



OFICINA DO CES

ces

Centro de Estudos Sociais
Laboratório Associado
Faculdade de Economia
Universidade de Coimbra

JACQUELINE ADAMS

**A CONSUMPTION ORIENTATION TO MOTHERHOOD
IN HONG KONG**

**Junho de 2010
Oficina nº 347**

Jacqueline Adams

A Consumption Orientation to Motherhood in Hong Kong

**Oficina do CES n.º 347
Junho de 2010**

OFICINA DO CES

Publicação seriada do

Centro de Estudos Sociais

Praça D. Dinis

Colégio de S. Jerónimo, Coimbra

Correspondência:

Apartado 3087

3001-401 COIMBRA, Portugal

Jacqueline Adams

Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra

A Consumption Orientation to Motherhood in Hong Kong*

Abstract: What having a child means to women who anticipate having a child without the assistance of reproductive technology is an understudied subject, particularly in the Chinese context. In Hong Kong, women who do not yet have a child think of the enterprise as costly in terms of money, freedom, and time, requiring preparedness, and conferring positive experiences including the status of “complete family,” being cared for in old age, and the ownership of something “cute.” They approach the decision in a highly rational manner, as one would an important purchase. They face it, in other words, with a consumption orientation. These findings emerge from the analysis of twenty-six in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Hong Kong Chinese would-be mothers.

Key words: Family, motherhood, fertility, consumption, Hong Kong, China.

Why do so many women have children? The answer to this question is self-evident, people believe, yet where there is a climate of choice about the matter, it is not so straightforward. The notion that one can live a worthy and satisfying life without children may be said to have gained ground in many developed countries. So, too, have lifestyle alternatives to that of parenthood.

Regions or communities with low fertility rates are a particularly good context in which to examine this issue, if there are large numbers of women and men in these regions who could have children but are not doing so, since in such regions there might be more freedom for a woman to choose whether or not to have a child than in places where very large numbers of women of childbearing age are having children. Hong Kong is one such context. In 2004 Hong Kong had one of the lowest total fertility rates in the world. A total fertility rate of 2.0 or above indicates that, on average, couples are producing at least two children to

* Acknowledgements: I am grateful to the East-West Center (Honolulu) and to Hong Kong Baptist University for funding for this research. Many thanks to Anna Lo for information of cultural significance for the research, to Michele Pridmore-Brown for fruitful discussions on the topic, and to the Beatrice Bain Research Group on Gender at the University of California at Berkeley for hosting a panel on which I presented this work.

replace themselves. Hong Kong's was 0.922.¹ Here, I undertook research to answer the question of why women have children, approaching it from the symbolic interactionist perspective of meaning.² Aiming to find out from women what having a child meant to women in Hong Kong, and how they approached decision-making on the topic, I conducted in-depth interviews.

In this article I focus on a theme that was unexpected and striking in the data that I gathered: that of consumption. I suggest that when the middle-class women in my sample consider whether or not to have a child, they approach the decision in a way that one might associate with the process of purchasing an expensive product or service; they approach it, that is, using the language and thought processes of consumption. They view having a child as a costly enterprise (in terms of money, freedom, and time), for which they need to be financially and otherwise prepared, but which will bring positive enhancements to their lives.

More broadly, I suggest that the ubiquity of consumption in late capitalism exerts power over individuals by creating habits of thought. I term this a consumption orientation. People exercise these habits of thought not only with regard to items for sale in the market place, but also within areas of life not involving purchase, such as having a child and, more broadly, within their relationships with other people. In the Hong Kong case I am discussing today, the women are applying the consumption orientation to a potential child and to the experience of parenthood.

I further suggest that women tend to approach the issue of whether to have a child very rationally, even engaging in mathematical calculation. This intense rationality is linked to the consumption orientation in that one might exercise it while buying a house, car, or other expensive item that is not acquired regularly. It is reminiscent of Max Weber's rational, calculating, methodical capitalists, and the creeping process of rationalization that he

¹ Demographic Statistics Section, Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong. In other words, 0.922 is the average number of children that would be born to each woman if she were to live to the end of her child-bearing years and bear children at each age in accordance with prevailing age-specific fertility rates. The total fertility rate has been rising since 2004, and in 2008 stood at 1.056 (Table: "Vital Events" in web page entitled "Statistical Tables," Census and Statistics Department, the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. Website accessed 30th March 2010: http://www.censtatd.gov.hk/hong_kong_statistics/statistical_tables/index.jsp?charsetID=1&tableID=004).

² This research falls within the tradition of "symbolic interaction" in sociology, a tradition based on the idea that people behave a certain way because of the meaning that situations, other people's actions, and their own hold for them (Blumer, 1969).

identified and saw as eventually creating an “iron cage”³ (Weber, 2001). What we observe in the Hong Kong data is one of the many ways in which rationalization colonizes family life.

A number of scholars have associated motherhood with consumption. There are three prominent strands within the body of work that they have produced. In the first, scholars have suggested that the “consumption society” is partly to blame for the low birth rate (Brejon de Lavergnée, 2006), and that women have eschewed maternity in favor of material pursuits (Cullinane, 2007). In a classic study of consumption, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Thorstein Veblen (1971 [1899]: 113) stated that “the conspicuous consumption, and the consequent increased expense, required in the reputable maintenance of a child is very considerable and acts as a powerful deterrent [to having large numbers of children].” To have a child, in other words, meant to the leisure class to need to spend a large amount of money.

