Hunting Mirages of Success:

Dreams of Extralegal South Asians in Hong Kong*

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ABSTRACT

Many scholars have discussed irregular immigration in contemporary societies; however, we know little of the subjectivities of such migrants. It is of increasing importance to understand not just migrants' marginal realities, but also their future aspirations and expectations. This research sheds light on the construction of aspirations for irregular immigration by examining cases of the extralegal male-dominant migrant community in Hong Kong, where estimates suggest that 75% of the approximately 7,000-strong irregular migrant population comes from South Asia. Their stories are often not of trafficking, terror and violence as one might expect of such migrants, but instead, speak of cultures of migration creating obligations to engage in out-migration, of media influence, and of false aspirations constructed by fallen migrants feigning success. Despite knowing the risks that await them, why do South Asians choose not only to live their own lives at the margins of society as extralegal citizens, but also continue to reproduce the perpetual myth of success in the promised foreign land? Based on a year of in-depth interviews and three months of participant research, this paper looks at extralegal South Asian men in Hong Kong in order to examine how their dreams of illegality are constructed, what realities are met, and how the mirage of success remains.

Key Words: Aspirations, Citizenship, Globalization, Migration, South Asia

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I. Introduction

Recent years have seen a rapid expansion in the irregular movement of persons from developing to the developed world nations. Images capturing the plight of asylum seekers and of politicians arguing for and against their fates constantly linger in the media today. Irregular migrants have also drawn considerable attention in academia, though a majority of current studies consider matters primarily of internal migration within third-world nations or international migration from the third to the first, mainly from the East to the West (Trager 2005). Much of the excellent literature also focuses on the implications on irregular migration on governmental policies and on the economic or social impact these have on the relevant communities. While the studies clearly familiarize us with the marginal realities of these persons, there is also a need to hear the migrants' voices as something more than simply victims of global political economic processes, given that their subjectivities, which are left neglected amidst theoretical debates, often reveal deeper issues concerning their choices to move into lives of uncertainty and instability. Indeed, with current numbers of international irregular migrants in the world reaching well over thirty million and a strengthening of political borders in the first world against the third subjecting more people to this fate, it is of importance to understand not simply the migrants' marginal livelihoods and their impact on the sending and hosting societies, but also their aspirations and expectations in wake of rapidly globalizing political and cultural systems.

For many, moving outside the unsafe borders of their homes is not an option but a necessity because of the violence that threatens their

lives. A majority of people who stay illegally at the margins citizenship, however, do so voluntarily to seek better, often economic, opportunities. This label, with its connotation of stealing from the host community, has subjected migrants to growing anti-migration sentiments in the first world and put them in perhaps more vulnerable positions than migrants that are considered to be "genuine" asylum seekers. What these sentiments overlook are the embedded processes involved in the decision to voluntarily live a life of hardship at the margins of society—a decision that is supported by social and institutional negotiations and personal choices involving considerable economic investments and psychological stress. It embodies the migrants' and their communities' dreams, aspirations, and ambitions for finding "something better."

In this paper, I explore the construction and perpetuation of aspirations for irregular migration by examining cases of extralegal South Asian male migrants to Hong Kong. I use the term extralegal largely in reference to their political status that places them in a state of migrant liminality. Certainly, though there are a handful of migrants, particularly from Sri Lanka and pockets of north-western Pakistan, that are seeking shelter outside their homes to flee major conflicts back home, most others are self-admittedly in the city for economic pursuits. Migrants with motivations to seek more prosperous lives, however, have often been stigmatized in academic literature, national policies, and public and media discourse that place a great emphasis on differentiating between "real" and "fake" asylum seekers. As some scholars of citizenship and globalization have stated, "reducing migration to economic factors alone functions to reduce our capacity

to think fully about the life experiences of those who are differently situated from us… The trend is linked to understanding people increasingly as labour, as ingredients in an economic process" that dehumanizes them (Dauvergne 2008).[1] Indeed, the lack of geographical mobility amongst a majority of the underdeveloped population reflects the failure of this reductionist assumption in providing an accurate and holistic picture of the phenomenon. These pursuits have embedded in them stories of cultures of migration in their communities that have created obligations to engage in out-migration, of media influence that has encouraged a search for global and cosmopolitan identities, and of false aspirations constructed by fallen migrants feigning success to hide the shame of not meeting the promise to bring back that "something better" they had once left home to pursue. By recounting their experiences in Hong Kong, I explore why, despite often knowing the risks and dangers involved in living illegal lives and of the failures that await them, South Asians continuously choose not only to live their own lives at the margins of society as extralegal citizens, but also continue to produce the perpetual myth of success in a promised foreign land that essentially encourages more migrants in their home countries to engage in this cycle. In short, by looking at migration in a particularly personal light, this paper discusses how their dreams of illegality are constructed, what realities are met, and how the mirage of success is maintained to encourage more migrants to come to Hong Kong.

This ethnographic research is based on interviews in Hong Kong

1) Cf. Koser (1998) and Khosravi (2010).

between November 2010 and November 2011; intensive participant observation was further conducted during the summer months of 2011, a small part of which was spent in the Indian states of Delhi and Punjab where I met return migrants and families of those still residing abroad. In Hong Kong, I attended religious services at a church and temple frequented by the extralegal community and volunteered at non-governmental organizations that provide services for asylum seekers and refugees in Hong Kong. Through them, I was able to explore and expand my network amongst the extralegal migrants' community in the city, and as a result, came to meet hundreds of extralegal South Asians (ESAs), South-East Asians, African and Middle-Easterners. This paper, however, primarily focuses on the cases of twenty-four South Asian men that I came to know closely, having lived and spent a majority of my field experience with them.

