

# **Social Work Practising Social Justice for the Collective Trauma of the Hong Kong Diaspora Community in Canada**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores how social work can address the collective trauma experienced by members of the Hong Kong diaspora in Canada following their migration in the aftermath of the 2019 protests and the enactment of the National Security Law. For many, migration is not only a search for safety but also a means of resisting political oppression and preserving cultural identity. Drawing on trauma-informed and culturally responsive social work frameworks, the paper argues for an integrated approach that combines advocacy for social justice with community empowerment.

Through a case study of Echo Theatre in Calgary, a cultural organisation, the paper illustrates how community-led initiatives can foster healing, solidarity, and resilience. Echo Theatre's programming, including documentary screenings, cultural events, and dialogue spaces, exemplifies trauma-informed practices that validate the lived experiences of Hongkongers while reinforcing their collective identity.

The discussion is framed by social justice concepts such as human hierarchies, institutionalisation, and non-performativity, highlighting the systemic barriers faced by the diaspora, including precarious immigration status, employment inequities, and mistrust of institutions.

The paper concludes by offering practice-based recommendations for mental health support, culturally sensitive outreach, community engagement, and policy advocacy. Emphasising the value of participatory approaches and solidarity-building, it underscores the vital role of social work in supporting the long-term healing and integration of trauma-affected migrant communities. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on diasporic trauma and highlights the transformative potential of social work in fostering justice, dignity, and belonging.

**Keywords:** Social Work, Social Justice, Collective Trauma, Hong Kong, Diaspora

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## Introduction

The recent migration of Hong Kong residents to Canada has been profoundly influenced by socio-political turmoil, particularly the 2019 protests and the enactment of the National Security Law in 2020 (Creery, 2019; Hung, 2020; Lau, 2021; Ngai, 2024a). These events marked a shift toward heightened repression and eroded freedoms in Hong Kong, pushing many individuals to seek refuge abroad. For many Hongkongers, migration represents not only a pursuit of safety but also an effort to preserve autonomy and cultural identity in the face of political struggles and trauma (Ng, 2020; Pubrick, 2020). Canada, with its historical ties to Hong Kong and reputation for multicultural inclusivity, has become a significant destination for this diaspora. However, the unique experiences of a particular group of these immigrants, those affected by political persecution, civil unrest, or threats of arrest, highlight a shared sense of collective trauma, rooted in forced displacement and cultural dislocation (Government of Canada, 2023; Yan et al., 2023a).

This collective trauma underscores the importance of culturally sensitive and trauma-informed social work practices that acknowledge both the individual and community-level impacts of migration and displacement. Social work has the potential to address these challenges by combining advocacy for social justice with strategies aimed at fostering resilience and community cohesion. By integrating principles of trauma-informed care, cultural competence, and community empowerment, social workers can create spaces where the Hong Kong diaspora feels supported in their adaptation and healing process (Wong & Yan, 2023; Yan et al., 2023b).

This paper argues that supporting trauma-affected members of the Hong Kong diaspora in Canada requires a multidimensional framework that integrates trauma-informed social work and social justice practices. The discussion begins with a literature review of key concepts such as diaspora, trauma, and social justice. It then examines a case study of Echo Theatre in Calgary, a community organisation embodying social justice principles, to illustrate actionable strategies for empowering and healing the Hong Kong diaspora.

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## **Hong Kong diaspora in Canada**

The emergence of the Hong Kong diaspora in Canada is closely tied to the worsening sociopolitical situation in Hong Kong. In 2019, Hong Kong experienced an unprecedented social movement advocating for democracy and social justice, aiming to achieve a more equitable society and a transparent political system (Chiu and Siu, 2022; Lai, 2023; Ngai, 2024b). In response, the Hong Kong government implemented the National Security Law on June 30, 2020, to restore societal stability (Lau, 2021; Lo, 2021; Pubrick, 2020). However, the law has been widely criticised for suppressing dissent, as it led to the imprisonment of pro-democracy activists and political representatives (Lai, 2023; Ngai, 2024a, 2024b). Many in Hong Kong perceived these actions as an assault on civil rights, further restricting freedoms and stifling public expression (Hung, 2020; Ng, 2020). The resulting sociopolitical climate triggered a significant wave of emigration, with many Hongkongers immigrating to countries like the United Kingdom and Canada (Yan et al., 2023a; Yue, 2023).

