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Article abstract

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South Asians in “Asia’s World City”: Post-Colonial Identity Struggles and Artistic Self-Representation in Hong Kong

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Abstract: With the government of Hong Kong having branded the city “Asia’s World City,” it has also proclaimed its commitment to fostering an inclusive society. However, critics question the effectiveness of the government’s policies in this regard, as many South Asians in Hong Kong continue to struggle with their identity due to social issues which have persisted since the beginning of the post-colonial period. Referencing observations shared by interviewees, this article discusses how South Asians engage in community art projects as a much-needed means of self-representation, given the perception of the state’s inadequate inclusion policies and its failure to achieve assimilatory multiculturalism within its institutions. Against this backdrop of perceived policy shortcomings is the emergence of a “dual” Hongkonger identity, which was observed through interviews with minority descendants, and which, it will be argued, is augmented through participation in community art projects. The findings and critical discussion presented in this article contribute significantly to our understanding of the problematic issues surrounding cultural inclusion, as well as the importance of self identity and community empowerment through artistic expression in Hong Kong specifically, and in East Asia more generally.

Keywords: Ethnic minorities, Hong Kong studies, community art, cultural inclusion, postcolonial identity, multiculturalism.

Résumé: Alors que le Gouvernement de Hong Kong a inscrit la ville en tant que « Ville du monde de l’Asie », il a aussi proclamé son engagement pour favoriser une société plus inclusive. Cependant, les critiques ont interrogé l’efficacité des politiques du Gouvernement à cet égard, dans la mesure où de nombreux sud-asiatiques à Hong Kong continuent de revendiquer la reconnaissance de leur identité et de leurs enjeux spécifiques depuis l’avènement de la période post-coloniale. Recensant les observations partagées des personnes interrogées, cet article discute de l’engagement de la communauté sud-asiatique dans des projets d’art communautaire qui sont autant de moyens nécessaires pour assurer une autoreprésentation, compte tenu des politiques d’inclusion inadéquates de l’État et de son incapacité à parvenir à un multiculturalisme assimilatoire au sein de ses institutions. Face à ces lacunes, on assiste à l’émergence d’une double identité hong-kongaise qui a été observée au travers des entretiens avec des descendants des minorités et qui, comme cela sera défendu, se voit renforcé par la participation à des projets artistiques communautaires. Les résultats et les discussions critiques présentés dans cet article contribuent de manière significative à notre compréhension des problématiques entourant l’inclusion culturelle et de l’importance de l’identité personnelle et

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de l'autonomisation communautaire par l'expression artistique, à Hong-Kong en particulier, et en Asie de l'Est en général.

Mots clé: minorités ethniques, études d'Hong-Kong, art communautaire, inclusion culturelle, identité postcoloniale et multiculturalisme.

Introduction

Being an “ethnic minority” in “Asia’s World City”

While the majority of Hong Kong’s population is ethnically Chinese, Hong Kong has been an immigrant society since the time of British colonisation. Today, as Hong Kong’s government proclaims it as “Asia’s World City” (BrandHK, 2019), its population is indeed quite a diverse one. According to the latest available statistics (Population By-census, 2016), ethnic minorities constitute up to 8% (around 584,000 people) of the whole population of Hong Kong.

In contemporary Hong Kong, the term “ethnic minority” often refers to the non-Chinese and non-Caucasian members of the population. As it states on its official website, the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) is committed to fostering an inclusive society. To that end, C.Y. Leung, the former Chief Executive of the SAR Government, included the slogan “Build an Inclusive Society” in his policy address in 2017, and the government implemented various policies to facilitate socio-cultural inclusion of ethnic minorities over the course of a decade. For example, since 2014, the Education Bureau (2019) has been developing a new curriculum for local students who are not ethnically Chinese to learn Chinese as a second language. In 2015, the Employees Retraining Board (2019) also offered 800 openings across dedicated training courses for ethnic minorities to increase their employability.

