The fragmentation, shift and adaptation of the "asylum seeker" identity in Hong Kong

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This article explores through empirical data how asylum seekers in Hong Kong reconstruct their identity while waiting for their asylum claim to be determined by the authorities.

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This paper adopts a sociological approach in the study of the "asylum seeker" identity, exploring the interactions and relationships between individuals and the wider social spheres on group, local, national and global levels. This paper is based on a four months observation of a youth integration service program for African asylum seekers aged 18-25 in Hong Kong, a focus group and a staff interview. It is hoped that this qualitative approach will present and utilize a wide range of personal experiences and perspectives, especially directly through the voices of the asylum seekers to gain a greater understanding of the population on the individual level and the concerns they raise while drawing onto wider sociological theories to further our understanding. By examining the fragmentation, shift and adaptation of the "asylum seeker" identity, the paper seeks to examine the notion of identity by exploring 1) home and rootedness – the bridge and link between the past "home" and the new asylum seeking experience and identity in Hong Kong, 2) the individual resistance, reconstruction and adaptation of their "asylum seeker" identity.

By exploring the complexity of the identity-negotiation process, the paper identifies the need to better understand the role and functions of the "asylum seeker" label for asylum-seeking individuals themselves, and the social meaning the label has within the wider society. In response to the interpretation of "identity" from various aspects, this paper hence raise questions of 1) how one can empower a more stable sense of self and belonging under the modern context of "rootlessness" to minimize isolation and segregation, 2) how to minimize misperceptions in response to the growing complexity of global mobility under the context where the "asylum-seeking" community in Hong Kong are made of a diverse group of individuals of wide-ranging differences in experience within the spectrum from "economic" to "non-economic" migrants. It is hoped that the paper will work towards building an "asylum seeker" identity that is of worthiness, recognition, and an accurate portrayal of this population's personal characteristics and current circumstances to minimize misperception and hence isolation of the population.

Space, rootedness, and home

In this section, I argue that the lack of territorial attachment to Hong Kong as a home given the loss of previous bonds and past identity in the asylum-seeking experience under the context of globalization leads to the fragmentation of identities.

Given asylum seekers are forced to exile from a territorially bounded home, they become a unique population that develops a form of "global rootlessness" due to the loss of their previous roots.[1] The immobility of asylum seekers means a breakdown in their rooted relationships, while their notion of a "home" only remains in the form of a past memory.[2] For example, one asylum seeker mentions:

"Because I was a valuable person to people, you know. I was loved once, I also love one, you know? And...there are still some people that uh...that...um...that...I have a home in their heart, you understand? And I am away from them, and some of them I don't know if they are well or not now [lost contact with their loved ones due to lack of telecommunication infrastructure in Somalia]. That's why I'm also feeling not the person I used to be." (Focus group, April 26, 2013)

The inability to connect with their family and friends in their home countries leads to a fragmentation of their identities, putting them into a state of limbo that lacks any form of stable identity. It can be considered that although there is a "home", their "home" remains an abstract form in their memories within a specific time in the past and within a territory that they are unable to return to. By developing a different lifestyle as an asylum seeker, the participants in my sample are not able to completely hold onto their past identities given the detachment from their past relationships, nor are they able to construct a new form of stable identity and regain a sense of belonging in Hong Kong, resulting in a form of rootlessness.

The lack of meaning and the lack of "home" they are able to build in Hong Kong leads to the insignificance of the place. As a result, they place little importance on the presence of now or the physical place in Hong Kong as part of their identity or their lives.

