Doing family, contesting gender and expanding affinity: Family practices of married women in Hong Kong

Anita Kit-wa Chan

akwchan@ied.edu.hk

Department of Social Sciences
The Hong Kong Institute of Education
10 Lo Ping Road
Tai Po
Hong Kong

Abstract

Despite rapid social and economic changes, the persistence of gender inequalities in the conventional nuclear family remains puzzling. It seems unlikely that women will contest gender inequalities if they have accepted the ideology of separate spheres or if they regard mothering and care giving as integral to their feminine identity. However, this article re-examines these issues by analysing the family practices of 23 married Chinese women. It argues that how and why women 'do gender' have to be understood along with their family circumstances and their broader social contexts. It also reveals how women in unhappy marriages have developed creative strategies to subvert the needs and authority of their husbands and de-centre the nuclear family as their sole source of care and support. The article contributes to the discussion by unfolding the complexity, fluidity and cultural specificity of practices, agency and change.

Keywords: family practices, doing gender, Chinese culture, married women, ideology of separate spheres

In the past two decades, feminist scholars have contested the extent to which gender relations have changed in the domestic sphere. An important concern is whether and how gender inequalities persist amidst rapid social and economic changes (Gillies, 2003; McGraw & Walker, 2004). Some studies argue that while post-industrialization may have led to 'dehousewification' (Ochiai & Molony, 2008), as more women have joined the labour market, the power within and division of labour at home have not changed accordingly. The new economy may have undermined male employment and men's role as providers in the family, yet women continue to do 'the lion's share of housework' (Lachance-Grezela & Bouchard, 2010). Furthermore, despite the increased involvement of men in parenting, child care is still defined as 'woman's work' (Fox, 2009).

Gender ideologies and 'doing gender' are two common explanations of this persistence. When couples endorse the notion of male-breadwinner and female-homemaker, husbands are likely to remain powerful within the home, regardless of their actual economic contribution (Lim, 2000). Furthermore, the ideology of separate gender roles also masks the husbands' privileged position and prevents wives from perceiving unfairness (Steil, 1997). On the other hand, some

studies turn to the gendered processes within families and examine the negotiation of meanings and identities of women (and increasingly of men). An important argument is that marriage and family, where gendered differentiation processes are institutionalized, are important contexts for 'doing gender' (Zvonkovic, Greaves, Schmiege & Hall, 1996; Dryden, 1999; Walzer, 2010). Women develop, negotiate and achieve their feminine identities as wives and mothers when they perform domestic chores, emotional work, caring responsibilities and motherhood, and as a result perpetuate gendered division of labour and, unwittingly, disadvantage themselves (Fox, 2009; DeVault, 1991; McMahon 1995).

Notwithstanding their insights, studies adopting these approaches have difficulty grasping the changes and complexities of family lives. For instance, although 'doing gender' recognises the active construction of gender in daily interaction, its emphasis on 'the regulatory nature of *existing* normative guidelines governing gender behaviour in the home' (Sullivan, 2006, p. 10, italics original) has limited the possibilities of changes. Even though redoing gender is possible after divorce (Walzer, 2010), contesting gender inequalities and making changes are unlikely when women stay in conventional households. Meanwhile, while gender is central to understanding

families, mothering and family experiences differ according to class, generation, race and culture (Miller, 2005; Nielsen & Rudberg, 2000; Smart & Shipman, 2004). In Chinese culture, a woman can have multiple positions in the family household, whose gender identities include wife, mother, daughter, daughter-in-law, sister and sister-in-law (Chou, 2000). It is likely that she not only has to do gender but must also mesh and weave webs of relationships if she is to make her family work. Many scholars have argued for the need to understand 'the whole constellations of personal ties within which people are embedded' (Jamieson, Morgan, Crow & Allan, 2006, para. 1.1) and recommended 'family practices'.

Family practices, as defined by Morgan, are 'set of practices which deal in some way with ideas of parenthood, kinship, marriage and the expectations and obligations which are associated with these practices' (1996, p. 11). A merit of the term is its emphasis on fluidity. By focusing on how people 'do families', it allows researchers 'to conceptualize how family "practices" overlap with other social practices' (Smart & Neal, 1999, p. 21). Being informed by the theoretical insights of the concept, this paper will explore the experiences and subjective evaluations of Chinese women in

contemporary Hong Kong and unfold the cultural specificity, fluidity and complexity of practices, agency and change.

Background of the research

Our project was to understand the lived experiences of contemporary Hong Kong families in light of the momentous social changes that the society has gone through since the 1990s. In 1997, immediately after the handover, Hong Kong's economy, which had been restructuring from manufacturing- to service and financing-oriented since the late 1970s, was hit hard by the Asian financial crisis, and the stock and property markets collapsed. The onset of Sudden Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003 only exacerbated the economic hardship and pushed the unemployment rate up from an average 6% (from 1998 to 2002) to 7.8% (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, 2010). However, despite these grave economic conditions, women's economic participation and household contributions rose substantially: women's employment increased from 47.8% to 53.1% from 1996 to 2009 whereas men's dropped from 75.7% to 69.4% (Hong Kong Government, 2010); the contribution of the income of wives to total household income increased from 18.9% to 24.3% between 1991 and 2001 (Chiu, 2005).

