Frozen Splinters:

Intergenerational Fractures in the Hong Kong Diaspora

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Much of the emerging literature about the Hong Kong (HK) diaspora perceives it as a homogenous collective, perpetuating “a trope of ethnic solidarity that… [ultimately ignores] the dynamism and internal complexity of migrant communities in a city” (Madokoro, 2011, p. 18). Yet the experiences of many in the HK diaspora are stories of intergenerational differences. The cultural identities of children and parents diverge as they adapt differently in response to the dominant culture (Cheung et al., 2011). Furthermore, Madokoro (2011) suggests that differences in immigration time can cause intergenerational cultural differences in the HK diaspora, as those who migrated away from HK are left behind relative to the rapidly changing culture in HK. Examining Madokoro’s observation through the lens of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory of human development (1977) reveals the importance of an individual’s physical place in cultural identity formation. Intergenerational differences arising from these two factors—age at immigration and time of immigration relative to HK history—can lead to fractures within the HK diaspora. This challenges the popular view of a homogenous diaspora. HK immigrant churches in Vancouver, a microcosm of the diaspora, show such intergenerational cultural fracturing, as reported in the qualitative research of Byassee et al. (2023). To explore the intergenerational fractures in HK-immigrant churches in Vancouver, I interviewed three individuals: Celeste and Estelle, who are sisters, and Dawn (all pseudonyms). All three identify as HK-Canadian. Celeste and Estelle regularly attend a HK-immigrant church, while Dawn regularly attends a multi-ethnic church. In this essay, I analyze their diasporic experiences and contrast their observations of their church communities to consider potential implications for the HK diaspora in general.

All three interviewees described contrasts between their cultural identities and that of their parents which can be attributed to different acculturation experiences. Acculturation is the process of cultural adaptation a group of people makes when encountering a group of a different

culture. Often, it refers to the adaptation of a diasporic community to the mainstream culture. Berry's bidimensional model of acculturation describes four strategies for such adaptation: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization (1992). Assimilation describes the strategy of abandoning the heritage cultural identity and embracing the mainstream cultural identity. Separation describes the converse strategy, where the heritage cultural identity is maintained, and the mainstream cultural identity is rejected. Integration describes an embracing of both the heritage and the mainstream cultural identities, while marginalization describes the alienation of both identities. For HK immigrants to Canada, Cheung et al. (2011) found that the age of an individual at the time of immigration plays a significant role in determining which strategy they adopt. Cheung et al. (2011) show evidence that, if an individual immigrates from HK to Canada between 1 and 15 years of age, they are much more likely to adopt the integration strategy. The same researchers also suggest that, conversely, individuals who immigrate from HK to Canada between 31 and 50 years of age are more likely to adopt the separation strategy. Thus, parents and children who immigrated from HK to Canada at the same time will likely find their cultural identities diverging the longer they stay in Canada. Estelle, who immigrated to Canada at 14 years of age, described her cultural identity this way:

> I feel like I'm in the middle between [a HKer] and [a Canadian]. I'm in between because… I still prefer Cantonese. It's the language I grew up with… so I feel like I will be able to express myself better in that language. . . . But then, after being [in Vancouver] for so many years, I also feel like [Celeste and I] absorbed some of the Canadian culture. . . . We did high school and university here, and a lot of the materials we learned [are] very liberal… which contradicts a lot sometimes with traditional Chinese culture.

Estelle has adopted the integration strategy to acculturation, as Cheung et al. (2011) would predict. She highlighted two key aspects of her cultural identity—language and social values—and how the former aligns with HK culture while the latter aligns with Canadian culture. Celeste and Dawn described their cultural identity in similar ways. When describing their parents, however, all three interviewees used words like "traditional", "Chinese", and "old school", referring to primarily their social values and media preferences. This language suggests that their parents have acculturated using the separation strategy, as Cheung et al. (2011) would also predict. While the tension between parents and children pervades all cultures, diverging cultural identities due to different acculturation strategies after immigration adds another layer to the intergenerational conflict in HK immigrant families. This is another dimension of the "splintered and divergent diasporic life" (Madokoro, 2011, p. 22) and challenges the belief that the HK diaspora is a homogenous group.

The physical place of an individual plays a critical role in the formation of their cultural identity and values (see Bronfenbrenner, 1977; among many others). Thus, the culture of diasporic communities that are physically separated from their heritage country may diverge from the culture of their heritage country over time, even if the diasporic communities reject the mainstream culture of their new place. This divergence is especially pronounced if the heritage country undergoes rapid cultural change. This is the case in the HK diaspora in Canada, which is separated from HK by over ten thousand kilometers, a 15-hour time difference, and a 14-hour flight. HK culture has changed immensely over the last 40 years. In the 1970s and 1980s, many escaping from the political chaos in China to HK strove to disengage from politics, "hunker down, and make money for their families" (UBC Hong Kong Studies Initiative, 2022). In stark contrast to the apolitical culture of the 1970s and 1980s, the HK culture from the 2000s to the

