

# Families in transition in Hong Kong: Implications to family research and practice

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## Abstract

Utilizing the life course perspective, historical time and events that have influenced family development, delay of social timing of family development, linked lives that supported families and emergence of different modes of the families in Hong Kong were examined. The analyses showed several changes in the structures and functions of families in Hong Kong during the past few decades, which include: 1) reduced birth rate due to the success of the “birth control” campaign, the change of the conception of childbearing and the rising burden associated with child rearing; 2) delay of social timing of marriage and parenthood as more females participated in the labor force; 3) increased involvement of grandparents and foreign domestic helpers in taking care of the children; 4) parents are heavily affected by the educational opportunities and achievement of their children, resulting in the mushrooming of “monster parents” (helicopter parents) who “hover” over their children's lives; 5) emergence of “DINK” (Double Income, No Kids) families; 6) an increase in cross-border marriages; 7) an increasing trend of marital disruption in families; and 8) a growing demand for the recognition of non-traditional forms of families. The implications of these family developments to family research and practice were discussed.

**Keywords:** Life course perspective, family, social timing, family development, transition

## Introduction

Family is regarded as the “vital component of the society” (1). It is the basic unit of production, reproduction and perpetuation, protection of members from external forces, socialization, nurturing for the next generations, mutual support and emotional security (2, 3). However, the socio-economic and cultural transformations in Hong Kong in the past few decades have brought about dramatic changes to the families. The reduction of family size, an increasing number of mothers entering into the labour force, the

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rise of divorce rate, an emergence of “DINK” (double income with no kids) families, the blossoming of “monster parents” (helicopter parents) who “hover” over their children’s lives (4) are examples illustrating the inevitable structural and functional changes that have happened in the families in Hong Kong. While some changes are the result of global transformation of the families, some changes are unique to the social, political and economic conditions in Hong Kong. Against such macro societal changes, several questions should be asked - What have happened to the cohorts who are now the main actors of the families? What were the historical, social and cultural transformations that have influenced the family structures and functions? What were the changes of the families during this transition?

The generation theorists have offered special labels to different cohorts born after the World War II, namely the “Baby Boomers” (1943-1960), “Generation X” (1961-1981), and “Generation Y” or “The Millennial” (1982-2000) (5,6). According to such views, each cohort showed very special characteristics due to the social changes that happened during those eras. The cohort studies provided an insightful lens for scholars and policy makers to understand how the social changes affected the generations, and how one generation affected the other generations. However, such studies did not specifically employ the family as the basic unit of study, and they paid inadequate attention to the changes of the family structures and functions. Moreover, the studies took US as the backstage and the observations might not be applicable to the non-American cultures, as culture is an important determinant of the development of families (7). To understand the changes of families in the transition in Hong Kong, the life course perspective (8, 9) provides a useful angle to examine the historical and social transformations that have influenced family development in the past few decades in Hong Kong.

### **The life course perspective**

As suggested by Bengtson and Allen (10), the life course perspective is a “contextual, processual, and dynamic approach to the study of change in the lives

of individual family members over time, and of families as social units as they change over historical periods” (10). Elder (8) concretely gave a definition to the life course as “age-graded life patterns embedded in social structures and cultures that are subject to historical change” (8). Three basic components are intrinsic to this definition: age-graded life patterns, social structure and culture, and historical change. Regarding the age-graded life patterns, they are formulated by the ontogenetic development of individuals as well as the stages of family life cycle. Life span theories, such as Erikson’s (11) psychosocial stages of development, give an account of the ontogenetic development of individuals. A family life cycle portrays the stages of family development by examining different family developmental tasks in response to the development of its members (12). Concerning the social structure and culture, there are four dimensions: social structural context, social construction of meaning, cultural context and the interplay of macro-micro levels of analysis (10). Finally, historical time is the “events, periods, or eras dominated by watershed geopolitical or economic events” (10). In summary, the life course perspective emphasizes the interplay of life span development, historical time and events, as well as the social context. White and Klein (13) regarded the life course perspective to focus on the “sociological meaning of development” (13). Hence, the evolvement of the life course perspective put the two lines of inquiries, including life span development (i.e., the intra-individual changes) and social development (i.e., the extra-individual changes), together.

