

**CENTRAL POLICY UNIT**  
**THE GOVERNMENT OF THE HONG KONG**  
**SPECIAL ADMINISTRATIVE REGION**

**A RESEARCH STUDY ON MAINLAND CHINESE**  
**IMMIGRANT ARTISTS IN HONG KONG**

**HONG KONG BAPTIST UNIVERSITY**

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# **Executive Summary**

## **Significance of the Study**

Hong Kong has long been ridiculed as a "cultural desert". The irony is that while the Hong Kong government has indeed invested much in art and culture over the years, criticisms abound. In recent years, the idea of the West Kowloon Cultural District has contributed to a social discourse on art and culture which, among other things, has engendered a host of new wishes and expectations among the Hongkongers. To develop a place's art and culture, the key lies in the preservation, cultivation, and development of the human resources. One major policy strategy of the government in this regard has been in the importation of professional immigrants, including artists and cultural workers, from overseas, particularly from the mainland. In 2008, we completed a study of the socio-economic adaptation of mainland professionals in Hong Kong for the Central Policy Unit of the Hong Kong Government. Thirty professionals from a diversity of occupational fields were interviewed and a report was submitted to the Unit. Studies of artists in general and immigrant artists in particular in Hong Kong, or for that matter, elsewhere, are few and far between, leaving a gap in the knowledge of members of this occupational group. Ours is arguably a path-breaking, innovative study. The objectives of our present study are to analyze the work and economic condition of mainland immigrant artists in Hong Kong and their personal and collective strategies of coping, and to formulate policy recommendations toward enhancing the artistic and cultural labour resources of Hong Kong society.

## **Research Methods**

The artistic and cultural workers in our study hailed from three main sectors: performing arts, visual arts, and literary production. The major data-gathering method was face-to-face in-depth interviewing, which lasted one to three hours. There were three different ways of recruiting respondents: sending out letters of invitation to interview; second, mobilization of our own social networks; and third, snowballing.

Of our 27 respondents, 19 were from the mainland, six were local Hong Kong residents, and two were Singaporeans. Those from the mainland came from ten different cities or provinces, while their artistic occupations covered 12 different groups.

## **Findings of the Study**

### **The quadruple marginality of the mainland immigrant artists**

In regard to the political economy of art and artists in Hong Kong in general, and the work and economic development of the artists in particular, mainland immigrant artists in Hong Kong have discovered to their shock upon arrival in Hong Kong that they have come to the wrong place, a place that does not value art and artists highly. There is a deep "lack of fit" between art and society in Hong Kong. Artists are misfits, occupationally and socially dislocated. This is our first finding.

Mainland immigrant artists in Hong Kong suffer from a "quadruple marginality". The first moment of marginality is the consequence of art and artists having been marginalized, a process socially constructed by a three-cornered reciprocal influence of government, business and society. Politically and administratively, the Hong Kong

government has not viewed art and culture as something of primary importance, in fact treating them as similar to entertainment, leisure, or sports. In business and industry, materialism, commercialism and capitalism have long developed a stronghold in Hong Kong society. In the social arena, Hongkongers have in turn internalized the modes of thinking, attitudes and values of the government and the business world: being an artist is not a lucrative career for the youth because art is seen as not producing a surplus value, a profit. This first moment of marginality has historical as well as structural causes, which defies the efforts of individuals or organizations to change.

The second moment of marginality stems from negative labels, even stigma, having been attached to mainland immigrant artists in Hong Kong. Immigrant artists are immigrants from the mainland first, artists second. Being an immigrant from China is a master status, a stigma, which singularly determines how the artist and his or her works are treated in Hong Kong society. The stigma constructs both visible and invisible boundaries separating the locals and the immigrants. Prejudice and discrimination are discernible in the impermeability of these boundaries. That immigrants' formal qualifications and work achievements prior to immigration are not recognized in Hong Kong adds to the "immigrant's plight". More often than not, they must "start all over again", from the bottom.

The third moment of marginality happens when artists from Hong Kong, whether they are indigenous or are immigrants, face prejudice and discrimination in the mainland's artistic community. The art world of Hong Kong suffers from a lack of organization and leadership, as a result of which art works and artists chosen to represent Hong Kong during exhibitions in the mainland may not be Hong Kong's best. Artists from Hong Kong are not held in high esteem in the mainland.

The fourth moment of marginality traces its origin to colonialism. Western art styles, values, tastes, conventions prevail over those of the Chinese--a deep sense of superiority of the west/the foreign sits uncomfortably with an even deeper sense of inferiority of the east/the local, resulting in a profound moment of internal colonialism: local Chinese artists de-value each other's works. All this has far-reaching implications and consequences for the government's priority in funding and budget allocation, deciding on salaries and so on.

