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To cite this article: Shen Yang, Bo Miao & Alfred M. Wu (2020): Immigration and public attitudes towards social assistance: evidence from Hong Kong, Journal of Economic Policy Reform, DOI: [10.1080/17487870.2020.1760102](https://doi.org/10.1080/17487870.2020.1760102)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17487870.2020.1760102>



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Published online: 13 Jul 2020.



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Immigration and public attitudes towards social assistance: evidence from Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

The paper investigates the puzzling phenomenon of why Hong Kong citizens have much lower support for increasing spending on social assistance when all other welfare programs have been favored by local residents. With a random sampling survey, we find that citizens' support towards raising the requirement of immigration is negatively correlated with their support for social assistance (the CSSA scheme). This study highlights that the perception of "who benefits" will influence citizens' support for welfare spending. The Hong Kong story enriches the debate about the impact of citizens' attitudes towards immigration on welfare spending against a backdrop of deglobalization and anti-immigration.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 6 March 2019
Accepted 21 April 2020

KEYWORDS

Immigration;
deglobalization; public
attitudes; poverty;
Hong Kong; China

Policy Highlights

- An influx of immigrants could be negatively associated with the public support for social assistance spending.
- The perception of who benefits from social assistance affects citizens' support for welfare spending.
- Immigration policy has significant socio-political implications in other policy arenas.

Introduction

The changing, turbulent world requires both the state and citizens to rethink the role of state assistance and income redistribution. In many countries, rising income inequality and intergenerational poverty highlight the importance of social assistance. However, fluid, ambivalent public opinion towards welfare programs, particularly after the austerity measures introduced in the wake of the 2008–2009 Global Financial Crisis, has made it difficult for policy-makers in many countries to orchestrate and improve social assistance programs. Immigration associated with globalization has further complicated the situation. Although bifurcated, exclusionary public attitudes towards social assistance have been documented in many contexts, we can gain a nuanced understanding by using the case of Hong Kong in the East Asian context.

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The “East Asian Miracle” after World War II has drawn significant attention. Scholars have examined economic and political developments in the region; these studies usually cover Japan, and then South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. More recently, mainland China has been included in this field of research. It is further argued that East Asia may possess a distinctive welfare regime. Holliday (2000) argues that East Asian economies may all share features of a productivist regime, in which social policy is strictly subordinated to the goal of economic development. The productivist regime may be associated with income inequality. Hong Kong is a small and developed economy at the high end of income inequality in the region (You 1998). Hong Kong’s Gini Coefficient was 0.518 in 1996 (Census and Statistics Department of Hong Kong 2007), and then reached 0.533 in 2006, followed by a slight increase to 0.539 in 2016 (Census and Statistics Department of Hong Kong 2017). In contrast, the Gini Coefficient in Japan was 0.339 in 2015, and that in South Korea was 0.355 in 2016 (OECD 2020). Hong Kong’s welfare regime is further classified as facilitative: social rights are minimal, stratification effects are highly limited, and market is prioritized (Holliday 2000). Hong Kong citizens are assumed to be influenced by East Asian Confucian values that highlight self-reliance. However, in our fast-moving, globalized world, more empirical research is warranted to examine Hong Kong citizens’ attitudes towards income redistribution. As Hong Kong is deeply embedded in the global political economy, it could serve as an ideal place to study citizens’ changing attitudes towards redistribution policy.

After the handover of sovereignty from the United Kingdom to China in 1997, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government has generally maintained the *laissez-faire* economic policies inherited from colonial times. Furthermore, the social welfare system in Hong Kong is largely residual and falls short of a full-fledged welfare state (Wong 2008). The main social assistance program in Hong Kong, the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) scheme, takes the form of tax-funded and means-tested cash welfare benefits. Financial assistance from the CSSA scheme is intentionally kept at a low level, to avoid work disincentives and welfare dependency.¹ In 2019, the standard rate for an able-bodied adult under 60 is as low as HK\$2,525 per month (about US\$322), with HK\$1,835 rent subsidies (around US\$235). Recipients can barely survive on this amount in Hong Kong, which is one of the most expensive cities across the world. The social welfare system in Hong Kong assumes that citizens possess an ethos of self-reliance that may constrain the demands for social benefits. Yet, recent research has shown that there has been a significant change in attitudes among Hong Kong residents towards social welfare, with the majority of citizens believing that the government should improve income redistribution to reduce economic inequality (Wu and Chou 2017). The change in public attitudes towards welfare is probably due to increasing poverty and widening income gaps amid the phenomenal economic growth and huge financial surplus that Hong Kong has experienced in recent years (Lau 2015; Wong 2017).

