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“Constructing Belonging”

*/investigating the act of hospitality as a
spatial production of belonging for
diasporic HK migrants*

Keyword(s):

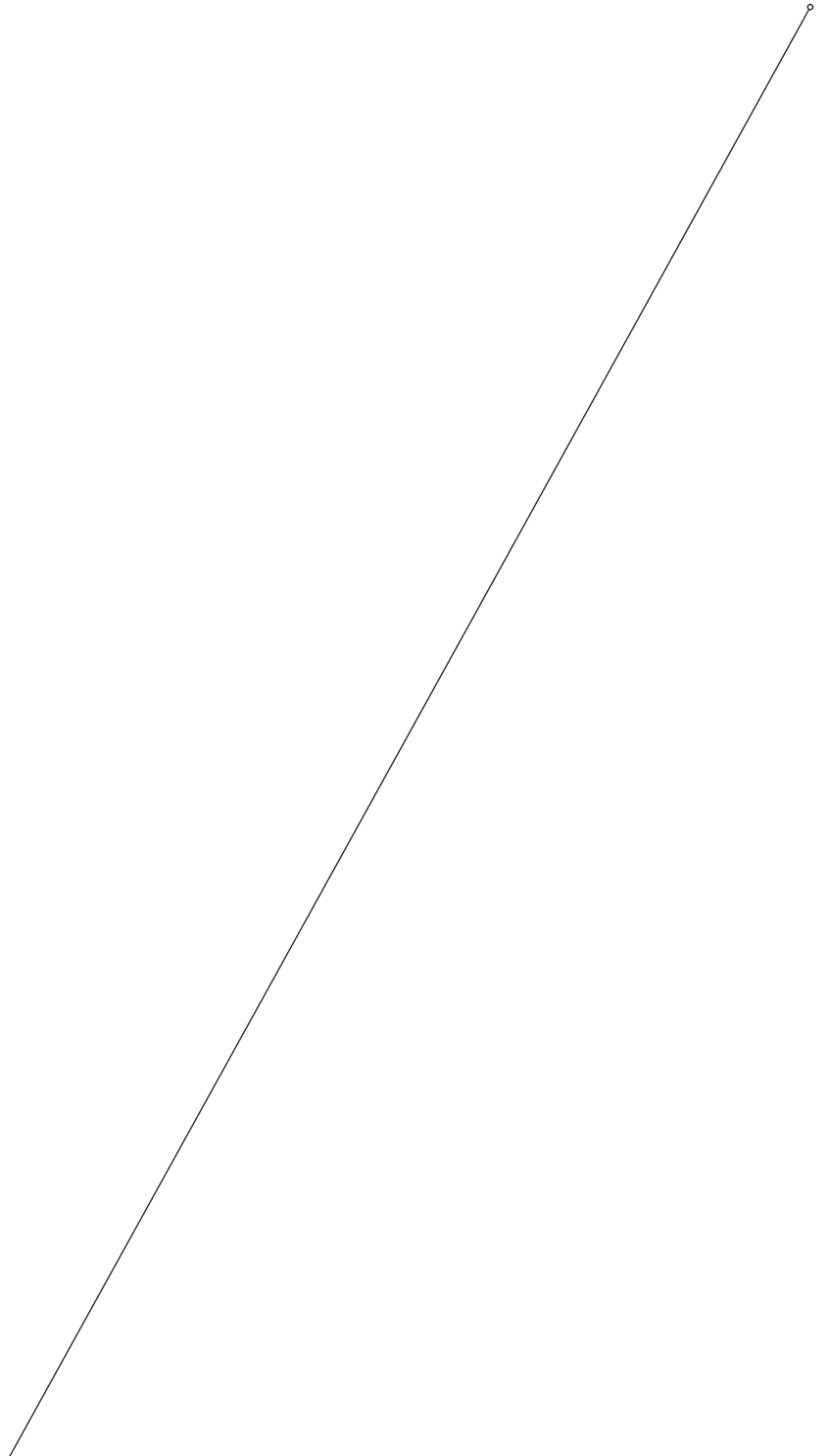
#diasporic bodies

#hospitality

#liminal state

#stranger encounters

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i.**/INTRODUCTION**

“Wherever I am is Hong Kong.”

David Won (2022)

“We were constantly being told: ‘Britain really couldn’t have done any better’ when we were always saying that the reason was that you tied your hands behind your back [...] is because you really didn’t want us. Now I mean that, Britain won’t get away with this historically. We’re gonna continue to say that, the whole reason was, of course, we are not white.”

Christine Loh (1983), as transcribed by Author at the British Library in July, 2022, from Julian O’Halloran, “Chinese Whispers”, BBC Two, 17 June, 1997.

The Emergence of Belonging

When the world was preoccupied with the pandemic, in the last few years, hundreds of thousands of families and individuals were fleeing the city of Hong Kong only to never return.

