



The Roles of Asylum Seeker–Led Organisations in Settlement Processes and Determinants: Evidence from Hong Kong

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Abstract

Organisations led by refugees or migrants play an important role in their settlement, providing platforms for establishing connections and reaching the wider community. However, our knowledge of how they utilise these platforms for establishing connections and the factors affecting the formation of these connections remains limited. This paper, drawing on evidence from Hong Kong, examines the use of organisations led by asylum seekers as platforms for establishing connections, the roles of these connections in their settlement process, and the factors affecting the formation of these connections. Data were collected from an asylum seeker–led organisation in Hong Kong. The author conducted participant observation and 30 semi-structured interviews with adult asylum seekers while volunteering with this organisation between 2018 and 2021. The findings reinforce the importance of organisations led by refugees or migrants in their settlement process, particularly when official humanitarian aid is insufficient. They utilise these platforms to reach the wider community for support, thereby filling assistance gaps through establishing connections with the local community (bridging) and participating in policy advocacy activities (linking). Proficiency in the local language and institutional responsiveness were found to determine their ability to bridge with the local community and link with policymakers respectively. Overall, the findings suggest that, aside from the engagement of refugees or migrants, the support of host communities and institutional responsiveness are equally important in creating favourable conditions for them to adjust to and establish their lives in a new context.

Keywords Asylum seekers · Asylum seeker-led · Refugees · Refugee-led · Settlement · Hong Kong

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Introduction

Today, some parts of the world may be living in the age of “forced migration”. Whereas in the late twentieth century, migration was motivated by a desire for better opportunities and improved well-being, in the early twenty-first century an increasing number of individuals are driven to move by the need to escape threats (Massey, 2020). Latest statistics show that, as of 2023, 117.3 million people worldwide were living in displacement due to persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations, or events that seriously disturb public order (UNHCR, 2024). As the number of individuals seeking protection increases, their situation has attracted considerable research attention. The focus has particularly been on their experiences and challenges in adjusting to host societies, with the aim of identifying the key determinants that better facilitate integration (Ager & Strang, 2008; Essa et al., 2024; Fasani et al., 2022; Feinstein et al., 2022; Mencutek & Nashwan, 2021; Strang & Ager, 2010). This is particularly important because smooth integration into host societies is relevant not only to the well-being of migrants themselves (Neto & Neto, 2023) but also to societal harmony and stability (Grzymala-Kazłowska, 2018).

Immigration literature has shown that migrants actively utilise organisations led by their own communities as platforms to adjust to and establish lives in new contexts. Similarly, research on forced migration has presented observations that are consistent with these findings. Although the services provided by these organisations vary across locations, they often include information and advice, interpretation and translation, social and cultural activities, and policy advocacy (Benson, 2020; Bloch, 2002). Mencutek (2021) observed that in locations where official humanitarian aid for refugees is insufficient, refugee-led organisations have transformed into alternative service providers to cater to the diverse needs of refugees. This was particularly evident during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Research has showed that refugee-led organisations filled gaps in public health assistance during the pandemic by delivering health information and services to refugee communities (Benson et al., 2022; Betts et al., 2021; Nungsari & Chuah, 2022). Recent research has also shown that refugee-led organisations serve as platforms enabling refugees to establish connections with host communities and other institutions, thereby facilitating social integration and enhancing the services provided to refugee and migrant communities (Easton-Calabria & Wood, 2021; Mencutek, 2021; Pincock et al., 2021). These findings show that organisations led by refugees or migrants play an important role in their settlement, providing platforms for establishing connections and reaching the wider community. Despite these insights, our knowledge of how they utilise these platforms to establish connections and the factors affecting the formation of these connections remains limited.

Drawing on evidence from Hong Kong, this paper examines the use of organisations led by asylum seekers as platforms for establishing connections, the roles of these connections in their settlement process, and the factors affecting the formation of these connections. The integration framework introduced by Ager

and Strang (2008), which identifies the aspects of social connections as “bond”, “bridge”, and “link”, is adopted to guide the analysis. Informed by the literature, asylum seekers may utilise organisations led by their communities as platforms to establish connections with compatriots (bonding), host communities (bridging), and institutions (linking). Thus, applying the framework developed by Ager and Strang helps us better understand how asylum seekers utilise these platforms to establish connections, particularly to distinguish the types of connections established. Data were collected through participant observation and 30 semi-structured interviews with adult asylum seekers at an asylum seeker–led organisation in Hong Kong, conducted while volunteering with this organisation from 2018 to 2021.

