Exclusionary attitudes toward the allocation of welfare benefits to Chinese immigrants in Hong Kong

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Abstract
Studies on migration often assume that members of the same ethnic category are less likely to develop exclusionary attitudes toward each other. In order to explain why many Hong Kong people exhibit exclusionary attitudes toward granting social rights to Chinese immigrants who share the same ethnic ancestry with them, we conducted a phone survey to examine four important factors: (1) economic threat; (2) social threat; (3) negative stereotypes; and (4) contact with immigrants. We find that the economic threat—either at the societal or individual level—perceived by respondents does not explain their exclusionary attitudes. The results are consistent with alternative explanations emphasizing cultural and non-economic concerns commonly associated with ethnocentrism.

Keywords
intergroup relations, exclusionary attitudes, China, Hong Kong

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Introduction

Denying immigrants equal entitlement to social rights is one of the most common exclusionary attitudes toward immigrants (Gorodzeisky and Semyonov, 2009). Over the years, scholars have developed sound theories explaining exclusionary attitudes toward immigrants from other ethnic communities. Yet, there is no equally good explanation for similar attitudes developed among individuals and groups that share the same ethnic ancestry. Until now, most studies on attitudes toward new immigrants conducted in America and Europe have been linked with complex issues of racism. It is an implicit assumption in many of these studies that members of the same ethnic category—usually defined by the state—are less likely to develop exclusionary attitudes toward each other because of their common culture and race (Pehrson et al., 2009; Reeskens and Wright, 2013). Although ethnic identities are fluid human constructs that are subject to subjective interpretations, more often than not, the official ethnic categories are treated as though objectively grounded in the human world (Yanow, 2003), thereby leaving inter-group conflicts within these official categories devastatingly unexplored.

There is, however, no doubt that exclusionary attitudes and conflicts can be extremely salient even among individuals and groups that share the same ethnic ancestry (Warren and Troy, 2015). This is particularly true in the age of globalization, in which individuals are less bound by their traditional religious, ethnic and racial identities. Instead, the boundaries of identity are increasingly shaped by social policies and materialistic concerns (Taylor, 1998). Welfare institutions, in particular, are believed to play a key role in identity making because they have significant implications for entitlement to resources and thus social relations (Lewis, 2000). As such, understanding the formation of exclusionary attitudes in an ethnically homogeneous community will not only extend existing studies on these attitudes into a different context, but also advance our understanding of the role of welfare policies in shaping intergroup relations.

Hong Kong offers an excellent case to achieve these objectives. As a former British colony, its border with mainland China was constructed and is maintained for administrative purposes. Unlike other territorial units in which immigrants can easily be identified as members of “other” ethnic or racial groups, the majority of immigrants to Hong Kong come from mainland China, and, according to official accounts, share the same ethnic heritage with the majority of Hong Kong residents (i.e., both are “Chinese”). In fact, many scholars suggest that Hong Kong’s population is predominantly made up of immigrants from mainland China (Lai, 1997; Lam and Liu, 1998; Siu, 2009; So, 2003). According to
the 2011 Population Census, approximately 40 percent of Hong Kong residents were born in mainland China (CSD, 2012).

Despite this apparent ethnic homogeneity, the granting of access to social benefits to new immigrants has been one of the most contentious social issues in Hong Kong. A case in point is the controversy over the inclusion of new immigrants in the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) scheme. As the “last resort” for financial assistance, CSSA is a tax-funded, non-contributory, means-tested cash welfare benefit with a flat rate and re-distributional nature. Before 2004, needy immigrants who had been living in Hong Kong for more than one year were eligible to apply for financial assistance under the scheme, but in January 2004, the Hong Kong government prolonged the residency requirement for CSSA from one year to seven in view of severe fiscal deficit after the Asian financial crisis and the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (HKSAR Government, 2003). Consequently, families with new immigrant members of less than seven years’ residence were rejected from the scheme. The tightening of the CSSA residence requirements sparked intense debate. Some non-government organizations, like the Society for Community Organization, branded the measure discriminatory against new immigrants and thus, in 2008, helped a homeless new immigrant to launch a judicial review of the government’s decision. Although their appeal was dismissed twice by the High Court and the Court of Appeal, in November 2013, it was eventually brought to the city’s top court, the Court of Final Appeal, which subsequently declared the seven-year residency requirement targeting new mainland immigrants unconstitutional. Following the ruling, some local citizens and political parties who opposed the abolishment of the seven-year residency requirement took their anger to the streets, resulting in a series of protests and online campaigns targeting immigrants from mainland China in early 2014.

