/11 and the tightening of visa restrictions in other developed countries. While the initial number of asylum seekers was a trickle, by 2010, there were some 6,000 in Hong Kong (Mathews 2011: 171),

with the number growing until the last several years: asylum seekers in Hong Kong have declined from 10,922 in 2015 to 8,956 in 2017,⁽⁵⁾ both because of an increasing number of deportations,⁽⁶⁾ and because it is widely known there is no hope in Hong Kong of gaining refugee status, with an acceptance rate of less than 1%. Although articles in the English-language press have remained generally sympathetic to asylum seekers in Hong Kong, some newspapers in the Hong Kong Chinese-language press have become critical.⁽⁷⁾ Most asylum seekers in Hong Kong are males between the ages of 22 and 40, although there is an increasing number of females due in part to former domestic helpers declaring themselves as asylum seekers.⁽⁸⁾ The majority of asylum seekers are from South Asia (Murgai 2013), with some 10% from sub-Saharan Africa, and an increasing number from Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries, as well as from the Arab world, the Middle East, and elsewhere.

Asylum seekers arrive in Hong Kong by airplane or come by boat illegally into Hong Kong from China, or declare themselves as asylum seekers after being in Hong Kong in some other status.⁽⁹⁾ Once in Hong Kong, they can apply with minimal initial screening to be asylum seekers. After months of waiting, they can obtain a government stipend of HK\$1,200 in food coupons and HK\$1,500 rental support, and transportation money: about HK\$3,000 in aid each month. This may seem like much money to people from the developing world, but it is not enough to survive on in Hong Kong—housing cannot easily be found for this amount. Asylum seekers are prohibited from working, subject to a two-year jail term if they are caught, although because of stringent Hong Kong rules of evidence, it is difficult to catch working asylum seekers. Because this stipend is insufficient, many asylum seekers work illegally, unless they receive ongoing charity payments or have lovers who support them.

4. See Gordon Mathews, “Arguing, Learning, Waiting,” Op-ed column, *The New York Times*, 27 June 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/28/opinion/asylum-seekers-wait-and-learn-in-hong-kong.html> (accessed on 2 June 2017).
5. Rachel Blundy, “The Agony of Hong Kong’s Asylum Seekers, Stuck in Limbo ‘Neither Alive nor Dead,’” *South China Morning Post*, 13 May 2017, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education-community/article/2094115/agonies-hong-kongs-asylum-seekers-stuck-limbo> (accessed on 6 January 2018). There are discrepancies in different Hong Kong mass media accounts on such basic facts as how many asylum seekers are in Hong Kong, discrepancies that relate to the Hong Kong government’s own figures, which can be subject to various interpretations. See Hong Kong Immigration Department, “Statistics on Non-refoulement Claims,” <https://www.immd.gov.hk/eng/facts/enforcement.html> (accessed on 30 May 2018). The numbers I quote here are accurate, from all I have been able to ascertain.
6. Christy Leung and Xinqi Su, “Unsuccessful Asylum Seekers, Illegal Immigrants in Hong Kong Sent Back on Chartered Flight to Vietnam,” *South China Morning Post*, 29 December 2017, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/community/article/2126150/unsuccessful-asylum-seekers-illegal-immigrants-hong-kong> (accessed on 2 June 2018); Ellie Ng, “Hong Kong Repatriated 5,932 Unsuccessful Refugee Claimants Last Year; China Top Country of Origin – Gov’t,” *Hong Kong Free Press*, 2 April 2017, <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2017/04/02/hong-kong-repatriated-5932-unsuccessful-refugee-claimants-last-year-china-top-country-origin-govt/> (accessed on 2 June 2018); Rachel Carvalho, “Charter Flight Plan for Pakistanis Denied Asylum,” *Sunday Morning Post*, 29 July 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/hong-kong-law-and-crime/article/2157265/hong-kong-and-islamabad-considering-chartered> (accessed on 30 July 2018).
7. “酷刑聲請開支逾6億：確立個案僅佔千分之4” (*Kuxing shengqing kaizhi yu liuyi; quli ge'an jinzhan qianfenzhisi*, Torture claimants cost HK government HK\$600,000,000 annually and only 0.4% are real), *Oriental Daily*, 28 March 2015, http://hk.on.cc/hk/bkn/cnt/news/20150328/bkn-20150328222614750-0328_00822_001.html (accessed on 22 December 2017).
8. Domestic helpers, usually women from the Philippines or Indonesia, do not have residence rights in Hong Kong; if their contracts are not extended or they cannot obtain a new contract, they must leave. Thus for some who seek to remain in Hong Kong, becoming an asylum seeker may seem a viable alternative. See in this context the discussion of Hong Kong asylum seeking in Constable (2014: 183-215).
9. Some of those who worked in Hong Kong on tourist permits and regularly returned home to renew their visas have realised that it is easier to remain in Hong Kong as asylum seekers. In one Indian asylum seeker’s words, “Why should I go back to India every 42 days to renew my visa when I can talk to my children every day here in Hong Kong?” (Interview in a Chungking Mansions hallway, 16 September 2017). The downside of being an asylum seeker is that he cannot return home; but with social media so easy and cheap to use, he feels that it is a price worth paying.