¹ Miaojung Lin, Kari Soo Lindberg, and Lisa Pham, “Hong Kong Migrants Find U.K. Is a World Turned Upside-Down”, Bloomberg, 18 March, 2022, extracted from, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2022-03-18/moving-to-u-k-from-hong-kong-migrants-still-coming-to-terms-with-new-lives??leadSource=uverify%20wall>

The displacement was difficult to define, but was widely recognized as primarily prompted by the failure of democratic movement in 2019 and the subsequent deterioration of freedom in the city. Along with the majority of financially-secured families leaving with a detailed plan, some were leaving on last-minute flights to flee imprisonment on the horizon.¹ At the corona-strike airport with limited incoming air traffic, it has been a common sight for families and friends bidding farewell to their loved ones in

the departure hall, with long queue of luggage-loaded passengers checking in for their one-way flights to new homes overseas. **(figure 1)** In tears and dear hugs, the city witnessed a mass migration of population (often referred as the “exodus” in media²) out of Hong Kong in the hope of leaving behind their traumatic memories and escaping the increment of authoritarian grip onto the society.³

While the city of Hong Kong is experiencing a brain drain, other cities are welcoming the HK migrant families with open arms, of which the majority brings along significant asset and talents from their educated background, with special immigration policies such as the popularly referred “lifeboat” schemes from Canada, and the British National (Overseas) [BN(O)] visa from the UK.⁴

UK in particular emerged as one of the most popular destinations for HK migrants, because of the convenient immigration policy, as well as the familiarity in languages and everyday life. Contrary to the hostility to other incoming migrant “strangers” (such as the deportation of Rwanda nationals from the UK soil), the HK migrants enjoy a much more hospitable welcome from their hosting countries due to the obvious economic benefits of receiving new capital and labour they brought along.⁵ Despite being titled as a benevolent solidarity act to “live up to our [Britain’s] historic responsibility to its [Hong Kong’s] people,” if situated along the colonial historical discourse, the story of HK migration to the UK becomes more complicated than it is bannered.⁶

Nonetheless, this mass migration is as historical as contemporary, with official estimates of about between 258,000 and 322,400 arriving in the next five years, posing new challenges as to how does the British society house their new migrant neighbours.⁷

On the other hand, as our HK migrants settle themselves in their new homes, they still have to wrestle with constructing their belonging in the new space. Here, our spatial question emerges: **how can the diasporic HK migrants construct belonging in their new interiors?**



Fig. 1 The departures gate at Hong Kong International Airport last month. Since China introduced its sweeping national security law, tens of thousands of people have made plans to leave the city and start new lives elsewhere. Credit...Anthony Kwan for The New York Times

² Candice Chau, “Explainer: How to measure Hong Kong’s mass exodus”, HKFP, 16 January, 2022, extracted from, <https://hongkongfp.com/2022/01/16/explainer-how-to-measure-hong-kongs-mass-exodus/>

³ In 2022, Hong Kong has had a population of around 200,000 people leaving the city (approx. to one-third of Rotterdam’s population), accumulating to a 1.6% dip in its total population as compared to 2019’s statistics, the year the city encountered its most heated (in terms of violence) and largest (in terms of extent and period) civil movement in its history. Between mid-2021 and mid-2022, 113,000 has left Hong Kong, resulting in a year-on-year drop with the largest percentage decline over a 12-month period since records began in 1961. Yet, the real extent of the mass exodus is yet to be measured. Figures such as that of school vacancies, application for BN(O) (a special visa track by the British government), and withdrawal of pension fund, all pointed to a continuous emigration of people leaving the city with long-term, if not permanent, departures. Almond Li, “Over 113,000 residents left city in 12 months, as Hong Kong sees largest mid-year population drop on record”, HKFP, 12 August, 2022, extracted from <https://hongkongfp.com/2022/08/12/over-113000-residents-left-city-in-12-months-as-hong-kong-sees-largest-mid-year-population-drop-on-record/>

⁴ Monica Buchanan Pitrelli, “Thousands of people are leaving Hong Kong – and now it’s clear where they’re going”, ASIA-PACIFIC NEWS, CNBC, 27 May, 2022, extracted from, <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/05/27/people-are-leaving-hong-kong-and-here-is-where-they-are-going.html#:~:text=Most>

⁵ “The expectation is that this is going to be quite a distinctive migration wave because of how high-skilled it is and the kind of contributions it can make to the knowledge economy,” said Peter William Walsh, a senior researcher at the University of Oxford’s Migration Observatory, said of those arriving from Hong Kong. Isabella Kwai, “‘Wherever I Am Is Hong Kong’: Migrants Build a New Life in the U.K.,” *The New York Times*, 4 June, 2022, extracted from <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/04/world/europe/hong-kong-migrants-uk.html>

⁶ From uncovering some archival materials about the negotiations leading up to the 1997 Handover, one realized that the discussion never involved the public of Hong Kong. As remarked by then-governor of Hong Kong Murray Maclehouse, he admitted it was “much better to keep quiet about the hoping” and that he “realized that this isn’t open but it was a very satisfactory way of governance.” Julian O’Halloran, “Chinese Whispers”, *BBC Two*, 17 June, 1997, as transcribed by Author in *British Library archive*

⁷ As set out in our impact assessment, our central range analysis estimated between 123,000 and 153,700 BN(O) status holders and their dependants coming in the first year and between 258,000 and 322,400 over five years. UK Home Office, “Media factsheet: Hong Kong BN(O) Visa route”, *Home Office in the Media*, 24 February, 2022, extracted from <https://homeofficemedia.blog.gov.uk/2022/02/24/media-factsheet-hong-kong-bnos/>

The British National (Overseas)

⁸ It should be noted to the reader of this paper that the colonial history of Hong Kong and its subsequent period of “re-nationalization” has been a site of conflicting narratives which foreshadow the democratic struggles and, controversially, also the recent mass migration observed. From the British, the narrative has been emphasizing the infrastructural development left behind by the colonial government in Hong Kong, hard and soft, as the major attributors to the city’s success, while from the Chinese, the narrative has been emphasizing the rightful return of the stolen territory of Hong Kong to the motherland on a celebratory note. Both narratives are not without problems, with the British selective-

