

Executive Summary

Emigration is not a new phenomenon to Hong Kong. During recent decades there have been a few waves of emigration, mainly due to the city's special social background (e.g. the negotiations in the early 1980s about its future, and subsequent political disputes and crises of confidence).

The recent spates of social unrest sparked by the proposed extradition legislation, and coupled with other issues, have revealed many unresolved and deep-rooted tensions within Hong Kong society. This has triggered people's anxiety about the city's future. A survey by the CUHK in September 2020 noted that 43.9% of respondents would emigrate if they had the chance, up from 33.1% in 2017¹. Most of the reasons were related to the governance of the HKSAR Government, and Hong Kong's overall political atmosphere.

There are many factors, both social and personal, that contribute to the reasoning to stay or leave a home city. Whatever factor/s ultimately decide the outcome, confidence in future stability or prosperity is important; good governance plays a significant role.

The social unrest of the city in recent years has heavily impacted the governance of the HKSAR Government. Young people were widely understood to be major participants, expressing sadness, anxiety, and dissatisfaction. Young people's sense of belonging to Hong Kong might be adversely affected if the situation continues or deteriorates; thoughts of leaving the city cannot be ruled out. While the city becomes more divided, the struggles and needs of young people who opt to stay and live in the city deserve attention as well.

Young people have a sense of belonging to², and wanting a better³, Hong Kong. With the city under tremendous difficulty, which has never been seen

¹ Press Release by The Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies at The Chinese University of Hong Kong (6 October 2020).

² HKFYG. (2018). YI033. "Nurturing Talent for Governance" (Aug. 2018). The study noted that 69.1% of the young respondents agreed with the notion that "you have a sense of belonging to Hong Kong".

³ HKFYG. (2017). YI023. "Young People's Views on Togetherness" (Jun. 2017). The study noted that 97.6% of the young respondents agreed with the notion that "you want Hong Kong to become better".

before, the spotlight is now on the inclination of youth to stay or leave. The deficiency of the HKSAR Government's governance highlighted by the issue of whether the youth stay or leave is also worth studying.

In light of the recent social unrests of the city, this research looked at the main considerations of youth in Hong Kong affecting the decision to stay or leave, and their concerns and needs given the current situation. This research aimed to propose key insights as to how the Government and wider society could progress through the current difficulty.

In conducting this research, data was collected between October and December 2020 through: an on-site survey of 525 young people (aged 18 to 34); parallel case interviews with 17 similar individuals (8 chose to emigrate, 9 chose to stay), and research-exclusive interviews with 5 academics and experts.

Main Discussion

- 1. The recent spates of social unrest have triggered an atmosphere of uncertainty and anxiety about Hong Kong's future and a new wave of emigration seems to be emerging. The underlying issues involve governance and a lack of confidence in the future of the city. The HKSAR Government should pay attention to this latest wave of emigration.**

Data from the Security Bureau noted that the estimated number of emigrants before the Handover increased from 18,000 in 1981, to 22,000 in 1984, and from 62,000 in 1989 to a peak of 66,000 in 1992. While the figure was 31,000 in 1997, for the first few years after the Handover emigration stood at around 10,000 (e.g. 13,000 in 1999).

The number of emigrants over the years has gone up and down. Freedom to travel, to enter or leave the city, has always been one of the most treasured aspects of Hong Kong. However, increasing uncertainty and anxiety about the city's future have resurfaced among the people of Hong Kong. Deep-rooted conflicts, coupled with the impacts caused by social unrest within the city over recent years, have affected the governance of the HKSAR Government and social cohesion.

Of the 525 polled respondents, 150 (28.6%) had a plan to emigrate overseas. Of these, the three most common factors cited for leaving (socially, rather than personally determined) were: the enactment of the National Security Law in Hong Kong (50.7%); disappointing performance of the HKSAR Government (49.3%); serious divisions in society (31.3%). Respondents with a plan to leave were less confident when asked about the extent to which they believed Hong Kong could maintain cherished core values.

As such a new wave of emigration is appearing, and this time it might last for a longer period. Emigration is a particular phenomenon as it displays the level of confidence in the home location, including the adequacy of governance by a respective government. The HKSAR Government should pay attention to this latest wave of emigration.

- 2. Society is dissatisfied with Government policies and its poor performance in handling public opinion that have led to increases in public grievances. As society gets more complicated, there is a pressing need for the Government to improve its explanation of policies and its understanding of different public voices.**

An academic in the interview pointed out that the Government should reflect upon the social conditions that have caused the recent increases in emigration planning. The conditions included the emergence of large-scale social movements whose participants were from different classes and backgrounds, with different motives. This implies that citizens from all walks of life are dissatisfied with the Government's policies.

There were youth cases that felt the Government had lost its willingness to explain its policies and listen to public opinion. They also had an unfavorable impression of the Government's performance in handling different public voices. They regarded it as one of the major reasons for the serious rifts within the city. They urged the Government to be responsive to public voices; some wanted to have dialogues with government officials.

In a 2015 survey, the performance of the Government in policy consultation was not outstanding according to young people's perceptions. This referred to the areas of listening to people with different positions, using information technology to proceed with consultation, and reporting the results of consultation to the public. Young people only gave a pass rate in each of the above areas.

