Choosing 'good migrants' for 'Global Britain'
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The new visa for Hong Kongers is framed as 'a haven' for Britain's former colonial subjects but has 'undoubtedly colonialist overtones' warns a Lancaster University professor.

Professor in Public Sociology Michaela Benson says the new Hong Kong British National (Overseas) Visa, launched in January this year, shows how an 'anachronistic and ambiguous legal status, an afterlife of an empire that, until now, had been glaringly empty of significance for its holders', has been infused with new meaning.

The new visa route has been created in response to the imposition of National Security Law in Hong Kong, which the UK considers violates agreements made between the UK and China at the time of the Hong Kong handover in 1997, when the BN(O) status was uniquely awarded to the people of Hong Kong.

The introduction of the new visa—a bespoke route for some Hong Kongers to migrate to and settle in the UK, rests upon this residual status.

The visa will enable BN(O)s and their dependent family members to live in the UK for up to five years. They will then be able to apply for permanent settlement and, in turn, British citizenship (subject to associated eligibility criteria).

Writing in the journal Current Sociology, Professor Benson describes the new visa as the latest chapter in the longer history of Britain's relationship to the people of Hong Kong in which 'exception has always been the norm' - a case apart in the broader context of Britain's migration and citizenship regime, with the Hong Kongers emerging as the 'perennial exception to the rule'.

Her article, Hong Kongers and the coloniality of British citizenship from decolonisation to 'Global Britain' questions what the rhetoric of the 'good migrants' for global Britain'—at the heart of the promotion of the new bespoke Hong Kong Visa—conceals from view.

"Rather than a case apart in the context of increasingly restrictive immigration controls, the renewal of Britain's obligations, commitments, and responsibilities to the people of Hong Kong through this visa scheme provide further evidence of the enduring colonial entanglements in the formation of 'Global Britain' and the new immigration plan," she says.

The HK BN(O) visa is the latest articulation of a longer history with the 2021 provisions singled out as an example of the UK Government's 'fair and generous' approach to immigration, which Professor Benson adds, is seemingly at odds with an immigration regime that the government claim is 'tough on immigration'.

"This is not an easy story to tell," she says. "Along with many other people, part of me wants to believe that the HK BN(O) Visa is, indeed, an exceptional act that offers hope not only to those seeking to leave Hong Kong but also to those of us staunchly opposed to the increasingly exclusionary and brutal conditions of the UK's migration governance, legislation, and policy."
"However, by recognizing the longstanding presentation of the Hong Kongers as exception, new sight lines into the coloniality of British citizenship are opened which reveal that not all is as it seems."

The response in Hong Kong, she adds, was mixed, with some welcoming the announcement and others criticizing the UK for interfering and for its lack of confidence in Hong Kong’s future.

"Its timing makes the new visa the ideal poster child for a 'Global Britain' that has 'taken back control' of its borders," says Professor Benson.

"Government announcements and media reports about the scheme recycle longstanding stereotypes that present the Hong Kong Chinese as hardworking and entrepreneurial, a ready-made model minority who should be welcomed with open arms.

"A bespoke scheme such as this demonstrates that the Government are now in a position to choose which particular migrants will be beneficial to 'Global Britain'."

She said it also allowed Britain to flex its muscles on the international stage in the wake of Brexit.

She added: "This revitalisation of Britain's interest in its self-claimed moral responsibilities, obligations, and commitments to the people of Hong Kong has further significance in the context of Britain's post-Brexit position on the world stage.

"Through this lens, its provisions for the Hong Kongers emerge as the exception that proves the rule that Britain has taken back control of its borders and is able to pick and choose who might be 'good migrants' for 'Global Britain'."

**More information:** Michaela Benson, Hong Kongers and the coloniality of British citizenship from decolonisation to 'Global Britain', *Current Sociology* (2021). DOI: 10.1177/00113921211048530