

FAMILY IN FLUX: BENCHMARKING FAMILY CHANGES IN HONG KONG SOCIETY¹

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Abstract

This paper explores whether Hong Kong people are under the process of modernization/individualization in their family life. Data from a 2005 territory-wide survey are used to uncover the patterns of relations, practices, choice and diversity in the families of Hong Kong, with particular interest in testing the individualization thesis. The findings can both confirm and 'unpack' the trend of individualization. They suggest that individualization in Hong Kong is compartmentalized in that more individualized lifestyles can be contemplated and practised in some areas without undermining family mutuality or the connection between marriage and parenthood, and certainly without establishing diversified familial life-courses. In this regard, we argue that individualization in Hong Kong represents a more flexible way of handling and managing the multifarious practices and obligations of family life. Families in Hong Kong are less an entity than a process and an assemblage of practices, and 'families are what families do'.

The Beginning:

Hong Kong Families and the Functionalist Orientation

It was almost forty years ago that Wong Fai Ming (1972) conducted his survey of middle class families in Hong Kong. He surveyed 100 families, his sample drawing from the parents of his Chinese University students. Like many other local studies at that time, Wong's study addresses the problematic of industrialization/westernization and its impact on institutional integrity (or 'health' or dysfunctions) in a society where, as they are wont to say, 'East meets West'. Wong's family studies thus focused on the acceptance of modern family ideology (as predating industrialization, and with the latter as supplementing the ideology) by middle classes parents, and the impact of this on the prevalence of conjugalism. The functionalist point about the systemic needs or functional requirements of industrialization (or more generally, differentiation) was accepted and taken as a theoretical point of departure.

¹ The study was supported by a grant from the Research Grant Council of Hong Kong. The project title is *Family in Flux: Values, Relations and Strategies in Hong Kong Families*, reference number HKU7237/03H.

Wong (1972) did concede that the conjugal family could be and was indeed found in pre-industrialized societies, and that industrialization did not necessarily account for the emergence of the independent nuclear family; social and geographical mobility or a subsistence type of economy could also be conducive factors. He added that the modern conjugal family is not necessarily structurally isolated, because extended family relations could be maintained through mutual assistance, social visits, regular communication, etc.

This line of approach has for many years more or less framed the discussions and debates in family studies (Ng 1994; Irwin 2005). The idea that the modern nuclear family has specialized in its functions, thereby satisfying the needs of a dynamic and mobile industrial order; the conception that sees the modern family as a companionate family where males are groomed for the labour market and females trained for domesticity and for fulfilling maternal roles; or the 'concession' that the nuclear family is not as structurally vulnerable as it appears to be: all of these claims and theoretical predilections have been conducive to a deeply-ingrained conception of the family as a clearly bounded entity and as a readily identifiable unit. The 'anomalous' conditions of the 1950s in the U.S.—full employment, the emergence of suburbia, the return of people after the war to normal family life and family aspirations, etc.—have contributed to the idea of the golden age of family. While some would see it as the precursor of modern nuclear family, others would see it as an aberration, a revival of tradition, that soon was to retreat and decline in the face of the swinging 60s, and the barrage of attack from feminist circles.² The modern (and middle class) conjugal family of the 1950s, from which the functionalists took their theoretical cues, further reinforced the conception, in the popular imagination as well as among academics/policy makers, of the family as a normative arrangement, as a set of specific gender relations and as a concrete structure or form. The 'breadwinner-homemaker' had become both a normative model and an aspiration. Wong Fai Ming's studies of the Hong Kong family back in the 1970s were very much a product of this ideological climate and these theoretical orientations.

It is for these reasons that family studies have for a long time focused on these issues: the relative isolation of the nuclear family, the availability and extent of extended family ties, the existence or otherwise

² See Coltrane and Collins (2001) for a more precise account of the anomaly of the 1950s and the rise of the 'familistic generation'.