### **Paradigmatic themes of the life course perspective**

Elder and his colleagues (8, 9, 14) suggested four paradigmatic themes that are central to the life course perspective, including a) human lives in historical time and place, b) the timing of lives, c) linked or interdependent lives, and d) human agency in the choice making and social constraints. These themes do not only constitute the essential elements of the life course perspective; they also identify important mechanisms through which the history and social contexts influence human development.

Human lives are influenced by the historical events and social contexts. Throughout the course of life, people of different ages are exposed to different historical worlds, and they might have different impacts in their lives. Thus, history brings the “cohort effect” to a particular birth cohort when there are social changes that affect and differentiate their life patterns from other cohorts (8).

The timing of lives emphasizes the concept of “social timing” that defines the beginning and the termination of social roles, their duration, and their sequence in respect to the relevant expectations and beliefs of the age (8). The social timing of lives is essential because it gives the structure to the life course where age norms, sequences, duration of life events, and trajectories are embodied.

Linked or interdependent lives are the social relationships with kin, friends, and the significant others throughout the span of life (8). It is expected that one’s life course would intertwine with those of the others sharing the significant relationships (9). Finally, as differentiated from social determinism that human agency is determined by the social environment, the life course theory respects the choices of individuals in determining their lives’ courses. However, there are social constraints and age-graded norms that may create restrictions. The individuals may need to make their own choices with the interpretations of the opportunities and constraints [8].

### *Hong Kong families in transition*

Hong Kong has undergone rapid demographic changes and social changes that have had a strong impact on the development of families over the course of the past few decades. Furthermore, the Government’s policies also provided structural opportunities and constraints to individuals that may affect their marital and parental trajectories (15). Thus, identifying the historical development as well as the policies implemented during the past decades would be important in order to understand the families in transition.

### *The birth control campaign in the 1970s: “Two is enough”*

The baby boom in the post-war period as well as the influx of immigrants from mainland China resulted in a rapid increase of the population from 1950s to 1970s in the last century in Hong Kong. There was a need for the Government to control the population growth. Against this background, the Family Planning Association of Hong Kong launched the “Two is enough” campaign to arouse the public concern on birth control in 1975. The Association used a series of propaganda and educational means to encourage the families to have two children at most, accompanied with other birth control services such as the use of contraceptives, sterilization and pregnancy termination operation. The campaign not only resulted in a sharp decrease in the fertility rate (from 3,459 children per 1,000 women in 1971 to 2,047 in 1980) in Hong Kong; it also altered the Chinese beliefs of “child-bearing” in the Hong Kong society. In the traditional Chinese culture, childbearing was considered as a natural biological imperative in the Chinese families. The Chinese cultural focus of “*chuan zong jie dai*” (continuation of posterity) and “*ji hou xiang deng*” (to have descendents for lighting the joss stick and lantern) was considered as the primary function of the family. Thus, contraception and termination of pregnancy were considered as anti-natural, immoral and anti-familial concepts that were not generally embraced by the Chinese values. The consequences of “*sha sheng*” (killing lives) and “*jue hou*” (prohibiting posterity) were social taboos in the traditional Chinese culture.

However, the “Two is enough” campaign constructed a new conception of childbearing that birth could be “controlled”. Birth control was no longer considered as an anti-natural and anti-familial concept that resulted in “*sha sheng*” or “*jue hou*”, but a new connotation of “family planning”. With the advancement and popularity of contraceptive methods, people are more acceptable to use these methods to “control birth”. The frequent use of contraceptive practice (almost every time of sexual intercourse) was 86%, 79.5% and 74.8% in 2002, 2007 and 2012 respectively. The rate of induced abortion was 26.3%, 20.6% and 14.1% in 2002, 2007 and 2012 respectively (16). Though there were

decreasing trends of frequent use of contraceptive practice and induced abortion during the past decade (probably due to the use of other means of contraception), the figures were still striking. The campaign not only helped to legitimize the use of contraception and termination of pregnancy, but also altered the Chinese cultural value of “continuation of posterity.” In a survey on understanding the change of family values, it was found that the young generation showed less agreement on “having descendants to carry on the family name is very important” than did their parents (17).

The attitudinal changes on childbearing as well as common practice of contraceptive methods have facilitated the couples to have few kids, or even have no kids. From the statistics of the Census and Statistics Department (18, 19), it was found that the average domestic household size has gradually decreased from 4.3 in 1981 to 2.9 in 2014. The total fertility rates also dropped rapidly over the past three decades. There were only 927 children per 1,000 women in 2001, which were far below the replacement level of 2,100 children per 1,000 women (20). “The small family culture” (21) characterized by very few kids and child-centered family practice was evolving.