A second theme in the consumption-motherhood literature is that consumption helps produce both the mother and child. One analyst states that “mothers, fathers, partners, relatives and friends anticipate children in their own ways, ahead of any moment of an actual birth, often using commercial products to help visualize and make material the not-yet existing person” (Cook, 2008: 232). Taylor (2004) and DeVault (1991) suggest that consumption is central to mothering and constitutive of it; “ordinary people struggle on a daily basis [with the question]: What must I (and what *can* I) do and have and buy in order to properly love, value, educate, nurture, provide for, raise – in a word, *mother* – my child(ren)?” (Taylor, 2004: 12). Along similar lines, scholars have examined how women consume to construct a motherhood identity (Thomsen, 2006), and how consumption offers certain ways of being a mother (Pugh, 2005).

A third prominent branch of the motherhood-consumption literature examines women’s becoming a mother through adoption and reproductive technology, viewing it as a process similar to buying a product. Scholars have suggested that the adoption of children involves the commodification of children and parenthood (Landes and Posner, 2005; Williams, 2005; Zelizer, 1985), and with regard to international adoption, more than one analyst has stated that “children [are] commodities for consumption by wealthy Western nations” (Riley, 1997). Surrogacy has also been examined in relation to the notion that it involves a commodification

³ Other scholars have pointed to a highly rational approach with regard to having a child. Ritzer (2004) states that the highly rational process of McDonaldization (engineering, manufacturing, and commodifying) operates in the ways in which people approach conception, pregnancy, and birth. Similarly, in an early work Bumpass (1973) hints at this in stating that having children is voluntary, debated, and subject to evaluation.

of children (Markens, 2007; McLachlan and Swales, 2009; Scott, 2009; Teman, 2001), or of women's bodies (Rothman, 1989). Analysts have also examined reproductive technologies in terms of the commodification of parenthood (Ertman, 2003).

Within these three stands in the consumption-motherhood literature, the idea that mothers approach the question of whether to have their child very rationally and with a consumption orientation, is hinted at only, except for within the adoption and reproductive technologies literature which do put forth this idea. Women who intend to bear children without reproductive technology are neglected in this regard.⁴ Even in the key work on motherhood and consumption, *Consuming Motherhood* (Taylor *et al.*, 2004), there is no chapter about an outlook influenced by a consumption orientation in mothers who intend to have their own child in the "traditional" way. Moreover, there are relatively few studies on contexts beyond Europe and North America.

The State of Knowledge on the Meaning of Children in Hong Kong

Within the Hong Kong literature on family formation there is no analysis that suggests a consumption approach, but there is on what it means to women to have children, arguably the next close topic.⁵ The number of studies, in either English or Chinese, is very small indeed. What do they tell us? One study, based on survey data (Shek, 1996a) asserts that a majority of married adults agree that children contribute to their lives' meaning, maturity, life satisfaction, family happiness, and family wholeness, but they also believe that children bring an increased financial burden and personal sacrifice. This study also finds that most respondents did not attach high value to children as providers in their old age, and likewise did not think it important to have a son to continue the family line. Another study (Ding, 2001) states that individuals in Hong Kong see children as a burden, both materially and psychologically, and think that they will have to put a large number of resources into their children. Moreover, they feel it is no longer possible to have the children take care of them in the future. A third study (Wu, 1985), based on a survey conducted in one neighborhood,

⁴ For the broader literature on reproductive decision-making, see Rosina and Testa (2009) for a good review. For reproductive decision-making among specific categories of individuals, see Nattabi *et al.* (2009) on the reproductive decision-making of AIDS survivors (a growing research area), and Randall and Legrand (2003) and Dunlap *et al.* (2006) for low-income contexts, internationally and within the United States, and Grant *et al.* (2002) of decision-making of adolescent girls.

⁵ For other geographical contexts, the body of work that most focuses on what children mean to women is that which studies people who have elected not to have children, and that which studies infertile would-be parents (see Ulrich and Weatherall, 2000). Kanaanah (2002), however, is an excellent book-length study of what having children means to Palestinian women in Israel.

asserts that people tend to think that children represent “emotional satisfaction” and “happiness of the family,” although some also think of children as an emotional and economic burden. A study not directly focused on meaning asserts that women constructed the very beginning of having a child, that is, – pregnancy and childbirth, – as frightening events, to the extent that some wished to avoid them (Tsui *et al.*, 2007).

These Hong Kong studies present methodological problems. First, the fact that they are based on survey methods means that the richness of data available from in-depth interviews is lost. This is particularly unfortunate in the case of studies on meaning. Second, most of the studies were conducted with people who were already parents. It is probably safe to assume that the experience of having a child alters one’s perceptions of what having a child means. The data, then, do not help us fully to understand why people choose to have children in the first place; for this it is necessary to interview people before they have had children. Third, in the case of Shek’s work, the value of children is a narrower concept than the meaning of children; it emphasizes what children will bring to the parents (what positive or negative value they will have), and as such it does not encompass some aspects of meaning, such as what having a child will mean in terms of what people envision their lives will be like, for example. It is more useful to look at meaning rather than value when seeking to understand why people have children, because people do not have children just because of their value, but also because of how they envision life with a child.

Given that so few studies on meaning have been conducted in Hong Kong, it is helpful to look at studies of Mainland China, a region with considerable cultural influence over Hong Kong. Again, there are few studies, in either English or Chinese, on what it means to people to have children in Mainland China (Li, 2004; Zhang, 2003; Chen *et al.*, 2002; Wang, 1994; Huang, 1994; Li, 1994; Li, 1997; Zhou, 1994). Chen *et al.* (2002), for example, finds that for village women, having a child means having security in old age, continuing the family tree, increasing the family labor force, happiness to the family, and increasing the influence of the patriarchal clan. Li (1997) finds that for parents in cities, children mean increased family income, labor power for the family, security in old age, psychological support, a continuation of the family lineage, inheritance for family property, and an increase the influence of the patriarchal clan. For parents in villages, children mean labor power for the family, security in old age, a continuation of the family lineage, inheritance for family property, and happiness for the family. As with the Hong Kong studies, the richness of data is the Mainland studies is

compromised by the use of quantitative methods. Moreover, in several cases the people interviewed were already parents.