Hong Kong had been under British colonial rule for about a century, only to be transferred to another superpower that was the People’s Republic of China in 1997, at the expiration of the arbitrary “99-year” lease of territory historically signed between the British and Chinese powers without consultation of the Hong Kong public.⁸ From 1997 onwards, the city of Hong Kong would henceforth operate under the “One-country-two-systems”, with a promise of “keep the status quo for 50 years” from then ruling Chinese leadership. The 50-year count-down was artificially decided upon, much akin to the “99-year lease” of the New Territories.⁹ Drawing from this historical parallel of living in count-down, society of Hong Kong has been living under a “permanent liminality” where Hong Kong people were struggling with their identity, as remarked

by many cultural theory scholarships.¹⁰ Instead of reclaiming a cultural identity immediately after the end of colonial ruling, a story familiar in other adjacent regions of decolonization, society of Hong Kong has to struggle with the question of “becoming Hong Kong”, i.e. to actively construct and produce the “Hong Kong” identity.¹¹

“Between imminent decolonization and an emerging postcoloniality lies what we consider to be a significant history: a history of becoming (post-colonial) Hong Kong.”

Erni, John Nguyet. 2001. “Like a Postcolonial Culture: Hong Kong Re-Imagined.” *Cultural Studies* 15 (3-4): 389-418. <https://doi.org/10.1080/095023800110046632>.

In the subsequent years of disorientation, the identity crisis would later resurface at the heat of the 2019 protest, only to transform into a productive questioning for the public, who were made aware that identity is to be produced and constructed. Amidst the feverish protests on the streets, the questioning has prompted the Hong Kong society to forge an identity from shared trauma, with increasing reference to “Hongkonger” as a self-identity. **(figure 2)** Some would have taken this new found camaraderie to another theoretical position, claiming a “Hong Kong nation” united by the shared identity, a narrative that fundamentally challenges the Chinese narrative of one unified Chinese nation.¹²

“Given the particularities of the ‘handover’ threshold of imposed decolonization in 1997 followed by a fifty year phase as a ‘special administrative’ region of China (1997-2047), does Hong Kong’s liminality have any implications extending beyond the local conflicts and their peculiar historical formation?”

Meaghan Morris, “Hong Kong Liminal: Situation as Method”, *Hong Kong Culture and Society in the New Millennium, Hong Kong as Method, Chapter 1*, edited by Yiu-Wai Chu et al., 2017, Springer

ly ignoring the systemic exclusion of democratic elements in its governmental structure, and the Chinese fabricating a mythological origin story of Hong Kong as always part of China, in turn disregarding the city’s unique history and cultural identity. The conflicting narratives crack open the identity crisis of the society whether to belong to the British or the Chinese.]

⁹ Julian O’Halloran, “Chinese Whispers”, BBC Two, 17 June, 1997, as transcribed by Author in British Library archive

¹⁰ “... recent work in political anthropology developing a model of ‘permanent’ liminality to account for protracted transitional states in modernity suggests ways to connect recent Hong Kong experience to wider contexts of historical stress elsewhere.” Meaghan Morris, “Hong Kong Liminal: Situation as Method”, *Hong Kong Culture and Society in the New Millennium, Hong Kong as Method, Chapter 1*, edited by Yiu-Wai Chu et al., 2017, Springer

¹¹ The lately popular BN(O) visa also sheds light on the problem. Taking origin from the British National (Overseas), a special passport issued to residents born during colonial period in Hong Kong, the BN(O) illustrates the exceptionality of the Hong Kong identity in its namesake. Bracketed from the “British National”, the question of Hong Kong identity would never escape encountering its colonial past. In response to this post-colonial anxiety, many have resorted to the notion of hybridity as the essence of the Hong Kong identity. Yet, the hybrid concept has proven to be not sufficient to comfort the society in the pending unification with China in 2047.

¹² “Hong Kong nation” was a narrative founded upon the theoretical resources of Imagined Communities from Benedict Anderson. The narrative however was not novel. First proposed in the 1980s (some argue the 1970s), the idea of rebuilding an entirely new Hong Kong in faraway island (Isle of Lewis) offshore of Scotland came in the wake of the pending Handover in 1997. Fearing the Chinese take over of Hong Kong, a sentiment more exacerbated after the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, society of Hong Kong had imagined ways of moving away, and rebuilding the entirety of Hong Kong with the chartered city concept was one of the many discussions then. The proposal was ultimately not realized, but recently regained popularity in the society. Speculative projects have emerged to visualize the said proposal.

¹³ albeit the two contexts being distinctly different and therefore any effort to make leveled comparison runs the risk of overgeneralization.

¹⁴ During the 2019 protests, it became more common sight than before in the city to see banners claiming “Hong Kong independence, the single way out”, asking for full autonomy of the city from the Chinese leadership. Such narratives, albeit remaining ambivalence and open, was regarded as subversive by the Chinese leadership. Therefore, any mention of a “Hong Kong nation” would be subject to the new National Security Law, and imprisonment would follow.



Fig. 3 Theatrical recreation of scenes from 2019 protests in Vancouver, which attracted many controversies from many who remained in Hong Kong, sourced from <https://www.epochtimes.com/b5/22/6/14/n13759196.htm>

Diaspora VS Diasporic

Without rushing to disperse this gravitation towards a “Hong Kong nation” as naïve nationalism, if recognized as a theoretical postulation of “living as a collective” in spatial terms, one might be able to develop an empathetic and critical understanding of recent HK migrants overseas.