Meanwhile, the social, economic and political reintegration with mainland had a significant effect on personal and family relationships. As more Hong Kong people worked and resided in mainland China, the rise in the numbers of cross-border marriages, 'concubines', and liaisons with 'women in the north' became serious social concerns (Leung and Lee, 2005; Wu, 2003). It was against this background that our research project was conducted.

This research project has two parts. The first part is a territory-wide survey of over 2,000 respondents, designed to explore the changes and continuity of family forms, relationships, practices and values. The second part consists of 40 in-depth interviews on individual men and women, who were drawn from the survey sample. We particularly listened to their stories of family life, their definitions of 'family', the families that they have traversed, their family practices and strategies, their evaluations of relationships, and the morality and rationality that have governed their decisions and actions (Crow, 2002; Harris, 2006; Morgan, 2001). Our interviewees belonged to the 'conventional nuclear family household'.[1] While we do not see this

[1] We have loosely identified "conventional nuclear family households" as families of heterosexual couples, usually with children, both dependent and independent. For more detailed discussions of our methodology, please refer to Koo and Wong (2009) and Ng, Ng and Chan (2009).

form of family as ‘typical’ and are aware of the danger that such research reinforce the ‘heteronormative framework’ (Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004), there are two reasons for the choice. First, this type of family constitutes 62% of respondents from our territory-wide survey (Koo & Wong, 2009). Secondly, despite the emergence of new personal relationships (Kong, 2009; Ng & Ng, 2009), this type of family remains emotionally and politically significant in popular and policy discourses. We intended to engage with those concerns by unpacking the difficulties and inequalities exhibited, and thus challenging the desirability and naturalness of this family form.

This article is based on the experiences and accounts of 23 married women, interviewed in 2005 and 2006. All but two were mothers. Among those who had children, eight had one child and the rest had two to four. At the time of the interview, their ages ranged from 29 to 55, and the average age was 39. This probably explained why the educational level of this group of women was relatively low. As universal compulsory primary education was introduced only in 1971, almost half of the women did not advance past junior secondary school. Twelve women reported being full-time homemakers, two had part-time jobs, five worked in the clerical and service sectors and four were either co-owner of a family business or in professional and

managerial positions. Seven respondents had husbands who were construction or manual workers, the husbands of five were technicians and supervisors, those of another five owned a shop or workshop, those of three were civil servants and the remaining three worked in professional or managerial positions. In terms of education, their occupations and those of their husbands, and the reported household income,[2] at least half of these women were from working class or lower-income families. (For a more detailed profile of these women, see Appendix 1, Table 1.)

In analysing the transcripts, a distinguishing feature of these 23 women is that their husbands do little housework or child care. Gender remains significant in the delegation of domestic chores and child rearing among these households. However, when women's accounts of their practices and relationships were closely examined, we noticed diversity, fluidity and complexity of agency and practices. For some who appeared to 'accept' gender inequalities, their accounts were more than just 'doing gender'. For those who were unhappy with or even critical of their husbands, they

[2] The median household income in 2006 was around $17,250, see http://www.bycensus2006.gov.hk/FileManager/EN/Content_962/06bc_hhinc.pdf.

stayed in the marriage but found ways to contest and reinvest in themselves or in other meaningful relationships. It is to these complex accounts that we now turn.

Doing families in Hong Kong

There are 13 married women, including eight dual wage earners,[3] who have accepted the male breadwinner/female homemaker division. Several local surveys on public attitudes have found that although more Hong Kong people have accepted that the couple should be jointly responsible for family duties, in practice women report that they do more (Young Women's Christian Association, 2008); the notion that 'women should be homemakers' is still prevalent (Women's Commission, 2010). Studies also found that married women in Hong Kong, regardless of education, employment and professional status, continue to be shaped by the dual spheres ideology. They see themselves as mainly responsible for the private sphere and regard motherhood as central to their identity (Chan, 2008; Lau, et al. 2006; Lee, 2002).

Tsang (013),[4] a full-time homemaker of three described her family arrangement this way:

[3] See Table 1, from case 001 to case 038.

[4] For protection of the interviewees' anonymity, a pseudonym is given to each interviewee. The numbers in brackets is the case number.

> I am fully responsible for housework… He is already very tired after a day of hard work. I will only ask him if it is really heavy stuff, like fixing the electricity. If not, I won't trouble him… I find it acceptable to have one responsible for outside and one for inside.

Miu (016) used to be a full-time homemaker but took part-time cleaning jobs when her husband, a construction worker, was sporadically unemployed during the bad economy. She worked four mornings and three evenings every week. In between the two jobs, she had to do housework, take her daughter to and from school and supervise her schoolwork. She did not want to trouble her husband:

> Yes, the cleaning jobs can be quite tiring, but it is bearable. You only have to tell yourself that you can make it…Yes, it would be nice if he could help. However, his job is very tough and he has lots of pressure. If I can manage, I won't trouble him.