Methods

This paper is based on twenty-six in-depth interviews conducted in 2004-2005 with women who wanted to have a child. I chose to interview middle-class, married women of childbearing age who did not yet have a child, but who either wished to have one or were already expecting their first child. I selected middle-class respondents because I wished to conduct the interviews in English, feeling that my intermediate-level Cantonese was not sufficiently good for the purposes of interviewing. I chose to focus on married, heterosexual women because I wanted women who were within the “status” in which it was most socially acceptable to have a child. I elected to focus on interviewees who had not yet had a child so as to study more effectively what it meant to have a child, based on the assumption that the meaning of having a child is likely to change once a person actually experiences having a child.

The interviews were semi-structured, in-depth, one-on-one, and conducted by myself. They were recorded on both a tape player and a digital voice recorder. I analyzed the data using a variant of the grounded theory method (Glazer and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 2008; Charmaz, 2006), an analytical technique within the tradition of qualitative research that involves drawing out themes from the data, and examining and comparing sections of data on the same theme.

A Consumption Orientation to Motherhood

Having a child, the data suggest, is something Hong Kong women construct as a major enterprise involving high costs, financial and otherwise, requiring preparedness and planning, and conferring enhancements to their lives. Seeing it this way, they assess whether or not they want it, and weigh the question up as one might the purchase of a car or other valuable item not bought on a regular basis.

A Costly Enterprise

When Hong Kong women think of having a child, they envisage it as a very “costly” enterprise, in terms of money, freedom, and time.

Money

Hong Kong women construct having a child as requiring a lot of money over a long period of time. Gloria told me:

If we uh, don't have a babies [sic], we have a um, um, maybe lots of spare money to spend [laughs]... It's very difficult to plan but at least we have to uh, maybe spare uh, I think um, in, in terms of Hong Kong dollars, I think um, 10,000 to 20,000, maybe per month, as to spend money to having babies.⁶

Gloria has thought about the monetary cost of having a baby, and has worked out a dollar amount that she and her husband will require. Furthermore, her words suggest that she has in mind an alternative, not having a child, which, to her, means having a substantial amount of extra money available.

The women foresee and think about three main expenses that they would need to meet. These are education until university, an apartment in a "clean" area of the city with an extra bedroom,⁷ and childcare in the form of a Philippina maid (since the preferred option of the woman's mother caring for the child is seen as not always possible full-time).⁸ In addition to these, the women think about clothes, food, and extra-curricular activities such as piano lessons. Why did these particular expenses come to mind? Regarding the most frequently mentioned expense, education, the women interviewed perceive public education, which is free for the first nine years in Hong Kong, as being of poor quality. They want to be able to send their child to private schools, beginning with kindergarten. A minority envisage sending their child abroad.⁹ Both options are expensive.

⁶ The transcriptions are intended to be as close as possible to the actual words of the interviewee.

⁷ The couples tended to be living in apartments without an extra room, when I interviewed them. A suitable apartment meant an apartment large enough that it had a room for the baby, and given the high price of accommodation in much of Hong Kong, this was something that the women perceived as expensive. A suitable apartment also meant an apartment located in a "good environment," that is, in a clean building complex, with relatively clean air. Air pollution was and remains a much-discussed issue in the press. Moreover, the interviews were conducted shortly after the SARS [Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome] outbreak, which raised public awareness about health and healthy living environments. A housing estate was made infamous as the place where SARS spread most rapidly, because of the poor sanitation of the buildings.

⁸ The preferred child-care option was the mother or mother-in-law. The next-best was the "domestic helper," meaning maid, and most maids were from the Philippines. Many women spoke of a mother and maid combination, whereby they would hire a maid to help the mother or mother-in-law, who would oversee the maid's work. Many of the women expressed worry about abuse by maids, having read numerous articles in the press describing them in a negative light. Child-care was seen as necessary because the men and women both intended to keep working full-time.

⁹ The hope some women had of sending children to university in England, the United States, and Canada stemmed in part from many Hong Kong residents fleeing to these places shortly before the handover by Britain

The concern for an apartment in a clean area of the city reflects the widespread concern in Hong Kong about air pollution. This pollution comes mainly from rapid industrial development in the Pearl River Delta, where China has one of its “special economic zones” in which manufacturing and entrepreneurship had been encouraged. The air pollution problem and women’s concern also arise because of the nature of urbanization in Hong Kong, which had left some areas far more densely crowded than others. The idea of the Philippina maid reflects the availability of extremely cheap migrant labor, primarily from the Philippines, to carry out domestic work, the promotion of such emigration by the Philippino government, and the middle-class tradition in Hong Kong of hiring maids.¹⁰

The women, then, bear in mind the expenses of education, a good apartment, and childcare, and see having a child as “costly,” far into the future. In thinking in terms of money and expenses, the women are approaching having a child as rational consumers, who know that what they want to acquire has a price, and need to weigh up the purchase. They are also behaving a little like Weber’s rational, calculating, methodical capitalists, working out what having a child would cost and estimating these costs far into the future. The emphasis on costs reflects, in addition to a rational approach, higher standards with regard to what constitutes good parenthood. Arguably, to be a good parent one must provide a child with more and better conditions than was true in previous generations. This raises the cost of having a child.¹¹

Freedom

As well as “expensive,” having a child meant, to the women in the sample, a loss of “freedom” to enjoy leisure activities, especially travel. With a child, the women reflect, they would not be able to travel as much, or go on particular trips they have planned.

to Communist China, and in part from the fact that when Hong Kong was a British colony, education in a top British university was highly prized.

¹⁰ In earlier decades, middle and upper class Hong Kong couples used to hire single, Chinese women called “amahs.”

