



**Community  
Engagement &  
Education**

DISCUSSION GUIDE



**FREEDOM SWIMMER**

a film by Olivia Martin-McGuire

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## FREEDOM SWIMMER

The story of a grandfather's perilous swim from China to Hong Kong that parallels his granddaughter's own quest for a new freedom.

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This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and designed for people who want to use *Freedom Swimmer* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit <https://community-network.amdoc.org/>.

## PARTICIPANTS

The people involved in making this film have chosen to remain anonymous for safety and solidarity reasons.

## KEY ISSUES

*Freedom Swimmer* is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- The history between China and Hong Kong
- Intergenerational familial divergences and intergenerational trauma
- Global migration, asylum seekers, and refugees
- Censorship, self-censorship, fear, and freedom of expression
- Activist filmmaking, authorship, and anonymity
- Animation as a tool for evoking emotion
- Resilience and hope

## CHINA AND HONG KONG HISTORY

From 1950 to 1997, it's estimated that as many as 2 million people fled from the Chinese mainland to Hong Kong. From 1841 to 1997 Hong Kong was a British colony and therefore not a part of mainland China. Because of this, Hong Kong developed a democratic governing system that differed greatly from the Communist dictatorship of mainland China. Many Chinese people fled to Hong Kong in search of better economic prospects; others left to escape oppressive Chinese Communist rule, mostly from 1950 to 1980. The world called these people "freedom swimmers" because they swam for six to eight hours in the dark from mainland China to Hong Kong. Refugees desperate to escape the fallout of the Cultural Revolution braved deadly cold water, sharks, and police patrols. Illegal immigration to Hong Kong from mainland China peaked in the late 1970s, and by that time local sentiment in Hong Kong had grown less than sympathetic to the new arrivals.

## CONTEMPORARY HONG KONG

On June 30, 2020, China's parliamentary body passed a national security law in Hong Kong. It severely limits the formerly democratic parliament and free speech rights of Hong Kong residents. Peaceful protests were criminalized and other restrictions on the territory's freedoms were implemented. When China acquired Hong Kong from the United Kingdom in 1997, it vowed to give Hong Kong fifty years under its existing democratic system. This law paved the way for the most radical changes to the self-governing territory since it passed from British to Chinese rule. Beijing has said the law is in response to the pro-democracy protests that have taken place in Hong Kong since 2019. The law makes secession from China and subversion illegal and punishable by a maximum sentence of life in prison, according to text released by the country's Xinhua News Agency.

The new legislation also bans any "violators" from running for office in Hong Kong elections, thus keeping democratic candidates from holding office. According to the Chinese government, the law aims not only to tackle secession, terrorism, and subversion, but also to halt collusion with foreign (democratic) powers.

A group of pro-democracy activists, now known as the Hong Kong 47, are on trial for advocating for Hong Kong's democratic society in the face of Communist Chinese regulation. The defendants were charged with conspiracy to commit subversion, and their trial began in February 2023. Several were convicted at the time of this writing in April 2023.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

## MIGRATION

Hundreds of opposition activists, lawmakers, and protestors have been arrested under the law since it came into effect in 2020. Dozens have been refused bail and some have been sentenced to more than a year in prison. Many young Hong Kong residents decided to leave Hong Kong and go abroad because of the limits the law places on personal freedom and sovereignty. The United Kingdom has set up a special visa program for Hong Kong refugees to emigrate more easily.

From 2021 to 2022, the city's population dropped from 7.41 million to 7.29 million, according to the Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department. The drastic drop also accounts for residents fleeing Hong Kong's restrictive Covid-19 policies.

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**DISCUSSION PROMPTS****STARTING THE CONVERSATION**

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. You could pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion. Alternatively, you could ask each participant to share their thoughts with a partner before starting a group discussion.

- What are your initial reactions to the film?
- What feelings or emotions does it stir for you?
- Did you know about the “freedom swimmers” before watching the film? If not, what struck you most about them? If so, how does your prior learning compare to what you witnessed in the film?

**INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

- Do you know people who are either two generations older or two generations younger than you are?
- What are some significant cultural events you haven’t experienced that they have?
- What are you both living through now?
- For this film, audio interviews were conducted with intergenerational family members in Hong Kong. What is the power in intergenerational storytelling?

**THE ROLE OF ANIMATION**

- How did you react to the animation in the film?
- What story was the animation trying to tell?
- In what ways does the animation allow you to feel more or less connected to the people in the film?
- How does animation tell this story differently than live action would?

**CENSORSHIP**

- How much information are you willing to give when you don’t feel safe?
- What is one circumstance in which you would want to remain anonymous?
- Do you feel comfortable expressing your disagreement with your government’s laws or policies?



**DISCUSSION PROMPTS****GLOBAL CONVERSATION AROUND MIGRATION AND REFUGEE STATUS**

- How are the police in China depicted differently than the police in Hong Kong in the film?
- What choices do the police have?
- What practices are you aware of that your nation follows for refugees?
- What are the most important freedoms you enjoy now? What would you do to keep them?

**CLOSING QUESTION**

Is there anything you would change about your nation's immigration policies after learning about the struggles of refugees?

If the group is having trouble generating their own ideas for next steps, these suggestions can help get things started:

One way to help refugees fleeing Hong Kong is through lifeboat policies—governmental programs that make it easier for Hong Kongers to acquire permanent residency abroad. Does your country have such a policy in place? If not, consider suggesting one to your representatives.

Freedom of the press has diminished in Hong Kong, so fewer news outlets report on restrictions there. Choose a resource from the list below and create a plan for sharing news within your circle of influence.

Many of the protestors and activists from the 2019 protests are still being charged today. Circulating knowledge is key to activism when freedom of expression and freedom of the press are limited. Follow the trials and alert others to this landmark legal case.

Bethune House is a migrant women's refugee organization in Hong Kong that supports women who need shelter.

Hong Kong Democracy Council is a U.S.-based non-profit founded by and in support of Hong Kong refugees in the United States and the greater diaspora.

Hong Kong Watch is a UK-based charity organization that researches and monitors threats to Hong Kong's freedoms.

Stand With Hong Kong is an advocacy group that champions political action in support of Hong Kong democracy.

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