In this paper, the term “settlement” is defined as the process by which asylum seekers adjust to and establish their lives in new contexts (Valtonen, 2004). Although Hong Kong serves only as a transient spot for asylum seekers, they still need to adapt to a new context like other migrants, regardless of their legal status. This is particularly challenging due to the prolonged legal processes, which can require many to remain in Hong Kong for over a decade after first lodging an asylum claim (Vecchio & Beatson, 2014). To protect the individuals seeking protection and the asylum-seeking community, the name of the organisation where I collected data has been anonymised and is referred to by the pseudonym “ALO-1”. The term “asylum seekers” is used to include both asylum seekers and mandated refugees. While the term “refugees” is more widely used by ALO-1 and individual asylum seekers, often without a clear distinction between refugees and asylum seekers, this is partly for ease of communication and partly because they believe they are entitled to the same rights and protections as mandated refugees. However, I use this terminology because the majority of individuals seeking protection in Hong Kong are asylum seekers, not mandated refugees. In Hong Kong, the substantiation rate for asylum claims is less than 1% per annum (Vecchio & Ham, 2018). In other words, the remaining majority are asylum seekers. Asylum seeker–led organisations are those that are formed and led by asylum seekers, or have more than 50% of their leadership and decision-making positions occupied by asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2021).

Through an empirical study of an asylum seeker–led organisation in Hong Kong, this paper enhances the understanding of the roles played by these organisations in the settlement of asylum seekers into new contexts. In particular, this paper advances the understanding of how they utilise these platforms to establish connections, the roles of these connections in their settlement process, and the factors that affect the formation of these connections. At a glance, the findings of this study reinforce the importance of asylum seeker–led organisations in the settlement process, particularly when official humanitarian aid is insufficient. Amid limited official support, asylum seekers in Hong Kong utilise these platforms to reach the wider community for support, thereby filling assistance gaps through establishing connections with the local community (bridging) and participating in policy advocacy activities (linking). Proficiency in the local language and institutional responsiveness were found to determine their ability to bridge with the local community and link with policymakers respectively.

Contextualising the Experience of Asylum Seekers in Hong Kong

Hong Kong is a Special Administrative Region of China and is one of many places where forcibly displaced people take refuge. Hong Kong itself is a refugee society. After the Second World War, millions of refugees fled the turmoil in mainland China and came to Hong Kong in search of stability. Many of these settled in the city (Fong et al., 2018). From the mid-1970s to mid-1990s, Hong Kong served as a port of first asylum for over 200,000 Vietnamese refugees before they were resettled or repatriated (Loper, 2010). Hong Kong was a British colony from 1841 to 1997. Since the handover of sovereignty from the UK to China, new arrivals from mainland China to reunite with family members have become the major source of Hong Kong's population growth. Until 2014, about 879,000 new arrivals have settled in Hong Kong (Legislative Council House Committee, 2015). Currently, Hong Kong has a population of 7.5 million (Census & Statistics Department, 2024).

Hong Kong has been a signatory to the United Nations Convention Against Torture since 1992, but it is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention. Thus, Hong Kong does not accept refugees and is only a transient spot for asylum seekers (people who are awaiting a decision on their claim) and mandated refugees (those whose claims are substantiated and who are awaiting resettlement). The Hong Kong government launched the Unified Screening Mechanism to process asylum claims in 2014. Claims that are substantiated are referred to the UNHCR for determination. The applicants may then be resettled in third countries by the UNHCR. The applicants whose claims are not substantiated will be repatriated (Legislative Council, 2015). Official figures show that there are nearly 15,000 asylum seekers in Hong Kong. Many of these came from countries in South and Southeast Asia (e.g. Vietnam, Pakistan, and Indonesia) and Africa (e.g. Nigeria) (Press Releases, 2022).

Although many asylum seekers lodge a protection claim upon arrival in Hong Kong, many remain stranded in the city for over a decade, even before the launch of the Unified Screening Mechanism in 2014. They face “violence of uncertainty” (Grace et al., 2018) due to prolonged legal processes, particularly those who lodge an appeal after an initial rejection. The substantiation rate for asylum claims in Hong Kong is also very low, at less than 1% per annum, despite a global average of 27% (Vecchio & Ham, 2018). The situation has recently worsened. In December 2022, the Hong Kong government revised the law, allowing immigration authorities to remove asylum seekers with unsubstantiated claims who are awaiting appeal court verdicts (Legislative Council Panel on Security, 2022). This updated removal policy inevitably makes appealing decisions of the Unified Screening Mechanism more difficult and increases the likelihood of asylum seekers' deportation.

