

A Study of Hong Kong Middle Class in Britain - Is migration to Britain via the BNO pathway justified for Hong Kong middle class?

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Abstract— To reflect Britain’s historic and moral commitment to the Hong Kong people who chose to retain their ties to Britain by taking up the BNO status before 1997, Britain offered the BNO migration pathway to Hong Kong people in 2021. Many of the middle class in Hong Kong moved to Britain. However, the average salary in Britain was half of what they earned in Hong Kong. Will they survive in Britain and do they think their decision of migration justified?

Keywords— BNO visa, HongKonger in Britain, Hong Kong middle class, Hong Kong professionals in Britain, household income and expenses, survival mode

I. Introduction

In 1984, the Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed between China and Britain which confirmed the return of Hong Kong sovereignty to China after 1997. In order to ease the worries of Hong Kong people towards ruling by the Communist Party after 1997, Hong Kong people were offered British National (Overseas) (BNO) status upon neutralisation to Britain before 1997. Over two million Hong Kong people registered as BNOs. Then the National Security Law was introduced in Hong Kong in 2020, which criminalises anything considered as secession (breaking away from China), subversion (undermining the power or authority of the Chinese central government), terrorism (using violence or intimidation against Hong Kong people), and collusion with foreign or external forces. Suspects violating any of these law may go on trial in mainland China and/or heard behind closed doors, and the maximum sentence is life imprisonment. In view of this, Britain offered Hong Kong people the BNO immigration route on 31 January 2021, which grants Hong Kong people the right to live, study and work if their application for immigration via the BNO pathway are approved. (However, Hong Kong people are not eligible for any public benefits.) According to the UK statistics in March 2024, 144,400 Hong Kong people called Britain their home, studying and working in the country. Hong Kong people were known for their diligence and efficiency at work. Their work was of high quality and mistakes are rare. They worked overtime to meet the deadlines, even when that meant working on weekends and public holidays. The clients and customers had high hope on their work and services. The professionals in Hong Kong, such as doctors, nurses, lawyers, teachers and IT experts, worked efficiently and effectively round the clock under high pressure and their work contained almost no mistake. These professionals were rewarded with much higher salary than professionals doing similar jobs in other developed countries in the world. Besides, Hong Kong institutions and companies offered attractive salaries to professionals because they wanted to attract the best in the city and perhaps the best in the world, and in return, they expected the employee to work long hours under pressure with outstanding performance. Besides, residential properties in Hong Kong was the most expensive in the world, with an average property price of US\$1,254,442 (CBRE, 2020). An employer could not offer his potential employee a salary with which the employee could not pay the rent. Many of the professionals in Hong Kong with BNO status chose to leave Hong Kong and migrated to Britain under the BNO migration route in 2021 and 2022. Many of them were after freedom of speech and rule of law in Britain. According to Maslow’s theory of hierarchy of needs, these people were already satisfied with food and shelter since most of them owned their flats and they occasionally dined in prestigious restaurants. They also had love and friends as most of them were married and they had friends to share their happiness and sorrow. More importantly, they had financial security with their high salary and they could afford the application fee for BNO visa, which was £268 per person, and the Immigration Health Surcharge for 5 years, £5,175 per person. Therefore, after achieving all of the above, they advanced to pursue ideologies like freedom of speech and rule of law. However, the average salary of relevant professional positions (after tax) in Britain was only half or one-third of the average salary of the professional positions (after tax) in Hong Kong. In this paper, I shall discuss the differences in income as received by Hong Kong professionals in Hong Kong and in Britain, and how they justify their migration to Britain. This paper is the first of its kind. There is not much research on Hong Kong immigrants in Britain via the BNO status pathway. There was no literary review on this topic at the time when this article was written.

II. Methodology

An invitation for interview in regard to the purpose of this paper was sent to 96 Hong Kong professionals who have landed Britain via the BNO migration pathway. 38 of them agreed to be interviewed. Each interviewee was asked 24 questions. All interviewees were asked the same 24 questions. The interviewees were not given the list of questions before the interview, and they gave their answers right after they heard a question during the interview. All interviewees were professionals in Hong Kong. This paper focuses on comparing the income received in Hong Kong and the income received in Britain by the same Hong Kong professionals who had landed British soil via the BNO migration pathway, and whether they thought their decision on migration to Britain is justified. The questions in the interviews were only designed for this purpose.