What has been problematic with these policies, however, is that they attempt to deliver inclusion by means of “assimilation,” (Pakulski, 2014) a social process of homogenisation whereby minorities are forced to shed their differences in favour of imposed norms and to acquire the cultural and civil competences of the majority. In other words, rather than being celebrated, multicultural diversity is slowly eradicated. Furthermore, while many of these policies are intended to improve the lives of a large number of people, marginalised groups with low sociability, such as women, or those with poor learning abilities, such as senior citizens, are neglected in the current policy platform because of longstanding prejudices and other cultural barriers, or the fact that it is difficult to learn new skills in later years. This adds another layer as to how these inclusionary practices are exclusivist by their design.

In addition, although the Race Discrimination Ordinance was established in Hong Kong in 2009 (Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau, 2016), a study conducted by the Equal Opportunities Commission (2016) revealed that non-white ethnic minorities in Hong Kong were the most discriminated against when seeking banking and property services. Nearly half of the respondents in that survey experienced discrimination when obtaining goods and services, with such experiences

diminishing their desire to communicate with local Chinese people. This is particularly the case for South Asians (e.g. Pakistani, Nepalese), as researchers have shown (Crabtree and Wong, 2013).

Feeding this discrimination is the frequent demonisation of South Asians by local Chinese media. A number of local news outlets and publications have described South Asians as criminals and a burden on the government. Very often, members of ethnic minorities have been improperly described as belonging to “South Asian Gangs,” as “Bogus Refugees” and as “South Asian illegal workers” in media reports. While the use of such labels creates a highly problematic and unjust stereotype of these communities in the minds of members of the majority Chinese population, it also suggests many Hong Kong people have little understanding of “ethnic minorities,” not only in terms of their cultural differences, but also, and more importantly, in relation to the history of Hong Kong which they share.

To this point, Louis, who is a social worker and who has served South Asians in the “Hong Kong Community Centre” for eight years, said: “[O]ur society always uses ethnic minority as an umbrella term, but fails to understand that there are strong culture differences among different South Asian groups.”¹

As will be explained in the next section, many South Asian communities find themselves marginalised in post-colonial Hong Kong. As citizens, they often experience a double identity struggle due to the government’s assimilatory practices which have failed to preserve their cultural identity, as well as discrimination by native Chinese members of their local communities in everyday life.

Against this background and by employing ethnographic observations and interviews, the findings presented in this article illuminate (1) how marginalised South Asians effectively represent themselves in community art projects in Hong Kong, and (2) how their participation in community art projects empowers them and shapes their identities. The research presented here provides new insights not only into the development of a multicultural society in Hong Kong, but also how participation in community art projects can contribute to cultural inclusion in the daily lives of the participants themselves.

South Asians and their colonial past

Most South Asians residing in Hong Kong find themselves there due to the historical and social legacy of the colonial period (see Erni and Leung, 2014; Nagy, 2014). During the colonial period, many South Asians in Hong Kong who worked as traders, served as prison guards, policemen and members of the occupying British military force until the British relinquished sovereignty of the territory to the Chinese in 1997. Indian and Nepalese servicemen and women were more trusted by the British than their Chinese counterparts and were also perceived by the British as both brave and loyal fighters (Plüss, 2005). This helped them attain higher positions and higher salaries while serving in the British Armed Forces (Ho and Chu, 2012, p. 41 & 46).

Due to the intentional separation of South Asians and the native Chinese population by the colonial government, the special social role of the South Asians in the occupying force, and the

cultural differences between South Asians and the native Chinese population, there was little interaction between the two communities in Hong Kong at that time. It is no exaggeration to say that Chinese people generally felt intimidated by South Asians because they were associated with British policing of the territory (Plüss, 2005). While there were already clear instances of prejudice and discrimination against the Chinese in the colonial government hierarchy, there were also cases of South Asians being favoured over their Chinese counterparts for promotion to senior positions (Gurkhas in Hong Kong, 2018). Their low level of proficiency in the Chinese language did not prevent them from being included in the colonial government's administrative structure.

After the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, the socio-political identity of ethnic minorities changed in tandem with the political environment. Administration of the territory was gradually localised, and British government officials were replaced by individuals drawn from the local Chinese population. Due to their limited command of the Chinese language, South Asians were regarded as less valuable to native Chinese administrators than they had been by their British predecessors. South Asians who were part of the British administrative system or the British Armed Forces in Hong Kong (particularly the Gurkhas and Sikhs, who had a long history and prestigious role in the military) could now only find low-skilled jobs. Many became security guards, restaurant waiters, construction workers, or taxi drivers (see O'Conner, 2019).