Aside from the violence of uncertainty, many asylum seekers in Hong Kong also regard their lived experience as a struggle for subsistence, as the government provides inadequate assistance for them. While mandated refugees may be allowed to work, the majority who are asylum seekers are prohibited from

working and are solely reliant on a limited monthly stipend of HK\$ 3200 (US\$ 408) to survive. The stipend comprises a HK\$ 1200 food allowance, HK\$ 1500 rental subsidy (HK\$ 750 for children), HK\$ 300 for utilities, and HK\$ 200 for transport to official visits. There is also provision of toiletries, and asylum seekers may be eligible to apply for medical waivers, education assistance, and legal aid beyond the basic provisions of the assistance programme (ISSHK, 2019). The stipend is subcontracted from the Social Welfare Department to the International Social Service Hong Kong, an international non-governmental organisation, for provision (Vecchio & Ham, 2018). The stipend is barely adequate for living in Hong Kong, one of the world's costliest places, and the amount of the stipend has not been increased since 2014. It is thus not uncommon for asylum seekers to seek assistance from support organisations, charities, and churches in the neighbourhood to fill assistance gaps. Faced with impossible choices, some asylum seekers resort to working illegally, risking imprisonment and potentially jeopardising the status of their asylum claims (Vecchio, 2016). Aside from the stipend, there is a lack of other policies or programmes that help asylum seekers adjust to a new context. The limited official support for asylum seekers can be attributed to the city's laissez-faire policy and overarching agenda to minimise the intake of protection claimants. From the perspective of the Hong Kong government, strict refugee policies aim to prevent the city from becoming a "magnet" for economic migrants to take advantage of its resources (Press Releases, 2020).

Overall, the shortcomings of refugee policies in Hong Kong are as Vecchio and Ham (2018, p. 207) described: "... a confusing and punitive bureaucracy which limits protection and welfare for asylum seekers, restrictions on asylum seekers' attempts at self-reliance through inadequate assistance and a legal prohibition on working, and long waiting periods for case resolution which produce frustration and powerlessness."

Formation and Operation of ALO-1

The formation of ALO-1 is an asylum seeker–led response to the challenges faced by themselves and fellow asylum seekers. ALO-1 was founded in 2014 as one of the first asylum seeker–led organisations in Hong Kong. It was formed following a group of asylum seekers staging an 8-month-long protest against the assistance policies and practices in place. The protest also marked an important turning point in the development of the local asylum seeker community, as it encouraged asylum seekers to actively participate in policy discussions pertaining to them (Vecchio & Ham, 2018). As of now, ALO-1 has reported having more than 3000 registered members. About half of these individuals are considered active members, and over 500 are children below 18 years old.

The centre of ALO-1 is filled with people every day. The centre is managed by a group of asylum seeker leaders who often have had a longer stay in Hong Kong and are familiar with the situation of asylum seekers in the city. They share responsibility for the operation of the centre and respond to enquiries. Dozens of mothers and children often spend the day in the centre. The mothers chat with each other while

the children play games. Throughout the day, teachers and students from schools and universities visit the centre and organise social and cultural activities for asylum seeker children, adults, and families. Individuals, charities, corporations, and other groups send donations to the centre. Occasionally, recently arrived asylum seekers visit the centre to seek information and advice. Asylum seekers gather in the centre for discussion when it comes to important decision-making, such as relocating the centre and organising policy advocacy activities. However, conflicts can still occur among the asylum seekers, particularly regarding the distribution of valuable donation items. When volunteering at ALO-1, I heard of some leaders being accused of favouring certain co-ethnic asylum seekers or those with better relationships. Some leaders were also accused of taking valuable donation items or cash. Despite these challenges, at the time of writing, the centre of ALO-1 continues to maintain an overall harmonious atmosphere.

Except for ALO-1, an asylum seeker-led organisation, there are several other non-governmental organisations in the local area that support asylum seekers and other migrants, each with their own areas of expertise. Some offer legal support, others provide education and training for asylum seekers who are adults and children, and some address their psychological needs. Within these organisations, some also involve asylum seekers in decision-making positions (Lau, 2021). Some differences can be identified between asylum seeker-led organisations and other organisations. Firstly, formed and led by asylum seekers themselves, asylum seeker-led organisations are generally more sensitive to the needs of asylum seekers (Bloch, 2002). Secondly, the platform provided by asylum seeker-led organisations enables asylum seekers to directly engage in affairs in the receiving context (Easton-Calabria & Wood, 2021). Thirdly, as Lau (2021) observed, in the case of Hong Kong, asylum seeker-led organisations are more active in policy advocacy activities, as they do not receive government funding and thus are less influenced by authorities.

