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**Back in Hong Kong: Return Migration or Transnational Sojourn?**

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# **Back to Hong Kong: Return Migration or Transnational Sojourn?**

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**Abstract:** This paper re-considers the meaning of return migration in a period of growing transnational practices. In its conventional use, return migration conveys the same sense of closure and completion as the immigration-assimilation narrative. But in a transnational era, movement is better described as continuous rather than completed. Focus groups held in Hong Kong with middle-class returnees from Canada disclose that migration is undertaken strategically at different stages of the life cycle. The return trip to Hong Kong typically occurs for economic reasons at the stage of early or mid-career. A second move to Canada may occur later with teenage children for education purposes, and even more likely is migration at retirement when the quality of life in Canada becomes a renewed priority. Strategic switching between an economic pole in Hong Kong and a quality of life pole in Canada identifies each of them to be separate stations within an extended but unified social field.

**Key Words:** transnationalism; return migration; Hong Kong; life cycle; family dynamics; focus group methodology

## Introduction

In August 2004 the political candidacy of Albert Cheng, host of a feisty open-line radio programme in Hong Kong, attracted prominent and simultaneous media attention in Canada and the Special Administrative Region. Mr. Cheng is a leading media figure and his bold pro-democracy stance has become both a *cause célèbre* in Hong Kong and also a source of considerable tension with his broadcaster, who is nervous about recrimination both from organised crime and from the Beijing government. His decision to seek elected office in the Hong Kong legislature maintained a flamboyant public persona and also sustained high visibility for the pro-democracy movement in the September elections. But the candidacy also received attention on the front page of Canada's leading daily newspaper, because Mr. Cheng, like tens, probably hundreds, of thousands of fellow citizens is a returnee to Hong Kong with a Canadian passport.<sup>1</sup> The newspaper's China correspondent was fully alert to the transnational content of the story as Mr. Cheng told him that he was now fighting in Hong Kong for liberal values he had learned in Canada: "I have to stand up against violence and against any evil force that wants to shut me up...This is a Canadian value. It's something I learned in Canada." (York 2004: A10) Moreover, he was obligated to renounce his Canadian citizenship as a requirement for running for office in Hong Kong, a step he had found to be "a very serious and emotional decision". But despite this heavy sacrifice and commitment to a long-term political project in China, he was not abandoning his transnational lifeline. "I still consider myself a Canadian and one day I will retire in Canada and apply for my citizenship again." (York 2004: A1)

We argue in this paper that Mr. Cheng's bi-national sentiment and transnational longing are shared by compatriots in Hong Kong, bringing a new twist to the 'myth of return' among international migrants. Hong Kong and Canada are stations between which strategic switching is practised by households within an extended social field and at distinctive stages in the life cycle. Among some migrants such time-space co-ordination is meticulously orchestrated.

## Ocean crossings and re-crossings

Return migration has provided a sidebar to the historic immigration narrative of departure, arrival, and assimilation. The weight of the assimilation narrative, especially in the United States, has tended to obscure the significance of the return trip home. In his examination of the *Round Trip to America*,

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<sup>1</sup> See York (2004). The same day's edition of the Hong Kong English-language daily, the *South China Morning Post*, contained no less than eight stories with references to Mr. Cheng.

Mark Wyman (1993:4) has suggested that in the period of mass immigration from 1880–1930, “Returned immigrants rejected America and, it seems, American scholars have rejected them”. While the population data are flawed and discontinuous, the best estimates suggest that during this half-century as many as a quarter to a third of arrivals to the United States re-crossed the Atlantic Ocean to return home. Significantly, rates were lower for the older migration sources in north-western Europe, but much higher for newer national origins in southern and eastern Europe. In the more recent, post-1945 period, return migration has continued even among north-west Europeans in such culturally compatible settings as Australia and Canada. Estimates suggest that as many as 20-30 percent of Britons returned to the United Kingdom from these seemingly harmonious destinations (Hammerton 2004). For other groups, such as Turks in Germany, Italians and Greeks in Australia, or West Indians in Britain, return migration was a prospect long contemplated, for many ultimately a myth than was not enacted, but for others a transition prepared for by earlier return visits (Baldassar 2001; Duval 2004) and undertaken usually at retirement (Gmelch 1980; King 1986; Western 1992; Byron and Condon 1996; Thomas-Hope 1999).