Such a gravitation therefore explains the popularity of the keyword “diaspora” in Hong Kong local media to refer to emigration out of the city, with intentional reference to the Jewish Diaspora as the society of Hong Kong struggles to find glimpse of hope in its erosion of self-identity.¹³ Having been through the identity crisis, and arriving at a solid “Hongkonger” identity, the promise of the diaspora allows the society of Hong Kong to find comfort in knowing that “Hongkonger” as an identity could be preserved despite the ever-more-active erasure of local identity by the Chinese leadership.¹⁴ It becomes an urgency for many in the society to define and construct a public civic life that is under attack by the regime. In fact, occasions where such an identity is “performed” have been common in the hosting cities for the Hong Kong migrants, such as protest march on streets on significant dates related to 2019 movement, recreation of protest scenes in public space, open screening of Hong Kong-related films etc. (figure 3)

Whilst these settings of performing become effective in consolidating the “Hongkonger” identity in the foreign contexts, one might begin to question if identity can only be constructed in the events of political activism. One might even be tempted to refer to these as the “events of the absurd”, often with a heightened theatricality that exploits the emotional appeal of imageries.

One would then question, other than relying on the extraordinary events, can the ordinary everyday life in any way allow performing of the Hong Kong identity? And can we design such performances?

Mass migration due to political instability or conflicts is not uncommon in history. In fact, it is as contemporary as now. Looking across, every day families and individuals in parts of our world are displaced from their home because of wars, or institutional failures, or climatic threats. What then makes the study of HK migration to the UK a unique case contributing to this ongoing discussion?

Why do we care?



Fig.2 Photo of 2019 Anti-Elab protest in Hong Kong, demonstration with banner that wrote "All the best, Hongkongers", MingPao, extracted from <https://m.mingpao.com/in-s/%E6%B8%AF%E8%81%9E/article/20191231/s00001/1577609219490/%E3%80%90%E5%9B%9E%E6%9C%9B2019-%E4%BA%BA%E7%89%A9%E3%80%91%E9%A6%99%E6%B8%AF%E4%BA-%E5%AD%B8%E7%94%9F-%E8%AD%A6%E5%AF%9F>

Here, it is argued that the case of Hong Kong migrants emerges as conceptually unique in the ongoing spatial study of migrants. Ashish Rajadhyaksha's reading of Hong Kong's Umbrella Revolution in 2014 can be equally appropriate to describe the emerging Hong Kong migrants, who "appear to be taking us into a political zone for which there may well be no historical equivalent for the questions raised."¹⁵ One should note that the recent wave of Hong Kong migrants is distinct from existing Chinese communities in the UK. Drawing historical equivalence from existing Chinatowns to settlement patterns to now Hong Kong migrants would be insensitive to the peculiarity of each distinct community.¹⁶ Situating at the intersection of "being Hong Kong" and "being migrant", (figure 4) the HK migrants, especially for those arriving at the UK, have to wrestle with a "double liminality" in terms of ethnicity and settlement status.¹⁷ At this intersection of identity, the spaces inhabited by Hong Kong migrants would also have to reconcile with their inscribed "permanent liminality" of becoming Hong Kong as well as their new liminality as migrants. Think, for instance, a Turkish community could refer to their rich material culture to territorialize their new homes, by furnishing with culturally unique elements to create belonging in the interiors. However, for our Hong Kong migrants, the same act of home-making becomes more difficult, as the population struggles to find the quintessential "Hong Kong" material cul-

¹⁵ Ashish Rajadhyaksha, "Hong Kong from the Outside"

¹⁶ A majority of Hong Kong migrants prefer to not associate with the Chinese communities, and prefer to identify as "Hongkongers" themselves. Hackney Chinese Community Services (HCCS), Hong Kong Assistance and Resettlement Community (HKARC), and Hongkongers in Britain (HKB), "Supporting Hongkongers to settle in the UK", 26 January, 2021, extracted from <https://zh.hongkongers.org.uk/supporting-hongkongers>

being "Hong Kong"
being "migrant"

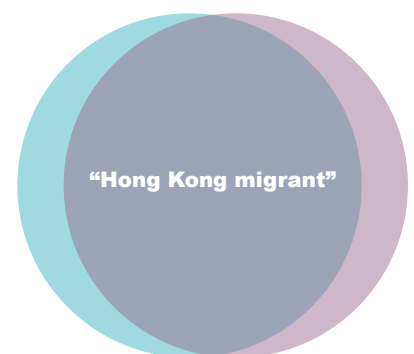


Fig.4 Diagram showing intersectionality of Hong Kong migrant as double liminal

¹⁷ This liminal state is further accentuated in the 5+1 period for the BN(O) visa holders to fully become British Citizens. Before a full BC citizenship, with the BN(O) visa, no social welfares or housing subsidy are available to the visa holders, except self-registered healthcare insurance. On top of the limited social support, BN(O) holders would have to stay in the UK for a required extensive period of time (no more than 180 days outside the UK in any 12-month period), meaning that long-term return to Hong Kong would be difficult. Titled as the “Indefinite leave to remain”, the visa allows holders to settle in the UK with the right to live, work and study for as long as they prefer. Indeed, without housing subsidy or mortgage available, out of necessity of settlement, many of the HK migrants have already become, or in the process of becoming, cash buyers of UK properties. The purchase is possible due to the high property price in the HK market, which supplies a handsome sum of cash for emigrating families to bring to the UK market. With such an investment into property, one would imagine the HK migrants to settle for good in the UK. Yet, when asked what is the plan 5 years forward, surprisingly many have mentioned the possibility of moving elsewhere, within the UK or even abroad, citing the ease of selling their UK property in the fierce market and their eventual British Citizenship

