Negotiating Identity Through Emigration: Value, Aspiration, and the Anthropology of the Future—A Hong Kong Case Study

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Abstract
In 2019, a new emigration wave began in Hong Kong following a series of anti-government social movements. As a response to the movements, the Chinese government implemented the National Security Law in June 2020. In the following year, Hong Kong witnessed a 1.2% decline in the city's population. Centering on the relation between evaluation, aspiration, and anticipation, this thesis explores how changes in the sociopolitical environment are influencing the emigration decisions of Hong Kong's people. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six interlocutors. I first explore how the interlocutors conceptualize their identities. Next, I discuss how their modes of identification alter meanings assigned to recent social changes in Hong Kong. Finally, by examining my interlocutors' emigration narratives, I highlight how emigration decisions are rooted in aspirations and anticipations, restricted and facilitated by external forces, and mediated by shifting exposures and current situations. I argue that because a Hong Kong identity is constructed largely upon values and qualities different and readily differentiable from those of mainland Chinese, recent social changes (understood as an increased integration into China) place Hong Kong's people in a new reality where their values are contested, and where decisions to emigrate become means through which aspirations, identities, and futures are negotiated and reformed.

Keywords
value, aspiration, identity, Hong Kong, emigration

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NEGOTIATING IDENTITY THROUGH EMIGRATION:
VALUE, ASPIRATION, AND THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE FUTURE—
A HONG KONG CASE STUDY

By

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In

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Submitted to the
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2022
Abstract

In 2019, a new emigration wave began in Hong Kong following a series of anti-government social movements. As a response to the movements, the Chinese government implemented the National Security Law in June 2020. In the following year, Hong Kong witnessed a 1.2% decline in the city’s population. Centering on the relation between evaluation, aspiration, and anticipation, this thesis explores how changes in the sociopolitical environment are influencing the emigration decisions of Hong Kong’s people. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six interlocutors. I first explore how the interlocutors conceptualize their identities. Next, I discuss how their modes of identification alter meanings assigned to recent social changes in Hong Kong. Finally, by examining my interlocutors’ emigration narratives, I highlight how emigration decisions are rooted in aspirations and anticipations, restricted and facilitated by external forces, and mediated by shifting exposures and current situations. I argue that because a Hong Kong identity is constructed largely upon values and qualities different and readily differentiable from those of mainland Chinese, recent social changes (understood as an increased integration into China) place Hong Kong’s people in a new reality where their values are contested, and where decisions to emigrate become means through which aspirations, identities, and futures are negotiated and reformed.
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On the evening of August 25, 2021, I arrived at the Hong Kong International Airport to check in for my flight to London. Contrary to what I was used to, the Hong Kong International Airport was deadly quiet. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Hong Kong (HKSAR) government had implemented a 3-week quarantine policy upon return to the city. Under this newly implemented policy, people rarely traveled into and out of the city. The airport was pretty much empty, shops were closed, along with airline counters.

As I arrived at the British Airways check-in counter, a completely different scene emerged, the check-in aisle was crowded with people and their luggage. These people were not ordinary tourists. Walking along the check-in counters, I saw elders looking after infants and young kids while middle-aged parents were checking-in storage boxes. I realized that these people were not tourists, but families with one-way tickets preparing to seek new life in the United Kingdom. I was hit by a wave of emotions as I realized I was witnessing the recent emigration wave in Hong Kong, one that is going to rewrite the future of the city.

**Introduction**

As a special administrative region of China, Hong Kong is distinct from other Chinese cities due to its colonial history under the British empire. From 1841 to 1997, Hong Kong was a British colony. During that period, Hong Kong developed its independent institutions including legal, education, and capitalist economic systems.

In 1984, Britain and China signed the Sino-British Joint Declaration, declaring that Hong Kong would return to China starting from July 1, 1997. In this declaration, the “One Country, Two Systems” framework was established. Under this framework, the social and economic systems, as well as the life-style of Hong Kong’s people, which includes human rights and freedom, would
remain the same for 50 years until 2047. Hong Kong would also be able to maintain its autonomy in all matters except foreign affairs and defense.

A new emigration wave from Hong Kong began during the social movements of 2019. This series of social movements was triggered by the HKSAR government’s proposal of the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill 2019, a bill that would allow mutual legal assistance between Hong Kong and places outside of the city, including mainland China. This mutual legal assistance was not previously available. The proposal of the Amendment Bill was seen by many as part of the Chinese government’s continuous interference with Hong Kong’s autonomy, and a violation of the “One Country, Two Systems” promise.

In June 2020, as a response to these social movements, the Chinese government pushed to pass the Hong Kong National Security Law (Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region). The National Security Law established the offenses of secession, subversion, terrorism, and collusion with foreign country or organizations (The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region 2020). Under this Law, speech and verbal promotion of Hong Kong’s secession from China is considered an offense as well. Many Hong Konger have come to see the Law as one that greatly reduces the autonomy of Hong Kong and makes Hong Kong more similar to other cities in China. With several countries opening their borders for Hong Kong’s people in response to the new law, many citizens, pessimistic about the future of Hong Kong, have chosen to emigrate. In June 2021, one year after the National Security Law was passed, Hong Kong saw a 1.2% decline in the city’s population (Afp 2021).
Migration studies have long centered on the idea that migration is a “calculated rational choice at a singular point in time” (Collins 2018, 967), and many scholars have attended to questions of economic “pushes” and “pulls” as main factors for emigration. The emigration from Hong Kong exemplifies a wave of migration that does not fit neatly into any of these explanations. Arguably, the emigration wave is a response to the perceived diminishing autonomy of Hong Kong, and its triggers are deeply entrenched in the city’s history of colonization. Media have reported that many of Hong Kong’s emigrants are middle to high-income class people who have professional backgrounds (Cheng, Lee, and Lee 2021; Langfitt 2021; Soo 2020; Yu 2021). When emigrating, many have yet to find a job or a stable income source in the receiving country. A significant portion of emigrants have to give up their relatively stable careers in Hong Kong, and it is not uncommon for Hong Kong’s emigrants to anticipate a lower level of income post-emigration. As such, decisions to migrate go beyond economic push and pull forces.

Growing up in Hong Kong, I was always aware that identity is an ambiguous concept among Hong Kongers. National, historical, and ethnical associations with China warrant Hong Kong’s people to call China home, yet daily experiences of cultural ideals and practices that significantly diverge from those in mainland China suggest otherwise. Mathews (1997) writes, “almost all people in the world today are socialized and propagandized to hold a national identity...this...has not been the case for those who live in Hong Kong” (Mathews 1997, 3). The identity of Hong Kong’s people reflects the ambiguity of “being Chinese” and “being part of the China polity” (Siu 1993, 28). While being politically governed under China may give Hong Kong’s people a national identity as Chinese, the cultural identity of Hong Kong’s people—“who Hong Kong’s people believe themselves to be” (Mathews 1997, 4)—is more complex.
Mathews (1997) characterizes a group of middle-class Hong Kongers who identify themselves as Chinese only based on ethnicity, history, and cultural traditions. For many Hong Kongers, “their Chinese cultural identity is only partial, and their political idealism is influenced by western criteria” (Siu 1993, 33). Living under the strong presence of colonial legacies, Hong Kong’s people negotiate their identity everyday through finding meaning in their Chinese traditions as well as western idealism that is significantly different from China’s political agenda.

The objective of this thesis is to examine the relationship between the act of emigration and identity, one that is manifested in the form of values and aspirations. In particular, I seek to examine how the values and aspirations of Hong Kong’s people are formed and contested in 2021 and 2022, as well as how they function as factors influencing emigration decisions.

This thesis is organized into six sections. In Section 2, I provide a brief historical background of Hong Kong. Focusing on the colonial past of Hong Kong, I highlight the development of the unique political culture and values of the city. I also address the way social movements were utilized by Hong Kong’s people until recently. Through that, I point out that recent social changes in Hong Kong present Hong Kong’s people with a new reality where their values and aspirations are contested.

In Section 3, I review existing literature on topics of i) identity and value, ii) migration, and iii) Hong Kong identity. First, I frame the concept of identity under the anthropology of value. Drawing on anthropologists such as Kluckhohn (1951), Dumont (1980), and Munn (1987), I discuss the ways through which anthropologists have explored and defined “value” as a mediating concept for anthropological inquiry. Combining the descriptions of value by different anthropologists, I explore “value” in the form of qualities that are ranked according to their sociocentric desirability and capacity to influence action decisions. Then, drawing on Carling,
Collins, Van Hear and others (2018), I conceptualize migration as a function of “aspirations” and “drivers.” I also discuss Appadurai’s (2013) concept of the “Future as a Cultural Fact” in order to situate “aspirations” and “drivers” within larger anthropological discussions. Finally, I review sociological and ethnographic work on Hong Kong, discussing how scholars have described Hong Kong identity in the city’s colonial and post-colonial years.

In Section 4, I describe the methodology employed in this thesis. I explain the ways through which participants were recruited and through which data was collected. I also outline the profiles of the six interlocutors.

In Section 5, I present the findings from my conversations with my interlocutors analyzed under the frameworks delineated in Section 3’s Literature Review. The findings are presented in three parts. First, I analyze the way the Hong Kong identity is understood by my interlocutors. Then, I explore how my interlocutors assign meanings to Hong Kong’s recent social changes. Finally, drawing on findings from the aforementioned two parts, I examine the emigration narratives of the interlocutors and discuss how values and aspirations reflect and shape emigration (and non-emigration) decisions.

In the final section, I summarize my findings in Section 5 and conclude that emigration decisions are rooted in aspirational and anticipatory orientations, restricted and facilitated by external forces, and mediated by shifting exposures and current states of being. Since a Hong Kong identity is constructed largely upon values and qualities construed as different from those of mainland Chinese, the recent social changes (understood as an increased integration into China) are placing Hong Kong’s people in a new reality where their values are contested, and where decisions to emigrate (or not to) become the means through which aspirations, identities, and futures are negotiated and reformed.
Historical Background

During 1841 to 1997 as a British colony, Hong Kong developed its own institutions, including legal, education, and capitalist economic systems independent from those of China. This period of separation had led Hong Kong to “develop a political culture and identity of its own” (Siu 1993, 33), and made Hong Kong a city distinct from other Chinese cities.

Becoming a British Colony and the Formation of Hong Kong

In January 1841, the British took control over Hong Kong Island in the midst of the Opium War. As a result of the war, the island of Hong Kong was officially ceded to the British Empire “in perpetuity.” At the time, it was reported that, on Hong Kong Island, there were only “about 7500 inhabitants, and over 20 fishing hamlets and villages” (Mathews, Ma and Lü 2008, 23). Others have described Hong Kong as a “barren island, which will never be a mart of trade” (Mathews, Ma and Lü 2008, 23).

Hong Kong Island is one of the three regions that constitute the city of Hong Kong that exist today. The two other regions, the Kowloon Peninsula and the New Territories, were ceded to the British empire in 1860 after the Second Opium War and in 1889 under a 99-year lease respectively.

In 1984, as Hong Kong was approaching the end of the 99-year lease of the New Territories, Britain and China signed the Sino-British Joint Declaration, which declared that Hong Kong would return to China starting on July 1, 1997. In this declaration, the “One Country, Two Systems” framework was established. Under this framework, the social and economic systems, as well as the lifestyle of Hong Kong’s people, including human rights and freedom, would remain
the same for 50 years until 2047. Hong Kong would also be able to maintain its autonomy in all matters except foreign affairs and defense.

1841-1997: Hong Kong as a British Colony

During its 150 years as a British colony, Hong Kong was separated from the series of changes and chaos that hit mainland China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as the Taiping Rebellion and the Chinese Civil War. Importantly, Hong Kong was parted from China during the rise of the People’s Republic of China, which brought about the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, Hundred Flowers Blooming Campaign, and more, where “in the course of these some twenty million Chinese died, a great part of Chinese heritage was destroyed” (Welsh 1997, 467).

