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## Strategies of Marginalised Parents in Hong Kong

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**ABSTRACT:** Sham Shui Po (深水埗) is an unusual case of a marginal neighbourhood in the heart of urban Hong Kong. Its residents are the city's most disadvantaged and stigmatised, and these people live in the oldest and poorest housing conditions that the city has to offer. My talk explores the various kinds of resources that socially and materially marginalised parents have harnessed to raise children in contemporary Hong Kong. In particular, I focus on how parents in reduced circumstances organise the lives of their children after school hours.

Sham Shui Po is a neighbourhood of urban Hong Kong, so what's special about it? By looking at a map of Hong Kong, Sham Shui Po situates at the heart of the city, but surprisingly though, it is not a place for mainstream residents. It is a marginal place. A place of old buildings, left-over from post-industrial Hong Kong, and is the place of poor people. So-called "dysfunctional" and marginalised peoples are those who fall outside the accepted so-called "mainstream nuclear family" norm --- a double income family, hiring a domestic housemaid to mind the family's meals and do the laundry, while the kids enjoy the luxury of overseas exchange and international schooling etc. The main factor is that a large majority don't have regular incomes and are struggling to make ends meet. They are a left behind bunch after the tide of economic transition had

washed out factory work and switched Hong Kong into a predominately serviced based industry. For various reasons, age, health, or sheer experience incompatibility, many non-skilled workers couldn't easily switch jobs, or start out afresh, and their acquired skills were rendered disused. As such, the neighbourhood is referred to by the Cantonese as *hou-japp*.<sup>1</sup> My talk explores the attitudes of these “marginalised parents” including single parents, low-income families and retired father, and how they raise children in contemporary Hong Kong. It focuses on how parents organise children's time after school, and in particular, look at how meals, homework and other “leisure” activities are organised in the family.

My talk introduces you to four families. First is Makalya, a Filipina single mother of two and is on welfare. She is among the poorest of the poor living in Hong Kong, with only a precarious income of a few thousand a month. And in times of need, she is reluctant, but willing to help wash neighbours clothes to ensure that when the time comes she can ask them for cash. She gets her weekly rations from Salvation Army, coming home with a trolley-filled with can-food. Sometimes, when she is tight on money she sells the cans before they make it home, then she doesn't cook but waits for her tenement neighbours to

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1 *Hou-japp* (好雜) refers to Cantonese term for the complex nature of a place where a unsorted group of individuals, that are outside the scope of mainstream society, congregate,.

ask if her kids had eaten, before feeding their empty stomachs with leftovers.

Makalya's two children have grown up on can foods, such as fried spam and Sichuan bamboo shoots etc and she also regular makes the children's favourite deep fried chicken for them. Moreover after Makalya's visits the welfare department, she also let the kids enjoy a meal of their choosing, like McDonalds or KFC, to reward them for staying at home most of the time and not having much to eat.

Makalya's case exemplifies that as an isolated family, she was able to exploit her social networks and relied on others to help her through troubled times. In the same way, our second family Patrick Lau also counts on his network, the extended family that are also living in Sham Shui Po as a means of survival. As a second generation resident, Patrick currently works as a freelance translator. He is facing many problems that arose due to changing circumstances coupled with reduced income. His extended family thus helps with child care when he is unable to provide it—like his sister, the children's aunty who just had a baby. He said,

“She is good with kids. So I'll be good, if she can take time off work, but it's impossible, as their financial situation isn't that great either. I just thought it was not only good for her baby child to have a mother around, but she could also help me out with my child too.”

From this quote we can see there is a reliance and dependency on family as a form of emotional and social support. Patrick Lau became a full-time father, when his son, Alex was getting into too much trouble at school and the police were on his back. For a period of a few years Alex involved himself with petty criminal offenses, such as setting up pranks, harassed people and making inappropriate gestures towards any passerby in their vicinity. When babysitting him, I caught Alex ripping posters off noticeboards and reapply the sticky stuff onto other places as we tore up the sheet of paper into pieces before throwing them into the wind. He told me: “I am having fun, don’t you think this is *hou-wan*?<sup>2</sup>”

Alex is simply not responsible. And because Patrick was most worried about him having too much idle time and being contaminated by the wrong gang, he decided not to buy a mobile phone for him. It is not only because of the price or the bill that would eventuate, but because of its functional networking facility,

“I don’t want him to mix with that bunch [of kids]. I don’t like him going around swearing at people as if it is not a problem...Doesn’t he know what’s right? Alex was labelled the problem kid by the school, and I have also been blamed for being the problem kid’s father. Do you know exactly how that feels like? So I need to find ways to maintain his distance and occupy his idle time.”