¹⁸ Here, one should recognize the ongoing efforts from design communities in Hong Kong, from graphic design to fashion, and to architecture, to create a Hong Kong material culture. Initiatives such as capturing Hong Kong modernism, or preserving font typology design, have beautifully preserved and created new references for the imagination of a Hong Kong material culture. Despite the beautiful efforts, the imagination of a Hong Kong material culture is still absent in public discussions, let alone in outsider gazes of Hong Kong. To define a “Hongkong-ness” in architecture still remains ambivalent, and an ongoing task for designers. It is not the intention of this research to define a Hong Kong material culture in architecture, as it is hypothesized that a space for a culturally specific inhabitation does not rely on a defined set of symbols or materials, but such a space is created by designing affordances for the diasporic subjects to encounter each other and produce their new belonging.

¹⁹ As documented from the interviews with HK migrants in Greater London in July, 2022. A total of 7 households were visited, with some extra conversations with those who could not afford a house interview. A total of 16 subjects were asked.]

ture due to their inscribed identity crisis.¹⁸ The difficulty emerges as a spatial question: *how can Hong Kong migrants construct belonging in their new interiors?*

To answer this question, one needs to first return to the ambivalent theoretical definition of our Hong Kong migrants.

“Nonetheless, respect for diasporic specificities allows for political identities to be formed without a permanent and constraining return to the relationship with the dominant/ normative group (be it white or other).”

Léopold Lambert, “Diasporas: Introduction”, *The Funambulist* issue. 43, “Diasporas”, (2022)

To define the mass migration of Hong Kong population overseas is difficult. When asked an accurate term describing their displacement, the Hong Kong migrants often first hesitated, and then uttered different synonyms: “as mobility”, “as relocation”, “as opportunity”, “as escape” etc.¹⁹ When asked if “diaspora” could be an accurate description, many of the Hong Kong migrants have rejected the term.²⁰ This rejection seemingly contradicts the previously established affinity of Hong Kong society towards the terminology. However, this contradiction underlies the operating of different narratives around this mass migration and a discrepancy in the use of languages. For those keen on following and theorizing the mass migration, “diaspora” emerges as a useful instrument to frame the discussion in relation to the topic of identity and belonging. Popularly used in media, the term signifies an immensity in scale and time, and subsequently provokes a productive reading of the otherwise tearful farewell as an act of fertility, with reference to the epistemological root of the word as “dispersing seeds”.

Despite so, it is worth delving into their reluctance to identify as “diaspora” by looking closer to the translation of the terminology. In Chinese, it is translated as “離散 (lei4 saan3)”, meaning literally “-to leave” and “-to disassemble”. The negative connotation with the literal meaning of

the Chinese characters might explain the reluctance to identify with being a diaspora by the HK migrants in question. Interestingly, emerged from the conversations with these HK migrants was the antonym of the Chinese characters, that is, “團聚 (tyun4 zeoi6)”, meaning literally “-to gather”, “-to reunite”.²¹

In their own accounts of their migration story, one could not help but notice a strong sense of longing for reunion with friends and families in Hong Kong. However, the site of reunion is not geographically bound to Hong Kong. Some regarded their new home in the UK as the place for reunion, where new friends in the neighborhood and visiting families could come together. Some remarked that old relationships were rekindled following the migration because old friends also moved to the UK.

Here, one could observe that the Hong Kong migrants do not necessarily share one fixed site of belonging, which stands in stark contrast to the idea of “promised land” in the “Hong Kong Nation” fable. (figure 5) They have no intention of rebuilding a new Hong Kong elsewhere. Instead, they look towards the private domestic spaces as sites of reunion. Within the walls, over dishes of Cantonese cooking, or very often a mix of international cuisines, with wines poured and music being played, friends and families can enjoy moments of reunion. The interior is therefore produced as a site of belonging through the act of hospitality. Finally, the disassembled can meet again, not in the promised land, but in an array of “homes” across the new soil.

²⁰ One should also note, that the fact that our interviewees disregard the term “diaspora” as an accurate description is irrelevant to the application of the term. What is being said might differ from what is being done.

²¹ As documented from the interviews with HK migrants in Greater London in July, 2022. A total of 7 households were visited, with some extra conversations with those who could not afford a house interview. A total of 16 subjects were asked.



Fig.5 A proposal of rebuilding the entire HK in the NW of Scotland with the chartered city concept, proposed in 1980s in the wake of rising anxiety over 1997 handover, and recently popular in HK society

“The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.”

Hall, Stuart. 1990. “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.” *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory : A Reader* 392.

Now, the “Home” of the nation is substituted by the “home” of the domestic life. Interior space becomes not only the metaphor of one’s identity, but an actual site where identity is performed. Then, can we understand the event of hospitality as a site of reunion? As a spatial production of belonging in the new interiors?

To be diasporic does not necessitate a belonging to a “promised land”. *To be diasporic* necessitates one to constantly produce and reproduce oneself in the foreign context. *To be diasporic* is to respect the fluidity of identity, that one can have the agency to decide what one wishes to be. *To be diasporic* means to be here and there at the same time, that identity is no longer an either-or. Following the feminist notion on gender and identity, identity is constructed through repetitive performances that it almost acquires a non-act status of the present. This suggests a liberating notion that identity can be constructed at the disposal of the subject. *To be diasporic*, one moves away from the comfort of a given identity, and therefore bears the responsibility of constructing an identity one wishes to own.