II. Hong Kong and South Asian Extralegal (ESA) Immigration

Since its establishment as a colony in 1841, Hong Kong has served as a cornucopia of dreams for migrants from Mainland China, South and South-East Asia and the Euro-American West that have passed through its borders and whom have helped to transform the once barren rock to "Asia's World City".[2] Today, Hong Kong attracts thousands of international migrants each year, and represents, to many, the pinnacle of modernity and affluence—a taste of the developed world in midst of

2) For Hong Kong's migration history, see Davis (1991) and Ku (2004).

a largely underdeveloped-East. It is, therefore, a refuge for those who come to pursue the rags-to-riches dream that the city has offered many of its previous residents, but also, in some senses, for those who seek a global cultural identity to which access may be guarded or limited in their own nations.

South Asians, with their numbers ranging up to fifty thousand, form the third largest group of ethnic settlers in Hong Kong, not including the Chinese majority. The city is also currently host to an almost seven thousand-strong population of extralegal migrants, of which seventy-five percent come from South Asian nations including Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. I emphasize the term "extralegal" instead of "illegal" or "undocumented" here, because, though they may generally be referred to as the latter in general public discourse as well as within their own communities, most (falsely) apply to seek political asylum in Hong Kong, and are thus granted temporary legal status by the local Government until their cases are reviewed and they are deported; they live, in essence, in a liminal state between legality and illegality, as illegal citizens. This peculiar citizenship status has particular consequences in Hong Kong as they are seen by the general public, local refugee-aid organizations, media and politicians, as thieves stealing from public resources by untruthfully making use of the asylum registration system present in the city. Indeed, upon arriving in Hong Kong through illegal channels in the Pearl River Delta or after over-staying visas, most South Asian irregular migrants choose—and in some ways, are encouraged—to register for asylum with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or under the United Nations Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman

or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (UNCAT). Though a majority of cases filed are false, this strategy, on the one hand, guarantees a prolonged time in Hong Kong for the ESAs as their files are investigated, and during which they receive governmental allowances for accommodation and rations, but on the other hand, acts to bring them under the surveillance of the Immigration Department to which both the UNHCR and UNCAT report.

Besides the housing and ration allowances allotted to extralegal migrants in the city, Hong Kong remains a popular destination for ESAs because of the relative ease of entry into the territory owing to the city's fairly open borders. Indeed, being a city of immigrants, Hong Kong has harboured relatively open attitudes towards irregular migrants for much of its history until recently.[3] The territory's proximity to South Asia and subsequently cheaper transportation and safer smuggling routes further add to the city's appeal, especially in wake of the Euro-American West closing its borders over the past ten years as a result of the September 11, 2011 tragedy. In comparison, Hong Kong until recently has offered visa-on-arrival to most South Asians for a period of fourteen days. Today, though this access has been limited only to include Indian citizens, other South Asians are also able to acquire visas prior to entering the city with relative ease. Javed, for instance, arrived in Hong Kong under the pretence of working for a fictive uncle in Hong Kong—a resident Pakistani and migration agent—who helped him acquire a visa to the city. His entire journey, he claims, cost him less than US$1,000, but for those coming from western South Asia, the

3) Cf. Davis (1991), Chan (2004) and Information Services Department (2011).

amount may be as low as US$325 if they fly with Biman Bangladesh Airlines. A further fee may also be payable to seamen or transborder agents if entry through the illegal waterway channels is required; however, the amounts are often token in comparison to journeys to the Americas, and safer given the short distance involved either through China or Malaysia. It is the cost of living in Hong Kong during the first few weeks which troubles a majority of the migrants, but with Hong Kong's relatively neoliberal immigration policies and lax efforts to deport irregular migrants, ESAs are able to construct hopes of meeting their rags-to-riches dreams. These dreams, however, are not simply a consequence of Hong Kong's geopolitical location and policies, but instead begin to form in the migrants' South Asian homes.

III. Making Dreams

Hong Kong is often cited as "the most thrilling city on the planet [where] change is a constant" (National Geographic 2012). Yet, it is exactly this concept of "change", albeit in the socio-political circumstances of South Asia, which has driven many ESAs out of their homes to pursue dreams of better lives in foreign lands. This, however, is not because of a simple desire to gain wealth, but instead of attaining stability in the changing socio-political climate of the subcontinent in wake of its emergence in the global economy. Many of the ESAs I have met, for example, blatantly admit their economic motives for being in Hong Kong, but over subsequent interviews reveal the reasons behind these motives that are engrained in other processes. Indeed, many come not

only from urbanizing towns in India, but from families of landlords, business owners and servicemen. Though none were very affluent, many were fairly well off in relation to their own community's economic status, or at least were able to draw stable incomes from work in local industries. However, with the introduction of transnational and mega-national corporations moving into their communities, particularly in the northern regions of the subcontinent, many of the ESAs' businesses were threatened and their land taken away by force. The looming corruption in the local government and police force further added to their inability to acquire compensation or justice. Other informants also spoke of feeling the limiting effects of pro-Islamic sentiments on their livelihoods. It is sudden change in their circumstances, they state, that gives them no choice but to look elsewhere to seek opportunities to support their families and see stability once again.