The objectives of this study are twofold. First, it seeks to examine the level of exclusionary attitudes toward immigrants in Hong Kong. Given the fact that the residency requirement of CSSA was directed specifically toward new immigrants, it provides an ideal opportunity for us to fulfill this objective. We gathered evidence from a representative sample of the Hong Kong population in 2012 through a phone survey, in which we asked our respondents to what extent they agreed with abolishing the seven-year residency requirement. Contrary to what many expected, we found that exclusionary attitudes toward Chinese immigrants are highly prevalent among Hong Kong residents. This conclusion holds true even

1Children were waived from this requirement.
when we compare our data with studies carried out in countries that feature a more complex ethnic composition, such as Sweden and Israel (Gorodzeiksy, 2012; Gorodzeisky and Semyonov, 2009).

The second objective, therefore, is to explain such a high level of objection. Past literature on exclusionary attitudes toward immigrants suggests four prominent explanations: (1) economic threat; (2) social threat and cultural identity; (3) stereotypes and social distance; and (4) contact with new immigrants. In this article, we offer unique tests to assess these explanations. Although each of these explanations has been tested to some extent, this is the first attempt, to our knowledge, to comprehensively test all of these proposed explanations for exclusionary attitudes toward welfare. This is important because examining all of these explanations simultaneously can identify which variables make a unique contribution to anti-immigrant attitudes, which has important policy implications. For example, if contact with immigrants has an independent effect on exclusionary attitudes toward immigrants, then facilitating contact between locals and immigrants would be an effective measure to reduce exclusionary attitudes.

Our logistic regression analysis yields results that present a major challenge for explanations that emphasize economic concerns. In particular, we find that people who are more educated are more likely than the less educated to oppose welfare benefits for recent immigrants. This is inconsistent with conventional interested-based accounts on intergroup relations, which hypothesize that the fear of competition with immigrants for scarce welfare resources will prompt less educated respondents to develop exclusionary attitudes. Furthermore, contrary to the “contact hypothesis” that increased personal contact with immigrants will result in more positive attitudes toward immigrants (Pettigrew, 1998; Powers and Ellison, 1995; Wagner et al., 2006), we find that personal contact with immigrants is not associated with reduced exclusionary attitudes, nor does it mitigate the relationship between negative stereotypes and exclusionary attitudes.

Finally, despite the fact that in official accounts, Hong Kong locals and mainland Chinese are often considered ethnically similar, we find that non-economic concerns commonly associated with ethnocentrism, such as social threat, cultural identity and stereotypes, significantly explain the high level of exclusionary attitudes in Hong Kong. Overall, the results of our analysis call into question the conventional assumption that exclusionary attitude among members of the same ethnic group is low.

Schlueter and Wagner (2008) examined the mutual effect of intergroup contact and perceived group threat on attitudes toward immigrants. We extend their study by connecting these factors to exclusionary attitudes.
Theoretical considerations

According to the 2011 Population Census, 171,322 immigrants from mainland China had resided in Hong Kong for less than seven years (CSD, 2012). The average educational attainment of these recent immigrants is significantly lower than that of the general population. For example, the same census data show that the proportion of recent immigrants who had attended post-secondary education was 16.0 percent, compared to 27.7 percent for the population as a whole (CSD, 2012). Though social scientists have paid increasing attention to attitudes toward welfare in Hong Kong (Wong et al., 2010, 2009), there has been little systematic research thus far on public resentment of immigrants’ eligibility for public welfare benefits in the city. Widely cited studies that examine public attitudes toward the allocation of welfare benefits in other countries have proposed four major explanations: (1) economic threat; (2) social threat and cultural identity; (3) stereotypes and social distance; and (4) contact with new immigrants.

