

VANISHING SELVES UNDER HONG KONG'S UNIFIED SCREENING MECHANISM." CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN CHINA

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Key implications

- Non-refoulement claimants in Hong Kong find themselves in protracted status determination situations, consequential for their wellbeing and their sense of self.
- Status determination situations amount to total institutional arrangements conducive to mortification of selfhood for non-refoulement claimants.
- While informal means to become part of community and pursue wellbeing are employed by protection claimants in Hong Kong, no official or institutional resorts are available to this end.



Background

This article stems from a broader research project on the lives of non-refoulement claimants in Hong Kong. The project aimed to understand the experiences of non-refoulement claimants (which include asylum seekers, mandated refugees, torture claimants) in protracted status-determination situations, as well as the impact of restrictive policy (low claim substantiation rates, long determination periods, legally barred from taking employment) and limited welfare provisions on the experiences of this migrant population in the city. The project sought to make sense of non-refoulement claimants' status and position within the city, their relationship to the broader community, their support networks, as well as the challenges and difficulties that they may face on an everyday basis.

Research methods

31 in-depth interviews with non-refoulement claimants (n=25) and NGO practitioners (n=6) were conducted between March – December 2016. Additionally, participant and non-participant observation within the community, attending church meetings and activities as well as review of legal and documentary evidence completed authors' understanding of the experiences of asylum seekers waiting for status determination in Hong Kong. All interviews were audio-recorded and integrally transcribed and subsequently coded into relevant themes.

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Key findings

This article centers experience and selfhood as cultural articulations shaped by the broader social, political, cultural and economic framings and discourses dominant in society at large. Relying on Erving Goffman's concept of total institutions, the key argument presents the status determination process in Hong Kong as a total institutional arrangement that engenders processes of untraining and disculturation leading to mortification of the self. The protracted period of determination coupled with harsh policies restricting the right to work, study and volunteer prevent individuals seeking non-refoulement protection in the city from exercising adult executive competencies, preventing them from tapping into institutional ropes for empowerment. While it also explores the informal ways in which protection claimants seek to empower themselves and to become members of their communities at large, the focus of this article are the official, formal, institutional resorts, or lack thereof, of empowerment and social and cultural integration of non-refoulement claimants. Moreover, the article shows, incumbents' racialized visibility further prevents them from social and cultural integration and from being seen and seeing themselves as fully contributing members of their host society.

Significance and implications

The article contributes insights and further contextualizes extant scholarship and global debates on the criminalization of migration and discrediting of seeking protection from persecution. It unpacks the implications for legal categorization and labelling on the constitution of experience and selfhood as cultural articulations. Moreover, the article emphasizes the role played by official definitions in shaping interactions between incumbents of marginalized categories and their impact into the constitution of trust or suspicion as foundations for social relationships both in everyday life and in institutional encounters with government authorities.

RELATED PUBLICATIONS

Lau, Pui Yan Flora & Iulia Gheorghiu. 2018. "Vanishing Selves under Hong Kong's Unified Screening Mechanism." *Cultural Diversity in China*, Vol. 30, Issue 1: 21-35.

REQUEST FOR MORE DETAILS

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