A Haven for Chinese Refugees

Being separated from the chaos in China yet remaining in close geographic proximity to China, Hong Kong had been on the receiving end of Chinese immigrants. In The Concise History of Hong Kong, Carroll (2007) points out that “from its early colonial days, Hong Kong served as a haven for Chinese refugees” (2007, 2). Given the small population of Hong Kong to begin with, these immigrants, whose key reason for coming to Hong Kong “was to stay away from Chinese politics and political rivalries” (Mathews, Ma and Lü 2008, 46) and who originally left China in search of peace, stability, and western ideologies, forms the majority of the population in today’s Hong Kong.
Growing Differences between China and Hong Kong: Economic Development and Becoming Global

Movements between Hong Kong and mainland China remained relatively free until 1949 when the Chinese Communist Party came to power and prompted the closure of the border between Hong Kong and mainland China. During the time when the border was closed, economic development as well as cultural practices in Hong Kong began to diverge significantly from that in mainland China.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, Hong Kong enjoyed the comparative advantages of low taxes and free markets as British administrators in Hong Kong “put minimal restraints on maximizing profits, continued low taxation” (Welsh 1997, 462). In the 1970s, Hong Kong saw a rapidly growing economy. At the same time, the education system was reformed to “provide even comprehensive primary education” (Welsh 1997, 482) to people. Public healthcare spending also increased. With these economic and social developments, Hong Kong simultaneously developed a “local popular culture expressed in film, music and television shows” (Carroll 2007, 169). On the whole, the 1970s marked “an era of growing economy, improving living standards, and increasing opportunities for social advancement” (Mathews, Ma and Lü 2008, 36). During that period, Hong Kong had “from an impoverished colony struggling to cope with the influx of refugees...become ‘a stable and increasingly affluent society comparable with the developed world in nearly every way’” (Welsh 1997, 462).

With the rise of globalization and technology in the latter half of the twentieth century, Hong Kong “had also become more cosmopolitan rather than just Chinese and British” (Carroll 2007, 169). Hong Kong’s people began to follow American popular culture—Hollywood films and American TV shows became part of their day-to-day life; the first McDonald’s restaurant in
Hong Kong was opened in 1975, and Japanese department stores became landmarks of Hong Kong (Carroll 2007). Here, it is important to note that this change in lifestyle in Hong Kong was arguably enabled and facilitated by free access to information and an open border unavailable in mainland China.

Approaching 1997: the Final Years as a British Colony

In the late 1970s, China began its economic reform and started to open up its border to the outside world. Consequently, Hong Kong’s “economic co-operation with China flourished (Welsh 1997, 524),” and travel between Hong Kong and the mainland increased. As Hong Kongers’ exposure to mainland China increased, they also became increasingly aware of the differences accumulated between themselves and mainland Chinese during the period of separation. A 1985 survey showed that “three fifths of Hong Kong’s Chinese population preferred to see themselves as Hong Kongese rather than Chinese (Carroll 2007, 170).”

As Hong Kong approached 1997, concerns began to rise in regards to its future. The Sino-British Joint Declaration signed in 1984, which established the “One Country, Two Systems” framework, “helped restore confidence after a period of panic” (Mathews, Ma and Lü 2008, 46). However, confidence shattered shortly after the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre took place, which once again raised people’s concerns about Hong Kong’s future. Welsh (1997) writes, “The pictures shown on the world’s television screens horrifed Hong Kong; the thought that a regime capable of slaughtering their own people in hundreds, or, thousands…, was going to be responsible for the colony’s future in a few years’ time was terrifying. A million people turned out on the streets, demonstrating with great dignity their silent grief” (1997, 524). Fear for Hong Kong’s future also prompted a new wave of emigration. In 1990, a year after the Tiananmen Massacre,
62,000 people, about 1% of the city’s population, emigrated. Figures remained stable in the years that immediately followed.

1997-Present: Post-Colonial Period

Scholars have often noted that during the colonial period, Hong Kong’s people were market-oriented and politically apathetic (Mathews, Ma and Lü 2008; Lam 2004). The post-colonial period saw a switch in the political attitude of Hong Kong’s people. As reflected by an increase in social movements and political participation, there was a rise in political interest among the populace.

On July 1, 2003, the sixth anniversary of the handover, Hong Kong had its most massive protest since the handover at the time. 500,000 people took the streets during the annual rally to protest the legislation of Basic Law Article 23—an “anti-subversion law that would make Hong Kong more like the mainland” (Mathews, Ma and Lü 2008, 3). What stood out from this protest was Hong Kongers’ support for the protection of freedom and civil liberties, a theme that later recurred in Hong Kong as it motivated and characterized subsequent social movements.

Numerous social movements ensued in the years after 2003. These movements included the 2012 Anti-National Education Curriculum Campaign, which was a response to the adoption of Chinese civic education into Hong Kong’s school curriculum, where the moral and civic education would be replaced by the moral and national education. In response to the social protests, the government postponed the commencement of the subject indefinitely at the time. Another remarkable movement was the Umbrella Movement/Occupy Central Movement in September 2014, which involved a 79-day occupation of the city’s important commercial district and a series of strikes in schools and workplaces. This movement was triggered by the “831 decision” of the
Chinese National People’s Congress in August 2014, which prescribed a selective pre-screening of candidates for the 2017 Hong Kong Chief Executive election and denied genuine universal suffrage. However, unlike the outcomes of the previous movements, the government was indifferent towards voices in the Umbrella Movement, and the 2017 election continued to adhere to the “831 decision”.

In two consecutive weekends in June 2019, 1 and 2 million people took the streets respectively to protest against the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill 2019, which would allow mutual legal assistance between Hong Kong and places outside of the city, including mainland China. Despite more than one-fourth of the city’s population protesting, the government remained indifferent. The protest escalated and ended in 2020 when the Chinese government passed the Hong Kong National Security Law (Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region). The National Security Law established the offenses of secession, subversion, terrorism, and collusion with foreign country or organizations; verbal promotion of Hong Kong’s secession from China is considered an offense as well (The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region 2020). Under this Law, many pro-democracy and anti-Chinese government social movements are considered to be outlawed. These social movements include the annual June 4th Vigil to commemorate Tiananmen Massacre, which was banned for the first time since 1990.

The discussion in the preceding paragraphs demonstrates that Hong Kong’s people are dealing with a colonial past that uplifted values of freedom and civil liberties on one hand, and a political reality that is suppressing these values on the other. Up until recently, social movements
served as a means for Hong Kong’s people to resolve this conflict. Social movements symbolized Hong Kongers’ aspiration for a future with democracy and freedom, and they carried the hope and anticipation for a change in attitude of the Chinese government. Yet, with the implementation of the National Security Law and the banning of social movements, these containers for aspiration, hope, and anticipation were simultaneously removed. In the following sections, it is this new reality that I focus on to explore how Hong Kong’s people are currently negotiating their values and identity.
Literature Review

There are three components to the following literature review: i) Identity and the Anthropology of Value, ii) Migration Studies, and iii) Hong Kong Identity.

Part 1: Identity and the Anthropology of Value

The concept of “identity” has long fascinated anthropologists as it speaks to how individuals and societies come to view themselves in relation to each other.

In this thesis, I approach questions of “identity” by way of anthropological understandings of “value.” As will be elaborated in this section, value formulates human actions and defines for cultures what is important (Graeber 2001; Kluckhohn 1951). Value is also semiotically created and recreated in ongoing processes of human communicative interaction. One’s persona, or identity, can be understood as the cumulative effects of actions one performed in the past (Graeber 2001). So, too, a person’s actions, informed by certain evaluative frameworks, will continue to configure, and reconfigure, that person’s identity. Psychologically inclined anthropologists have described how value is “directly involved in the individual’s existence as a ‘self’,” where it “act as components of super-ego or ego-ideal” and is “constitutive of the person’s sense of identity; if violated, there is guilt, shame, ego-deflation, intropunitive reaction” (Kluckhohn 1951, 398). In this important sense, value forms a link between one’s actions and one’s identity. In employing the anthropology of value as an analytical framework, this thesis hopes to bridge the two topics it explores—i) the action of emigration and ii) the negotiation of identity.

Within anthropology, value is something of a slippery concept. The term “value” is frequently cited in anthropological work, but the definition of the term itself is not always fully fleshed out. In the following, I will outline the conceptualizations of value by Clyde Kluckhohn
(1951), Louis Dumont (1980), and Nancy Munn (1987). These three scholars all describe value as constructed through social processes. Together, these conceptualizations provide us with a framework to better understand what value is, and how it comes to be.

Clyde Kluckhohn (1951) defines value as “a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of action” (1951, 398). Here, the notion of value as “desirable” is worthy of attention. According to Kluckhohn, the difference between what is desired and what is “desirable” is that while desire simply refers to wants and wishes, the “desirable” refers to a desire with rational justification. As Kluckhohn puts it, “the desirable is what it is felt or thought proper to want… it is what an actor or group of actors desire—and believe they ‘ought’ and ‘should’ desire” (1951, 398). Value, then, involves notions of obligation and duty, and is distinct from a wish or a desire. Through describing how value is formed and perpetuated through the internalization of the approval and disapproval of others, Kluckhohn highlights the inherent social embeddedness of “value.”

The notion of the “desirable” gives rise to another necessary characteristic of value—its “verbalizability” (Kluckhohn 1951, 397). While value is an abstract concept, the notions of duty and obligation it incorporates means that every value has a rational justification, or the potentiality for justification. Consequently, all value must be able to be verbalized or communicated, either implicitly through discursive acts of approval and disapproval or explicitly through the direct discussion of the value itself.

Another characteristic of value is its influence on actions. According to Kluckhohn, value has a “selective” element that prompts “an individual (to) select[] one line of thought or action rather than another, insofar as this selection is influenced by generalized codes rather than
determined simply by impulse or by a purely rational calculus of temporary expediency” (1951, 402).

Another major contributor to the anthropology of value is Dumont (1980), who points out the relationship between ideas and values. Dumont popularizes the notion of hierarchy, and argues that ideas and values are inseparable. When organizing ideas, humans are prompted to relate ideas to each other by creating binary and symmetrical oppositions, such as by relating the right in opposition to the left, raw to cooked, men to women, and so on. This way of conceptualizing ideas primes us to view two components in opposition as having equal status. Dumont argues that components in a pair are, however, never of equal status. In fact, one component in a pair will always be ranked higher, viewed as the more superior entity that “encompass the contrary.” This, in turn, creates a hierarchy. Because of their relation to each other in a hierarchy, ideas are simultaneously values. Dumont illustrates this concept using the example of the opposition of left and right. The left and right hand are often conceived as a binary opposition. Yet, it is evidenced that many cultures view the right as superior to the left. For example, when doing a handshake, the right hand is often the hand that is reached forward. In such cases, it is the right hand that is seen to be representing the body as a whole, not the left hand. As such, the difference between right and left hands’ “relation to the body (i.e. to a higher level of being)” (1980, 223) results in the varied values of the right and left hand. As Dumont writes, “the value of an entity is dependent upon or intimately related to a hierarchy of levels of experience in which that entity is situated” (1980, 223).

Dumont (1980) also points out that “societies are divided into a series of domains or levels” (Graeber 2001, 17). Essentially, domains are social contexts under which the conceptual terms are ranked, such as political domains and religious domains. According to Dumont, these social
contexts themselves are also ranked. Ideas within the more superior domains will encompass those within the subordinate domains. This creates a phenomenon which Dumont calls “reversal between levels of experience” (Dumont 1980, 211) where “the relations between different conceptual terms can be inverted on different levels” (Graeber 2001, 17). Dumont’s notion of hierarchy helps to draw out relationships between ideas and domains, and as will be elaborate in the third part of this section—Hong Kong Identity—Dumont’s framework enables us to conceptualize the way certain ideas comes to be valuated.