### *Compulsory and free education*

In 1971, the Government launched the policy of “six-year compulsory and free education” in Hong Kong. The policy was expanded to nine years in 1978 and free education was further expanded to twelve years in 2008. The policies provided dramatic changes on the educational attainment of citizens in Hong Kong. Before that, it was not easy for children to receive education to the secondary level, especially for females. With the traditional cultural discourse of “man is superior to woman” (*nan zun nu bei*) in the Chinese society, the chance for females to receive education was less. However, the implementation of “compulsory and free education” policy became a turning point for educational attainment of women, where women were treated the same as men in receiving free and compulsory education. The policy has three important impacts: higher educational attainment of women, increased women’s partici-

pation in the labor force, and rising aspirations for career prospect for women. It was found that female students studying in the programs funded by the University Grants Committee (sub-degrees, undergraduates, postgraduates) had been increased from 15,609 (32.9%) in 1986/1987 to 52,598 (53.9%) in 2014/2015 (22). The related percentages of females had surpassed the percentages of males from 1996/1997 onwards (19). In particular, the percentage share of female students enrolled in postgraduate and undergraduate programs were 60.6% and 54.7% respectively, which further exceeded the percentages of males enrolled in these programs (19). When considering women’s participation into the labor force, there was a steady increase of females entering into the labor force. In the past three decades, the female to male ratio in labor force has increased from 0.58 in 1986 to 0.95 in 2014 (19). The gap between the labor force participation between males and females was narrowing. Furthermore, there were increasing numbers of women occupying higher positions in the labor market. The numbers of females occupying the posts of managers/ administrators and professionals have increased from 403,000 and 377,000 respectively in 1993 to 1,065,000 and 861,000 respectively in 2010 (19). Women in Hong Kong have been gaining better career prospects.

### *Open-door economic policy of mainland China since 1978*

The open-door economic policy of mainland China is an important milestone of the changes of the economic structure in Hong Kong. Before that, Hong Kong was dominated by the manufacturing industries which required unskilled or semi-skilled labor. Women were commonly engaged in the low-wage factory work which required a low educational standard and skills. With the open-door economic policy of mainland China since 1978, there was a great expansion of the tertiary industries such as banking, finance, legal advice and consultation, information technology, etc. A high level of knowledge and professional skills were required. Managerial and professional positions increased and required employees with higher educational attainment and career commitment. As mentioned,

this attracted more females to fill the managerial and professional positions (19).

The open-door economic policy of mainland China has also facilitated the emergence of cross-border marriages, extra-marital affairs across the border, and educational problems of children across the border (23).

### *Engagement of foreign domestic helpers*

In the face of the labor policy of the Philippines to encourage and promote export of labor in the form of overseas Filipino workers, the Hong Kong Government has opened up the legal immigration channels for the families to hire foreign domestic

helpers (FDH) since 1974. The employer families need to sign up a two-year standard employment contract with the foreign domestic helpers and apply for a visa from the Immigration Department. With the economic prosperity of Hong Kong in the 1980s and 1990s, the employment of foreign domestic helpers was becoming very popular in Hong Kong. The number of foreign domestic helpers increased from 172,119 in 1998 to 330,650 in 2014. Among them, Philippino and Indonesian maids accounted for 52.3% and 45.3% of the number of foreign domestic helpers, respectively (19).

In summary, Figure 1 illustrates the occurrence of the historical events during 1961-1980 in Hong Kong that influenced family development.