2020s has been very politically engaged. In much of the public consciousness in HK during that time, hunkering down and making money for family no longer sufficed when the future of HK—its stability and freedoms—was at stake. The Occupy Central Movement in 2014 and the anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill protests in 2019 were key socio-historical events that would have contributed greatly to identity development in HK, according to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1977). This theory posits five layers of cultural context surrounding the self, like the layers of an onion. From the innermost (proximal) to the outermost (distal), these layers are the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. An individual's microsystem consists of the people with whom they are in direct contact, like friends and family; their mesosystem encapsulates the interactions between people in their microsystem; their exosystem describes events or people that affect their microsystem; their macrosystem consists of the attitudes, beliefs, and acceptable behaviours of the broader culture around them; and finally, their chronosystem includes socio-historical events around them. Bronfenbrenner then describes how key events, attitudes, and attributes in the outer layers trickle down through the inner layers to the self. Identity development, according to Bronfenbrenner, occurs when connections between these layers are made. The protests and the surrounding attitudes towards political engagement in HK during the 2000-2020s would have been in the chronosystems and macrosystems of both those in HK and those in diasporic communities overseas; however, they would have been far more proximal to the self for those in HK at the time, who were immersed in the sights, sounds, and tangible atmosphere of the protests, than the diasporic communities. Since proximal causes of identity development have greater impact than distal ones, divergence thus emerges between the culture in HK and the culture in the diaspora. It follows that a member of the HK diaspora who left HK in the 1980s and one who remained in HK until the 2020s may

have significant cultural differences and may not necessarily feel solidarity with one another, for "without shared memories, diasporic solidarity is undermined" (Madokoro, 2011).

Both Celeste and Madokoro (2011) observe cultural differences between recent and previous immigrants from HK. Madokoro pointed to aesthetic and social values, not political engagement, as another salient difference between the HK culture of the past and that of today:

> Newer migrants, however permanent or unsettled their time in Vancouver, disrupted diasporic unity as their aesthetic and social values clashed with those of more permanent and settled residents. While the clash was rarely overt among members of the so-called diaspora, its reverberations affected all those identifying with a sense of Chinese community in Vancouver or the global Chinese diaspora. (2011, p. 22)

The clashes of social values that Madokoro described are especially pronounced in long-standing communities of HK immigrants which have welcomed immigrants from HK over the last 40 years, like the church of Celeste and Estelle. Celeste described the Cantonese-speaking congregation at her church as "frozen in time" (her words), saying:

> The culture is definitely closer to Hong Kong culture than Western [culture], but I would say it's like 20 years ago… rather than the current Hong Kong culture. . . . Or not even 20, maybe like, 40 years ago… because that's when most of them immigrated here.

The relationship between the time of immigration and cultural identity is clear to Celeste, who went on to describe aspects of the culture in her church congregation that resemble the HK of 40 years ago: Confucian values including filial piety, conservative views on marriage and sexuality, and desire to remain apolitical (and thus support the status quo). The commitment of the congregation to a 40-year-old HK identity was likely a combination of two factors: the desire to separate, in Berry's terms (1992), from Canadian culture, and the physical distance from HK that

hindered changes in attitudes in the HK macrosystem, in Bronfenbrenner's theory (1977), from trickling down into their sense of self. These two factors explain why, when new immigrants from HK in the 2020s joins a diasporic community formed much before it, there may be significant intergenerational conflict, particularly in the realm of social values and political engagement. Celeste's observations about her church expose potential intergenerational fractures in the HK diaspora in Canada, further dispelling notions of diasporic unity.

A comparison between attitudes toward mental health in the churches of Celeste, Estelle, and Dawn further supports the conclusion that cultural differences lie behind intergenerational conflict in the HK diaspora. Differences in attitudes toward mental health hinder young people from seeking support from their parents. When asked where she goes to receive support during adverse life events, Dawn immediately replied, "not my parents." "Growing up", she said, "my parents never really talked about [mental health]". She explained that "mental health isn't really talked about in Chinese culture", pointing to culture as a salient difference between her and her parents. Estelle shared a similar experience, saying that "growing up, having a mental illness [meant] you're weak." Now that the three interviewees have integrated with Canadian culture, however, they all recognize the importance of discussing mental health and acknowledge the real effects of mental illness on academics and work productivity. This intergenerational dynamic is also present in HK-immigrant communities, like Cantonese-speaking churches. Celeste and Estelle, who attend a HK-immigrant church, described the stigma against mental health in their community. They stated that they would rarely talk about mental well-being with the people of the generation above them and that conflict over attitudes toward mental health caused great discomfort in the young adults and may have contributed to the departure of some from the community. In contrast, Dawn said an older mentor at her multi-ethnic church (60% Caucasian

and 40% ethnically Chinese) helped her through challenges by talking with her about mental well-being. None of the interviewees associated the differences in attitudes towards mental health in their communities to differences in Christian orthodoxy even when directly asked, which supports previous research finding no significant relationship between Christian orthodoxy and mental health stigma (Adams et al., 2019). The contrast between the two churches in view also suggests that the intergenerational conflict over mental health attitudes within the church of Celeste and Estelle does not simply arise out of experience or age differences. Instead, cultural differences are the most likely explanation for this intergenerational conflict. This echoes the discovery of Chen et al. that Chinese cultural orientation predicts stigma against seeking professional mental health support in the HK diaspora in Vancouver (2009). The diasporic experiences of the interviewees demonstrate that the intergenerational conflict over attitudes toward mental health in the HK diaspora arises out of cultural differences.

The analysis of the diasporic experiences of Celeste, Estelle, and Dawn presented here reveals that intergenerational conflict within the HK diaspora may not be simply due to differences in age or experience; rather, there is an added dimension of cultural differences, arising out of different acculturation experiences after immigration and different times of immigration. This sheds more light on the fractured nature of the HK diaspora and unveils the dynamism within the community. It paves the way for a multi-cultural understanding of the HK diaspora and supports the use of multicultural analysis in understanding the complexities of the diasporic life of HK immigrant communities here in Vancouver.

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