Our random sampling survey, conducted in 2017, supports previous research which suggests that Hong Kong citizens now have a strong desire for more welfare spending, but citizens’ attitudes towards spending on social assistance (the CSSA scheme) are puzzling. A comparison of attitudes towards the CSSA scheme and other welfare expenditure demonstrates a striking phenomenon (Table 1). While an overwhelming majority of respondents support increases in expenditure in general welfare, public

health, education, retirement welfare, public housing, and assistance to children in poverty, only 35.9% of respondents support an increase of CSSA spending, 42.7% of respondents believe that social assistance expenditure through the CSSA scheme should be kept at the same level, and 16.7% of respondents support the reduction of spending on the CSSA scheme. By contrast, only 1–3% of respondents favor a decrease in spending on public health, education, retirement welfare, public housing, and children’s welfare. It should also be noted that both universal welfare programs, such as retirement welfare, and “selective” means-tested welfare spending on, for example, support for children from low-income families, receive high levels of support from the respondents. The results of this comparison are bewildering. Our research question therefore naturally arises: Why is there such little support for increasing spending on CSSA, given that Hong Kong’s CSSA has been widely known to be kept at a low level while considering the general trend of favoring more welfare spending?

Our study highlights the influence of public attitudes towards immigration regarding support for social assistance (the CSSA scheme in Hong Kong). After the handover in 1997, the Hong Kong SAR government has maintained the border with mainland China in accordance with the principle of “one country, two systems”; mainland citizens must obtain a permit to visit and emigrate to Hong Kong. Statistics show that the inflow of immigrants to Hong Kong is predominantly from mainland China (Chan and Chou 2016). A 2016 government report indicates that 2.1 million of the population of the city were born in mainland China, with a total population of 7.3 million in that year (according to the Basic Law of Hong Kong, if Chinese newcomers stay in Hong Kong for seven consecutive years, they can obtain permanent Hong Kong residency) (Census and Statistics Department of Hong Kong 2018). One major institutional arrangement allowing immigrants from mainland China to move to Hong Kong is the one-way permit. With a quota of 150 people a day, it is primarily targeted at family reunions, especially for mainland Chinese women who marry Hong Kong men (Chiu and Choi 2019; So 2003). From 1997 to 2018, 1,032,598 mainland citizens entered Hong Kong through the one-way permit.² The latest government data shows that, in the year of 2018, 42,331 immigrants from mainland China entered Hong Kong through the one-way permit.³ Research shows that, when mainland immigrants enter Hong Kong, they are less likely to be employed and earn less even if employed when compared with the native population (Chiu, Choi, and Ting 2005; Chou 2013; Zhang and Wu 2011). Research also shows that the children of migrants tend to do less well in academic performance compared to the natives, but there are no differences in academic performance once

Table 1. Comparison of citizens’ attitudes towards welfare spending programs (%).

	Welfare	CSSA	Health	Education	Retirement Welfare	Housing	Children
Increase	68.2	35.9	85.5	76.8	74.6	83.4	78.4
Same level	22.5	42.7	11.8	18.9	16.8	11.3	15.0
Decrease	4.8	16.7	1.3	1.5	2.3	2.4	2.7
Don’t know	4.5	4.6	1.3	2.8	6.2	2.9	3.8
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Note: N = 1002. The source of the data comes from the author’s Project of Citizens’ Attitudes towards Income Redistribution. For comparison purposes, we grouped 5 “largely increase” and 4 “slightly increase” into the category of “increasing the expenditure” and 2 “slightly reduce” and 1 “largely reduce” into the category of “reducing the expenditure”.

controlling the parental education and parent-child communication (Zhang, Nie, and Xu 2019). Lee, Ng and Chou's (2016) study illustrates the way in which Hong Kong citizens have a strong exclusionary attitude towards granting immigrants access to welfare. Research also shows that the immigrants are more likely to approve the political and economic status quo, and less likely to vote for pan-democratic opposition parties (Wong, Ma, and Lam 2018)

In recent years, there have been substantial media reports on cases in which immigrants are portrayed as lazy and cheating the system to gain CSSA benefits.⁴ Though such news reports may be biased,⁵ they could exert a significant impact upon citizens' attitudes towards immigration, especially during the rise of "anti-China" sentiments and localism since the Occupy movement in 2014 (Chan 2017; Kwong 2016; Ng and Kennedy 2019; Yang 2019, 2020). For instance, when the Hong Kong SAR government announced that the 2018–2019 budget would offer an extra two-month allowance for CSSA recipients, it immediately led to an online outcry. Many netizens complained that CSSA recipients did not need to work hard but still gained benefits from the government. While citizens' complaints about immigrant inflows and the CSSA system are often heard in traditional and social media, there has not been a systematic study of citizens' attitudes towards immigration and their connection with citizens' attitudes towards social assistance in Hong Kong.