Nancy Munn (1987) studies how value is created and transformed in the Gawan society through everyday human actions. She argues that “value is signified through specific qualities that characterize such components of practice as the body, kula shells…and other entities” (1987, 16). Examples of value signifiers, or qualities, include elements such as heaviness, darkness, slowness, and so on. In describing these value signifiers, Munn employs Peirce’s notion of “qualisign,” which, as she elaborates, is a “condense marking that is part of a ‘more comprehensive whole’ and conveys some fundamental aspects of that whole” (1987, 16). For Peirce, a sign stands for an object and gives rise to an interpretant. Framed with respect to our discussion of values, the interpretant exists in the form of valuation and evaluation. Actions and speeches convey qualities, which function as signs to construct positive or negative values for the object an act or a speech stands for. In short, value reflects and shapes qualitative experiences (Chumley and Harkness 2013).

As elaborated in the previous paragraphs, values are simultaneously hierarchical ideas and qualitative experiences. Gal and Irvine (2019) describe how hierarchical ideas create qualitative experiences, and vice versa. Gal and Irvine’s argument centers on the notion of comparison. According to Gal and Irvine, schemas exist in the form of axis of differentiation. An axis of
differentiation is constituted by “contrasting, complementary qualities” (2019, 118). Qualities exist only in contrast to another. For example, “there can be no ‘big’ without a ‘small’” (2019, 120), no “more” without “less,” and so on. Also, because “these contrasting pairs are complementary, one side of the contrast is ideologically defined as what the other is not” (2019, 120).

According to Gal and Irvine (2019), all experiences, when incorporated into schemas, are simultaneously placed on an axis of differentiation, where they are compared to previous experiences, assigned meanings to, and endowed with some sense of qualitative value. In this way, existing schemas shape novel experiences, and novel experiences would in turn expand, challenge, reinforce, and change pre-existing schemas, providing new experiences with an additional reference to assign qualitative meanings to. As such, all qualitative experiences embody comparison (see Carruthers 2017). This concept is important for ethnography, where qualitative descriptions are schematically interpreted as indexes of axes of differentiation. Simultaneously, any qualitative description indexes not only the evaluation placed on the entity being described, but also the entity that lies on the opposite end of an axis. And what lies at the opposite end of an axis becomes apparent from a speaker’s “narrative organization” in which the qualitative description is incorporated.

Part 2: Migration Studies

Traditionally, scholars within the field of migration studies were fixated on the idea that migration processes result from a “calculated rational choice at a singular point in time” (Collins 2018, 967). In recent decades, scholars have recognized the complexity behind real world migration. Migration processes can be seen in different forms—such as north-south, north-north,
south-north migrations—and factors influencing migration are deeply embedded in social structures and processes. Much scholarship has thus sought to explain the complex phenomenon of migration. Migration studies orientations include but are not limited to transnationalism (Faist 2010; Schiller, Basch and Blanc 1995), lifestyle migration (Benson and O'Reilly 2009), and gender and migration.

This thesis approaches the conceptualization of migration as a function of aspirations and drivers. A framework encompassing both aspirations and drivers is outlined by Carling, Collins, Van Hear and others in a special journal issue published in 2018 (Carling and Collins 2018; Carling and Schewel 2018; Collins 2018; Van Hear, Bakewell and Long 2018). This framework highlights aspirations and drivers as thematic factors involved in shaping migration decisions. Rather than drawing out specific reasons for migration, the authors provide a more comprehensive and general framework applicable for explaining migration processes under diverse social contexts. This framework considers the complexity of migration processes by conceptualizing migration as “embedded in social relations, imaginations of the world, economic settings and opportunities and political controls” (Carling and Collins 2018, 911). For the authors, “rethinking the drivers of migration to foreground notions of aspiration and desire requires relinquishing the primacy of economic rationality that has long held an almost sacred place in theories of migration. It means recognizing that even economic narratives of movement are socially constructed and can only be read in relation to the subjectivities of migrants, their states of feeling and the circulation of affect within and across borders” (Carling and Collins 2018, 913).
The Future as a Cultural Fact

Before more fully exploring the aspiration and driver models, I first turn to Appadurai’s (2013) work *Future as a Cultural Fact*, which helps situate the aspirations and drivers framework with respect to broader anthropological concerns. Anthropology as a field has substantially studied and understood the present through events in the past, looking at how the past has shaped the present, and how new practices and new ideas are absorbed into existing cultural frameworks. Appadurai (2013) proposes that the future deserves more attention in anthropology for the “future is a part of how societies shape their practice” (2013, 292). Humans engage with the future through imagination, anticipation, and aspiration. This engagement with the future drives present-day behaviors. Because of this, the future does not only exist in the time ahead, but also as an occurring fact, resulting in the phenomenon where “the production of everyday life, the dynamics of lived experience, or the production of locality is an always incomplete project in even the simplest of societies” (2013, 288).

Appadurai argues that the future does not exist in isolation of the present and the past—processes of imagination, anticipation, and aspiration are informed by events in the present and in the past. “The capacity to aspire is a cultural capacity, in the sense that it takes its force within local systems of value, meaning, communication, and dissent. Its form is recognizably universal, but its force is distinctly local and cannot be separated from language, social values, histories, and institutional norms, which tend to be highly specific” (2013, 290). As such, the past and present create a culturally specific “good life” that people come to desire or assume to be desirable. This good life, while appearing to exist only in the future, functions as a map for people to negotiate and navigate their present everyday lives.
Another important notion put forth by Appadurai is the ethics of possibility versus the ethics of probability. Appadurai defines the ethics of possibility as “those ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that increase the horizons of hope, that expand the field of the imagination, that produce greater equity in what [he] have called the capacity to aspire, and that widen the field of informed, creative, and critical citizenship” (2013, 295). On the other hand, the ethics of probability is closely related to the “sophisticated combination of probabilistic thinking, gambling, scientific modeling, pricing, and risk-assessment” (2013, 297-298). There is always a tension between possibility and probability. Hope and aspiration are often counteracted by past experiences of failure, fear, as well as unpromising current situations. As will be elaborated in Section 5—Data and Analysis—I argue that this tension underlies every migration decision. Aspirations and drivers are alternate expressions of the ethics of possibility and probability, and migration decisions result from the negotiation of the tension between the ethics of possibility and probability, and of aspirations and drivers.

**Aspiration/Ability Migration Model**

The aspiration/ability model explored by Carling and Schewel (2018) is a two-step approach to migration. The idea is that migration is an outcome of both migration aspiration and migration ability. The authors define aspiration as a “conviction that migration is preferable to non-migration” (2018, 946). Migration aspiration is produced by a combination of social forces. “The aspiration to migrate emerges within a particular macro-level emigration environment, encompassing the social, economic and political context in which particular social constructions of migration exist. Individual characteristics interact with this environment to determine patterns of who wishes to leave and who wishes to stay” (2018, 946). Here, I would like to point back to
Kluckhohn’s (1951) notion of the desirable. Kluckhohn distinguishes between “desirable” and “desire,” where the “desirable” is produced not only by an individual’s wishes, but also by cultural values and societal forces that make something ought to be wanted. Similarly influenced and shaped by social contexts, migration aspirations carry resembling characteristics of the “desirable”, namely its justifiableness and verbalizability. In short, aspirations encompass a culturally-specific image of good life, of the “desirable,” which an aspirational person justifies based on the particulars of their social domain.

This social embeddedness of aspiration is similarly highlighted by Ray (2006), who defines aspiration as “the social grounding of individual desires” (2006, 2). Ray argues that aspiration is formed within, and only within, a person’s aspiration window. An aspiration window is “the set of (known) opportunities” (Czaika and Vothknecht 2014, 3), and it is formed from a person’s socio-interactional world, “her zone of ‘similar,’ ‘attainable’ individuals” (Ray 2006, 2). Hence, an individual would draw her aspirations “from the lives, achievements, or ideals of those who exist in her aspiration window” (Ray 2006, 2). Put another way, the aspiration window is made up of the possibilities that one conceives in her own social exposure, and it allows her to form a future that she might imagine, anticipate, and aspire toward.

Another concept worth pointing out is the aspiration gap—“the difference between the standard of living that’s aspired to and the standard of living that one already has” (Ray 2006, 4). Ray argues that it is this aspiration gap, rather than aspiration itself, that influences future-oriented behaviors. Ray’s argument not only echoes Appadurai’s (2013) point that present-day behaviors are future-oriented, but it also highlights how present states are involved in determining future-oriented behaviors. This means that behaviors, including migration decisions, never originate within a single temporality.
Similar to aspirations to migrate, the ability to migrate is also deeply entangled within diverse social contexts. The relationship between migration ability and social structures is more straightforward. Carling and Schewel (2018) call the social forces that influence migration ability the “immigration interface,” referring to the “macro-level context of obstacles and opportunities” (2018, 947), which encompasses legal labor migration, visas, and other “general structural forces facilitating or constraining particular migration trajectories” (2018, 947).

Czaika and Vothknecht (2014) also argue that migration is a function of an individual’s capability for migration, which is determined by one’s “capacity to aspire” and “capacity to realize.” The authors further argue that the capacity to aspire and the capacity to realize are mutually interdependent—“aspirations can stimulate behavior leading to an improvement of capabilities, and at the same time, aspirations are the consequence of inherited and/or socially acquired capabilities” (2014, 3). That said, the formation of aspirations is an ongoing process. As one’s social conditions change, one might get exposed to more opportunities and possibilities. Consequently, one’s aspiration window also changes. This reconfigures one’s aspirations, thereby altering one’s aspiration gap. Migration, being a process that alters one’s social context, is itself an experience through which aspirations are formed and reformed.

*Aspiration and Identity in Migration*

One’s aspiration is closely related to one’s identity. Collins (2018) argues that migration is a process of subjective-becoming. Through analyzing expressions of desires within migrant narratives generated through interviews, Collins argues that migration intersects with aspirations “for going elsewhere or being otherwise, for achieving or avoiding (un)desirable futures, that are often not the result of calculative rationality as it is so often conceived in migration research” (2018,
Thus, migration is a process in which individuals strive to become otherwise through altering “their own subjectivity and place in the world” (2018, 974). Here, the notion of becoming otherwise renders migration processes as a mechanism of identity negotiation and configuration.

**Drivers**

Taking a slightly different approach from the aforementioned authors who look at migration from the lens of aspirations, Van Hear, Bakewell, and Long (2018) approach migration using the notion of “drivers”—factors which shape “the broader context within which aspirations and desires to migrate are formed and in which people make their migration decisions—whether to move or not” (2018, 930). Specifically, drivers are “the array of factors that make up the external structural elements shaping the decision space for those considering migration” (2018, 930). Put another way, drivers are the social contexts and structures under which aspirations are formed, and migration abilities enabled. Van Hear and colleagues term this drivers model a “push-pull plus” model. Through doing so, they highlight the similarity between the drivers model and the traditional push-pull model, emphasizing that “structural forces shape migration processes” (2018, 928).

The authors put forth four types of drivers, including predisposing, proximate, precipitating, and mediating drivers. Predisposing drivers “contribute to the creation of a context in which migration is more likely” (2018, 931), and it usually involves “disparities between place of origin and place of destination” (2018, 931), such as economic and political disparities. Proximate drivers “have a more direct bearing on migration and are derived from the aforementioned (predisposing) deep-seated structural features” (2018, 931); proximate drivers might take forms of economic cycle downtowns or upturns. Precipitating drivers are more often identifiable event(s) such as a
particular financial crisis, incidents of war outbreak from the region of origin, or the relaxation of migration controls and increased employment opportunities in the immigration destination. Lastly, mediating drivers “enable, facilitate, constrain, accelerate or consolidate migration” (2018, 932). These drivers include migrant networks, presence and quality of transport, culture of migration, and so on.

It should be noted that no one driver works alone to shape and drive migration. Drivers interact and work in combination to shape migration patterns. The interaction of drivers forms what Van Hear and colleagues (2018) term “driver complexes.” The complexity and multidimensionality of driver complexes strengthens the idea that migration is a decision closely intertwined with various social processes, and it is never a decision made at a single point in time. As highlighted by Collins (2018), migration contains multiple temporalities, expanding from the past, to the present, into the future.

Van Hear and colleagues’ (2018) drivers/push-pull plus framework provides us with a way of conceptualizing the various social forces that influence aspirations and abilities to migrate. In viewing external structural factors using this framework, where factors interact and work in combination to influence (but do not fully determine) migration, it becomes easier for us to appreciate the complex social forces undergirding migration decisions, as well as to make sense of the way different drivers that work together to produce a migration (or non-migration) decision.