Asylum seekers are in a liminal status, subject to eventual denial of their claims; what asylum seekers most seek is refugee status. Hong Kong, as a non-signatory of the Refugee Convention—although it has signed the Convention Against Torture, an alternative path to legal recognition of refugee status—does not generally accept refugees, but has the UNHCR send them to another country such as, most typically, Canada or the United States: if one is accepted as a refugee, this is a step towards eventually becoming a citizen of the country one has been resettled in. Over the years, only a very small percentage of asylum seekers in Hong Kong have been granted refugee status, either through the UNHCR or, more recently, through the Hong Kong government itself, in its Unified Screening Mechanism, enabling them to be resettled in the United States or Canada. The UNHCR was widely reviled by asylum seekers during the time it made judgments on asylum seekers' claims (Mathews 2011: 191-2); only 5-10% of asylum seekers attained refugee status from the UNHCR, and there was only a minimal appeal mechanism. The Hong Kong Government's USM replaced the UNHCR in 2014,⁽¹⁰⁾ with an acceptance rate of asylum seekers as refugees falling to under 1% over the past three years, a vanishingly small success rate as compared to some European societies, which have accepted well over 50% of asylum seekers.⁽¹¹⁾

On the other hand, the USM's judgments are subject to appeals lodged in Hong Kong courts, as the UNHCR was not. Although asylum seekers may be detained when their appeals run out, they are not deported unless they sign a statement agreeing to deportation (which some sign without understanding its implications); long-term asylum seekers in Hong Kong have been told by lawyers that although they will almost certainly never attain refugee status, they may be able to continue the appeals process indefinitely and thus stay in Hong Kong. It has long been apparent to many asylum seekers in Hong Kong that the only way they can alleviate being in limbo is to get married to a local. But since asylum seekers have no legal jobs and no recognised position in society, this is easier said than done. As a Middle Easterner said, "Once a Hong Kong woman finds out I'm an asylum seeker and don't have a career, she wants nothing to do with me."⁽¹²⁾ Marriages of Hongkongers and asylum seekers are seen by the latter as likely to be unhappy (Vecchio 2015: 146), because of the power differential inherent in such marriages.

The treatment of asylum seekers in Hong Kong is better than that in some countries and worse than that in others. Australia has placed asylum seekers in mandatory indefinite offshore detention (Pickering and Weber 2014), leading to long-term consequences for their mental health (Coffey et al. 2010). In Hong Kong, asylum seekers are generally not imprisoned except for a brief period during their initial application if they have overstayed their visas; they can live in Hong Kong freely. However, unlike asylum seekers in some European societies (Migration Watch UK 2013), they are not allowed to work, although many do anyway. Above all, while the processing of asylum-seeker claims takes place within 12 or 18 months in most other societies, in Hong Kong some asylum seekers have been waiting ten or more years for their claims to be processed, a wait some find unbearable.⁽¹³⁾ Hong Kong asylum seekers have the right to go anywhere and associate with anybody in the territory without fear of being picked up by police simply for being asylum seekers, and also obtain a minimal stipend. But they may well be stuck in Hong Kong indefinitely, and their claims will almost certainly eventually be rejected.

The situation of asylum seekers has significantly changed in recent years, but so too has the situation of Hongkongers, as I will now explore.