Moreover, the anti-British and pro-China propaganda pushed by both the Hong Kong SAR Government and Chinese elites after the Handover further marginalised South Asians in Hong Kong society, as they were viewed as part of its colonial past—a past that the SAR Government now wanted to erase. Along with erasing this past to reinforce China's sovereignty over Hong Kong, this approach also removed from public memory the communal and personal histories of a large number of people who found themselves in the city because of the historical and structural conditions created by its colonial past.

In addition, amid the rise in global terrorism, islamophobia, and right-wing political groups in Hong Kong (South China Morning Post, 2017), cultural inclusion and multiculturalism became frequent targets of criticism for their perceived lack of sustainability and their lack of desirability among lawmakers (Legislative council, 2016). One consequence of this development was that some political leaders became more hostile toward and openly critical of South Asians. For example, lawmaker Fernando Cheung, who speaks up for South Asians in Hong Kong in the public arena, was ridiculed as the "father of refugees" (Apple Daily, 2016).

To illustrate this point, Jack, a political organiser campaigning for ethnic minorities in Hong Kong, told me the following:

There are about 40,000 Nepalese citizens in Hong Kong who are permanent residents, and you cannot find a single one whose ancestors did not serve, or who is not related to someone who served in the British Armed Forces. The hostility (seeing South Asians as refugees) nowadays shows that Hong Kong people lack a sense of history.

How far is Hong Kong from being a multicultural city?

The term “multiculturalism” is understood and applied in vastly different ways and in vastly different socio-political contexts (Nagy, 2014). The conception of multiculturalism that I will adopt for the purposes of this article is advocated by the Australian Ethnic Affairs Council (1977), which is a political ideology that aims to promote social inclusion as the process of societal change, and social cohesion as its societal outcome. According to this conceptual framework, those in charge of governing a multicultural city should ensure its residents’ freedom to choose and maintain their own cultural identity as enabling a sense of belonging and attachment to a particular way of living. The Council also states that it is equally important to impose the obligations of social duty: to be responsible for, commit to, and participate in communal endeavours and the preservation of community values. As has been previously shown, the policy toward ethnic minorities in Hong Kong is based mainly on assimilation, which sociologist Jan Pakulski (2014) has recently criticised as “the major rival of multiculturalism.” Following Pakulski, I argue that Hong Kong is far from being a multicultural city for two main reasons.

According to my interviewees, while ethnic minorities represent about 8% of the total population in Hong Kong, the city lacks government-initiated cultural services for them, such as museums and public libraries for the preservation and promotion of ethnic minority literature. Consequently, the interviewees reported that they found it difficult to sustain and pass on their traditional culture to younger members of their communities. This indicates that the Hong Kong SAR Government remains unaware of their cultural needs and has failed to support minority ethnic communities (South Asians especially) in their efforts to sustain their own traditional cultures. Samantha, who is a Hindu living in Hong Kong, touched exactly on this point when I spoke to her:

Hindus in Hong Kong prefer not to go to Hindu temples here. Because space is limited in Hong Kong, Hindu temples are mostly installed inside commercial buildings, where many rituals cannot be performed. You can’t have fire inside commercial buildings even for ritual purposes due to fire regulations, and you need a large quantity of milk (and therefore food safety and hygiene licences). Although they [Hindus] have been in Hong Kong for many years and are westernised, they don’t agree with this. They prefer to worship at home.

The SAR Government has also failed to fulfil its social obligations towards ethnic minorities. In general, there is a low level of community involvement among South Asians, which is reflected in a very low voter registration rate (Census and Statistics Department, 2015, p. xvii) and their indifference to local news (Erni & Leung 2014, p. 68). While there are currently nine government-subsidised support centres for ethnic minorities in Hong Kong, when members of ethnic minorities were asked about their use of these services, many South Asians said that they were not aware of them (Census and Statistics Department, 2015, p. xvii). My interviewees also reported that they doubted the effectiveness of these measures aimed at enhancing the city’s level of social inclusion. Andy, who is a 21-year-old Nepalese student, told me:

Nobody speaks for us, we have no voice (in society) ... It is not only because of the language barrier. It is the attitude [of the majority], it is the perception of us [the Nepalese community] as a social problem that needs to be dealt with.