Refugee-Led Organisations as Platforms for Bonding, Bridging, and Linking

Informed by immigration literature, organisations led by migrants often serve as platforms that facilitate their adjustment and the establishment of their lives in new contexts. Research on forced migration has presented similar observations. Essentially, refugees utilise platforms provided by refugee-led organisations to establish connections and reach out to the wider community for support. The academic literature features diverse classifications of social connections for refugees. Some authors differentiate between familial and non-familial connections (Lamba & Krahn, 2003), while others distinguish between connections with compatriots and non-compatriots (Potocky-Tripodi, 2004). A more comprehensive framework was introduced by Ager and Strang (2008), which built upon the concepts of “bonds”, “bridges”, and “links” developed by Putnam (1993) and Woolcock (1998). Some major contributions of Ager and Strang’s work are the incorporation of diverse dimensions of connections and the application of these concepts to the context of migration. “Bonds” refer to connections with compatriots, “bridges” to connections with host communities, and

“links” to connections with institutions. Applying the framework developed by Ager and Strang to guide our analysis is particularly useful for distinguishing the types of connections established through the platform of refugee-led organisations, or, in the context of Hong Kong, asylum seeker–led organisations.

Many refugees rely on connections with compatriots created in the receiving context because many of them arrive at the destination without kinship ties or other support networks (Bloch, 2002). Ager and Strang (2008) defined this process as bonding. In their study based in Malta, Losi and Strang (2008) found that refugees felt alienated on arrival due to the absence of compatriots. The discomfort of being a “stranger” was alleviated, however, when they found and connected with compatriots. Refugees often make connections with compatriots through sets of shared values and activities or through geographical proximity (Ager & Strang, 2008). Policy advocacy activities led by refugees or involving refugees are examples of activities mobilised through shared interest (Strang & Ager, 2010). Worship activities bind refugees with others who share their faith. Refugees may also form close ties with each other when living in the same area for a long period of time (Losi & Strang, 2008). When the number of refugees in an area reaches a critical mass and they have developed strong bonding with each other, it may cultivate the formation of refugee-led groups or organisations. In other words, refugee-led organisations represent a form of strong bonding among refugees.

The services provided by refugee-led organisations may vary across locations. Wilkins (2023) noted that Vietnamese refugee–led organisations in London offer both Vietnamese and English classes to help Vietnamese refugees preserve their own culture and meanwhile adjust to life in the receiving context. During the pandemic, Betts et al. (2021) observed that refugee-led organisations in cities of Kenya and Uganda delivered health information and services to refugees. Other studies have also yielded similar findings, wherein refugee-led organisations provide health-related support for their members, who are refugees or migrants, during times of turbulence (Benson et al., 2022; Nungsari & Chuah, 2022). Scholars have outlined a range of common services that refugee-led organisations provide to their members, including information and advice, interpretation and translation, social and cultural activities, and policy advocacy (Benson, 2020; Bloch, 2002, p. 162). One of the major roles played by refugee-led organisations is to fill gaps in official humanitarian aid. A large number of studies have shown that, in locations where official humanitarian aid for refugees is insufficient, refugee-led organisations have increasingly transformed into alternative service providers to cater to the diverse needs of refugees (Betts et al., 2021; Bloch, 2002; Easton-Calabria & Wood, 2021; Mencutek, 2021; Nungsari & Chuah, 2022).

There is also evidence that refugee-led organisations serve as platforms for refugees to establish connections with host communities and to participate in policy advocacy (Benson et al., 2022; Easton-Calabria & Wood, 2021; Mencutek, 2021). Ager and Strang (2008) defined these processes as bridging and linking, respectively. Scholars have viewed establishing connections with host communities (bridging) as beneficial to the settlement of refugees because the day-to-day interaction with host communities expedites refugees’ adjustment to the culture of the destination (Korać, 2005). Scholars have highlighted specific factors that shape how refugees make

bridging connections, including the perceived friendliness of host communities (Spicer, 2008). Here, “friendly” does not simply mean an absence of discrimination experience but also an absence of “othering” experience. In their study of married Syrian refugees in Al-Mafraq Governorate, Anabtawi and Amad (2019) observed that refugees feel isolated when host communities perceive them as “outsiders”. Other factors include perceived similarity of cultures and lifestyles between sending and receiving societies and the primary language spoken in the host society. Korać (2003) showed that refugees from the former Yugoslavia living in Rome considered the Italian lifestyle (such as cafe culture) similar to theirs, which made it easier for them to engage with host communities. Proficiency in the local language may affect access to services and amenities (Ager & Strang, 2008; Heidinger, 2023) and they may also influence the depth of relationships between refugees and host communities (Wilkins, 2023). For the latter, being able to speak the primary language fluently may create more opportunities for refugees to have informal and personalised contact with host communities (Korać, 2005).