### **Strategies of Coping**

The origins of the mainland immigrant artists' plight are historical and structural, but the artists' coping strategies remain primarily personal, or certainly not collectivistic enough. The coping strategies of the artists are of three kinds.

The first strategy of coping is in with the construction of cognitions and reasoning. Through rationalization and self-persuasion, the immigrant artists compare their present condition in Hong Kong and their past condition in the mainland to "find" reasons to self-justify their decisions about migration, and to attain self-consolation and comfort. One manipulates thinking to produce positive feelings, sort of working on the mind to take care of the heart and the body, indeed a classic example of a "managed heart", or what sociologists call "management of emotions".

The second strategy of coping is instrumental in nature. Being practical, this type of strategy aims at problem-solving. One visible technique is what we dub as "half and half" coping, which could take different forms. Some artists choose to put artistic work

'on hold" during the initial years of their arrival in Hong Kong, and then return to it when economics allow. Other artists take on non-art-related work in the daytime, their first shift, to provide for themselves and their family, and engage in artistic production in the nighttime, their "second shift". This two-shift existence is exhausting and stressful, oftentimes operating in a condition of "self-exploitation". The artists shuttle between the art world and the worldly world, the boundary of which is marked out or marked off during a day, a week, or indeed an entire life course. Yet other artists undertake art-related jobs and try to produce artistically simultaneously. Teaching art is a popular choice, but it entails considerable expenditure of time, energy and emotions, much to the regret of the artists. An immigrant artist is a half-half man, a divided self. To be or not to be, that is the question. He teaches because he must. When he teaches, he is thinking of doing art. When he is doing art, he is thinking of teaching, which he must do to live.

The third coping strategy is emotions-focused. Passion for and commitment to art and artistic creation are deep inner resources which are often invoked by the artists for self-motivation and for management of stress and distress. Art students are the art teachers' major source of social, emotional and economic support.

### **Five Ironies**

The first irony is perhaps the most striking one: while the marginality of the immigrant artists is their identity and personhood which cause them much suffering, this same marginality, once bestowed on them, is something they cannot and should not do without. They discard their marginality -- for example by becoming commercially successful -- at their own peril, ironically, because living at the margin sharpens

their sensitivity and artistry which enables them to see, and feel, what others don't because the latter are at the center. Marginality separates the artists and the non-artists. Marginality indeed has its upside and downside, promise and cost. This may be the deepest irony.

The second irony is that coping with suffering produces yet more suffering. Since doing art is not a viable way to make a living in Hong Kong, our artists must do other things in addition to art. Once art production is a part-time activity, society de-values and disdains part-time artists, which makes it difficult for these artists to obtain a value in the market for their products because part-timers, in the eyes of the consumers, cannot and would not produce good work. Society pays half-timers half price for their half-time work. This is a classic example of "blaming the victim" ideology, holding the victim responsible for his plight which is not of his own making. Once this ideology is internalized by the victim, something horrible may happen: he begins to blame himself. Meanwhile, the status quo continues.

Art has multiple functions, one of which is to communicate with the masses, affect them emotionally; to construct future scenarios of utopia and possibilities; and to mobilize the masses to effect social transformations. Yet artists cannot change their own plight — like doctors who cannot cure themselves. This is the third irony.

The Chinese overseas are world famous for their "genius of organizing". As immigrants in the Chinese diaspora, for decades, they engender ethnic and class resources, they construct social networks, they put social capital to strategic use --all in an attempt to do business and to create wealth. Yet mainland immigrant artists do not seem to be able to organize themselves to transform their own fate--on their own or collectively. This is

the fourth irony.

The fifth irony is due to the lack of middlemen, the "go-betweens". Hong Kong businessmen are well known for their acumen of taking advantage of their "middleman" status to mediate between divergent interests of Asia and the world. Yet few attempts have been made on the part of the immigrant artists to bridge the art worlds of the Chinese and the west.

### **The Future**

While our respondents continued to hold positive views of art and culture in Hong Kong, saying the present is an improvement of the past, their assessment of their future prospects is one of gloom. In fact, art and culture in Hong Kong is *in a stalmate*. Failing to see a way out for themselves, many immigrant artists will choose to leave Hong Kong. Would-be immigrant artists may decide Hong Kong is the wrong place to migrate to. So, they won't come here. Those who have chosen to stay may one day give up their artistic career altogether. None of these scenarios would benefit Hong Kong society.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Since the plight of art and immigrant artists in Hong Kong has historical and structural causes, the government must take the lead in path-breaking and social transformations.