

Living Alone – A Comparison between Hong Kong and Sweden

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Introduction

There is a very significant change in the past decades in our society – the increasing number of people living alone. This has brought implication on every person, the environment, the housing, the economy – even feminism (Winterman 2008). It is claimed that men living alone are lonelier than women who do the same; women are empowered by living alone; poor people who live alone suffer more than their rich counterparts; housing and food industry are hurrying to match with the trend of the so-called “solo-living” (ibid). Is it true? Today, around 54% of the population lives alone in Sweden while Hong Kong has a gradually rising figure to 16.5% (Statistics Sweden 2007a, By-census 2006). What cause such difference between these two societies? In this paper, I will compare people living alone in Sweden and Hong Kong: why does Sweden have a high proportion of people living alone than Hong Kong?

Rubinstein, Kilbride and Nagy (1992) wrote about individual choice as a cultural ideal and as a behavior among the frail elders in United States. In Hong Kong, the studies of living alone are mostly about the mental health, poverty and housing situation of the elderly (The report of housing rights 2000, Chi, Chou, Boey 1999). In Sweden, on the other hand, the study of living alone is not about the elderly but related to the singles, housing or transition to adulthood (Sandstedt 1990, Bernhardt, Goldscheider, Goldscheider and Bjerén 2007). In this paper, I will try to follow the Swedish model to look at people living alone according to age.

Living alone is worth studying in a cross-cultural perspective because it reflects society at large. There are more and more people living alone in the past decades, namely United States, Britain and Sweden (Ogg 2003, Rubinstein, Kilbride, Nagy 1992, Fransson and Ludin 1993). There is an urge to adjust social and environmental planning because of the trend of living alone. Some said that living alone is bad for environment because one-person households consume more energy, land and household goods – they are creating environmental time bomb (West 2008). In a pan-Asia context, some think that people are more family-oriented and living alone therefore is not encouraged – such as in Japan or Hong Kong. As I will discuss later, however, living alone is on the rise for both young and middle aged people in Hong Kong.

The information I use to support my arguments was collected through interviewing or informal conversations with my informants in both places, as well as from books and journals online. In total, there were fourteen Swedish and twelve

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Hong Kongers interviewed. Formal interviews which last for around two hours were all recorded and transcribed. Swedish informants were found through my networks in Sweden with the help of my friends in Stockholm University. I am grateful that I had a helping hand from my Swedish friends who assisted the interviews in Swedish and English. For interviews in Hong Kong, I was fortunate to find informants through my mother and sister.

I compare the Hong Kong and Swedish informants of the same ages. As there are commonalities among the people who live alone of different ages, it is useful to compare their habits of living alone. There are needs to construct schedules, manage slack time, obtain social contact, provide personal comfort, and experience meals, sleep, hardship, sickness or joys by oneself (Rubinstein, Kilbride, Nagy 1992: 23). Regardless of the ages of the informants, this shared set of situational realities created by living alone enables me to compare living alone in two very different societies (ibid 52-55).

In terms of gender, there are five Swedish men and five Hong Kong men in my interviews. For geographical location, most of the Swedish informants live in the Greater Stockholm area. It is aware that experience of living in the city and rural area may be different.

In this paper, cultural, social and institutional factors, which contribute to the phenomenon, will be discussed. Firstly, I give the background of people living alone in Sweden and Hong Kong. Secondly, I show how informants feel about eating and staying at home alone – as people living alone may have different daily habits from others. Thirdly, I discuss the cultural ideal of independence and dependence in Sweden and Hong Kong. Fourthly, I talk about the societal views, how social stigma discourage informants from living or not living alone, and how the image of living alone in later life is seen in both societies. Finally, I explain how institutional realities, including welfare and housing policies, make living alone more feasible in Sweden than in Hong Kong. I hope this paper will allow the readers to know more about the trend of living alone, which reflects the changing environment, economy or gender relations.