Hence, we have established the difference between being “diaspora” and being “*diasporic*”. “Diaspora” is denoting a static given collective to belong to, whereas “*diasporic*” is referring to the liminal state of becoming.

Inscribed in their intricate histories, the struggle of choosing either-or, to be either British or Chinese, puts the Hong Kong migrants in a forever crisis of identity. While recently many have resorted to the essentialist notion of identity by claiming a “Hong Konger” title, it might be useful to expand the imagination on identities, and acknowledge that Hong Kong IS essentially diasporic. The permanent liminality used to describe post-colonization Hong Kong should refigure as a conceptual frame for contemporary identity struggle of HK migrants. More relevant to the design discipline, the conceptually unique case of the Hong Kong migrants introduces the notion of time to the designs of migrant arrival infrastructures. One should question, on the time horizon, when do the arrival infrastructures become no longer the anomaly to the city, but as parts of the city whole?

*“Prior to the writing of this paper, home visits to HK migrants in the Greater London were carried out in September. A total of 5 households were visited, with extra interviews conducted with subjects who could not offer a visit. The home visits comprised two parts: a round of interview questions, and then co-creating plans of memories of their HK and UK homes. As the interviewees were strangers two-degree removed from me in my social circle, it became obvious that the act of home visit and interview was an intrusive act. Trust had to be earned and developed over the course of the conversations. The entire act of home visit became performative. Mannerisms and intonations became important in walking the line between inquiry and intrusion. As strangers to each other, both me and the interviewee had to engage in a dialogic relationship, such as small talks before the real interview as a sign of affection, and in return being offered tea from the interviewees. In one instance, an obvious distrust was on display from an interviewee, assumably due to the perceived sensitivity of the topic relating Hong Kong under the current political climate. Interestingly, then, codes were being exchanged between us, to suggest the affinity of our positions in the political spectrum. At the end of the interview, a lunch was prepared by the family. As I was invited to the meal, conversations shifted onto a lighter tone. Praises over dishes and curiosity about the recipes became the appropriate gestures over the table. It was after the lunch that I was invited to visit again upon my next return.”*²²

Sites of belonging include...²²

²² The title of this sub-chapter is inspired by “Sites of diaspora include” by Raphaëlle Red, in *The Funambulist* issu. 43, “Diasporas”, (2022)

²³ Fieldnotes from the author, as documented from the interviews with HK migrants in Greater London in July, 2022. A total of 7 households were visited, with some extra conversations with those who could not afford a house interview. A total of 16 subjects were asked.

This account of the home visits promises a meaningful spatial reading of the HK migrants’ way of constructing belonging in their new interiors. The self-awareness of the ethnographic eyes is very present throughout the account. The interviewer was aware of the performativity embedded in the visit and the inter-

view, where all gestures and intonations are scrutinized by all parties. Albeit coming from the same context i.e. Hong Kong, the interviewer and the interviewees are strangers to each other. The familiarity could lend access at the beginning, but trust still has to be developed in the actual act of visiting. Interestingly, “the meal” emerged at the end of the account, and became an important ice-breaking for the parties. Over food, both the interviewer and the interviewees got to engage in another form of encounter, still performative, but founded upon a shared passion for a familiar palette. The interviewee got to share slices of their culture on the table, where the interviewer got to enjoy. The act of hospitality therefore emerges.

“...the term ‘belonging’ allows an affective dimension – not just be-ing, but longing.”

Elspeth Probyn, as quoted in Vikki Bell, “Performativity and Belonging”

To better frame the concept of “hospitality” within the discussions, let us revisit the arguments we have established:

- A significant number of new migrants from Hong Kong have arrived and is arriving at the UK in the upcoming years
- The HK migrants are always living in liminality
- The HK migrants are diasporic
- The HK migrants long for reunion, and have created sites of reunion in domestic spaces
- The HK migrants usually become cash buyers of UK properties for settlement, and possibly reselling in near future
- The HK migrants lack a culturally specific material culture to construct their belonging in the new interiors
- Identity may be performed in ordinary everyday life

Hospitality is traditionally understood as a gendered labour, which the female figures in the domestic space are expected to fulfill without questions. In terms of power structures, the host and the guest are engaging in a dialogic conversation at the event of hospitality. The host is expected to prepare a welcoming setting for the guest, to

²⁴ Sara Ahmed, *“Strange Encounters – Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality”*, 2000, Routledge

“feel at home”, in return for appropriate recognitions and gratifications, whilst the guest is expected to contribute to the event in tangible or intangible ways, such as the colloquial “bring a good mood”, in return for a well-prepared meal. The table therefore figures as a primary site of hospitality, where food is served and consumed. The act might also extend to adjacent spaces in the room, for those retreating from the main stage. Also, following the preparation of hospitality, the kitchen figures as a backstage. The performativity enshrined in the event of hospitality therefore draws an interesting parallel to the performativity of identity by the Hong Kong diasporic migrants. Here, the act of hospitality becomes a lead into the spatial questions of the HK migration to the UK.

For the HK migrants, the act of hospitality allows them to host. The preparation of food, the making of a welcoming setting, the greeting of guests, all these acts of hosting are imbued with cultural significance. By hosting, which is also a performance with the appropriate mannerisms, the HK migrants are able to perform their identity by welcoming guests into their world. Without referring to the non-existent “Hong Kong” material culture, the HK migrants can territorialize the new interiors with their mannerisms, such as music, bodily gestures, scents, flavours etc. The domestic space becomes a theatre where such a performance can play out. The table becomes the stage.