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2 *hou-wan* (好玩) is a Cantonese expression meaning to have fun.

So in order to rid him of his dysfunctional habits of “having too fun,” tutorials classes serves as a solution. His choice of tutorials as a solution was not dissimilar to Patrick Lau own experiences. During high-school he used to visit study rooms in the Buddhist centre in Mei Foo because home was too cramped a place and mother was constantly pestering him to do help out with chores. Moreover, tutorial sessions, firstly, provided a community centre and a base to locate him after school, since Alex likes going walkabout and frequently runs into mischief. Second, it occupies his time and makes him realise that he is supposed to be doing something at a particular time. Third, it is an arena for him to meet with other “good kids,” and try to learn from them how one should behave and study. This can be viewed as belonging. Also while Alex is kept busy doing his homework at the centre, Patrick can work at home with peace of mind.

The third case is Tang, Yim-yuk, another single parent mother. She is from the mainland, coming to Hong Kong about 10 years ago. Living off the limited income of welfare and being unemployable at the same time due to ill health, so how does Ms Tang spend her time?

Each day, she goes to market at closing time and buys discounted food that is far from being fresh. Needless to say her homemade meals aren't too

appetizing, and I am not sure if she realises that it is partly the answer to her worrying about why her son is so skinny. She knows that he prefers to go out to eat with classmates, but she cannot afford to let him regularly do that. Reduced circumstances has cause them to never to waste food, and all freshly cooked food, first goes to her son and the remaining leftovers from yesterdays are for her to consume. From this pattern, it is obvious to see that the child always gets the best nutrients from the limited food available.

When she is not at home, Ms Tang is a volunteer at New Wave Centre, a Sham Shui Po based community service organisation for the disadvantaged, which had helped her apply for public housing. She believes that she has a responsibly to give back to the community which has provided much for her. Helping out is her way to get to know the community and become a part of it.

“I don’t agree that all those not working and are welfare recipients are lazy and play mah-jong all-day-long. For instance, I don’t do that. I am working too, but just not the type that is paid. I am participating in other people’s lives by helping out at the centre and doing odd jobs. In the evenings I go out-reaching to visit single elderly people.”

Ms Tang is not working because of illness and frequently gets incentives in the form of coupons and free passes to various excursions and activities from the centre she does volunteer work for. The centre allocates regular visits for her to see the Chinese herbalist, free of charge, due to her illness and she claims it is as

a form of reward on her active participation. She is also given preference in limited spots to functions such as family visits to Ocean Park, HKUST or single day trips to the Outlying Islands. Hence, we see how Ms Tang depends on her deeds in exchange of more resources. But this motivation isn't only materially based, in the form of benefits, but by participating she is also reaping social and ideological rewards at the same time. For example, even if she is not getting monetary gains, she is doing something meaningful with her time. Also Ms Tang said there is nothing worse than for a single mother to sit at home and feel helplessly lonely.

My last case is Mr Kwok, a retired father approaching 60 years. He and his 6 year old son live with his mother, the child's grandmother. Unlike the openness of Ms Tang, the grandmother doesn't like to have strangers visiting her, as realising the dangers of having other people to blame for misplaced items.

"My mother is a lonely old woman. She is careless and sometimes forgetful at 90 year of age. She is paranoid that the visitor is likely to steal her belongings and break things. So precious is she about her stuff, that we never have any visitors. She is every-so inhospitable and makes sure that they never return if they come at all. And when things go missing they are the first to be blamed," said Mr Kwok.

So each time we met, Mr Kwok would take me to try "something new." In fact I

noticed how he was constantly looking for a diverse variety of new experiences.

