Migrants' Quotidian Lived Experiences and Ethnic Capital: A Comparative Case Study of Hong Kong British National (Overseas) Migrants in the UK

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Abstract *Whilst a considerable number of Hong Kong parent and school-aged youth migrants have relocated to the UK, little is known about their familial migration and educational trajectories after migration. This qualitative study addresses this gap by examining the pertinent lived experiences of Hong Kong migrants. The study draws on data gathered from semi-structured interviews with two Hong Kong migrant families, as well as diaries and social network maps provided by the participants. The findings reveal that ethnic networks and ethnic norms are identified as two significant forms of ethnic capital, which can be leveraged to obtain educational information, facilitate adaptation to the new educational context, and shape migrant youths' aspirations. It is important to note, however, that certain ethnic networks and norms may be perceived as ethnic deficits, potentially hindering Hong Kong migrants' development in the UK, particularly in relation to their integration into the host society.*

INTRODUCTION

Following the enactment of the National Security Law (NSL) in Hong Kong, which is widely regarded as threatening Hong Kong's autonomy and freedoms,[1] the UK government introduced a tailored immigration route for British National (Overseas) (BN(O)) status holders. This status, established during the Sino-British Joint Declaration to maintain a connection between Hong Kong and the UK, now allows BN(O) holders and their families to live, work, and study in the UK. Since its launch on 31 January 2021, the route has facilitated the arrival of 158,000 BN(O) applicants by September 2024.[2]

With more than 150,000 Hong Kongers having migrated to the UK, scholars have examined the broader circumstances of this migrant population, including the reasons for migration. However, albeit a significant number of parents and school-aged youth migrants, their familial migration and education experiences in the UK remain largely unexplored. Current research often conflates Hong Kong migrants with Chinese migrants, overlooking Hong Kong's unique historical and cultural context.[3] Therefore, it is crucial to investigate the migration and educational experiences of Hong Kong migrants in the UK.

This essay investigates how Hong Kong migrants' 'ethnic capital' shapes their experiences of migration and education in the UK. Focusing on two migrant family cases (see Table 1), the study employed semi-structured interviews, social network maps, and a diary method to achieve its aims. Two families were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling. One month prior to the interviews, the families were asked to write at least four diary entries reflecting on their migration and educational experiences in the UK. During the interviews, they were invited to elaborate on these entries and supplement their narratives with social network maps.

Table 1: Overview of participant profiles

Name	Age	Previous job (Hong Kong)	Current job (UK)	Time in the UK
Family A				
Fung Lin	40	Social Worker	Housewife	21 months
Ka Yan	14	Student	Student	21 months
Family B				
Chi Chung	51	Teacher	Carer	24 months
Po Chu	50	Housewife	Housewife	24 months
Chun Kit	16	Student	Student	24 months

ETHNIC CAPITAL

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital helps explain how family socio-economic status shapes educational attainment across generations,[4] including tangible resources (e.g., learning materials) and intangible ones (e.g., exposure to highbrow activities) valued by middle and upper classes.[5] Lee and Zhou argue that this model is insufficient for understanding the educational and migration experiences of Asian migrant youths in the US, as many migrant parents possess low English proficiency, limited economic resources, and little familiarity with American customs, yet their children can still gain admission to prestigious universities.[6] Instead, they propose that ethnic capital – comprising both tangible resources and intangible resources acquired from the co-ethnic communities – is crucial in explaining facilitation of migration and education experiences among ethnic minority migrants. In this study, the concept of ethnic capital is employed to examine Hong Kong migrant families' migration and educational experiences, with a focus on the co-ethnic networks and ethnic norms. According to the participants' narratives, co-ethnic networks refer to ties with other Hong Kongers that are formed through family relationships, friendships and in-person or online platforms, such as the Hong Kong church and social media groups, whilst ethnic norms within Hong Kong migrant communities in the UK can be defined as collectively imagined expectations regarding behaviours, values, and social practices, which Hong Kong migrants perceive as binding within their ethnic communities. Regardless of the actual prevalence or visibility of these norms in everyday interactions, the belief in their existence may exert influence over individual conduct. The following sections will give the empirical evidence on the use of co-ethnic networks and ethnic norms.