On the other hand, understanding hospitality as “encounters for strangers”,²⁴ the domestic space is transformed into a site of reunion. For friends and families, the event of hospitality allows the HK migrants to rekindle the kinship they long for. For familiar strangers, such as the interviewer and the interviewees who are both from the same cultural context, the event of hospitality allows the HK migrants to break the ice and create social bonds with each other. For stranger strangers, such as new British neighbours who are from a different cultural context, the event of hospitality allows the HK migrants to share their cultures by setting the scene imbued with cultural significance. Strangers become friends over the encounter of hospitality. At the event of hospitality, the private domain of the domestic space also becomes charged with a public life. Instead of a plenary assembly, such as street demonstrations which occur in singular, hospitality allows new encounters in multitude for diasporic bodies, who reject the notion of a fixed given identity, but embrace the liminal state of becoming themselves. Such is the new imagination of sites of belonging.

“My model of strange encounters as a form of political activism and collective work suggests that we need to find ways of re-encountering these encounters so that they no longer hold other others in place.

Alliances then are not guaranteed by the pre-existing form of a social group of community, whether that form is understood as commonality (a community of friends) or uncommonality (a community of strangers). Collectivises are formed through the very work that has to be done in order to get closer to other others.”

Ahmed, Sara, “Strange Encounters – embodied others in post-coloniality”

ii.**/PROBLEM STATEMENT**

In recent years, triggered by the failure of the 2019 pro-democracy movement and subsequent deterioration of freedom in the city, large influx of HK migrants into the UK is observed, and the phenomenon would continue into the upcoming years. The unique case of the HK migrants as diasporic subjects poses new questions to the ongoing spatial study of migration, requiring new techniques to document their inhabitation patterns and new conceptual resources to reflect on the process of home-making of migrant subjects. Hospitality emerges as a useful theoretical lens to study the diasporic HK migrants in the UK, as it suggests a new form of spatial production of belonging, where the migrants can be homed by affording encounters. Premising the research around HK migrants in the Greater London area, which is a popular destination for arriving into the host country before settling into their new life, the possibility of designing “hospitable interiors” for diasporic subjects is explored.

One needs to ask: *how can Hong Kong migrants construct belonging in their new interiors?*

iii.**/RESEARCH QUESTION(S)***Main question*

How can Hong Kong migrants construct belonging in their new interiors?

Sub-questions

As designers, how do we engage with the problem of identity expression in space?

What space can we design for the HK migrants to express their diasporic identity?

How can we design affordance for the strange encounters of the HK migrants?

What can a “hospitable interior” be?

“The production of the effect of identity, the effect (and affect) of various modes of affiliation, is an embodied process.”

Vikki Bell, “Performativity and Belonging”

iv.

/METHODODOLOGY

An Embodied Method

Acknowledging that the event of hospitality is an embodied process where the diasporic identity of the HK migrants in the UK is produced, the research will proceed with fieldworks into the everyday life of the studied subjects.

Home visits to the HK migrants will be arranged upon the existing connections established with multiple households in previous visits. It is hoped that round 4-5 households will be visited in November 2022. Inspired by the feminist epistemology incorporated in researches such as that of Stéphanie Dadour’s,²⁴ the visits would embed the researcher into the event of hospitality, where the researcher would prepare the food as well as sit together in the meal with the HK migrants. As such, the researcher takes up the position of the observer at the same time with the position of the invited guest to the event of the hospitality. The event will be documented in traditional methods of investigations as well, such as field recording of sound, videography, and other ethnographic methods. Prior to the visit, the households will be communicated to prepare a meal together with the researcher, where the researcher would conduct a walking interview to identify places relevant to the preparation of hospitality. A thick map would be produced as such. The researcher would therefore follow through the event of hospitality from its preparation to actual happening. The research findings would be later synthesized and translated into a “script” that allows performance and interpretation at the design stage.

²⁴ Stéphanie Dadour, “Building on Ethnography, for Architecture: Private Hospitality and the Making of a ‘Home’ (France, 2019-2021)”

Expected deliverable(s):

- + Thick map of preparation of hospitality from walking interview
- + Field recording and Videography of the event of hospitality
- + Fieldnotes from embodied observation from the event of hospitality
- + A synthesized “script” of hospitality

Duration of study:

- /November/ preparation of fieldwork
- /23-30 Nov/ one-week fieldwork in Reading, UK
- /Nov - Jan/ synthesis of research findings
- + development of initial design ideas



Fig.6 Photo taken together with HK migrant families in Reading, UK. Researcher was invited to lunch with the family, a form of embodied research method.

V.

