DOING FAMILIES IN HONG KONG: STRATEGY, MORALITY AND EMOTION

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Abstract

In the past two decades, a series of major demographic and lifestyle changes have prompted a growing concern with the state of families in Hong Kong, leading to polar predictions of personal crisis and social renewal. This paper engages with this perceived state of flux by reporting on the findings of in-depth case interviews conducted in 2005 and 2006 with individuals from 40 families. It analyzes their acts and thoughts from a theoretical vantage point that stresses the contingent and achieved nature of family lives. We argue that there are different ways of ‘doing families’ in Hong Kong. Members of families try in their different ways to achieve a better life by coping with the material challenges thrown up by social restructuring. They also try to account for that life by drawing on a diverse range of ideational resources. The results of these acts of coping and accounting are subtle, diverse and intricately patterned by class and gender dynamics. Our findings urge us to eschew universalistic theories about family change. Instead we should systematically study the processes, reasoning and outcomes of uncoupling in familial practices in Hong Kong today. We also need a policy on family that is open and plural, and leaves room for different accounting methods.

Hong Kong Families: Crisis and Renewal

In the past two decades, a series of demographic and lifestyle changes have prompted growing concern in both the academic and policy fields about the state of families in Hong Kong. These changes include, among others, a later age of marriage, lowering fertility, rising divorce rate, increasing female education and labour force participation, heightened concern with child education, and issues of sustenance and care in the face of a rapidly ageing population. The scale and speed of these changes have generated polar predictions of personal crisis and social renewal. Thus, some lament the deteriorating health and functioning of ‘the family’. Others celebrate the coming of a new, post-modern age of individualization. Hong Kong families, and the views we have about them, are in flux (Koo and Wong in this issue).

This paper attempts to engage with this state of flux. It reports on the findings of in-depth case interviews conducted in 2005 and 2006 with
individuals from 40 families. It analyzes their acts and thoughts from a theoretical vantage point that stresses the contingent and achieved nature of family lives. We argue that there are different ways of ‘doing families’ in Hong Kong. Members of families of different classes try in different ways to achieve a better life by coping with the material challenges thrown up by the social and geographical transformations of the past two decades. They also try to account for that life by drawing on a diverse range of ideational resources. The results of these acts of coping and accounting are subtle, diverse and intricately patterned by class and gender dynamics. Our findings put paid to simplistic notions about family change and crisis in Hong Kong. We should instead systematically study the processes, reasoning and outcomes of uncoupling in familial practices in Hong Kong today. The notion of uncoupling, as we explain in more detail below, highlights the fact that conventional notions of marriage and family are currently being re-examined by ordinary people. The pursuit of intimacy does not necessarily end up in marriage. Marriage does not automatically entail certain forms of family formation, certain preferred modes of children’s upbringing, or forms of couple intimacy and kin obligations. As a result, the accustomed norms and practices relating to marriage and family are being loosened, or ‘uncoupled’, from one another. People are groping for new ways to justify their changing familial practices (Stacey 1996; Silva and Smart 1999). In this context, we need a policy on family that is open and plural, and leaves room for different accounting methods.

Studying Families: What?

This paper sets out to examine how people in Hong Kong do families in the context of social and economic restructuring in the new millennium. It is part of a larger project studying family life and social change in Hong Kong at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In our previ-

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2 Please refer to the introduction to this special issue for an elaboration of the concept doing families.
3 The project includes a large-scale benchmark survey on family forms, practices, relationships and values in Hong Kong. It also includes a set of in-depth qualitative interviews, which provide the bulk of the data for this paper.