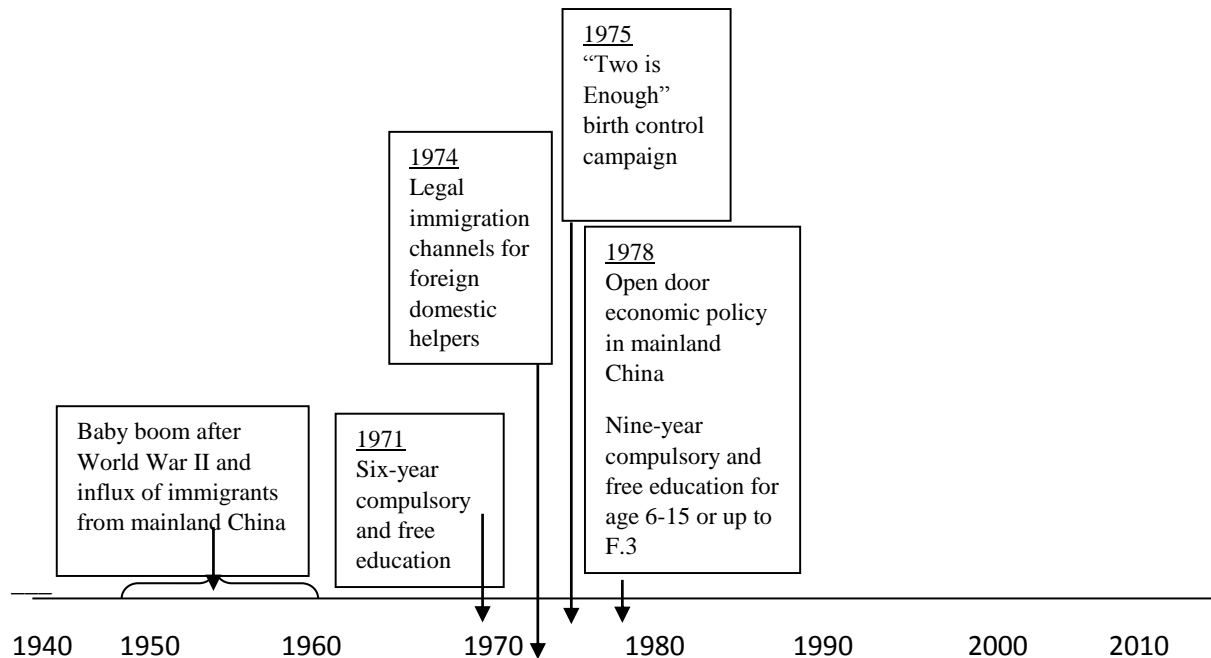


Figure 1. The occurrence of historical events during 1961-1980 in Hong Kong that influenced family development.

### *The delay of timing in different stages of family development*

The popularity of education resulted in the delay of school completion age of adults. A crucial effect is that there was a time delay for a person to enter the work force. The labor force participation rate of males and females aged 15-24 dropped significantly from

65.5% and 61.7% respectively in 1986 to 8.0% and 8.6% respectively in 2014 (19). Obviously, the delay of timing of school completion implies prolonged dependency of adult children to their families.

Besides, women nowadays have a higher chance to hold a job with better career prospect. To sustain the requirement of the job, they need to invest on their jobs through long working hours, more work

commitment, educational advancement and on-job training. According to the human capital theory (24), increased economic opportunities may influence the marriage pattern and decision of women. The career commitment and human capital investment happened early in the life course of adulthood may delay the decision of women to engage in marriage. Wong (25) provided support for this view which showed the relationship between the rising educational attainment and employment opportunities of women and the postponement of timing of marriage in Hong Kong.

During the past three decades, it was found that the median ages of first marriage of males and females have risen from 27.0 and 23.9 respectively in 1981 to 31.2 and 29.1 respectively in 2014 (22). With the normative sequence that marriage precedes parenthood, the delay of timing of marriage definitely delays the timing of parenthood.

To understand the timing of parenthood, it is important to differentiate the concepts of the biological timing from the social timing of parenthood. Biological timing of parenthood refers to biological capability of individuals to remain reproductive. Biological capability sets a non-negotiable deadline to parenthood, with the loss of fecundity of women (15). Normally, the childbearing ages of women are between 15 and 49 years of age (22). Social timing of parenthood takes into account of the readiness of an individual to enter into the parental role. Marital status, life transition, social expectations and constraints would propose a relative "social timing" (15). In the past three decades, there was a disparity between biological timing and social timing in marriage and parenthood in Hong Kong. The couples were biologically "fit" to enter marriage and parenthood, but the social timing to enter into the social roles of being married and as parents lagged behind. There are three consequences of the delay of timing of parenthood. First, women gave birth to a child at an older age. The median age of women at the first birth rose from 25.1 in 1981 to 31.3 in 2014 (19). Second, the couple did not have many children. The changes of cultural beliefs on "child-bearing" resulted from the "birth control" campaign also fascinated the delay of timing of child-bearing. Third, some parents might consider having no children due to the high risk of dystocia and anxiety for bearing an abnormal child in late pregnancy, as well as the anticipated difficulties

in finance and effort to rear a child. Interestingly, there has been a social discourse generated by the mass media that rearing a child lifelong requires HK\$4,000,000 (roughly US\$500,000).