A more recent repatriation process has been the appearance of the so-called brain exchange, complicating the earlier emphasis on a brain drain to the countries of the global north. In developing countries like China and India an emergent high technology industry has led to return migration by citizens who had moved to western nations as students and young professionals, but who now see career and entrepreneurial opportunities in their countries of birth (Iredale et al. 2002). Return migration of the highly skilled has been encouraged by targeted programmes in some nations, notably China and Taiwan, including the construction of science parks as specific labour attractions for expatriates with high levels of human capital (Luo et al. 2002; Tsay 2002). Following reticence in the immediate shadow of Tiananmen Square (Zweig 1997), the option of return now appears more attractive.

But the tale of return migration has itself been complicated by current transnational developments. Return migration extends the linear model of migration to a circular model with an imputed re-adjustment and assimilation to the country of origin. The return has frequently been anticipated by earlier visits and by remittances that may well include funds for the construction of a new family house (Owusu 1998; Duval 2004). In this manner transnational connections are now recognised as important in facilitating return. Nonetheless return has an air of finality, of completing the circle of ocean crossings. But for some migrants return migration is less a final adjustment than another stage in a continuing itinerary with further movements ahead, whether unexpected or, as we shall see, eagerly awaited.

To understand more fully the motives and implications of return migration in a transnational context, we organised seven focus groups in Hong Kong with 56 returnees from Canada. They were identified both from personal contacts and from notices placed on the web sites of the alumni clubs associated with the University of Toronto and the University of British Columbia. For the latter institution, with its strong trans-Pacific linkages, the Hong Kong alumni club is the largest outside Canada. The observations of the Hong Kong sample are interspersed with ethnographic interviews conducted with economic migrants from Hong Kong still living in Vancouver.<sup>2</sup> This latter group are typically at older stages in the life cycle, and thereby cast light upon the space-time positioning of the returnees, who we argue are at a station now that may well not be permanent, but rather represents one point in a life-long trajectory of moves across the Pacific Ocean.

### **Transnational Hong Kong**

Transnationalism invokes a travel plan that is continuous not finite. Immigrants never quite arrive at their destination because they never quite leave home. Indeed the whole problematic of ‘home’ can become extraordinarily complex in an age with increasing levels of dual citizenship, labour contracts with short-term visas, family members located on opposite sides of national borders, and fast and ever cheaper lines of contact between nations. The life-world of the transnational migrant is stretched across space (Jackson et al. 2004); as one of our informants told us, the Hong Kong migrant would like to work in Hong Kong and sleep in Canada.

Much of the early transnational literature has been concerned with the relatively short and inexpensive movements between American cities and migrant origins in Central America and the Caribbean islands (Rouse 1991; Mountz and Wright 1996; Portes et al. 1999; Glick Schiller and Fouron 1999). In this research, in contrast, we are considering longer-range movement, a more costly trans-Pacific air journey of 12-13 hours between Hong Kong and Vancouver, the closest global city landfall on the American continent. Hong Kong, with its special and ephemeral constitutional status both in the past and in the present, is inherently transnational, “not so much a place as a space in transit” (Abbas 1997: 4). From the mid-1980s, alarmed at geopolitical futures in East Asia, tens of thousands of middle-class residents left Hong Kong. In part they were enticed by welcoming immigration policy in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, and to a lesser degree Britain and

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<sup>2</sup> These interviews were part of extended research among Hong Kong and Taiwanese migrants to Canada conducted since 1996. Ethnographic interviews have been conducted with some 200 households. See Ley (1995, 1999, 2003), Waters (2002, 2004), Ley and Waters (2004).

the United States. Canada in particular ran a pro-active immigration programme that recruited economic migrants from East Asia, and 380,000 migrants from Hong Kong arrived between 1980 and 2001, including 100,000 receiving visas through the business immigration streams, and another 64,000 securing entry as skilled workers. The numbers leaving the British colony and making the crossing to Canada reached a peak of over 44,000 in 1994 and for a decade Hong Kong was the leading immigrant source to Canada, and particularly its Pacific province of British Columbia.<sup>3</sup>

Fearful of closer ties with China in 1997, and precipitated by the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, many made the crossing for geopolitical reasons. We were told by one Hong Kong returnee that:

I moved to Canada in 1989, when the Beijing massacre happened. But actually my parents already had the intention of moving to Canada to secure a better future for us. They were really concerned about Communist China and what that implied for Hong Kong in the future. Especially on my father's side, his family had experienced brutal treatment from the communist government because they were land owners.<sup>4</sup>

The massacre was the decisive trigger motivating migration for some households, but its impact added force to other motives that had already raised the issue of present insecurities in people's minds.