Their aspirations for specifically choosing Hong Kong as a destination, too, have embedded stories of obligations to out-migrate as a result of a culture of migration that has developed in many of South Asia's urbanizing communities today. Many ESAs also credit media influence and an increasing desire to obtain global cultural citizenship in light of modernization processes that have taken over the subcontinent (Derné 2008; Gentleman 2008). Most accounts additionally speak of the work of dishonest migration agents and past migrants' successes—real or imagined—that permeate the decision making process.

1. Cultures of Migration

A majority of ESAs in Hong Kong come primarily from the northern

and western reaches of the subcontinent including the Indian and Pakistani states of Punjab as well as coastal cities and towns in the Bay of Bengal. There are also scattered populations from regions throughout Nepal and Sri Lanka; however, Pakistanis and Indians constitute a majority of the ESA population in the city. The concentration of migrants from these particular areas can partially be attributed to the development of cultures of migration "characterized by a high rate of out-migration… [where] international migration becomes so deeply rooted that the prospect of transnational movement becomes normative" (Kandel and Massey 2002). Vis-à-vis Hong Kong, such cultures of migration are in many ways a consequence of historical ties that these regions have maintained with Hong Kong since the European colonization of the subcontinent (White 1994). These ties have provided not simply ideas and opportunities for migration to Hong Kong, but have also helped to establish exploitable social networks that are central to the organization of outward, especially irregular, migration.

Repeated patterns of migration often also enforce obligations on young residents of sending communities to engage in international migration, questioning their communal identity and worth if they choose not to comply (White 1994; Cohen 2004; Newell 2005). Amongst potential ESAs in Hong Kong, the emphasis is many times placed on the migrants' identity as sons and family men to be economic contributors to the household. Many of my informants from throughout the sub-continental region claimed as this Punjabi, that:

> I had no choice, but to look at opportunities to move out. If your neighbour is doing well because they sent someone

> overseas, you try to find a way to go there too however you can manage it because you know that you'll be left behind if you don't… What was I supposed to tell my family even though I knew I would have no life here [in Hong Kong]; no future? How could I tell them no? What kind of son would that make me?

The established networks arising out of such patterns of movement also work as social capital that individuals are able to draw upon for psychological support and security, particularly in regards to acquiring work. Raju used the well-established culture of irregular migration in his community to meet his relatively unusual success among ESAs in Hong Kong. A young and energetic man in his twenties, Raju arrived in the city on a fourteen day tourist visa granted to him on arrival at the Hong Kong Airport, from where he immediately sought to make his way to Chungking Mansions, an international hub for the informal economy in Hong Kong. He had heard of this multi-storied "ghetto" at the center of Hong Kong's metropolitan circuit from return migrants in his city where the name Chungking Mansions rings loud among migrants as it hosts a majority of the visible ESA population in downtown Hong Kong (Mathews 2011).

At Chungking, Raju met several of his compatriots who volunteered to prepare him for the immigration procedures that would allow him to over-stay his visa in Hong Kong for at least a few months, if not years, while his case was reviewed. They urged him to firstly surrender to the Immigration Department and claim asylum in order to reduce the jail sentence awarded to irregular migrants in Hong Kong from up to three years to a period of less than two weeks. They also recommended

versions of their own false stories of state-enforced torture that would allow him to file a case under the UN Convention Against Torture, while also suggesting work opportunities in the building that would allow him to earn US$400 per month. With parts of his income spent to compensate for the debts accumulated to travel and live in Hong Kong, Raju was able to send the small but regular remainder of his savings back home where, multiplied manifold, they would be used to start a small restaurant venture or business to provide his family of six with a stable income after he was inevitably deported. For Raju, "migration [served as] an income-generating strategy directed at family preservation", enabled by the cultures of migration in his community in India (Selby and Murphy 1982).

A growing culture of migration in South Asia is clearly reflected in that migration is seen not simply as a discontinuous separation in the migrants' lives at home, but rather as integral parts to complete their transitions—or rites of passage—into family men and, more recently, global citizens. Today, expressions towards aspirations for outward mobility are a key aspect of public discourse throughout the globalizing landscape of northern South Asia, where illusions of "more opportunities abroad" are encouraged by the media and where high social value is placed on imported products that have come to represent modernity and affluence (Derné 2008). In this right, extralegal migration to Hong Kong, at least for a few, has also become a tool by which South Asians seek to consume new, more global identities generally reserved for the affluent ten to fifteen percent of society (Mathews 2000), but sought after by much of the social strata. By exploring the role of culture in encouraging mobility among ESAs, we

are able to reach a more holistic view of migration—one that cannot be understood solely by looking at economic models and explanations of upward social mobility paradigms (Åkesson 2004).

2. Bollywood and Modern Identities

Feeding into the development of cultures of migration throughout the subcontinent, South Asian media today is also highly geared towards supporting outward migration. Bollywood, India's prominent film industry, popular also in much of the rest of South Asia, for instance, has greatly contributed to this image. With a growth in television programmes catering to the needs of the South Asian Diaspora and transnational markets, along with an increase in live programming such as the International Indian Film awards, being held in foreign countries, the effects on the overseas South Asian population have been to embolden their transnational ties and community identities (Kaur and Sinha 2005; Rao 2007; Kavoori and Punathambekar 2008). For the population remaining in South Asia, the effect of such programming has been to produce imaginings of modernity and affluence and constructed desires to move abroad.