With a new, unique survey conducted in 2017, this study analyzes the association between citizens' attitudes towards immigration and welfare attitudes in Hong Kong. Specific research questions include: What are the determinants of public attitudes towards CSSA? What is the influence of attitudes towards immigration on the level of CSSA?

This article is organized as follows. First, we offer a literature review of studies on the determinants of public attitudes towards social assistance and welfare spending, especially how citizens' attitudes towards immigration influence public attitudes towards social assistance. We then describe the methodology of this study, which includes data collection and measures for our variables. The data analysis consists of both descriptive statistics and regression analyses. Finally, we discuss the policy implications of this study.

Theoretical background

The literature on public policy (particularly social policy) uses surveys and experimental methods to point out the importance of citizens' views of public goods and services in policymaking and implementation (Clifton, Díaz-Fuentes, and Fernández-Gutiérrez 2019; Van de Walle 2018). Among citizens' attitudes towards public services, public attitudes towards income redistribution and social assistance are certainly an important area of inquiry. In this section, we examine the existing literature on the determinants of income redistribution, looking in particular into the impact of public attitudes towards immigration.

The study of the politics of income redistribution and social welfare suggests that citizens trade off the redistributive and insuring effects of social insurance with the assumption of rational self-interested individuals. Regarding the determinants of individual-level preferences for social policies, citizens' demand for social welfare benefits increases with the risk to which they are exposed (Rehm 2011). For example, citizens who have a higher risk of unemployment have a stronger demand for unemployment

benefits. According to this self-interest approach, individuals' class, gender, and age influence their attitudes towards welfare spending. Individuals who perceive themselves as lower class tend to be more supportive of income redistribution, as lower-class individuals are more likely to experience unemployment or poor health (Svallfors 2004). A person's age also influences his or her preference for income redistribution, as the elderly typically need more healthcare and social assistance (Busemeyer, Goerres, and Weschle 2009). Research also shows that gender has an influence on attitudes towards welfare spending; women are more likely to support welfare spending than men for various reasons, including the way in which women are more likely to be relied upon to carry out housework that could disturb their careers (Habibov 2013). Research further shows that the personal experience of economic difficulty, particularly being unemployed, has an effect on increasing support for welfare spending (Margalit 2013).

The extant literature has paid a great deal of attention to the impact of immigration on welfare spending. Some argue that if immigrants have higher rates of unemployment, higher dependence on social welfare, and do not share the native population's cultural values, immigration will negatively influence public support for welfare spending (Burgoon 2014). In this context, immigration is believed to lower solidarity, trust, and social capital, thus resulting in diminishing public support for welfare spending (Alesina and Glaeser 2004; van Oorschot 2008). The literature further shows that immigrants are perceived as being less deserving in terms of welfare support. Studies conducted in European countries show that the native population tends to view immigrants as less deserving of social welfare compared to other vulnerable groups, such as the elderly and the disabled (van Oorschot 2006). In a survey experiment involving Swedish voters, it was found that the country of origin of the immigrants influences public support for cross-border welfare rights within the European Union (Hjorth 2016). In another study in European Union countries, it was found that EU countries with higher levels of welfare spending are more likely to attract immigrants, which could further raise citizens' concerns about immigrants (van Oorschot and Uunk 2011). Research in the United States shows that immigrants are more likely to receive social assistance when compared with the native population (Borjas and Hilton 1996). A crucial reason for resistance to the welfare state in the United States is due to the way in which white people tend to believe that welfare programs disproportionately benefit ethnic minorities and immigrants, particularly African Americans and Latinos (Fox 2004; King and Smith 2005). It should be noted that immigration could also increase support for public spending on social assistance, as the inflow of immigrants, especially those who are less-skilled workers, can lower wages, worsen working conditions, increase the risk of being unemployed, and reduce income especially, for the less-skilled native population (Burgoon 2014; Frey et al. 1996).