In a 2017 survey, of the various HKSAR Government abilities listed out in the questionnaire, its ability to comprehend public opinion was most disapproved of by young people.

Hong Kong society is at a serious juncture, the Government should truly take public opinion into account in a more innovative and systematic manner; Principal Officials should also immediately improve their policy explanation skills. This could help develop more mellow policies, and reduce the risk of public grievances accumulating.

3. More than forty percent of respondents were without hope in Hong Kong's future; in particular those who had a plan to leave the city. Youth are our future. The Government has a responsibility to create hope in the future for youth, providing them with the reason to stay and take part in creating a better future.

An overwhelming majority (91.8%) of the total respondents agreed that they had a sense of belonging to Hong Kong. Nevertheless, a considerable proportion (76%) did not trust the Government. Another significant percentage (43.6%) had no hope in the future of Hong Kong. Respondents with a plan to leave were more inclined to take these two positions.

Youth from the case interviews were worried about their personal prospects in Hong Kong. They could not see their career path or were unsure if there would be more diversified industries from which they could choose. They also expressed concerns about the prospects of the city that its uniqueness (such as way of life, core values) could not be maintained. Some youth cases cited these worries as their reasons for leaving.

An expert in the interview pointed out that hope, whether in the area of career development, family establishment, and political participation, was particularly important for young people because it helped them endure hard times. Yet, Hong Kong as a society lacked any long term and meaningful goal that could attract young people to stay and strive to help attain.

Youth are our future and their concerns need to be addressed. The HKSAR Government needs to make great effort, through concrete actions and policies, to demonstrate that it has a real interest in and connection with the youth, and create hope in them. Only by doing so could it encourage the youth to stay in this city to help its long term development.

- 4. Talent mobility is becoming more common. Respondents with an educational degree or above, or those in work with managerial or professional backgrounds, are more likely to consider emigrating. In youths' perception, however, the Government is not being active enough in retaining talent which is unfavorable for the sustainability of Hong Kong.**

In the 525 respondent on-site survey, those with an educational degree or above, or in work with managerial or professional backgrounds, are more inclined to consider leaving. More than 70% (71.4%) of respondents did not think that the HKSAR Government had paid sufficient attention to the retention of youth to stay in for development. In addition, talent loss was the most significant problem that respondents were concerned about if the number of local emigrants kept increasing (36.6%), followed by the deteriorating competitiveness of the city (28.0%).

Youth is the source of sustainability of any society. Human resources has always been the most important asset that Hong Kong has possessed. Given the huge demand for talent worldwide, coupled with the trend of high mobility of talent globally, those with higher education or professional backgrounds are in great demand. However, in many of the respondents' perceptions, the HKSAR Government is not active enough

in retaining its local youth talent. This poses a threat for the sustainability of the city in the long term. The Government, and society as a whole, should be alert to this and prepare as early as possible.

5. Young people aspire to contribute to Hong Kong. The Government and society should treasure its youths' passion to serve the city by exploring more opportunities for the youth to more fully make use of their enthusiasm and potential.

More than 80% (83.8%) of respondents took the view that they wanted to contribute to Hong Kong. More than 75% (76.2%) believed that youth could bring about change through participation; these were in particular for those who had no plan to leave the city.

Most of the respondents would take various action as a sign to take part in Hong Kong's development. Some would strengthen their personal ability (63.0%), express personal views online (35.6%), or participate in social movements (29.0%). Other actions included using their creativity or professional knowledge to help solve social problems (15.6%), providing opinions to the Government directly (14.5%), or having a public affairs post (11.2%).

Youth have a passion to serve the city. This level and type of aspiration is so important at a time when Hong Kong is experiencing so many difficulties. The Government and society should set aside differences and allow young people to take part in developing the city. An affirmation of youth participation would enable them to more fully make use of their enthusiasm and potential.

Recommendations

Based upon the findings and discussion above, this study proposes the following recommendations so Hong Kong is able to progress despite the current difficulty.

1. **Launch a territory-wide campaign to collect the dreams and vision of youth about Hong Kong for the next ten years.**

We recommend a government-led campaign, joined by different organisations at the district level, to collect views of youth on their dreams and visions about Hong Kong for the next ten years. The campaign would serve two purposes: (1) To help the Government and the community have a clear understanding of youths' desires, and absorb their aspirations when they formulate the projects in future. (2) To provide young people with a sense of empowerment and suggest that they might have a role to play in building a future society together.

2. **Set up a high-level centralised government mechanism for handling public opinions.**

The Government should set up a high-level centralised, innovation-based mechanism for handling public opinions. This might allow Principal Officials to better understand public sentiment at a time when social issues have become complex. In the long run this could reduce the risk of accumulating public grievances.

3. **Grasp every opportunity to communicate with young people.**

There can be no quick fix or shortcut solution to rebuilding hope or trust. The Government should therefore grasp every opportunity to reach out. Through communicating and listening effectively, it might help move to the process of rebuilding the trust of youth on the Government. We also recommend that the society actively create every opportunity for mutual communication between the Government and the youth.