How the situation of Hongkongers and asylum seekers has changed

There was, in the years before 1997, considerable trepidation about the handover of Hong Kong from Great Britain to China: "There is no point in concealing the fact that apprehension is the prevailing emotion," as was written in one local newspaper in a New Year's Day 1996 editorial (Mathews 1996: 399). In the initial years after the handover, there was a small degree of optimism in the air, in that the worst of predictions did not come to pass: Hong Kong did not change nearly as much as some feared. However, the first chief executive of Hong Kong, Tung Chee-hwa, proposed to pass Article 23, requiring Hongkongers to swear fealty to China, leading to massive street demonstrations in 2003 and 2004, each involving some 500,000 people (Mathews, Ma, and Lui 2008: 3, 56-7). There was a respite under the new government of Donald Tsang, but this too gave way (he was eventually imprisoned under charges of misconduct in office). C. Y. Leung, the next chief executive, was considerably more hard-line, and sought to instil patriotic education in Hong Kong, as well as acquiescing to China's insistence that Hong Kong not become democratic in the selection of its chief executive. These factors led to the Umbrella Movement of fall 2014, whereby as many as 100,000 people seeking democratic elections in Hong Kong occupied for 11 weeks the main road in front of Hong Kong's Legislative Council Building and several other main roads (see Veg 2016). As I wrote at the time:

Hong Kong students overwhelmingly see the mainland as a foreign dictatorship rather than a motherland, and see Hong Kong as being progressively swallowed up by its authoritarian mainland masters. This is totally different from what Hong Kong and Beijing pundits envisioned 20 years ago; they assumed young people would become more Chinese.⁽¹⁴⁾

A 2017 report by the Hong Kong Public Opinion Programme found that Hongkongers identify themselves more as "Hongkongers," "Asians," and "global citizens" than as "Chinese" or "citizens of PRC."⁽¹⁵⁾ Particularly striking is the fact that only 3.1% of respondents between 18 and 29 said they identified themselves primarily as Chinese, a number that is at a 20-year low.⁽¹⁶⁾ Despite the Chinese and Hong Kong governments' ongoing asser-

10. See Te-ping Chen, "Hong Kong Changing the Way It Handles Refugees," *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 July 2013, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324694904578601171702287356> (accessed on 21 December 2017).
11. Drew DeSilver, "Europe's Asylum Seekers: Who They Are, Where They're Going, and Their Chances of Staying," *Pew Research Centre*, 30 September 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/09/30/europes-asylum-seekers-who-they-are-where-theyre-going-and-their-chances-of-staying/> (accessed on 28 May 2018).
12. This interview took place at a restaurant in Chungking Mansions on 2 December 2017. Many although not all asylum seekers do not want to be identifiable in this article, because of concerns about their pending cases with the Hong Kong government. Thus I do not give names and or the exact country they are from, or in some cases disguise the country. Disguises are in use for Hongkongers as well. The only exception is when an informant is a public figure.
13. The process has been considerably speeded up for newer asylum seekers, with some claims decided within a year or less; but the backlog of cases remains.
14. Gordon Mathews, "Politicians and Police Have Done a Thorough Job of Alienating Our Youth," *South China Morning Post*, 3 December 2014, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1654663/politicians-and-police-have-done-thorough-job-alienating-our> (accessed on 24 December 2017).
15. "HKU POP Releases the Latest Survey on Hong Kong People's Ethnic Identity," Public Opinion Programme, The University of Hong Kong, 20 June 2017, <https://www.hkupop.hku.hk/english/release/release1474.html> (accessed on 27 December 2017).
16. Kris Cheng, "HKU poll: Only 3.1% of Young Hongkongers Identify as Chinese, Marking 20 Year Low," *Hong Kong Free Press*, 21 June 2017, <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2017/06/21/hku-poll-3-1-young-hongkongers-identify-chinese-marking-20-year-low/> (accessed on 27 December 2017).

tions of Hong Kong's Chineseness—its emphasis that Hong Kong has been an inseparable part of China since ancient times⁽¹⁷⁾—there are very large numbers of young Hong Kong Chinese who simply do not believe this.