The comparative welfare state literature further suggests that the institutional design of the welfare system influences citizens' attitudes towards social spending. In recent years in some contexts, universal welfare spending has been more likely to obtain higher public support in comparison with "selective" or means-tested programs (Esping-Andersen 1990; Gilens 2009; Svallfors 1997). Social welfare programs that potentially benefit all people are likely to receive higher support when compared with those that just benefit the poor or a small segment of the population. There is an ongoing, intense debate over whether or not universal programs are more effective than targeted pro-poor programs (Herd 2005; Kim 2018; Wu and Chou 2017). The targeted pro-poor program

in the Hong Kong context (CSSA) has been investigated as well. Chan (1998) found that the low levels of assistance and the stigmatized application procedure of the CSSA had shaped the expectations between the state and the needy.

The literature also highlights that the preferences for income redistribution are not simply influenced by self-interest, as individuals' values and beliefs also influence their preferences regarding redistribution (Fong 2001; Svallfors 2012). Empirical research shows that social values could influence public attitudes that are independent of self-interest (Funk 2000). Attitudes towards welfare spending are rooted in a person's value system, which defines the proper relationship between the state and individuals (Blekesaune and Quadagno 2003). With regard to those who support the welfare state, their positions are rooted in the belief that all citizens have basic social and economic rights to a basic standard of living. In contrast, citizens who adopt the concept of economic individualism hold that individuals are responsible for their own welfare and that, individual well-being is an outcome of hard work. Moreover, citizens may prefer income redistribution for the poor if they believe that poverty is caused by structural factors that are beyond individuals' control (Cheng and Ngok 2020; Wu and Chou 2017). In contrast, if citizens attribute the cause of poverty to individual responsibility – laziness, for example – they are more likely to oppose welfare spending.

The determinants of public attitudes towards income redistribution have been documented in the extant literature as being very complex. The influx of immigrants against the backdrop of globalization, particularly in some economies in need of new people to maintain economic prosperity, exerts an effect on public support for social assistance and other income redistribution programs. However, the bulk of the existing evidence on the relationship between immigration and public support for social assistance is based on Western developed economies. A small, developed economy, facing similar challenges, such as an aging population and weak support for social assistance, like its Western partners, has not been examined in great depth. Nevertheless, the study on Asian context should be instrumental in understanding the nuances of public attitudes towards income redistribution in various countries.

Methodology

Data collection

This study conducted a random sampling telephone survey in February 2017. The interviewees were Hong Kong residents aged over 18 years old who could speak Cantonese (the main local language). The sampling procedure comprised two steps. First, from the latest residential telephone directories, we randomly identified some telephone numbers and used these numbers as seeds. Based on the selected seed numbers, we obtained another set of numbers by randomly either adding 1 or 2 to the seed numbers, or subtracting 1 or 2 from seed numbers. In this way, we received new and unlisted numbers. Second, our well-trained telephone interviewers called the selected numbers and made sure that the respondents fulfilled the criteria for participation in this study. When there was more than one respondent in a household fulfilling our criteria, our interviewers randomly selected one respondent for the interview according to the “next birthday” rule, in which we picked the interviewee whose birthday was closest to

the date of the interview. The interviewers were all monitored by supervisors and camera surveillance was used to monitor their performance. The sample size was 1,002 and the response rate was 72.3%.

Measurement

In the questionnaire, a series of questions were asked: “For the government expenditure below, please let us know whether you hope the government increases or reduces expenditure.” The interviewees were asked about their attitudes towards general welfare expenditure, the CSSA scheme, public health services, education, retirement income protection, assistance for poor children, and public housing. Responses were collected using a five-point Likert-type scale, with “5 = largely increase the expenditure”, “4 = slightly increase the expenditure”, “3 = keep the expenditure at the same level”, “2 = slightly reduce the expenditure”, and “1 = largely reduce the expenditure.” The interviewees’ answers to the question about spending on CSSA was the dependent variable for this study.

For the independent variables, we first included a variable about respondents’ attitudes towards immigration: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following standpoint? The Hong Kong SAR government should raise the requirements to become a permanent Hong Kong resident.” The responses were measured on a five-point scale from “1 = strongly disagree” to “5 = strongly agree”, with “3 = half-half”. Permanent residents are entitled to social welfare and assistance, while non-permanent residents (immigrants) are entitled to social welfare programs but with some constraints and conditions. The attitudes towards the requirement of becoming a permanent resident in Hong Kong could serve as a good proxy for measuring citizens’ attitudes towards immigration, as immigration by getting permanent residency has become a very hot topic in the society in recent years. In the context of Hong Kong, as the issue of immigration mainly concerns the inflow of immigrants from mainland China (the majority of immigrants come from mainland China), we believe that our measurement is a further proxy for the citizens’ attitudes towards immigrants, particularly towards immigrants from mainland China. Thus, the answer to this question could indicate the respondents’ attitudes towards immigration and also serve as a proxy to measure their attitudes towards immigrants, helping us to explore the impact of immigration on welfare spending. As most of the immigrants in Hong Kong come from mainland China, the respondents’ identities could also influence their attitudes towards social assistance spending, particularly immigrants’ welfare spending. In the questionnaire, we used one variable to measure each interviewee’s identity, asking: “On a scale of one to seven, with one representing ‘I am a Hongkonger’, four representing ‘I am both a Hongkonger and Chinese’, and seven representing ‘I am a Chinese’, which number is closest to your mindset?”