As for linking, refugees may utilise the platform provided by refugee-led organisations to participate in policy advocacy. Participating in policy advocacy, whether within or outside institutional settings, enables refugees to engage in discussions about policies that particularly affect their situation. This engagement can be seen as a means to link and may influence the decision-making processes pertaining to their situation, thereby improving the rights and services afforded to refugee or migrant communities (Elliott & Yusuf, 2014). However, this process depends not only on the active participation from refugees, but also on the wider social and political contexts. In other words, creating an environment where refugees are encouraged (or at least tolerated) to participate in such activities is important (Easton-Calabria & Wood, 2021; Mencutek, 2021).

Overall, previous studies have shown the important role refugee-led organisations play in assisting refugees to settle into their new contexts. They utilise the platform provided by these organisations to establish connections, thereby reaching out to the wider community for support. Despite these insights, there remains a limited understanding of how these platforms are utilised to forge such connections. There is also little discussion about the factors affecting the formation of these connections. This paper contributes to this growing body of literature by conducting an empirical study of an asylum seeker-led organisation in Hong Kong. Specifically, the study explores the use of this platform by asylum seekers to establish connections, the roles of these connections in their settlement process, and the factors that affect the formation of these connections.

Data and Methods

The current study was granted ethical research approval by the Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee of the author’s affiliated institution at the time the research was conducted (SBRE-20-103). The target population comprises all adult asylum seekers in Hong Kong. I conducted participant observation and 30 semi-structured interviews with adult asylum seekers while volunteering with ALO-1

from July 2018 to March 2021. When volunteering with ALO-1, I organised social and cultural activities to help asylum seekers adjust to and establish their lives in Hong Kong. This long-standing cooperation with ALO-1 has provided me with access to the target population. Without this connection, it would be difficult to collect data because asylum seekers in Hong Kong account for less than 1% of the population and are scattered across multiple areas (Vecchio, 2015). As trust developed over time with a number of asylum seekers I met at ALO-1, their confidence in the study and willingness to share information also increased.

I conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with adult asylum seekers to supplement my observations during my fieldwork at ALO-1. Conducting observations and interviews jointly creates a comprehensive understanding of the topic of study. On one hand, observations during my fieldwork allowed me to observe the actual experiences of being an asylum seeker and their interactions at ALO-1. The interviews, on the other hand, enabled the collection of rich and in-depth data from the perspectives of the asylum seekers. However, as participants may share not only their experiences with ALO-1 but also their biographies, I conducted individual interviews instead of focus groups to protect their privacy and increase their confidence in sharing information. I recruited participants with the assistance of referrals from asylum seeker leaders at ALO-1. These leaders have had a longer stay in Hong Kong and are more familiar with the situation of asylum seekers in the city. They take charge of the centre's operations and often have a trusting relationship with fellow members at the organisation who are asylum seekers. Their assistance in participant referrals has provided convenience for participant recruitment and has also increased participants' confidence in the study. The participants in this study were carefully chosen to maintain the diversity of the sample. I asked several asylum seeker leaders to refer participants to minimise the overreliance on specific social networks. In recruiting participants, I sought to diversify the sample by including individuals with varied demographic characteristics. More specifically, I sought to balance the gender distribution of participants in the sample and include participants from different age groups and places of origin. I introduced the research background and objectives to the participants; each provided informed consent and received supermarket vouchers as compensation for their participation. Data collection was suspended when the data reached a saturation point where information started to repeat. The demographic details of each participant are not disclosed to protect those in the process of seeking protection.