Over these years, there have been significant changes in how asylum seekers are treated in Hong Kong. In the early 2000s, when asylum seekers first began coming to Hong Kong, the Hong Kong government seemed to have had no idea how to deal with them. In 2006-2007, the government arrested asylum seekers on sight. Once this policy was ended, the situation of asylum seekers remained tenuous. Over the years, however, various NGOs were established to help asylum seekers; lawyers, funded by the government, emerged to aid asylum seekers; and the various steps in the process of asylum seeking became regularised. An asylum seeker from Russia elaborated on these changes:

I first came here in 2006. In those times, it was much harder to get assistance. There were some NGOs, but not many, like today. The process now is easier; you can understand it, because NGOs and the Hong Kong government too will explain it to you. Before, you put in an application to the UNHCR, but they did not tell you what the process was; and if you got rejected, it was done. Now if you're rejected, you can appeal. In Hong Kong the treatment of asylum seekers has become standardised—not just NGOs but immigration itself supplies information on its website. Yes, the situation for asylum seekers has become better. But this doesn't mean that it's good. You're still stuck here forever!⁽¹⁸⁾

It is because of appeals that asylum seekers like these men remain in Hong Kong indefinitely, albeit in a limbo of an uncertain future, penurious aid, and irregular employment. A Central African discussed how he has wasted the best years of his life:

I came here in 2006 as an asylum seeker. In the beginning, there was no such thing as food or rent assistance—from that perspective, some people could say, yes, it's changed. But if you are talking about how immigration handles cases, things have not changed much. Some people have been here 14, 15, 16 years and they are still not accepted. I think the Hong Kong government's purpose is to discourage people from coming. If someone comes here at age 20, you're now 35—you've wasted the best years of your life. If only they could process the case faster, very soon I would have known my fate, and I would have looked for other options in my life. But they have kept me for so long!⁽¹⁹⁾

One reason for the endless delays in the processing of asylum-seeker cases is bureaucratic slowness, at least for those asylum seekers in the backlog of cases; but perhaps the biggest reason is Hong Kong law, allowing court appeals that stretch on endlessly. This, in a Hong Kong that in other respects may be moving away from the strict rule of law, may seem to be a very good thing.⁽²⁰⁾ However, since almost everyone will be rejected in the end, these appeals are all but hopeless, unless their underlying aim is simply to buy time. They in effect aid those asylum seekers who come to Hong Kong for economic reasons, but hurt those who come to Hong Kong in fear for their lives. Those who come to Hong Kong to work illegally can probably work for many years before eventually returning home or being deported; I know Indian asylum seekers who have financed their siblings' weddings,

rebuilt the family home, supported aging parents, and financed their own future businesses, all through their Hong Kong earnings as asylum seekers. On the other hand, those asylum seekers who are fleeing persecution in their home countries are often afraid to work illegally, for fear of being deported, and can only stew for years on end.⁽²¹⁾ It seems possible that Hong Kong authorities are using this situation to enable a flexible irregular labour force; but in any case, it seems clear that working asylum seekers significantly benefit the local Hong Kong economy (Vecchio 2016).

Beyond this, some asylum seekers in Hong Kong have taken on a socially and symbolically important role for some of Hong Kong's young, as I now explore.

Changing Hong Kong attitudes towards asylum seekers

The long-time asylum seekers in Hong Kong I interviewed maintain that attitudes of young people in Hong Kong have significantly changed in recent years. A West African said:

I got here in 2005. Things have changed very huge. We've been going to schools, talking about racial issues, and that's one reason why Hong Kong has become a friendlier place for asylum seekers. It was much worse before—it was difficult to make friends with Chinese. Nobody wanted to sit with you on the MTR [metro]. We put on a program called "African my neighbour," trying to educate local people. Students used to ask, "Why do you people come here?" in an unfriendly way. Now, over the past few years, they really want to talk with you! Lots of students come to Chungking Mansions now—I help them by answering their questions. I answer one and then ten will come to listen, including their teacher!⁽²²⁾

A Central African asylum seeker discussed this in terms of basketball:

17. Kris Cheng, "Hong Kong a Part of China 'Since Ancient Times': CY Cites Basic Law Amid Independence Debate," *Hong Kong Free Press*, 15 March 2016, <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2016/03/15/hong-kong-a-part-of-china-since-ancient-times-cy-cites-basic-law-amid-independence-debate/> (accessed on 12 December 2017); Yi-Zheng Lian, "Is Hong Kong Really Part of China?," *The New York Times*, 1 January 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/01/opinion/hong-kong-china.html> (accessed on 29 May 2018).
18. Interview in a Chungking Mansions restaurant, 3 February 2018.
19. Interview in a Chungking Mansions restaurant, 10 February 2018.
20. The ongoing fear of many in Hong Kong is that the rule of law will be eroded by the influence of mainland China. In China, the legal is subordinated to the political; some see this happening in Hong Kong as well, as in, for example, the repeated prosecutions of Joshua Wong and his compatriots for their actions in the Umbrella Movement, and in the political screening of electoral candidates. See Ernest Kao and Tony Cheung, "Bar Association Slams 'Political Vetting' in Polls," *South China Morning Post*, 15 February 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/2133321/inaccurate-assume-landmark-ruling-means-agnes-chow-will-win> (accessed on 30 May 2018).
21. There is controversy over what "genuine" and "bogus" asylum seekers refer to. A newspaper editorial ("Loopholes Mean Genuine Asylum Seekers Suffer," *South China Morning Post*, 28 November 2010) criticised the Hong Kong government for dragging its feet in creating a comprehensive policy towards asylum seekers, saying that "either claimants are genuine and their lives are at risk, or they are merely economic migrants whose claims should be quickly disposed of." However, as Marfleet notes, "Increasingly, both pure refugees and purely economic migrants are ideal constructs rarely found in real life" (2006: 310). This applies to the Hong Kong asylum seekers I know, most of whom have both economic and political reasons for fleeing their home countries, although in their official accounts, they are forced to speak of the latter and keep silent about the former. I know several asylum seekers who tell me that they are fleeing death threats, for example from creditors (see Mathews 2011: 174); but while these may be legitimate threats to their lives, these do not enable them to become refugees, since they do not involve torture or ethnic, political, or religious persecution.
22. Interview in a Chungking Mansions restaurant, 27 January 2018.

It used to be, a few years ago, when I stepped onto a basketball court in Hong Kong, all the Chinese people would leave. Now they all want to play basketball with me, and even invite me to dinner.⁽²³⁾

The asylum seekers I interviewed spoke profusely about racism in Hong Kong, with most saying that they encountered it frequently. A Middle Easterner said:

Young Hongkongers, the new generation, see asylum seekers as a very positive thing. But many older Hongkongers don't think like this. You go to the market: the people there, they don't like people who look like us.⁽²⁴⁾

An East African told me:

No one knows that you're an asylum seeker, because they can't see your papers; you're simply a foreigner to them. But foreigners are in different categories; if you're a white foreigner, you're privileged; but if you're African, like me, they may treat you badly.⁽²⁵⁾

He related a story of how an old Chinese woman, seeing him a few days before our interview, shouted at him and then stuffed a tissue down her pants, wiped it on her rear end, crumpled it up and threw it at him. He said, "I was laughing: she was so creative in her abuse!"⁽²⁶⁾

There is indeed continuing racism in Hong Kong (Sautman 2004; Law and Lee 2012; Crabtree and Wong 2013), with white people often treated better than South Asians in everyday interactions, with Filipinas and Indonesians, the dominant nationalities of Hong Kong's domestic helpers, often looked down upon, and with mainland Chinese suffering abuse in their interactions with Hong Kong Chinese (this last tension may not be racism in the strict sense of the term, but is the most marked cross-cultural conflict in Hong Kong today). The World Values Survey in 2013 found that 27% of Hongkongers would not want to have a neighbour of a different race, leading to consternation among commentators.⁽²⁷⁾ Hong Kong racism is often decried in mass media, but racism remains, in government policy towards South Asians,⁽²⁸⁾ in educational practices towards South Asians and mainlanders (Chee 2012), and in multitudes of everyday encounters in Hong Kong. The question of racism in Hong Kong is complicated: to what extent is it a matter of the colour of one's skin and to what extent the colour of one's passport? It is clearly a mixture of both: an African or a South Asian with an American or British passport may find that nationality, as well as linguistic facility in English, transcends ethnicity in the way that they are regarded. Nonetheless, most of the African and South Asian asylum seekers I know say that racism is something they often encounter, something that I, as a white person, may not recognise, they insisted.