Scholars have indeed argued the government's measures to enhance social inclusion in Hong Kong through institutionalised assimilatory multiculturalism are ineffective and have had long-lasting, negative practical implications on the agency and daily life of ethnic minorities in the city (Ku, 2006). The way in which members of marginalised ethnic minorities have sought to compensate for this state-level ineffectiveness through participation in community art projects as an alternative means of self-representation and of exercising their own agency is an area where much research remains to be done, and which is the focus of the research presented here.

Research Design

Previous studies on the use of art as a means of enabling cultural assimilation have often employed quantitative approaches and have focused on the consumption of community art or its impact on economic development initiatives (e.g. Matarasso, 1997; Williams, 1997; Goodlad, Hamilton & Taylor, 2002). Consequently, many of these studies do not consider the daily lives and individual experiences of the people engaging in these art projects. This is especially the case when it comes to community art in Hong Kong, about which there is little research.

For these reasons, I adopted an ethnographic approach, spending eight months visiting different community art spaces in Hong Kong. My fieldwork included ethnographic observations in the area of North Kwai Chung (sometimes referred to as the "Pakistani village" by local media) in order to gain insights into how members of marginalised ethnic minorities participate in community art within the area where they live and work. The aim was to get a bottom-up perspective on what participation in community art projects means to people on an everyday basis and how it relates to the larger discourses of inclusion in post-colonial Hong Kong. I also conducted eleven in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the staff members and participants in community art events. The interviews lasted around one hour each, and we discussed their experiences, feelings and opinions on participating in community art projects, based on four key themes:

- i. Participation, audience, and representation: What kinds of art do South Asians in the community engage in? Do South Asians in the community think that community art events are welcoming of culturally diverse audiences? To what extent can South Asians exercise agency and express their own cultural identity by means of such events?

- ii. Customised engagement: Do community art spaces provide a different level of engagement for participants of diverse backgrounds? Do South Asians react and use these spaces differently to both local people and members of other ethnic minorities?
- iii. Reciprocal empowerment: Do community art spaces provide an environment in which audiences can learn about the artistic practices and aesthetic values of South Asians, such that the culture of South Asian ethnic minorities can be better appreciated and South Asians can also seek to engage with the local culture of audience members more easily?
- iv. Self-development: Does engagement in community art projects and interaction with the local artistic community help South Asians express and concretise their existential uncertainties and anxieties? Can South Asians' participation in community art projects help them in their efforts toward self-expression and self-actualisation?

After the interviews, I had follow-up discussions with the interviewees about their family and their life in Hong Kong more generally, in order to collect stories related to their home country, family background, religious beliefs, and level of education. I also revisited the themes that emerged over the course of the research. The information gathered from this process is particularly useful in understanding the identity struggles which South Asians in Hong Kong have on a daily basis.

South Asians, community art and cultural inclusion

The identity struggle of “true Hongkongers”

One of the ethnographic observations for this research was conducted at the South Asian Art Festival, organised by the local district council and a local community art organisation, called “Art for All.” The festival organiser, Dennis, spoke to me when he was giving me a tour of the venue for the event. According to Dennis, “Hong Kong people often make the mistake of thinking that ethnic minorities cannot appreciate art just because they [the Chinese locals] think South Asians are low-educated.”

Over the course of my research, I found that many South Asians in Hong Kong are indeed interested in art. However, I also noticed that the forms and styles of South Asian art differs from local Chinese art, and that the artistic tastes of South Asians were different from those of the local Chinese population. For example, while music, painting and theatre are common art forms in Hong Kong, most of my South Asian interviewees preferred handicrafts. During the festival, when I asked the workshop instructors which types of art are most representative of their cultural identity, Selina (a Pakistani, artist) made the following remarks:

Because of the poor living conditions in Pakistan, the women learned to make their own mat at home and developed unique skills in mat making. The way we recycle

and tailor old dresses is a beautiful art in Pakistan. Handmade mats, arm bracelets and Mehndi (a decorative pattern painted on a woman's hand or body) express and represent the culture of Pakistani women the most. Besides handmade mats and arm bracelets, other forms of handicraft are very rare in Hong Kong.