...because of the June 4<sup>th</sup>. massacre, also because of the 1997 handover. That was the primary reason. The second reason was better education. We were all very young at that time, and my parents arranged for us to go to school there.

For others the educational motive was primary, in order to introduce one's children to the perceived superior (and more accessible) opportunities of Canadian schools and universities.

It was more for our education. They [Parents] think they have better opportunities over there. At that time it wasn't that easy to get into one of these universities in Hong Kong, so they thought it would be better for us.

For others again there was an emphatic quality of life mandate, with appreciation of Canada's outdoor environment and available social and leisure services, information confirmed through family networks:

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<sup>3</sup> For a selection of research on aspects of this migration, see Li (1992), Mitchell (1993, 1998), Skeldon (1994, 1995), Ley (1995, 2003), Wong and Ng (1998), Olds (1998, 2001), Wang and Lo (2000), Rose (2001), Wong (2003), Waters (2002, 2004), and Ley and Waters (2004).

<sup>4</sup> These quotations come from returnees interviewed in focus groups in Hong Kong by the authors. Any names of respondents that appear in the text are fictitious.

Because my aunt is there and my grandma was in Canada as well. So my father just wanted to live there. He loves Canada. The environment is very good, it's good for living.

But ominously (and ironically) interviews disclosed that economic factors did not appear to be prominent among the list of motives behind migration, although many new arrivals landed in Canada as economic migrants, including the largest single national group of millionaire immigrants granted admission as business investors and entrepreneurs.

Indeed, the business immigration programme has not unfolded as expected (Ley 2003). For a range of reasons, and despite their impressive pre-migration business experience, many Hong Kong migrants found economic success elusive in Canada. The business culture was far more regulated than they were familiar with, language was frequently a problem, and many who chose to invest in the ethnic enclave economy found cut-throat competition in a saturated market. There is a suggestion too that a number were not fully committed to the task, but were seeking Canadian citizenship as an insurance policy, and once this had been secured they would return to an advantageous pre-existing economic niche in East Asia. Mak (1997) has noted that some Hong Kong firms gave favoured employees departing for Australia a two-year leave of absence, time to qualify for citizenship and then return to their former position. Senior managers at the Canadian Consulate in Hong Kong told us how in the early 1990s, they had confronted a new phenomenon for which their manuals gave them no answers. Well-qualified residents were applying for Canadian immigration visas, though the managers strongly suspected they had no real desire to live in Canada. Here were the 'reluctant exiles' whose anguished decision-making concerning departure was well-captured by Hong Kong social scientists at the time (Skeldon 1994, 1995).

Census data and tax returns reinforce the near unanimous view we heard from interviews on both sides of the Pacific about the limited economic success attainable in Canada.<sup>5</sup> Individual incomes for Hong Kong immigrants in Canada in 1996 were very low, with 45 percent earning less than Cdn\$1000 a month, and mean incomes fell below half the level of returnees working in Hong Kong (DeVoretz et al. 2003). "So I like Canada" observed one returnee, "But the problem is I have to work there." Another returnee weighed the alternatives: "Everything is good in Canada except for job opportunities. The living standard is so good but the job opportunities (are) getting worse and worse". Not surprisingly there have been high levels of return migration. Exit data from Australia, (where unlike Canada such records are kept), suggest that as many as 30 percent of 1990-91 arrivals had returned to Hong Kong in short order (Kee and Skeldon 1994). Many households fragmented, with

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<sup>5</sup> There is considerable evidence of a comparable lack of economic success in Australia and New Zealand. See Ho and Bedford (1998), Ip, Wu and Inglis (1998), Burrill (2000), Chiang (2004).

mothers and children left in Australia or Canada, while the father and husband assumed the role of ‘astronaut’, with his home and primary occupation in East Asia, undertaking long commutes for short visits on the ‘Pacific shuttle’ (Ong 1999) to see family members.