*"Linked lives" --- The support but indulgent care of grandparents and foreign domestic helpers*

In the life course perspective, linked lives are essential for a family to establish significant relationships with others across the life span (9). Among all, two significant relationships are critical for the Hong Kong families: the family of origin as well as foreign domestic helpers.

The families of origin are important supportive systems of the nuclear families. Grandparents played an important role of taking care of their grandchildren and were often regarded as "substitute parents" (21). Though grandparents might not live together with their adult children due to the limited space in Hong Kong, the non-cohabitation did not restrict the genuine needs of the adult children as well as the grandparents' enthusiasm to take care of their grandchildren. In a household survey commissioned by the Family Council in 2013, it was found that 58.3% of the respondents agreed on the high values of roles played by grandparents in family life, and 65.3% agreed that grandparent's involvement was appreciated by the adult parents (26).

The opening-up of legal immigration channels for foreign domestic helpers from the Asian countries by the Hong Kong Government has facilitated more women to enter into the labor force, while foreign domestic helpers manage the family housework as well as take care of the elderly and the children at home. Though employing foreign domestic helpers in childcare was regarded as the reluctant choice of the working parents, it became an actual reality of many families in Hong Kong (27).

As there was an increasing trend of mothers participating in the labor force, grandparents were more involved in taking care of their grandchildren. However, the parenting style of grandparents might be different from that of the parents (28) and this might result in intergenerational conflicts and disputes (29). Moreover, the involvement of grandparents

might intrude into the family life of the adult child's family and create power dynamics between the grandparents and adult parents. Intergenerational discrepancies in parenting styles might generate opportunities for the children to manipulate the family members in order to get the most benefits (28).

As a consequence, there was a creation of "4-2-1 indulgence" culture (i.e., four grandparents and two parents spoiling one child) (30). In addition to the popularity of employing foreign domestic helpers to do housework and take care of the children, there were totally seven adults serving one child. The child becomes the "little emperor" of whom the family adults give superior attention, human and material resources (31). The adolescents today are labeled as the "spoilt generation" who show signs of narcissist traits (32). They are also regarded as "Hong Kong Kids" who are "unable to look after themselves, have low emotional quotient and even lower adversity quotient." (33). This would make them grow up in a "greenhouse" and become more egocentric (34).

Due to the very few children in the family as well as the "*wang zi cheng long*" (expecting the son to become a dragon) beliefs embedded in the Chinese culture, the parents have high expectations about their children's futures (3). They were heavily affected by the educational opportunities and achievements of their children, hoping that their children could be competitive in their future. The parents paid great efforts and plenty of resources to nurture their children, with the expectation that they could win "at the starting line." As a consequence, they were highly involved and intervened frequently in their children's lives. Different terminologies of "helicopter parenting" (35), "monster parenting", and "lawnmower parenting" (36) have been used to describe the over-parenting or over-nurturing phenomenon. The parents have faced a lot of stress in nurturing their children and may further affect the parent-child relationship. In a household survey commissioned by the Family Council in 2013, it was found that 72.0% of the parents felt more tired than before, 63.2% expressed that a large part of their lives were controlled by the children's needs, and 60.4% suffered from the severe lack of personal time (26).

### *Choices of the couples – Emergence of different forms of families*

Though there were historical events and social constraints shaping the life course trajectories of the families, the couples could still make their own choice in constructing their families. There were three types of families that are prevalent in Hong Kong: the "DINK" families, cross-border marriages and the divorced families.

"DINK" means "Double income with no kids". "DINK" families are childless or childfree families with the couples participating in the labor force. In the past, the phenomenon was considered as "deviant" and "abnormal", especially in the Chinese culture that continuation of posterity is emphasized. Childlessness was considered as "*jue hou*" (prohibiting posterity) in the traditional Chinese culture which was regarded as a taboo. It was up to 1970s and 1980s that "child-free" was considered as an "alternative lifestyle" that families could have outside the traditional norms of a nuclear family (37). According to the Family Planning Knowledge, Attitude and Practice in Hong Kong Survey in 2012, it was found that there were 23.4% of the respondent families reported childless (excluding those families with involuntary infertility or sub-fecundity). There were also 7.1% of females and 5.3% of males who preferred to be "child-free" (16).