Tong (038), a mother of a seven-year-old son, was an account manager – a job that she liked very much. She obviously worked a 'second shift' (Hochschild, 1989), despite having a foreign domestic helper. At home, she had to take care of her husband's grandmother, who lived with them, and supervised her son's homework. She had to apply for time off work to attend school meetings or shoulder the domestic chores

when the helper was on annual leave. She found her family responsibilities back-breaking but did not think that she could protest:

> He works shift, so won't be home in the evenings. Do I want him to change to another job? His job actually allows him to bring grandma to see the doctor during the daytime.… He is freer during the day and I am freer at night, so we divide our labour this way.

Tong's division of labour at home is slightly different from other women's. However, her ambivalence suggested that she had also more or less assumed that most caring duties were her responsibility. Nevertheless, the ideology of separate gender roles cannot fully explain why women perform the majority of domestic and care-giving work. Women make sense of their practices in relation to their family circumstances and the broader social context. Two cases will illustrate this.

It is tough living in Hong Kong

Leung (018), 29, had an 18-month-old son. She came from mainland China six years ago and opened a small fashion stall with her husband. Every morning she wakes up at around 9:00 to feed the child, do the laundry, mop the floor and prepare lunch. Then

she takes a cooked meal to the stall for her husband at noon, and stays there to sell clothes for two or three hours before going home to prepare dinner. She takes another cooked meal to the stall again at around 7:00 pm and works at the stall until 11: 00 pm. Then she takes the baby home, bathes him, puts him to bed, does housework and prepares a late supper for her husband, who comes home at around 1:00 am. She rarely goes to bed before 3:00 in the morning.

She admitted she worked exceptionally hard and was under financial and psychological stress. Even after her baby's birth, she rested only for two weeks before returning to work. She would not allow herself to take a break because she worried the family income would suffer. Despite the pressure, she saw her hardship as part of the strategy of a new migrant family:

> It is tough living here and you don't really have a choice. If you don't work hard, you will be looked down upon. [People from Hong Kong] look at how much you can earn each month.

As an immigrant from mainland China, Leung was conscious of the quick pace, keen competition of life and not least the prejudice of Hong Kong people towards mainlanders. She found people in Hong Kong snobbish and she and her husband had to work very hard to prove themselves to them. Her views are similar to those Korean

immigrant families in Lim's (2000) study, whose survival and collective family interests have framed women's understanding of their sacrifice.

Leung said she had a strong personality. At home she made all the decisions, including those pertaining to the family business, but she acted differently in public:

> Although I am very strong, I won't show this in public when my husband is around. I can't embarrass him. If I don't give him face, we will be looked down upon.

Obviously, deferring to the husband and showing that he is in charge is not simply gender work but family work. Leung was very conscious of the opinions of the people around her. In fact when she performed the role of a 'supportive wife' by acting deferentially, such a conscious 'family display' (Finch, 2007) signalled to her audience – Hong Kong people – that they were not only a harmonious couple but a hardworking and respectable migrant family.

Doing a better wife and mother

The family practices and moral tales of Sin (037) have more to do with the changing economy and her family past. Sin impressed us with her views on gender:

> Hong Kong women are among the luckiest, as we enjoy many rights, but we are also the toughest. We are too competent – we have to take care of our family and our career. If we have a foreign domestic worker, we have to take care of her feelings, as well as the feelings of our husband.… Why do Hong Kong men turn to mainland women? Because Hong Kong women, like me, are not so gentle; we are much tougher. However, this also shows how incompetent Hong Kong men are.

Sin's narratives mirrored what she did at home: she had a full-time job and was also a supportive wife, a committed mother and not least a considerate employer. Although Sin described herself as very tough, her toughness had been forced upon her by her parents' divorce. More precisely, her mother, when Sin was only six years old, complaining that her husband was incompetent and lazy, deserted the family, after which Sin's distraught father left her and her younger siblings to be raised by their grandmother. Sin told us that she had no choice but to support her family at the age of 12. As she was not able to finish junior secondary school, she could not advance very far at work and felt stuck in her clerical position where she was not well-paid but 'a jack of all trades'. Several times in the interview she expressed anger at her parents, especially at her mother, finding them irresponsible and cold-hearted to have abandoned her and her siblings.

Because of her parents' divorce, Sin was determined to make her marriage work. She worked hard to be a supportive wife to her husband, a construction worker who was bruised by the economic restructuring and financial crisis in Hong Kong. At the time of the interview, he had been out of work for several months:

> I ask him not to worry too much. He can work harder when the situation improves…Shall I ask him to change to another job? Of course not, he might think I look down upon his craft. As his wife, all I have to do is to support him.

What is apparent in Sin's narrative is her moral responsibility to support her husband and not to make him feel diminished at a difficult time (Rubin, 1994). Her sense of moral obligation is even stronger when she talked about her mothering practices. She admitted she gave birth to a child out of a sense of duty; yet once her daughter was born, she would go to great lengths to protect her, and to provide her with the best. Again, she compared herself to her own mother:

> I could not understand why she just left us behind…. I will do everything for my daughter. I want her to lead a happy life. In the future if she works, I want her to choose a job that she likes…I work hard and buy insurance and education funds for her, so that if I die, she doesn't have to suffer.