Silvia, a Nepalese folk dance teacher, gave a similar response:

The most representative forms of art in my country are folk dance, Madal (a traditional Nepalese music instrument) and Lokta paper (a Nepalese handmade paper made from the Lokta plant), because Madal and Lokta paper are only made in Nepal.

Both Selina and Silvia agreed that it is meaningful for them to maintain their home culture in Hong Kong because they believed that doing so is being "true to their identity." With this in mind, Silvia performs a Nepalese folk dance and wears a traditional Nepalese costume during the event, while Samantha wears a female Pakistani bracelet every day.

These practices in fact create a kind of hybrid identity, whereby Selina identifies herself as a "Nepalese-Hongkonger," and Silvia a "Pakistani-Hongkonger." While in their own local communities, both women consider themselves "Hongkongers" since they have been living in Hong Kong for decades. Having said that, they also expressed their belief that the Chinese majority still sees them as Nepalese and Pakistani individuals due to their physical appearance and attire. Indeed, while they said they have a hybrid or composite identity, they thought that I would regard them in a similar manner. To this point, Selina said:

My ancestors are from Pakistan but this is the 3rd generation of our family living here now, so I can say I am a Hongkonger as well. Even if I say I love Hong Kong, it is not that easy in reality. I think you [the interviewer] will also write in your article that "a Pakistani artist" said this to you, right?

In our discussion, they expressed their shared belief that generally the Chinese majority in Hong Kong has a narrow understanding of South Asians and is also reluctant to accept them. According to Selina and Silvia, many people in Hong Kong do not have opportunities for exposure to the arts and culture of ethnic minorities, and as a result, South Asians are often misunderstood and culturally excluded from society. This is also an important factor behind the identity struggles of South Asians in Hong Kong in the postcolonial period, because they don't feel accepted by the majority of ethnically Chinese Hongkongers.

Nevertheless, as we have seen, despite these unfavourable circumstances and the fact that the government's policies have failed to take care of their cultural needs, a hybrid or composite "Hongkonger" identity is being embraced by members of ethnic minorities in the city. In the two indicative cases we looked at, this occurred only by virtue of the acceptance of ethnic minorities on the part of ethnically Chinese people in Hong Kong on an everyday level.

Community art, empowerment and representation of identity

Besides serving to maintain their ancestral culture, participating in community art projects also brings empowerment to South Asians in Hong Kong in many ways. Before she headed for her class, I interviewed Samantha, a Kathak dancer (Kathak being a traditional Indian dance). Samantha said:

At first, I was attracted by the beautiful clothes that people wear in Indian dance. Women love colourful dress and wearing jewellery. These things are superficial, but after years of practicing traditional dance, I now also understand the history and stories behind [Kathak]. Traditional Indian dance was often related to religion, as an expression of our respect to the “Mother Goddess.” Before we start (the dancing class), we have some rituals to tell the “Mother Goddess” that we will use her space to dance. Now whenever I perform, I talk to her. I believe it is important.

For those like Samantha, community art offers the chance to attain greater social mobility by developing art-related careers. She also believes these activities reinforce her cultural identity and strengthen her bond with the traditional dance community in Hong Kong and in India. Finally, her dance class provides opportunities for local participants (in this case, Chinese women) to interact with South Asian members, which assist in cultivating a mutual understanding between the two communities.

Andy, who is a Nepalese musician, also experienced a similar process of empowerment, saying:

Before, I was in my comfort zone, the bubble of my own environment. With music I need to get out of my bubble, so I made more local friends and became friends with different kinds of people. I meet people in different music groups... There are a lot of things music can give you.