As will be seen in later parts of the thesis, Van Hear and colleagues’ (2018) framework is useful for understanding migration processes within the context of Hong Kong. This approach helps us to refrain from taking a reductionist approach and prevents us from attributing migration to a single factor. It allows us to pull together the diverse realities negotiated by Hong Kong emigrants into the same conversation. For instance, factors such as colonial legacies may be
understood as the predisposing drivers that gave rise to political disparities, involving conflicts related to “human rights and human security, often associated with nation-building, disintegration or reconstitution” (Van Hear, Bakewell, and Long 2018, 931), whereas more recent social movements and the implementation of the National Security Law can be interpreted as precipitating drivers of migration. Mediating factors such as a culture of migration, which “emerge(s) among people and communities who become habituated to mobility” (Van Hear, Bakewell, and Long 2018, 932), are also worthy of exploration.

Under the aspirations and drivers framework, migration is a process of being and becoming, of personhood, and of identity. It is one with multiple temporalities, and one deeply entrenched in social relations. It is mapped by a future (aspiration and desire) that is informed by the past (historic forces and societal values) and the present (a continually shifting economic and political environment). In the sections that follow, I will continue to turn to the notion of aspirations and drivers in analyzing migration decisions of Hong Kong emigrants.

Part 3: Hong Kong Studies—The Hong Kong Identity

In this section, I review sociological and ethnographic work on Hong Kong. I discuss how scholars have described a Hong Kong identity in the city’s colonial and post-colonial years.

Scholars in the field of Hong Kong Studies have always been interested in studying the Hong Kong identity. Due to the city’s “colonial history and regional geopolitics” (Want, 420), identity has long been an ambiguous concept in Hong Kong. Anthropologist Gordon Mathews (1997, 3) comments that while “almost all people in the world today are socialized and propagandized to hold a national identity…this…has not been the case for those who live in Hong Kong.” Siu (1993) highlights that the identity of Hong Kong’s people centers upon the ambiguity
of “being Chinese” and “being part of the China polity” (1993, 28). Having a majority of ethnic Chinese, Hong Kong’s people perceive China as their cultural home. However, China as a state simultaneously represents a political reality many Hong Kongers chose to flee during and after the Chinese Civil War. Thus, while being politically governed under China may give Hong Kong’s people a national identity as Chinese, the cultural identity of Hong Kong’s people—“who Hong Kong’s people believe themselves to be” (Mathews 1997, 4)—is more complex.

The rise of a Hong Kong identity is a relatively recent phenomenon. While Hong Kong was ceded to Britain in 1841, a Hong Kong identity did not arise until later in the colonial period. During the first decades under the British empire, a distinct local identity barely existed for Hong Kong’s people. Residents in Hong Kong were mainly “sojourners or economic migrants or refugees” from China, who “most intended to return to their home in China for their retirement” (Tsang 2003, 222). A distinct local identity only began to develop after 1949 when the Chinese Communist Party came to power. Many fled to Hong Kong in the subsequent years due to political fears, more than doubling Hong Kong’s population between 1945-1950 from 900,000 to 2 million. The rapid rise in population prompted the closure of borders between Hong Kong and mainland China by the colonial government. The borders were closed until the 1980s. During that period, while movements to Hong Kong still existed, many who arrived in the territory were no longer those who intended to return to China at a fixed time in the future. At the same time, Hong Kong flourished into a growing economy and eventually a metropolis as people began to adopt a market mentality and view Hong Kong as the land of opportunity. As such, those “born and bred in Hong Kong since 1949 by and large had no firsthand experiences of the PRC (People’s Republic of China)” (Tsang 2003, 223). This period of separation had eventually turned into the critical time for Hong Kong to “develop a political culture and identity of its own” (Tsang 2003, 223).
The Early Characterization of the Hong Kong identity

Numerous scholars have attempted to characterize the Hong Kong identity. Approaching the handover in 1997, Mathews (1997) explores the cultural identity of Hong Kong’s people through interviewing alumni of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and “extensively analyzed mass media and scholarly reports in English and Chinese on the issue of Hong Kong identity” (1997, 5). Mathews first highlights that the Hong Kong identity is distinct from a Chinese identity. More importantly, Mathews describes the Hong Kong identity as a “Chinese-plus” identity after observing how Hong Kong’s people expressed traditional Chinese values and at the same time displayed characteristics that are more westernized and internationalized. The “plus-ness” in the Hong Kong identity involves characteristics and values such as capitalism, colonial education, democracy, the rule of law, and so on. Essentially, a Hong Kong identity is capitalism, westernized education, and political ideals added onto a Chinese ethnic identity.

Chan and Chan (2014) have explored the Hong Kong identity from the perspective of patriotism. The authors introduce the notion of “liberal patriotism” to describe how Hong Kongers’ “love of the homeland and state” (2014, 968) is suffused with, and qualified by, liberal democratic values. This characterization of the Hong Kong identity highlights that Hong Kong’s people endorse social and political values different from those of mainland Chinese while framing Hong Kong identity as one still encompassed by a Chinese identity.

Mathews (1997) and Chan and Chan’s (2014) descriptions of the Hong Kong identity represent an early characterization of a Hong Kong identity. These characterizations acknowledge that the divergence of political ideals and the difference in social structures from mainland China have given rise to a distinctive day-to-day experience in Hong Kong. Nonetheless, under these
characterizations, a Hong Kong identity remains one that is different from, yet compatible with, the Chinese identity.

**The Rise of Localism**

In the past few years, more research has been carried out to explore the Hong Kong identity under the notion of “localism.” Localism is a broad term referring to the ideal of “protecting the interests and identity of Hong Kong” (Kaeding 2017, 158), and to prioritize local over national identification (Veg 2017). Lam (2018) defines localism as “a range of political positions that prioritize the welfare of the locals, such as the support for local production, the consumption of goods and services, local governance, and promotion of the local identity, culture, and history” (2018, 73). Today, discussions of localism are prevalent within both the political arena and everyday scenes in Hong Kong. “Localism” is a concept that arose as Hong Kong’s people became increasingly aware of their distinction from the everyday culture and political ideals of mainland China. This increased awareness arguably emerged from Hong Kongers’ daily encounters with mainland Chinese, as well as a series of social movements in post-1997, such as the Anti-National Education Movement in 2012, Umbrella Movement in 2014, and most recently, the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement in 2019.

The rise of localism has prompted new characterizations of Hong Kong identity. Unlike the scholars mentioned in the previous subsection who described the Hong Kong identity as one that is compatible with the Chinese identity, Veg (2017) has argued that local and national identifications by Hong Kong’s people are becoming increasingly incompatible. Through analyzing media reports, survey data, as well as interviews with the post-handover generation, Veg explores modes of identification during the time of three social movements, namely the June
Fourth vigil in 2009, the Anti-National Education Movement in 2012, and the Umbrella Movement in 2014. Data surrounding the social movements highlights the existence of a “local community that affirmed its ‘agency’ and right to ‘self-determination’” (2017, 342), and that “younger generations of Hong Kongers identify more strongly, sometimes exclusively, with a local community” (2017, 342).

In analyzing a speech by Joshua Wong, a pro-democracy activist, Veg (2017) states that for Wong, identification is “ultimately subordinate to the claim of democracy,” where “if the only community that is willing to democratize in the foreseeable futures is Hong Kong, then Hong Kong is the relevant community to identify with” (342). Here, Veg’s statement can be analyzed using the “hierarchy of value” outlined by Dumont (1980) (see Part 1: Identity and the Anthropology of Value). Veg’s statement hints that democracy, or more broadly, ideas within the political domain, are deemed superior (and hence valued more strongly) by Hong Kong’s people. If Wong’s hierarchy of value represents that of Hong Kong’s people, this would mean that in a scenario where political values and cultural/ethical identification do not align, when liberal and patriotism are perceived as incompatible, Hong Kongers would choose political values, and orient their behaviors according to their political values, rather than values from other domains such as cultural or ethnic values.

Chow, Fu, and Ng (2020) have identified the characteristics of Hong Kong’s people from a cultural and civic domain under the localistic context. From the civic domain, those who identify more as Hong Kongers are more likely to be involved in political activities and show strong anti-authoritarianism sentiments. From the cultural domain, those identifying more as Hong Kongers “uphold[] Cantonese as their native language” with a mix of English “as a signature of their cultural practice” (2020, 582). These people also avoid using simplified Chinese characters, the written
system popular in mainland China but not in Hong Kong. The authors also observed that these people reject the use of services from mainland China such as payment apps and online shops. Seeing a tendency among Hong Kong’s people to abandon the notion of patriotism, like Veg (2017), the authors question whether the Hong Kong identity is still built upon “liberal patriotism.”

Stephan Ortmann (2018) has conducted semi-structured interviews with students from 2013 through 2015 to understand their local and national identity. From the interviews, Ortmann observes that there is a “rejection of the Chinese identity and the emergence of a separate ethnic Hong Kong identity with growing demands for independence” (2018, 127). This increase in localist sentiment is closely linked to pride over Hong Kongers’ core values. Through comparing Hong Kong and mainland China, Ortmann’s interviewees highlighted differences between Hong Kong and mainland China in terms of levels of economic development, emphasis on liberal values, levels of internationalization, and so on. The interviewees’ feelings of being Hong Kongers are derived from daily practices such as speaking Cantonese and English, celebrating both Western and Chinese festivals, buying international products, and so on. Also, some expressed feelings of being ashamed of their Chinese identity, which resulted from mainland Chinese visitors’ “uncivilized behavior” such as public defecation and “being noisy and arrogant” (2018, 120). Ortmann observes that wishing to be “different from those uncivilized Chinese visitors” (2018, 120), the interviewees often described mainland Chinese as the “other,” and their sense of superiority was apparent.
Methodology

The empirical data for this paper consists of in-depth semi-structured interviews with six middle-class Hong Kong citizens, Justin (Male, 57), Audrey (Female, 54), Robert (Male, 57), Kate (Female, 50), Martin (Male, 22), and Carly (Female, 22).

Participants in the study were mainly recruited through convenient sampling (i.e. existing networks of friends and families) and snowball sampling via text messages. It was stipulated that interlocutors had to be a Hong Kong citizen and must be over 18-year-old. During the recruitment process, interlocutors were informed about the background of the study, the objectives of the interview, and interview logistics. Prior to the start of the interview, interlocutors were presented again with the information of the interview, as well as methods used for data management. They were also informed about their rights to refrain from answering any questions they did not feel comfortable with or to terminate the interview at any time. All of the interlocutors gave oral consent prior to the start of the interviews. Because this project concerns political issues, interlocutors might potentially encounter politically and legally sensitive questions. Every measure was taken to ensure that interlocutors only answered questions they were comfortable with and that all information disclosed would remain confidential.

All interviews were conducted online over Zoom or WhatsApp calls, and all of them lasted between one to two hours. The semi-structured interviews were structured according to a set of predetermined questions. The predetermined questions included questions about the interviewees’ understanding about their own cultural identity, their perceptions on social changes in Hong Kong, and their thoughts on emigration.

In order to obtain a balanced sample, efforts were made to ensure that interlocutors from both genders and different age ranges were recruited. Interlocutors from varied degrees of pro-
China backgrounds were also recruited to ensure a diversity of political backgrounds within the samples. Since only six interlocutors were interviewed for this project, it must be noted that while findings within this thesis provide important insights about the identification and emigration considerations of Hong Kong’s people, the findings should not be generalized as representative of the larger Hong Kong population.