A qualitative approach was adopted in this research because in-depth analysis could be done on the basis of real life conversations. Open-ended questions related to the background of the interviewees and their current living circumstances were laid out during the interviews. Interviews with the Hong Kong professionals were conducted within the same week and vivid descriptions by these interviewees were recorded on dedicated digital recorder. The information gained from the interviews was kept as authentic as possible. All conversations had been kept confidential.

III. Participants

All 38 interviewees were Hong Kong professionals who had migrated to Britain via the BNO migration pathway. Hong Kong professionals in this paper means Hong Kong people with professional qualifications in the medical, education, accounting and information technology fields (76%) and Hong Kong people with positions in the management level (24%). The former included doctors, nurses, teachers, accountants and software engineers. The latter were managers, senior managers and general managers in various industries. All participants had a job before they left Hong Kong. 92% quitted their job for Britain and 8% managed to keep their job even after they migrated to Britain. All participants needed a job in Britain.

Among the 38 interviewees, 12% were aged under 30, 26% aged between 30-39, 38% aged 40-49, and 24% aged 50 or over.

IV. Summary of Findings

A. Financial background when the interviewees were in Hong Kong

In this paper, middle class is defined as households which can generate a household income (before tax) between Hong Kong Dollar \$40,000 to \$120,000 (approximately US Dollar \$5,119 to \$15,356). Whenever household income and expenses and household savings are concerned, each interviewee represented a household; otherwise they represented themselves.

97% of the interviewees considered themselves middle class in Hong Kong. 53% of these middle class had a maid at home, 5% of them had two maids at home.

100% of the interviewees were satisfied with their salary when they were in Hong Kong. As regards the monthly household expenses of these interviewees in Hong Kong (Table I), 11% of the interviewees spent 11-20% of their household income every month, 10% spent 21-30% of their

household income, 13% spent 31-40% of their household income, 11% spent 41-50% of their household income, 16% spent 51-60% of their household income, 21% spent 61-70% of their household income, 13% spent 71-80% of their household income, 3% spent 81-90% of their household income, and 2% spent 91-100% of their household income.

Table I Monthly Household Expenses in Hong Kong

Percentage of household income used for household expenses	Percentage of interviewees
11-20%	11%
21-30%	10%
31-40%	13%
41-50%	11%
51-60%	16%
61-70%	21%
71-80%	13%
81-90%	3%
91-100%	2%

Before the interviewees migrated to Britain, 87% of them knew their income would decrease if they work in Britain. Of those who expected their income would decrease, 6% assumed their income in Britain as compared to Hong Kong would drop approximately one-fifth, 8% assumed would drop approximately one-fourth, 17% assumed would drop approximately one-third, 59% assumed would drop approximately half, 12% assumed would drop approximately two-third. As regards job expectation, 68% of the interviewees hoped they could do the same profession or office job as they had in Hong Kong. However, many worried that this was not possible. 63% of the interviewees would not mind working in factories or warehouse in Britain if they could not find an office job, 13% would have to accept any job offered to them including bin collection, while 15% insisted on working in the professional environment. When the interviewees were working and living in Hong Kong, all of them managed to save some money (Table II). 18% of them saved 11-20% of their income every month, 24% saved 21-30%, 13% saved 31-40%, 11% saved 41-50%, 13% saved 51-60%, 10% saved 61-70%, and 11% saved 71% or more.

Table II Monthly Household Savings in Hong Kong

Percentage of household income put into savings	Percentage of interviewees
11-20%	18%
21-30%	24%
31-40%	13%
41-50%	11%
51-60%	13%
61-70%	10%
71%+	11%

B. Financial background when the interviewees were in Britain

Of all the interviewees, 92% tried to find a job after they had settled in Britain, while 8% continued with their job in Hong Kong even though they were physically in Britain. Of those who were looking for jobs, 37% were offered their first job within a month, 28% within two months and 23% within three months. 52% of the interviewees were able to get a similar professional job or an office job as they did in Hong Kong. 32% were working as labourers or cleaners. Among the interviewees, 26% were satisfied with their salary, 29% not very happy with their salary, 29% were dissatisfied with their salary, and 13% were very dissatisfied with their salary. In terms of the monthly household expenses in Britain (Table III), 32% of the interviewees spent 71-80% of their monthly income, 12% spent 81-90% of their monthly income, 13% spent 91-100% of their monthly income, 8% spent 101-110% of their monthly income, 11% spent 111-120% of their monthly income and 24% spent 121-130% of their monthly income. Those who spent over 100% meant they were using their savings. When income could not match their expenses, they said they were in survival mode, consuming their own savings till it was all used up.