Economic threat

Social scientists have often viewed exclusionary attitudes toward new immigrants as a consequence of perceived economic threat (e.g., competition or fear of competition in the economic labor market) (Bonacich, 1972; Rajzman et al., 2003). Researchers have presented and measured economic threat at two complementary levels. First, economic threat at the societal level reflects a challenge to the interests of all members of the host society (Bobo and Hutchings, 1996; Sniderman et al., 2004). Specifically, the inflow of immigrants may hinder the economic development of the host society or cause lower wages. Researchers have also suggested that locals believe that certain economic resources like jobs “belong” to them, and they perceive immigrants as a threat because they may take jobs away from them. Consequently, locals might express exclusionary attitudes toward immigrants as a defense mechanism. More relevant to this study is the economic threat related to the fiscal burden of public services, including education, healthcare, welfare and public housing (Facchini and Mayda, 2009; Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2010). The more locals perceive an economic threat, the more likely they are to express attitudes that exclude immigrants from access to public welfare.

The second view emphasizes the individual level, reflecting economic threat to the self-interest of locals and competition with immigrants for scarce resources, such as wages, healthcare, public housing, social services and welfare benefits. Such an economic threat rationalizes the exclusionary attitudes against immigrants, especially for social rights. One
underlying premise of this threat is that the locals hold “zero-sum beliefs,”
the notion that as more resources become available to immigrants, less is
available to locals (Esses et al., 1998, 2001). Along this line of argument,
locals with lower education levels or low-level skills are more likely to be
in competition for welfare resources with immigrants, who largely have a
similar background and, as a result, are more likely to hold exclusionary
attitudes (Espenshade and Hempstead, 1996; Raijman and Semyonov,
2004). Similarly, those who receive CSSA are more likely to hold exclu-
sionary attitudes toward immigrants. Moreover, feelings of economic
depression (Hernes and Knudsen, 1992) and pessimism about the state
of the national economy (Chander and Tsai, 2001; Citrin et al., 1997;
Pantoja, 2006; Sides and Citrin, 2007) may exacerbate the effect of eco-
nomic threat on exclusionary attitudes. We hypothesize that receiving
CSSA, a negative assessment of one’s personal financial situation, a nega-
tive assessment of the economy of the host society, and education level are
not only associated with exclusionary attitudes, but also moderate the link
between economic threat and attitudes toward allocating welfare to new
immigrants.

**Threat to cultural homogeneity**

An alternative explanation of exclusionary attitudes toward immigrants is
the social threat they pose to the cultural homogeneity of the host society
(Gorodzeiksy, 2012; Raijman and Semyonov, 2004; Sniderman et al., 2004).
Specifically, immigrants are often perceived to violate the traditional
values, norms, morals and beliefs shared by locals. The discrepancies
between locals and immigrants in those cultural domains may be per-
ceived by the former as a social threat. We expect that those who perceive
a greater social threat from immigrants may be less willing to grant them
social rights. Although social threat has traditionally been examined in the
context of intergroup conflicts (e.g., see Sniderman et al., 2004), it is also
highly relevant to exclusionary attitudes. This is because social welfare
programs are powerful distributive institutions that shape the allocation
of both welfare resources and group membership (Lewis, 2000; Mewes
and Mau, 2013). In many welfare states, eligibility for welfare benefits
symbolizes the full attainment of citizenship or group membership.
Consequently, as Chambon and Bellamy (2015) have demonstrated, fac-
tors that shape intergroup relations may also determine the level of exclu-
sionary attitudes.

The impact of social threat on exclusionary attitudes toward
immigrants may be aggravated by strong national identity. Although
Hong Kong locals and immigrants from mainland China are both officially
considered ethnic "Chinese" and share the same national identity, due to the long British colonial rule prior to 1997 and the subsequent "one country, two systems" policy, Hong Kong locals developed a distinct local identity. In the political and economic realms, there was a growing undercurrent of opposition to increasing mainland influence among Hong Kong citizens. In fact, scholars such as Baker (1993) have even argued that the Hong Kong population is so distinctive that it is neither "Chinese nor British." Consequently, exclusionary attitudes may not only be linked to non-economic factors, but may even be more prevalent among people with a strong attachment to Hong Kong or greater pride in being a "Hong Konger."