Living alone in Sweden and Hong Kong – a general depiction

When I was in Sweden, I did not notice how common it is to live away from one's family until I started looking for informants. I attributed this to the support of the state, because university students can easily receive grants and loans from the government. The sum was much more substantial than the grants and loans I had got in Hong Kong. But after doing the interviews, I found that the welfare policies only contributes to part of the phenomenon. As mentioned above, 54% of Swedish households consists of one person living alone in 2006 (Statistics Sweden 2007a). In the past 40 years, the percentage of Swedish who lives alone has increased tremendously. "The proportion of households with only one person has increased from 20% to 25 % in 1970 and then to almost 40% in 1990. In terms of individuals, this means that about 20% of the adult population live(s) alone, a proportion which has been doubled since 1960." (Fransson and Ludin 1993: 6) This remains to be discussed in the following part.

The patterns of transitions to adulthood among young adults in Sweden are

unique in European countries – which let young people more likely to live alone or cohabit (Bernhardt, Goldscheider, Goldscheider, Bjerén 2007: 234). The differences of young people between Sweden and other Southern European countries are: “the timing of events in the life course, particularly, leaving the educational system last among countries in Europe, leaving home at the youngest ages, and marrying the latest are particular characteristics of Sweden” (ibid). Gender equality also makes living alone more common in Sweden than in other non-Scandinavian countries (ibid).

For the young people living alone, Swedish scholars have discussed the positive image of living alone, as claimed by Eva Sandstedt. Living alone used to mean “ensam”, being “lonely”, in Sweden. She said that “It was conceived as a negative – dark and cold, while being together suggested warmth and light. But then along came the idea of singles. They were young, beautiful and strong! Now, young people want to live alone” (Power quoting Sandstedt 2007).

For the elderly, who contributes around 17.2% of population, living alone may not be as positive as the case of the young people (Göran 2007: 7). Currently, around 30 % of the elderly in the 65-74 age group and some 50% in the 75-84 age group live alone (Göran 2007: 44). Unlike the young people, living alone seems to have correlation with loneliness and depression, which is very negative.

It is said that the responsibility of the caring for the elderly lies with the state (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs 2007). The Swedish government has claimed that it can enable the elderly to live independently with a high quality of life. One of the policies is to help them live in their own homes as long as possible (ibid). There are services for the elderly ranging from home services, adult day care, personal safety alarm, and special housing to dental care (ibid). A great number of the pensioners were dissatisfied with the food provided by the home services scheme (ibid). As the care for the elderly is mainly financed by the tax revenue, the aging population may be a heavy burden for the Swedish government in the near future.

Despite or because of the tax burden of the elderly place upon Swedish people in general, there has been a smaller and smaller proportion of the elderly in Sweden receiving public home-help services. It is getting more common for the elderly to receive informal care from their family members. Larsson and Silverstein (2004: 242) pointed out that “Public in-home services did not fully buffer the lack of care among childless individuals, showing that even in an advanced welfare state like Sweden, children are social assets in old age”. The elderly living alone in Sweden may seem to be well-taken care of. Still, many the elderly claim to be lonely, insecure and isolated according to the Swedish Association for Senior Citizens (The Local 2006a).

I have already discussed the elderly; let me talk about the working people in Sweden. In Sweden, the relatively high salary of the single working people allows them to support themselves to live alone. The GDP per capita (PPP) estimated for year 2006 for Sweden is 34,409.273 (International Monetary Fund 2007). The median of the disposable income for Swedish who live alone is around 141,000 Swedish Crowns (SEK)² in 2006 (Statistics Sweden 2007). Since Swedish enjoy subsidies in medical and housing benefits, their disposable income can be spent in other ways. As

² The exchange rate is supplied by Yahoo! Finance, 1 Swedish Crown/ Swedish Krona is equal to 0.7694 Hong Kong Dollars.

we will shortly discuss, the Swedish singles may have greater financial potential to choose how they live and improve their ways of living than the Hong Kongers.

When compared to Sweden, living alone in Hong Kong is usually depicted as a poor living arrangement as seen in the newspapers, especially for the “elderly living alone” (獨居老人). “Elderly living alone” is a commonly used term in news reports. The concern for the living condition and security of people living alone is pronounced as some of them were found dead in the flats long after they had died (Hong Kong Economic Journal 2008). There are more negative mass media comments on living alone in Hong Kong than in Sweden.

