

‘A lit-up city’: Hong Kong and the ‘future’ of the Sindhi business diaspora

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In this paper, I explore the emergence of Hong Kong as a diaspora node for the Hindu Sindhi business community. Emerging from a dispersed merchant community, the Hindu Sindhi diaspora in Hong Kong grew through multiple movements and mobilities, including migration for trade, displacement during the 1947 Partition, and mobilities for marriage, work and business. Discourse around Asian migrations calls for interrogation of the hegemonies of center and margins, and exploration of the lateral, decentered and rhizomatic connectivities that comprise migration and diaspora. In this vein, I explore the emergence of Hong Kong as a Sindhi diasporic node. Specifically, I suggest that an engagement with diasporic ‘futures’ enables us to rethink linear connectivities between homeland and hostland for this community. Sindhi migration to Hong Kong was shaped by various unforeseen temporal junctures, including, but not limited to colonial merchant networks, the 1947 Partition, and changing immigration regimes in the 1960s and 70s. I explore the ways in which ‘Sindhi futures’ coalesce and thicken around Hong Kong - through the flows and movement of goods, aspiration, and desires in particular temporal contexts, alongside the emergence of Hong Kong as a ‘global metropolis’. Using ethnographic data and in-depth interviews (conducted between 2019-21), I frame and contextualize the arrival and flows of Sindhi merchants to and through Hong Kong – thus far, a relatively under-explored migratory trajectory – through literature on mobilities and futurity.

In this paper I engage with Sindhi mobilities through the lens of the future – specifically, I explore how Hong Kong became a ‘futural place’ for the Sindhi diaspora – a ‘lit-up city’, to and through which desires, goods and people flowed and coalesced. However, these flows were not uniform or uninterrupted. Sindhi residents of Hong Kong also experienced a series of crisis temporalities, at what I call ‘temporal junctures’ – such as wartime and the Japanese Occupation, Partition, the 1997 Handover of Hong Kong, and more recently, the pro-democracy movement, and the Covid-19 pandemic. In these moments, or at these junctures, the futural potential of Hong Kong was destabilised, or reframed. This business community which had invested in businesses, property, families, and futures in Hong Kong, experienced various forms of immobility, or ‘moorings’, which tied them in place, or shaped their migratory trajectories and drew on their capital, as well as their visions of the future, to navigate these moments. I frame the varied ways in which diaspora actors navigated such temporal junctures, and ‘oriented’ towards or invested in, futures in Hong Kong or elsewhere. For some, India emerges as one such ‘elsewhere’ - but as a place of futural potential rather of past or nostalgic connection - through investments and retirement plans. Thus I suggest that diasporic futural imaginings, across temporal and spatial contexts, upset linear understandings of diaspora temporalities and connectivities and invite us to rethink the core concepts of homeland and nostalgia. Through the case of this community, I argue that diaspora and migration emerge as much from displacement and a shared past, as the turn towards an uncertain future.