

RGC Ref. No.: <u>UGC/FDS15/H06/15</u> (please insert ref. above)
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**RESEARCH GRANTS COUNCIL
COMPETITIVE RESEARCH FUNDING SCHEMES FOR
THE LOCAL SELF-FINANCING DEGREE SECTOR**

FACULTY DEVELOPMENT SCHEME (FDS)

Completion Report

(for completed projects only)

<p><u>Submission Deadlines:</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Auditor's report with unspent balance, if any: within six months of the approved project completion date. 2. Completion report: within 12 months of the approved project completion date.
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Part A: The Project and Investigator(s)

1. Project Title

People without identity: Exploring the social experiences of asylum seekers in
 Hong Kong

2. Investigator(s) And Academic Department(s) / Unit(s) Involved

Research Team	Name / Post	Unit / Department / Institution
Principal Investigator	LAU, Flora Pui-yan / Assistant Professor	Department of Sociology / Hong Kong Shue Yan University
Co-Investigator(s)	--	--
Others	--	--

3. Project Duration

	Original	Revised	Date of RGC / Institution Approval <i>(must be quoted)</i>
Project Start Date	1 st January 2016	--	--
Project Completion Date	31 st December 2017	--	--
Duration <i>(in month)</i>	24 months	--	--

Deadline for Submission of Completion Report	31 December 2018	--	--
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Part B: The Final Report

5. Project Objectives

5.1 Objectives as per original application

1. To describe the problems, difficulties and discriminatory and daily life experiences of asylum seekers in Hong Kong
2. To analyse asylum seekers' stigmatisation experiences and coping strategies from a sociological perspective
3. To evaluate current government policies regarding asylum seekers based on evidence drawn from the asylum seekers' interactive daily life experiences
4. To suggest solutions to social problems, such as illegal activities carried out by asylum seekers, by making reference to the asylum seekers' ways of life and social connections in Hong Kong

5.2 Revised objectives

Date of approval from the RGC: N/A

Reasons for the change: N/A

1.

2.

3.

5.3 Realisation of the objectives

(Maximum 1 page; please state how and to what extent the project objectives have been achieved; give reasons for under-achievements and outline attempts to overcome problems, if any)

Ways to achieve the objectives

I conducted a total of twenty-eight in-depth interviews with asylum seekers and six interviews with NGO practitioners between April 2016 and February 2017. Asylum seekers of diverse background were interviewed: eight of the asylum seekers respondents are female (from East Africa and South-East Asia) and twenty are male (coming from different parts of Africa, South-East Asia, the Middle East and the former USSR), with the age ranges from 28 to 57. Eleven of them had received higher education and were working in their respective professions such as teaching and engineering before coming to Hong Kong. Others were working class people or businessmen. Interviews with asylum seekers were conducted in NGO offices, the parks and cafes, and the length of interviews varies from one hour to seven hours.

I also interviewed seven NGO practitioners, i.e. senior management, supervisors and counsellors who were working for NGOs by the time of interview. They gave a variety of insights into the general situation of asylum seekers in Hong Kong, the roles of NGOs, their empowering effects and the limitations of their services. Moreover, a thorough literature review on the difficulties of asylum seekers, their identity changes and policy advocacies were completed.

The extent to which each project objective is achieved

Upon the completion of research, objectives 1-3 are fully achieved while objective 4 is partially achieved. With regard to objective 1, asylum seekers respondents told me extensively the discriminatory experiences they encountered by local citizens on daily basis. They gave me a lot of examples on which they are discriminated in different aspects of life such as in public transports and supermarkets, and in the course of negotiating a contract with the landlord. The research helps to illustrate a true picture of who asylum seekers are and their difficulties in various different aspects of life in the Hong Kong community.

With regard to objective 2, I found that however desperate the situation is, asylum seekers tried hard to struggle to survive on daily basis. Some of them are able to recall their original identity as professional and highly educated person, and to maintain their passion in life. I used Erving Goffman's (1961a, 1961b) account on asylums, with the concepts of total institution, secondary adjustments and role distance, to understand the process of identity construction of individuals when they were seeking political asylum.