### **The necessity of return...**

A weak job market and limited entrepreneurial opportunities were primary, but they were not the only factors prompting return. Some immigrants to Canada had treated their move single-mindedly as a means to gain a passport and thus neutralise their political anxieties in East Asia. With completion of a three-year residence requirement, they could return to Hong Kong in security, a Canadian passport in their pocket. “If there are no political problems, it wouldn’t matter which citizenship I have,” we were told. In addition to protection, Canadian citizenship also offered greater flexibility in visa-free international travel. So, “Before it was insurance. Right now it’s for the convenience”; and again, “I strongly agree... I find a [Canadian] passport is very, very convenient for me to go anywhere.”

The fact of return was already registering in Hong Kong media in the early 1990s, even before the peak year of emigration had occurred. In December 1993, an account in the *South China Morning Post* announced: “Brain drain slows as managers return” (Ng 1993). Over the next five years the pace of such stories quickened. “Immigrants flee Canada recession for rosy territory” (anon 1994); “Hong Kong returnees on the increase” (Wallis 1994); “Brain gain follows tremendous brain drain” (Batha 1996); “Luxury (Vancouver) homes for sale as migrants return to SAR” (Lyons 1997); and “Emigrants return home to better prospects” (Wong 1998). Simultaneously, estimates of the number of Hong Kong residents holding foreign passports steadily inflated in media stories, reaching the giddy figures of 500,000-700,000 out of a population of around 6.5 million by the mid 1990s. Canadian passport-holders were regarded as the largest single group with estimates ranging from a low figure of 150,000 to a maximum of 500,000 by the Canadian Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong.

In 1999 the Government of Hong Kong sought to establish a profile of returnees through its General Household Survey of 22,300 households, conducted with a response rate of 92 percent (Government of Hong Kong 2000). Returnees were defined as those who had returned to reside in Hong Kong after spending at least two years of the previous decade in another country. While the survey produced an estimate of 120,000 returnees, this figure was discounted as subject to “substantial under-reporting...(o)wing to the rather sensitive nature of the subject” (2000: 48). Nonetheless the profile of returnees was informative, and confirmed media reports that members of a

departed economic elite were re-establishing residence in the territory. Returnees were three times as likely as the general population to be in the top income bracket of more than HK\$30,000 a month. Almost three-quarters were employed as professionals, managers and administrators, and over half of the adults had university degrees, a rate five times greater than the population at large. There was an under-representation of children and the elderly, and a heavy over-representation of adults in their twenties and thirties. Thirty-five percent had formerly lived in Canada, 24 percent in Australia or New Zealand, 12 percent in the United Kingdom, and 11 percent in the United States.

More recently, special runs of the 2001 Census of Hong Kong for the entire population of 6.4 million have revealed a similar profile of returnees (DeVoretz et al. 2003). This analysis is also a partial count, as the census includes Hong Kong residents in 2001, born in Hong Kong, who were living outside Hong Kong, Macao and China in 1996. The figure is an undercount not only because many emigrants from Hong Kong were born in China, but also because only returnees from the period 1996–2001 are caught in the census questions. No doubt too ‘the rather sensitive nature of the subject’ again encouraged under-reporting. Nonetheless the data are of great interest with some 86,000 returnees enumerated, 40 percent of them moving from Canada, and with an equal share of men and women. The cohort was primarily in a career-building stage. The largest single group of Canadian returnees, 37.5 percent, were young adults, aged 20-29, with another 21.5 percent aged 30-39. Half the returnees from Canada had university degrees (70 percent of these earned overseas) and the same proportion held professional or assistant professional positions. The elite nature of this returning cohort was rounded out by earnings levels that were two-thirds higher than the level of the overall population.

The consistency of the two databases confers some confidence in identifying an ideal typical returnee as a well-educated professional, bi-lingual or better, in early career and with considerable earnings capacity. This description counters the typical retirement age profile of the returnee to North America, Europe and the Caribbean, but agrees with descriptions of skilled workers in Australia likely to repatriate to Taiwan or China (Guo and Iredale 2002). Our Hong Kong interviews and focus groups amply filled out this profile, and the deployment of human capital resources that it implied. Economic motives for return dominated all others.