CHANNELS OF EDUCATIONAL INFORMATION EXCHANGE

Within Hong Kong migrant communities, parents actively exchange information regarding subject selection, school admissions, and vacancies. Throughout various waves of Hong Kong emigration, ethnic networks have proven to be a valuable resource for migrant families, helping them navigate educational challenges and adapt to new environments.[7] The recent large-scale migration since 2019 is no exception. Chi Chung, Po Chu, and Chun Kit admitted their limited familiarity with the British education system before their relocation to the UK. As a result, they relied on different forms of ethnic networks, including co-ethnic friends and online co-ethnic communities, for support:

> *"This week, my friend's wife not only shared the experiences of fostering plants with my wife but also information on admission to UK universities, which can be of reference to our eldest son's future studies. (Extracted from Chi Chung's diary)*
> *My son's current school is recommended by my [co-ethnic] friend. Also, I've participated in several Facebook groups which are established by Hong Kong migrants, in which they provide a lot of information concerning school admission and vacancy." (Po Chu)*

Family B relied strongly on ethnic networks, particularly close co-ethnic friends, to obtain educational information. Later in the interview, Po Chu discussed online co-ethnic communities as useful for learning about the education system. For instance, in Hong Kong migrants' Facebook groups she joined, members discussed eligibility for home fee status in Scotland. The Scottish Parliament announced that BN(O) visa holders are eligible for home fee status and financial aid in Scottish higher education if they have lived in Scotland for at least three years.[8] This policy helped Family B alleviate their financial burden. Meanwhile, Chun Kit greatly benefited from university admissions information, gaining insight into entry requirements, subject content, and application procedures, all of which are crucial for achieving his educational and career goals.

SUPPORTING ADAPTATION TO NEW EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS

Hong Kong migrant youth participants initially expressed concerns about their English proficiency, which they feared might impact their social development in schools. In this context, ethnic capital could help mitigate their anxiety. Chun Kit, for instance, expressed appreciation for the support provided by co-ethnic friends:

> "During the first year of arriving in the UK, I couldn't speak fluent English and fully adapt to the new environment. One day, a co-ethnic schoolmate told me that I could join a Hong Konger group in school, in which my friend gave me a lot of insightful advice, such as subject choices for Scottish Highers, Scottish Advanced Highers and even university. Ultimately, I successfully adapted to this community." (Chun Kit)

When Chun Kit migrated to the UK, he was a secondary three student and faced the challenge of selecting subjects for his senior studies. At that time, he felt uncertain about making a definitive choice. Fortunately, he befriended a co-ethnic peer at school, who advised him to choose subjects based on his interests rather than their popularity. Chun Kit also emphasised the significance of forming friendships with co-ethnic individuals:

> "Making co-ethnic friends is as essential as making local friends since we share a similar cultural background and speak the same language. They can understand what I'm thinking or talking about. To be honest, sometimes I don't understand my local friends' and classmates' jokes, thus, I feel sad about this matter." (Chun Kit)

Ethnic networks could offer a sense of security to the migrant youth participant, as members of the Hong Kong community often share similar experiences and cultural knowledge. As a result, they were less likely to feel embarrassed about not understanding localised Scottish humour when conversing with co-ethnic friends.

Additionally, Chun Kit and his co-ethnic friends shared a background in the Hong Kong educational system, where students typically select subjects that are perceived to enhance their chances of university admission and success in professional careers within a money-oriented environment. For example, students aspiring to pursue a Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery in Hong Kong are required to study Chemistry or Combined Science in secondary school. However, Chun Kit's co-ethnic friend observed that this approach, characteristic of Hong Kongers, did not align with the Scottish education system, where Scottish students – the friend thought – often prioritise their personal interests over pragmatic or materialistic concerns. Following this advice, Chun Kit began focusing on subjects that interested him and considering his desired career path. He chose to study Geography and Economics in secondary school and planned to pursue a Business and Geography degree at the University of Edinburgh. This degree aligns with his aspiration to work in hotel management. In summary, the support from co-ethnic friends proved valuable in helping Chun Kit adapt to the new educational environment and in shaping his educational and career aspirations.