Virtually all the asylum seekers I interviewed perceived a generational divide in Hongkongers' attitudes, with younger people more accepting of different ethnicities than their elders. There is no comprehensive survey data demonstrating these changing attitudes, but at least among university students, the difference between a decade ago and today is clear. In the classes I teach at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, developing-world students who earlier would have been quietly disdained by some Hong Kong students are now often sought out by Hong Kong students, who want to understand their societies and lives. In my Saturday Chungking Mansions class of asylum seekers, so many young Hongkongers want to attend that often they now

outnumber the asylum seekers. I have to vet all potential Hong Kong attendees, not because asylum seekers worry that they are government spies, as they sometimes did in the past, but simply because so many young Hongkongers want to attend and space is limited.

In interviews, I asked the young Hongkongers who attend the asylum seekers' class why they come. The simplest answer, from a university student, is that "I come to this class because I want to talk to people with different experiences than me."⁽²⁹⁾ Another university student alluded to a different motivation when she said, after prompting:

If I had an asylum seeker boyfriend, my friends would think it's very cool. Yes, my friends would think it's much cooler to have an African boyfriend than, say, a Japanese boyfriend! My parents might oppose it if I tried to marry him, though (...). No, no, I definitely would not want a mainland Chinese boyfriend!⁽³⁰⁾

One might criticise this attitude in its implication that an African boyfriend may be the latest cool accoutrement for a Hong Kong girl before she moves on to more serious decisions in her life. Nonetheless, as compared to a decade ago, it is remarkable. Ten years ago, few Hong Kong university students would have dared even venture into Chungking Mansions, seen as Hong Kong's home of racial otherness (Mathews 2011: 15); now, at least some come perhaps seeking lovers. These prospective lovers are not from the developed world—not from Japan, or Korea, or Europe, or the US—but from the developing world, as a target not of disdain, as in the past, but of fascination. These prospective lovers are also distinctly not mainland Chinese—an African boyfriend is unimaginably better than a mainland Chinese boyfriend, a remarkable statement in a Hong Kong that has "returned to the motherland."

Other young Hongkongers spoke of political reasons for coming to the class: a young activist said, "I've heard that the government is treating asylum seekers badly, and I wanted to come and see for myself by getting to know them and finding out about their lives."⁽³¹⁾

The most pointed political response was from a social worker, who said:

Because of the Chinese government and what it's doing in Hong Kong, asylum seeking may be my own future, so I'd better understand

23. Interview in a Chungking Mansions restaurant, 10 February 2018.

24. Interview in a Chungking Mansions restaurant, 3 February 2018.

25. Interview in a Chungking Mansions restaurant, 10 February 2018.

26. Comment made in asylum-seeker class, Chungking Mansions Service Centre, Christian Action, 10 February 2018. He, like most asylum seekers, knows only a few words of Cantonese, relying on English for his daily interactions. Thus the verbal abuse that this woman directed at him he could not comprehend.

27. York Chow, "Racist Hong Kong is Still a Fact," *South China Morning Post*, 25 May 2013, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1245226/racist-hong-kong-still-fact> (accessed on 27 May 2018).

28. Luisa Tam, "Where Do You Stand in Racist Hong Kong? Here's Something to Chew Over," *South China Morning Post*, 15 January 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/community/article/2128326/where-do-you-stand-racist-hong-kong-heres-something-chew> (accessed on 27 May 2018); Yonden Lhatoo, "Hong Kong's Ethnic Minority Woes Just Keep Getting Worse," *South China Morning Post*, 11 February 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/2132845/hong-kongs-ethnic-minority-woes-just-keep-getting-worse> (accessed on 27 May 2018).

29. Interview in Chungking Mansions restaurant, 20 January 2018.

30. Interview in Chungking Mansions restaurant, 10 February 2018, continued on 17 February in follow-up comments.

31. Comment made in asylum-seeker class, Chungking Mansions Service Centre, Christian Action, 3 February 2018.

it. Most of my friends are active in social movements; many of us think this way. Some human rights lawyers in Hong Kong I've spoken with worry that they too may become asylum seekers soon, or else they will be imprisoned like human rights lawyers on the mainland.⁽³²⁾

This is an extraordinary statement, indicating that the class's asylum seekers are seen not as exotic others, but rather as teachers of one's own potential future in a Hong Kong increasingly swallowed up by China's authoritarian regime.

When I asked this woman to elaborate on her feelings towards China, she said:

I'm not anti-Chinese, it's just the Chinese government and the Communist Party that I hate. I have many mainland friends.