As to objective 3, I evaluated the Unified Screening Mechanism implemented by the Hong Kong Immigration Department, and commented on the slow pace of processing the asylum seeking application. I also evaluate the social welfare (e.g. food coupons, rent allowance, transportation etc.) delivered to asylum seekers on monthly basis and formulated two major arguments: first, the assistance is of minimal amount for the basic survival in Hong Kong. Second, the delivery of services requires a strong multi-organizational cooperation between the government and NGOs (including charities).

Nevertheless, objective 4 was only partially achieved substantially due to the very sensitive nature of this objective. None of the asylum seeker reviewed that they were involved in illegal activities. I tried to overcome this under-achievement by asking how they perceive their counterparts. They managed to tell me that they would not resemble some other asylum seekers who engage in criminal activities. This may imply the fact that some are involving in illegal activities but respondents were very reluctant to tell me what these illegal activities really are. At maximum, several of them told me they would not take drugs or engage in sex work. Moreover, based on the interview results with NGO practitioners, I came up with the argument that it is important to offer asylum seekers more chances to voluntary services and to participate in the local community so that they feel empowered and will be better able to delineate themselves from possible illegal activities.

5.4 Summary of objectives addressed to date

Objectives <i>(as per 5.1/5.2 above)</i>	Addressed <i>(please tick)</i>	Percentage Achieved <i>(please estimate)</i>
1. To describe the problems, difficulties and discriminatory and daily life experiences of asylum seekers in Hong Kong	✓	100%
2. To analyse asylum seekers' stigmatisation experiences and coping strategies from a sociological perspective	✓	100%
3. To evaluate current government policies regarding asylum seekers based on evidence drawn from the asylum seekers' interactive daily life experiences	✓	100%
4. To suggest solutions to social problems, such as illegal activities carried out by asylum seekers, by making reference to the asylum seekers' ways of life and social connections in Hong Kong	✓	80%

6. Research Outcome

6.1 Major findings and research outcome

(Maximum 1 page; please make reference to Part C where necessary)

The following major findings are emerged from my research. First, the experiences of poverty and discrimination, and the subsequent change of identity of asylum seekers were fully addressed in this research. To describe and analyse the process of identity construction and identity loss among asylum seekers in Hong Kong, the research draws on Erving Goffman's conceptualization of total institutions and mortification of self. I expanded the concept of total institution to include arrangements that impose legal and moral constraints without physically constraining their members, and that the institutional arrangements for asylum seekers in Hong Kong have similar mortifying effects on the self. This significant finding gives rise to two peer-review journal articles (one is in preparation) as well as two conference presentations in December 2016 and September 2018. For details, please refer to Part C8-9 for further information.

Second, although local NGOs provided emotional and financial assistance to asylum seekers, they feel that NGOs are not working for the recipients' benefit, but rather to further their own agenda. They are rather happy with grassroots NGOs (another term of refugee community organizations) which proactively engage in policy advocacy and empower asylum seekers from dissatisfaction with the status quo. The research also finds that local NGOs' financial subordination to the government dampens the empowerment process, and the disaggregation and lack of unity among asylum seekers undermines the development of refugee community organizations. This finding gives rise to one journal manuscript, which is now under review. Please refer to Part C8 for further information.

Third, the research finds that the restriction on the rights to work and the minimal welfare provision for asylum seekers leave them isolated from the mainstream Hong Kong society, and thus, rely heavily on bridging social capital (i.e. network associated with NGOs and charity). I have incorporated the research finding into the manuscript mentioned above.

Fourth, the research discovers that the majority of asylum seekers have stayed in Hong Kong for several years, among which one has stayed in Hong Kong for sixteen years. I argue that the slow pace of processing of political asylum applications under the Unified Screening Mechanism policy as well as the restrictions imposed on rights to work and the minimal welfare provisions for asylum seekers leads them to further isolation from the broader society. This research finding, as well as the advocacy for speeding up the pace of asylum-seeking application was reported in interviews with four major local presses in December 2017. Please refer to Part C12 for further information.

Fifth, the research advocates affirmative policies for which asylum seekers can always preserve a great sense of self. Rather than treating them as needy persons who are waiting for assistance all the time, they need more empowerment from NGOs and the governmental sector. This argument is advocated in a journal manuscript which is now under review.