In Hong Kong, there is a greater disparity between the wealthy and poor people in single households than in larger households (2006 Population by-census Thematic Report: Household Income Distribution in Hong Kong, 2007: 12). One-person households constitute 39% of the poorest household income group in Hong Kong³, so the biggest challenge for most of my Hong Kong informants is the financial problem, which is one of the differences from the Swedish cases. A number of people living alone in Hong Kong may live in poverty even though the GDP (PPP) is around 38,127.345 USD for year 2006 estimated by International Monetary Fund (2008).

As for the proportion of people living alone in these two societies, it has not changed as much as that of Sweden. In 1976, 14.8 % of domestic household was occupied by one person only. In both 1986 and 1995, it was 12.9 %. In 2006, it notably increased to 16.5 %. This is not only because of the increasing number of old people living alone. It is also due to the rise of the number of people below 65 who are living alone, among which are women in the age 40-44⁴.

Although the images of living alone may be different in these two places, keeping regular contact with parents and friends is common both among my Swedish and Hong Kong informants. Meeting close friends and family members makes the informants feel more encouraged in life, and obviously, less lonely. Swedish informants, Ola and Anders, shared how they think about their relationships with their families and friends. Ola, 26, has lived alone since he was 18 years old. When he lived very far away from his friends at the age of 19, he experienced a period of depression. But he tries to move closer to his friends and meet them more often than he used to be,

If I don't meet my friends that much, I would feel quite lonely. I cannot say that overall friendship is more important than family. But I have such a need for family. This is not only on financial basis. I like my family. I would not celebrate Christmas without them. Otherwise, I would feel that I am not supporting them. They have done a lot of things for me. I would like to help and support them.

³ According to the 2006 Population by-census. Thematic Report: Household income distribution in Hong Kong (2007: 44) The first decile and second decile groups refer to groups who receive income between 3200 to 4500 Hong Kong dollars.

⁴ Discourses gradually change seeing the rising number of non-married women in Hong Kong from the census report in 2006 (By-census 2006). Commentaries hotly debate the social change how some Hong Kong women do not rely on men and delay their marriages. In the past 5 years, number of women who live on their own increases by 43 percent. This is often not viewed in positive light as in Sweden by mass media (Hu and Lam 2007).

A laboratory technician working in the Stockholm Water treatment company, Anders, a 52-year-old man, has lived alone for 20 years. He points out what is essential for people living alone,

You have to have friends if you live alone. Otherwise, it is not so fun. I have friends who I play folk music with. Family is very important. They invite me in Christmas, or once a month to see their babies. When they have birthdays, they invite me for celebration...I would be very lonely if my brother's children do not visit me in the elderly homes when I become old in the future

To elaborate, I can quote the opinion of Astrid on living alone and social isolation. "You try to look for friends and go out more if you are alone. Couples may not have the same need. You would rather go out than sitting at home." I found that living alone for my Swedish informants seem to be common and normal for the younger age groups. Yet living alone for the elderly may be lonely, as reflected by some of the informants and newspaper reports.

One reason for the large proportion of population who lives alone is that there is little social stigma for people living alone. Another reason is that being independent is encouraged in Swedish society.

For the Hong Kong informants, on the other hand, living alone does not go with the mainstream. The Hong Kong people living alone are deviants according to traditional Chinese cultural concepts⁵. (But living alone is getting more and more common as we have seen.) In many cases, my informants mention how they would spend time with their family and friends. Even though some of my informants do not have contact with some very close family members, such as their wives or children, they are keen on meeting other family members or friends.

Leung, 83, a successful business man, made quite a lot of money in the 1980s in Hong Kong. Divorced twenty years ago, he has lost all the contact with his children. He jokingly said that he was a very lonely and abandoned old man with a broken family. "Fate goes ever as it must" – he repeated this again and again. Although he still puts the picture with his children in the sitting room today, he is unable to know where his children are anymore, especially after his ex-wife passed away. Today, no matter how unfortunate he was in his marriage, he still goes to meet his secondary schoolmates as an emotional support – in a well-known 4-star hotel every Tuesday afternoon for a buffet – as a VIP member of the restaurants in the hotel. It seems that this regular meeting supports Leung emotionally. I asked him who will handle his funeral if he passes away. He said that his 86-year-old sister may handle it. In fact, they spent three years together working in a Japanese owned military utility store during the occupation by the Japanese in the Second World War. That is why he had a very close relationship with his elder sister – even after he moved back from the United States, he lived with his sister for some years. When he tried to move away and live alone, his sister's family members were almost reluctant to let him go. Leung