¹¹ An early study (Wat and Hodge, 1972) suggests that the rising costs of childbearing (which in turn is related to increasing employment opportunities and increasing normative expectations about the amount and quality of schooling children should receive) was partly responsible for Hong Kong’s fertility decline, in addition to changes in the age composition of the population.

Author: But you can still travel when you have baby.

Anna: Maybe quite difficult, may- because, um, in the holiday I need to take care my baby [yeah], and in the day time, my mother take care baby is very, very tired [Author: She will be very tired], yeah she will be very tired. So in the holiday I cannot leave my baby to my mother, I also need to give my, my mother a holiday [Author: Yeah, absolutely]. [Laugh together] [Author: OK] Yeah. Up today, he [Anna's husband] think that after my baby was, was, is birth, we can go to the Macau, one month after he, he, he think that. [Laugh together].

Anna's words suggest that she thinks it would not be easy to travel after having a baby, and that she feels that she and her husband cannot take the baby with them. They also point to a gendered concern on her part with the issue of who would look after the child during such travel, and less concern on the part of her husband. Anna and the other women in the sample, like other young, middle class individuals in Hong Kong, place a high value on travel and other leisure activities, and expect to have access to such activities.¹²

This valuing of travel reflects the rise of the travel and tourist industries. Mass tourism has expanded in recent decades, in Hong Kong and elsewhere, and its expansion had produced a high level of competition between companies in what had become a crowded sector, leading to very attractive prices and aggressive marketing. The valuing of travel reflects, more broadly, the rise of the leisure industry and the expectation that the enjoyment of leisure activities be a part of one's life. Thanks to these developments, travel had become integrated into the young, Hong Kong middle-class person's lifestyle, in a way that had not been true in their grandparents' and even parents' era.

Time

Another cost in the women's minds is time. Hong Kong women see it as necessary to spend a lot of time with the child, and experience this as meaning less time for themselves. Paulette told me:

Paulette: There are things that money cannot buy and I, I think that's one thing, uh, uh, I think, the, there's also a challenge of, for me personally, um, to grow out of my own self and [laughs]-.

Author: Grow out of your own self?

Paulette: To, to, to, my own ego and sort of be willing to um, part away some of the time that I think I want to do things, because I like doing certain things. Uh, and to

¹² This observation is based on information I absorbed through the experience of living and teaching in Hong Kong for five years.

actually devote that time to a person, uh for a, a good number of years and to make those choices and sacrifices. I think that is also quite a challenge. And the patience that you have to um, to, to basically give to this small child. [Q: Mhm.] To help them to grow and to basically walk a good path of their life, the first 20 years of their life with them. Um, that I think it's, it's not an easy task.

For Paulette, having a child means taking time away from what she likes doing, and devoting that time to a child. She frames this as a “challenge,” and “sacrifices,” and her word “patience” implies time given with difficulty. Her words are gendered in that they suggest, arguably, that she saw herself as a primary carer for the child.

Paulette and other interviewees conceive of this time as taken from their leisure time, primarily. However, they also see it as time taken from work, understanding it as detracting from their ability to earn as much as they could otherwise. They think, furthermore, in terms of both less time for themselves and less time for the couple, that is, less time spent alone with their spouse. With regard to what the time would be used for exactly, the women tend to emphasize needing time to care for the child, and to teach him well, especially, they explain, so that he or she might grow up to be a “good person” having “good values;” someone who will be good “for society.”

The framing of this time with the child as a cost to themselves reflects the existence of a notion, widespread in Hong Kong and elsewhere today, of time as a precious commodity. It also points to the emergence of the concepts of “time for oneself” and “time for the couple”, both of which are considered valuable. It derives, furthermore, from the fact that long hours are required of Hong Kong people at work, which leaves little time for enjoyment. The working week is five and a half days long (one works Saturday mornings), and the leave period when employed in a company may start off as low as only one week a year. Such long hours are a product of companies struggling to compete in a global marketplace. The limited time the women were spending outside of work may have made non-work time all the more precious to them. Hong Kong women, then, framed having a child as costly in terms of money, freedom, and time, considering these carefully before having a child.

Preparedness

The women interviewed consider that to have a child one must first be “prepared.” This means having thought things through and made plans, before conceiving. Gloria, for example, said, “We have to think, we have to calculate [laughs] if we can, uh, um, we can

manage to have a babies and we can grown up a baby.” Her use of the word “calculate” suggests that she feels that a rational approach and the work of working out the feasibility of the idea will be necessary. Meanwhile, her words “grown up” suggest that she thinks it necessary to think about what having a child would involve not just at the baby stage but also beyond.

Being prepared means certain prerequisites being met. Chief among these is the assurance of enough money in the future to be able to pay for the expenses incurred by the child. This means the prospect of a stable and sufficient income for both partners, having money saved up, and having paid off at least part of any financial burdens. These meanings are a logical accompaniment to the understanding that to have a child is an expensive enterprise. Not being financially prepared is cause for doubt about the appropriateness of having a child. Elizabeth said:

Elizabeth: I have think about, think about if I don't have money, will I still want a have, to have a children? I have think about that before. Mhm. If I have enough money, like um, sorry, um, I don't have enough money. Should I have a children? I have considered this, this kind of uh, uh, issue before.

Author: In your mind, how much money is enough money?

Elizabeth: [Laughs] Um, [pause] at least I have a sufficient money for him to educ-, for his education. Mhm. Because um, you know, in Hong Kong, you, you don't know when you will have a secure job, you know. So, as, as long as I have a good money, I will, I'm thinking of uh I should have a baby.

Elizabeth's words suggest she has been weighing up things up, and doing some calculating. She and the other women are saying to themselves, “I'd like to have a child, but can I afford it?” Julia expresses, for example, that it is best to have a child to complete the family, but only if financially viable. There is much in common with these patterns of thought and those one might adopt with regard to an important purchase, such as a mortgage on a house, or a new car. The women are reminiscent of Weber's capitalists in that they point to a calculating of future expenses, a careful working out beforehand.