*Interlocutors’ profiles*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Justin</th>
<th>57, Male</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Regional Finance Manager a multinational Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master’s Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Married, has children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>In the process of emigration</strong></td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audrey</th>
<th>54, Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Retired, used to work as a regional marketing manager at a multinational company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>College Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Husband is British, no children</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Planning to emigrate</strong></td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Robert</th>
<th>57, Male</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Banker at an international financial organization</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master’s Graduate</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Married, has children</strong></td>
<td><strong>Considering emigrating</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kate</strong></td>
<td><strong>50, Female</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Retired, used to professional accountant at a multinational company</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>College Graduate</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Married, no children</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Decided to not emigrate</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Martin</strong></td>
<td><strong>22, Male</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Surveyor at a multinational real estate services firm</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>College Graduate</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Single</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Planning to Emigrate</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Carly</strong></td>
<td><strong>22, Female</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>College Student at an Australian University</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Single</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Already Emigrated</strong></td>
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</table>
Data and Analysis

In the following, I present my findings and explore the relationship between identity and emigration in three parts—i) The Hong Kong Identity, ii) Search of Meanings in Recent Social Changes, and iii) Emigration Narratives.

Part 1: The Hong Kong Identity

Scholars in the field of Hong Kong Studies have long recognized that a Hong Kong identity exists in distinction to a Chinese identity. Across my interviews with interlocutors, this distinction is also apparent—regardless of their political stance, expectation of Hong Kong’s future, and sense of belonging towards China, all interlocutors described the Hong Kong identity as one that is different from a Chinese identity.

A Distinct Identity

“I don’t really feel proud of being Chinese, I don’t really have that sense!” said Audrey. Born in 1967, despite being raised in a Chinese household, Audrey does not identify herself as Chinese. “In primary and secondary school, all my teachers, headmasters...they were all Brits. I think of Britain as my motherland,” said Audrey, who then paused and clarified, “but actually, I don’t identify myself as British either, I am just a Hong Konger.” Refraining from identifying herself as Chinese or British, Audrey highlighted that Hong Kong’s people have a cultural identity of their own, and this identity is distinct from that of Chinese and British.

Similarly, Justin, a 57-year-old professional accountant, also emphasized his sense of belonging towards Hong Kong as one that is separated from that towards China. He said, “If something bad happens in mainland China, I would not have much emotions. It is just like if
something happens in North Korea, I would not have very strong emotions attached to it...Hong Kong and mainland China are two different places, I would not feel much about it [mainland China].”

Another interlocutor, Robert, 57, too, understands “Hong Konger” as an identity distinct from “Chinese.” When asked about how strongly he identifies as a Hong Konger, Robert responded that on a scale of 1 to 10, he would rate his Hong Kong identity as an 8 out of 10. Robert then explained this rating, saying that the remaining two points lie in his identity as a Chinese person and an Asian person. Here, Robert revealed his understanding of the Hong Kong identity as one that does not encompass a Chinese identity.

Unlike Audrey and Justin who refrained from identifying themselves as Chinese, Robert emphasized his Chinese identity. “I am Chinese, I was born as a Chinese person, I am completely Chinese,” said Robert. By fully identifying himself as “Chinese,” Robert hinted that while the identity of Chinese and Hong Konger are distinct, being Chinese and Hong Konger are not mutually exclusive—one can be both a Chinese and a Hong Konger.

While claiming full identity as Chinese, in the later part of his interview, Robert stated that he was not sure whether he can accurately describe the Chinese characteristics. He explained, “If you are not a mainland Chinese, you will not be able to associate with and describe a Chinese person.” This comment stood out to me as it seemed contradictory to Robert’s previous description of himself as “fully Chinese.” Here, Robert’s understanding of himself as simultaneously Chinese and not Chinese reflects the ambiguity within the Hong Kong identity. This ambiguity is also reflected in my conversation with Justin, who said, “I am Chinese...well, I am not sure whether this is right... Yes, I am a Chinese person, culturally, I mean traditional culture, and from a DNA perspective... If someone asks me what I am, I would say that I am a Hong Kong Chinese.”
Thus, on the one hand, Justin and Robert identify themselves as Chinese based on their ethnicity and historical links to China. One the other hand, however, they are aware of their lack of familiarity with modern Chinese culture; there is a sense of alienation caused by decades long cultural and political separation. These two interlocutors’ contradicting remarks reflect the difficulty they face in negotiating their identities. Ultimately, in searching for the answer to the question “who am I?,” Robert and Justin find themselves torn between their ethnic, national, and cultural identities.

“I am from Hong Kong (not China).”

“My nationality is Chinese but I am a Hong Konger. I mean... I respect and acknowledge my nationality as a Chinese person, but if people ask me where I am from, I will say I am from Hong Kong,” said Kate, a 50-year-old retired professional accountant. Unlike Justin and Robert mentioned in the previous subsection, Kate has a clear understanding that her national identity and cultural identity are different and separable. She simultaneously holds on to her national identity as Chinese, while expressing her cultural identification as a Hong Konger. It should be noted that in emphasizing her cultural identity as a Hong Konger, Kate was also implicitly expressing her refusal to be identified as, culturally, a mainland Chinese.

The reluctance to introduce oneself as mainland Chinese is a common theme that emerges across the interviews with my interlocutors. When asked why she would introduce herself as a Hong Konger, not a Chinese, Kate said, “it is more appropriate to describe myself as a Hong Konger...because of Hong Kong’s uniqueness, it is something non-existent in mainland China.”

Other interlocutors were more explicit when expressing their unwillingness and reluctance to identify and be identified with a Chinese identity. Martin, a 22-year-old graduate from the
University of Hong Kong, said, “I don’t like the fact that I am Chinese, I won’t say I am a Chinese person. But I am a Hong Konger, this is an unchangeable fact.” Here, Martin emphasized that, for him, “Chinese” is an unwanted identity, and this constitutes a reason for his preference to be identified as a Hong Konger.

It is important to note that while the interlocutors were unwilling to be identified as Chinese, they emphasized that they generally do not have a negative impression of Chinese people. Rather, their reluctance to be identified as Chinese stems more specifically from the perceived negative associations other people have with a Chinese identity.

Robert:

“If you introduce yourself as a Chinese person, people will have different associations. Normally, people have different associations with Hong Konger and Chinese, but how different the associations are is dependent on the person’s experience… I won’t intentionally say that I am not Chinese, but I will introduce myself as a Hong Konger, I want to be associated with more international knowledge.”

Carly:

“Many foreigners often associate Chinese with many not-good characteristics… you are trying to distinguish yourself from those things. I don’t want to be associated with that. [If someone does not know what Hong Konger is], I will make my own brand, I will show them we are different, we are more open-minded.”

Justin:

“I don’t want people to think that I am a Chinese person from mainland China. In the past, I probably would not have cared because others did not dislike Chinese.”
"What the Chinese government does represents the entire China... Since I live in Hong Kong, I have exposure to mainland Chinese, and I know that some people are like this [what the Chinese government represent], and some people are not. But in countries like in the US, UK, and Australia, they will think that Chinese is like that [what the Chinese government represent], and I don't want others to think that I am like that, because on this planet, probably 70-80% people dislike them.”

Across the interviews, a Hong Kong identity is often, if not always, spoken of in relation or opposition to a Chinese identity. In expressing their desire to be identified as Hong Kongers, the interlocutors also presented their reluctance to be identified as mainland Chinese. Here, an identification as a Hong Konger becomes simultaneously an identification as not-mainland-Chinese. As seen from the responses, for some, the desire to be identified as Hong Konger originates from the appropriateness of using “Hong Konger” to describe oneself. For others, the unwillingness also stems from an unwanted association with mainland Chinese, an identity that they perceive to be imbued with negative qualities. Thus, it may also be argued that it is precisely due to some unique and different characteristics the interlocutors saw in a Hong Kong identity that they choose to identify themselves as Hong Kongers, not Chinese.

Characteristics of Hong Kong’s People

When describing and talking about the attributes of Hong Kong’s people, certain adjectives were repeatedly brought up by my interlocutors: “international,” “flexible,” “pragmatic,” “freedom-loving,” and “hard-working.” My interlocutors agreed that some of these qualitative values, such as “hard-working” and “flexible”, are not unique to Hong Kongers—these characteristics are also possessed by mainland Chinese. At the same time, my interlocutors
emphasized that some of these characteristics are applicable only to Hong Kongers. These characteristics included “international” and “freedom-loving.” Thus, for my interlocutors, while Hong Kongers share similar qualities with mainland Chinese, they are also qualitatively distinct from mainlanders due to the western values they adopted during their colonial past.

This understanding of the Hong Konger as a person who exhibits traditional Chinese characteristics, while at the same time displaying characteristics considered more westernized, echoes Mathews (1997), who notes that the cultural identity of “Hong Kongese” is built on the notion of being “Chinese-plus,” which includes values such as democracy, colonial education, and capitalism. These values are developed from the colonial systems and institutions—a capitalist economy, independent legal and education system, as well as human rights and press freedom—that created in Hong Kong a social and political environment distinct from mainland China.

Qualities of Hong Kong’s People—An Evaluation

The Hong Konger characteristics described by my interlocutors are not neutral, uncharged attributions of difference between Hong Kongers and mainland Chinese. Drawing from Munn’s (1987) notion of qualisigns of value, the manner in which my interlocutors discursively characterized qualities of Hong Kongers and mainland Chinese indexed their qualitative experiences of the two identities, and signified the values they place on those particular qualities. In addition, through describing Hong Kong’s people in relation, or in opposition to, mainland Chinese, my interlocutors have not only endowed the qualities with values, but have also placed the qualities (along with the identities they represent) in relation to one another along a hierarchical axis of differentiation (see Dumont 1980 and Gal and Irvine 2019).
In the interviews, after asking my interlocutors to discuss Hong Konger qualities, I asked them explicitly how they would compare Hong Kongers to mainland Chinese. Below are some of their responses.

Audrey:

“We are more international... the way that they [mainland Chinese] think is still not international. Having an international mindset means that one is very opened to foreign mindset and foreign ideas, that one is very open-minded, very curious...”

Martin:

“Chinese people focus on benefits, they focus on themselves, their education standards are lower...and these are related to their critical and independent thinking... These are all due to their cultural background and education system, which cause the loss of values, and the loss of values will lead to a lower baseline of morality... these are all very important.”

Robert:

“Education is generally different. Hong Kong’s people will have relatively more knowledge about international affairs, more exposure to other cultures, they will have stronger association with professional life... integrity and compliance with law will be stronger.”
Kate:

“Hong Kong’s people, since they were under British rule, their thoughts, exposures, and so on, are broader... these should be to our advantage.”

In asking the interlocutors to compare Hong Kong’s people to mainland Chinese, I hoped to explore how the interlocutors would evaluate Hong Kong’s people and mainland Chinese along an axis of differentiation (see Gal and Irvine 2019). It turns out that what was previously emphasized as Hong Konger characteristics—"international," “exposure,” “western education,” and so on—were repeatedly mentioned by my interlocutors when they compared Hong Konger to mainland Chinese. This hints that when my interlocutors were assigning qualities to Hong Kong’s people earlier, mainland Chinese were already situated on the opposite end of the axis of differentiation as the reference or “point of departure” for comparison (Sapir 1944; see Carruthers 2017, Kockelman 2016). Thus, in describing what Hong Kong’s people are, the interlocutors simultaneously described what mainland Chinese are not. As such, the Hong Kong identity is arguably not only different from a Chinese identity, but also constructed vis-à-vis its differences from a Chinese identity.

In the above dialogues, some contrasting descriptions include “high” versus “low” in education standard and morality, “more” versus “less” in curiosity and openness, “strong” versus “weak” in integrity, and “broad” versus “narrow” in exposure. In describing Hong Kong’s people as having “stronger,” “broader”, and “more” of the characteristics considered to be desirable, my interlocutors expressed their positive evaluations of Hong Kong’s people, a relative negative evaluation of mainland Chinese, and an evaluation that Hong Kong’s people are superior. In addition, intensifiers such as “very” were repeatedly employed by Audrey when describing these
qualities. These intensifiers discursively index her perception of a high degree of differentiation between Hong Konger and mainland Chinese.

The sense that Hong Konger is superior to mainland Chinese also stands out in my conversations with some of the interlocutors.

When asked what his impressions of mainland Chinese were and whether he would use the same adjectives he used to describe Hong Kong’s people to describe mainland Chinese, Martin said, “the words I used [to describe Hong Kong’s people] were relatively neutral. I think when describing mainland Chinese, I will switch to some negative terms. For example, I will probably replace ‘realistic’ with ‘selfish’.” Here, Martin’s explicit mention of using negative terms to describe a Chinese person signifies his negative evaluation of mainland Chinese people and the qualities they possess.

