

## Research Assessment Exercise 2020

### Impact Case Study

**University:** [The Education University of Hong Kong |

**Unit of Assessment (UoA):** [27 Sociology & anthropology |

**Title of case study:** [Impact of research, advocacy and support on asylum seekers and refugees in Hong Kong |

#### (1) Summary of the impact

[Hong Kong has a community of up to 11,000 refugees and asylum seekers who are regarded by human rights organisations as receiving minimal political and social support while they await reviews of their cases. Moreover, the local community appears to be hostile to their plight, as reflected in local policy debates and media coverage. Knowledge of this marginalised community and of societal attitudes towards it is needed to change public perceptions and inform advocacy and policy decisions, and service work. Dr Isabella NG Fung-sheung's research involving surveys and ethnography has filled this research gap. The endeavour has practical impact of reach and significance through changing attitudes in Hong Kong; informing the advocacy of international and local NGOs by conducting surveys on local attitudes towards the group and influencing policy decisions; and by providing on the ground material and basic support for around 300 individuals through the NGO she co-founded.]

#### (2) Underpinning research

[As principal investigator, Dr Ng, assistant professor, Department of Asian and Policy Studies (APS), led interdisciplinary research on issues related to migrants, asylum seekers and refugees since joining EdUHK in 2012. The plight of the refugee and asylum seeking community, neglected in research in Hong Kong, prompted her research and related advocacy and service work. Even though the majority of Hong Kong people come from families that were refugees, government policy and public opinion, as reflected in the media, has generally been hostile to the community, estimated around 10,000 to 11,000 people. With Hong Kong being one of the few wealthy jurisdictions in the world not to be a signatory of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, activists have argued that there is minimal protection of the rights and needs of asylum-seeking and refugee adults and their children. For example, the substantiation rate of all non-refoulement claims filed in the city (0.68%) falls well below averages in developed countries (30%), according to the Justice Centre that Ng collaborates with.

Since 2016 Ng's research has involved biennial polling on local attitudes towards asylum seekers and refugees. This work built on her wider body of quantitative and ethnographic research on the challenges faced by marginalised groups including new arrivals from mainland China and refugees; how they are perceived in Hong Kong; and their experiences of migration [R1, R2]. Unlike other refugee studies that involve either quantitative data analysis, or ethnography and/or action research, her unique contribution has been to combine the survey studies with ethnography, and advocacy to shed new insight into the status and challenges facing these communities; to lobby for policy and societal changes, and thereby secure lasting impact [R3-R6]. Her advocacy and service work informs and empowers the survey and ethnographic studies she conducts by enriching her perspective and changing the way she sees the policy issue.

Working with a team in APS, she developed and led a biennial polling survey, *Hong Kong people's understanding and opinion on refugee and human rights issues*, the first and only surveys to monitor and analyse societal knowledge and attitudes towards refugees. The outcomes of this research are unique resources for policymaking and advocacy. The surveys, in 2016 and 2018, [R3-R6] indicated generally negative perceptions and widespread misunderstanding. However, the 2018 survey, involving 1002 telephone interviews with Cantonese speaking residents (60.2% response

rate), also indicated strong concern that the Hong Kong government needs to improve its human rights record; some improvement in understanding of and concern for the population and status of refugees in Hong Kong; rejection of the need to detain refugees; and support for the children of refugees to be given right of abode in Hong Kong. The 2018 survey also identified local people's generally positive attitude towards refugee children (59.2%), and compared attitudes towards mainland migrants and refugees from beyond China and found greater sympathy towards the latter – the negative attitudes towards mainland Chinese being identified as another challenge Hong Kong faces as a society and in its relations with the rest of the country.

In parallel to the survey work, in 2018 Dr Ng analysed how print media frame the issue of asylum seekers and refugees, the discrepancies between people's attitude and media portrayal and its effect on government attempts to implement tougher policies [R3]. This was the first such academic analysis of its kind in Hong Kong. Dr Ng's work has been extensively communicated, through press conferences to announce the survey findings in 2016 and 2018; media interviews and public engagement in sharing sessions and talks [See Section 4].

### (3) References to the research

[R1] Ng, I.F.S., Lee, S.Y., Wong, W.K.F. and Chou, K.L. (2015). Effects of perceived discrimination on the quality of life among new Mainland Chinese immigrants to Hong Kong: A longitudinal study. *Social Indicators Research*, 120(3), p. 817-834.