Contesting gender

There were ten women[5] in our study who expressed uneasiness and even grievance when they talked about their conjugal and family relationships. Similar to women in the previous group, they chose their own marriage partners and worked hard to build their own families that hewed closely to the modern domestic ideal. Yet, some seemed to be increasingly disappointed in their husbands while some even felt angry at spouses who did not show more appreciation, understanding, involvement, collaboration and commitment. In these narratives, the husbands were described as egocentric, individualistic, immature, irresponsible, selfish, chauvinistic, wrong in priorities, weak and even unfaithful. Five respondents stated explicitly that they had been suffering from physical and mental problems because of 'family problems'.

However, like the unhappy mothers in Chan's study (2008), none of these women were considering leaving their families. Some women were still economically dependent on their husbands, others wanted to remain married for the sake of children, and still others simply thought that 'an intact family' (in form) was better than a broken one. Yet they also reinvested their energies and efforts and challenged traditional gender expectations.

[5] See Table 1, from case 005 to case 040.

Being a minimal wife

Or (011) shared with us how she maintained an unhappy conjugal relationship by being a 'minimal wife' and doing minimal 'emotional work' (Duncombe & Marsden, 1993) on her husband. In her mid-fifties, Or recalled the difficulty of being a competent homemaker when the family moved to an outlying island. For more than four years, she had to send her two sons to school by taxi, then ferry and then bus:

> I purposely chose a school which was closer to the pier so that the rush would not be too bad. After school, we fetched the ferry home. If we were late, we waited for an hour for the next one. After reaching home, I then went to shop for food, so that dinner would be ready at around 8:00 pm. It was very tiring but I was used to it.

Or was not unhappy with this routine; her frustration and resentment were directed at her mother-in-law. The couple stayed with the in-laws for nine months when they were first married. Her husband's mother, however, was very demanding and insisted that Or did the dishes, mopped the floor and hand-washed all the laundry every night after she returned from work. Or was unhappy but was made angrier by her husband's 'lack of concern'. The tension between the couple grew when the husband insisted on visiting his mother after they had moved out:

> His heart was always with his mother, and everything was for her…I am not asking anything special. I want him to spend time with his family too. I just want him to stay home more often, spend time with the boys and have dinner together... It is not a problem to love and care for your mum, but you need to love and care for your wife too. All I want is equality.

Relationships between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law have been intricate in traditional Chinese households, as a son's filial duty to his mother was given priority over his duty to his wife (Kung, 2011; Wolf, 1970). Although daughters-in-law were expected to suffer in silence, Or refused. She was disappointed that her husband did not side with her and worse still did not invest equal effort in making *his* own family. Over the years their relationship soured as they quarrelled over the mother-in-law. Even after his mother's death and his own retirement, Or's husband preferred spending time with his ex-colleagues in Shenzhen to spending time with her.[6] Or said when she reached her fifties, she gave up on the marriage and stopped trying to please her husband.

[6] Shenzhen is a mainland city near Hong Kong. It is rumoured to be a place that Hong Kong men keep their mistresses.

While cultivating the bond between father and child is important emotional work done by women (Fox 1998), Or refused to mediate for a husband who found it increasingly difficult to communicate with his two adult sons:

> My husband doesn't understand his sons and I told him, 'Of course you don't know what they think. You hardly talked to them when they were young. You were seldom home. Even when you had a day off, you either went playing mahjong or visited your mother. Now you have retired, you should catch up by talking to them more'. How am I going to help? He should do his own work.

Or not only declined to do emotional work, but also refused to have sex:

> There was a period that I really didn't want any sex at all. This might be menopause. This might be my subconscious mind – I could not explain why I was so mad at him and didn't allow him to touch me at all. There was one time he was so upset that he stormed out of the house… When we were young, he was too tired (for sex). He probably is freer now, but no use. I have already closed my door and can't help.

Whether it was menopause, 'subconscious mind' or her expression of anger or autonomy, Or's withholding of sex clearly upset her husband. Furthermore, like other middle-aged women in Ho's study (2007) who sought 'second spring' in later life, Or

channelled her energy into dancing in the park every day.[7] At the time of the interview, she had become a 'big sister' who encouraged others to dance. Or was delighted to share her achievements and her new perspective on life:

> I am popular because I am easy-going. I tell them that the purpose of dancing is to come out and meet more people, so that we won't be stuck at home and become petty-minded. We are together just for fun. We laugh, chat, drink tea and go marketing and afterwards we will all go home. Life can be very simple….

Reinvesting in motherhood

If some women chose to be minimal wives, others maximized their involvement in mothering and child rearing. Apparently, being a mother can be dissociated from being a wife.