Audrey illustrated the difference between a Hong Konger and a mainland Chinese using Maslow's hierarchy of needs. “According to the psychology of Maslow, I think the mainlanders focus more on the bottom part...Hong Kongers are more into self-actualization as compared to the mainlanders. I think in the mainland, they are still focusing on basic needs, food, and stuff like that.” Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is a folk-framework dealing with notions of levels and hierarchy. Through employing the Maslow’s hierarchy and placing Hong Kong’s people at the top of the pyramid and mainland Chinese at the bottom, Audrey revealed her evaluation of Hong Kongers’ qualities as superior. It is also important to note that Maslow’s hierarchy is a process of progression from the bottom to the top of the pyramid. Thus, by placing Hong Kong’s people and mainland Chinese at opposite ends of this pyramidal schema, Audrey hinted that for her, Hong Kong’s people have reached the end of their progression, while at the same time, to become a mainland Chinese would involve a regression.
During my interviews, I found that westernized values and international characteristics were not only passively spoken about by the interlocutors, but were also manifested in the interviewees’ actions. Kluckhohn (1951) describes values as “desirables”—values are what one believes one ought to desire, prompting individuals to “select[] one line of thought or action rather than another” (1951, 402). As such, actions are reflective of values as they are choices made based on one’s values.

Many interlocutors quoted other countries as examples to elaborate their points. For example, when speaking about China’s international relationships, Justin mentioned China’s maritime claim on the south sea region near Malaysia. Rather than merely expressing his opinions on China’s maritime claim, Justin supported his opinions by explaining how the maritime claim influences the geographic relationships between states in Malaysia. In the process, Justin demonstrated his understanding of countries outside of his own. Similarly, when describing the political environment in Hong Kong, Audrey compared Hong Kong’s political system to the democratic systems in the UK and the US. In so doing, Audrey demonstrated her knowledge about political systems not only existing in her immediate surroundings, but also in other places around the world.

Through conveying their messages by making connections to occurrences in other countries, my interlocutors demonstrated that the way they understand their surroundings is not only through their immediate experience, but also through events happening elsewhere. This way of thinking where they constantly think in relation to other countries reflects certain values associated with a westernized education and a capitalist economy that comes with the colonial history of Hong Kong.
Three interlocutors, Audrey, Robert, and Carly, chose to conduct the interviews primarily in English despite being given the option to conduct the interview in Cantonese, which they identified as their native language. For the other interlocutors, while they chose to conduct the interview in Cantonese when given the option, they also incorporated a significant number of English words in their dialogues. For example, when asked to provide a few adjectives to describe a Hong Konger, Justin gave all adjectives in English rather than Cantonese. When describing her daily language usage, Kate said, “As a Hong Konger, I think our daily conversation is a mix of English and Cantonese.” That said, being international is a part of all day-to-day interactions of Hong Kong’s people, dictating the manner in which they talk, think, and behave.

Part 2: Search of Meanings in Recent Social Changes

To explore how Hong Kong’s people understand and give meaning to recent social changes, I asked my interlocutors what has changed for them following the 2019 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement and the implementation of the National Security Law.

One common response across my interviews is the notion of “becoming more like China” or “becoming more Chinese.” The integration into mainland China is experienced by my interlocutors in multiple arenas, including the political, economic, and cultural. Changes perceived in the political and economic arenas are relatively congruent. Politically, the Chinese government is asserting more influence and control over Hong Kong. Economically, businesses are becoming more China-focused—there are more mainland Chinese professionals working in Hong Kong, and the working language has been shifting from Cantonese and English to Mandarin. In the following analysis, I focus on my interlocutors' experiences from a cultural perspective. In particular, I
explore how Hong Kong’s people assign meanings to the political and economic changes in Hong Kong.

**Changing Core Values**

In the interviews, some of my interlocutors described the recent social changes as changes affecting the core values of Hong Kong.

When asked about what is happening in Hong Kong, Martin commented, “Hong Kong is experiencing a second-time return. The first time is the actual handover of autonomy. This time, Hong Kong is experiencing something culturally. They [The Chinese government] are taking back the essence of the society, including the systems and people’s ideology.” When asked further, Martin explained that “people’s ideology” refers to the conflict between Western and Chinese values, such as the value of freedom and democracy. Martin then commented on what has changed for him after the social movements in 2019. “My daily life, I mean my routines, is not really affected... but I can see that people’s mindset, their feelings, and the atmosphere in the society... these have changed a lot,” he said. “These changes resulted from the changes in the core values of Hong Kong, such as high degree of autonomy, freedom of the press and media, separation of powers...”

According to Martin, the cultural changes in Hong Kong are not visible in the cultural practices and living patterns manifested in one’s daily routine. Rather, what is changing are the values of freedom and democracy, which he referred to as the “essence” and “core” of Hong Kong that are inseparable from the colonial systems and doctrines of high degree of autonomy, freedom of the press and media, and separation of powers.
Similarly, Carly emphasized that while the “physical” aspects of Hong Kong are going to remain the same, the core values of Hong Kong are going to change. “If you are talking about the physical stuff, obviously it’s going to stay modern, the place is still going to be a metropolitan city, very vibrant, and very fast paced... but if you are integrated into a city, these are not the impressions you would have for the city. The city is full of memories... it’s not going to be the same for anyone who grew up there, it’s going to be different...,” said Carly, who then elaborated on the differences she was referring to, “They are the core values of Hong Kong, such as the Basic Law, separation of powers, judicial independence, rule of law, political stability, and freedom of the press... all of these WERE the core values of Hong Kong...but in the future, it’s absolutely not going to be the same.”

For Martin and Carly, the primary changes experienced are not visible externally from the physical features of Hong Kong and the daily routines of Hong Kong’s people. The changes pertain exclusively to Hong Kong’s people, to those who “grew up there,” and to those who are deeply integrated into the culture. Through describing the changes experienced as ones invisible yet nevertheless core and essential, my two interlocutors highlighted that instead of being merely pragmatic, the recent social changes are highly ideological, where the meaning of changes comes to be derived from the values one places on the colonial legacy of rule of law, separation of powers, and freedom of the press. Consequently, changes in Hong Kong can only be experienced by those who place value on these colonial legacies as they navigate their day-to-day lives in search of meanings and possibilities.
“Becoming China”: Becoming Less, Becoming Worse

Multiple interlocutors described Hong Kong’s integration into mainland China as worsening and diminishing.

Justin:

“Hong Kong’s unique features are disappearing... the degree of freedom has lessened, our east-meet-west feature is deteriorating (退化), we can already see foreigners leaving, Hong Kong is becoming more like a mainland Chinese city...”

“I am quite unhappy because I see things getting less and less—the things I can use, the things I can do. There are more and more things that I cannot do. For example, I feel like some newspapers, those with varied values, are already closed; the media we have now all has the exact same perspectives. The things they talk about are very single-dimensional, they are not comprehensive. I am worried that the foreign news and foreign commentaries I am currently reading will be gone in the future, just like in mainland China.”

Through describing the process of “becoming China” as disappearing, less, and deteriorating, Justin implied that qualities of Hong Kong and mainland China vary by degree. These words that Justin employed also index his schema or axis of differentiation (see Carruthers 2017, Gal and Irvine 2019, Sapir 1944), where the qualities of Hong Kong are, on one end of the spectrum, experienced or envisioned as “better” and “more,” whereas the qualities of mainland China are, on opposite end of the spectrum, experienced as “worse” and “less.”
Carly used the phrases “being blended” and “losing its colors” to describe the integration into China.

“The path is quite clear of where Hong Kong is going in the next 10-20 years, with 90% certainty it will end up like Shenzhen, becoming more and more like Shenzhen. As a Hong Konger, seeing it being blended and losing its color, it’s a really unfortunate thing.”

Audrey described Hong Kong as currently being in a stage of being shrunken through using a “bird in a cage” analogy.

“A lot of people compare Hong Kong to Singapore. I think of Singaporeans as birds in a cage. Hong Kong’s people are birds outside the cage, they are wild birds. Birds outside the cage need to work hard to find food while those inside the cage don't have to. So birds inside the cage think that birds outside the cage are stupid, while birds outside the cage think that birds inside the cage are just locked. Both are happy in different ways. But Hong Kong’s people are struggling because they are at the stage of going into the cage.”

The above dialogues reveal that in the schemas of the interlocutors, Hong Kong and mainland China are put on the same spectrum, and mainland China is evaluated negatively relative to Hong Kong. The descriptions of the integration into China as a process of shrinking, worsening, and becoming less show that the qualities of mainland China, and correspondingly the integration into China, are considered of less value and undesirable.
Challenges to the Success of Hong Kong

The interlocutors also pointed out that the changes that come along with the integration into China are influencing the success of Hong Kong.

Justin:

“I really like how international Hong Kong was. I like that we are an international financial hub, that we have the best of the West and China—we are the fusion of both—and we are very free. If you have a central government, it is almost impossible to have an efficient economy... We have media freedom, we can access all kinds of information, these are what make Hong Kong successful as a financial center... these qualities are what I like about Hong Kong, but all these are diminishing under the Chinese Communist Party.”

Martin:

“I think what make Hong Kong an international financial center are our legal system and press freedom. This is because when you don’t have press freedom, you won’t have the flow of information. When this happens, you will not be able to react.”

The above dialogues demonstrate that for Justin and Martin, the success of Hong Kong is built upon press freedom and legal systems, two aspects of the society created during Hong Kong’s colonial past and unique from mainland China. Consequently, a removal of a separate economic and legal system is perceived as a threat to the success of Hong Kong. This explains why an integration into China is seen in a negative light as diminishing and worsening.
Audrey described the current situation as the worst time of Hong Kong.

“I am very lucky. I was born in the heyday of Hong Kong, when Hong Kong was transforming the most. I enjoyed the best time of Hong Kong...Since we have gone through the best time and we see the worst time now, the impact is very big.”

Similar to Justin and Martin, Audrey believes that what enabled the “heydays” and “best” time of Hong Kong were the ability to be international and free, qualities interdependent on colonial infrastructures such as economic and legal systems. Consequently, perceived changes in these infrastructures meant that the “best time” and “heydays” of Hong Kong no longer exist, and Hong Kong is at, and will be continuing to move towards, its “worst time.”

“Even Worse”

Another common phrase that emerges from the interviews with my interlocutors is “even worse.” Multiple interlocutors described Hong Kong as being, or going to be, “even worse” than other cities in China.

Audrey:

“It will be the same as one of the cities in mainland China, or even worse, I mean, worse in the sense that it’s a complete control.”
Justin:

“If you remove the characteristics of Hong Kong that make it different from mainland China, then Hong Kong has no uniqueness, it would probably become even worse than an ordinary city in mainland China.”

Martin:

“The China-izing is done even more thoroughly in Hong Kong...that’s why Hong Kong is even worse compared to a city in mainland China.”

The phrase “even worse” indicates a comparison by interlocutors in describing how they expect Hong Kong to appear in relation to the current state of a Chinese city. By choosing to use the phrase “even worse,” which features the adverbial intensifier “even” as opposed to “worse than” (a phrase which also indicates a comparative operation), the interlocutors expressed negatively evaluative stances toward the qualities of cities in mainland China. The phrase “even worse” implies that it is not just going to be “worse than,” but it is going to be “worse than” what is already “worse.” The phrase indexes both a negative evaluation of a present mainland Chinese city and a negative anticipation of Hong Kong’s future. As will be touched upon in the next section—Emigration Narratives—when combined, the negative evaluation and anticipation act as strong motivations for emigration.
“I am no longer complete”: Loss of Freedom of Speech and its Challenge to the Hong Kong Identity

One change mentioned by the interlocutors as one of the most drastic changes seen in Hong Kong is an increase in government control over speech and media, which simultaneously results in a reduction in freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Justin and Audrey specifically pointed out that an increased control over speech and media has affected their being and identity.