[R2] Lee, S.Y., Ng, I.F.S. and Chou, K.L. (2016) Exclusionary attitudes towards the allocation of welfare benefits to Chinese immigrants in Hong Kong. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 25(1), p.41-61

[R3] Ng, I., Choi, S.F.Y, and Chan, A.L.S. (2018) Framing the Issue of Asylum Seekers and Refugees for Tougher Refugee Policy – A Study of the Media's Portrayal in Post-colonial Hong Kong. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 20, 593-617

[R4] Ng, I.F.S.; Chan, A.L.S; and Wong, A.K.N and Choi S.F.Y (2016) Hong Kong People's View on Refugees and Ethnic Group Issue. The Education University of Hong Kong

[R5] Ng, I.F.S.; Chan, A.L.S; and Wong, K.N. (2018) Hong Kong people's understanding and opinion on refugee and human rights issues. Education University of Hong Kong.

[R6] Ng, I.F.S. (2019) Criminalizing the innocents: social exclusion of the asylum-seekers and refugees in Hong Kong. *Journal of Asian Public Policy*  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17516234.2019.1630790>

### (4) Details of the impact

Dr Ng's research has achieved impacts in three main areas: (i) impact on changing the nature of public debate and perceptions; (ii) impacts on policy and policy debates; and (iii) improvement on the day-to-day quality of life of individuals she works with.

i) Dr Ng's polling surveys have raised public awareness of refugee issues through extensive local and international mass media coverage [e.g. C1], with the findings published in more than 10 media outlets. The survey released in August 2016 was reported by the South China Morning Post (SCMP), Hong Kong Standard, Hong Kong Free Press; am730, inmediahk and, internationally, by Deutsche Presse-Agentur [e.g. C1]. It achieved further reach by being discussed on RTHK's news and Hong Kong Today programmes, with Dr Ng the main discussant [C2-3]. The 2018 survey was reported by SCMP, inmediahk; Apple Daily (average readership 1.33 million) and RTHK, and featured on RTHK Hong Kong Today [e.g. C2-3]. Together, media coverage reached estimated audiences of at least one million people for the first survey and at least two millions for the second. The surveys and public engagement helped change the nature of the debate and discussion in the media and more widely in Hong Kong. For example, the 2018 survey showed some significant softening of public perceptions

towards refugees, with over 20 media interviews conducted with Ng advocating for rights of the group and although misunderstandings were still prevalent, respondents showed greater knowledge of the status of refugees and challenges they faced, and over 50% of respondents supported granting right of the abode to asylum-seeker children, the latter also indicated in a supportive submission to the letters page of SCMP [C4]. A comparison of media coverage between the 2016 and 2018 surveys indicates the media's more positive attitude and greater understanding for this marginalised community, as analysed in Ng's subsequent research [Section 3, R3]. Legislative Council member Dr Fernando Cheung attested to the impact of the surveys and media engagement: "She has been one of the most reliable sources in informing the public of the situations and needs of this often neglected and misunderstood population." [C5].

Ng's public education and engagement, carried out through the NGO Hong Kong Society for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (HKSASR), which she founded in 2014 with a former asylum seekers and a group of students from EduHK, also contributed to growing public understanding of refugee issues (R3-R6). In May 2018 she partnered with Lush Cosmetics to give a talk in the PMQ community space, attended by 30 people and relayed to 1300 Facebook users locally and internationally. She led HKSASR's participation in Summer Fest 2017, a large-scale community event, engaging around 200 people. In September 2017 she highlighted the issues in a talk to the Civil Human Rights Front, attended by 200 people. A talk to students at Heep Yun School (secondary school) resulted in 10 students offering volunteer service to the children of refugees. More than 100 students from universities across Hong Kong have attended talks and service activities. A Secondary Five student from Heep Yun School reflected on Ng's visit: "*I changed my negative perception on the new arrivals in Hong Kong and expanded my horizon to a global level. I found that the 'refugee' issue involves the concepts such as ethics, distribution of social resources etc., which I want to explore and analyze more*" [C6].

ii) Ng's work has been used as evidence to support significant changes in policy and to inform policy debate and discussion. The 2018 polling data was used by NGOs, including Pathfinders [C12] and Resolve Foundation. The 2016 survey was used in the op-ed by Amnesty International [C1] and the Justice Centre [C1] to inform their work to counter discriminatory attitudes and narratives by the Hong Kong government and media. In addition, Ng made a deputation to the Legislative Council Subcommittee on Children's Rights on 24 July, 2017, in which she drew attention to her survey on how little public support there was for a detention camp, rebuffing claims to the contrary by the Security Bureau of the HKSAR [C7-8]. As a result, the tougher measures called "combating fake refugees" motion suggested by pro-establishment legislator Holden Chow could not pass. The significance of her polling studies in influencing the policy discourse was affirmed by the Justice Centre: "*They have been useful for maintaining the support of stakeholders such as Legislative Councillors, other civil society organisations as well as funders*"; "*an invaluable tool for rebutting the Government's justification for inaction that any policies that protect the rights of the refugees will draw public criticisms*", and have "*strengthened our efforts to draw the attention of the United Nations to the situation in Hong Kong*" [C9].