Other than helping South Asian artists in Hong Kong develop social networks and gain recognition, some community art spaces allow South Asians to express their political convictions so they can exercise greater agency in the wider community. The “3 mins story” exhibition, organised by “Multi-artwork,” gave South Asians the opportunity to showcase several three-minute short movies pertaining to their experiences of living in Hong Kong. One of these movies recounted the experience of a Nepalese woman receiving discriminatory treatment from her landlord. Art events like the movie exhibition just mentioned give South Asians a platform to discuss issues which directly affect them in Hong Kong from their own perspective, bypassing local media and biased discourse.

Cultural conflicts in community art spaces

While community art spaces provide many benefits to members of ethnic minorities in Hong Kong, the research also shed light on cultural conflict and ostracism between South Asians and the native Chinese public in those same artistic spaces. For example, while the folk dance workshop held in the

“Minority Art Exchange” was very popular among Nepalese women, very few local Chinese people attended. My interviewees (Dennis & Louis) explained to me that if local Chinese people believe they will be outnumbered in a social space, they may feel “uncomfortable” and be discouraged by others in their community from attending. As such, spaces intended for cultural exchange may also suffer from conflict and ostracism when seeking to bring participants from different cultures and ethnicities together in their programmes. This is particularly the case in Hong Kong, because most people, including both Chinese and South Asians, have not personally witnessed instances of positive cultural exchange and mutual cultural edification.

As indicated above, because the Chinese population of Hong Kong has enjoyed cultural homogeneity, when they experience a situation in which they become the cultural minority, they tend to retreat from it. Dennis, an ethnically Chinese, project manager of “Art for All” agreed, saying:

Once we organised an exhibition for a Nepalese painter. It turned out... that lots of his friends and relatives kept coming to visit him. He didn't know he had so many relatives, but they all shared the same family name “Rai.” Needless to say the Chinese people who wanted to come to the exhibition felt intimidated by the number of Nepalese people there. Even Caucasians (who are perceived to be more culturally open) seemed to be intimidated.

It is mainly for this reason that organisers of art-related events in Hong Kong prefer to separate South Asian and local Chinese attendees by putting them in different classes, so the participants can stay in their comfortable “cultural bubble.” In so doing, community art spaces are sometimes guilty of institutionally segregating Hong Kong society based on ethnicity. While the aim of many of these institutions was responding to prejudices and cultural barriers already present among participants in community art projects (as well as society as a whole), they faced practical challenges in terms of balancing their commitment to make Hong Kong more culturally inclusive while reflecting the demands of participants, whose attendance they depended upon for their own survival.

Nevertheless, such deliberate separation of culturally diverse participants does not, in fact, violate multicultural principles, and the community art spaces I visited have demonstrated the benefits it affords to the health and cultural preservation of ethno-specific communities which undeniably exist in Hong Kong. This is because it “aid[s] social integration by becoming important intermediate structures for social attachment and nourishing a sense of belonging” (Pakulski, 2014). Having said that, the practice has reduced the number of opportunities for cultural exchange between participants.

To clarify, I am not suggesting that such separation means community art spaces have failed to foster cultural inclusion. Rather, by referring to these cases, I hope to highlight the complexity and difficulty involved in promoting cultural inclusion by organising and participating in community art events. The implication is that such social process can only be achieved gradually, and consists of more than putting people of different cultures and ethnicities in the same social space.

After all, who wants to be culturally included?

I undertook this research at a time of growing criticism and challenge to cultural diversity in Hong Kong in political discourse (Manson, 2017). In the preceding pages, I have discussed how community art spaces can contribute to greater cultural inclusion in Hong Kong society. However, there is one factor which I have not yet touched on, and this is the role which ethnic identity plays in such cultural inclusion. To my surprise, I found over the course of my research there are many South Asians in Hong Kong who have little desire to be culturally included in wider society. Andy, the Nepalese musician already mentioned above, made these remarks:

I can't speak for all the generations in my community as I have never been in their shoes... but quite a lot of them are being quite passive. In my generation [the post-colonial Nepalese youth in Hong Kong], there are still a lot of people being passive. I think they prefer to work in an environment where there are more Nepalese rather than Chinese people.

As my interviewees told me, some South Asians only see Hong Kong as a temporary place for work, or they know that they will go back to their home country for marriage in the future, which gives them little incentive to connect with the local community. Speaking from his own experience, Dennis also shared his thoughts on this issue:

Last time, we wanted to invite them [South Asians] to our community music programme, and we just wanted to talk to them, but they didn't appear to be friendly. Maybe it is because they had never encountered friendly local Chinese people.