When asked about what the increased control over media and speech meant to him, Justin commented:

“The loss of media diversity meant that I am no longer complete. I can only see one side of every issue; it is as if I am living in a world of illusion. I will pity myself if I live in a world without media diversity...”

For Justin, media diversity helps him to stay knowledgeable about international issues and provides him with the ability to think from multiple perspectives. This corresponds to the notion of being international, which, for Justin, is a core quality of his Hong Kong identity. Consequently, a reduction in media diversity threatens Justin’s core values, giving rise to a feeling of being incomplete.

Audrey pointed out how the loss of freedom of speech results in a loss of “substance” in Hong Kong’s people.

“Substance is about quality, from a cultural and artistic perspective...you have the depth of a conversation, you can elaborate. For something that doesn’t have a substance, you
can only describe it. When the environment does not allow you to talk about it, you won’t go deeper anymore, because you may get into trouble, it is not fun anymore.”

Through referring to the freedom to speak in depth about one’s own perspective on an issue, rather than solely describing an issue, as a “substance,” Audrey highlighted the essence of freedom of speech in the Hong Kong identity.

Audrey then added:

“Hong Kong’s people have a good sense of humor, they can laugh at themselves, but now we are not allowed to have a good sense of humor, there are no more jokes.”

By shining a positive light on Hong Kongers’ sense of humor, Audrey revealed that their sense of humor is a quality she values and takes pride in. More importantly, Audrey pointed out that this “good” sense of humor only exists under freedom of the press and freedom of speech. Consequently, an increased control in media and speech prevents her from holding on to this quality.

In referring to freedom of speech as “substance” and an essential element to being “complete,” Audrey and Justin expressed the strong value they place on media freedom and highlighted that freedom of the press is core to their being and their identity; without freedom of media, they are not whole. As they understand the current situation as a loss in media freedom, they are thrust into a new reality in which they must re-negotiate their being and identity in the world.
Alternative Interpretations of Changes

In the above, I have touched upon some negative evaluations of the integration into China. However, not all of my interlocutors expressed such negative evaluative stances. While notions of diminishing or worsening are common and prominent throughout my interviews with four of my interlocutors, these descriptions are almost absent in my interviews with Robert and Kate.

When asked about what is happening in Hong Kong, rather than emphasizing that there is a negative change that is worsening and diminishing, Robert focused on describing Hong Kong as being in an accelerated state of changes.

“It’s always changing; the change is not unusual. Right now, the change we are experiencing is to become more integrated with China, but you can’t say whether it is good or bad. You just need to adjust to it. Usually, when changes take place over a long period of time, you don’t really feel as much, it is easier to adjust. We have changes all the time anyway, and we have been adjusting quite alright. It is just that the current social events have triggered a lot of changes, and the changes are taking place over a much shorter time period.”

“It would shock some people in a way, but generally Hong Kong’s people are quite adaptive and flexible, I can see that this [the change] would ultimately be absorbed and accepted as a new way of life.”
The other interlocutor, Kate, described Hong Kong as being sick and lost rather than expressing pessimism towards Hong Kong’s future. For Kate, Hong Kong’s future is dependent on what Hong Kong’s people do right now.

“I think Hong Kong is very ill right now. Our pneuma(元氣) is hurt very badly. Pneuma means the power gathered by people from a place to fight against external forces.”

Kate then elaborated on what she thinks Hong Kong’s people should focus on right now.

“The role of Hong Kong is blurred. In the past, Hong Kong was a window for mainland China. But now, mainland China is opening its own windows. If Hong Kong cannot leverage its advantage, it will be easily replaced by other mainland Chinese cities. One thing that is unique to Hong Kong is our legal system. The question is, how are we going to solidify our advantage and utilize it... I think this is something Hong Kong’s people have to think about right now.”

Like other interlocutors, Kate and Robert identified freedom as a quality of Hong Kong’s people. By identifying as a Hong Konger, Kate and Robert expressed the value they placed on freedom. Despite similarities in values, however, the meanings assigned to recent social changes by Kate and Robert vary hugely from those of other interlocutors. As the following dialogues will show, this difference is largely due to a different perception Kate and Robert have on Hong Kong’s status quo and future.
Kate:

“I don’t think of Hong Kong as having no freedom. This is because as long as you are within the framework, you are very free. It is true that there are things you cannot do under the National Security Law, but think about it, there are also things that you cannot do under the British colonial government. Do you think you would be ok if you throw eggs at the Queen’s statue? Every country has their own rule. If you think that being free is to be able to do things outside of the rules, outside of the framework, then you are not going to have freedom. If you respect the system, then you have freedom... I think one must be fairer. Sometimes the freedom that Hong Kong’s people want does not exist even in foreign countries [pointing to countries with western democratic systems].”

I then asked Kate about her thoughts on the increased control over media. She said:

“I don’t think it is a huge concern. Even if you are in mainland China, there are ways where you can access information from the outside. There is no need to make a great deal out of it.”

Thus, for Kate, the recent social changes have not affected how freedom is practiced in Hong Kong. To integrate into China does not mean that there would be a change in the level of freedom. Further, Kate believes that even when press freedom is seemingly suppressed under a governing body, access to news and information can still exist. As such, integration into China need not to be a “lessening” and “worsening” phenomenon.
Robert:

“\textbf{It is true that they [the Chinese government] can make Hong Kong the same as mainland China, where even Facebook and YouTube are not allowed, but will they actually do it? Not necessarily, although the control is going to be tighter than before.”}

“\textbf{Many people will compare Hong Kong with Singapore, and frankly speaking, Hong Kong is just, to a certain extent, becoming more like Singapore... Is Singapore's economy bad? Its economy is good, the economic development is good, and it has foreign investment... Do you need to be very free to have economic prosperity? I believe not necessarily.”}

Robert has an expectation for Hong Kong’s future that is different from other interlocutors. Whereas other interlocutors are pessimistic about the level of freedom Hong Kong would continue to have in the future, hope remains in Robert that freedom will be available in Hong Kong. On top of that, while Robert describes freedom as a core value of Hong Kong’s people, he does not see it as a crucial factor to the success of Hong Kong. Thus, for Robert, even if freedom of the press is limited, Hong Kong will still be able to flourish and gain success economically. The difference between Robert and other interlocutors’ interpretations of recent social changes shows that the meaning assigned to an experience is not only influenced by one’s values and aspirations, but that it also varies depending on one’s anticipation of the future.

Part 3: Emigration Narratives

To explore how recent social changes have impacted emigration (and non-emigration) decisions, I asked my interlocutors about their thoughts on emigration. The interlocutors described
their varied considerations for emigration. In the following, I present the emigration narratives of the six interlocutors. Echoing Carling, Collins, Van Hear, and others (2018), these emigration narratives demonstrate that emigration decisions are not reducible to a single calculated rational choice nor a single point in time. Ultimately, emigration decisions are complex processes, rooted in aspirations and anticipations, restricted and facilitated by external forces, and mediated by shifting exposures and current states of being.

**Justin and Audrey: Aspirations and Anticipations**

The emigration narratives of Justin and Audrey exemplify how aspirations—who one wants to be—and anticipations—how one expects the future to look like—work conjointly to motivate emigration decisions. Both Justin and Audrey evinced strong desires to emigrate, and both have revealed concrete plans to emigrate in the very near future.

When asked about his emigration plans, Justin told me that he has plans to leave Hong Kong in the coming one to two years. He will be immigrating to the United Kingdom through applying for the British National (Overseas)—BN(O)—visa. The BN(O) visa is available to British National (Overseas), a status that every person born in Hong Kong before 1997 will have; it allows British Nationals (Overseas) and their close family members to live, work, and study in the UK for up to five years, after which they are eligible to apply for permanent settlement and British citizenship.

When asked what prompts his decision to emigrate, Justin said:
“I am pessimistic about the current situation, and I expect the future situation to not look good. Every day, I see the existing freedom and rights slowly fading, I am unhappy... and I don't know what Hong Kong would look like in the end. There is too much uncertainty.”

“If the trend stops, maybe I can tolerate, although I am already very unsatisfied with the current situation, but I don't see the trend stopping.”

In the above dialogue, Justin expresses feelings of being pessimistic, unhappy, and unsatisfied. This is because while he values and aspires for a life with freedom and rights, he sees the freedom and rights he values fading as Hong Kong becomes more integrated into China. As Justin anticipates these values to continue fading in the future, the integration of Hong Kong into China meant that Hong Kong will no longer be a place for him to achieve his aspirations.

When asked about what emigration means to him, he said:

“If I leave this place, there will be security, there is less risk... and those loss of freedom and rights, if I leave, I won't feel that much, I won't be that unhappy, and I won't be that worried about what the future will be.”

“I know roughly how life would look like when I get there [to the immigration destination], but I don't know how the situation would look like here [in Hong Kong], the potential change here might be too huge that I would rather leave...I have no other choice, it is not ideal, but I have to do it.”
Similarly, Audrey expressed hopelessness regarding Hong Kong’s future.

“I think Hong Kong is over. If I stay here, I will feel so stuck, it will be so backwards, it is not growing...”

“It’s depressing, frustrating, hopeless, and sad.”

Like Justin, Audrey has plans to emigrate from Hong Kong to the United Kingdom in the near future. Audrey said that the current situation of Hong Kong constitutes half of the reason for her leaving, with the remaining 50% of the reason being her husband. Audrey’s husband is British, so they have had plans to eventually move to the UK for retirement. The current situation, nevertheless, gave Audrey a reason to leave much sooner than planned.

Further, Audrey pointed particularly to “maintaining a Hong Kong identity” and “being [her]self” as motivations for emigration. She said:

“In Hong Kong, I think the Hong Kong identity is certainly going to diminish... I think that is the reason, I want to keep my Hong Kong identity, I want to be myself, I am trying, I am grasping at straws (垂死掲扎). You will never know... I think staying here, there is definitely no way out; being in another country, there is no guarantee, but you still can explore, we will have a chance, who knows...”

For Audrey, the Hong Kong identity is diminishing as Hong Kong becomes more integrated into China. In highlighting “keeping a Hong Kong identity”, and “be myself” as motivations for emigration, and through expressing her hopelessness for Hong Kong’s future,
Audrey demonstrated how aspirations and anticipations simultaneously influence her emigration decisions.

Emerging from my conversations with these two interlocutors is another theme concerning Appadurai’s (2013) ethics of possibility and probability. Here, possibility refers to the possibility to retain a capacity to aspire—to be a Hong Konger and to uphold the values of freedom. Probability, in turn, refers to the subjective perception of the actual likelihood of realizing this aspiration in the real world. Thus, possibility is an aspiration dependent on one’s values and identity, while probability is dependent on one’s expectations of the future and associated risk assessments.

For Justin and Audrey, their emigration decisions arguably result from a subconscious calculation of the possibility and probability in both Hong Kong and the UK. The above dialogues show that for Audrey, who aspires to maintain a Hong Kong identity, there is “no way out” in Hong Kong, whereas there is a “chance” with emigration. For Justin, who aspires for a life with freedom and security, the life post-emigration is predictable, whereas the risk of staying in Hong Kong is uncertain, and the “potential change [in Hong Kong] might be too huge.” In both cases, emigrating presents a better possibility to retain the capacity to aspire and higher probability to achieve the aspiration. As a result, emigration decisions arose.

**Martin and Robert: The Driver Complexes**

Unlike Justin and Audrey who identified recent social changes as main reasons for their emigration, Martin and Robert emphasized that recent social changes are only one of the many factors when considering emigration. In this way, the emigration narratives of Martin and Robert showcase certain driver complexes for emigration outlined by Van Hear, Bakewell, and Long
(2018), where drivers and aspirations interact and work in combination to shape migration decisions.

Martin is planning to emigrate within the coming five years through Canada’s immigration scheme for Hong Kong’s people. Canada’s immigration scheme for Hong Kong’s people allows recent graduates of post-secondary educational institution (within five years) to live and work in Canada for up to three years, and apply for permanent residency during that period.