⁵ Traditionally, Chinese should live together under the same roof. A research shows that the high number of co-residence of parents and children is mostly because of the needs of the parents, rather than the children's needs. (Logan, Bian and Bian 1998). During the child-rearing process, they are taught with Confucian ideals as a person. (Lin and Fu 1990) Filial piety towards their parents is very important. Today the number of co-residence is declining.

has the highest standard of living among all the other Hong Kong informants although he did not gain independence of living until four years ago.

Keeping regular contact with family members is impossible for somebody like Lam. This 73-year-old watchman shared with me how he faces his life and all his ups and downs. Worked for some illegal gambling den when he was young, he seems to be proud of his glorious past even though he lost the trust of his wife. Because of the illegal activities he participated in, he was sent to jail for some years. After he was released from jail, he does not have any family members who keep contact with him anymore. But he values friendship between him and his male friends. “I still have several (three) friends who I can talk to. This is a 20-year friendship. I don’t have to call them before we meet. We just go there (to the specific restaurant) and meet. We have a lot of experience in common. Some years ago, I weighed 150 lbs. I got slimmer and slimmer. But I was not sick. My friends said, ‘Are you crazy? See, you weigh around 100 lbs only. You should work again. We will support you.’ I had very good friends.” Lam has strong determination to continue to survive even though he squatters on the roof top of an old building as his shelter, which is unbearably hot in the summer and shivering cold in winter. Unlike Leung who goes to a nice restaurant every week, he cannot even afford eating in a Chinese restaurant. His quality of life is the worst among all my informants. I believe, however, that he continues to live because he has support from his good friends – older people living alone perhaps are less lonely if they have more contact with both family and friends

If a person living alone wants to commute to meet their family members, he/she has to be financially capable to afford all the expenses which may be incurred. In Hong Kong, a large proportion of people who live alone may not be able to afford all these expenses. But my informants in Sweden can receive financial help from the government. Some Hong Kong informants, like Lam, who does not have any pensions may have very poor living standard. In the following sections, I discuss the cultural, social and institutional framework for Sweden and Hong Kong in terms of living alone.

Practicalities of living alone

There are shared experience among the people who live alone including eating and facing silence. In the first part, I will talk about how people live alone, for example, the issue of eating and overcoming of the social isolation at home. For people living alone, it is possible that no partners, family members or friends eat with them every day – from thinking about what to eat, how to cook, where to eat, or whom to eat with, eating can be a troublesome issue. Social isolation at home, on the other hand, may also be a very practical issue for people living alone. If the informants do not invite friends to visit their homes, get online or call others, they do not have to speak even one word after they get back home.

Eating and living alone

1. Simplicity and eating

For people who work and live alone, cooking is often as simple as possible. Using breakfast as an example, Hong Kong and Swedish informants handle breakfast in a

similar way. They make it fast, easy and simple. I noticed that some of my Hong Kong informants go to fast food shop to have breakfast, while most of them eat at home. For those Hong Kongers who eat breakfast at home, they choose bread and “milk tea” (奶茶)⁶. This is especially common among the older informants in Hong Kong. “Westernised breakfasts” such as oatmeal or milk tea are easier to prepare than traditional Chinese breakfast such as congee and noodles. For Swedish, yoghurt, toast, cheese, jam, butter, Havre grain, milk and most importantly, coffee, are what they may eat or drink in breakfast. Although the specific food and ways of cooking are different, both seek to make their meals simple and easy, and perhaps, this is why, they also use convenience stores extensively.