Besides personal choices, there are social constraints that might affect the couples to choose childlessness. Work is one of the barriers for married couples to have children. Career advancement, employment opportunities, long-hour work culture are considerations of the married couples to remain "childless" (38). Age is another important factor that the couple would prefer childfree, especially those entering middle adulthood. Rowland [39] highlighted two components for the age-related fertility decline: a reducing probability of conceiving and an increasing risk of spontaneous abortion. Furthermore, the high risk of dystocia as well as anxiety for bearing an abnormal child in late pregnancy would forbid the couples to consider childbearing. In addition, rearing a child requires huge responsibilities and financial costs that have become a social constraint of childbearing. Jones (40) suggested the ideology of having "quality" child and financial costs of childbearing

were factors that lower the desire of childbearing among the married couples in Pacific Asia. Among the respondent couples who did not want to have children in the Family Planning Knowledge, Attitude and Practice in Hong Kong Survey in 2012, 43.3% of females and 42.0% of males suggested that the financial constraint was the main reason for childlessness.

The open-door economic policy of mainland China has facilitated the emergence of the cross-border marriages in Hong Kong. In 2014, there were 26,330 cases of cross-border marriages in Hong Kong, of which 20,698 marriages registered in Hong Kong, occupying 36.7% of the total marriages registered that year (19). There were some unique features arising from the cross-border marriages,

which include the marriages between a young wife and an old husband, split families and pseudo single parent (either children live with father in Hong Kong while mother stays in China, or the children stay with mother in China while father resides in Hong Kong), and cross-border education of children (41, 42). Though the cross-border marriage has been a common form of marriage in recent years, concerns and problems such as adjustment difficulties of migrant mothers and children, increased risk for marital stability and harmony, accommodation problems in Hong Kong with limited living space, parenting difficulties, problems in children's education, poorer care, nurture and modeling of the children, social isolation and higher risk of spousal violence (23, 42, 43) are emerging.

**Table 1. Summary of family changes in Hong Kong under the paradigmatic themes of the life course perspective**

Paradigmatic themes		Family changes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Humans live in historical time and place</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The birth control campaign in 1975: "Two is Enough"</li> <li>Compulsory and free education</li> <li>Open door economic policy in mainland China</li> <li>Legal immigration channels for foreign domestic helpers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduced birth rate</li> <li>Change of the conception of childbearing and less emphasis on the Chinese value of "continuation of posterity"</li> <li>Delay of social timing of marriage and parenthood</li> <li>More mothers participated in the labor force</li> <li>The employment of foreign domestic helpers for childcare and family housework</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The timing of lives</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Delay of social timing of marriage and parenthood</li> <li>Reduced birth rate</li> <li>Emergence of "DINK" (Double Income, No Kids) families</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Linked or interdependent lives</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased involvement of grandparents and foreign domestic helpers in taking care of the child</li> <li>Indulgence parenting with seven adults (four grandparents, two parents and one foreign domestic helper) in nurturing one child in a family</li> <li>Parental stress due to high expectation on education and achievement of their children</li> <li>The mushrooming of "monster parents" (helicopter parents) who "hover" over their children's lives</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Human agency in choice making and social constraints</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emergence of "DINK" (Double Income, No Kids) families</li> <li>Increase in cross-border marriages involving young wives and old husbands</li> <li>Increasing trend of marital disruption in families</li> <li>A growing demand for the recognition of non-traditional forms of families</li> </ul>



When looking at the divorce rate figures, the crude divorce rate has been increasing steadily from 0.76 in 1984 to 3.1 in 2013, with the first time of decrease to 2.8 in 2014 (19, 44, 45). It is worth noting that divorce as a percentage of marriage remained high (33% to 35%) during the past five years. One reason accounting for the change was the direct influence of the Western romantic conception of marriage that has eroded the Chinese cultural values of familism (46). The conception of marriage in Hong Kong has been moving away from a traditional and patriarchal mode to a modern and egalitarian one (47). Instead of preserving a long-lasting conjugal relationship based on the Confucian virtues of familism, the couples would consider divorce when they experienced marital dissatisfaction. The temptation of extramarital affairs also constituted the increase of divorce rate (46, 48). Moreover, the general acceptance of divorce by the public makes divorce become a “means” to solve marital dissatisfaction. In a household survey commissioned by the Family Council, 63.2% of the respondents agreed that if a married couple did not have children, divorce was the best solution for them when they could not live harmoniously. Even if the couple has children, 32.3% still agreed that divorce was the best choice if they could not live together agreeably [26].