Canada's longstanding historical and economic ties with Hong Kong positioned it as a key destination for this wave of migration. Due to the lack of clarity in the National Security Law and its implications for repressing human rights and freedoms, Canada expressed deep concerns over Hong Kong's declining political and civil rights (Government of Canada, 2023). In response, Canada introduced specialised immigration pathways in early 2021, including Stream A for in-Canada graduates and Stream B for those with Canadian work experience, specifically designed to accommodate Hong Kong residents (Government of Canada, 2024). By 2023, approximately 33,000 Hongkongers had arrived in Canada under these pathways (Yan et al., 2023a).

The Hong Kong diaspora in Canada, like other diaspora communities, faces dual challenges: integrating into their new environment while preserving their cultural identity and emotional connection to their homeland. This community is characterised by a deep-rooted cultural identity, encompassing the Cantonese language, traditional values, and a history of political

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autonomy (Wong & Yan, 2023). Scholars in diaspora studies emphasise that historical and political experiences profoundly shape the collective identity of immigrant communities (Aydin, 2017). For the Hong Kong diaspora, migration under duress, particularly amid political conflict, amplifies the emotional and psychological toll of displacement.

Understanding the Hong Kong diaspora requires an appreciation of how collective memories, values, and political stances influence their integration process. The community's resilience is shaped by its experiences of colonial history, economic independence, and political resistance, which also inform its collective memory and social cohesion. Literature on diaspora studies highlights the critical role of cultural practices, language preservation, and shared spaces in maintaining collective identities in host countries. For the Hong Kong diaspora in Canada, these elements serve not only as a means of cultural preservation but also as a form of resistance against erasure and marginalisation.

This dynamic underscores the need for culturally sensitive and empowering social work practices. Social workers must recognise that for many Hongkongers, migration represents not just a practical necessity but a profound act of resistance to oppressive systems. Addressing the unique challenges faced by this community involves creating spaces that honour their collective identity and promote resilience, ensuring their voices are heard and their experiences respected.

## **Understanding Collective Trauma**

For the Hong Kong diaspora in Canada, collective trauma stems from a succession of politically charged experiences, including the 2019 civil protests, police repression, and the implementation of the National Security Law. These events have been widely perceived as an infringement on democratic freedoms and autonomy (Chan, 2024; Chiu and Siu, 2022; Kwan, 2023; Lai, 2023; Ngai, 2024a). These events have created a shared sense of trauma that is not just individual but also profoundly communal, as each member of the diaspora is connected through a web of experiences involving fear, loss, and the perceived or real threat of

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persecution (Chan, 2024; Chang, et al., 2021). Manifestations of this collective trauma include heightened anxiety, struggles with identity, and pervasive mistrust of authority figures, which often affect interactions with social services and local institutions (Chan, 2024; Yan et al., 2023b).

Collective trauma refers to the emotional, psychological, and social impacts of traumatic events on an entire community, rather than individuals alone (Abrutyn, 2023; Erikson, 1991). It arises when a group is exposed to an overwhelming event—or a series of events—that disrupts bonds, trust, and the cohesion needed for stability and resilience (Erikson, 1991; Herman, 1992, 1998). Marked by feelings of loss, disorientation, and vulnerability, collective trauma can persist across generations, reshaping the social dynamics and shared identity of the affected community (Abrutyn, 2023; Chan, 2024). Harris (2022) has observed that collective trauma can fracture group identities and challenge collective resilience, affecting both how individuals view themselves and how they interact within their communities.

Understanding the collective trauma of the Hong Kong diaspora requires an exploration of the coping mechanisms and resilience strategies developed in response (Herman, 1992, 1998; Reimann & König, 2017). The Hong Kong diaspora has developed a strong collective identity grounded in cultural pride, shared heritage, and, in many cases, activism (Wong & Yan, 2023; Yan et al., 2023a). Shared spaces, cultural events, and digital platforms enable members to remain connected despite physical distance, fostering a sense of solidarity and mutual support (Yue, 2023). Furthermore, for some in the diaspora, this trauma has stimulated a new wave of civic engagement, both within Canada and globally, with members participating in activism, advocacy for human rights, and political discourse (Lee & Fong, 2023; Lee et al., 2024; Yan et al., 2023a; Yue, 2023). This engagement serves as both a coping strategy and a way to collectively process trauma by reaffirming core values and finding strength in unity.