Cheung (012) and her husband are a middle-class couple. Their family living arrangements follows closely the modern domestic ideal in which the husband is the provider and the wife is the nurturer. Cheung's husband was a professional and she

[7] A popular morning exercise among middle-aged women, commonly seen in the public parks in Hong Kong.

quit her job after giving birth to her first child. After marriage, Cheung found her husband, seven years her senior, immature and egocentric:

> I think that with men, even if they are older than you, it's as if their skull hasn't grown together' [they have not matured]. Because he's the only one in his family, and his parents all focus on him, so he doesn't really care about others' feelings, so he's really not mature, very egocentric; he always expects people to adapt to him...

Cheung did not want to talk much about her husband but became animated when she discussed her children. As a mother of two in her early thirties, the maternal practices of Cheung are definitely child-centred, labour-intensive and emotionally consuming (Hays, 1996). In the morning after taking the children to school, she goes shopping for organic food. She makes sure that everything the children eat is nutritious, such as beef from New Zealand or Canada. She takes them to the park once a day to ensure that they have enough exercise. She chose not to employ a domestic helper because she thought the negative effects – such as talking nonsense and 'being too emotional' – would 'pollute' the atmosphere of the house. Cheung preferred to home school her children. She would learn things herself, digest them and then teach simplified versions to her children.

Her mothering practices are clearly arduous and cost a lot of time, effort and not least, money. Cheung, however, said she enjoyed mothering very much and wanted to have more babies. She explained that the birth of children had changed her. The transformation was not so much about achieving 'a feminine identity' (McMahon 1995), but about being more mature in understanding things and solving problems:

> How should I say – this is interesting I think – a woman really has to get married, and if you don't have children after you marry, then you will not be able to mature yourself, or start understanding things. There's a reason to why people in the old days say women should marry early, and have children, because only this way can you have a sense of responsibility – you learn how to solve problems.

Cheung's maternal practices might have been shaped by the new mothering ideology in Hong Kong (Wong, Ng & Chan, 2010), but hers are more complicated. At one point, she compared mothering to stock brokering and anticipated good future returns in her mothering-cum-investment project. By raising her children to be successful adults – 'someone with a good profession, have a very high salary and have a spouse that is decent' – she believed that her own future would be secure. It turns out that Cheung's mothering project is a modern version of traditional Chinese views on

child-rearing, which still stress the importance of raising children for the old age security of their parents.

As Cheung had been fully occupied by her child-centred caring practices, she explained why she had no time to take care of her husband. She sometimes called him at work to tell him to eat before coming home as she was too tired to cook. It is also very interesting to see how she defined her sexual relationship. She said that they were both busy after they became parents, so 'it is already very good that you give him any sex at all'. She blamed the media for overstating the importance of sexual satisfaction and the necessity of achieving high standards. After having given it a lot of thought, she concluded that sex was merely for 'procreation'. She still had sex with her husband and was contented that the sex was merely functional:

> You know, like, we leave it to, I mean, if he can feel that he did some exercise; for me it is reproduction and that's enough.

Rethinking nuclear family and expanding affinities

In their pragmatism and disillusionment with their husbands, a few wives redefine the meanings of 'family'. Although these women have not de-centred family as the

source of care (Rosenil & Budgeon, 2004), they do not rely on their spouse or children for support and care.

Feeding extended families

Hung (008), a working mother of three daughters, supervised the helper's housework and her children's homework. She wanted her husband to be more involved in childcare but apparently he enjoyed a high degree of freedom, and refused to be tied down by the family. He spent more time doing things he liked (such as playing snooker, badminton or mah-jong) than she would like:

> I actually need him a lot of the time, but he's not around. How should I say? When he's in a good mood, and also when he has time he's willing to teach the children. But he's not that patient, and not that into it.... Well all these years he doesn't seem to put his heart into it much, into planning for the house…If he doesn't want to do it then shouting is not going to change anything, right?

Even though Hung presented her relationship with her husband as 'okay' and not tense, she also believed that no relationship could last forever. In fact she has already

thought of what to do if a divorce were to happen. Her plan was to take all of her husband's money, and then give some back to him after discussing with him how much she needed for her daughters. She would ask her parents-in-law (who own their present flat) to let her stay there with the daughters. She would also mobilize other family members to support her if necessary.

We were surprised by her detailed post-divorce plan and her great confidence in enlisting the support of family members. We soon learned that her confidence was not overstated as she has had working very hard to build a cohesive, harmonious and extended family. Hung has excelled at doing 'kin work' (Finch & Mason, 1993). She networks several families, including her nuclear family, her birth family, her husband's family and more amazingly, the family of her brother-in-law who is actually the husband of her sister-in-law. These 21 relatives gather at her place for a meal almost every Sunday and on holidays. Hung admitted that she had to work very hard to feed all of these people but recalled proudly how she had created a home that was a special place for everyone (cf. DeVault, 1991):

> I have to sacrifice myself a bit… I need to do the planning. I usually call each family two days before to check out what they want to eat. On the day, I go to the market very early, then come back and start to cut, chop and marinate the meat. I

> will brew a pot of good tea for the elderly… I am really proud that I can make everyone happy and they all give me praise. Yes, it is hard work but I have successfully created the feelings of 'family', the feelings of warmth and cohesiveness when they come to my house.