HKSASR is a member of the Refugee Concern Network that made deputations in writing and directly to the United Nations Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review panel, in meetings in Geneva in August and October 2018. Deputations that drew on Ng's research were also made to a Legislative Council's Panel on Constitutional Affairs meeting on the Periodic Review [C10] and the joint submission by the Concern Group for the Rights of Asylum-Seekers and Refugees in Hong Kong on October 18, 2018 [C7-8]. The NGOs have successfully lobbied for some changes in policy that make practical differences to asylum seekers and refugees in Hong Kong, using her ethnography to understand their needs. These include more flexibility in the way that they can use supermarket coupons so that they can get better variety of food; and increased subsidy for children in kindergartens and nurseries to cover uniforms and books. Meanwhile, government proposals to establish refugee detention centres, which the NGOs had lobbied against, have not proceeded [C1]. Legislative Council member Cheung reflected on the impact of Dr Ng's work on policy: "*The government is checked on*

*its policy as to whether it is up to international and humanistic standards...Without her help and encouragements the fight for sustaining human rights in the legislature would have been 10 times harder.” [C5]*

iii) HKSAR works with around 300 individual asylum seekers and refugees, including about 60 children [C1], and is the only such group that involves extensive local participation. Its support ranges from help with basic needs, such as finding accommodation, to assisting communications with immigration officials. The NGO also organises a weekly playgroup that provides a social hub for 20-30 families and prepares children for mainstream schools. Refugees affirmed the importance of this support. Kristine wrote: “Her arms is very wide-open in helping. Without her, I guess I am very upset and down” [C11]. In *Apple Daily*, Ana was quoted: “I am so grateful that she has done so much for us. Otherwise our lives will be even more miserable” [C1]. Through her advocacy, ground work and ethnography, she could lobby with convincing and objective data; show how this group is misrepresented by the media and how the public are, in fact, generally neutral to them and relatively sympathetic, as seen in Ng and her students’ work, rather than being hostile and fearful as described in the media [R3]. Ng’s work was the subject of the documentary film “Walled Village”, directed by Brian Hung Kwong-yin, an EdUHK doctoral student and won an international film award in 2018[C12]. This shows how she worked with asylum seeker Tariq to help this community and debunk the idea that “fake refugees” are prevalent in Hong Kong. |

#### **(5) Sources to corroborate the impact**

[C1] Newspaper Clippings: Interview, *Apple Daily*, 20 January, 2017; *Hong Kong Free Press* (1 December, 2016 & 30 August, 2016); *Deutsche Presse-Agentur* (2 September, 2016); *HK01* (20 July, 2017); *立場新聞* (8 December 2016 & 3 September, 2016)

[C2-3] *RTHK and RTHK Hong Kong Today* April 20, 2018

[C4] Newspaper Clippings: *SCMP* (18 April, 2018); *Appledaily* (19 April, 2018); *SCMP* (24 April, 2018)

[C5] Letter, Dr Fernando Cheung, Legislative Council Member

[C6] Whatsapp communication from student

[C7-8] Legislative Council documents

[C7] Legislative Council Subcommittee on Children’s Rights (Agenda), 24 July 2017

[https://www.legco.gov.hk/yr1617/english/hc/sub\\_com/hs101/agenda/hs10120170724.htm](https://www.legco.gov.hk/yr1617/english/hc/sub_com/hs101/agenda/hs10120170724.htm)

[C8] Joint Submission to the Subcommittee to follow up issues relating to the USM for non-refoulement claim on 18 October 2018. Submitted by Concern Group for the Rights of Asylum-seekers and refugees in Hong Kong.

[https://www.legco.gov.hk/yr16-17/english/hc/sub\\_com/hs54/papers/hs5420181018cb2-121-2-e.pdf](https://www.legco.gov.hk/yr16-17/english/hc/sub_com/hs54/papers/hs5420181018cb2-121-2-e.pdf)

[C9] Email Communication from Annie Li, Research and Policy Officer, Justice Centre

[C10] HKSAR Government’s Outline of its HKSAR Report to China for China’s Third Report to the United Nations Human Rights Council’s under its Universal Periodic Review Mechanism (UPR)

[C11] Letters from refugees Kristine and Attri

[C12] EdUHK news feature. Walled Village wins Gold Remi award

[https://www.eduhk.hk/main/features/FeatureBanner\\_20180503\\_104722](https://www.eduhk.hk/main/features/FeatureBanner_20180503_104722) |