We also added a group of variables based on the literature, with the assumption of rational self-interested individuals in mind. The interviewees’ estimation of their future financial situation was included in the study. The interviewees were asked: “What do you expect the financial situation of your household to be in 12 months’ time?”⁶ The responses were measured on a five-point scale from “1 = much better” to “5 = much worse”, with “3 = no difference.” To measure the interviewees’ objective financial

situation at the time, we used a dummy variable of whether or not the interviewees were unemployed (we did not regard students, the retired, and homemakers as unemployed). We also included the self-rated class of the interviewees' family as a variable. A binary variable was created to capture whether or not the interviewees identified their family as being lower class. We also included information regarding the age of the interviewees. A dummy variable was created to capture whether or not the interviewees belonged to the over 50 age group.

We further included a set of variables to control for the interviewees' socio-economic status and values, including their perceived causes of social inequality and causes of poverty. Regarding the perceived causes of social inequality, we used the variable of whether or not the interviewees agreed that "social inequality occurs mainly because of the control and manipulation carried out by a small group of people in power." The item was measured on a five-point scale from "1 = strongly disagree" to "5 = strongly agree", with "3 = half-half". In regard to the perceptions of the causes of poverty, we used the question: "Why are there poor people in Hong Kong? Here are four possible reasons: bad luck, laziness or lack of willpower, injustice in society, and modern social development. Which reason do you consider to be the most important? And which do you consider to be the second most important?" The interviewer randomly presented the order of the four reasons for the cause of poverty. We created three dummy variables for the most important reasons for poverty – namely bad luck, laziness, and injustice in society, being the other reason (modern social development) the reference category used in the estimations.

We also included a set of demographic variables, including gender (0 = male, 1 = female), education level (1 = primary school or below, 2 = middle school, 3 = college/university, or above), and marital status (0 = unmarried, 1 = married).

Hypotheses

Based on the existing literature and our main independent variables, the hypotheses that guide this research are:

H1: Citizens' support towards raising the requirement of immigration is negatively correlated with their support for social assistance.

H2: Citizens' exposed risk is positively correlated with their support for social assistance.

H3: Citizens who perceive poverty as being caused by structural factors are more likely to support social assistance.

Data analysis

Descriptive analysis

In our statistical analysis, we first offer a descriptive analysis of the main variables that were included in our study (observations with missing data are excluded for descriptive analysis and regression analysis). In terms of the dependent variable – that is, the attitudes of

respondents towards the CSSA scheme – 4.9% of respondents supported increasing the expenditure by a large amount, followed by 32.8% who supported a slight increase of the spending, 45.4% who wanted to keep it at the same level, 12.0% who supported a reduction of the expenditure, and 4.9% who supported reducing the spending on the CSSA scheme by a large amount. As indicated in the introduction, public attitudes towards CSSA are indeed puzzling, given that citizens support a substantial increase of all other public welfare spending, no matter whether the welfare programs are universal or selective. As the government has intentionally kept the CSSA at a very low level, the fact that 45.4% of citizens desired to keep it at the same level while 16.9% of citizens even would like to reduce the CSSA indicated citizens' negative attitudes towards CSSA when compared with their attitudes towards all other public welfare programs.

In terms of the independent variables, we first looked at the attitudes towards immigration among Hong Kong respondents. A total of 42.7% of the respondents said that they strongly agreed with the statement that “the Hong Kong SAR government should raise the requirements to become a permanent Hong Kong resident”, followed by 37.1% of the respondents supporting this statement. This indicates that the majority of Hong Kong residents (i.e., 79.9% of the respondents) believe the Hong Kong SAR government should raise the threshold for qualifying as a permanent Hong Kong resident. This finding suggests that the public may desire a lower quota for the inflow of immigrants who may then obtain permanent resident status after seven years.