As he so seldom ate out, each time we met he would declare,

“I haven’t tried the food here before, so I’m not sure what it is like...But this place seems popular place and the prices are reasonable. So should we go and try?...My kid likes trying new things!”

Mr Kwok would order something completely different to his kid—or *leng-jai* in Cantonese<sup>3</sup>, to share and let him do a mix and match and try a bit of everything.

So this approach was like a mini taste-testing buffet giving the child new habitats of tasting /meaning (see Hannerz) of different foods, methods of eating, and different flavours. And also, unlike the day-to-day practice of eating at home, he also showed off that he ate out too by sharing the dining experience with others like my fortunate self!

Afterschool Mr Kwok takes *leng-jai* out to play “guess the Chinese character.” This game helps *leng-jai* recognise more new Chinese words as they pass by shop-signs on the street. He also lets his child run around in the park to sweat a little before going home.

“Don’t parents think about it before bringing the child home? The 6 year old has been sitting in a classroom for endless hours and even if he want to go home, he probably has lots of energy and cannot sit still anyway, and come to think about it: Just how big

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<sup>3</sup> *Leng-jai* (靚仔) was the term he used to call his kid.



are Hong Kong homes? There is no room or space to have an active kid at home!”

Going to the park also gives parents a chance to socialise, talk and exchange information on how to best deal with their growing children. Topics such as how to select schools, enrol in outside school programs and discuss other issues related to the child’s development.

Yet unlike Patrick, Mr Kwok has different thoughts about tutorials. He says they are a waste of time, money and are bad for children. The main facility provided by the tutor is a “check over” and “monitor” homework, as Mr Kwok proudly asserts,

“Tutorial classes aren’t cheap! For goodness sake, the kid’s a first grader. He should be able to manage on his own. What more, it steals the control and initiative of a child’s learning out of them. To put it bluntly, how can a child be more careful if there is a tutor looking over his back? If the kid can spend an extra one or two minutes to looking over it himself, and discover his own mistakes, that is where all the learning takes place, doesn’t it? When other parents tell me about tutorials, I reply by telling them my kid is doing fine at school without it, so why do I need tutorials?”

Mr Kwok highlights the main thing of tutorial class is to check over homework and instead the student should take responsibility for getting his answers wrong if he doesn’t spend this time. Mistakes are an integral part of the learning process. So we can see that Mr Kwok’s attitude exemplifies a different strategy of regulating his child time after-school hours.

Throughout my talk I have used many incidents to demonstrate how deeply committed parents are to see their children overcome the tough battle of being accepted as a member of mainstream society--- they weren't part of and hence not able to communicate in such a cultural vocabulary. Meanwhile the most prevalent idea running throughout is that marginalised parents have exercised a high degree of agency to ensure their child were properly being taking care of, and at the same time, to their detriment they sacrificed immensely, on all levels. This included various social stigma associated with labelling, career disruptions and the degradation of mental and physical wellbeing. Lastly, from analysing the various lifestyle and consumption patterns, the four cases showed not only how children grows up in Sham Shui Po but also how a particular set of social relationships are constructed among parents, children and those who are involved in the process of supplying nourishment, emotional support and physical care, including the operation of tutorial classes.

In conclusion, there was no standard model for the marginalised parents of Hong Kong. But in fact, they simply responded quite differently to the array of problems they confronted on a daily basis. These people relied on and resorted to various set of strategies, including personal, social and community institutional frameworks, that not only often reflected individualistic life

experiences, but also a timely socio-culturally constructed imagination of what is “best practice” at the time. Moreover the *hou-japp* nature of the neighbourhood community in Sham Shui Po, as and place of misfits and odd-balls, provided a vital platform to make all the diverse scope and variations permissible. Such that, with time and persistent effort, parents were able to identity, exploit and extend their repertoire of parental resources and faculties to stabilise their own lives and counter-balance the various challenges they faced in upbringing a child. So, could parental practices of marginalised families be any more than the permutation of Benedict Anderson’s imagined “mainstream” community, against putting on a good performance for Goffman fans and the Foucauldian rationale of fitting-in through discrete methods of normalisation?