Convenience stores may save time for people who want to eat alone. There is variety of food to choose from in convenience stores in Sweden and Hong Kong. Pressbryran often promotes coffee with cinnamon bread (*Kaffe och kanelbullar*) for 25 SEK as a set menu. Other than bread and sandwiches, salads, with dressing included, are also available – as if the large amount of candies, which exist in every other convenience store. In Hong Kong, convenience stores play this role too. There are refrigerated boxes of rice with pork, or cup noodles for people to microwave and eat inside the stores. The stores provide sauce, utensils and a small table for customers’ convenience. But did people living alone create this fast consumption of food from convenience stores, or did the stores create such habits of eating instant food for them? No matter how this dialectical relationship works, people can eat alone easily.

Hong Kong Chinese tend to have three to four dishes with rice for lunch or dinner – variety of dishes seems to be a key to enjoy a dinner. But for Hong Kongers who live alone, they cannot enjoy the different kinds of dishes as it is complicated to cook three dishes for just one person. Swedish, on the other hand, tend to cook one dish with potatoes, pasta, rice or salad on the side. They tend to eat more cold dishes than Hong Kong informants. The fact that Swedish have one dish and are used to cold dishes let Swedish live alone easier than the Hong Kong people. Wong, one of my Hong Kong informants, commented on cooking and eating for people living alone. She said,

It is troublesome (to cook for one person). Say, if I want to eat chicken wings or pork ribs, I have to eat the same kind of food for the whole week. It is boring. If there are more people to eat together, then it is less troublesome. It is not too complicated to cook more rice as I bring lunch boxes to work. I just have to cook some more rice for the lunch on the other day. But for vegetables, I can only eat it over and over again.

When Hong Kongers do shopping in markets, it is unusual to ask for a small portion of vegetables or chicken wings. The retailers expect the customers to buy one big packet at one time, which is usually cheaper. This makes cooking for oneself more difficult in Hong Kong. No doubt that there are far fewer products marketed for people living alone. With the increasing number of people living alone, there may be more room for single portions. The increasing trend of shopping in supermarkets, which provide more “westernized” food products and sell vegetables in a smaller portion, may make cooking alone easier.

⁶ “Milk Tea” is a kind of drink that one can add sweetened condensed milk to the red tea. It is a common drink in Hong Kong.

Swedish informants use frozen food extensively while Hong Kong informants do not eat it often. Frozen vegetables are common ingredients for Swedish informants as is frozen meat. Many Swedish informants tend to store much meat in the freezer and so they do not have to go to the supermarkets often. This can take place because Swedish have larger flats than the Hong Kong people. My Swedish informants have at least 30 square meter large flats to reside in. So they can keep more food in the freezers than the Hong Kong informants. On the contrary, the public single-person households I visited in Hong Kong were around 11 to 14 square meters large, how can the Hong Kong informants to keep big refrigerators? Another reason is that Hong Kong Chinese see fresh ingredients as a must. Although they eat left over sometimes, they do not like eating frozen food, except chicken wings or frozen fish. They prefer buying the fresh vegetables or meat in the market every day. Frozen vegetables or meat is regarded as unhealthy and tasteless among some of the Hong Kong informants.

When talked about the perception of frozen food in Hong Kong with my Swedish informants, Kristian, 23, who has visited Hong Kong, responded surprisingly and said,

Frozen food is unhealthy? Why? I don't think so. I don't think freezing the food is worse than keeping it for four days in the refrigerator. Meat can be stored in the freezer for a year without losing quality. I can put it into the freezer and eat it two months later!

Since the informants come from different cultural background, the food culture varies a lot. When Kristian visited a Hong Kong market, he found the meat hanging under condition at 30 degrees Celsius as very unhygienic. When I was studying in Sweden, packets of pork or beef were always kept in the refrigerators in supermarkets. Needless to say, it is very rare to see the fresh pork or beef hanging in supermarkets or open-air markets in Sweden. There was a specific packaging for the meat so that they will not turn bad so easily in the refrigerators. The cooking methods and ingredients or even the views of "freshness" affect how people living alone handle their meals.

2. Eating in restaurants or taking away

Many Swedish and Hong Kong informants do not prefer eating alone in proper restaurants. The Chinese restaurants (茶樓)⁷, where one can have dim-sum and tea in the day time, attract a lot of families or couples. It may be odd for my Hong Kong informants to go there alone. "If I go to Chinese restaurants with friends, then I can enjoy the tea and chat with them," says Cheung. The settings in Chinese restaurants are also designed for different groups of people. Although tables for 2 persons are available, bigger tables are often more commonly used in the Chinese restaurants.