"Hong Kong is a bridge connecting two places .... It has nothing to do with my future. So for Hong Kong, I think...you know...it's not that city we should talk about

it [in the focus group] or what is wrong here or what is bad, because we are in this situation, it's just transition." (Focus group, April 26, 2013)

Therefore, we ought to recognize the importance of rebuilding, despite temporary, a sense of "home" in our practice towards asylum seekers. This is especially important in minimizing the risk where the lack of ability to build up a new identity will likely lead to no identity at all. Furthermore, with reference to the fragmentation of identities where a research participant claims "I am not the person I used to be", asylum seekers have little opportunity to showcase their talents or other aspects of themselves that they are proud of. As a result, the positive aspects of their past identities are largely denied, dismissed, and misunderstood.

In many sense, the positive self and social identities developed from their home countries are rarely recognized across borders at the 'low-end' of global migration, indicating that their identities are only valid and exists within a specific 'local' context under a territorially bounded, cultural, and social environment. As being persecuted from one nation equates to "being thrown out of the family of nations altogether"[3], the new possession of the "asylum seeker" label is, however global, implying immediate

deprivation that they have no control over under larger global and local host institutional controls. Hence, practice can be oriented towards exploring paths of retaining the positive aspects of their past identity. Exploring ways to nurture positive social relationships and community involvement are further ways to reconstruct a more stable sense of self and to enhance the possibility of building a new "home" in Hong Kong.

Yet, understanding the reconstruction of identity cannot happen without the context of what the "asylum seeker" label and identity means for different people under various social contexts in Hong Kong and at large, which will be explored in the next section.

Identity, strategies of resistance and techniques of adaptation

Asylum seekers are highly responsive to their existing social environment, where their identities are constantly evolving under a mutual self-negotiating process. Hence, we ought to recognize that rather than being passive victims, they are engaged in a process of self-negotiation where they adapt strategically to the "asylum seeker" label and identity given to them by the society.[4] Hence, in this section, I examine

some asylum seekers' active negotiation and reconstruction of their sense of identity through various perspectives. This includes examining 1) the asylum seeker's self-perception of the "asylum seeker" label, 2) perception of the local people's understanding of the "asylum seeker" label, 3) the individual's portrayal of the "asylum seeker" identity among other asylum seekers, 4) distinguishing the "asylum seeker" identity from other economic or "fake" asylum seekers.

As mentioned, Hong Kong hosts a large variation of refugees from numerous countries with distinctly different past identities and experiences. This reflects the phenomenon of the increasing complexity of globalization which leads to the compression of various populations and agendas within a concentrated space. However, one must acknowledge the asylum-seeking population is diverse and dynamic, where individuals share no single story or agenda. This ranges from those who are involved from religious to political to environmental persecution, and varying ranges of mixture between forced and voluntary migration, especially within the discourse of the spectrum from economic to non-economic migrants. Given the complexity and hence difficulty to pinpoint each individual story, the "asylum seeker" or

"refugee" has become a generalized label given to the population, resulting in various forms of misperceptions, stereotypes and prejudice. How individuals respond, adapt and resist this societal label illustrates their active negotiation of identity, challenging how society ought to address and position this population.

1) Asylum seeking individuals understanding of themselves

Under a context where their past atrocities are often overlooked by others, the asylum-seeking individual understands their label as one of individual strength and courage albeit the social degradation of unjust policies that they face. A research participant tells me: "You cannot take how they treat us". Another one remarks in a focus group: "If they [local people] are in our position, I think they might come to suicide and kill themselves. But we still flourish, you know, my good faith, you know" (April 26, 2013). Misunderstood by the general public regarding their position and experience, the asylum seeker provides an alternative perspective and voice to this largely socially-trodden label. The underlying tone illustrates the tension between the oppressor and the oppressed, whereby they "look down" on the global elite or socially privileged as they value their own strength and resilience from atrocity

and injustice rather than the possession of income or wealth as a social measurement of human value. As a result, self-segregation exists on a different layer and perspective beyond the racial, social, legal, and cultural marginalization and discrimination where they are constructed as "fighters" and "survivors" rather than victims.