Hung's marvellous effort in kin work may be an attempt to protect her daughters. It can also be linked to her own upbringing in a family in which maternal support was very strong. Whatever the reason, via her feeding practices, she clearly became the pillar of this extended family and expanded the boundaries and membership of the usual 'privatized' nuclear family household.

Expanding family boundaries to include friends

Liu (005) and her husband are another middle-class couple, married for more than 20 years. When asked about her relationship with her husband, Liu mentioned casually that 'the passion has faded' and thought it was a natural transition. Yet when the interview continued, the fading passion was not simply to do with the passage of time but with her husband's preoccupation with karaoke. Even early in their marriage, Liu's husband was out singing most evenings, leaving his bride home alone.

However, Liu tried to rationalize her husband's absences in terms of the importance of giving 'space' in a conjugal relationship in order to make it last. Yet this space, given reluctantly or not, has allowed Liu to nurture a wide and close network of friends. Liu is very sociable who hosts gatherings with friends every weekend. She is always the sole organizer: 'I just have to make a call, and many friends will turn up'. Since her marriage, she has opened her flat to single friends who brought their friends back for hotpot, mah-jong and partying every weekend.

Liu enjoyed her relationship with her children but did not put much effort into childcare. She saw herself as very liberal in regard to her children's education. She did not push them to study but let them decide what they wanted to do. She only insisted that 'they do well in their human relationships'. Since they were toddlers, her children have been mingling with her friends. Socializing her children with her friends was part of her maternal practice.

Friends are indispensable in Liu's life and a main source of emotional support. In fact she might spend even more time with her friends than with her family. Liu told us that every evening she usually talked to six friends for 30 minutes each. She explained that this friendship network became even more important after the death of her mother, as

'all my brothers and sisters have migrated'. She has more friends, of different backgrounds and nationalities, than she can count:

> I really love these relationships. I won't give up my friends. I feel very upset if I have lost a friend. I believe in affinity – it is fate that I and my friends met, so I treasure them very much.

Conclusion

The experiences and evaluations of these married women have vividly illustrated the complexity of family practices in a Chinese society. Undoubtedly, as influenced by the gendered ideology of dual spheres, most of the Hong Kong women interviewed still shoulder more housework and caring tasks than their spouses do. Furthermore, instead of asking for a fairer allocation of family responsibilities, some women seemed to willingly take up the roles of a 'supportive wife' and 'caring mother'. Nevertheless, the power of gender ideology or the necessity of 'doing gender' has to be understood along with these women's family circumstances and their wider social contexts. In a context where some families were struggling to survive in a restructured economy or have found themselves as newcomers in a less-than-welcoming society, they did

not see their hardship in gendered terms. Rather, they regarded their personal sacrifices as morally necessary or an essential collective survival strategy.

This paper also identified the agency of Chinese women who refashioned their family projects and developed practices of contestation in order to make their 'families' work for them again. For instance, wives who are discontented with their husbands resort to creative practices and strategies: minimizing their marital duties; separating motherhood from wifehood; investing in intensive child care and indirectly in their own future security; reinventing themselves via personal pursuits; and building a big family and fostering friendship networks that also become sources of support and care.

These practices have significant ramifications for gender and family relations. By rejecting the needs and desires of a husband or questioning his entitlement to a wife's services and body, they have obviously challenged the normative expectations of the marriage contract and destabilized the patriarchal rules of intimacy. For those who channelled their time and creative energy into their own interests or into cultivating extensive kinship or friendship networks, they have undoubtedly de-centred the nuclear family as the main source of care and

emotional support, redrawn its restrictive boundaries, and loosened its privatized nature. It is probably true that these contestations are individualistic and far from making any structural and institutional changes; they have, nevertheless, eclipsed the primacy and desirability of conjugal relationships and the domestic ideals of the nuclear family model.

Last, but not least, the family practices of Chinese women are culturally specific in at least two ways. First, even though these women have aspired to the nuclear family model or are practicing its mode of living, some of their family activities, relationships, moralities and rationalities are still intimately intertwined with their own family history and the wider kinship and extended families (such as with mothers-in-law). These family connections can become burdens and constraints on women, but at times they can also be important material and moral resources. In fact this analysis has revealed how some Chinese women have envisaged the importance of 'family support' in their children or extended kin when they actively participate in intensive mothering or in feeding close and distant relatives. Second, we find not only the overlapping of family practices, but also their possible dissociation – some Chinese women would stay in a less

than happy family and get by through separating being a wife from being a mother. It seems possible that such a strategy may be related to the multiple family positions of a Chinese woman who is sometimes able to compartmentalise different roles and demands and focus on some more than others. Although we may need more research to ascertain this cultural significance, it is certainly important to unravel this kind of marital strategy and the active cultivation of 'family resources' behind the 'consent' of Chinese women to unequal family relationships if a more nuanced understanding of their agency is to be developed.

References

Chan, A.H.N. (2008) '"Life in happy land": using virtual space and doing motherhood in Hong Kong', *Gender, Place and Culture*, 15(2): 169-88.