Swedish may feel the same if they have to eat alone in a proper restaurant. Astrid, who is 62 years old, said,

Going to nice resturants is the only thing I have hard feeling to do alone. I

⁷ Chinese tea restaurants serve Chinese tea and Guangdong dimsum for family gathering in the day time. People sit in round tables usually. Customers sit for over one hour and read newspapers or chat with family members when they eat. Tables for two are rarely seen in the Chinese restaurants.

can go to theatre alone but going to a restaurant and sit alone is something that I have difficulty to do. I can stand in queue and buy a hamburger in the fast food shops. If it is an outdoor-cafeteria, I can go there alone in the summers. Otherwise, I feel being shut in the restaurant. I would feel more alone if I do so.

Taking away is the alternative for people who do not like cooking nor eating alone in restaurants. Cheung, from Hong Kong, who used to work and wake up early does not have time to prepare breakfast. She likes to take away the food and eat it in the office. She has a small partition in the office, where she can sit comfortably without many people seeing how she eats. Kristian, from Sweden, may be able to explain further. “It is more comfortable to take away and then eat in front of the televisions! I would choose to eat (cook) at home as it is cheaper.”

The type of restaurants also matters – the nicer the restaurants, the less likely for my informants to visit when they are on their own. *Cha chann teng* (茶餐廳)⁸, mediocre and inexpensive Hong Kong cafés, are the choices for people who want to eat alone. Like many other working people, Michael, 30, does not like cooking after work. “*Cha chann teng* is simply a gathering place for me and my friends on weekdays. It is not a fancy place. It seems that nobody will bother if I eat alone there.” says Michael. For another informant, Lam, whom I mentioned in the previous section, eating out, is very expensive. He only earns 4000 Hong Kong dollars a month as a security guard. *Cha4 Chaa1 Teng1* is one of the cheapest places for him to eat out. Many people living alone in Hong Kong are financially incapable to eat in nice restaurants. This is one of the reasons why *Cha4 Chaa1 Teng1* is popular among the Hong Kong informants. Another reason is that it offers one-person portion food as a set menu.

Fast food restaurants in Sweden, such as kebab stores, charge around 60 Swedish Crowns for one pizza or a set menu in which 25% of the price is taxed (*moms*)⁹. In fast food restaurants, from seating to set menu, they are usually for one-person portion. Kristian distinguished nice restaurants and fast food shops clearly. He said,

If you are alone, you would choose to eat in a cheap restaurant to still your hunger. But when you go to a nice restaurant, you do not only sit and relax there. You go to a nice restaurant with your friends and chat with them. If you have no one to talk to in the nice restaurants, or nothing can entertain you, it is boring.

Social isolation at home

Lack of any family or partners as accompany may make people living alone

⁸ There are some chained fast food restaurants, selling economical breakfast, lunch, and afternoon tea, dinner meals for just one-person portion in Hong Kong. They are known as *cha chaa teng*, which are not very luxuriously decorated restaurants serving inexpensive one-person portion Chinese food. It opens as early as six in the morning and closes around six in the evening. Some of them open twenty-four hours a day. It is normal for people to go there alone. It is also good to meet a few friends there although it is not for a big group of people for gathering.

⁹ *Moms* means value-added tax, VAT in English. Indirect tax included in the price of goods and services. The final consumer pays this tax.

experience moments of loneliness and boredom at home. Inviting friends to their homes every other day is impractical for informants to do. Many Hong Kong informants said that they watch televisions while eating at home¹⁰. Several Hong Kong informants said that they watch televisions or switch on the radios whenever they are at home. The sound from televisions and radios may make my informants feel being accompanied. As most of my Hong Kong informants, especially the ones in their 50s or 60s, do not know how to use computer, it is difficult for them to get in touch with others through internet.