With reference to section one where I emphasize on the importance of building a stable sense of "home" and present identity in Hong Kong, the key to integrating a smoother transition between the asylum seeker's past and present identity is to present greater credit when portraying the process of asylum seeking. Practice can be oriented towards allowing the general public to recognize and acknowledge the positive aspects asylum seekers see themselves in order to place a positive meaning to the "asylum seeker" label. Furthermore, in addition to raising awareness on the unjust conditions that asylum seekers are in, more attention can be given to their individual life stories in order for the general public to connect with them on a more personal level. These individual stories not only include their talents and strengths from their original sense of self in order to feel valued in the community, but also in acknowledging their resilience despite these conditions as something that we can learn

from. Hence, NGOs, media, and governments have an important role to play in the reconstruction of this identity. It is hoped that by shifting the general public's perception of this "refugee" label of down-trodden population, it creates a more positive asylum-seeking identity that can help bridge the gap between an asylum seeker's internal and society-based external identity.

2) Asylum seeking individuals understanding of the label given by non-asylum seekers and local people

What is further important is in understanding the asylum-seeking individuals' perception of the local people's or the non-asylum seekers' "outsider" perspectives given to the "asylum seeker" label, as this largely affects how asylum seekers perceive themselves and behave towards others. In my research, asylum seeking participants identify the label of an "asylum seeker" as one where the local Hong Kong population is unaware of, lacks the ability to understand nor empathize. As illustrated:

"Nothing, they [Hong Kong people] know nothing about us. They do not know about their city. They do not know we exist, or who asylum seekers are....Really, nobody understands my situation, except like those

who face this problem. If you have a... cold or flu. If you heard about it and you never encounter the fever, or like headache it has got. You just imagine and you don't know. But the day that cold catches you, you will know what it is." (Focus group, April 26, 2013)

Given the frequent misunderstanding and misperception of the Hong Kong people holding negative views towards the "asylum seeker" label, and through repeated negative experience of discrimination and hearing other asylum seekers' experience or advice to not trust the Chinese, asylum seekers come to learn the social rules of the city, such as a research participant who is socialized into understanding self as an asylum seeker as "We are category, we are a special category of people living in Hong Kong" (Focus group, April 26, 2013). However, one must further recognize the interaction of both parties as a mutual process. As a result of the local people's inability to understand their unique or vastly different asylum-seeking identity and/or the asylum seeker's perception that non-asylum seekers are unable to do so, they become socialized into developing their own strategies of adaptation in the re-socialization process. Active segregation and withdrawal becomes a learned strategy in order for them to protect their own self-

worth, dignity and identity. A research participant remarks:

"[When they ask] 'Where are you from?'...'I'm from Somalia.' Even when someone [is] asking you 'what are you doing here'...it's not meaningful. It's kind of my business, you know. So if we are close to each other, he can ask me. But you know, while we are stranger or new to each other, or just passing each other or just met at some place, it's really an irrelevant question." (Focus group, April 26, 2013)

This reveals a sense of indifference, in which there are little desire to form any social interactions or integration with others. Beyond the perception of the local people as strangers, it is further evident that he also perceives himself as a stranger to others. His conclusion that we are a "special category" further reflects how the institution's legal, political, economic, social and cultural marginalities are translated into individual perceptions of themselves as strangers to others. They view themselves as a segregated segment of the population, whereby the indifference of the local population further leads to a learned isolation from their part.

This influences their behavior in response to the society's given label. Some asylum

seekers attempt to make invisible their asylum seeker label as a strategy to integrate with the wider population by going to places with a higher concentration of expatriates and foreign travelers. A research participant suggests:

"Because over there [Hong Kong Island area], they don't really make a difference. [There are] more foreigners as there is such a big mix. Westerns are used to having blacks in their community… so [they] will treat them as equal. On the other side, the further North you go, then there will be more locals." (Interview, April 11, 2013)

Another illustrated his attempt to hide his identity among local people such as in bars and clubs:

"Although it is a usual question that people ask you what you are doing here, why you are here, if you are to tell them your current situation, they look down to you. So you actually need to see how to best to cover up that in the sense that your dignity [is upheld]…I tell them I am a 'traveler', that sounds good to me." (Focus group, April 26, 2013)

This illustrates the juxtaposition between the internal identity of the asylum seeker label as associated with dignity and strength as a

contrast to one associated with shame that needs to be hidden. The fact that the asylum seekers view that the "asylum seeker" label as misunderstood by the Hong Kong leads to their adoption of a learned active segregation or a strategy of invisibility.