Images of mass outward-migration of South Asians along with portrayals of conspicuous consumption habits among non-resident South Asians in films, interviews of Bollywood personalities, and sporting celebrities aspiring to chase dreams in the "West" (Rao 2007; Jamkhandikar 2010) have raised much awareness, particularly among the South Asian youth, of cosmopolitan lives in the world at large. These images also construct ideals for modernity and have a significant impact

on the South Asians' dreams, aspirations and experiences (Rao 2007; Jamkhandikar 2010; Gentleman 2008). In regards to Hong Kong specifically, the release of the Bollywood blockbuster *Company* (2002), partially filmed in Hong Kong, saw a rise in tourism and migration to the city (Perappadan 2004; Singh 2004). Subsequently, keen to "establish synergies between the film capital of South Asia and Hong Kong" (Singh 2004), the Hong Kong Tourism Board and Television and Entertainment Licensing Authorities encouraged South Asian film makers to use Hong Kong for shooting backdrops in hopes that "seeing Hong Kong's glamour, its cosmopolitan lifestyle and fusion of cultures on screen [will] attract more visitors to come" (Perappadan 2004). Since then, other blockbusters such as *Awarapan* (2007) and *Double Dhamaal* (2010) have similarly featured Hong Kong, bringing a total of 393,000 visitors from India in 2009 alone, and more from the rest subcontinent (Dhar 2010).

Further, a vast and growing number of billboard, newspaper and television advertisements promoting migration agents and college programmes with foreign itineraries also reflect the increasing demands and motivations for migrating from South Asia. When driving from the Indian capital, Delhi, to the northern state of Punjab where a majority of extralegal Indians in Hong Kong come from, one can notice rows upon rows of billboards and street-side graffiti advertising immigration opportunities. Unfortunately for the migrants, many of these advertisements are supported by opportunistic scammers waiting to lure potential migrants into a web of lies and debts.

Contemporary media has also had a significant impact on developing the aspirations of South Asians today by influencing many changes in the cultural and social values among their youth. Mass media in this

sense has created cultural imaginings that provoke and challenge the hierarchical and heteronormative morals of South Asian society. I encountered several men that at least partially credit the search for modern social values in their consideration for choosing to migrate. To illustrate, third year extralegals Ghaffir and his brother Abbas from a region near Peshawar, Pakistan had come to Hong Kong in an attempt to flee terrorist attacks in their community, yet also in hopes of being able to support their families from abroad; their business in Pakistan had been shut because of the attacks, cutting the family's income. Despite their unsuccessful attempts at earning a living in Hong Kong, Ghaffir, the older of the two, refuses his brother's requests to return. He says that "I will send them [his family] as much money as they want if I can work here, but there is no way I'm going to go back to that backward place… Abbas can choose, but I won't go back until they stop pestering me to marry a girl I don't want or know. That's old fashioned. I want to marry someone I love." Laughing, Abbas joined in to tease Ghaffir by saying, "Yes, he wants *filmi pyaar*", referring to relationships developing out of dramatic "love at first sight" circumstances as portrayed in Bollywood films. Ghaffir replied quite seriously, "What's wrong with that? That's what most of the world does. That's what I want too."

Another ESA, Abir from Khulna, Bangladesh, stated that he had long dreamt of leaving his country in hopes of migrating somewhere where he would be able to openly express his sexuality. Influenced by information he sought on the Internet about a more liberal queer-culture abroad, Abir began to aspire to one day migrate to Europe. Not being able to afford smuggling fees and facing a burden to support his

family as an only child, he fell under a migration agent's ruse that encouraged him to move to Hong Kong while promising many work opportunities. Abir mentioned that though he was not entirely satisfied with his option, he was content to have found a place where, despite the relative social-conservatism, he would be able to enjoy a period of sexual freedom being away from his family.

Indeed, many scholars have discussed the impact of mass media on youth aspirations, and while it is often suggested that media influences are limited particularly to the middle-class and elite that are more readily available to access it (Mathews 2000; Derné 2008), the two men above show that media's influence is more expansive than first perceived. More credit should be given to media as an influence to migrate, though certainly economic reasons cannot be belittled.

3. Feigned Successes and Tempting Lies

Success, particularly economic success, whether imagined or real as recounted by previous migrants and their families, is a major impetus towards making the decision to migrate. While some may well find success, most find it to be fleeting or much harder to attain than originally supposed. Utilizing their established networks in Hong Kong from their hometowns as a result of locally established cultures of migration, a few ESAs such as Raju do find successful, albeit menial and poorly paid work in Hong Kong. Indeed, the nature of work that a migrant finds himself in is also often determined by his regional affiliation: where Pakistanis work primarily as manual labour in construction sites and in Hong Kong's

outskirts cutting used car parts for international shipments, western-Indians work more often as dishwashers, waiters and peddlers promoting counterfeit products in the city's downtown urban areas. Bangladeshi men as well as Punjabi Indians, on the other hand, work most often as coolies in shipyards or under contracts with private one-man moving companies. Because of the illegal nature of work, most earn no more than US$10-12 for a full day's work, much of which is spent on maintaining their livelihoods in Hong Kong, leaving little if anything to send back home.