Promotions, opportunities, money. I think it's much better here. Here you work hard, but you get your promotions, your money. You do work up the ladder. With a lot of my friends who graduated at the same time [they] are still in the same position [in Canada] or have only got one promotion, and it's been three or four years now...

Or again:

The only reason I want to come back is to find a job. Because in Canada it's not easy to find a job. Likewise, I would say the working environment is better in Hong Kong. Like earning more money. Lower tax. That's the main issue I would say, lower tax. More opportunities here. I would say it's not hard to earn HK\$15,000 a month for a fresh grad. But it would be super hard for the fresh grad to get a really good job in Vancouver or in Canada.

Finally: *How much more do you think you get paid in Hong Kong?*

Including [lower] tax, 300 per cent.

There is a sense of finality to these abstracted quotations that could easily be used to amplify the abundant newspaper stories of economic dissatisfaction in Canada, leading to return migration and restitution of a territorial bourgeoisie. But the narrative of return can imply as much coherence and closure as the immigration-assimilation genre. The focus groups revealed a much more complex and unfinished set of personal and family trajectories.

**...at least for the medium term.**

Recall that the government household survey and analysis from the 2001 Census both suggested a concentration of childless households in their twenties among returnees. Our focus groups reinforced the attractiveness of Hong Kong for this age cohort:

[I'm here] because of job opportunities. Yes, mainly. And because I'm still young enough so I can tolerate the environment. And I'm more mobile I guess. Just to give it a shot here.

Hong Kong evokes terms like fast, bustle, energy, lively:

We've all previously mentioned before, the working system, the energy, in this little place is actually much higher than we have in Canada.

And from the same focus group:

Hong Kong is more bustling, it tends to be more lively, there's more of a night life... and it's more attractive to young people.

Respondents are working long hours to launch or consolidate their careers; focus groups were held of necessity over a working dinner in the evening as participants left a heavy business or professional day. But now we must intervene in this narrative of return and ask the question: to what extent is there an expiry date to this energetic pursuit of career development?

A number of families interviewed in Vancouver who had made the decision *not* to return alluded, sometimes emphatically, to the desire to escape a life in Hong Kong shaped by the single-minded pursuit of economic advancement (Ley and Waters 2004). In the words of one couple:

*Mr Yee:* When we were in Hong Kong we both felt very busy for life, and we both wanted some life changes. And so we travelled a lot around the world to Australia, States, Canada. We went to Toronto and Vancouver. One morning in the summer in Vancouver, I stepped out the door of the house of my distant relative. I felt the air so fresh, and the sun so bright and everything so beautiful. And then I said to my wife that's the place that we want to go...

*Mrs. Yee:* [In Hong Kong] it's the pressure you can hardly face because the whole society is so rushed, you know, and life is so busy that you can hardly slow down a little bit to enjoy life...It's both too busy for adults and the kids. So we want to slow down our pace a little bit so we came...

Mr. and Mrs. Yee were older than the young adults who formed the vanguard of the returnees to Hong Kong, and they had school-aged children. They identified the positive quality of life dimensions of Canadian society – slower paced, environmentally attractive, family friendly - qualities that were also acknowledged by our Hong Kong respondents, but had been set aside in deference to economic opportunities. But will there be a future date when these assets will be capitalised on by the returnees as well?

Some of the respondents, many single and in their twenties working hard to establish a career, projected themselves into the future to the status passage of having a family. They would then consider for themselves the decision made for them by their parents, and some would renew the trans-Pacific migration cycle. For others, in their thirties, the decision was at hand:

I think my daughter will probably go back to Canada for her studies. Being that the education system here is such a mess. Going to international school [in Hong Kong], it costs so much money. She has to go back.

Besides the passport, Canadian family networks remain, facilitating re-settlement. “My family is still there. I have very close connections with them. So I call them probably, sometimes, at least ten times per month.” Added to the presence of family and familiarity, the prospect of education and the quality of life, thought of Canada arouses generally positive memories, making the prospect of return plausible:

I think we all have some special feeling for Canada. It's like a second home. I still have a brother who lives in Canada. Besides that, I like to eat some Canadian food, watch Canadian TV and all stuff like that. When I come back to Hong Kong for a couple of months I miss that and I want to go back.