Negative stereotypes and social distance

Sociological and psychological research has provided theoretical reasoning and empirical evidence that negative stereotypes and tendencies that increase social distance from immigrants increase exclusionary attitudes (Gorodzeisky and Semyonov, 2009; Stephan et al., 1999). Negative stereotypes of immigrants might serve as a basis for negative expectations about their behavior (Hamilton et al., 1990). To the extent that people's expectations are negative, they are likely to reject the granting of social rights to immigrants. Previous studies have documented the popular perception among Hong Kong locals that immigrants are more a liability than an asset (Ng et al., 2015). As a group, they are often regarded as unproductive, lazy and uneducated. These negative stereotypes may lead locals to avoid immigrants—in other words, a tendency of social distancing from immigrants.

Following the logic of these theories and the results of this body of research, it is reasonable to suggest that negative stereotypes and social distance might justify the denial of equal access to welfare benefits for new immigrants, in some cases, regardless of the sense of threat posed by immigrants. In other words, negative stereotypes and a tendency toward social distance should be positively associated with exclusionary attitudes toward immigrants.

The contact hypothesis

Exclusionary attitudes could be perceived as a form of discrimination because they judge people not as individuals but based on their group membership. However, personal contact with immigrants might give people first-hand information on cultural beliefs and values, lifestyles, and experiences, which may serve as a counterbalance to negative
stereotypes (Powers and Ellison, 1995). Decades of studies have firmly established the link between intergroup contact and positive attitudes (Pettigrew, 1998; Wagner et al., 2006). Contact in the domains of friendship, workplace and neighborhood has been shown to reduce negative attitudes toward immigrants, particularly when contact is voluntary and cooperative and occurs under conditions of equal status (McLaren, 2003; Schneider, 2008; Wagner et al., 2006). No study to date has specifically investigated the role of contact with immigrants and exclusionary attitudes toward them in the allocation of social rights. However, based on the aforementioned findings, we anticipate that Hong Kong residents’ contact with immigrants is negatively associated with their exclusionary attitudes and that it could moderate the impact of economic threat, social threat and negative stereotype on exclusionary attitudes.

Methodology

Data collection

The main analysis used a telephone survey conducted in February 2012, the targets of which were adults aged 18 and older who were Hong Kong residents and Cantonese speakers. The sampling procedure involved two steps. First, a fixed set of telephone numbers was randomly drawn from the latest residential telephone directories as “seed” numbers, and another set was generated by randomly adding or subtracting one or two to the numbers (the “plus/minus one/two” method) to capture new and unlisted numbers. Second, the respondent in each household was asked to participate in this study if he or she fulfilled the requirements of the sample above. If there was more than one potential respondent in a household, one was randomly selected for interview using the “next birthday” rule, which selects the person whose next birthday is soonest. All interviewers were well trained and monitored by well-qualified supervisors and real-time camera surveillance. All interviews were conducted anonymously. The sample size was 1,024, with a response rate of 65.3 percent. A summary of the characteristics of the respondents is provided in Table 1.

Measures

The survey included a question on attitudes toward the allocation of welfare benefits to immigrants and attitudes toward immigrants from mainland China. Since not all Hong Kong locals are aware of the seven-year residency requirement for CSSA, we asked respondents whether they
knew about it. The dependent variable was: “Do you agree or disagree that the seven-year residency requirement for CSSA should be abolished?” The five response categories in the original survey were “strongly agree” (1); “agree” (2); “neither agree nor disagree” (3); “disagree” (4); and “strongly disagree” (5). This item is an imperfect indicator because respondents were not asked how much they were willing to pay (e.g., in tax increases) for the abolishment of this residency requirement. Asking for welfare preference without a “price tag,” however, is a common issue in public policy research that relies on survey data (Goerres and Tepe, 2012).

Analysis consisted of bivariate correlations and logistic regression covering the four groups of variables. The first set of variables contains economic threat, which was measured with three items assessing the degree to which respondents agreed that “Average wages are generally brought down by immigrants from the mainland,” “Immigrants here generally harm the economic prospects of Hong Kong,” and “Immigrants from the mainland generally take jobs away for Hong Kongers.” All items were rated on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”), and the scores for all items were summed, with higher scores indicating greater perceived economic threat (Green, 2009). The moderating variables of economic threat include assessment of Hong Kong’s economy, personal financial situation, and CSSA