For these women, being prepared means having the money ready for the expenses involved. The backdrop to the notion of a need for financial preparedness was the insecurity of employment in Hong Kong. A number of women express that either their own or their husband's jobs were not stable or certain to last. This insecurity of employment was a function of the recent downturn in the economy (in 2004 6.8 percent of the population was

unemployed, a high figure by Hong Kong standards¹³). This downturn was caused in part by the SARS [severe acute respiratory syndrome] outbreak in 2002 and 2003, which brought a decrease in tourism and professional visits to Hong Kong. The increased insecurity of employment was also related to the growing number of companies moving to or opening branches in Mainland China, and dismissing Hong Kong staff or sending them there. In 2001 there were 176,300 Hong Kong residents who had worked on the mainland during the 12 months before enumeration and were still required to work there, and in 2003-2005 there were 228,900.¹⁴ This insecurity of employment caused both by this relocation to the Mainland and by the economic downturn meant for many of the women that it was difficult to be certain about being able to provide for the child as one would wish.

Being well-prepared does not just mean having enough money, however. It also means being psychologically ready. Being psychologically ready means being prepared to give the child the attention it would need, which in turn means being prepared to spend considerable amounts of time with the child. As such, it is the corollary to the meaning “taking up much time” that the women attribute to having a child. Paulette told me:

I have a very strong sense of responsibility, and I always think, think I, I need to be ready in order to give the best to my own children. Uh, and I have seen so many cases where parents, you know, they have children and they leave them with their nannies or leave them with grandparents or even, you know, a babysitters and they are just not given the proper attention that I think they should deserve.

Paulette's use of the word “ready” suggests that she feels she needs to be in the right frame of mind, so as to be able to give her child the best of herself, and offer it the attention it deserves. Her words suggest a gendered expectation that she will play a very large part, or the primary part, in the care of the child. Two other forms of readiness that the women describe are having decided what form of child-care they would use, and having found a suitable apartment. Hong Kong women, then, construct having a child as something you need to be ready for, financially, psychologically, and otherwise.

¹³ General Hong Kong Survey Section (2). Census and Statistics Department, the Government of the Hong Kong SAR.

¹⁴ Special Topics Report No. 30, Social and Analysis Research Section, Census and Statistics Department, the Government of the Hong Kong SAR 2001; and Special Topics Report No. 42, General Household Survey Section (1), Census and Statistics Department, the Government of the Hong Kong SAR, 2005.

Positive Experiences

A complete family

To have a child, for Hong Kong women, means to acquire a number of enhancements to their lives. Chief among these is “a complete family.” In the women’s view, a child turns a couple into a family. A “complete family” consists of a mother, father, and child - a heterosexual, nuclear family unit.¹⁵ About how a child would bring completeness to the family, Anna explained, “I think if only, only I and my husband, it’s only a, a marriage. I think that if I have a baby, this is a family [JA: Yeah], yeah, this is a complete family.” For her, the state of complete family was more desirable than mere marriage, and it could be attained by having a child. In the same vein, Queenie expressed, “I think we should have a child for a complete family.” For Queenie, the goal for which one should strive was the “complete family.”

Traditionally, not to bear a child was seen as one of the major sins against filial piety. A Chinese proverb states “among the three un-filial duties, to have no heir is the greatest.” Until recently, having children was a family obligation and a taken-for-granted part of married life in Hong Kong and Mainland China. This “traditional” thinking continues today in subtle forms. When a couple gets married, there are symbolic gestures which express the wish that they will be blessed with children. In Hong Kong, for example, red seeds are served, symbolizing the wish that the couple will have many children. Sweet lotus seeds are also served, expressing the hope that the couple will give birth to boys in consecutive years.¹⁶ There is also overt and less overt pressure from parents once the couple is married, suggesting that they still have a job to do. In addition to the cultural tradition of thinking of children as desirable or necessary, there was, arguably, until recently, a certain stigma associated with marriage without children, and traces of the stigma remain. Although a number of the women interviewed say they respect the decision of childless women to not have children, one says it is “abnormal” and others talk about it as if it were an unusual course of action to take.

That the interviewees speak of the nuclear family when they talk of a complete family should not be taken for granted. Less than a century ago, it was common for several generations to live under one roof in China and Hong Kong. The extended family is still a

¹⁵ The meaning of “complete family” was also found in a study published in 1996 (Shek, 1996), based on survey data, which asserts that a majority of married adults agree that children contribute to their lives family wholeness (among other meanings).

¹⁶ I am grateful to my colleague Anna Lo for kindly sharing this information with me.

large part of one's leisure time today, with frequent visiting and eating out with parents, grave-sweeping festivals that bring together the extended family, and of course Chinese New Year, the occasion of family get-togethers and visits. However, the omission of parents and the focus on just mother, father, and children in the concept of "complete family" is partly to be accounted for by fact that the number of individuals living in nuclear family units has increased, and the number living in three-generation or extended family units has shrunk. The following table shows a small increase in the number of nuclear families over the last thirty years.

Percentage of households by household composition				
	1976	1986	1996	2006
One unextended				
nuclear family	60.2	59.2	63.6	67.0

Sources

For 1976: Hong Kong By-Census 1976 Basic Tables. Census and Statistics Department, The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. For 1986: Hong Kong 1991 Population Census Main Report. Census and Statistics Department, the Government of the HK SAR. For 1996 and 2006: 2006 Population By-Census. Summary Results. Census and Statistics Department. The Government of the HK SAR.

Another factor that may explain the emphasis on the nuclear family is the small size and high cost of apartments, making it difficult for parents to live with the couple. Also significant may be the fact that when the women interviewed were in primary and secondary school, British school and kindergarten curriculum materials were prevalent, and these emphasized that a family was made up of parents and children, usually a boy and girl, in accordance with British notions of family. Some of the schools the women attended were Christian, and here too the nuclear family may have been emphasized as part of the schools' Christian mission.