Some ESAs further utilize their regional networks to find work generally reserved by companies for legal residents of the city by renting a resident identity document, the Hong Kong Identity Card (HKID). Though the nature of work available to these migrants is similar or even the same as that of other ESAs, those with an HKID stand a higher chance of gaining employment as companies are often afraid to hire more than a few persons without legitimate citizenship status in Hong Kong and tend to generate a relatively larger income. Indeed, many company owners, I am told, are aware of the fraud, but still turn a blind eye under claims of their perceptions of ESAs as hard working individuals that, of course, cost much less than local Chinese men.[4] Some such informants from Lahore, Pakistan, for example, work in scrap metal workshops revamping American cars for sale in the Mainland and cutting old cars for shipment to African ports. Unlike a majority of their ESA workmates, they use HKIDs rented from permanent citizens or residents of Hong Kong from Pakistan. The identity fraud allows them to

4) Cf. White (1994).

earn up to US$1,400 per month, with up to a forty percent commission taken by their agents. The agents themselves often generate their own income by working and leasing their HKIDs to multiple ESAs—usually their countrymen—who register as part-time workers but instead work full time shifts. Despite the hefty cuts, many such ESAs would agree with a statement by one migrant who proclaimed that, "It is definitely worth it. It's bad that I lose so much money that I make from my own sweat, but it's more than what I could get if I did it without [the agent]… I can send some back this way."

Although they are typically uncommon, a few ESAs have also succeeded in establishing small business ventures in Hong Kong, primarily working as middle-men between local trade transactions. One such case is that of Riaz, who, like Javed, also came under the pretence of working with a fictive relative and was subjected to indentured servitude under the threat that he would be reported to the Hong Kong Immigration Department if he failed to work in the conditions defined by the agent. He was frustrated with the lack of economic prospects and freedom that had been promised to him in Hong Kong, yet disinterested in returning to Pakistan where the recent death of his father and subsequent loss of business, as well as the lack of his brothers' ability to work because of a mental illness, had raised pressures on him to find a stable source of income for the family. After deciding to surrender himself to the Hong Kong Immigration Department and filing a claim for asylum, he was freed from his contract with his agent, who, afraid of drawing attention to his illegal dealings, fired Riaz. Still waiting for the results of his immigration application after five years, Riaz began to develop his own trade

network, partially derived from the contacts he had acquired while working for the agent. Today, he is a successful businessman drawing a fairly stable, albeit modest income.

Such cases of success, however, are extremely rare and limited only to small groups in Chungking Mansions, Hong Kong, and those with access to particular networks as explained above. A majority of ESAs in Hong Kong, instead, spend months and years waiting for the results of their asylum applications until they are inevitably deported without hopes of realizing the dreams they had come to pursue. With barely any work opportunities available in Hong Kong and mounting pressures from their families back home, many search for ways to escape from the shame of not being able to send back anything to their families after having sacrificed a lot, if not all, of their families' assets to fund their migration. Though Hong Kong's neoliberal borders offer relative ease of entry for many, ESAs still must sacrifice a considerable sum in order to compensate for the migration agents' fee, travel documents, and the high cost of living in Hong Kong. Feeling ashamed for making rash decisions under the agents' influence or by following ill advice, many ESAs I encountered maintain illusions of success in Hong Kong among their families by sending photographs of themselves in front of expensive cars, prime apartment complexes and in front of Hong Kong's glittering skyline to show that they have "made it". They also reduce the contact they maintain with their families to no more than once or twice a month, telling them that they are busy at work and unable to send remittances because of a lack of trustworthy means or by lying about making investments in Hong Kong to multiply the sum they have earned so far.

Community support also plays a very important role in maintaining this mirage: Sarjeet from Amritsar, Punjab had only recently arrived in Hong Kong when I met him at a church gathering he attended on recommendation of a compatriot. While he was Sikh himself, Sarjeet came to the church for the free lunch and small allowance it paid attendees to cover travel costs, but also to develop and maintain community relations in Hong Kong in hopes of finding a way out of his predicament. He had left his mother and infant son behind in India, running from death threats he started receiving from his parents-in-law after his wife had gone missing. Though Sarjeet's records from the Indian magistrate confirm that the court did not find him guilty on any charges, the continuing threats from his in-laws emphasizing their political power forced him to leave Amritsar. Using what remaining money he had left from his father's transport business before it had been taken over by his in-laws, Sarjeet fled first to Macau, and later to Hong Kong, when hitmen hired by them pursued him to Macau. Despite feeling the burden of supporting his mother and child, he found himself stuck, unable to work or move forward in Hong Kong while quickly running out of the money he had borrowed from his family.

Over several weeks, I observed Sarjeet's compatriots suggest that he register himself as an extralegal migrant in order to at least be given a housing and food allowance from the Hong Kong government and the International Social Services. However, each time, he refused to do so out of worry that his ageing mother—already burdened by her husband's recent death and concerns over her son having left—would not be able to handle the stress of not speaking with him while

he fulfilled his obligatory jail sentence to gain extralegal citizenship. Sarjeet had tried to keep the details of much of his case to himself, telling her that he had only gone overseas to seek economic opportunities. His fellow ESAs at the church, in response, offered to talk with his mother during his sentence in order to help him gain his extralegal status: "You see, without our help, he wouldn't be able to stay in Hong Kong. We, the Pakistani, Indian and Sri Lankan, are all in the same situation here and so we all know what he needs to do. He's worried right now, but we'll convince him to do what's good for him." Over time, they had indeed cleared his concerns regarding the length of the jail sentence, the benefits that would come to him, and ensured that they would tell his mother that he has been out of town on a business trip or has been busy in meetings when she called; they assured him that they would maintain an image of her son's success in Hong Kong. Running out of money to support himself in Hong Kong, Sarjeet took his compatriots' advice and after coming back from jail, mentioned that he had received telephone calls from his community members in Amritsar who were thrilled to have heard of his success through his mother.