6.2 Potential for further development of the research and the proposed course of action (*Maximum half a page*)

Two major developments can be reported. First, the research findings give rise to various possibilities for future research. For example, given the social isolation and identity loss experienced by asylum seekers, I am interested to learn the ways through which they are emotionally and socially connected with their homeland. One possible aspect of research is bereavement: to explore if they had experienced bereavement of close relatives and friends when they were alone in Hong Kong, and how they coped with the experience socially and culturally. Research questions can include: how are they connected to their homeland? Was there any social and emotional support when they experienced bereavement as asylum seekers? In terms of customs, how did they memorize and worship the bereaved? What are the meanings of homeland to them? This research direction does not only contribute to analyzing the social connection of asylum seekers, but the cultural side of them. Through bereavement and loss, I can learn further about their identity preservation and change. This research direction can be the main theme of my next RGC FDS application.

Second, the research findings have attracted the attention of Routledge, a renowned international book publisher. I have discussed very briefly with the commissioning editor and preliminarily I am expected to submit a book proposal in 2019. I develop the book proposal around the following themes: what does the HK experience of forced migration tell the international readers? What are the distinctive features of Hong Kong (e.g. visa free, relation with mainland China, the colonial history, legal obligation if there is any) as a gateway for asylum seekers? I can analyse the specific legal, political and social context of Hong Kong and within this specific context, I will present micro experiences and stories of asylum seekers. That would be global stories in the context of local studies.

7. Layman's Summary

(*Describe in layman's language the nature, significance and value of the research project, in no more than 200 words*)

The research explores the daily life experiences, social networks and discrimination encountered by asylum seekers in Hong Kong. Research questions include: how do they feel as asylum seekers in Hong Kong? How do they cope with discrimination and respond to social detachment in the Hong Kong community? How do they feel about the change of identity – from a person with citizenship and decent job to one without citizenship and is deprived of the right to work? By means of in-depth interviews with twenty-eight asylum seekers of various national and cultural backgrounds and seven NGO practitioners, the research answered the above questions.

The research contains the following significances: first, it brings the topic of asylum seekers, which is an under-studied topic into sociological research. Classical sociological concepts including stigmatization and total institution were used and revised as the analytical tool in this research. Second, based on the experiences of asylum seekers, the research advocates a speeding up of the asylum seeking application process implemented by the Immigration Department, and thus, contributing to local policy advocacy. Third, the research also appreciates the role of NGOs and charities in assisting asylum seekers, as well as the cooperation between the government and NGOs.

Part C: Research Output**8. Peer-Reviewed Journal Publication(s) Arising Directly From This Research Project**

(Please attach a copy of the publication and/or the letter of acceptance if not yet submitted in the previous progress report(s). All listed publications must acknowledge RGC's funding support by quoting the specific grant reference.)

The Latest Status of Publications				Author(s) (denote the corresponding author with an asterisk*)	Title and Journal / Book (with the volume, pages and other necessary publishing details specified)	Submitted to RGC (indicate the year ending of the relevant progress report)	Attached to this Report (Yes or No)	Acknowledged the Support of RGC (Yes or No)	Accessible from the institutional repository (Yes or No)
Year of Publication	Year of Acceptance (For paper accepted but not yet published)	Under Review	Under Preparation (optional)						
2018	2017	--	--	LAU, Pui Yan Flora* and GHEORG HIU, Iulia	"Vanishing Selves under Hong Kong's Unified Screening Mechanism", <i>Cultural Diversity in China</i> 3(1): 21-29.	2017	Yes	Yes	N/A
--	--	Yes	--	Lau, Pui Yan Flora	"Empowerment in asylum seeker regime? The roles of policies, non-profit sector and refugee community organizations in Hong Kong", <i>Journal of Refugee Studies</i>	N/A	Yes	Yes (The acknowledgment was written on the 'title page' of manuscript submission which can only be read by the editor but not the reviewers. It needs to be written separately from the manuscript during the review process)	N/A
--	--	--	Yes	Lau, Pui Yan Flora	Whispering against the Machine: Secondary Adjustments and Other Forms of Everyday Resistance among Asylum Seekers in Hong Kong	N/A	No	Not yet	N/A