ETHNIC NORMS AS A MOTIVE FOR EDUCATION AND ASPIRATION

During the interviews, all participants mentioned that Hong Kongers generally subscribe to the idea of 'winning at the starting line' and place a high value on education, as Chi Chung, a former secondary school teacher in Hong Kong, said:

> "I think, in Hong Kong, of course, in that atmosphere, the expectations for children's education are more demanding, the competition is fierce, and comparison [among students] is common." (Chi Chung)

In Hong Kong, being a 'winner' typically refers to someone who graduates from a prestigious university and secures a high-status job with a substantial salary.[9] This concept is closely linked to the norm of valuing education, as education is seen

as a sole pathway to achieving occupational success, as Chun Kit said:

"When I studied at a Hong Kong secondary school, I felt a little bit exhausted. It's because the social climate would force you to study. Also, under this social climate, you'd think you must go to a good university. If not, you'll become homeless."
(Chun Kit)

Parents in Hong Kong who uphold this norm may enrol their children in private tutoring sessions or require them to complete additional exercises to improve their academic performance,[10] aiming to give their children an advantage in educational and career competitions. Furthermore, this ethnic norm is associated with several cultural traits, such as diligence, stoicism, and obedience.[11] Although the value placed on education is also evident in British middle-class families,[12] participants believed that it does not carry the same importance and urgency in British society as in Hong Kong. They suggested that multiple career pathways and opportunities exist in British society. For example, Po Chu and Fung Lin argued that attending an elite university and pursuing a professional career is not the only viable way to earn a living in the UK, as income disparity between professional and blue-collar workers is minimal. Nonetheless, university education was still deemed the first choice for their children.

The ethnic norm of valuing education persists to some extent in the mindset of the Hong Kong migrant participants, as evidenced by the paradoxical situation in Family A. Although Fung Lin wished to move away from the concept of 'winning at the starting line' and provide her daughter with a low-pressure learning environment, she simultaneously expressed concerns about her daughter falling behind academically. She compared the educational systems of Hong Kong and Scotland and explained her decision to arrange additional academic exercises:

"I've discussed the local education system with my neighbours. We found that the education

systems in the UK and Hong Kong seem like two extremes: Hong Kong schools require students to do a lot of homework, and British schools have almost no homework. I won't say which system is the best, but I definitely don't want to go back to Hong Kong. But my daughter needs parental support, so my sister and I will arrange some supplementary exercises for her every day, such as English grammar exercises or maths exercises."
(Fung Lin)

Fung Lin observed differing educational practices between Hong Kong and the UK. Accordingly, she sought to find a balance between excessive and limited homework by assigning additional academic exercises to further enhance her daughter's academic performance and strengthen her proficiency in specific subjects like mathematics. In fact, her daughter had achieved excellent academic results in the UK. However, the concept of 'winning at the starting line' was deeply ingrained in Fung Lin's mindset. She found the idea of having no homework unacceptable and felt compelled to assign extra exercises to her daughter; otherwise, she worried her daughter would fall behind in the academic competition. This case demonstrates that the ethnic norm of 'winning at the starting line' is an invisible belief about expected behaviours and values, which shapes how the Hong Kong migrant participant acts.

From migrant youths' perspectives, both Ka Yan and Chun Kit partly appreciated the positive influence of the ethnic norm:

"Local students wouldn't do any extra exercises, but I think these exercises are useful to improve my English proficiency. Especially English language is the basis of all subjects in the UK since we learn all subjects in English. It's also possible to achieve a high score in other subjects if I've got a high level of English proficiency. For example, I scored 27 out of 30 something in the latest Science exam." (Ka Yan)

"I'm not a highly self-disciplined student. However, Hong Kong's atmosphere forces me to

focus on my studies. Although I'm not interested in studying, I've to do revision and try my best on examinations. Generally, teachers in the UK may have a great impression of Hong Kong students' learning attitudes. When I was a secondary three student, I obtained an 'A' in maths." (Chun Kit)

Hong Kong migrant youth participants appeared to have benefited from the ethnic norm of valuing education, as they were either motivated or compelled by this norm to focus on their studies. As Chun Kit noted, the learning attitudes and approaches cultivated in Hong Kong are advantageous for Hong Kong migrant youths in achieving strong academic results in the UK, particularly in mathematics. From Chun Kit's perspective, this is because the Scottish mathematics curriculum is less challenging than that of Hong Kong. Additionally, Hong Kong students are instilled with the expectation of completing extensive mathematics exercises from an early age. Even after more than a year and a half in the UK, this norm remains deeply ingrained in their mindset, despite the changes in their educational and social environment. This aligns with the perspective of Zhou Min, a renowned Chinese-born American sociologist specialising in Asian migrants, who posits that migrants can adapt to various aspects of the host country while consciously preserving their ethnic culture and norms, thereby benefiting from both the host and ethnic cultures.[13] For instance, Chun Kit believed that embodying the characteristics of a typical Hong Kong student – diligence, stoicism, and obedience – can increase his chances of successful university admission in the UK.