Chiu, S.W.K. (2005) *Family changes and income inequality under globalization: the case of Hong Kong*, Occasional paper, no. 154, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Chou, W.S. (2000) *Gender transgression in China*, Hong Kong: Tung-zhi Publisher Company.

Crow, G. (2002) 'Families, moralities, rationalities and social change', in A. Carling, S. Duncan and R. Edwards (eds) *Analysing families: morality and rationality in policy and practice*, London, New York: Routledge.

DeVault, M. (1991) *Feeding the family: the social organization of caring as gendered work*, Chicago & London: The Chicago University Press.

Duncombe, J. & Marsden, D. (1993) 'Love and intimacy: the gender division of emotion and emotion work', *Sociology*, 27(2): 221-42.

Dryden, C. (1999) *Being married, doing gender: a critical analysis of gender relationships in marriage*, London & New York: Routledge.

Finch, J. & Mason, J. (1993) *Negotiating family responsibilities*, London: Routledge.

Finch, J. (2007) 'Displaying families', *Sociology*, 4(1): 65-81.

Fox, B. (1998) 'Motherhood, changing relationships and the reproduction of gender', in S. Abbey and A. O'Reilly (eds), *Redefining motherhood: changing identities and patterns*, Toronto, Ontario: Second Story Press.

Fox, B. (2009) *When couples become parents: the creation of gender in the transition to parenthood*, Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press.

Gillies, V. (2003) *Family and intimate relationships: a review of the sociological research*, Families and Social Capital ESRC Research Groups, Working paper, No. 2, London: South Bank University.

Harris, S.R. (2006) 'The everyday meaning of marital equality', in J.F. Gubrium and J.A. Holstein (eds), *Couples, kids and family life*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hays, S. (1996) *The cultural contradictions of motherhood*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press.

Ho, P.S.Y. (2007) 'Eternal mothers or flexible housewives? middle-aged Chinese married women in Hong Kong', *Sex Roles*, 57: 249-65.

Hochschild, A. (1989) *The second shift: working parents and the revolution at home*, New York: Viking.

Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department (2010) *Hong Kong annual digest of statistics 2010*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Government.

Hong Kong Government (2010) *Women and men in Hong Kong: key statistics – 2009*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Government.

Jamieson, L., Morgan, D., Crow, G. & Allan, G. (2006) 'Friends, neighbours and distant partners: extending or decentring family relationships?, *Sociological Research Online*, 11(3), http://www.socresonline.org.uk/11/3/jamieson.html

Kong, T. (2009) 'Where is my brokeback mountain?', *Social Transformations in Chinese Societies*, 4: 135-60.

Koo, A.C. & Wong, T.W.P. (2009) 'Family in flux: benchmarking family changes in Hong Kong society', *Social Transformations in Chinese Societies*, 4: 17-56.

Kung, H.M. (2011) *China-tradition-persistence and transition*, http://family.jrank.org/pages/254/China-Tradition-Persistence-Transition.html

Lachance-Grezela, M. & Bouchard, G. (2010) 'Why do women do the lion's share of housework? A decade of research', *Sex Roles*, 63(11-12): 767-80.

Lau, Y.K., Ma, J.L.C. & Chan, Y.K. (2006) 'Labor force participation of married women in Hong Kong: a feminist perspective', *Journal of Comparative Family*, 37(1): 93-112.

Lee, W.K.M. (2002) 'Gender ideology and the domestic division of labor in middle-class Chinese families in Hong Kong', *Gender, Place and Culture*, 9(3): 245-60.

Leung, H. & Lee, K. (2005) 'Immigration controls, life-course coordination, and livelihood strategies: a study of families living across the mainland-Hong Kong border, *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 26(4): 487-507.

Lim, I.S. (2000) 'Korean immigrant women's challenge to gender inequality at home: the interplay of economic resources, gender, and family', in M. Hutter (ed), *The family experience: a reader in cultural diversity (3rd ed.)*, Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

McGraw, L.A. & Walker, A.J. (2004) 'Gendered family relations: the more things change, the more they stay the same', in M. Coleman and L.H. Ganong (eds), *Handbook of contemporary families: considering the past, contemplating the future*, Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.

McMahon, M. (1995) *Engendering motherhood: identity and self-transformation in women's lives*, New York: The Guilford Press.

Miller, T. (2005) *Making sense of motherhood: a narrative approach*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Morgan, D.H.J. (1996) *Family connections: an introduction to family studies*, Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.

Morgan, D.H.J. (2001), 'Family sociology from the fringe: the three "economics" of family life', in R.G. Burgess & A. Murcott (eds), *Developments in sociology*, London: Pearson Education.

Nielsen, H.B. & Rudberg, M. (2000) 'Gender, love and education in three generations: the way out and up, *The European Journal of Women's Studies*, 7: 423-53.

Ng, E.G. & Ng, C.W. (2009) 'Single working women in Hong Kong: a case of "normal" deviance?', *Social Transformation in Chinese Societies*, 4: 111-34.

Ng, C.H., Ng, B.Z. & Chan, A.K.W. (2009) 'Doing family in Hong Kong: strategy, morality and emotion', *Social Transformation in Chinese Societies*, 4: 57-87.