I used the grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) to derive insights from my data. My data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously. I analysed both the field notes prepared during my fieldwork at ALO-1 and the interview transcripts. Each time, I compared the new data collected with the existing data to identify similarities and differences between them. My data analysis began with open coding, where I broke down the collected data and manually grouped fragmented parts into sub-categories and categories based on their thematic similarities. I attempted to identify the relationships between these categories through axial coding. When gaps in the data emerged or more in-depth exploration was required, I returned to the field to collect more specific data and, at times, conducted additional interviews to obtain more detailed information. I continued to compare new data

with existing data until the data collection reached a saturation point where information started to repeat. Using selective coding, guided by the literature and field experience, I developed several core categories from the data, such as “alternative service provider”, “platform to establish connections with the local community”, and “platform to participate in policy advocacy”. The details of each core category will be reported in the findings section.

Among the 30 participants interviewed, half were male and half were female. Their names were replaced with pseudonyms: Man 1 to 15 and Woman 1 to 15. The average age of the participants was 40. Most of them had received at least a secondary education in their home countries. Among them, 11 participants came from South Asia, nine from Southeast Asia, seven from Africa, and three from the Middle East. The main reason most participants reported becoming asylum seekers was due to persecution or social upheaval in their home countries. A number of them, particularly those from Southeast Asia, had been foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong. They generally had a better understanding of Hong Kong, having gained local work experience. These individuals became asylum seekers following the termination of their contracts, often due to unforeseen circumstances such as unexpected pregnancy or workplace exploitation, and their inability to find new employment within the 2-week timeframe required by the law. Unable to return home due to limited financial resources or the fear of cruel or inhumane treatment, they sought asylum in Hong Kong. On average, the participants had been staying in Hong Kong for about 10 years.

Establishing Connections upon Arrival

The findings focus on how asylum seekers utilise ALO-1, an asylum seeker-led organisation, as a platform to establish connections, the roles of these connections in their settlement process, and the factors that affect the formation of these connections. I begin by showing how asylum seekers locate and connect with ALO-1. I then illustrate how they utilise the platform provided by ALO-1 to fill assistance gaps through establishing connections with the local community (bridging) and participating in policy advocacy (linking).

Most of the asylum seekers I interviewed knew little about Hong Kong prior to arrival, nor did they have established social networks locally, as many had moved unexpectedly and were unprepared. The context of Hong Kong is also unfavourable for these asylum seekers to adjust to and establish lives, due to the lack of policies or programmes that help them settle. Even the stipend is not immediately available to them upon arrival. Without any support at the early stages of settlement, these asylum seekers had to search for shelter on their own. Some sought help from people on the street, hoping that someone would provide aid. As one of the participants recalled her experience:

I did not know anyone, so I tried to talk to walking people on the street, but people do not know [you are] an asylum seeker or refugee. They only know you are not Chinese or Hong Kong people. Some of them looked at me, some

ignored me, others talked to me, until someone told me to go to the Chungking Mansions. There I met people who speak my language and sell the food I used to eat back home. At that moment, I felt relieved. (Woman 3, Africa)

The participants eventually were able to find shelter after repeated attempts and expressed feeling “relieved” after connecting with compatriots. These compatriots are often co-ethnic asylum seekers or migrants. As for the Chungking Mansions mentioned by Woman 3, it is a complex located in the hustle and bustle of Hong Kong and is a place where asylum seekers, migrants, and ethnic minority groups connect with compatriots. Mathews (2011, p. 1) described the Chungking Mansions as “the haunt of South Asian merchants, African entrepreneurs, Indian temporary workers, African and South Asian asylum seekers, and penurious travellers from across the globe.”

Aside from the Chungking Mansions, other asylum seekers also connected with compatriots at several other locations. Some participants reported that they met other asylum seekers in a migrant detention centre after being detained for overstaying a visa. Some mentioned meeting others through religious institutions. Those who had previously worked as domestic helpers continued to gather with former co-workers on weekends and holidays. In other words, participants often developed bonding connections with each other through shared interests, values, and activities. They located and connected with ALO-1 either because they were one of the participants in the Occupy protest (Vecchio & Ham, 2018) or were told by compatriots to visit the centre after they had arrived in Hong Kong for some time.

Alternative Service Provider

Against the backdrop of insufficient official humanitarian aid, the centre of ALO-1 serves a “practical” function and has become one of the primary alternative service providers for asylum seekers to fill these gaps. The participants visit the centre of ALO-1 on a regular basis to access goods and services, for instance, collecting donations of cash and items and joining social and cultural activities. One of the participants shared his experience with ALO-1 and thoughts about the centre:

We cannot survive without the support of ALO-1 because we are not allowed to work. The Hong Kong government does not give us enough money, so we need to rely on ALO-1 to help ourselves and our children. At the centre [of ALO-1], people pick up donations of food, clothes, baby items, and many [other items]. We need these items because we do not have enough. Toiletries, for example, every month we get only a few to use. Also, we do not have dish-washing detergent, but we need to use it every day. (Man 1, South Asia)

