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Life Elsewhere: Migrant, Refugee, and Traveler

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Hong Kong (HK) was a city largely made up of migrants and refugees who moved to and through there during the second half of the 20th century. From the 1950s to the present, like many other places in Asia, it has gone through periods of political turmoil and uncertainty. In response to uncertainty at home, many people—Hong Kongese and others—choose to flee or migrate. Thus, their local identity is tied to recurring instances of translocal and global migration that are sparked by uncertainty and desire.

Migration involves a rapid change of people's spatial references in search of different social, political, and economic realities. Hong Kongese are familiar with migration and spatial mobility. Millions of them fled from China and entered Hong Kong legally or illegally from the 1940s to 1970s in the anticipation of more just economic opportunities and stable political conditions, while some fled China simply for survival (Lam and Liu 1998). In the 1980s and 1990s, amid the political overcast of HK's pending return to China, hundreds of thousand went abroad to secure political insurance—that is, to acquire a foreign passport (Skeldon 1994). By the 2000s, the majority of them had returned to HK for economic and family reasons (Ley & Kobayashi 2005; Sussman 2011), but today, entering the second decade of Hong Kong's sovereignty turnover, political reality has pushed many again to migrate.

Based on the experiences and narratives of three migrants, this essay explores the relationship between mobility and freedom. These migrants came from very different backgrounds and are related to Hong Kong in different ways. They all faced a similar question at a certain point in their lives: where life should, and where life could, be continued. Migration mobility has dotted their life choices and chances. In search of 'liberty', people continue to move. This essay aims to very briefly delineate the intertwined complexities of freedom, space, and mobility.[2]

Refugee / migrant / traveler

Ah Wing[3] came to Hong Kong from Vietnam on a refugee ship in the late 1980s. She was put into a boat people refugee camp where she stayed for several years before being released to marry a local man (see Chan 2011a). But having lived in Hong Kong for almost three decades, she was unable to feel “at home” there. After a divorce from her husband in 2012, she decided to take another life-changing journey—to travel to and stay in Europe through various legal and illegal means.

Mrs. Lam, a mother of two, recently moved from Hong Kong to Taiwan in order to find a better living situation for her family. She was one of those who rode the new wave of migration to Taiwan since the late 2000s.[4] To her, Taiwan represents not only a more viable urban space for her children to learn and grow up in, it also offers an ‘extension’ of time and space given Hong Kong’s currently constricted social and political environment. Compared to HK, Taiwan is much less crowded[5] and has more political freedom. HK’s dispiriting political scene and Beijing’s continuous interference there has forced Mrs. Lam and many others to leave.

Coming from an immigrant Chinese family, Mr Tran grew up in De An in the southern part of Vietnam in the 1940s. He served as a captain in the South Vietnamese government in the 1960s and was jailed by the Vietnamese communists after the defeat of the Americans and South Vietnam. Upon his release he filed an application to study theology in Canada, and before going there he was required to go to Hong Kong for an interview. Since the 1990s, he has worked as a pastor in America. Having endured decades of political turmoil, wars, and instability, he still considers Vietnam his second home. In recent years, he has returned to Vietnam every summer to meet with old friends in Ho Chi Minh City. He has also visited HK, where his cousin and brother live. A large part of his youth was spent in the swirl of global politics and unrighteous wars, and he says that there isn’t much one can do in the face of politics.

World Refugee Day protest in Hong Kong, June 2016.

Freedom, migration, refuge

Each of the above cases has a different background, and each subject left home under very different circumstances. All of them connect to HK at some points in their lives. What links them is mobility: one refugee, one migrant, one traveler. While Ah Wing attempted to continue her ‘refugeeing’ trajectory, Mrs. Lam brought her family offshore to Taiwan. Mr. Tran, on the other hand, commenced a grand return to his point of origin. These three people have held their desires in mind; each attempted to realize such desires by moving. Perhaps, to be free means to be able to achieve what one desires—people feel ‘unfree’ when their wants are not met. Mobility has become a common means for the management of a desire for ‘freedom’.