For the Hong Kong diaspora, collective trauma encompasses more than immediate emotional distress and also includes a disruption in one's sense of stable cultural identity and belonging, uncertainty about future stability, and a deep-seated mistrust toward authority figures. To

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advance social justice in Canada, social workers must address the injustices experienced by this group both prior to migration (e.g., political persecution) and after resettlement (e.g., institutional barriers, exclusion from services). Social workers must acknowledge the unique lived experiences of the diaspora, creating interventions that build trust and foster empowerment. This involves providing culturally sensitive mental health support, developing trauma-informed services, and recognising the community's strengths in cultural preservation and activism. By doing so, social workers can contribute to healing and help the Hong Kong diaspora navigate their journey of resilience and rebuilding.

### **Case Studies – Echo Theatre in Calgary**

Examining case studies of successful interventions can illuminate how social work practices can effectively address the collective trauma experienced by the Hong Kong diaspora in Canada. By reflecting on past successes, social workers can identify and adapt strategies to meet the unique needs of Hongkongers navigating the challenges of migration and displacement. Echo Theatre in Calgary offers a compelling example of how cultural initiatives can serve as tools for healing and empowerment within diaspora communities (Echo Theatre, n.d.).

Echo Theatre, a cultural association founded by a social worker, is dedicated to promoting Hong Kong culture and fostering social inclusion (Brenden, 2023; Echo Theatre, n.d.; Simon, 2023). According to the 2021 Census, Calgary is home to approximately 10,775 people of Hong Kong origin (Statistics Canada, 2023). Originally, Echo Theatre focused on performing arts and drama tailored to the local Hong Kong community (Simon, 2023). However, as the sociopolitical situation in Hong Kong deteriorated, a significant influx of Hongkongers immigrated to Calgary. Alberta's relatively affordable living costs made it an increasingly attractive destination. In response to this demographic and contextual shift, Echo Theatre expanded its activities to include community screenings of documentaries such as *Revolution of Our Times* and *Inside the Red Brick Wall*, which document the 2019 Hong Kong protests and police responses. These screenings were held in rented community centres and small local theatres, often followed by facilitated group discussions. Participants were invited to share

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personal stories in a safe, nonjudgmental environment, creating opportunities for collective processing and solidarity. These screenings provided a platform for shared storytelling and dialogue, offering a space for Hongkongers to confront their pain and trauma collectively (Echo Theatre, n.d.).

This shift demonstrates a trauma-informed approach in the organisation's efforts to create safe and inclusive spaces (Echo Theatre, n.d.). Key principles of trauma-informed care, such as safety, peer support, and empowerment, are embedded in these initiatives (Reeves, 2015). The community screenings allow members of the diaspora to gather in an environment where they can openly share their experiences, process emotions, and build mutual support networks (Simon, 2023). For the Hong Kong diaspora, such events function as communal healing spaces that reinforce cultural identity while equipping participants with tools to cope with trauma. These gatherings exemplify social work's commitment to social justice by addressing systemic displacement and fostering community resilience.

Another noteworthy initiative by Echo Theatre is the annual Hong Kong Cultural Day, designed to strengthen community ties and promote cultural pride (Simon, 2023). The event fosters intergenerational connections, ensuring that the younger generation can engage with and understand their heritage. Activities such as book sharing, art workshops, cultural markets, and Hong Kong cuisine and games offer diaspora members a sense of belonging and stability, often disrupted by migration and trauma (Echo Theatre, n.d.). These culturally rich experiences allow individuals to feel rooted in their identity, reducing isolation and enhancing psychological resilience. Additionally, the collective act of remembering and celebrating Hong Kong culture serves as a form of resistance to forgetting the events that led many to leave their homeland.

By promoting Hong Kong culture within Calgary's local network, Echo Theatre also builds bridges with other cultural and identity-based groups. This fosters solidarity and encourages collaboration across communities, exemplifying the values of inclusion and collective empowerment central to social justice in social work. In doing so, Echo Theatre provides a

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model for how community-based cultural initiatives can address the complexities of collective trauma while fostering integration and solidarity in a multicultural society.