In a transnational social field there is no finality to movement, but always the prospect of another 12-hour flight and another sojourn. Consider the following biography outlined by one of our focus group members, Simon, and his various trans-Pacific moves with their shifting motivation at different status passages through the life course.

I immigrated in 1989. I really love Canada. Before we immigrated we would go to Canada for vacation, two to three times a year. The reason why I like Canada is because my younger brother studied there. After I've visited him there, I fell in love with Canada... He was in Vancouver. But my wife never wanted to go there. She really didn't want to immigrate to Canada, because she had a lot of friends in Hong Kong... After June 4<sup>th</sup>. 1989, my wife was willing to immigrate to Canada.

Note, so far, frequent visits initiated by a brother who had been sent to Canada for education. This pattern of education-led migration is not at all uncommon (Waters 2004), though for Simon's family it took the political horror of Tiananmen Square to overcome his wife's diffidence. However, landing in Canada does not address the problem of economic well-being. Simon continues:

We've been there for over twelve years. I've always been flying back and forth. I was an astronaut for about four or five years when we first moved to Vancouver... After that I decided to move to Vancouver permanently. So I sold my business in Hong Kong and moved to Vancouver permanently. But now I'm back here by myself. I'm working in Hong Kong, while my family members are staying in Vancouver.

The need for economic achievement meant that Simon's business in Hong Kong was maintained, and he adopted the identity of an astronaut, engaged in Ong's (1999) Pacific shuttle between work in Hong Kong and his family on the Pacific coast of North America. Eventually this arrangement became socially unsustainable, the family business was sold, and he moved to Vancouver. But not permanently, for career objectives could not be sustained in his new home, and he is now back working in Hong Kong, once again an astronaut. This is not, however, the end of his frequent flyer miles, for another status passage is looming.

Now, my son likes Canada, but he would like to come back to Hong Kong to work after his university education. He said that it's difficult to find a job in Canada. Actually, he prefers to live in Canada.

*So if your son comes back to Hong Kong, would you and your wife move here permanently?*

Yes, we do have a plan. My wife and I have made a commitment that we would stay in Hong Kong for five years, and then we'll move back to Canada... Actually, I was already planning [in the 1980s] to save enough money in Hong Kong and go to Canada to retire.

We see from this remarkable family history that the two sides of the Pacific Ocean are a single social field transgressed seemingly at will at different stages of the life cycle in response to

family needs that can be fulfilled more satisfactorily at one site or the other. In general terms it is economic activity that is the recurrent pull to Hong Kong, quality of life attractions that draw the family back repeatedly to Vancouver. Simon's family have perfected in their own way a path that optimises each site in the social field for its own assets as they become relevant at discrete stages in the life cycle.

While few families have achieved this level of life-stage and movement synchronization, we see similar examples of this over and over again in the biographies of our respondents. The enlargement of the social field means a dispersal of family members on both sides of the Pacific, a scattering of parents, siblings and children according to which station works best for their present stage in the life cycle. It means some confusion as to where exactly is home. It leads in Simon's case to him speaking as a resident in Hong Kong and telling us that "We've been there [Vancouver] for twelve years." A fusion of 'here' and 'there' has occurred in his mind because they are part of a single, if geographically diffuse, life-world.

### **And then Retirement**

We heard numerous examples of the careful synchronization of space and time in an expanded social field. There was, for example, discussion about the best age to transfer children to schooling in Canada, the dominant view being around grade 10 when a sufficient level of Chinese language and culture had been absorbed, but in time for preparation for provincial examinations in Canada. This period also coincided with the much-feared Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination, whose avoidance sometimes precipitated family migration in the first place (Waters 2004). But a prominent and unexpected topic was the renewed transnational mobility anticipated at retirement.