Hence, this illustrates the importance of bridging the gap of mistrust between the local and asylum seeking population. In the long run, it is hoped that by improving the perception of the "asylum seeker" label, asylum-seeking individuals feel less misperceived and misjudged by the rest of society, which can minimize the current active segregation and invisibility strategies, which in turn will assist them in building a more positive and stable sense of self-identity for themselves.

3) Asylum seekers' understanding of label among other asylum seekers

In my study, the "asylum seeker" label seems to hold a different social meaning among the local people and among the asylum-seeking population. When in the youth group program with twelve other fellow asylum seekers, another research participant claimed to introduce himself as a traveler to non-asylum-seeking strangers adopted a different identity:

"I could have said I was from Europe or America or Australia, but that would not mean anything to me [even though they would not look down on me]. There is no reason for me to lie [about where I am from]." (Youth program, March 18, 2013)

The inconsistency of his identity illustrates the construction of multiple identities depending on the context. The meaning of "self-dignity" holds different social meanings among different people, where individuals might adapt their strategy depending on what they consider the most socially appropriate behavior is to maximize their social acceptance. Among fellow asylum seekers who are also from other African countries, it would be shameful to admit that he lies about where is from given they share the same background.

In addition, there are also high levels of mistrust amongst the asylum seeking community themselves. This becomes a barrier in utilizing the potential social capital of a "common" asylum-seeking identity and developing a supportive local community to create a greater self-identity in Hong Kong.

Bar-Yosef argues that migrants tend to form smaller groups and networks among themselves, leading to the emergence of collective "sub-cultures" to enhance their feeling of integration and group solidarity. [5] Although one might assume that the asylum-seeking community as a racial minority in a unique situation would form a more cohesive unit in response to their exclusion from the local population, this was less evident in my research with the exception of the Somali community. For those on the margins of globalization, trust and reciprocity is a luxury that cannot be afforded as survival comes first. A local NGO caseworker interprets:

"It's about survival here, and…I think people tend to become very selfish and not supportive. Like I say, the solidarity I can only observe among the Somalis, otherwise others just look after themselves …Due to this mistrust, there are also instances where one would hide the news if they were granted a refugee status, given there were incidents where refugees attempt to sabotage another's status by going to UNHCR and accusing the other of reporting false stories." (Interview, April 11, 2013)

As Bauman argues, the fragmentation of traditional social relationships is deemed "unfit, invalid, or unviable human relations".[6] In a hostile environment where asylum seekers are competing for their survival, building friendships remain a low priority, leading to the fragmentation of social

relations and the lack of a group/collective identity or traditional communities within a territorially-bounded space. As a research participant claimed, "You need to set boundary and protect yourself, or else other people will just take advantage of you" (Youth program, March 8, 2013).

Perhaps this brings attention to the importance of building trust within the asylum-seeking community. The "common" asylum-seeking experience has an enormous potential to become a social capital. By building a more integrative and supportive community, it can become a form of social and emotional support for one another. Furthermore, it creates opportunities for asylum seekers to feel involved within as part of a community. This assists them to create a more stable sense of self, allowing them to set firmer despite temporary roots and identity at the local territorial level. Therefore, given the prevalent level of mistrust in the current asylum-seeking population, we raise further questions on how to better build a "common" identity of an asylum seeker, and how to form a greater sense of cohesion and community to utilize this as a social asset rather than fuelling the mistrust as a social liability that worsens their identity and experience in Hong Kong.