Migration agents, too, have drawn much attention of scholars from a variety of humanities and social sciences who have written on the organizations of coyotes and snakeheads as they are sometimes called.[5] According to the Migration Information Source, "Migration agents and labour brokers organize most recruitment of Asian migrant workers both to the gulf and within Asia. Their dominance is partly

5) Cf. Khosravi (2010), Roth (2010), Gilman, Goldhammer, and Weber (2011).

due to the unwillingness of receiving states to make bilateral temporary-worker agreements with countries of origin" (Castels and Miller 2009). Presenting images of Hong Kong's contemporary urbanscape and false stories and pictures of previous migrants' successes, migration agents create or enforce illusions of success among potential migrants—particularly those with ailing financial conditions—to whom they make promises of better economic and social opportunities abroad. Some ESAs have also come to the city after having paid their agents to smuggle them into Europe or the Americas; the agents will then charge less than the average cost for smuggling to those destinations, but abandon their clients at the Hong Kong airport.

The fees that agents charge for taking migrants to Hong Kong, though considerably less than that of smugglers for the Euro-American nations, are still very high for many South Asians. If they choose to travel using an agent's service, they become highly indebted to the agent or people within his network in Hong Kong. Many are forced to liquidate all of their families' assets, including their property and jewellery in order to pay their fees that the agents promise will be but a small percentage of what the client would earn. With hopes held high, South Asians follow the agents' directions and arrive in Hong Kong where some, as shown above, succeed, but where most must face the reality of extralegality in Hong Kong.

IV. Marginal Realities

Despite the perceptions and hopes carried by potential migrants for gaining social freedom and escaping from poverty, many of Hong Kong's ESAs find their dreams shattered and come to realize first-hand the hardships involved in the embodiment of their extralegal citizenship status in the city. A typical pattern of living in Hong Kong for many of these migrants starts with the consideration to become extralegal citizens. On the one hand, by doing so, the migrants are able to gain access to housing and ration allowances, as well as an opportunity to file a case for asylum that can potentially lead to the migrants permanently relocating out of South Asia. Even as most cases for asylum by South Asians in Hong Kong are inevitably denied, the period over which the decision is made still offers opportunities for the ESAs—with reduced economic opportunities on their part—to scout work or avoid family interaction. On the other hand, by registering and being required to verify their registration every few weeks, migrants come under the vigilance of the Hong Kong Immigration Department to whom both the UNHCR and UNCAT authorities report. Indeed, many extralegal migrants complain that their homes are raided or checked by governmental authorities to ensure that the addresses given by the migrants are correct and that no other unregistered migrants share the accommodation. Such a system further allows the authorities to issue and execute deportation orders with more efficiency; failure to comply with these orders can result in multiple years' imprisonment.

The obligatory jail sentence for extralegals, on the contrary, lasts

no more than a few weeks, longer for those who arrive by illegal means. Even with the relatively short sentencing terms, potential ESAs dread their jail terms, often viewing themselves not as criminals who transcend geopolitical citizenship laws, but rather as victims of socio-political issues at home that rid them of their Bourdieuan capitals. The shame of being sent to prison is overbearing, particularly in their vulnerable psychological states after having left their homes in hopes of finding something better, only to instead find themselves in prison. It is, however, in prison that ESAs often start forming friendships and developing their networks with others in similar situations. These networks later help with ESAs looking for work if it is available, but most important housing that must be shared amongst two, if not more persons because of the high cost of living in Hong Kong.

Extralegal migrants in Hong Kong are entitled to a monthly housing allowance of approximately US$150, payable directly to the landlord, as well as an in-kind ration allowance of around US$115. Given Hong Kong's property prices soaring to a fourteen year high in 2011, seventy percent higher than 2009, and an inflation index running at a continuous three year high of 5.6 percent without showing signs of change (Wong 2011; Wong 2012), such sums are incredibly insufficient to live in Hong Kong. Even payments for the city's infamous "coffin rooms" and "cage homes"—respectively, sublet apartments as wide as one's body and cages resembling livestock coops surrounding single bed spaces—exceed the amount allotted to the extralegal migrants. More often than not, landlords prefer to charge two months' rental deposits upon signing leases to account for the electricity and

water bills that inevitably go unpaid. Though homelessness is generally uncommon amongst the ESA community because of its networks, there are still some, particularly newcomers, that can be found sleeping on streets waiting for housing solutions. Having imagined a prosperous future in Hong Kong, these men are often left to question their decisions.

Food rations, too, pose several problems for the ESAs. Offered in-kind, the migrants must travel to one of only seven designated shops by the International Social Services (ISS) to pick up their rations every ten days. If the migrants fail to arrive on the allocated day, they are denied rations until the next date scheduled for collection; a further failure to collect rations, then, results in the cancellation of the ration quota that is procedurally difficult to revive. For many ESAs, however, the distance between the locations in which they are able to rent and the ISS shop allocated to them can also be difficult to overcome because of the transportation costs involved as their transportation allowance only compensates for official visits to immigration or asylum authorities. For this reason, some must illegally use concessionary passes in public transports despite the heavy fines charged if they are caught.