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<th>Table 1. Characteristics of respondents.</th>
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<td>Age group</td>
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<td>18–29</td>
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<td>30–59</td>
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<tr>
<td>60+</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
<td>Born in Hong Kong</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
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<td>Primary or below</td>
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<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
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<tr>
<td>Matriculation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Post-secondary</td>
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<td>Degree or above</td>
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Note: N = 1,024.
participation. Respondents were asked (1) to what extent they were satisfied or dissatisfied with Hong Kong’s overall economy on a five-point scale from 1 (“very satisfied”) to 5 (“very dissatisfied”); (2) which of the following descriptions came closest to how they felt about their household income (1 = “living comfortably”; 2 = “coping”; 3 = “finding it difficult”; 4 = “finding it very difficult”); (3) whether they currently received CSSA; and (4) education level (elementary school and below; lower secondary; upper secondary (matriculation); some university; and completed university). To facilitate statistical analysis, we recoded education into dummy variables.

The second group of variables represents social threat and cultural identity. Social threat was assessed with two items: “In general, immigrants from the mainland are good for the cultural life of Hong Kong” and “Hong Kong has become a better place to live because of immigration from the mainland.” These two items were rated on a five-point scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” (Green, 2009). The moderating variable of social threat is cultural identification, which was measured by one item: “How proud are you of being a Hong Konger?” which was rated on a five-point scale (Pehrson et al., 2009).

The third category of variables captures negative stereotypes, social distance, and contact with immigrants from the mainland. For stereotypes, respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed that immigrants from the mainland are hardworking, with reference to the same five-point scale above. To measure social distance, we asked respondents to evaluate how much they would mind if an immigrant from the mainland was married to a close relative or appointed as their boss on a five-point scale ranging from “not mind at all” (1) to “mind a lot” (5). To assess respondents’ contact with immigrants from the mainland, we asked two items: “Do you have any friends who are immigrants from the mainland?” and “Do you have any colleagues at work who are immigrants from the mainland?” The items were rated on a three-point scale, with “no, none at all” (0), “yes, a few” (1), and “yes, several” (2).

Finally, the last set of variables included basic demographic variables: gender, age in three groups (18–29, 30–59, and 60+), and place of birth (Hong Kong or not). Table 2 reports the descriptive statistics of the variables used in our analysis. We calculated the Cronbach’s alpha coefficients to assess the internal consistency of the items of the variables developed from summated scales. The relatively lower alpha coefficient (0.58) for social contact was expected because contact with colleagues, unlike that with friends, is partly shaped by career concerns.
Research findings

Bivariate analysis

Before the data analysis, variables’ missing values were imputed by means of the maximum likelihood method.\(^3\) The results showed that 72.9 percent of respondents disagreed (35.7 percent) or strongly disagreed (37.2 percent) with abolishing the seven-year residency requirement for CSSA, while only about 21 percent agreed (15.9 percent) or strongly agreed (5.1 percent). Table 3 shows the correlations between the dependent and independent variables. Agreement with continuing the seven-year residency requirement was significantly correlated with six variables: assessment of the overall Hong Kong economy, receipt of CSSA, social threat, cultural identity, stereotypes and education. Specifically, people who were not satisfied with Hong Kong’s economy, did not receive CSSA, perceived a higher social threat from immigrants from the mainland, and were proud of being Hong Kongers did not agree that immigrants from the mainland were hard working, and those who had more education tended to support the seven-year residency requirement.

\(^3\)The appendix lists the percentage of missing values for all variables. With the exception of the dependent variable, they all had less than 5 percent missing values.
Logistic regression analyses

To formulate the simplest model of exclusionary attitudes, the logistic regression model only included variables that were significantly correlated with attitudes about the seven-year residency requirement, controlling for socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents.\(^4\) Again, we recoded the variable education into four dummy variables, with the lowest level of educational attainment (primary school or below) as the reference category. The results of the analysis, which are shown in Table 4, basically confirm the pattern that we found in the bivariate analysis. Clearly, people

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Logistic regression was performed because most respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the repeal of the residency requirement.

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Table 3. Bivariate correlations with agreement that the seven-year residency requirement of CSSA should not be abolished.