Regarding socio-economic values, 69.7% of the respondents agreed with the statement that social inequality is mainly due to the control and manipulation carried out by a small group of people in power. This demonstrates that a substantial amount of people agree that structural social problems lead to inequality, and they do not attribute social inequality to individual responsibility. In terms of the primary cause of poverty, 28.2% of the respondents attributed poverty to individual problems, such as laziness, and 6.3% to bad luck. We can infer that these respondents view poverty as an issue for which individuals are primarily responsible. In contrast, 30.8% of the respondents agreed that injustice in society is the primary cause of poverty, while 34.7% thought that modern social development is the main reason for poverty. This group of respondents thus attributed the cause of poverty to social-structural issues.

Regarding the self-interest variables, the average prediction for family economic situations in the coming 12 months was 2.7, with a standard deviation of 0.69, which indicates that the respondents were slightly optimistic about the future (2 refers to a slight improvement, while 3 signifies no difference in the future). Of the respondents, 1.6% were unemployed; 29.0% of the respondents perceived themselves as being lower class; and 56.6% of the interviewees were in the over 50 age group.

In terms of identity, 22.2% of the respondents identified themselves as Hongkongers, who may demonstrate a localist identity; 46.0% of the respondents identified themselves as both a Hongkonger and Chinese, which shows a mixture of identities, and 12.7% of the respondents claimed to be just Chinese and did not identify themselves as Hongkongers.

In terms of the demographic variables, 52.9% of the respondents were female and 59.1% of the interviewees were married. The average education level for the respondents was above middle school education ([Table 2](#)).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics.

Variables	Percentage/Mean (SD)
Dependent Variable	
Attitudes towards Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme	3.2 (.89)
5 = substantially increase the expenditure	4.90%
4	32.79%
3 = keep it at the same level	45.44%
2	11.97%
1 = substantially reduce the expenditure	4.90%
Independent Variables	
Attitudes towards Immigration	
The Hong Kong government should raise the requirements to become a Hong Kong permanent resident.	4.06 (1.07)
5 = strongly agree	42.72%
4	37.14%
3 = half-and-half	6.53%
2	11.16%
1 = strongly disagree	2.45%
Identity	3.59 (1.85)
Self-interest Variables	
Prediction about future life (Perceived vulnerability)	2.71 (.69)
Unemployment	1.63%
Lower class	28.98%
Age (above 50)	56.6%
Socio-economic Values	
Social inequality is mainly because of the control and manipulation by a small group of people in power.	3.72 (1.26)
The causes of poverty	
Bad luck	6.3%
Laziness	28.16%
Injustice in society	30.8%
Social development	34.74%
Demographic Variables	
Female	52.93%
Married	59.05%
Education level	2.33 (.644)

Note: N = 735. Observations with missing data are excluded.

Multiple and logistic regressions

As the dependent variable was an ordinal variable measured on a five-point scale, we used both a multiple regression and an ordinal logit regression to test our hypotheses (Model 1 and Model 2). In Models 3 and 4, we further added interactive terms as a robustness test. Our hypothesis (H1) regarding attitudes towards immigration was confirmed by all models. The support to government in raising the requirements to become a permanent Hong Kong resident is negatively correlated to the support of the government in increasing spending on CSSA. This indicates that people who more strongly support raising immigration requirements and reducing immigration tend to be more supportive of a reduction in CSSA spending. Although there has been a rising local identity in Hong Kong in recent years, our study shows that, controlling for all the other variables included in the models, identity has no significant correlation with public support for spending on CSSA. Whether a person identifies herself/himself as a Chinese person or a Hongkonger has no influence on whether or not they support an increase in spending on CSSA. This shows that, in the case of Hong Kong, it is the attitude towards immigration in general, rather than sharing the same identity as immigrants, that influences opinions regarding welfare spending on CSSA.

Our model shows some support for the self-interest hypothesis (H2), which echoes findings in the existing literature. Our multiple regression shows that people identified as lower class are positively correlated to the support of increasing spending on CSSA. This is probably because they are more likely to benefit from the potential increase in social assistance spending. The same is true for people who are over 50 years old in the models of logistic regression; they are more likely to support a rise in CSSA. This is mainly because Hong Kong does not have a retirement income protection system, many people have to rely on the CSSA scheme when they become old and lose their earning capacity.

Our model further supports the notion that certain social economic values have significant impacts on public attitudes towards social assistance (H3). The ordinal logistic regression shows that people who support the view that “social inequality occurs mainly because of the control and manipulation carried out by a small group of people in power” are more supportive of increasing spending on CSSA. People who support such views tend to believe that social inequality is caused by structural injustice in society, which is positively correlated to their support for an increase of expenditure on CSSA. On the other hand, people who attribute poverty to laziness are much more likely to oppose increased spending on social assistance than those who attribute poverty to modern social development (reference category). Rather than thinking of poverty as an issue of general socio-economic structure, such respondents tend to attribute the cause of poverty to individuals’ working attitudes, such as laziness, and they may highlight the importance of self-reliance.