At the shops, ESAs are able to choose from a small variety of rations a few items that they wish to purchase. However, the shop vendors usually offer the poorest quality materials to the extralegal migrants, saving better quality products and produce for paying customers; often the packaged food that the ESAs receive, for example, is past or near its expiration date, and the produce is at times rotten or about to begin rotting. The migrants are also given a choice to purchase gas

canisters for portable stoves as part of their rations, but many cannot afford to purchase the actual stoves to cook their food. A further lack of means to refrigerate food at their homes, especially in Hong Kong's humid summer months, means that produce must be consumed within the first few days of acquiring it, leaving them with nothing but bags of rice, flour (*atta*) and oil for the remaining week or more before they receive fresh food once again. Some are able to borrow money from their compatriots and peers in order to buy vegetables at the local wet market for low prices, while others simply choose to sell the remaining food at cut-rate prices to small restaurant ventures scattered throughout the city. The amount they receive in return, however, is usually a third of the market price—barely enough for two meals. To compensate for the occasional need for fresh meat, an expensive rarity in their diets, ESAs have also been known to fish in Hong Kong's polluted harbour and rivers for themselves or to sell for small amounts of money[6]; some have also been known to have chosen easier, yet criminal, methods by "fishing" for ornamental carp (koi) in ponds at public parks. There are also well known stories of migrants who have acquired refrigerators from individual donors or from junkyards yet are unable to utilize them because of a lack of adequate electricity in their often-illegally constructed homes, because of concerns over their electricity bills, or as in one case, because the migrants were not able to afford an extension cable to connect the refrigerator to the only socket in their apartment.

It is for such complications that ESAs wish to turn to NGOs that claim

6) Cf. Apple Daily (2012).

to cater to the local asylum seeker and refugee (ASR) populations. There is, however, a widely acknowledged stigma within the ASR network against ESAs because of the stereotype that they are "just economic migrants"; it is a label that has deemed them less worthy to seek aid under the assumption that they volunteer to migrate simply to better their economic conditions. As a representative from one NGO stated, "We cannot possibly serve all South Asians; there's simply too many! You open the door to one and you have to feed the four hundred living behind him… I have to help the real guys." In fairness, international human rights NGOs in Hong Kong lack considerable funds and must draw a line somewhere; it is a common joke that it is easier to raise money for cats and dogs in Hong Kong rather than for helping people. These boundaries, though, are often drawn on regional affiliations rather than individual cases. In regards to ESAs, those from Sri Lanka and the north-western stretches of Pakistan—areas which are known to be host to political violence today — may sometimes be given priority. Most others, however, state that they are not welcome at the NGO offices.

It is because of this stigma and lack of use in contacting NGOs that ESAs, then, place much more emphasis on building their own social networks in Hong Kong by attending religious or regional social gatherings, based either on their own regional affiliation from South Asia or their neighbourhoods in Hong Kong. Still, registering to become extralegal citizens allows them to legally live as *illegal citizens*, granting them housing and food rations—often their only source of income. More importantly, the lengthy period of up to seven years over which many of the ESAs' asylum cases are reviewed—especially

if they have registered before 2011—allows them time away from their families as they hide from the shame of broken promises to bring back a better future at the cost of sacrificing the family's total assets back home. It also provides an opportunity for them to seek work opportunities of which, unfortunately for the migrants, there are but a few, if any.

Because of a lack of work, ESAs face prolonged boredom, a loss of meaning and purpose in their lives owing to the continuing shame and a loss of motivation, increasing pressures from their families back home and worries about their impending debts. Indeed, contrary to common perceptions in the city claiming that ESAs have an easy time finding work because they blend in with the masses of South Asians already residing in Hong Kong for over a century, most ESAs I encountered claimed that they were not able to find much work at all. The Immigration (Amendment) Bill passed at the end of 2009, issued as a result of fears of mass migration after the city loosened its labour policies at the beginning of the same year, presently prohibits visitors, irregular migrants and extralegal citizens from working. A failure to comply with this law can leads to a prison sentence of up to three years along with a hefty fine of US$6,410. Without legitimate resident identity cards and bank accounts, many employers are also very reluctant to hire such migrants out of fear for being charged for tax fraud or evasion. Unless the migrants are indeed very lucky, such as the few mentioned in the previous section, much of the work to be found is very menial, paying wages that are hardly enough to sustain livelihoods in Hong Kong, let alone save for their families back home:

> People think there is a lot of work for us here. Yes, we can sometimes get a job, but only after the employers hire many more IDs [Hong Kong Identity Card Holders] first… maybe only one or two of us can find a job now and then. I'll tell you that the last time I worked was maybe two weeks ago, and before that, maybe two or three weeks. A Bangla friend of mine called me and asked me to work for a Chinese moving guy, you know, to load things on the van. I worked for six hours straight and nearly broke my back from the pain, but he only gave me $100 [US$12.9]. What should I do with that? I do it because I have to pay bills here and eat, but what's the use?

Not being allowed to work, and being unable to seek international protection because their circumstances do not qualify them to gain refugee status, their only hope to stay in Hong Kong remains in the hopes of marrying a resident to gain legal citizenship. Among Sarjeet and his friends, for example, one of the most frequented topics of conversation revolved around them finding prospective wives in Hong Kong including debates regarding marriages of convenience versus love, the value of marrying women of different ethnicities, etc. A right of abode through marriage, however, is not easy to obtain in Hong Kong and is only granted if the spouse is able to prove the ability to financially support both parties. Given Hong Kong's rising anti-migration sentiments in light of debates about amending the UNCAT review procedures, residency claims by long-term Filipino domestic helpers, and on-going reviews in legislation concerning potential mothers from Mainland China giving birth in

Hong Kong, such partners—with Hong Kong permanent residency—are very difficult, if not impossible, to find. The prevailing hypergamy in Hong Kong society and lack of the ESAs' ability to communicate in Cantonese as well as limited travel beyond their secluded neighbourhoods further limit their opportunities for finding a suitable spouse.