9. Recognized International Conference(s) In Which Paper(s) Related To This Research Project Was / Were Delivered

(Please attach a copy of each conference abstract)

Month / Year / Place	Title	Conference Name	Submitted to RGC (indicate the year ending of the relevant progress report)	Attached to this Report (Yes or No)	Acknowledged the Support of RGC (Yes or No)	Accessible from the institutional repository (Yes or No)
December / 2016 / Hong Kong	Rejecting Self-Mortification – Asylum Seekers in Hong Kong	The 18 th Annual Conference of the Hong Kong Sociological Association	Yes (2017)	Yes	Yes (Not on the presentation abstract but I acknowledged the support of RGC at the beginning of the presentation)	N/A
December / 2017 / Colombo, Sri Lanka	Poverty and psychological degradation: Experiences of asylum seekers in Hong Kong	4 th International Conference on Poverty and Sustainable Development	N/A	Yes	Yes (Not on the presentation abstract but I acknowledged the support of RGC at the beginning of the presentation)	N/A
September / 2018 / Winchester, UK	Negotiating identity under total institution: Secondary adjustments and other forms of everyday resistance among asylum seekers in Hong Kong	Boundary Crossing: An International, Interdisciplinary Conference on Refugees and Social Justice	N/A	Yes	Yes (Not on the presentation abstract but I acknowledged the support of RGC at the beginning of the presentation)	N/A

10. Whether Research Experience And New Knowledge Has Been Transferred / Has Contributed To Teaching And Learning

(Please elaborate)

N/A

11. Student(s) Trained

(Please attach a copy of the title page of the thesis)

Name	Degree Registered for	Date of Registration	Date of Thesis Submission / Graduation
N/A			

12. Other Impact

(e.g. award of patents or prizes, collaboration with other research institutions, technology transfer, teaching enhancement, etc.)

Knowledge transfer and dissemination of research findings

The research findings have contributed to knowledge transfer to the Hong Kong community and hopefully will create policy impacts in the local community. The followings show the evidence of knowledge transfer via press interviews:

- a) South China Morning Post, 'Asylum seekers in Hong Kong who are trying to make the best out a bad situation', on 27th December 2017.
- b) 香港 01, 「往內地求庇護 遭蛇頭騙到香港 等甄別身份滯留11年」, 二零一七年十二月二十七日。
- c) 香港 01, 「學廣東話 創NGO助難民 高學歷尋庇護者盼貢獻香港」, 二零一七年十二月二十七日。
- d) 明報, 「提聲請者有專業人士 剛果女教師冀助人 聞「設集中營禁閉」倡議 感歧視二零一七年十二月二十七日。
- e) 蘋果日報, 「高學歷難民盼搵工回饋香港」, 二零一七年十二月二十七日。

Further dissemination

The arguments on the insufficient knowledge and thus the subsequent enhancement of the chance to judicial appeals emerged in these interviews and were cited in *Kung Kao Po*, the Catholic Hong Kong Diocese weekly newspaper, issue 3899 in November 2018, which is sold among Chinese Catholics worldwide and circulated online.

13. Public Access Of Completion Report

(Please specify the information, if any, that cannot be provided for public access and give the reasons.)

Information that Cannot Be Provided for Public Access	Reasons

**RESEARCH GRANTS COUNCIL
COMPETITIVE RESEARCH FUNDING SCHEMES FOR
THE LOCAL SELF-FINANCING DEGREE SECTOR**

FACULTY DEVELOPMENT SCHEME (FDS)

Completion Report - Attachment

(for completed projects only)

RGC Ref. No.: UGC/FDS15/H06/15

Principal Investigator: LAU, Flora Pui-yan

Project Title: People without identity: Exploring the social experiences of asylum seekers in Hong Kong

Statistics on Research Outputs

	Peer-reviewed Journal Publications	Conference Papers	Scholarly Books, Monographs and Chapters	Patents Awarded	Other Research Outputs (Please specify)
No. of outputs arising directly from this research project [or conference]	3 (one published in 2018, one under review, one in preparation)	3	N/A	N/A	Media interviews: Interviews with four major local presses in December 2017, among which one media wrote two separate articles for the same interview