Being Cared for in Old Age

There was a further positive outcome that the women see as accruing to them if they have a child: that of being cared for in old age. They envisage for their later years their children's

taking care of them, providing them with company, preventing them from feeling lonely,¹⁷ and being a source of happiness if the children are successful. They emphasize that they did not expect their child to provide them with money, only company. Olivia told me, referring to the time when her mother was about to pass away:

Just like her [Olivia's mother], I, I think she also don't like me to lose her, so by that time I want to have my own family, to have my own child so that when I get old like my mother, I will also have a child like that to look after me.

Having a child means having someone look after you in old age.

Something cute

A further positive outcome that the women see as accruing to them if they have a child, is having something "lovely" and "cute." The women are thinking primarily of a young child or baby, when they think in these terms. Beatrice told me:

When I was young, I don't like children at all, [Author: Yeah], because I don't think they're cute, but I becoming old, then I think, "Oh, the children is so cute, I, I want to have one, [Author: Yeah], or two."

Beatrice's words "the children is so cute, I want to have one" point starkly to the wish to acquire the cuteness, so to speak. Hence to have a child, in these women's minds, brings with it the acquisition of the status of complete family, care in old age, and cuteness. Some women measure this up against the negatives. Frances, for example, says that "the burden" is less than the "happiness" that she would experience.

Conclusion

The women construct having a child in terms of a costly enterprise, with positive outcomes, and the need for preparedness, primarily in financial and psychological terms. These meanings carry a striking likeness to the meanings one might attribute to an expensive or very important purchase, such as a mortgage on a house. These ways in which the women frame motherhood suggest that the habits of thought that develop in the consumption-focused

¹⁷ They might be lonely without a child, the women reflected, particularly if the spouse passed away, and the house would be very quiet, but their grown-up children would bring them happiness. Some mentioned that these children would come to their house, go traveling with them, or eat out with them.

world of late capitalism, or what I term a consumption orientation, have colonized their thinking, to the extent that they consider things not within the marketplace, including their own potential child and the state of motherhood, in these terms.

It is not merely a consumption orientation that is at work, but also a penetration of rationalization into the women's thinking. Whereas having a child used to be, for arguably the majority of Chinese women, an "automatic" event following marriage, and one strongly encouraged by family, the women interviewed consider it carefully, and calculate. They engage in a weighing up process when faced with the decision about whether or not to have children, rather than leaping in.

Why do the women apply this consumption orientation and rational thinking to the question of whether or not to have a child? We consume so much on the market place, every day, several times a day, that it would be surprising if our thoughts were not influenced by these repeated acts of consumption. As for rational thinking and calculation, these are thought processes taught in school, and put to work in many aspects of life. They are so much a feature of the institutions we deal with every day, such as bureaucracies, businesses, even transport systems and the media, that they are inescapable. This is one of several ways in which they form, to use Weber's term albeit not in the way he uses it, an "iron cage."

There is something else, however, that may facilitate a highly rational and consumption orientation with regard to having a child. Hong Kong people of childbearing age today live in a climate of choice about whether or not to have a child. The degree of choice is mitigated by traditional ideas, but Hong Kong at the time of the interviews had one of the lowest total fertility rates in the world, suggesting that many women were choosing to opt out of having a child. As Elizabeth told me:

Some of [my friends in Hong Kong], they prefer, they don't want to have a childrens. Um, but um, it's getting, the trend, I think the trend is getting more people, they don't want to have a, babies anymore. Um, I don't know why. I haven't talked to them, um, seriously for this topic but, but uh, most of my friends, really, they, they, they give up. They don't want to have a children any more. They jus-, they just say they wanted to, they want to have more freedom. Because they feel a baby or children like, just like a burden. A burden for them."

Being in an environment in which some couples or individuals have opted out of children makes it easier for other women to do so, since they are not going to be the only ones, and they will have other friends to mix with in the same boat, sharing a similar lifestyle.

Arguably, this climate of choice makes one more prone to giving the matter of having a child careful thought. Hence there may be a feedback loop, with the climate of choice resulting in rational weighings up and calculations, and the calculations resulting in some women not having children, which helps constitute a climate of choice.

Also conducive to rational calculation is that fact that middle-class, educated women in Hong Kong have attractive lifestyles available to them. The labor force participation rate for women is relatively high and career opportunities are considerable, for women lucky enough to acquire an education. Moreover, to participate in the labor force is something women feel is expected of them, and something that they expect of themselves and wish for after giving birth. All the women except for two, who were not working, intended to continue working full-time after having a child. Yet the structure of middle-class jobs made child-rearing difficult. There were few part-time jobs, flexi-time and family-friendly arrangements were not common, and worksite day-care centers almost non-existent. This gave women room for pause. Meanwhile, there were multiple leisure options; the leisure industry had boomed, and it, too, offered components of a lifestyle that women saw as attractive and somewhat incompatible with child rearing, as we saw above. The climate of choice, expectation that they will work full time, perception of difficulty of combining work with childrearing, and attractiveness of the leisure as an alternative, were all conducive to the calculation and weighings-up that we observe in the data, and hence to the application of a rationalization and consumption orientation to the decision to have a child.

Implications

These findings have a number of implications. The meanings that Hong Kong women attach to having a child may help shed light on why the fertility rate has dropped so far that it is among the lowest in the world. Most demographers answer the question of why fertility rates are what they are in terms of “macro-level” factors such as the proportion of women marrying in their prime childbearing years (Yip, 2002a), rising education and labor force participation rates for women (Yang, 1996), and the development of the economy leading to less labor-intensive work (Zhu, 2002), and they tend to neglect meaning. A fuller answer, however, does require that meaning be taken into account because whether or not a couple

decides to have a child depends in part on what they think having a child will mean for their lives.¹⁸

Second, an examination of what it means to have a child may help us understand family change. In Hong Kong, like elsewhere, ideas about what children, marriage, and family are and should be, are changing. What it means to have a child is influenced by these changing ideas, and in turn influences them.

