

Research Assessment Exercise 2020
Impact Case Study

Institution: The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Unit of Assessment (UoA): 27 sociology & anthropology

Title of case study: *Improving the Lives and Increasing the Understanding of Asylum Seekers, Ethnic Minorities and Other Migrants in Hong Kong*

(1) Summary of the impact

Globalization, migration, and migrant communities in Hong Kong are a major research focus of the Department of Anthropology (ANT) of this UoA. The attitudes towards migrant communities including South Asians and Africans have generally been negative in Hong Kong, and our research seeks to create a more nuanced understanding of migrant issues. Research results have been disseminated through media, publications and cultural workshops. These activities have created an impact in two main ways: (a) improving public knowledge about migrant communities, and (b) changing the practice of those engaging in ethnic issues, including policy makers, educators, civil servants, and NGOs. In particular, the Hong Kong public administration has improved medical services for ethnic minorities and adjusted the level of social benefits to asylum seekers. Furthermore, 1,300 people have attended cultural workshops from 2013-19 and the great majority of them indicated that their intercultural knowledge has improved.

(2) Underpinning research

Researchers involved in the research include:

1. Gordon MATHEWS: research began in 2005 with a focus upon Chungking Mansions as a major hub of low-end globalization, particularly for African and South Asian traders in Chinese manufactured goods;
2. Siumi Maria TAM: research began in 2013 focusing on South Asian communities in Hong Kong;
3. Sealing CHENG: research began in 2012 with a focus on the health needs, access, and health-seeking behaviour of African asylum-seekers and refugees (ASRs) in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong society has long followed the racial hierarchy practiced in the colonial period, with white people treated better than South Asians and Africans in everyday interactions. In response to this, researchers have carried out long-term ethnographic fieldwork on these communities and provided a more nuanced understanding of migrant issues.

With the support of an RGC grant (GRF project no. 448807), MATHEWS spent several days a week over four years living in Chungking Mansions, a developing-world center in Hong Kong, interviewing its residents. The research has explored how low-end globalization works, and also the lives of African and South Asian traders, merchants, and asylum seekers, in terms not just of economics, but also their hopes, fears, religious beliefs, and romantic lives, to understand how they are changing Hong Kong, and how Hong Kong is changing them [3.1, 3.2]. His research has transformed the negative image of Africans and South Asians in Hong Kong [3.3].

TAM's research (2013-19), funded by the University's Knowledge Transfer Project Fund (KPF) and Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) grants, has studied the living experiences and cultures of South Asian communities in Hong Kong. The research series includes 2013-14 on Indian communities, 2014-15 on Nepali communities, 2015-16 on Pakistani communities, 2016-17 on Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi communities, 2017-18 on intercultural work among women's communities, and 2018-19 on intercultural work in neighborhoods. Her research also assessed the level of cross-cultural knowledge and cultural sensibility of the public and examined how intercultural experiences could enhance participants' intercultural competency. The research paid particular attention to female homemakers of different ethnic origins [3.4, 3.5] as women often play the role of change agents on the levels of family, neighborhood, and society in general. Her research has shed light on the importance of intercultural education as well as the pathways to develop intercultural competency.

CHENG's research (with William WONG from the University of Hong Kong, and an interdisciplinary team, supported by a grant received from the Hong Kong AIDS Trust Fund in 2012), studied the mental health of African asylum seekers and refugees (ASRs) in Hong Kong [3.6] by conducting 18 months of participant-observation and coordinating survey-based research that reached 373 African ASRs (close to 50% of the total population). In 2015-16, she continued her research on African ASRs with an RGC fund (GRF project no. 14607415) focusing on the meanings of intimate relationships between asylum seekers and local Hong Kong residents. In 2017-18, she was awarded a Robert H. N. Ho Foundation fund to conduct a project to introduce African arts to local schools and communities. Her research has successfully raised awareness of the "in limbo" status of ASRs and has contributed to NGOs, government institutions, the judiciary, and public understanding of their support needs in terms of health and well-being.

(3) References to the research

- [3.1] Mathews, Gordon. 2011. *Ghetto at the Center of the World: Chungking Mansions, Hong Kong*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press/Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- [3.2] Mathews, Gordon and Yang Yang. 2012. "How Africans Pursue Low-End Globalization in Hong Kong and Mainland China." *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 41(2):95-120.
- [3.3] Mathews, Gordon. 2018. "Asylum Seekers as Symbols of Hong Kong's Non-Chineseness." *China Perspectives* 3:51-58.
- [3.4] Tam, Siumi Maria. 2010. "Dealing with Double Marginalization: Three Generations of Nepalese Women in Hong Kong." *Asian Journal of Women Studies* 16(2):32-59.
- [3.5] Tam, Siumi Maria. 2014. "Transnational Duties: Marriage and Family Practices among Indian Migrants in Hong Kong." In Siumi Maria Tam, Wai-ching Angela Wong, and Danning Wang, eds., *Gender and Family in East Asia*, pp. 160-174. New York: Routledge.
- [3.6] Wong, Chi Wai William, Sealing Cheng, Heidi Yin Hai Miu, Julie Chen, Kelley Ann Loper, and Eleanor Holroyd. 2017. "Mental Health of African Asylum-seekers and Refugees in Hong Kong: Using the Social Determinants of Health Framework." *BMC Public Health* 17:153-161.