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<th></th>
<th>Correlation Coefficient</th>
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<tr>
<td>Economic threat</td>
<td>0.05</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assessment of Hong Kong’s overall economy</td>
<td>0.11***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal financial situation</td>
<td>−0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receipt of CSSA</td>
<td>−0.09**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social threat</td>
<td>0.13***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural identity</td>
<td>0.10**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stereotype</td>
<td>0.15***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social distance</td>
<td>0.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contact with new arrivals</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>−0.05</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.03</td>
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<tr>
<td>Born in Hong Kong</td>
<td>0.03</td>
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<td>Education:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Primary or below</td>
<td>−0.10**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>Matriculation</td>
<td>0.03</td>
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<tr>
<td>Post-secondary</td>
<td>0.05</td>
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<tr>
<td>University or above</td>
<td>0.06</td>
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***\(p < 0.001\), **\(p < 0.01\).
who assessed Hong Kong’s economy negatively, perceived a higher social threat from immigrants, had a strong Hong Konger identity, held more negative stereotypes of immigrants, and had more education were more likely to disagree with abolishing the seven-year residency requirement. At the same time, current CSSA recipients were more likely to support abolishment.

### Results

This study assessed the exclusionary attitudes toward the seven-year residency requirement for welfare benefits in Hong Kong and identified its correlates. Doing so allows us to evaluate the level of exclusionary attitudes among individuals who share the same ethnic heritage, and to simultaneously examine four prominent explanations in the social policy literature for such attitudes. Data obtained in this investigation can thus contribute to a better understanding of the complex mechanisms

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 4. Logistic regression model of attitudes toward the seven-year residency requirement of CSSA.</th>
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<tr>
<td>DV: Agreement that the seven-year residency requirement should not be abolished</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assessment of Hong Kong’s overall economy</td>
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<td>Receipt of CSSA</td>
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<td>Cultural identity</td>
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<td>Stereotype</td>
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<td>Education (Ref: Primary or below)</td>
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<td>Gender (Ref: Male)</td>
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<td>Place of birth (Ref: Hong Kong)</td>
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Notes: Pseudo R2: 0.045; ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05.
associated with the inclination to exclude immigrants from the welfare system. In relation to the level of exclusionary attitudes, the data reveal that about 73 percent of the general public would deny granting welfare cash benefits to immigrants. This is a high level of objection even when compared with countries that have a more complex ethnic composition. In a study of European countries, the level of objection to allocation of equal social rights, in general, to foreigners varied from 5 percent (in Sweden) to 37 percent (in Switzerland), much lower than in Hong Kong (Gorodzeisky and Semyonov, 2009). Similarly, in a recent study in Israel, only about one-third of respondents thought that the state should not grant foreign workers welfare services (Gorodzeiksy, 2012).

The results are consistent with studies that identify important cleavages between Hong Kongers and mainland Chinese (Chun, 1996; Ku, 2004; Sautman, 2004). Although Hong Kong was handed over to China in 1997, under the “one country, two systems” policy, the city has continued to enjoy a high degree of autonomy in formulating its own monetary and welfare policies. These policies structure how resources are distributed and thus contribute to the formation of a specific set of values that can divide an ethnic community or create a new identity. CSSA is likely to be one of these policies because in Hong Kong, receiving CSSA has long been portrayed by the media as a violation of the city’s core values of self-reliance and work ethic (Wong and Lou, 2010). In a phone survey conducted in Hong Kong, 60 percent of respondents stated that they would only apply for CSSA if all other possible means were exhausted (Wong and Lou, 2010). The image of CSSA recipients in the general public has been linked to abuse and fraud, and they are portrayed as the undeserving poor (Choi, 2000). It is therefore possible that the high level of exclusionary attitudes is a result of negative attitudes toward welfare in general. Although in this study, we did not measure respondents’ attitudes toward welfare, nor did we examine whether they perceived a difference between new arrivals and locals with regard to the values of self-reliance and work ethic, we found significant correlation between negative stereotypes and exclusionary attitude, which we will discuss later.

**Economic threat**

This study concurs with previous literature (Chander and Tsai, 2001; Citrin et al., 1997; Pantoja, 2006; Sides and Citrin, 2007) to the extent that pessimism about the economy is associated with exclusionary attitudes. However, the finding that education level is positively related to exclusionary attitudes provides new insights into certain influential
accounts of intergroup relations, which argue that education can enhance one’s ethnic and racial tolerance and one’s appreciation of cultural diversity, thereby leading to a higher level of support for immigrants (Citrin et al., 1997; Chander and Tsai, 2001; Dustmann and Preston, 2007; Fetzer, 2000; Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2007). Further studies must be conducted to explain divergence. Nevertheless, given the widespread emphasis on the values of self-reliance and work ethic in Hong Kong discussed above, it is highly possible that the less educated find it easier to understand why new arrivals need such financial assistance from the government (i.e., circumstances—in addition to personal attributes—contribute to their financial needs).