Apart from the increase of DINK families, popularity of cross-border marriages and high divorce rate, there is a growing demand for the recognition of non-traditional forms of families. Similar to the Western world, the voice of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) communities to recognize their rights for marriage, adoption of children and formation of family was blooming. In 2013, the court ruling on transgender marriage has raised the hopes for sexual minorities to pursue their rights in marriage and family formation (49). At the same time, it has brought great challenges to the traditional values of marriage and family. As mentioned by the dissenting judge of the court case, to consider a transsexual’s marriage a right implies “a radical change to the traditional concept of marriage” (50). The traditional forms of marriages are confronted with strong pressure, which may bring revolutionary changes to the family forms, values and systems. Table 1 summarizes the family changes in the transition under the paradigmatic themes of the life course perspective

## Implications to family research and practice

With reference to the analyses based on the life course perspective, the families in Hong Kong are exhibiting several changes. These included: 1) reduced birth rate due to the success of the “birth control” campaign, the change of the conception of childbearing and the rising burden associated with child rearing; 2) delay of social timing of marriage and parenthood as more females participated in the labor force; 3) increased involvement of grandparents and foreign domestic helpers in taking care of the children; 4) parents are intensely affected by the educational opportunities and achievement of their children, resulting in the mushrooming of “monster parents” (helicopter parents) who “hover” over their children’s lives; 5) emergence of “DINK” (Double Income, No Kids) families; 6) an increase in cross-border marriages involving young wives and old husbands; 7) an increasing trend of marital disruption in families; and 8) a growing demand for the recognition of non-traditional forms of families. The changing family trends draw attention of social scientists, researchers and clinical practitioners on family research and practice.

The life course perspective provides thoughtful ideas in understanding how the historical and social contexts influence the development of family life patterns. This is especially meaningful in the Chinese families, as familism is central in the Chinese culture (51, 52). It is insightful and important if longitudinal panel studies across cohorts were conducted to examine how different historical and social contexts influence the family beliefs and life patterns in the life course trajectories.

As suggested by Elder and Shanahan (9), the temporal location of reproductive cycle greatly influenced the family life cycle. Early childbearing would hasten the cycle and shorten the distance between generations. In contrast, late childbearing may decelerate the cycle and reduce the age similarities across generations. In Hong Kong, the delay of social timing of marriage and parenthood is salient and affects the family life patterns across adjacent generations. Thus, it is important to examine the influence of temporal location and timing of

family life cycle on human development and life patterns.

The life course perspective not only sketches the temporal changes in the patterns of family life cycle, it also portrays the changes of roles within the family. The social contexts have influenced greatly on the roles and division of labor in the family. With more mothers participating in the labor force and grandparents and foreign domestic helpers offer support in childcare and housework, their roles within the family are changing. It is interesting and important to examine the changes in roles and functions of different members in the families, as well as the family dynamics such as family boundary, rules, power and interactions, etc. The importance of linked lives across the life span and generations should catch more research attention. Furthermore, timing also matters to the role and identity change of the family members. The implications of marriage and parenthood may vary in accordance with the social timetable, age norms and age-graded sanctions (9). Ebaugh (53) used the term "role exit" to describe an identity change in response to the transformation of roles in the life span. Indeed, temporality of family roles may be an emerging area that needs to be explored.

The prevalence of divorce and child-free couples has strong impact on the family life development across generations. However, it is criticized that the life cycle which only focuses on reproduction and parenting has "limited value as a way of viewing the lives and developmental trajectories of children and adults because it does not apply to never married, non-parent, or divorced persons, all of whom have become increasingly common" (9). In fact, divorce may imply multiple families in a person's life which may lead to interwoven roles and complex kin relationship. Regarding the child-free families, there is a concern about the changes of the family life patterns as well as the developmental life tasks of the couples. "Parenthood" has been expected as an important developmental task in one's life span, which may result in generativity in the middle age (54). Thus, the absence of parenthood in the family life cycle may have great impact on the members. The effects of the divorce and DINK to the family members may need to be further researched.