When asked why he wanted to emigrate, Martin said,

“I don’t like the big city vibe in Hong Kong, like the pace and what people are striving for... In the past, I have always felt that I won’t live in Hong Kong forever, I like going around. So now my emigration plan is just pushed forward, partly because of the social environment, but also because now we have a convenient immigration scheme.”

A good life for Martin involves a life without the pace and features of a city like Hong Kong. In the above, Martin points out that his aspirations to live elsewhere, to be otherwise, long existed before recent social changes. In Martin’s case, challenges to Hong Kongers’ values posed by recent social movements solidify his hopes to emigrate, and the emigration schemes that became available after the implementation of National Security Law serve as an external structural force that facilitates his emigration process.

The other interlocutor, Robert, is considering emigrating but does not know where to go. Similar to Martin, Robert emphasized lifestyle as his main consideration for emigration.
“I think it is mainly lifestyle...I have always thought about it [emigration]. It is too expensive to live in Hong Kong. The social movement is just adding one more reason for emigration. Think about this, if a place is expensive AND not affordable AND has no freedom, AND there is no internet, I don’t think anyone who has the choice to emigrate will choose not to consider it.”

“I want to find a place that is comparable to Hong Kong but less expensive, but I can’t find a place that is more affordable but with similar safety, freedom, convenience... The United Kingdom could be a possible destination, but then there are other things to consider—whether it is convenient, and how high the tax rates are.”

While Robert agreed that freedom and convenience, important values described by Justin and Audrey, are part of his considerations for emigration, he also pointed out that other values, such as affordability and tax rates, are relevant considerations. Dumont’s (1980) concept of hierarchy posits that values are incorporated in different domains or levels. These domains are ranked, wherein ideas within the more superior domains come to encompass those within some subordinate domain. While considerations such as freedom and lifestyle prompt Robert to consider emigrating, factors residing in other domains, such as convenience and tax rates, act as contradicting forces, pushing him towards other directions, resulting in his current state where his emigration decision remains unknown. In considering emigration, Robert is placed into a situation where he must evaluate the relative importance of each domain.
Kate and Carly: Shifting Aspiration Windows and Aspiration Gaps

Ray (2006) explains that aspiration forms within a person’s aspiration window—the possibilities conceived in one’s own social exposure, which allow one to form a future one might imagine, anticipate, and aspire toward. Further, Ray argues that future-oriented behaviors are influenced by an aspiration gap—“the difference between the standard of living that’s aspired to and the standard of living that one already has” (2006, 4).

Kate and Carly’s emigration narratives demonstrate how aspiration windows—one’s exposure—and aspiration gaps—which are determined by one’s aspiration and her current state of being—influence emigration considerations, and hence emigration behaviors.

Unlike my other interlocutors mentioned above, Kate explained that while she had considered emigrating, she has decided that she will not emigrate, at least for the time-being.

“The reason I considered emigration was purely to explore opportunities to further improve my current living situation, to live a life that I want more. But after considering it, I realized my current situation is pretty good, so I am not considering it anymore... I don’t think my life will be better if I immigrate to another place.”

In comparison to other interlocutors, Kate has a wider exposure to mainland China. When working as a professional accountant, Kate lived in mainland China for more than eight years. This experience gave her a deeper understanding of what life in an “ordinary city of China” looked like, an understanding the other interlocutors do not have.

I asked Kate to compare her experience living in mainland China and in Hong Kong, she said:
“It is more spacious in mainland China, but there are more restrictions. For example, they require you to use a specific bank for utility payments, and if they need to digitalize something, they will set a deadline and you would have to do it by the deadline. I think there are pros and cons to it...the good thing is that it is very efficient. Of course, it is inconvenient, but people have gotten used to it.”

Kate’s previous living experience in mainland China has created for her a relatively different aspiration window from my other interlocutors. Her first-hand experience of the mainland has given her a different understanding of the pros and cons of living in an ordinary Chinese city. Unlike other interlocutors who perceive the integration of China as unbearable, diminishing, and worsening, Kate’s aspiration window involves the possibility of getting used to it. This allows her to have a more positive anticipation of the integration into China.

Currently living in Australia, Carly is the only person among the six interlocutors who has already begun her emigration process and is in the process of getting Australian citizenship. Carly is a 22-year-old college student, and emigration was not an active choice she has made.

When asked about why she emigrated, Carly said:

“It’s my family. My parents decided to immigrate to Australia. At the time when they applied [for immigration], I was still under 18, so I was automatically considered to immigrate together as a dependent. But the reason I am here is because of school. My current major was not available to me in Hong Kong, and my parents wanted me to come to Australia. I didn’t really mind, so now I am here.”
Unlike other interlocutors whose emigration decisions were actively made, Carly emigrated at an age where emigration cannot, institutionally, be an independent and autonomic decision. Carly’s emigration narrative represents one that is influenced more by kin systems, institutionalized immigration rules, education opportunities, and so on, rather than her own aspirations and anticipations of Hong Kong’s future.

When asked what her plans after graduation are, Carly expressed uncertainty and frustration.

“I don’t know, I really have no idea. I think I want to go back to Hong Kong … the tax here, I hate it so much… oh…I want to go back to Hong Kong…”

It is important to highlight that Carly was very active in social and political movements during her time in Hong Kong. She was strongly against the Chinese government’s political agenda, and was an outspoken supporter for freedom of speech and media.

During the interview, Carly said;

“Freedom of the press is power; it is very important… For those who cannot leave, it’s a really sad thing because they are forced to give up the rights they have, or used to have...these are the people who are going to lose their colors and blend in, or if they try to speak up, the worst case is that they will not be able to protect their own personal safety.”

For Carly, her aspirations do not align with her anticipations of Hong Kong’s future—she values freedom, a quality that she does not think Hong Kong will have. However, when
considering whether to move back to Hong Kong, questions of tax rates, rather than freedom, appear to be more relevant concerns for Carly. Here, one could draw once again on Dumont’s (1980) hierarchy of value and argue that Carly’s consideration reflects how she values economic fortune more strongly than political freedom per se. Nevertheless, given Carly’s strong opinion on freedom and on Hong Kong’s integration into China, I argue that it is instead her current situation—a new emigration status—that is primarily guiding her emigration considerations.

Further, Carly’s emigration narrative sheds light on how her exposure affects her aspiration window, which in turn influences future-oriented behaviors. “I saw people around me working in mainland China, those who are even more outspoken than I am. I have questioned how they can survive there, but now I am thinking this: if even they can survive there, why couldn’t I?” She then added, “And at that time, I will already have Australian citizenship, I have the protection.”

For Carly, her aspiration window shifted as she sees people who are “more outspoken” than her doing fine in mainland China—a Hong Kong that is more integrated into China is now viewed as a potential environment to settle in. In addition, as she becomes an Australian citizen, her situation will also change. Though she might choose to leave Hong Kong, her new citizenship will provide her with certain protections, which is motivating her to move back. Together, Carly’s new aspiration window and her anticipation for her new citizenship status influence her emigration decisions.
Conclusion

Following the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill social movements in 2019 and the implementation of the National Security Law by the Chinese government in 2020, a significant number of people left the city of Hong Kong, creating a new wave of emigration. Drawing on notions of values, aspirations, and anticipations, this thesis has explored the ways these social movements and the National Security Law have affected emigration decisions and processes.

Echoing previous studies in Hong Kong Studies, the interlocutors in this study described a Hong Kong identity that is distinct from that of mainland Chinese. This distinct identity results from unique qualities and characteristics Hong Kong’s people adopted during their colonial past. Conversations with my interlocutors have revealed that identifications as a Hong Konger rather than Chinese stem primarily from the contrastive evaluation of Hong Kongers’ characteristics vis-à-vis those of mainland Chinese. The attributions my interlocutors used and the lines of action they selected reflect a sense of superiority, indexing a positive evaluation of Hong Kong’s people in relation to mainland Chinese, and simultaneously, a negative evaluation of mainland Chinese. These evaluations of the qualities of Hong Kong’s people and mainland Chinese hint at the values and aspirations of the interlocutors; they speak for the qualities the interlocutors find desirable, and the persons the interlocutors desire to become.

An observation that emerges across the interviews is that Hong Kong’s people are described by the interlocutors through comparisons made to mainland Chinese, whereby Hong Kong’s people and mainland Chinese are placed at opposite ends of an axis of differentiation. As such, Hong Kongers are not only different from mainland Chinese due to some unique qualities they adopted during their colonial past, the Hong Kong identity is arguably constructed upon its differences from mainland Chinese.
The implementation of the National Security Law is experienced by all the interlocutors as an increased integration of Hong Kong into China. Some interlocutors described this increased integration towards China as a change to Hong Kong’s core values such as its high degree of autonomy, freedom of the press, and separation of powers. These values are unique values of Hong Kong’s people enabled by infrastructures developed during Hong Kong’s colonial past. Through describing these qualities as “core” values of Hong Kong, my interlocutors reinforced the idea that a Hong Kong identity centers on its differences from a mainland Chinese identity.

The majority of my interlocutors shone a negative light on integration into China. Due to their relative negative evaluations of mainland Chinese in comparison to Hong Kong’s people, integration into China is seen as “becoming less” and “becoming worse.” The changes experienced are perceived as challenges to the success of Hong Kong as they are seen to remove qualities of Hong Kong that have enabled the city to become an international financial center. Further, two interlocutors explicitly described the loss of speech and media freedom as challenges to their identity as it undermines the essential qualities of Hong Kong’s people, which consequently gives rise to the feeling of being incomplete.

It should be noted that although all interlocutors described some negative consequences of integration into China, my interlocutors’ degree of dejection varies. While some interlocutors expressed frustration and hopelessness towards the future of Hong Kong, others expressed sentiments of hope. The differences in sentiments towards the future was a result from a varied anticipation of the future. For the interlocutors who expressed more positive evaluations about integration, qualities described as core qualities of Hong Kong such as freedom of speech and media are not necessarily going to be lost during the process of integration. As I examined the way my interlocutors understood their identities and their expectations for the future, it became
apparent to me that meanings assigned to social changes in Hong Kong are strongly intertwined with aspirations and anticipations of the future.

The emigration narratives by my interlocutors revealed that emigration decisions are rooted in aspirations and anticipations, restricted and facilitated by external forces, and mediated by shifting exposures and current states of being. The narratives of Justin and Audrey suggest that social changes gave rise to an anticipation of a future in which their aspirations cannot be fulfilled. This results in a strong motivation to emigrate. Martin and Robert described other reasons for emigration, including an aspiration of a different lifestyle. In such cases, drawing from Van Hear, Bakewell, and Long (2018), recent social changes function as external drivers that are part of a larger driver complexes facilitating emigration. Lastly, the narratives by Carly and Kate highlight that while future-oriented behaviors are dependent on aspirations and anticipations, aspirations and anticipations are in turn determined by one’s window of exposure and shifting realities.

It is important to note that only six middle-class Hong Kong citizens were interviewed for this thesis. Yet, the Hong Kong population is not homogenous and emigration processes differ from person to person. Born and raised in Hong Kong, I was challenged multiple times about the assumptions I had about Hong Kong’s people as I was conducting my research. Identifications among Hong Kongers, along with the values and aspirations they hold, vary. Loosely drawing from Anderson’s (2006) notion of an “imagined political community,” a Hong Kong community ultimately only exists within an individual’s imagination because “the fellow members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members…yet in the minds of each lives the image of the communion… Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity or genuineness, but in the style in which they are imagined” (2006, 6). As such, what this thesis hopes to have described is, rather than a Hong Konger persona, the modes of identification of Hong
Kong’s people as they are reflected in individuals’ values and aspirations, and are manifested through acts of emigration and non-emigration.

Summarizing the findings in this thesis, increased integration of Hong Kong into China presents Hong Kongers with a new reality where their values come to be contested. This is because a Hong Kong identity is constructed primarily upon qualitative differences from those of mainland Chinese. In this case, I have argued that processes of emigration (and non-emigration) serve as means through which Hong Kong’s people negotiate and reform their aspirations, identities, and futures. Lastly, by employing Hong Kong as a case study, I hope to have highlighted how migration processes are closely intertwined with both memories and hopes—and how migration is a process rooted in the past and extending into the future.
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