Retirement is a significant status passage, frequently associated with migration (Rogers et al. 1992). For many it is a time to move away from metropolitan cores toward quieter settings with enhanced quality of life. For some it is a time to go home, including migrants whose life earnings have been secured and saved in metropolitan centres of the global north. The traditional view sees Greeks, Italians, Turks, and West Indians, amongst others, returning from diaspora to their homelands. It is here that the transnational longing of skilled Hong Kong returnees leads to a novel trajectory through a seamless social space that crosses oceans and national borders, passing from their native place of work to their adopted place of rest. Interviews with a small sample of skilled Taiwanese Australians planning repatriation to Taiwan suggested the same spatial strategy of a double return, first to Taiwan to work, but with the prospect of a later return to Australia upon

retirement, if not sooner; “many saw returning as yet another temporary move and anticipated retiring or returning regularly to Australia” (Guo and Iredale 2002: 35).

Simon, still working in Hong Kong as we heard above, was already thinking in the 1980s of moving to Canada upon retirement, just as Albert Cheng, with whom this paper began, has retirement plans in Canada even at the peak of his media and political career in Hong Kong. A surprisingly large number, perhaps half, of the respondents in our focus groups had the same forward planning in mind. Here then is a particularly transnational double-take on the myth of return. There is a well-recognised expression among this transnational population ‘Hong Kong for making money, Vancouver for quality of life’. At retirement the balance of these two valuations undergoes a significant reassessment.

There’s polluted air, polluted water. Almost everything is polluted in Hong Kong so when I retire I don’t want to stay in Hong Kong. There’s no fun, you can’t go to fishing, you can’t go skiing. If I can, I want to go back there tomorrow. But I can’t afford to go back there right now because I need to make a living.

This theme was pervasive.

I’d say my parents really love Vancouver and Canada. Weather, clean air, environment, the living style and standard, they love all sorts of things. I think they would choose Vancouver after they retire.

And again:

I will consider moving back after retirement, though I still have thirty years to go. My dream is to go back to Vancouver for retirement...[My parents] plan to be there after retirement. My dad will retire in seven years. He will live there with my mum, because there it’s more comfortable.

For some families, retirement offers the prospect of emotional re-integration across fragmented spaces:

*Did your parents move to Canada with you?*

No, my mum was with us, my dad stayed in Hong Kong.

*Like an astronaut?*

Yes, for eleven years.

*He has not moved there so far? Has he been an immigrant?*

No... not until he retires.

Hong Kong in contrast is regarded as too expensive, too crowded and too polluted for comfortable retirement.

Within a patriarchal family structure there is some evidence of variability between men and women in prioritising the economic/Hong Kong *versus* the lifestyle/Vancouver stations in the social field. Economic gradients typically impel men more strongly. In several of the interviews quoted above, it is the astronaut men (like Simon) who are in East Asia, while their wife and family are in Canada. A returnee told us how economic underperformance in Canada gnaws at male self-esteem:

When you are not able to find a job, or earn enough money or work at your former position, especially for a male, they'll feel that they are useless. Some people who are used to being a boss, after they went to Canada they had to distribute newspapers or to work as a driver for a living. As their social class lowered dramatically, they also suffered serious psychological depression. I think, other than money this is another important reason why many have returned to Hong Kong.

It is the men who are typically the initiators of return to Hong Kong. In contrast, after a difficult settling in period, women seem to adjust well to the opportunities for self-development in Canada (Waters 2002). In one of our focus groups a couple had very different views about the desirability of return, differences that led to some emotional disagreement, with the husband acknowledging "She didn't want to come back to Hong Kong. So we're planning to go back there when we retire". The husband of another returnee family had found a job that required him to travel to Beijing during the week, returning only at weekends. His wife was left isolated and nostalgic:

I was there with my daughter facing the four walls. I was depressed... I was there in Hong Kong all by myself. I have friends there but they're busy too, as you know well...Hong Kong people! I've been so used to having different activities in Vancouver, like playing tennis, choir singing and pot luck dinners. I don't seem to be fitting into the Hong Kong lifestyle any more.