Drawing from her years of experience of managing community art spaces, Louis also explained to me:

Because of the religious and cultural differences, many South Asians do not have a chance to come across local Chinese in their daily life. Many of them [South Asians] have already established a strong network among their own minority community in Hong Kong. They can handle their daily survival needs without being integrated into the Chinese community.

Discussions

The role community art spaces plays in cultural inclusion

Based on my research findings, it seems reasonable to posit that community art spaces have played an essential role in facilitating greater cultural inclusion in Hong Kong. Firstly, such community art spaces provide South Asians who are marginalised in society an outlet for creative participation and

constructive engagement with the wider community in which they live. According to my interviewees, while community art centres such as the “Minority Art Exchange” and the “Centre for Islamic Friends” have provided material incentives (food, beverages, art materials, etc.) to encourage artists to share their work and participate in the community, attendees of their events have also benefited by being able to learn about other cultures. Furthermore, community art spaces provide a platform to “localise” minority art in Hong Kong. For instance, the “Minority Art Exchange” used the patterns of Henna painting (a temporary body painting using a dye prepared from the henna tree) for bookmarks and other household products sold in Hong Kong. As well, according to Richard, a Pakistani cultural event organiser, the “Centre for Islamic Friends” provided Halal food to local Chinese participants of the cultural tour, and had to “modify the recipe to match their [Chinese people’s] taste.”

In my research, I also found that community art spaces provided a stage (literally and metaphorically) for South Asians to introduce themselves and present their native culture to the local community. These community centres, such as “Art for All,” have a well-established theatre network and even their own exhibition rooms. When South Asians perform in these spaces, their audiences usually exhibit a higher sense of cultural awareness, possibly because they already had an interest in the arts of particular ethnic minorities before going to the event. It is therefore unsurprising that the feedback from such audience members is generally positive and supportive of the efforts of ethnic minorities in Hong Kong to cultivate cultural dialogue. This was especially noticeable when the guests were invited by the organisers. In such cases, community art centres helped to provide positive experiences for artists from ethnic minorities to encourage them in their broader, societal endeavours. Indeed I found the atmosphere of these spaces to be usually positive, encouraging, respectful and fostered constructive culture exchanges.

Ethnic minority art and the “minority gaze”

As previously mentioned, accepting a different culture as a positive force in society may be difficult for the Chinese majority in Hong Kong because of the cultural and social position they enjoy. While I found that community art organisers do listen to their South Asian instructors in designing their art programmes, not all the suggestions the latter propose are endorsed and acted upon. Silvia spoke about her personal experience in this regard:

I was a famous singer when I was young, singing in Nepalese. But I can’t organise a singing class here. On top of the language barrier, the skills that I used in singing before are totally different with those of local [Chinese] singers. Not many people came to my singing workshop here, so I decided to become a folk dance teacher instead.

Silva’s experience suggests there are a limited number of art forms that will be accepted by the local Chinese community. As illustrated in this case, while the Chinese majority were more open to Nepalese folk dance, they did not show much interest in Nepalese singing. This phenomenon can

be explained by what Mastro and Stern (2003) called a “minority gaze,” a myopic and highly selective approach on the part of the majority, by which they understand ethnic minorities. Mastro and Stern first introduced this idea in an analysis of racial representation in television commercials, where they argued that television commercials provide a limited presentation and understanding of an ethnic minority. Likewise, my research found that community art events in Hong Kong are also limited in their presentation and understanding of South Asian culture. In this case, the “minority gaze” of the Chinese majority filters out alien or challenging art forms in favour of art forms more readily comprehensible.

Similarly, in cultural spaces such as the “Minority Art Exchange,” Pakistani art was mostly presented in the form of Henna—the most popular kind of art of ethnic minorities in Hong Kong. But the arts Selina believed to be most representative of Pakistani women were not included in their events. Given that organisers are understandably concerned with the best use of their resources, they often focus on specific forms of art as a predictable way to attract people to their events and meet their expectations. In this way, by relying upon certain art forms, some community art spaces may be inadvertently contributing to a narrow representation of South Asians, which actually runs counter to their aim of building of a more culturally inclusive society.