Third, these findings may help us understand more fully the consequences in Hong Kong of economic globalization, and integration with Mainland China. The recent economic downturn, the moving of factories and companies to Mainland China, the insecurity of employment, the longer hours spent at work, and the speed-up of work (Hochschild, 1989), all of which are arguably products of globalization and integration with Mainland China, have an impact on what it means to people to have a child. A number of the interviewees in my data set mention at least one of these phenomena as influencing his or her thinking about whether or not to have a child at all.

Fourth, these findings provide an insight into deeper cultural changes occurring in Hong Kong, namely a possible spread of rationalization. Having a child is now something that many individuals in Hong Kong and elsewhere ponder over, yet not long ago to have a child was a taken-for-granted part of married life and something that must be done lest one go against the norms of filial piety. How did this change occur? Part of the answer, I believe, is the spread of rationalization (in the Weberian sense of the term). This development may be relevant not just to the family, but to many other areas of social life in Hong Kong.

Fifth, as “lowest low” total fertility rates are a feature not only of Hong Kong, but also of other areas of Chinese cultural heritage, these findings may also provide insights helpful for future studies about these other regions. Singapore’s total fertility rate, for instance, was 1.28 in 2008 (Singapore Government 2010) and Mainland China’s was 1.79 in 2009 (indexmundi.com 2010).

Finally, this Hong Kong case suggests that rationalization and a consumption orientation are forces that exert a power over what people do, by creating habits of thought; we saw how people put to work these habits of thought with regard to the possibility of becoming a parent or remaining childless, and to the potential child. This suggests that these habits of thought may click into action in multiple other interactions with other people. They

¹⁸ The birth rate depends only in part on the fertility of married women, but this is a part of the puzzle.

may also become activated when people are faced with other potential changes in their status or positioning, or other developments in their lives more broadly.

Bibliographical references

- Blumer, Herbert (1969), *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and method*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- Brejon de Lavergnée, Nicolas (2006), “Is Woman the Future of Man? Women’s Work and Birth Rates”, *Liberté Politique*, 33, 85-106.
- Bumpass, Larry (1973), “Is low fertility here to stay?”, *Family Planning Perspectives*, 5, 67-69.
- Charmaz, Kathleen (2006), *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Chen, Sheng Li (陳勝利) *et al.* (2002), “Family Fertility behavior and Fertility Aspirations”, (家庭生育行為與生育意願) in Sheng Li Chen (陳勝利) *et al.* (eds.), *Planned Fertility and Family Development in China (中國計劃生育與家庭發展變化)*, Beijing (北京): Renmin Publishers (人民出版社), 69-99.
- Cook, Daniel Thomas (2008), “The Missing Child in Consumption Theory”, *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 8(2), 219-243.
- Cullinane, Joanne (2007), “The Domestication of AIDS: Stigma, Gender, and the Body Politic in Japan”, *Medical Anthropology*, 26(3), 255-292.
- DeVault, Marjorie (1991), *Feeding the Family*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ding, Guo Hui (丁國輝) (2001), “To Have a Boy or a Girl: The Change in the Views on Fertility in Hong Kong”, (生男與生女：香港生育觀念的變遷) in Shao Jie Liu (劉兆佳) *et al.* (eds.), *Social Transformation and Changes in Culture (社會轉型與文化變貌：華人社會的比較)*, 259-269.
- Dunlap, Eloise *et al.* (2006), “The Elusive Romance of Motherhood: Drugs, Gender, and Reproduction in Inner-City Distressed Households”, *Journal of Ethnicity in Substance Abuse*, 5(3), 1-27.
- Ertman, Martha (2003), “What’s Wrong with a Parenthood Market? A New and Improved Theory of Commodification”, *North Carolina Law Review*, 82(1), 1-59.