However, many young Hongkongers explicitly disdain the multitudes of mainlanders they encounter in Hong Kong. The lack of racism among young Hongkongers described by asylum seekers is often not an absence of disdain towards others of any kind, but rather an absence of disdain towards those others who are not mainland Chinese. It is often the same young people who so vociferously oppose China and the Hong Kong government and have been active in movements like the Umbrella Movement who are also most sympathetic to asylum seekers. When I asked the young Hongkongers I interviewed if they felt that Hong Kong should be Chinese or international in its identity, their answer was unanimous; in one student's words:

Of course it should be international. If Hong Kong is only Chinese, it's dead.

Can asylum seekers be Hongkongers, I asked? They can, I was told, because they live in Hong Kong. "Anyone who lives in Hong Kong, regardless of ethnicity, can be a Hongkonger," one young activist said. "Asylum seekers are not foreigners!" he insisted.⁽³³⁾

Asylum seekers have come to be in demand in speaking to young people in Hong Kong, and this represents a significant shift from the recent past. Several asylum seekers tell me that they now go to secondary schools and universities in Hong Kong 10 to 15 times a year to give presentations on the situation of asylum seekers, and to talk about the society and culture that they are from: in one asylum seeker's words, "It's my job to introduce Africa to these young people."⁽³⁴⁾ It is ironic that these asylum seekers are educating Hong Kong students about the societies that they themselves have fled, an irony that the asylum seekers I know do not discuss. In any case, asylum seekers in Hong Kong such as those I teach are beneficiaries of this newly welcoming attitude among Hong Kong's young and liberal, and also creators of this attitude through their desire to educate Hong Kong people about their home societies. Asylum seekers sometimes express scepticism as to how many people in the audiences who hear their talks "are actually listening," and also express concern that "only liberal schools in Hong Kong" invite them to talk. This is quite true—it is indeed the more liberal, and less pro-establishment secondary schools in Hong Kong that tend to welcome asylum seekers. But the fact that this is happening at all is significant: some of Hong Kong is indeed welcoming asylum seekers.

Asylum seekers in Hong Kong may assert themselves in making their situation known, as their presence in mass media in Hong Kong and the world

attests: see, for a partial listing of Hong Kong asylum seekers in local and global media, the musicians Talents Displaced, the former asylum seeker and now university student Innocent Mutanga, and the novelist John Outsider.⁽³⁵⁾ Lam discusses "asylum seekers in Hong Kong who are trying to make the best out of a bad situation" through their activities helping asylum seekers and Hongkongers.⁽³⁶⁾ There is also the African Community Hong Kong.⁽³⁷⁾ As an asylum-seeker officer in the Community told me:

We have held workshops with the Equal Opportunities Commission. Sometimes police also come to us, from their headquarters, to ask for advice.⁽³⁸⁾

The above listing is partial, in that some asylum seekers do not want their asylum-seeker status to be known in their media presence; but it is nonetheless remarkable.

Conclusion

There has apparently indeed been a change in Hong Kong attitudes of the young and liberal towards asylum seekers in the city. My sample is small, primarily consisting of my own Chungking Mansions class and the people who have attended it. However, judging from the consistent reports I receive as to their daily encounters in Hong Kong, this shift in attitude does seem real.

Why is this happening? As discussed above, this seems related to young Hongkongers' attitudes towards the mainland. Lowe and Tsang discuss the young activists in the Umbrella Movement—"Many who have never even visited China already express a Sinophobic disdain and dislike towards the Mainland" (2018)—and discuss in a different article how "Hong Kongers' sense of collective identity is shored-up as they reject the People's Republic of China's favoured concept of pan-Chinese ethnicity by constructing Mainlanders as the inverse of themselves" (2017: 137). This parallels the attitudes of the young Hongkongers who come to my asylum seekers' class. To at least some extent, the racial animus that might a decade or two ago have been directed towards South Asians or Africans has become directed at mainland Chinese; mainland China has replaced South Asia and Africa as the major target of discrimination.

