

# Canadian grads find job haven in Hong Kong

(CUP)  
AS COUNTLESS GRADUATES FACE THE prospect of years of unemployment and dead end jobs, a colony of 35,000 other Canadians has discovered an employment paradise.

They have hopped on a plane to go west -- far west, to the East.

They fly across the Pacific to a land where joblessness is virtually nonexistent.

In Hong Kong, university grads say their abilities can flourish. Upon graduation, they are practically guaranteed a career-related job with good pay in a city which views education as sacrosanct as religion. A reference letter from a professor is almost like a letter from God.

Usually within two years, these Canadian enter management positions. Twentysomething Canadians spend their days flashing their business cards in a non-stop drive to increase their financial opportunities.

Job turnover almost mimics a stock exchange as employees quit permanent jobs for better ones, or they leave the city with considerable wealth.

Compared to Canada's 11 per cent unemployment rate, highest among major industrialized nations, Hong Kong's is only 2 per cent. It is eclipsed by a 4 per cent labour shortage.

"The 2 per cent unemployed are those

who have chosen to be unemployed," said public affairs manager Neil Reeder of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce. He is not kidding.

On Saturdays, local English-language newspapers carry nearly 100 pages of job listings for English speakers. For the South China Morning Post, that figure peaked at 186 pages last year.

The job boom has even given solid business to Vancouver newspapers Sing Tao Pao and Ming Pao, which are read more for their classified ads than their news.

But the peak has declined somewhat as thousands of Canadians have rushed to Hong Kong.

"Now more people have found out about the opportunities so it may take a bit longer to find a job," Reeder says. "It used to only take two weeks, now it takes about two months."

But, Reeder says, the job quality and selection are continuing to improve in Hong Kong's buoyant economy.

The city's Hang Seng Stock Exchange index recently rose to a record high of 12,000 points, doubling its position of two years ago.

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The increase is attributed to foreign interest from North American fund managers who are parking their funds at China's doorstep in the security of Hong Kong.

Driven by the economic growth of China, home to a quarter of the world's consumers, Hong Kong is witnessing the greatest economic growth of its

recent history.

Christina Pao, 22, who graduated with an International Relations degree from the University of B.C. last year, discovered that employers in Vancouver were unwilling to hire graduates without work experience -- or even many of those who had it. Many employers advertising for jobs in the Vancouver Sun were inundated with more than 500 applications.

In September, Pao, who speaks little Cantonese, left for Hong Kong armed with just a resume and a dazzling reference letter from a UBC professor. By November 14 she had three job offers: one for a reputable local marketing company, another for a British trading company, and a third at a five-star hotel for management training.

Pao spent a week working for the marketing company, but soon found even better work. Today, she says she is "very satisfied" working as a promotions officer for the Swire Group, a British trading house, whose operations include Cathay Pacific Airlines.

"Here in Hong Kong they really respect education," said Pao. "It gets my foot in the door and gets me advantageous work experience."

This "respect" is also translated into salary. College grads with no experience start their careers at a minimum of \$1,600 a month. There is also an unwritten rule giving employees a month's bonus at the year's end, and another month's bonus for good performance. Masters graduates start at a minimum of \$3,500 a month and Ph.D students start at \$5,000 a month.

"To have a Ph.D graduate working in a restaurant like in Canada would be a disgrace," said Vancouver City Polytechnic statistics professor C.S. Wong, who is on sabbatical from Canada. "Here they respect people with degrees. The government has put a lot of money into education."

Unlike in Canada, however, the Hong Kong government has a surplus of revenue from land leases, alcohol and tobacco taxes and lucrative royalties from Royal Hong Kong Jockey Club horse races. Income tax is a negligible source of revenue and has little impact on government purses. The tax system is simple: everyone's salary from rich to poor is taxed at a flat rate of 15 per cent. There are no sales taxes.

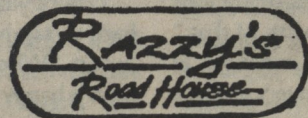
But Hong Kong's interest rates have driven up rent and subsequently inflated prices to the level of Canada's. Gone are the days of free spending in Hong Kong. Residential rents run from \$15 to \$25 a square foot in a high-density apartment building and can be an economic burden for those earning less than \$1500 a month. And there are very few accessible social safety nets for those few who are unable to work. Other trade-offs for Canadians include a lack of space, hot summer weather, expensive recreation and long work hours. But many young Canadians view Hong Kong as they would a stopover in university: a necessity for career advancement.

"There's quite a few young Canadians here," said John Parsons, 28, originally of Dunder, Saskatchewan. "I think Canadians have to leave the country to find work. There are certainly more prospects in Hong Kong than in Canada."

"I always plan to come to Canada in the long run, but in the short term, I plan to be in Hong Kong."

Parsons, who left Canada last summer, has one degree in anthropology and another in law from the University of Saskatchewan. Today he is studying international trade law at the University of Hong Kong. When he graduates, he is optimistic his consortium of contacts will land him a decent job in Asia.

"But," he said, "I will always be a Canadian no matter where I am in the world."

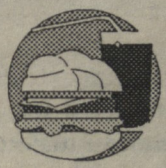
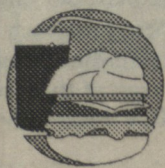


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