/DESIGN PROMPT

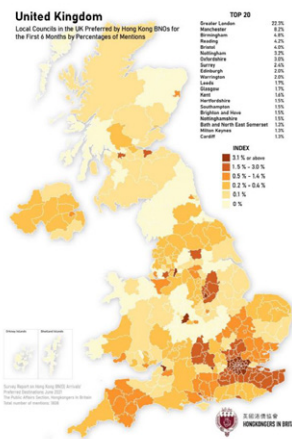


Fig.8 Map showing settlement preference of Hong Kong migrants in the UK, Hongkongers in Britain (HKB) (2021)

For HK migrants arriving at the UK, before settling down into the security of a long-term stay, there usually exists a window period of about 6 months when the new migrants would rent out temporary apartments. (figure 7) Most often, options include Airbnb, short-term rental rooms, or cramping into homes of friends or families. Emerged in one of the conversations with HK migrants on the ground is an Airbnb popular among new arriving families in Reading, which is the most popular Council adjacent to Greater London for settlement among HK migrants. (figure 8) In fact, two distinct families in the interview came to become friends with each other because of their overlapping time in the Airbnb. (figure 9 + 10) Regular gatherings with the alumni of the Airbnb continue to be organized after a year. Operating with this liminal state of inhabitation, the aforementioned Airbnb becomes the context for the design exercise. Premised in this singular architectural object, the design exercise wishes to answer: how can a hospitable interior be designed for the freshly arrived HK migrants in liminal state?



Fig.9 RG2 7PU, an impression of the Airbnb captured on Google street view.

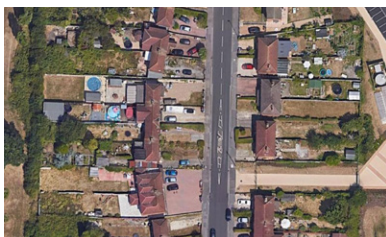


Fig.10 RG2 7PU, an impression of the Airbnb captured on Google satellite view

Programme + Context:

Design a house of hospitality for temporary stay for freshly arrived HK migrants through retrofitting (extension if necessary) an existing 3-storey semi-detached @Reading

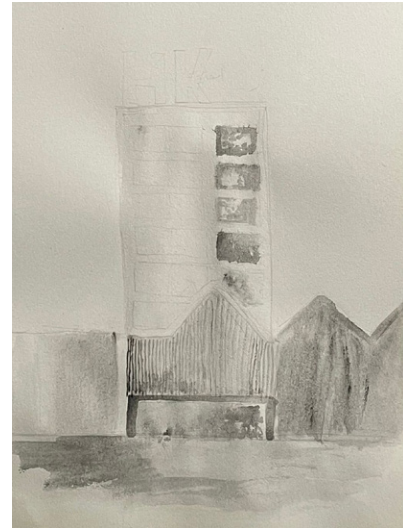


Fig.11 sketch of initial design idea of hospitable space for diasporic HK migrants

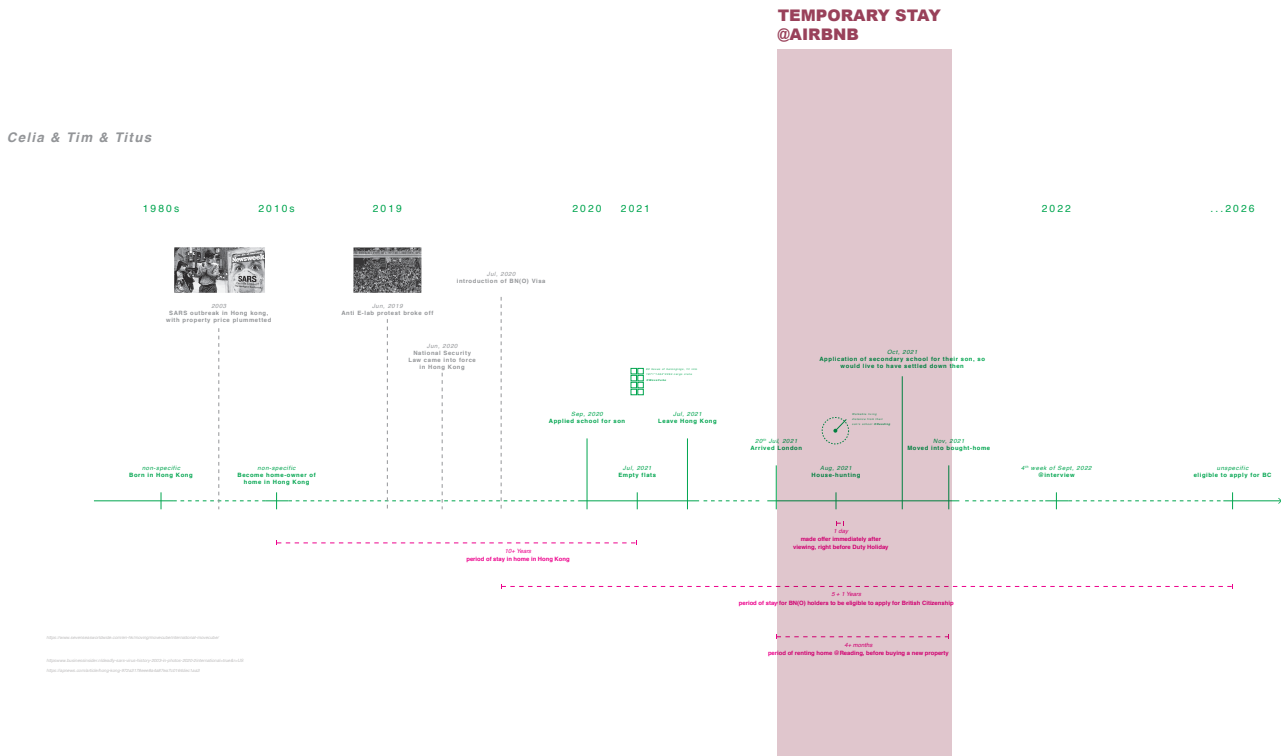


Fig.7 Timeline of migration story of Celia, Tim & Titus, annotated with a window-period of about 6 months where the migrant family lived in a airbnb

Vi.**/BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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