Such expressions of discontent and frustration can partly be understood against the background of Hong Kong’s history. Since the 1980s its citizens and residents have construed their own identity and values based on a local civic culture and the vast differences between HK’s and China’s political and economic systems (Chan 2014). Part of this identity is based on the perception that HK is a sophisticated, affluent city as opposed to poor, backward pre-1990s China (Ku 2014). Yet even after China

became the world’s second largest economy and millions of mainlanders have become extremely rich, Hong Kongese still look upon local history as distinctive from that of China, and believe that HK holds more respectable values: use of English, civil liberties, rule of law, freedom of speech, global vision, and an accountable government (Fung 2008). The recent intervention of China’s authorities in many of HK’s social and political spaces (media, education, economy, and governance) has generated much frustration among the younger generations.

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Mr. Tran says politics turns people around, makes them unfree. He described himself as a ‘container’ of all sorts of opposites and contradictions—left and right, south and north, military officer and prisoner, liberalism and socialism. Reflecting on his life, he observes: "The (Vietnam) war was totally meaningless. Those who win become heroes, and those who lose become prisoners…[life] is like what happens in a film: one red, one green; one character goes out, the other comes in…the characters change roles."

In his old age, what he desires most is to return to Vietnam periodically to enjoy the company of friends and glimpse memories of his youth.

Ah Wing does not speak much about her understanding of freedom. But in Vietnam people seldom talk about it, despite the fact that freedom, democracy, and equality are the three main elements of the country’s motto. She says:

> When we left home (Vietnam), we did not plan to stay in Hong Kong. We wanted to go to the West. Any of us who has the ability to go will go. We left Vietnam because we didn’t feel ‘right’; now HK people also don’t feel ‘right’… We are like the HK people. You leave when you think it is not right here. The only difference is that some have the ability to go ‘normally’ (legally), but people like us (penniless) have to use other ways. Our methods may be different, but in the back of the mind, the reasons (to leave) are the same.

Mrs. Lam, not unaware of the political problems Taiwan is now facing, still prefers Taiwan to Hong Kong. Like many others who decided to migrate, she has concluded: “Hong Kong is over.”

Sham Shui Po district, Hong Kong

Epilogue

In the second half of the 20th century, many Asian countries experienced internal instability and political strife in the process of decolonization, and many suffered deeply because of Cold War politics. Hong Kong has never stood aloof from global politics; here and there it played a role in the Cold War. It used to be a sanctuary for migrants and refugees from China. But as a latecomer to decolonization, it unavoidably suffers from the agony associated with it—which often sees an extended period of political instability and turmoil brought about by the clash of different political ideas and interests and reshufflings of power. Cold War politics may not have ended yet, especially in HK, which has felt and is still handling that legacy and the legacy of decolonization. Liberty is intrinsically relative, and Cold War politics has clearly displayed the relativity of freedom. One’s ideal will be another’s prison, and politics often makes people imprison others in the name of liberation.

A respected monk in the Hong Kong Vietnamese community once explained to some Vietnamese refugees the concept of refuge-taking during a Buddhist refuge-taking ritual (Chan 2011b: 175):

> People often want to take refuge in something. You are now taking refuge in Buddhist training. Do you understanding what ‘taking-refuge’ is? It is

> like being a refugee—you were refugees before you take refuge in something… All human beings are refugees. We take refuge in the best. Buddha is the highest refuge…

The unfinished refuge-taking trajectories of Ah Wing, Mrs. Lam, and arguably Mr. Tran have to do with their belief that elsewhere there lie things that they desire. In an age of increased migration and mobility, people move around and around looking for that space of 'refuge'. Life in reality seems to be a prolonged 'refugeeing' journey. To find the higher or better form of refuge, people continue to sojourn.

Notes

1. This essay is based on my presentation at the workshop on 'Hong Kong and Liberty', organized by the Department of Cultural and Religious Studies and Centre or Cultural Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong on 30 Sept, 2017. The author thanks the organizers for making the event a successful one.

2. For more systematic analysis of mobility, see Urry 2007.

3. The names of the informants are pseudonyms.

4. Since the mid-2000s, HK people have become increasingly interested in migrating to Taiwan, from 2,235 cases in 2005 to 7230 cases in 2015 (see Chan and Fung 2018).

5. HK has been receiving over 40 millions tourists from China annually since 2013 (Chan 2016).

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