From a macro perspective, the changes of forms and patterns of the families may have significant impact on the social values, structure and functions. For instance, the delay of marriage and parenthood would result in a reduced birth rate of Hong Kong, which may further bring the future risk of the aging population. The cross-border marriages may bring the demographic, cultural and social concerns to the society, as the education, value systems and lifestyles in China may be different from those in Hong Kong. Social scientists need to be sensitive to the changes and explore the impact on the society as a whole. In fact, family research in Hong Kong with respect to these areas is grossly inadequate (55).

Regarding family practice, the "small family culture" characterized by very few kids and child-centered family practice is evolving in Hong Kong. The "seven adults serving one kid" phenomenon (four grandparents, two parents and one foreign domestic helper) has happened in the Hong Kong families, with more resources being allocated for the child development, but at the same time the children are over-parented and over-protected. Further research to examine the impact of over-parenting on child development in Hong Kong is urged. Besides, it is important for family practitioners to understand the new forms of parenting in the Chinese families and to provide parenting education to the family members. In particular, grand-parenting is becoming more and more popular in Hong Kong when both parents enter the labor force in the recent decades. However, grandparent education programs are not well developed in Hong Kong. Thus, it is important to develop effective training strategies on grandparent education.

Furthermore, the life course perspective suggests that the historical events, age-graded experiences and role identity may influence the individual's life span and family life development across generations. In the swiftly changing world, grandparents, parents and children may share different cultures and experiences. These may influence the family values, dynamics and interaction among the family members. The discrepancies of perceived roles and expectation among the family members, as well as the differences in parenting styles and practices between the two generations may result in family conflicts (28). Thus, family practitioners should be sensitive to the

intergenerational conflicts that may generate between the grandparents and adult parents, and resolve the conflicts when these arise. It is necessary to explore the collaborative roles between grandparents and adult children of which complementary parenting as well as respectful participation could be nurtured (56).

In view of the prevalence of the cross-border marriages in Hong Kong, there are concerns to the adjustment of the families, educational needs of the children as well as the high risks of family instability. Supportive and counseling services are definitely essential. However, the differences in social welfare policies across the border make the service difficult to be delivered to the cross-border families. Negotiation with the Chinese Government is necessary so that more resources and services can be provided to help the cross-border families. Again, we need more research in this area to illuminate the issues involved.

The rising trend of divorce has set an alarm to the family development in Hong Kong. Family breakdown and dysfunctions has detrimental effects to parental distress and adolescent development. Marital counseling and post-divorced parenting education programs are necessary. Besides, family mediation services are important.

Last but not least, new family forms and patterns challenge the conventional values of the Chinese culture and social expectation to the families. Family practitioners should be sensitive to the cultural changes and work against the social disharmony and stigmatization that may arise. Obviously, we need more research to understand how the public look at these “non-conventional” families and examine the needs, problems and resilience facing such families. Besides, training family practitioners need to be sensitive to the “macro” social conditions instead of just focusing on the “micro” dyadic or family issues.

## Conclusion

Hong Kong families have undergone dramatic changes in these few decades. The life course perspective provides a sociocultural lens for social scientists to explore the family life cycle and patterns of the Hong Kong families. The success of birth control campaign, free and compulsory education, increased work opportunities for women in the labor

market have brought forward the delay of social timing of marriage and parenthood. Linked with the support of grandparents and foreign domestic helpers in childcare and family management, the indulgence culture of rearing the children and over-parenting was created. The increase of divorced families, cross-border marriages, DINK families and emergence of non-traditional forms of families also became one of the concerns of family development in Hong Kong. The social account of family life course in Hong Kong is just the beginning of the long journey to explore the family life development in the Chinese communities. More scientific research should be conducted to explore how historical time and socio-cultural contexts influence family life course across generations. With the belief that people can “work out their life course in relation to established, institutionalized pathways and their regulatory constraints” [9, p. 706], the studies of family life course in the Chinese communities may open a door for scholars and social scientists to have better understanding of the Chinese families in the transition.

## Ethical compliance

The authors have stated all possible conflicts of interest within this work. The authors have stated all sources of funding for this work. If this work involved human participants, informed consent was received from each individual. If this work involved human participants, it was conducted in accordance with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki. If this work involved experiments with humans or animals, it was conducted in accordance with the related institutions’ research ethics guidelines.

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