In terms of marital status, we find that people who are married are significantly less supportive of increasing social assistance spending. It could be the case that people who have formed a family have stronger mutual financial support and are less likely to rely on social assistance. This actually fits the self-interest argument, in that people who are less likely to become poor are less likely to support an increase in social assistance (Table 3).

Table 3. Multiple and logistic regressions of public attitudes towards social assistance.

DV: the government should increase spending on the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme	Model 1: Multiple regression Unstandardized coefficients	Model 2: Ordinal logistic regression Unstandardized coefficients	Model 3: Multiple regression Unstandardized coefficients	Model 4: Ordinal logistic regression Unstandardized coefficients
Attitudes towards immigration				
Raise the requirement for becoming a Hong Kong permanent resident Identity	-.096**	-.241***	-.106**	-.240**
	.002	-.018	.002	-.018
Self-interest variables				
Prediction about future life (Perceived vulnerability)	-.013	-.036	-.014	-.036
Unemployment	.221	.834	.218	.833
Lower class	.119+	.229	.001	.235
Age (above 50)	.103	.284+	.104	.285+
Socio-economic values				
Social inequality	.033	.106+	.034	.107+
The causes of poverty				
Bad luck	.078	.073	.078	.069
Laziness	-.216***	-.447***	-.434***	-.893***
Injustice in society	.021	.036	.065	.108
Demographic variables				
Gender	-.007	-.024	-.007	-.024
Education level	-.048	-.111	-.051	-.111
Marital status	-.132+	-.352**	-.132+	-.352*
Interactive variables				
Lower class*Attitudes towards immigration			.029	-.001
Adjusted R-squared	0.07	0.036	0.09	0.036

Note: + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

Discussion and conclusion

In this study, we tackle the question of how public opinion towards immigration affects welfare attitudes in a small, developed economy in Asia. Based on a random sampling survey conducted in early 2017, we investigated the puzzling phenomenon of Hong Kong residents demonstrating much less support for increasing spending on social assistance (CSSA) amid the strong desire to increase welfare spending on all other major items. We conclude that attitudes towards immigration are strongly correlated to public attitudes towards the CSSA scheme. A large portion of Hong Kong respondents favor raising the requirements to become permanent residents in Hong Kong. This support is negatively correlated with the support for an increase in CSSA spending. This demonstrates that public attitudes towards immigration play a crucial role in shaping the attitudes towards the social safety net in Hong Kong. The findings of this study support the existing literature that examines the impact of immigration on welfare spending, in which immigration could negatively influence the support for welfare spending (Burgoon 2014; Fox 2004; King and Smith 2005).

While the existing literature has well pointed out that “who benefits” is the key to explaining citizens’ attitudes towards welfare spending, this study highlights that the perception of who benefits also matters. The correlation between attitudes towards immigration and support for CSSA could primarily exist because citizens tend to think that there are too many mainland immigrants flowing into Hong Kong, and these immigrants tend to rely on CSSA and therefore do not need to work hard. As local residents believe that they are not the main beneficiaries of the CSSA scheme, they oppose spending on the social safety net. An illustrative case took place in 2018. When the government announced that it would offer an extra two-month allowance for CSSA recipients, many netizens made hostile comments on the Internet and social media in response. In one Facebook post about the extra allowance for CSSA recipients, netizens posted overwhelmingly negative comments about the issue.⁷ For example, one netizen commented that “every year (the subsidy) benefits the grassroots = (benefits) new immigrants.” Another netizen commented: “I work hard, pay tax, and feed the mainlanders.” One comment stated: “I work ten hours every day, but I do not have the two-month allowance.” All such comments received a substantial amount of “likes” from other netizens. These comments evidence the way in which many netizens perceive the CSSA scheme as mainly benefiting immigrants, who enjoy the benefits at the expense of local residents.

However, it could be a misperception among citizens that it is mainly immigrants who benefit from the CSSA scheme. According to official data, immigrants receiving CSSA only accounted for 4.8% of all CSSA recipients (Research Office of the Legislative Council 2018). Among all CSSA recipients in 2017, 62.1% of CSSA cases fell under the “old age” category and 49.7% of CSSA recipients were in the “60 or over” age group.⁸ Since the retirement income protection systems in Hong Kong are problematic, many older adults have to rely on the CSSA scheme after losing their earning capacity.⁹ Official data indicates that immigrants are not actually the main beneficiaries of the CSSA scheme.