Many participants and those who are members of ALO-1, however, are not passive service recipients. Instead, they also volunteer at the centre. One of the participants has been volunteering at the centre of ALO-1 for over 7 years. During the interview, she introduced the services that the centre offers:

Here in this centre, we offer different kinds of service for our members. People come to us every day, some need advice on [lodging an] asylum claim, some need language interpretation, and others need counselling when they feel depressed. Also, every week, volunteers come to our centre and teach classes. We have tutorial classes for kids to help them finish homework and prepare exams. For adults, we have classes teaching them English and Chinese languages and other skills. (Woman 4, Africa)

The services offered at the centre of ALO-1 are a collaborative effort between asylum seekers and the local community. The tutorial classes for asylum seeker kids and language classes for asylum seeker adults mentioned by Woman 4 are delivered by teachers and students at schools and universities. Asylum seekers who serve as volunteers at the centre of ALO-1 help coordinate these events and maintain order.

Still, challenges remain for ALO-1, particularly regarding service sustainability. Many activities at the centre of ALO-1 are in collaboration with the local community. However, these activities are often project-based and range from a few months to 1 or 2 years, with no guarantee that these activities will be sustainable. Despite these challenges, members of ALO-1 have made every effort to improve the services provided at the centre. In recent years, ALO-1 started to develop long-term partnerships with individuals and groups who provide services. They also maintained a crowdfunding platform on the internet to gather resources from outside the asylum seeker community to pay for the rent of the centre.

Platform to Establish Connections with the Local Community

Aside from accessing goods and services, asylum seekers also utilise the platform provided by ALO-1 to cultivate other forms of connection; one of these is bridging through interactions with the local community. After arriving in Hong Kong for some time, the participants come to know that they will have to stay in the city for a prolonged period. They thereby have made every effort to establish life in this temporary destination, including making connections with the local community. In this regard, the centre of ALO-1 has provided them a valuable platform. As one of the participants stated:

Students from schools and universities, sometimes with teachers and professors, visited our centre on Saturdays. They came here to know more about us asylum seekers and refugees and taught us Cantonese. (Woman 7, Africa)

Do you still remember what you have learned in the class?

Yes, “nei hou”, “dai ga hou” (greeting) ... “dim sum” (a range of Cantonese dishes) ... “zoi gin” (see you again). (Woman 7, Africa)

It is through the platform provided by ALO-1, such as participating in social and cultural activities and collecting donations, that the participants have got opportunities to interact with members of the local community who are donors or event organisers. Through these occasions, some also have developed friendships

with each other. Establishing connections with the local community gives the participants a sense of inclusion. As one of the participants stated:

It was Lunar New Year, back home people celebrate new year too, but at different times and in different ways. I felt alone during the festive season because people all spent time with their loved ones, but I cannot go home for family union. One day my Chinese friend gave me a red packet and invited me to her house for dinner. It meant a lot to me because people did not forget me. (Woman 8, Southeast Asia)

Establishing connections with the local community, however, is not always a smooth process. Language differences seem to be the biggest hurdle from the perspectives of these asylum seekers. This may be the case given that the majority (92%) of the population in Hong Kong is of ethnic Chinese descent and Cantonese is the most widely spoken language in the city (Census and Statistics Department 2024). But for asylum seekers and individuals from non-Chinese ethnic groups, most of them do not speak Cantonese. Some of these also have limited proficiency in speaking English. During interviews, participants mentioned that the people they encounter in daily lives primarily speak Cantonese. Without the ability to speak Cantonese and understand the Chinese language, they face challenges in communicating with landlords, comprehending school notices (for those who are parents), and occasionally using public transportation. Language learning is a long-term process. Although language classes are available at the centre of ALO-1, as shown in the conversation with Woman 8, her proficiency in speaking Cantonese, like many other participants, is at an elementary level and takes time to advance. Hence, language differences sometimes may have hindered these asylum seekers from developing deeper connections with the local community.