V. Perpetuating the Myth

The lack of opportunities, stress, boredom, and lost sense of purpose pushes a majority of at least ninety five percent, if not more, of the ESAs to voluntarily decide to return home after years of hoping for change and hiding from the shame when they see none. Sikhir, a young Bangladeshi who left his country in search for work he had been denied at home because of his religious affiliation to the Christian church in a predominantly Muslim Bangla community, is one such returnee. A few days before heading home, Sikhir said:

> There is no reason for me to stay in Hong Kong anymore. It's a nice place, but it's clear that I cannot do anything here. I don't even feel like a man living here; men are supposed to support their families, and all I've done so far is to cause them trouble… I told my family the truth finally after five years of living here, and they were very upset. Maybe more sad than angry… disappointed? But they want me to come back now. At least they said that even if we have nothing, we at least have the family. I

don't know what we'll tell the others though…

Information regarding migrants' marginal experiences in Hong Kong is readily circulated in South Asia where cultures of irregular migration to Hong Kong have been established. This information, however, contradicts the praises heard in the same communities of migrants that have gone abroad and calls into question why, despite knowing the risks of migrating to a place without economic or social opportunity, especially with a citizenship status that subjects them to public abuse and political scrutiny, do potential ESAs still consider Hong Kong as an ideal destination for migrating. Further, it is curious that given their experiences of facing endless hardships in Hong Kong that come to no avail, present ESAs and ex-migrants continue to perpetuate the myth of success in the promised foreign land that lures more young men to pursue the same lives.

To reach a conclusion, we must first understand that one of the primary misunderstandings concerning irregular economic migration throughout the first world rises from the assumption that migrants move solely for the purpose of attaining higher economic status (Åkesson 2004; Koser 2007). The geographical immobility amongst the poorest of people globally, however, reflects the falsity of this assumption; ideas about migrants "taking away" from the host community are often rooted in such suppositions, giving rise to anti-migration sentiments that have led to the ill-treatment and dehumanization of economic migrants. However, an increasing corpus of studies today shows that economic migration is, in fact, not harmful to the host economy and may indeed be beneficial for sustaining a

nation's development as it grows its knowledge economy (Hanson 2007; Nadadur 2009). Besides economic and social perspectives pertaining to such migration that this literature provides rich information about, we must also understand the subjectivities of economic migrants to understand wholly the embedded processes involved in the considerations for seeking opportunities abroad in the globalizing world economy today.

In the examples given throughout this paper, most of the migrants belonged to families that are not part of the poorest of poor in South Asia, but instead were economically stable or even well off in their communities. What they also have in common is that most have become victims of economic and social developments in South Asia that have threatened their livelihoods: where some were affected by the impending corruption in their societies that fail to protect residents whose land is taken away or have their businesses driven out by force, others were unable to acquire work because of the discrimination they faced in their society because of their religious affiliations amidst the pro-Islamic and Hindu-nationalist movements arising in South Asia. Still others were on the run from family disputes. In short, most ESAs in Hong Kong volunteered to seek opportunities abroad because of a sudden change in their circumstances backed by the inability of their own governments and social climate to offer adequate protection or solutions. The suddenness of the change breaking the stability of their livelihoods in itself has further encouraged the needs of many to look elsewhere in order to seek opportunities to support their families and regain stability.

Surrounded by media images promoting outward migration and

showing the conspicuous lifestyles of transnational South Asians and first world other, along with agents and present migrants maintaining these illusions by word of mouth or by images sent from abroad, those who are able to leave volunteer to do so in hopes of finding better opportunities abroad. Despite knowing of the hardships, many indeed convince themselves that life abroad must at least be better than what they have back home. Sikhir, for instance, commented:

> At home, there was nothing but poverty and fighting. No one works and they fight, that's all··· For people like me [because of his religion], there are no options to work even if I want to. This is why I came to Hong Kong. I could've gone to India, but I thought maybe it will be the same there. There are Christians in India, but in the East, I hear they're often chastised too. Plus, have you heard about the wall they're building in India to keep us Bangladeshis out... They don't like us··· So, I came to the first place where I could work. I have to support my family—my wife, my kids and my parents. I came here because I hoped there was something better to do here so at least I could do my duty to them.

Indeed, many ESAs migrated to Hong Kong after having sacrificed much of their family's wealth with promises of retuning with much more. Finding themselves instead in their undignified positions in Hong Kong unable to keep these promises, many revert to—at least momentarily—escaping from their family's taunts and feelings of self-

depreciation and shame by creating illusions of success that solidify the self-perpetuating myth. They live instead with the hope that within the period of time that they remain in Hong Kong, their aspirations of success may still be met, that they too will be able to benefit from the rags-to-riches dream the city has offered many migrants before them.

Hong Kong, throughout its history, has been a migratory centre for those in search of the dream to pursue better economic and social futures. Many, including some ESAs, have indeed succeeded in achieving their aspirations; however, for a majority of such migrants, success remains an imagined creation, a dream fuelled by the socio-political realities of South Asia. For most, though, this dream is unreachable because of the social and institutional challenges they face in Hong Kong stemming from the stigmatization in the local discourse surrounding economic migration. Still, when deported, many ESAs often choose to purchase their own return airline tickets using borrowed money instead of accepting governmental aid because of a belief that doing so would result in them being blacklisted from the city should they wish to return again. There still remains a hope, then, that despite the hardships they encounter in Hong Kong, the city might once again allow asylum seekers within its borders to work as it had done for a brief trial-period in the year 2009, or might sign temporary worker agreements with their South Asian homes. It is this hope that many ESAs carry with them throughout the process of their migration, which, despite the marginal realities met in Hong Kong, make them perpetuate the mirage of success by maintaining the thirst that first induced it.

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