A hobby is perhaps important for people living alone to keep them occupied and entertained. Lina is retired so she has a lot more time to spend alone at home than the working Swedish. Sometimes she knits, reads or talks to her relatives on phone. Astrid and Anders, on the other hand, have to work from Monday to Friday. So their time to be alone is limited when compared with that of Lina. Astrid, a divorcee, has two adult children who moved out. Working from eight to four pm, she has much time to do thing other than her work. She said,

I go swimming sometimes. Or I go to the water colour painting course. I meet my friends and eat out with them two or three times a week. I usually have something to do. But if I don't have any appointments, I go home, lie in the sofa, and read the daily newspaper that I did not have time to read in the morning. I can read some books and watch television.

For working informants in Hong Kong, they seem to have a way to spend their so-called lonely time, especially for the better off ones. Wai, a 26-year-old nurse, shared what they do in the free time at home and how they feel about quietness.. He is one of the few Hong Kong informants who can afford to buy his own flat. He enjoys the 50 square metre of space alone at home. He can also afford to learn digital piano. Since his mother lives near him, he spends three or four times a week at her place for dinners. He said,

I do not need televisions. Sometimes there is nothing interesting in it. I can read and get online. I do not have to talk with any one for over ten hours after work. I am fine with it. When I go to work, I can talk to people again. My friends sometimes call and chat with me. I don't feel bothered by the silence. It is nice to have a quiet home, isn't it?

Cheung, 58, cannot walk without the help of a walking frame. Because of her deteriorating health, she had to quit her job. So she can only stay at home or socialize within the neighborhood, where her sister also lives. Yet she seems to be optimistic toward her life living alone. "I can read some books or sing if I want to. I like singing Cantonese Opera songs. I can sing loudly in the bathroom. I can even walk naked from the bathroom!" Being the only person living in the apartment, one can almost do whatever he/she likes.

Are these informants being constrained, or did they create such practices for themselves? If informants in Hong Kong prefer eating more frozen food, they may have a choice in paying a higher price for it, because it is not as common as in Sweden. Swedish informants who want to eat more fresh vegetables also have to bear

¹⁰ There is exception for some informants. Younger informants keep themselves entertained by getting online. Some others play musical instruments in order to keep themselves entertained.

a higher cost. Thus they may, intend or not intend, to live in particular ways to suit what is available in societies. Clearly, people are being shaped to do certain things, at the same time, trying to shape their shaped lives, from an array of cultural conceptions, choose how to live the lives, and continue to repeat this circle. This may be why practicalities are important to note – what underlies the practicalities of living alone among all the informants, and whether they choose or being chosen to live in a certain pattern. But for the cultural conceptions, it will be the subject in the following section.

Cultural ideals to be independent and dependent

Swedish ideal to be independent

Being independent is a very important concept for the Swedes. “Independence represents the cultural sanctification of the individual through the ability to control one’s personal affairs, legal rights, and moral responsibilities” (Rubinstein, Kilbride, Nagy 1992: 3). According to Åke Daun, a Professor of Ethnology at the University of Stockholm, “[p]ersonal independence is highly valued in Swedish culture, significantly more so than, for example, in Finland, Italy and the United States. The need for independence among Swedes may explain their generally positive attitude toward being alone: to take walks alone, even to live alone. Swedish university students strongly prefer to live by themselves...Independence and self-sufficiency are also favored in Swedish child rearing¹¹” (Daun 1990). Many young Swedish informants are willing to move out and live alone to show their capability to be independent. This may be because young adults are expected to make their choices and do their own life planning (Liefbroer and Goldscheider 2007: 205)¹². Middle aged and old Swedish informants value their private space and continue to live alone if there are no partners to live together.

Some informants had explained how they feel about living alone. Kalle moved away from home when he was 19. Working as a janitor, he got 14,000 SEK a month. Unlike many young Hong Kong people who live alone but still pay their parents, he does not have to pay his parents after he moved out as in many other cases in Swedish context. This may be why his salary is enough for his monthly spending. Living in a rather remote area, he would like to move back to the city centre in the future. Through his words, I can see how important freedom and independence are to him. Kalle said,

To me, leaving parents is like leaving the nest! I am on my own. When you live at home, you are the child and have to follow the rules of your parents even you are 18 or 19. When I live alone, I have my own rules. If you share a room, then there are other people’s rules. So to me, living away from my parents is the ‘main thing’

¹¹ However, according to my informants, the Swedish housing market is making it difficult for the young people to buy their own flat. It used to be common that young people leave home when they were 20 or after they entered university. Yet, it happens that two the informants do not leave home while they studied in the university. They did not leave home until a few years after they started working and saved some money for their new homes.