Platform to Participate in Policy Advocacy

Asylum seekers also actively exploit the platform provided by ALO-1 to participate in policy advocacy activities, particularly regarding the policies and practices pertaining to them. They voice their demands collectively in an attempt to improve the assistance policies and practices currently in place. During interviews, the participants recalled their participation in the Occupy protest in 2014. As one of the participants stated:

This office [ALO-1] was founded because of our action in 2014. We sent petitions to the Social Welfare Department. Also, we protested the ISS (International Social Service Hong Kong) office because the treatment was unfair to us. At the time, the support for us asylum seekers and refugees was very little. So, we requested the Hong Kong government to increase the amount. We got together, we wrote petitions, and we organised a peaceful protest. Finally, the government increased the amount a bit. (Woman 4, Africa)

However, the Occupy protest stands out as one of the few instances where asylum seekers in Hong Kong successfully influenced policymaking. Each year, on World Refugee Day, members of ALO-1 gather to submit petitions to the Social Welfare Department. They call for improvements to the assistance system for asylum seekers in Hong Kong. However, these attempts have yielded little progress. Despite ongoing inflation, the official humanitarian aid for asylum seekers, particularly the stipend, has remained unchanged since 2014. Although asylum seekers are permitted some degree of participation in civil society, such as mobilising policy advocacy activities, their voices are often desegregated due to an unfavourable policy agenda aimed at minimising the intake of asylum claimants, thereby exacerbating feelings of powerlessness within the group. In essence, the lack of responsive institutions appears to have hindered meaningful political participation among asylum seekers.

Discussion and Conclusion

Drawing on evidence from Hong Kong, this paper examines the use of organisations led by asylum seekers as platforms for establishing connections, the roles of these connections in their settlement process, and the factors affecting the formation of these connections. Data were collected from an asylum seeker-led organisation in Hong Kong through participant observation and 30 semi-structured interviews with adult asylum seekers. The findings of this study reinforce the importance of organisations led by refugees or migrants in their settlement, particularly when official humanitarian aid is insufficient. In the context of Hong Kong, amid limited official support, asylum seekers utilise these platforms to reach the wider community for support, thereby filling assistance gaps through establishing connections with the local community (bridging) and participating in policy advocacy activities (linking). The former helps them gain material support and facilitates their social integration, while the latter is an attempt to improve the assistance policies and practices in place. However, these efforts do not necessarily yield the desired outcomes. Due to language differences, asylum seekers often find it difficult to develop deeper connections with members of the local community. Institutional unresponsiveness also acts as a barrier to their policy advocacy efforts.

The findings have two major implications for the literature on immigration and forced migration. Firstly, the findings align with the existing literature that organisations led by refugees or migrants play an important role in filling assistance gaps when official humanitarian aid is insufficient (Betts et al., 2021; Bloch, 2002; Easton-Calabria & Wood, 2021; Mencutek, 2021; Nungsari & Chuah, 2022). Amid limited official support, members of these communities rely on one another and create strong bonds among themselves. They utilise these platforms to reach the wider community for support, establishing connections with host communities (bridging) and participating in policy advocacy activities (linking).

Secondly, this study has identified several factors which may affect the outcomes of bridging and linking. On one hand, while the existing literature suggests that proficiency in the local language can affect access to services among refugees or migrants (Ager & Strang, 2008; Heidinger, 2023), evidence from Hong

Kong shows that it can also affect the depth of connections they establish with host communities. Limited proficiency in the local language hinders not only day-to-day communications but also the development of deeper connections with host communities. On the other hand, while the existing literature suggests that a favourable context, which encourages the participation of refugees or migrants in civil society or policy discussions, is a prerequisite for establishing meaningful links, thereby improving services and rights afforded to their own communities (Easton-Calabria & Wood, 2021; Mencutek, 2021; Pincock et al., 2021), evidence from Hong Kong serves as a negative example. In Hong Kong, the absence of such a favourable context means that the policy advocacy efforts of asylum seekers often fail to yield the desired outcomes. More specifically, the Hong Kong experience has shown the importance of responsive institutions in determining the outcomes of their policy advocacy efforts, not solely a space that encourages or tolerates their voices.

Overall, the findings show that, aside from the refugee or migrant community being engaged, the support of host communities and the responsiveness of institutions are equally important in creating favourable conditions for them to adjust to and establish their lives in a new context.

Similar to other research, the current study also has its limitations. The study was unable to include the entire asylum seeker community in Hong Kong due to practical constraints, meaning that the findings may not be representative of the entire asylum seeker population. Thus, the findings should be interpreted with caution. The value of the current study is reflected in the depth of the data, particularly the author's long-term fieldwork at an asylum seeker–led organisation and the in-depth interviews with asylum seekers. If time and resources allow, future research could extend to study the experiences of children born in Hong Kong to asylum seekers. Although this new generation may be culturally assimilated, they lack citizenship status in Hong Kong.

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author declares no competing interests.

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