Table III Monthly Household Expenses in Britain

Percentage of household income used for household expenses	Percentage of interviewees
71-80%	32%
81-90%	12%
91-100%	13%
101-110%	8%
111-120%	11%
121-130%	24%

45% of the interviewees had no monthly savings at all while 16% managed to save 1-10% of their income, 11% managed to save 11-20% of their income, and 28% managed to save 21-30% of their income (Table IV).

Table IV Monthly household savings in Britain

Percentage of household income put into savings	Percentage of interviewees
0%	45%
1-10%	16%
11-20%	11%
21-30%	28%

Even though the interviewees appeared to be not as well-to-do as when they were in Hong Kong, 79% considered their migration to Britain justified. 74% appreciated there was freedom of speech and rule of law in Britain. Freedom of speech is the right to express oneself without fear of government censorship or punishment. The principle of rule of law is that "all persons and authorities within the state, whether public or private, should be bound by and entitled to the benefit of laws publicly and prospectively promulgated and publicly administered in the courts" (House of Lords Library, UK Parliament, 2006). Another justification for their migration to Britain was to provide their children with British education which allowed their children to pursue the subjects they like. 53% of the interviewees said they did not want their kids to be brainwashed by the pro-government teaching content and they hoped to provide an environment in which their kids could choose their favourite subjects and develop the skills they like. When asked about what other things they liked about Britain, 71% of the interviewees said their living environment had improved, 55% said they had less pressure at work, and 47% said they loved the parks in Britain. 39% of the interviewees said they were happier in Britain whilst 16% said they were happier in Hong Kong. 45% said they were not happier nor unhappier after they migrated to Britain. All interviewees said they would stay in Britain in the coming 5 years.

V. Conclusion

In pursuance of freedom of speech and rule of law in another country, Hong Kong professionals had given up their career and their business network in Hong Kong, which they had built up for years. They had given up their high-paid well-respected jobs as well as the middle class lifestyle in Hong Kong. They had to start everything from scratch in Britain. In Britain, their salary after tax was on average one-third or one-half of that in Hong Kong. 45% of the interviewees could not save any money.

With all these 'sacrifices', more than three-fourth of the interviewees said their decision to migrate was correct and justified. Living in a country where rule of law applied and the right to criticise the government was granted, was of ultimate importance to these interviewees. And it was essential that the next generation would be brought up and educated in such an environment. It is also worth notice that 88% of the Hong Kong professionals could find a job in the first three months of their arrival in Britain, even though these jobs might not be what they preferred.

A. Why do Hong Kong people consider the rule of law important?

According to the House of Lord Library of the UK Parliament, rule of law means all men are equal before the law, whatever his condition or rank is. The adjudicative procedures provided by the state must be fair. Hong Kong people was brought up in an environment where rule of law was in full force. The judiciary system was independent from the Hong Kong government and any new law would have to be debated in the Legislative Council. Almost two-third of the Legislative Council members were elected by the public. All people were equal before the law and there were juries to decide if the defendant were guilty in the High Court. After experiencing the effectiveness of rule of law and the benefits of a fair legal system, many Hong Kong people could not choose to stay in a place where rule of law was fading. Most of Hong Kong people were law-abiding citizens and the crime rate in Hong Kong was relatively very low compared to cities in other developed countries. Both Hong Kong citizens and tourists to Hong Kong enjoyed a safe and vibrant city.