(4) Details of the impact

The research cited above has had an impact in two distinct ways: (i) direct impact on public knowledge about migrant communities in Hong Kong, transforming the understandings of these communities and enhancing their rights and benefits, and (ii) changes in the knowledge and practices of those engaging in ethnic issues, including educators, civil servants, and NGOs, promoting and emphasizing partnership and mutual empowerment in intercultural interactions.

i) Direct impact on public knowledge about migrant communities in Hong Kong

Attitudes towards ethnic minorities and asylum seekers have been generally negative in Hong Kong. However, MATHEWS' widely acclaimed book *Ghetto at the Center of the World* (with 9,000 copies sold for the English-language edition and 27,000 copies sold in Chinese-language editions, two book awards received, and an open-access audiobook made available in Cantonese), together with a series of articles [3.1, 3.2], changed the understandings of ethnic minorities and asylum seekers by stakeholders at multiple levels, affecting local and international media, legislative councilors, and NGOs [3.3]. MATHEWS was the first scholar to point out the significance of South Asians and Africans in Chungking Mansions to the development of low-end globalization connecting China to the developing world. His work was featured in key international publications like CNN, CNBC, BBC, *The Economist*, and *Time Magazine* from 2007 to 2011. Based on MATHEWS' work, *Time Magazine* referred to Chungking Mansions as the "Best Example of Globalization in Action", and legislator Joseph Lee, at a legislative council meeting in November 2013, cited MATHEWS' findings in *Time magazine* – "people of 120 nationalities have lived in Chungking Mansions" – to prompt the government to maintain the international orientation of the city by addressing the health needs of ethnic minorities [5.1]. A motion on "Formulating a Medical Policy to Support Ethnic Minority

Elderly People” was passed in the meeting, and better measures in support of ethnic minorities in the public healthcare system, such as the provisions of interpretation services for patients and cultural training for healthcare personnel, have been introduced by the government since the motion was passed [5.2]. MATHEWS has pointed out to many public audiences the difficult situation faced by asylum seekers in Hong Kong. In July 2013, legislator Fernando Cheung cited a report on MATHEWS’ work presented on CNN to request the Panel on Welfare Services of the Legislative Council to hold a special meeting with NGOs serving asylum seekers to discuss “*ways to improve the situation of refugees, torture claimants and asylum seekers in Hong Kong.*” This report followed MATHEWS’ analysis of the situation of asylum seekers and said, “*with no way to join society and no way to return home, these survivors languish in miserable situations...*” A special meeting was held on 13 January 2014, and one month after the meeting, the administration agreed to increase the level of social benefits by 20% on average to asylum seekers, including rent, transportation allowance, and food provisions [5.3]. Through extensive media coverage, MATHEWS’ work has informed public awareness and policy formulations regarding ethnic minorities and asylum seekers. In the course of his research, and his ongoing teaching of a weekly class for asylum seekers, he has helped some asylum seekers to attain refugee status overseas [5.4].

ii) Changes in the knowledge and practices of those engaging in ethnic issues

TAM received grants from KPF and EOC to launch her “Multiculturalism in Action” (MIA) projects based on her research on South Asian communities in Hong Kong [3.4, 3.5]. In contrast to the assimilative policy adopted by the government towards ethnic minorities, TAM’s projects aim at enhancing intercultural competency among young people using a train-the-trainers model. Participants were first introduced to the concept of interculturalism (e.g. partnership and mutual empowerment) in training workshops and then facilitated to run their neighborhood innovation projects in schools and communities. MIA has developed a series of training materials: four booklets on different ethnic minority groups (with a total of 3,000 copies given out), two publications for general readers (i.e. *What are We Celebrating: Multicultural Festivals in Hong Kong* with 1,600 copies sold and *The ICONIC Mums Kitchen: Taste of Intercultural Hong Kong* with 800 copies given out), two documentary films (*Feeling South Asian* and *Intercultural Mums Classroom* with more than 1,000 hits online), and other online resources (the MIA website with 4,000+ hits). The end-users include educators, civil servants, NGOs, and businesspeople. Between 2013 and 2019, over 120 individuals from various ethnic backgrounds have been trained as cultural trainers; they have made presentations in schools and communities. Over 13,000 members of the public, including teachers and students, have participated in these activities, including training workshops and outreach activities. Feedback has been collected after conducting these intercultural activities. Post-event surveys show that more than 75% of secondary school students (n=1,305) found their intercultural competency improved by the outreach activities [5.5]. Among workers in the public sector, 43 inspectors and superintendents in the Police Force have attended the intercultural training workshops, and the surveys showed that nearly 90% of the participants from the Police Force (n=43) found their intercultural competency improved [5.5, 5.6]. The facilitator of the workshop at the Police College commented, “*after getting a better understanding of Hong Kong ethnic minorities, the participants will bring the knowledge back to their workplace.*”