More importantly, the positive association between education and exclusionary attitudes serves as powerful evidence against the association between individual-level economic interests and exclusionary attitudes. In fact, it is surprising to find that individuals with more education are more likely to hold exclusionary attitudes than those of lower educational achievement (the disadvantaged). This is surprising because the latter group is most likely to compete for welfare benefits with immigrants, the majority of whom also have lower education levels. According to the “competitive threat” model, disadvantaged locals should develop a higher level of exclusionary attitudes toward new immigrants (Espenshade and Hempstead, 1996; Rajman and Semyonov, 2004). This discrepancy suggests that the disadvantaged may not really perceive the welfare system as a “zero-sum” game in which they need to compete with new arrivals for limited resources (Esses et al., 1998, 2001). Of course, it is again possible that the less educated generally enjoy fewer opportunities to accumulate wealth and earn income than their more educated counterparts, and are thus less likely to see the recipient of CSSA as undeserving. Either way, our findings present a major challenge to the current uses of individual-level economic threat in explaining exclusionary attitudes toward immigrants.

In addition, contrary to previous research suggesting that economic threat at the societal level intensifies exclusionary attitudes, our study found no association between them. One possible reason for the discrepancy is that our study focuses on means-tested access to cash welfare benefits, while the previous comparable study (Raijman and Semyonov, 2004) was broader, including basic social rights such as access to healthcare, housing, education, welfare and a minimum wage. This suggests that exclusionary attitudes may vary across different types of social rights. To evaluate this possibility, future studies must be undertaken to identify determinants of exclusionary attitudes toward granting access to different types of social rights in Hong Kong.
Social threat

Our findings suggest that the perception that immigrants pose a threat to the general population in the social arena leads to an increase in the level of objections to the allocation of welfare to immigrants. These findings are consistent with the theoretical view of exclusionary attitudes toward immigrants being a consequence of the perception of a threat posed by the minority group to the interests of majority groups in cultural and social domains (Gorodzeiksy, 2012; Sniderman et al., 2004). Moreover, we have found that cultural identity is significantly related to exclusionary attitude because it can be an indicator of nativism, which leads to negative attitudes toward immigrants. Of course, cultural identity is a complex construct that also involves the social norms and values of a culture, which are not captured by our measure of cultural identity. Therefore, the moderating role of cultural identity could be examined with a better assessment tool in future studies.

Negative stereotypes, social distance and the contact hypothesis

We also found that, when the general public does not attribute positive characteristics to immigrants (in this case, the attribute of being hard working), they are more likely to express exclusionary attitudes. This result is in line with a recent study which found that negative stereotypes were associated with excluding foreign workers in Israel from social rights (Gorodzeiksy, 2012). However, contrary to the same recent study, which found social distance to be significantly related to an exclusionary attitude toward foreign workers in Israel (Gorodzeiksy, 2012), no association between social distance and exclusionary attitude is found in our study. There are two possible reasons. One is that Gorodzeisky’s study focused on foreign workers but not immigrants; and the other is that foreign workers in Israel have a multi-ethnic background as they come from Romania, Thailand, the Philippines, India, China and Turkey.

Furthermore, we found that personal contact with immigrants was not associated with reduced exclusionary attitudes, nor did it mitigate the relationship between negative stereotypes and exclusionary attitudes. This finding is at odds with the contact hypothesis. It may be the case that the immigrants whom locals meet in their workplaces and the friends they meet in their social circles do not provide first-hand information on why new arrivals need financial support from the government. In that case, natives would not appreciate the difficult situation poor immigrants face each day. In other words, if locals were able to make contact with this
vulnerable group of new arrivals, they could empathize and understand why new arrivals need such welfare assistance, and not blame them for it. Another reason may be due to the fact that whether or not social encounter generates a counterbalance to negative stereotypes and produce a positive influence on the illusory correlation between immigrants and negative stereotypes depends on the nature of the encounter. Our measure of social contact does not capture the quality of encounter, which may partly explain the negative findings obtained in this study. Although Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) suggested that interpersonal contact may still reduce negative stereotypes even when its quality is low, other studies (e.g., Paolini et al., 2010) have shown that negative contacts can actually intensify intergroup conflicts. Future studies must be undertaken to examine whether the effect of social contact on exclusionary attitude is manifest when the measurement of social contact includes the quality of contact.