Nevertheless, Hong Kong migrants' reliance on ethnic norms may contribute to the reproduction of ethnic stereotypes. As early as 2006, Archer and Francis found that British teachers had constructed stereotypical views of Hong Kong migrant students as unhealthily assiduous, docile, and conformist.[14] The newly arrived Hong Kong migrants seem to consolidate these stereotypes. As noted above, the participants generally agreed on the advantages of being diligent, stoic and obedient, and they continued to uphold the ethnic norm of valuing education. Lee and Zhou indicate that this may stereotypically link ethnicity with these norms, potentially pressuring certain members of the ethnic community to distance themselves from co-ethnics – or even to relinquish their ethnic identities – if they do not conform to these expectations,[15] possibly harming the solidarity within the ethnic community.

PERCEPTIONS OF ETHNIC DEFICIT

The participants did not always perceive certain ethnic networks and norms as beneficial capital; instead, they sometimes viewed these as ethnic deficits within their migration and educational experiences. In other words, ethnic networks and norms may have a detrimental impact on the development of the participants in the UK.

Fung Lin expressed a negative view of ethnic networks and norms. Specifically, she linked the idea of 'winning at the starting line' to educational and occupational competitions among Hong Kong parents and youth. From her perspective, living in areas with high concentrations of Hong Kong migrants seemed to inevitably involve participating in various forms of competition. This individual viewpoint raises doubts about living in separate ethnic enclaves, such as 'Chinatowns', even though proximity to such areas was considered essential for establishing co-ethnic networks, through which they could access information to enhance their quality of life in their new countries.[16]

Apart from the strong competitive spirit within the Hong Kong migrant community, there is an ongoing debate regarding integration into the host society versus the formation of a co-ethnic community. Whilst some Hong Kong migrants prefer not to live in areas with high concentrations of fellow Hong Kong nationals, seeking to integrate into the local society, Chi Chung expressed this ambiguity:

"As migrants, we must construct a local social network in which we should have local friends and

local colleagues. We should also have a localised social life. It isn't contradictory that we can have both local friends and co-ethnic friends. However, I've heard a case of an old lady, who came from Hong Kong, and has lived in Chinatown for almost 50 years, and she even doesn't know how to speak English. I wouldn't perceive this as 'real migration'."
(Chi Chung)

He argued that migrants should engage in an integration process that allows them to balance relationships with both local and co-ethnic friends. His perspectives resonate with extant academic literature. For example, Sardinha, a migration scholar focusing racialised lives of migrants, challenges the notion that immigrants must entirely relinquish their ethno-cultural identity and disengage from co-ethnic communities to successfully integrate into the host society. Instead, Sardinha proposes that the ideal scenario involves maintaining cultural identity whilst actively assimilating into the receiving society. In this model, immigrants can form groups within co-ethnic communities, organise activities to achieve greater equality in the host country, and simultaneously engage in learning the new culture of the host society.[17]

Whilst the Hong Kong migrant youth participants recognised the benefits of the ethnic norm of valuing education for academic success in the UK, they also expressed concerns about its negative impact on mental health and personal development. As per their narratives, this norm might hinder personal growth by prioritising academic achievement over personal interests. Existing literature supports this concern. For instance, Liang et al. argue that whilst intense competition in Hong Kong schools may enhance learning effectiveness and foster a productive environment, it also fosters a fear of failure and harms mental health.[18] Furthermore, students are compelled to sacrifice leisure and personal development time to prioritise academic success.[19] Some ethnic norms and networks may act as a deficit rather than capital, as the competitive environment causes distress. Consequently, some Hong Kong migrants may choose to sever their socio-emotional connections with co-ethnic communities or seek a balance between integrating into the host society and maintaining ties with other Hong Kong migrants.

CONCLUSION

Although a significant number of parents and school-aged youth have migrated to the UK, their lived experiences, especially in education, have received limited scholarly attention. This essay has examined the migration and educational experiences of Hong Kong migrants and highlighted the role of ethnic networks and norms as key forms of ethnic capital. Ethnic networks offer valuable guidance on educational matters, such as school admissions and subject selection, particularly for those unfamiliar with the British education system. Co-ethnic peers provide support and advice based on shared cultural and educational experiences. Additionally, ethnic norms, such as the emphasis on academic success and the concept of 'winning at the starting line', motivate migrant youths, influencing behaviours such as engaging in extra academic activities. These values, rooted in the Hong Kong education system, might contribute to academic success in Scottish schools, where teachers value the diligence of migrant students. While many migrants retain these potentially advantageous norms, they may also be seen as an ethnic deficit, with potential negative effects on mental health.

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