4) Conflict between economic and non-economic "asylum seekers"

In addition to the lack of trust due to extreme poverty fuelling suspicion, the "asylum seeker" label is further complicated by the conflict between economic and non-economic asylum seekers. While the United Nation's definition[7] of an asylum seeker excludes economic persecution, scholars argue that impoverishment and conflict are closely tied in the modern context leading to an increasing difficulty to make the distinction between economic and forced political migration.[8] This complexity leads to micro tensions between the asylum seekers.

One of such tension is created as a result of Hong Kong's UNHCR system, which "hurts those it seeks to help" as "economic asylum seekers flourish, while political asylum seekers suffer".[9] Given Hong Kong's visa-free immigration policy, it has attracted a significant number of "economic asylum seekers" who can easily work illegally in Hong Kong's informal sector for a few years under the status of an asylum seeker before being sent back.[10] These "economic asylum seekers" are prolonging UNHCR's processing time of granting refugee statuses to the "genuine" asylum seekers given the former are put into the same screening system as the "genuine" asylum seekers who are fleeing from political persecution.

Furthermore, "genuine" asylum seekers are unwilling to take the risk of illegal employment as it might jeopardize their chance of being granted a refugee status.[11]

The tension and hostility among the economic and non-economic asylum seekers are evident on micro levels. A Somali asylum seeker who fled from violence comments on his views on the "economic" asylum seekers in Hong Kong:
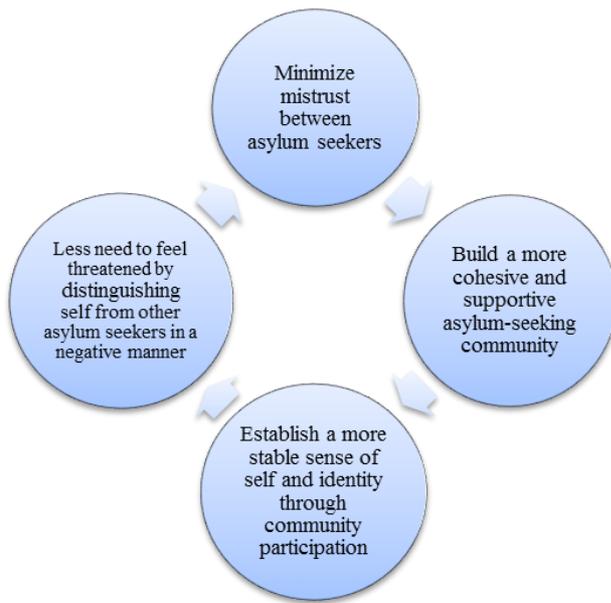
"'Are you [economic asylum seekers] crazy man? You left all the people, your family, the people, for just when you want to unite and return to family?' … I don't know what they want from Hong Kong. Immigration knows Somalia people…know they are different. They are different from other Africans. They are different from Asians. Even immigration officers say that 'you are from Somalia, then maybe you want to go back home.'" (Youth program, March 24, 2013)

In an environment where the population is marginalized and denied access to social rights, it is evident that a large part of a self-identity arises out of the desire to distinguish themselves by categorizing the "others" in the asylum seeker population as a "fake refugee". This illustrates the attempt to preserve a sense of self-worth and

individuality arguably as a response to degrading institutional policies, and also to gain recognition for their flight from the local population. Hence, given the official definition of a refugee excludes those who flee for economic reasons, "genuine" or non-economic asylum seekers seek to use the "asylum seeker" label to their advantage as an adaptive strategy to gain a higher position in the power hierarchy among the dynamic asylum-seeking population.