B. What kind of education do Hong Kong parents want for their children?

Most Hong Kong parents hope their children can have outstanding performance in school. Many Hong Kong parents are 'helicopter parents' which means they overprotect their children and shield them from possible mistakes and failure in school. They are strict to their children and they are controlling towards them. At the same time these parents try to provide their children the best education resources they can possibly have. They are willing to send their children to different learning centres after school hours, so that their children can be well prepared for future competition in school exams and being admitted by outstanding schools. Hong Kong parents who migrated to Britain hope to do the opposite. They were too stressful dealing with their children when they were in Hong Kong. They were exhausted sending the children to different learning centres after school and during weekends. They had to nag them when the kids did not do their homework and keep nagging them till they completed their homework. On the other hand, children did not like their parents because they were forced to study non-stop and they had no playtime. The relationship between parents and children in Hong Kong were tense. In Britain, there is not much homework for students, so Hong Kong parents here do not need to nag their children to complete their homework and the kids have more playtime. There are also fewer exams or even no exam in school at the end of the term. Hong Kong parents here do not need to schedule extra classes and send their children to learning centres. Instead, parents bring their children to gardens, parks, zoos, farms and carnivals to play and have fun. Both parents and children are happy here and the relationship between them is harmonious. 72% of the interviewees who had children clearly expressed their wish and plan of providing their children a choice of different subjects and their kids could choose the subjects they liked. Going to the university was not a must but they all hoped their children could learn a skill which they were interested in. However, if their children were in Hong Kong, parents would very much prefer them to go to universities because without a university degree, it was less likely that these young people would be able to find a job which would enable them to gradually achieve financial independence.

C. The living environment has substantially improved in Britain.

The average size of a semi-detached house in Britain is 1,033 square feet, which is two to three times bigger than most of the flats in Hong Kong. Children have more space to run around and adults can have a quiet room to work from home. Garden is a treasure for many families at which they can sit under the sunshine and have a cup of coffee. It is also a pleasure to see the flowers and fruit one has planted. The weather is dry and cool in Britain, so there is no mosquitoes or midges. Parks are also loved by Hong Kong people. The huge space and seasonal flowers like cherry blossom, daffodils, dandelions, tulips, sunflowers, are all popular spots to visit. The synergy with nature benefits human mind and well-being.

D. There is relatively no pressure at the workplace.

Most interviewees expressed that they had work life balance in Britain and they felt relax after work hours and had spent more time with their children. In Hong Kong, managers and team leaders would call them after work hours and on weekends. Many interviewees also said they didn't feel much pressure at the workplace in Britain and the relationship with their co-workers was harmonious. In Hong Kong, they worked under constant pressure as many were overloaded and no mistakes or delays were allowed. They worked overtime and on weekends in order to complete their duties, if necessary. Besides, office ladies in Hong Kong carried expensive bags of famous brands to show off, which gave pressure to other girls in the same office. There was no such peer pressure in the office in Britain.

E. Maslow's Theory of Hierarchy of Needs

The theory of hierarchy of needs proposed by Abraham Maslow (1954) has been one of the most popular framework in explaining humans' motivation. Maslow suggested that human's motivation were driven by a hierarchy of needs. When the lower-order needs were fulfilled, people would progress to higher-order needs. Lower-order needs were food, shelter, financial security, love and friends. Higher-order needs were self-actualisation and transcendence. Self-actualisation is the realisation of one's full potential. "Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos." Maslow believed that higher-order needs would only take precedence after the lower-order needs were satisfied. Hong Kong middle class did go through this hierarchy when they were in Hong Kong. However, what happened after they had migrated to Britain and their financial condition worsened? According to Maslow's theory, they should first resolve their financial issues before dominating their lives with higher-order needs. Nevertheless, the statistics of this study shows that once the Hong Kong middle class are in pursuance of the higher-order needs such as freedom of speech and rule of law, they would not forsake these values even when their financial situation deteriorated. They would uphold these values dearly even when they did not have financial security, as this was the reason they left Hong Kong. Hence, the Hong Kong middle class in Britain do not follow the pattern of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, because although they are struggling to satisfy their lower-order needs, that is, financial security, they embrace the values they cherish and persist on pursuance of the higher-order needs.

VI. Limitation and Study Forward

This research was completed by one person and therefore manpower was quite limited in this study. It is hoped that more subjects can be interviewed and more studies of this kind can be conducted in the future.

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