This study has significant policy implications for both Hong Kong and other contexts. First, while there is often media coverage of the discontent towards immigrants who

make use of social assistance in Hong Kong,¹⁰ this study offers solid empirical evidence of discontent based on an opinion survey conducted among adults in Hong Kong who were recruited through random sampling. Our detailed analysis of this survey shows that such discontent is not limited to a small group of netizens but is shared by a large number of Hong Kong residents. The discontent towards incoming immigrants who rely on social welfare has significant impacts on public attitudes towards government spending on the social safety net. The Hong Kong SAR government needs to make more substantial efforts to inform the public about who is actually benefiting from CSSA; based on the current information, CSSA recipients are disadvantaged and vulnerable people. Blaming immigrants for unfairly benefiting from substantial amounts of CSSA not only harms the reputation of immigrants, but also undermines public support for the social safety net. In the long run, this will limit the potential of a healthy flow of migrants to strengthen prosperity of society.

Second, this study shows that the Hong Kong SAR government may re-evaluate its immigration policy, given the strong desire of people to raise the requirement of immigration. With the inflow of mainland visitors and immigrants, there has been rising discontent in Hong Kong in recent years. The Hong Kong SAR government may carry out a careful evaluation of how many immigrants and visitors that the city can accommodate, both physically and psychologically. The immigration policy is a highly controversial topic, wherein the mainland authorities manage the one-way permit scheme, which encompasses a quota system determining who can emigrate to Hong Kong from mainland China. After all, under the “one country, two systems” policy, the mainland authorities and the Hong Kong SAR government should develop a feasible solution to the problems and predicaments associated with migration from the mainland to Hong Kong, especially when considering the low fertility rates in Hong Kong. This situation can also be seen in some other countries, although it may not be as complex as the case of Hong Kong, due to Hong Kong’s constitutional constraints and a single, large source of inflowing migration.

As right-wing anti-immigration sentiments are on the rise globally, this study sends out another reminder to governments that citizens’ attitudes towards immigration will influence their attitudes to seemingly unrelated social policies and could have a profound impact on society. All governments need to carefully design their immigration policies, address income inequality caused by globalization, and tackle misperceptions among citizens in regard to immigrants.

Notes

1. The Hong Kong government has put encouraging people to rejoin the workforce and avoiding work disincentives as a guiding principle for the CSSA scheme. For details, see page 2 for a government’s paper presented to the legislature: <https://www.legco.gov.hk/yr19-20/english/panels/ws/papers/ws20191111cb2-145-5-e.pdf>. Accessed on 9 December 2019.
2. The HKSAR Government Press Release. 2019. “The operation of one-way permit”. <https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/201903/20/P2019032000536.htm?fontSize=1>. Accessed on 9 December 2019.
3. Ibid.

4. There are reports that some immigrants have hidden income but may still receive CSSA. Next Magazine, 2018. “The case of new immigrants cheating the CSSA.” <https://nextplus.nextmedia.com/news/latest/20181023/632506>. Accessed on 29 January 2019.
5. Reclaiming the Social Worker Movement. 2018. “Response to Next Magazine’s report of ‘The case of new immigrants cheating the CSSA.’” <https://www.inmediahk.net/node/1060229>. Accessed on 29 January 2019.
6. Similar questions can be found in surveys in other countries. For example, the polls for Brexit also used such questions. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/apr/19/britain-uncovered-survey-attitudes-beliefs-britons-2015>. Accessed on 30 January 2019.
7. MOSers’ Facebook Page (28 February 2018). <https://www.facebook.com/groups/maonshanhk/>.
8. Research and Statistics Section, Social Welfare Department, HKSAR. 2018. “Statistics on Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme, 2007 to 2017.” <https://www.censtatd.gov.hk/hkstat/sub/sp390.jsp?productCode=FA100078>. Accessed on 29 January 2019. The “cases” could refer to both individuals and families, according to the government report.
9. Hong Kong’s pension regime is “voluntary private” according to the classification of Marcinkiewicz and Chybalski (2019), before the introduction of the Mandatory Provident Fund Schemes in 2000.
10. Some local advocacy groups do point out that immigrants from mainland China (as vulnerable people, see Clifton, Díaz-Fuentes, and Fernández-Gutiérrez’s (2019) insightful debate on vulnerable citizens in the European context) need to be paid attention to, and their contributions to economic prosperity should not be ignored.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This research was supported by Department of Asian and Policy Studies, Education University of Hong Kong; Shanghai Jiao Tong University Project WF220513006; the Ministry of Education of China Project 18YJC810010.

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