Ochiai, E. & Molony, B. (eds) (2008) *Asia's new mothers: crafting gender roles and childcare network in East and Southeast Asian societies*, Folkestone, UK: Global Oriental.

Roseneil, S. & Budgeon, S. (2004) 'Culture of intimacy and care beyond "the family": personal life and social change in the early 21st century', *Current Sociology*, 52(2): 135-59.

Rubin, L.B. (1994) *Families on the fault line: America's working class speaks about the family, the economy, race, and ethnicity*, New York: Harper Collins.

Smart, C. & Neale, B. (1999) *Family fragments?*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Smart, C. & Shipman, B. (2004) 'Visions in monochrome: families, marriage and the individualization thesis', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 55(4): 491-509.

Steil, J. (1997) *Marital equality: its relationship to the well-being of husbands and wives*, London: Sage Publications.

Sullivan, O. (2006) *Changing gender relations, changing families: tracing the pace of change over time*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Walzer, S. (2010) 'Redoing gender through divorce', *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 25(1): 5-21.

Wolf, M. (1970) 'Child training and the Chinese family', in M. Freedman (ed), *Family and kinship in Chinese society*, California: Stanford University Press.

Women's Commission (2010) Survey on 'what do women and men in Hong Kong think about the status of women at home, work and in social environments?', http://www.women.gov.hk/colour/en/research_statistics/research_status_of_women.htm

Wong, W.L., Ng, K.M. & Chan A.K.W. (2010) 'Deconstructing the "good mother" in Hong Kong's parenting magazine', *Gender Equity Education Quarterly*, 49: 106-13.

Wu, K.M. (2003) 'Discourse on baau yih naai (keeping concubines): questions of citizenship and identity in postcolonial Hong Kong', in E.W.Y. Lee (ed), *Gender and change in Hong Kong: globalization, postcolonialism, and Chinese patriarchy*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Young Women's Christian Association (2008) *Gender division of labour in child-caring: a survey report in HK*, Hong Kong: Young Women's Christian Association.

Zvonkovic, A.M., Greves, K.M., Schmiege, C.J. & Hall, L. (1996) 'The marital construction of gender through work and family decisions: a qualitative analysis', *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 58(1): 91-100.

Appendix 1

Table 1: Profile of Interviewees

Case No.	Case Name	Age	Education	No. of Children	Occupation	Occupation (Husband)	H's income	Household income
001	Luk	29	Post-sec	1 (1.5F)	Accounts clerk	Construction worker	unstable	20-25K
002	Mok	38	F.5	1 (11M)	Salesperson	Lorry driver supervisor	stable	25-30K
006	Yu	36	Post-sec	0	Homemaker	Engineer	stable	25-30K
010	Ting	55	P.6	4 (34F, 33F, 29M, 25M)	Homemaker	Technician (civil servant)	stable	25- 30K
013	Tsang	44	F.2	3 (17M, 16M, 9F)	Homemaker	Owner of a workshop	stable	15-20K
014	Lo	38	F.5	1 (3F)	Homemaker	Technician	stable	10-15K
015	Sung	34	Degree	0	Bank officer	Bank manager	stable	50-100K
016	Miu	39	No	1 (8F)	Home assistant (PT)	Construction worker	unstable	5-10K
018	Leung	29	Degree	1 (1.5M)	Stall owner	Stall owner	stable	15-20K
019	Koo	41	<F.3	2 (11F, 10M)	Homemaker	Construction worker	unstable	5-10K
034	Chak	40	<F.3	2 (18M, 16M)	Hotel assistant	Security (supervisor)	stable	30-50K
037	Sin	32	P.6	1 (5F)	Secretary	Construction worker	unstable	15-20K
038	Tong	39	Degree	1 (7.5F)	Accounts manager	Police officer	stable	50-100K

Table 1: (Cont.)

Case No.	Case Name	Age	Education	No. of Children	Occupation	Occupation (Husband)	H's income	Household income
005	Liu	47	F.5	2 (18M, 15F)	Owner of a small company	Owner of a small company	stable	30-50K
008	Hung	40	Post-sec	3 (13F, 8F, 6F)	Homemaker	Salesperson	stable	20-25K
011	Or	53	F.5	2 (25M, 22M)	Homemaker	Retired civil servant	stable	25-30K
012	Cheung	33	Degree	2 (4F, 3M)	Homemaker	Medical doctor	stable	50-100K
017	Chong	40	F.2	2 (11F, 9M)	Homemaker	Technician	unstable	5-10K
020	Tang	29	F.2	2 (8F, 2F)	Homemaker	Construction worker	unstable	15-20K
033	Law	46	<F.3	2 (24M, 21M)	Homemaker	Shop owner	stable	50-100K
035	Pang	38	F.5	2 (16M, 9M)	Receptionist	Manual worker	unstable	10-15K
039	Lai	49	F.3	1 (21F)	Warehouse assistant (PT)	Technician	unstable	10-15K
040	Ngo	42	P.6	3 (22M, 17M, 13F)	Homemaker	Chef	stable	15-20K