32. Comment made in asylum-seeker class, Chungking Mansions Service Centre, Christian Action, 3 February 2018.
33. Comment made in asylum-seeker class, Chungking Mansions Service Centre, Christian Action, 10 February 2018.
34. Interview in a Chungking Mansions restaurant, 27 January 2018.
35. Hillary Leung, "Artists First, Asylum Seekers Second: Talents Displaced Share Love of Music with Local Community," *Hong Kong Free Press*, 24 September 2017, <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2017/09/24/artists-first-asylum-seekers-second-talents-displaced-share-love-music-local-community/> (accessed on 21 January 2018); Jessie Yang, "Beyond the Lens of Innocence: The Lives of Refugees in Hong Kong," *TheNewsLens*, 22 August 2016, <https://international.thenewslens.com/article/47237> (accessed on 21 January 2018); Innocent Mutanga, "Context Matters: The Racist Laundry Ad was Ignorant, but so were the Reactions," *Hong Kong Free Press*, 9 June 2016, <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2016/06/09/context-matters-the-racist-laundry-ad-was-ignorant-but-so-were-the-reactions/> (accessed on 21 January 2018); Mangal Media, "Decentering Colonial Narratives About Zimbabwe," *Mangal Media*, 27 November 2017, <http://www.mangalmedia.net/english/decentreing-colonial-narratives-about-zimbabwe> (accessed on 21 January 2018); Jessie Yang, "John Outsider: 一位揭露強韌生命力的香港難民作家" (John Outsider: Yiwei jielu qiangren shengmingli de xianggang nanmin zuojia, John Outsider: Hong Kong refugee writer who reveals his strong resilience in life), *The Wandering Voice*, 12 October 2017, <https://www.thewanderingvoice.com/single-post/2017/10/12/John-Outsider-> (accessed on 21 January 2018).
36. Jeffie Lam, *South China Morning Post*, 27 December 2017. <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/community/article/2125679/asylum-seekers-hong-kong-who-are-trying-make-best-out-bad> (accessed on 23 January 2018).
37. African Community Hong Kong, <http://africancommunity.hk/> (accessed on 23 January 2018).
38. Interview in a Chungking Mansions hallway, 27 January 2018.

It is remarkable that a number of the young Hongkongers I know identify more with African asylum seekers as their friends than with mainland Chinese. Politically speaking, it seems clear that some of Hong Kong's young, tired of the government's increasingly enforced Chineseness, are seeking Hong Kong's non-Chineseness, and find that in asylum seekers.

Why asylum seekers? For the political activist quoted last section, the answer is clear. Since she herself might become an asylum seeker in a future of increasing Chinese repression in Hong Kong, she feels that she has much to learn from asylum seekers in Hong Kong: their past and present struggles may be her future struggles. For less politically active Hongkongers, however, we may ask, why should asylum seekers be symbols of Hong Kong's non-Chineseness? Why not, for example, British? While there is undoubtedly a degree of nostalgia for the past among some young Hongkongers, who sometimes say in my university classes, "Hong Kong was better under the British," the fact remains that white Europeans and Americans are often seen as representing a privileged expatriate population from a world of fading colonialism and fading American influence; and Japanese and Korean men may be seen by young Hong Kong women as particularly embodying male chauvinism, I have been told. There is indeed increasing interest in South Asians; but because they have their own established separate social worlds in Hong Kong (Murgai 2013), it falls to asylum seekers to play the role of representatives of non-Chineseness.

Those asylum seekers who assume more public roles in Hong Kong are typically educated and articulate, fitting few of the naive stereotypes (other than in their lack of money) that may be held concerning "people from the developing world." They may seem like kindred spirits to young educated

Hongkongers, much more than mainland students, some of whom in their patriotic attitudes towards their motherland represent complete foreignness. Some of these Hongkongers, as I have discussed, may readily extend the designation of Hongkonger to African, Middle Eastern, and South Asian asylum seekers, but would be reluctant to extend this designation to the mainland students in their midst. Their attitude is basically that "Africans, Middle Easterners and South Asians can be Hongkongers, but mainland Chinese can't." This is particularly striking in that China, to a large extent, maintains an ethnic basis of cultural identity: China is for Han Chinese (Wu 1991: 150-1). These young Hongkongers are reversing that ethnic equation, to say, in effect, that "Hong Kong is for everyone but mainland Chinese."

This attitude would have been difficult to imagine in Hong Kong 20 years ago, assumed to become more and more Chinese in identity, and less and less international in orientation. This would have been difficult to imagine in Hong Kong ten years ago, when asylum seekers were beleaguered and marginalised, and seen as foreign and other. But this is what has happened today. As this article has shown, asylum seekers have become symbols for some Hong Kong young people of Hong Kong's ongoing non-Chineseness.

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