Furthermore, one of the community projects concerning the South Asian sport kabaddi has received a Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship Development Fund for HK\$100,000 in 2018. The project is called Kabaddi United Hong Kong (KUHk). It has developed as a social enterprise with the aim of promoting ethnic integration through kabaddi in Hong Kong. With the advice and assistance of MIA, KUHk has run kabaddi programs in more than 50 schools and communities with a total of 2,500 participants from 2014-19 and employed one full-time staff and more than 20 part-time staff among ethnic minority members. The founders of KUHk said, “*the research of MIA has formulated three values which are particularly important in intercultural projects... We have adopted these values in our project and formed a strong intercultural team... The research of MIA has designed a ready-to-use teaching kit to teach intercultural competency and this kit is adaptable for different users... This has significantly widened the scope of our service*” [5.7].

CHENG and her team received grants from the AIDS Trust Fund to research the health practices, problems, and needs of asylum seekers, refugees, and torture-claimants (ASRs) from Africa in Hong Kong [3.6]. In 2014, the report was used by the judiciary in an Expert Report for a case at the Eastern Magistrate’s Court (Case ESCC 1139/2014) in support of a torture claimant being prosecuted for unlawful employment. In 2017-18, CHENG received a grant from the Robert H. N. Ho Foundation fund to develop cultural workshops on Africa in Hong Kong for university students and to collaborate with NGOs to conduct community outreach activities for secondary school students and the public. The activities were well received, with 29 students attending the workshops and more than 600 participants attending the community events. The participants particularly appreciated the intercultural collaboration. One participant who played the role of cultural trainer to secondary school students said, *“Through this outreach [to a secondary school], I felt like the students were coming out of their shells and enjoying learning African drumming and dancing. The fun and sincerity that I see in the students, African mentors, and myself was rewarding”* [5.8].

CHENG’s research has also resulted in herself playing a pivotal role in setting up a band “Talent Displaced” in 2016, with members including African ASRs. The band plays a variety of music genres, including hip-hop, rap, and African drums. With CHENG’s assistance, the band had the opportunity to perform about one show a month at bars, universities, music festivals, and government-sponsored events. This has helped improve the social and cultural well-being of band members. One band member said, *“[CHENG] uncovered our music talents...[and] introduced our music to the public. We have got opportunities to perform our music...and shared the message of love and harmony with the audience. Major newspapers in Hong Kong have covered our stories. This has changed the public perception of asylum seekers”* [5.9, 5.10].

(5) Sources to corroborate the impact

- [5.1] [Council Meeting, Official Record of Proceedings, Legislative Council, pp.3402 \(27 November 2013\)](#) [Appended]
- [5.2] [Food and Health Bureau within the Department of Health & Hospital Authority, “Progress Report on ‘Motion on “Formulating a Medical Policy to Support Ethnic Minority Elderly People” at the Legislative Council Meeting on 27 November 2013”](#) (January 2014) [Appended]
- [5.3] [Social Welfare Department, Security Bureau, “Legislative Council Panel on Welfare Service: Humanitarian Assistance for Non-refoulement Claimants”](#) (13 January 2014) [Appended]
- [5.4] Letter from Lakony Wilson corroborating the importance of Mathews’ research in enhancing the lives of asylum seekers in Hong Kong. [Appended]
- [5.5] Survey Results of Cultural Workshops of MIA projects at secondary schools and the Police College. [Appended]
- [5.6] Letter from the Police College corroborating the importance of MIA projects in their training. [Appended]
- [5.7] Letter from Kabaddi United Hong Kong corroborating the importance of MIA projects in their set-up and operation. [Appended]
- [5.8] Africa in Hong Kong Interim Report with student responses (March 2018). [Appended]
- [5.9] “Hong Kong Refugee Musicians Put on Hip-Hop Shows – A Form of Release while they’re Stuck in Bureaucratic Limbo”. *South China Morning Post* (3 February 2018). [Appended]
- [5.10] Letter from Talented Displaced corroborating the importance of Cheng’s research work in their set-up and operation. [Appended]