### **Social Justice Implications – Human Hierarchies and Institutionalisation**

While the Echo Theatre case study exemplifies community-driven healing, broader theoretical concepts can help explain the structural barriers this diaspora continues to face. Drawing from both the case study and literature on migration and systemic oppression, this section introduces two key concepts, human hierarchies and institutionalisation, that shape how social justice is practised in the Canadian context. These concepts emerge from the literature but are also reflected in the lived experiences and systemic encounters of the diaspora community.

Keywords such as human hierarchies and institutionalisation are central to understanding the social justice challenges faced by the Hong Kong diaspora in Canada. These concepts offer insight into the structural inequities that shape the experiences of this community and provide a foundation for advocating more equitable practices in social work.

Mignolo (2018) discusses the notion of social classification, which highlights how societal systems categorise individuals, often reinforcing hierarchical structures. For the Hong Kong diaspora in Canada, this classification begins with their designation as “new immigrants.” While Canada provides the opportunity for immigration, the structural barriers inherent in its systems perpetuate inequalities. Many Hong Kong migrants arrive on work permits, which grant temporary access to the labour market but restrict long-term opportunities (Yan et al., 2023a). Many Canadian employers require Permanent Residence (PR) or Citizenship for job eligibility, limiting the options available to these migrants and relegating them to positions below their qualifications and experience (Karki et al., 2023). This institutionalised stratification stigmatises new immigrants, including Hongkongers, as occupying a lower social rank, compounding their marginalisation within the job market.

Hacking’s (2002) concept of looping effects provides a lens to understand the dynamic relationship between classification and behaviour. In this process, classifications influence

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behaviour, individuals respond to these categories, and the interplay results in an iterative feedback loop. For the Hong Kong diaspora, the classification as “new immigrants” shapes their interactions with Canadian institutions and their advocacy efforts. Many individuals strive to secure PR to gain stability and equal footing (Hong Kong Watch, 2024). This advocacy process can be empowering, as community members come together to assert their rights and address the systemic challenges they face (Pyles, 2020). However, the outcome of this feedback loop is not universally positive. Those who fail to secure PR or face prolonged delays may experience retraumatisation, feeling excluded even in a country that initially appeared to offer refuge and opportunity (Chan, 2024; Yan et al., 2023b).

Ahmed’s (2006) idea of non-performativity further contextualises these challenges. Nonperformativity refers to actions or statements that project an image of commitment to change but fail to deliver substantive outcomes. Ahmed (2006) originally applied this concept to universities but it resonates in the governmental context. Canada has positioned itself as a sanctuary for Hong Kong migrants, emphasising freedom and prioritising pathways for immigration (Government of Canada, 2023; Nash, 2019). However, in practice, the government has failed to uphold these commitments. For example, while initial policies promised expedited PR processing for Hongkongers, recent shifts have resulted in extended waiting periods and a lack of clear communication (Hong Kong Watch, 2024). This disconnect between rhetoric and reality highlights the performative nature of Canada’s immigration policies, which appear welcoming but fail to address the structural needs of newcomers.

These issues of classification, feedback loops, and nonperformativity underscore how institutional systems and human hierarchies shape the experiences of the Hong Kong diaspora. The marginalisation they face is compounded by systemic barriers in employment, immigration, and access to resources, which undermine their integration and perpetuate inequality.

### **Toward a Social Work Practice Framework: Reflections on Power and Positionality**

As a new immigrant from Hong Kong, I share many of the challenges faced by others in the Hong Kong diaspora. I am not affiliated with Echo Theatre, but I have observed and researched their work through media sources, community discussions, and online platforms. My position as both a social worker and member of the Hong Kong diaspora informs my analysis, allowing me to interpret cultural and community-based initiatives with empathy, while maintaining critical distance as a researcher. This dual lens enables me to highlight the community's resilience without over-identifying or projecting my own assumptions. Growing up in Hong Kong has provided me with a deep understanding of the cultural, historical, and socio-political dynamics that shape our community. Witnessing the 2019 social movement firsthand, I saw how Hongkongers united in solidarity to demand change (Ngai, 2024b; Pubrick, 2020). However, my positionality introduces complexities. My personal experiences may enhance relatability but also risk assumptions about shared beliefs and transference. For instance, my proximity to the movement might unintentionally overemphasize political advocacy, even though not all community members prioritize this. Adopting a “not-knowing” stance is essential to ensuring an inclusive approach, free from my own biases.