Rethinking multiculturalism in Hong Kong

In the past, advocates for a multicultural society provided ethnic minorities with greater social resources for resolving societal conflicts and cultivating social harmony, but they also neglected the process of social inclusion (Hoon, 2006). In this way, the role played by community art spaces to help people from ethnic minorities find a stronger voice in society has been neglected by scholars. This is due in part, to changes in the socio-political landscape of Hong Kong. As previously mentioned, there have been many challenges including from the political right-wing, various racial conflicts, and the claim by local media of a “bogus refugee” crisis in Hong Kong, all of which has resulted in a call to retreat from multiculturalism in Hong Kong society. Furthermore, critics would often associate multiculturalism with social segregation, recession and terrorism.

In recent years, there has been growing support in policy forums and states around the world for a pragmatic version of multiculturalism known as “social integrationism,” which, broadly stated, encourages people to express their own identity within a common framework of rights and responsibilities for the sake of social cohesion (Home Office, 2004, p.6). Here I do not suggest that cultural inclusion should mean or lead to the assimilation of ethnic minorities into the local Chinese culture or the consequent loss of the original identity of ethnic minorities. Rather, I suggest that Hong Kong society should provide more opportunities to members of ethnic minorities to share their native culture and encourage their participation in wider society. I suggest that community art spaces can be important social platforms for members of ethnic minorities to do this. Over the course of eight months, through participating in and observing community art projects which include ethnic minorities, I can see how the cultures of such ethnic minorities were valued and

preserved in the local community, and how participants were brought together by common interests and concerns.

With regard to the political environment in which principles of multiculturalism are applied or challenged, I believe the notion of “multiculturalism” should, in fact be considered as a “social contract” (Australian Human Rights Commissions, 2014). While the majority ensures the preservation of cultural identities and their diversity through the instruments of meta-institutions such as the constitution, law, or (ideally) the democratic system, minorities should commit to their social obligations as a civic duty. This includes respecting such principles as human rights, freedom of speech and religion, and gender equality. Multiculturalism should also encompass cultural inclusion as a way of empowering marginalised groups to overcome the negative ways they are portrayed in society, and also cultivate in them the social values of the majority.

Based on these principles underlining the social integrationist model of multiculturalism, I contend that the SAR Government should support and promote cultural events organised by ethnic minorities in Hong Kong by allocating public resources and spaces for community centres (such as a library for South Asians), and recognise the cultural differences between South Asian and the native Chinese community. The government not only needs to provide for the economic needs of ethnic minorities, but must also maintain their cultural well-being. Hong Kong society should celebrate diverse cultures and beliefs, and provide more opportunities for its South Asian members.

Concluding remarks

Advocates of multiculturalism must understand that cultural inclusion is a process rather than an ideal achieved through institutional means alone. Furthermore, in order to satisfy the objections of critics and cultural traditionalists, they must also understand and be able to articulate how this process will improve social cohesion. To that end, this study has examined how community art spaces contribute to cultural inclusion and the practical complexities involved. The research focussed on Nepalese and Pakistani communities in particular due to their unique experience of the socio-political changes in Hong Kong from its colonial to post-colonial transition. I suggest more research on other ethnic minorities can and should be conducted in the future, to provide much-needed insight into the socio-political challenges and achievements of a wider range of ethnicities in Hong Kong.

Finally, in conducting the research for this study, I found that a dual or hybrid Hongkonger identity has emerged among some younger members of ethnic minorities in Hong Kong. This indicates that rather than provide top-down political solutions to problems of social inclusion, Hong Kong society should target the local, community level, since that is where the process of inclusion truly takes place and has the greatest positive impact on the daily lives of its citizens. Like other multicultural societies around the world, I am convinced that by helping Hong Kong become more inclusive, members of its ethnic minorities can contribute the type of unique wisdom and knowledge Hong Kong needs to flourish.

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Declaration of interest statement

I declare there is no conflict of interest.

¹In this article, pseudonyms for both interviewees and community art centres are used in order to protect their privacy.

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