The age when retirement will occur depends in good measure upon the scale and speed of acquisition of mobile capital. The low incomes of recent Hong Kong migrants in Canada, reported earlier, are to some extent the result of underemployment associated with early retirement, particularly for those in the business immigration streams who have significant international assets but a limited Canadian cash flow (Ley 2003). As significant pre-migration business experience is a prerequisite of entry through these streams, household heads are typically in their forties when they land in Canada. Within a few years many will be considering retirement. For example, Mr. Liang, a senior manager in a multinational corporation in Hong Kong, entered Canada through the investor stream of the business programme, an immigration track that permits passive investment without active entrepreneurialism (Ley 1999). Upon landing in Vancouver, at age 52, he began his retirement,

identifying through his space-time decision-making the appropriate station in an expanded social field for a man of his age and economic achievement:

...you can't earn any money here. If you have enough money you can come. Just stay here and relax...You cannot expect to have a [comfortable] life, or to earn good money here because the tax here is so high. So you must have earned enough to come...I would never think of doing business here. Actually most of my friends, they retire, because they are all my similar age. All my good friends are retired, I mean those who come recently, we are all retired people.

Hong Kong is for making money and Vancouver is for quality of life. Back in Hong Kong one of our focus group members, less than fifteen years behind Mr. Liang, is considering the same trajectory.

I'm almost 40. I'm almost thinking of retirement. I have to plan for my kids' education. They might end up somewhere else on the globe. I don't care where they want their education. For myself, I really want to retire in a place I feel really comfortable in...I think I will have to end up in Canada.

It is important to consider some of the potential consequences, if and when spatial mobility at retirement is activated as planned. We can anticipate the return to Canada of a population with considerable savings to spend in real estate and consumer goods and services. Expansionary effects upon the consumption sector were registered in the Vancouver regional economy during the peak years of Hong Kong immigration during the 1986-96 decade, while the real estate market fell back appreciably with the population exodus beginning in the mid-1990s (Lyons 1997; Walkom 1997). Such expansionary pressures would be expected to return. But in addition to these private sector impacts, there could well be public service costs associated with the arrival of a significant retirement cohort with appreciable assets but modest taxable income, likely to locate disproportionately in the Vancouver region where the quality of life is high, where a large, institutionally complete, diasporic community exists, and where the air journey to Hong Kong is the shortest among major North American centres. Awareness of these implications was registered by some respondents.

I know I'll definitely go back to retire because I'm Canadian so I can have all those benefits that retired people get. So I know I'll go back for retirement. Prior to retirement I may not, depending on financial, social, there's a lot of different things. But definitely for retirement!

## **Conclusion**

The methodological advantages of conducting transnational research at two sites, in Hong Kong and Vancouver, were frequently evident. The capacity to interview students in Vancouver, graduate career

builders in Hong Kong, middle-aged parents with school children and retirees back in Vancouver, together rounded out transnational experiences and strategies across the life cycle. Not least we could more fully understand the routines of everyday life at each site which made that location favourable now, but perhaps less so in the past or the future, as we heard migrants project themselves back and forward in space and time. As they lived across two territories linked by dense electronic messaging and frequent travel, stretching relationships and resources across space, so our field research needed to range between the two sites that comprised their blended social field.

Return migration is not a sufficient description of the hyper-mobility of transnational citizens living, presently, in Hong Kong, and for whom the two sides of the Pacific are part of a single life-world. As we have seen, their continuing itinerary over time undercuts conventional accounts that portray return migration as circular migration with its own logic of arrival, assimilation and closure. Instead there is a perennial openness to further movement at distinctive passages in the life cycle.

There are other theoretical issues at stake as well, such as the creation of a social space that transcends (and challenges) national borders (Ong 1999, Ley 2003), the meaning of citizenship and identity in a fluid bi-national residential history (Kobayashi 2004), the elasticity of family relations stretched across the Pacific Ocean (Waters 2002), and, as Albert Cheng expresses so courageously, the portability of political (and other) values between transnational sites. These issues merge readily with policy questions specific to different national territories, when, for example, the jurisdiction collecting career stage taxes, is not the same jurisdiction that dispenses retirement stage benefits. A larger calculus is required here that systematises costs and benefits more fully than has been possible to date (for example by Wang and Lo 2000).

Meanwhile at different stages in the life cycle the migrant capitalises upon one or other site in this trans-Pacific life-world, passing from one station to another, but always with an openness to the option of return. As one focus group respondent reminded us, that process can go on even beyond retirement.

I had no choice but to come back [to Hong Kong] to make a living. ...But I still wish to live there (Vancouver) after retirement, because I like the lifestyle there. But I prefer dying in Hong Kong, not there.

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