- Glazer, Barry; Strauss, Anselm (1967), *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Grant, Kathryn *et al.* (2002), “Predicting Desire for a Child among Adolescent Low-Income Urban Adolescent Girls: Interpersonal Processes in the Context of Poverty”, *The Journal of Primary Prevention*, 22(4): 341-359.
- Health, Welfare and Food Bureau (2005), “Statistics: Total Fertility Rate”, Government Information Centre Website. Acedido em 2003,
http://www.hwfb.gov.hk/statistics/en/statistics/total_fertility_rate.htm
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell (1989), *The Second Shift*. New York: Avon Books.
- Huang, Bing (王冰.) (1994), “The Influences of Social Morality on Human Fertility”, (社會倫理對人類生育的影響) *Economic Review*, (經濟評論) 2: 71-75.
- Indexmundi.com (2010), China total fertility rate. Accessed on 30/03/2010,
http://www.indexmundi.com/china/total_fertility_rate.html.
- Kanaaneh, Rhoda Ann (2002), *Birthing the Nation: Strategies of Palestinian Women in Israel*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Landes, Elizabeth; Richard Posner (2005), “Contested Commodities: Babies/Parental Rights and Obligations”, in Martha Ertman; Joan Williams (eds.), *Rethinking Commodification: Cases and Readings in Law and Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 46-57.
- Li, Yin He (李銀河) (1994), “The Influences of the Perception of Life Achievement on the Concepts of Fertility of Village Women”, (人生成就感對農村婦女生育觀念的影響) *Journal of Women Studies* (婦女研究論叢), 2: 17-18.
- Li, Xiao Ping (李小平.) (1997), “The Values of Children and the Structure of Values” (孩子的價值與價值結構), in Tian Xue Yuan (田雪原); Hu Wei Lue (胡偉略) (eds.), *Family, Economy and Fertility Studies in China* (中國家庭經濟與生育研究). Beijing (北京): Chinese Economic Press (中國經濟出版社), 150-198.
- Li, Yin He (李銀河) (2004), “How do Women Perceive Fertility?” (女性怎樣看待生育), *The Community* (社區), 22: 54-55.
- Markens, Susan (2007), *Surrogate Motherhood and the Politics of Reproduction*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- McLachlan, Hugh; Kim Swales (2009), "Commercial Surrogate Motherhood and the Alleged Commodification of Children: A Defense of Legally Enforceable Contracts", *Law and Contemporary Problems*, 72(3): 91-107.
- Nattabi, Barbara *et al.* (2009), "A Systematic Review of Factors Influencing Fertility Desires and Intentions among People Living with HIV/AIDS: Implications for Policy and Service Delivery", *Aids and Behavior*, 13(5): 949-968.
- Pugh, Allison (2005), "Selling Compromise: Toys, Motherhood, and the Cultural Deal", *Gender and Society*, 19(6): 729-749.
- Randall, S.; Legrand, T. (2003), "Stratégies Reproductives et Prise de Décision au Sénégal: Le Rôle de la Mortalité des Enfants", *Population* 58(6): 773-805.
- Riley, Nancy (1997), "American Adoptions of Chinese Girls: The Socio-Political Matrices of Individual Decisions", *Women's Studies International Forum*, 20(1): 87-102.
- Ritzer, George (2004), *The MacDonaldisation of Society*. Thousand Oaks (CA): Pine Forge.
- Rosina, Alessandro; Testa, Maria Rita (2009), "Couples' First Child Intentions and Disagreement: An Analysis of the Italian Case", *European Journal of Population*, 25(4): 487-502.
- Rothman, Barbara Katz (1989), *Recreating Motherhood*. New York: Norton.
- Scott, Elizabeth (2009), "Surrogacy and the Politics of Commodification", *Law and Contemporary Problems*, 72(3): 109-146.
- Shek, Daniel (1996), "The Value of Children to Hong Kong Chinese Parents", *The Journal of Psychology*, 130(5): 561-569.
- Singapore Government (2010), Statistics Singapore. Key Annual Indicators. Accessed on 30/03/2010, <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/stats/keyind.html>.
- Strauss, Anselm; Corbin, Juliet (2008), *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Taylor, Janelle *et al.* (eds.) (2004), *Consuming Motherhood*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Teman, Elly (2001), "Technological Fragmentation and Women's Empowerment: Surrogate Motherhood in Israel", *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 29(3-4): 11-34.
- Thomsen, Thyra Uth; Sørensen, Elin Brandi (2006), "The First Four-Wheeled Status Symbol: Pram consumption as a vehicle for the construction of motherhood identity", *Journal of Marketing Management*, 22(9-10): 907-928.

- Tsui, Michelle *et al.* (2007), "Maternal Fear Associated with Pregnancy and Childbirth in Hong Kong Chinese Women", *Women and Health*, 44 (4): 79-92.
- Tu, Edward (2003), "Patterns of Lowest Low Fertility in Hong Kong", *Journal of Population and Social Security (Population)*, Supplement to Vol. 1, 1: 629-642.
- Ulrich, Mirian; Weatherall, Ann (2000), "Motherhood and Infertility: Viewing Motherhood Through the Lens of Infertility", *Feminism & Psychology*, 10(3): 323-336.
- Veblen, Thorstien (1971 [1899]), *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Penguin.
- Wang, Shu Xin (王樹新.) (1994), "The Change on the View on Fertility among Beijing City Women", (北京城市婦女生育觀的轉變) *Population and Economics*, (人口與經濟) 1: 42-56.
- Wat, Sui-Ying; Hodge, R.W. (1972), "Social and Economic Factors in Hong Kong's Fertility Decline", *Population Studies*, 26(3): 455-464.
- Weber, Max (2001), *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Williams, Patricia (2005), "In Search of Pharaoh's Daughter", in Martha Ertman; Joan Williams (eds.), *Rethinking Commodification: Cases and Readings in Law and Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 68-70.
- Wu, Bai Tao (吳白弢.) (1985), "Some Social Factors for the Decrease of Birth Rate in Hong Kong", (香港生育率下降的一些社會因素) In Xing Mu Huan (邢慕寰) and Jin Yao Ji (金耀基) (eds.), *The Experiences of Hong Kong Development (香港之發展經驗)*. Hong Kong (香港): The Chinese University Press (中文大學出版社): 193-206.
- Yang, Ching Li (1996), "The Effect of Women's Labour Force Participation on Fertility in Taiwan", *Taiwanese Journal of Sociology*, 19.
- Yip, Paul; Lee, Joseph (2002a), "The Impact of the Changing Marital Structure on Fertility of Hong Kong SAR (Special Administrative Region)", *Social Science and Medicine*, 55(12): 2159-2169.
- Zelizer, Viviana (1985), *Pricing the Priceless Child*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Zhang, Yue Song (章越松.) (2003), "An Introduction to Modern Birth Culture", (現代生育文化引論) *Shao Xing Academic Journal of Arts and Science Faculty*, (紹興文理學院學報) 23(6): 44-47.

Zhou, Wei Wen (周偉文) (1994), "The Influences of Role Conflicts of Modern Working Women on the Pattern of Female Fertility", (當代職業女性角色沖突對女性生育模式轉變的影響) *He Bei Academic Journal*, (河北學刊) 3: 97-102.

Zhu, Hong Feng (朱洪峰.) (2002), "Modern Birth Concepts and the Modernization of Birth Concepts", (現代生育觀念及生育觀念現代化) *Population and Planned Fertility*, (人口與計劃生育) 3: 36-38.