In short, our findings indicated that assessment of Hong Kong’s overall economy, receiving CSSA, social threat, cultural identity, anti-immigrant stereotypes and education are independent and unique correlates of exclusionary attitudes. As one of the first attempts to examine exclusionary attitudes in Hong Kong, we relied upon a limited set of constructs to test each of the four important factors contributing to exclusionary attitude. Further studies may identify other potential moderators that we did not include in this study.

Conclusion

In this article, we have presented findings that suggest that exclusionary attitudes toward granting new arrivals access to welfare are strong in Hong Kong, despite the fact that these new immigrants share the same ethnic ancestry with the majority of citizens in the city. Such attitudes are significantly shaped by, as our analyses suggested, the respondents’ assessment of Hong Kong’s overall economy, social threat, cultural identity, education level, anti-immigrant stereotypes and receipt of welfare. To be more specific, those who are dissatisfied with Hong Kong’s economy, perceived a higher level of social threat, have a higher education level, and do not receive CSSA are more likely to hold exclusionary attitudes toward immigrants.

The growing hostility toward mainland Chinese in Hong Kong has caught the attention of many observers. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of this phenomenon by providing original evidence on the exclusionary attitudes of Hong Kong residents toward immigrants from mainland China. It not only challenges the reliability of using traditional ethnic categories in predicting exclusionary attitudes, but also sheds light on the role of welfare policies in identity making. The negative
correlation between receiving CSSA and exclusionary attitudes, in parti-
cular, suggests that the welfare program has played an important role in
strengthening the boundary between Hong Kong citizens and mainland
Chinese.

Since the residency requirement of the CSSA targeted immigrants only,
it is not possible in the present context to eliminate the possibility that the
respondents actually held the same attitude toward allocation of welfare
to immigrants and non-immigrants. Therefore, although the findings of
this article confirm that the level of exclusionary attitudes is high in
Hong Kong, they should not be seen as evidence of intergroup discrimina-
tion.

It is widely known that exclusionary attitudes among locals can signifi-
cantly undermine the integration of new immigrants. Previous studies in
the USA have shown that receipt of welfare facilitates the successful inte-
gration of new immigrants into the host society (Van Hook and Bean,
2009). In Hong Kong, the risk of child poverty was three times greater
among the children of migrant families (at least one immigrant parent)
than among those of local families (both parents local): 36 percent and 12
percent, respectively (Chou, 2013). The prevalence of exclusionary atti-
dudes and rejection of the allocation of welfare benefits to Chinese immi-
grants in Hong Kong is likely to pose a critical challenge for the current
cohort of immigrants in their attempt to successfully integrate into Hong
Kong society, especially the second generation. By exploring the determin-
ants of the public’s exclusionary attitudes toward immigrants from main-
land China, this article provides solid evidence that such attitudes can be
extremely salient even when the immigrants and locals concerned share
the same ethnic ancestry. If the Hong Kong government were convinced
that the provision of welfare to immigrants in their early stage of settle-
ment in Hong Kong can facilitate their integration rather than allowing
them to become dependent on welfare, measures should be devised to
remove exclusionary attitudes, particularly among those with higher edu-
cation levels. Moreover, social threat and stereotypes are changeable and
should be target factors for change. In fact, studies have already shown
that new immigrants tend to stay on the welfare payroll only for a short
period of time (Van Hook and Bean, 2009) and do not, therefore, neces-
sarily become dependent on welfare. The Hong Kong government has to
consider how to correct the negative stereotype of new arrivals as not hard
working through effective measures like enlightenment programs and
skill-based programs (Stephan, 2011).

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Declaration of conflicting interests

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References


**Appendix**

Percentage of missing values

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<tr>
<td>Assessment of Hong Kong’s overall economy</td>
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<td>Receipt of CSSA</td>
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<td>Contact with new arrivals</td>
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