The trauma tied to the National Security Law has led to pervasive fear and mistrust in the Hong Kong diaspora (Chan, 2024). Many immigrants avoid activities perceived as political, particularly those travelling between Canada and Hong Kong (Lee, 2023). Building trust requires depoliticising advocacy efforts. For example, picking up some specific issues, such as focusing on PR delays, rather than political grievances, creates safer spaces for community participation. Social justice in this context involves systemic advocacy to ensure equitable treatment and amplify marginalised voices. Social workers can play a crucial role in addressing the diaspora's unique needs by promoting inclusive policies and resources.

### **Mental Health and Trauma-Informed Care**

The mental health needs of the Hong Kong diaspora demand urgent attention (Chan, 2024; Yan et al., 2023b). Inspired by the work of Echo Theatre, social workers can collaborate with

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policymakers and community leaders to secure funding for culturally responsive and trauma-informed care. Many in the diaspora face barriers to accessing mental health services, including language difficulties, limited awareness, and fears of discrimination. Social workers can advocate for multilingual outreach programs, job training initiatives, and legal aid services tailored to the community's needs.

A culturally competent and trauma-informed framework is crucial for working with communities affected by collective trauma (Reeves, 2015). For the Hong Kong diaspora, cultural identity is intricately tied to language, shared experiences, and political awareness. Practices that honour family solidarity, indirect communication styles, and collectivist values help build trust and rapport. Social workers must navigate political sensitivities with care, creating safe environments for discussing trauma without imposing personal perspectives.

Trauma-informed care involves creating spaces where individuals feel safe to share their experiences, validate their emotions, and avoid retraumatisation (Reeves, 2015). For the Hong Kong diaspora, this may include accommodating language preferences, integrating cultural practices, and avoiding politically charged topics. Such care supports individual recovery while fostering community resilience. By validating shared experiences, social workers can help destigmatise trauma discussions, promoting a culture of healing and empowering the diaspora to rebuild their lives with confidence.

### **Community Engagement and Empowerment**

Community engagement fosters resilience, solidarity, and a sense of purpose. Participatory approaches, such as co-creating programs, organising cultural events, and facilitating storytelling workshops, empower individuals while strengthening cultural identity (Pyles, 2020). Initiatives like language classes and mental health programs can bridge the gap between cultural preservation and integration into Canadian society.

Social workers play a vital role in fostering these connections by centering the voices of the

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diaspora. Collaboration with community members ensures that programs are inclusive, empowering, and reflective of their needs. For instance, storytelling workshops provide an avenue for individuals to share their narratives, fostering understanding and mutual support. Similarly, cultural events and language classes celebrate heritage while facilitating integration into Canadian life.

### **Building Solidarity Across Communities**

A commitment to social justice requires social workers to build solidarity across diverse communities. For the Hong Kong diaspora, this means recognising their unique experiences while fostering resilience, empowerment, and trust. Social workers must bridge community divides, fostering inclusivity while respecting the group's autonomy. This approach creates a foundation for healing and collective growth, empowering individuals and strengthening the broader community.

### **Policy Advocacy**

Policy advocacy is vital to addressing systemic challenges faced by the Hong Kong diaspora (Hong Kong Watch, 2024). Social workers can push for immigration policies that account for the political drivers of migration and create tailored pathways for asylum or residency. Reforms should prioritize streamlining PR applications, improving access to work permits, and enabling family reunification. These measures not only provide stability but also foster a sense of belonging and inclusion. Advocacy efforts can further highlight the unique struggles of this community, ensuring their concerns are represented in national policy discussions.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has demonstrated how social work can support the Hong Kong diaspora through trauma-informed, culturally competent, and community-centred approaches. By addressing the collective trauma experienced by this population and advocating for systemic changes, social work contributes to the well-being and resilience of marginalised groups. Future efforts should prioritize community-driven interventions that empower the diaspora and dismantle systemic barriers to justice, ensuring long-term healing and integration for the Hong Kong diaspora in Canada.

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