Acknowledging that our sense of identity is formed where we establish our sense of self by distinguishing ourselves from others, focus should also be placed upon how individuals can find their self-worth and identity within the varying and heterogeneous/diverse population and be rooted with a stable sense of self without needing to threaten or downgrade the other individuals within this "asylum seeking community". The general public and asylum seekers themselves can hence further recognize this unique situation as a way to minimize the root of mistrust and barrier to community building.

Hence, the arguments that I have made are inter-related. The suggested relationship can be summarized as follow:

Minimize mistrust between asylum seekers

Build a more cohesive and supportive asylum-seeking community

Establish a more stable sense of self and identity through community participation

Less need to feel threatened by distinguishing self from other asylum seekers in a negative manner

Conclusion

For asylum seekers, Hong Kong is a replaceable space with a lack of territorially-bounded roots and substantial social relationships with the existing asylum seeking or local population. As the population exists among a realm of distorted "non-time" and "non-space" under the backdrop of global injustice and controls, they become constantly subject to a dynamic and liquid process in the fragmentation, readjustment, reconstruction of their identities in relation to the "asylum seeker" label in varying degrees as they face multiple marginalities.

The context of a global city sharply illustrates the tensions where global controls and individual micro struggles collide. The sharp differences and restrains in societal contexts leads to dilemmas where classes, status, labels, and identity collides as an asylum seeker migrate to a new social environment, leading to the reconstruction of their personal, class, racial, and cultural identities under the wider structural context. Given the marginality of their current status especially evident under a metropolitan city, the internal self-identity is negotiated through the protection of their self-worth through processes of withdrawal or hiding their refugee label from the local population, and through the process of 'othering' of other asylum seekers.

The study has great implications for understanding the asylum seeker identity under the context of a global city that demands a shift in perceptions of and treatment towards asylum seekers on individual and policy levels. Formal and informal channels are needed for various groups to interact to gain a greater mutual understanding upon the basis of acknowledging the diverse and differentiated social meanings and experiences constructed upon the "asylum seeker" identity in the local and global discourse. This includes building a greater sense of mutual support among the asylum seeker themselves based on their shared "asylum seeking" experience as a form of empowerment to redefine the label, and for

all to fundamentally recognize the diversity of the population beyond these social identities. [¥]

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[1] Malkki, L. (1992) "National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity Among Scholars and Refugees in Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference", *Cultural Anthropology*, 7(1), pp. 24-44.

[2] Auge, M. (1995) *Non-Places: Introduction to anthropology of supermodernity*. Verso: London.

[3] *Ibid*, Malkki.

[4] Timotijevic, L. & G. M. Breakwell. (2000) "Migration and Threat to Identity", *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 10, pp.355-372.

[5] Bar-Yosef, R. W. (1968) "Desocialization and Resocialization: The Adjustment Process of Immigrants", International Migration Review, 2(3), pp.27-45.

[6] Bauman, Z. (2004) *Wasted Lives: modernity and its outcasts*, Oxford: Polity Press.

[7] The criteria for a "refugee" and "asylum seeker" were initially established in a post-WWII setting for European refugees under the 1951 Refugee Convention. Scholars claim these criteria are outdated and unable to address the demands of today's global conflicts.

[8] Castles, S. & Miller, M. J. (2009) *The Age of Migration*, London: Palgrave-MacMillan.

[9] Matthews, G. & Vecchio, F. (2011, January 14). "Open and Shut Cases", *South China Morning Post*, Retrieved July 12, 2013, http://visionfirstnow.org/2011/01/15/open-and-shut-cases/

[10] Mathews, G. (2011) *Ghetto at the Center of the World: Chungking Mansions*, *Hong Kong*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

[11] More South Asian asylum seekers are willing to take the risk of working illegally as they are indistinguishable from those working with tourist-visa or with a permanent residency, whereas African asylum seekers are very distinguishable for the police to identify given the limited number of existing Africans with permanent residency in Hong Kong, which means they are more likely to arouse document checks from the police. See *Ibid*, Matthews.