¹² It does not mean that they do not love their parents. Living alone is just a practical and realistic way to live without causing disharmony.

Independence, in terms of transformation to adulthood, is seen as a positive thing in the eyes of my Swedish informants. Ninve, 30, is a Syrian-Swedish who was born in Sweden. She faced very strong opposition when she tried to move away from her family members at the age of 19. To them, a good Syrian daughter does not move out until she gets married, which is very similar to the cases of Hong Kong. Here are her words,

It is good to be independent. It means being responsible...you know, if you live at home, it implies that you are dependent on your parents. Even a 25-year-old Swede living at home, it doesn't mean that he/she wants to (because of the recent housing problem in Stockholm). Even though the young people have their own rooms, it is a culture to support your children to leave [*sic*]. You do not push them to live alone but you support that... I want my kids to live alone when they grow up.

Young Swedish who move out may avoid conflicts with their parents. It is also a way to respect one another. Karl, 37, feels difficult to get along with his parents under one roof. "Why bother to live together and bring even more conflicts?" says Karl. It seems that moving back to live with his parents would not be a sensible action for Karl. Some Hong Kong young people would move back to live with their parents after they enjoyed the period of living in the university campus, however. Because of the high rent of the housing in Hong Kong, Hong Kong people have difficulty to find flats with affordable rent and good living environment.

Does that mean Swedish care about their own interests more than caring for their parents? Perhaps, Swedish tend to stress the need of independence and talk about their living in individualistic terms. But from my interaction with Swedish families, I witnessed how they treasure their time with their families. Anders, planned to hold the 85th birthday party for her mother. By doing so, he would have to invite his mother's friends and relatives, which would be a tedious task. Yet his mother has been living alone for over twenty years. The emotional support to old parents in Sweden is not carried out in terms of residential dependence or any other kinds of reliance on daily basis. In Hong Kong, it seems that dependence on adult children is a legitimate way of life for the elderly, as I will show below. It is reasonable, however, to send old parents to the elderly home if the adult children are unable to provide sufficient medical or daily care for the elderly.

Cultural ideal to be dependent

To most Hong Kong Chinese, especially the people who are raised in traditional Chinese families, the notion of independence is different from the Swedish notion of independence. In Chinese teachings, independence is not a key concept. Generally speaking, Chinese children have to support parents financially and emotionally when the latter are old. In Confucian teachings, children have to take care of their parents. "Rearing children is for your future (養兒防老)" Even the bodies of the children belong to the parents. "The whole body is given by the parents (身體髮膚受諸父母)" This is a common saying in Chinese families. Aged parents' dependence on the children is usually regarded as culturally legitimate in Hong Kong.

For at least some people who are shaped by traditional Chinese views, living

alone may imply loneliness and the abandonment of the elderly. Old people are not supposed to live alone as their children should take care of them by living together. The care for the elderly in Hong Kong is usually family-centered. “The emphasis is on traditional family anchored care, through shared residence between the elderly and adult children are the most prevalent form of care giving” (Liu 1998: 15). Although it is not common to have three generations under one roof in Hong Kong, the unmarried children are the key caretakers of the elderly in the family. It is very common that the single-daughter or single-son in the family live with the parents until they get married¹³. It is not the children who have to take care of the parents. It can be the parents who take care of the adult children by helping them do the chores. So it is also an interdependent way of living. If the old parents are too sick to live with the adult children, they will be sent to the elderly homes. But the quality and images of the elderly homes in Hong Kong are not very satisfactory, at least from what I have witnessed.

After talking about the elderly, I would like to discuss how the concept of independence and marriage is related to each other in Hong Kong context. Independence or maturity is not gained until a person is married. So traditionally, moving out and living alone is not important for young Chinese.¹⁴

Among my informants who are generally not married, three of them live alone now but they lived with their parents for decades before the latter passed away. This means that they did not move out until they are 40 years old or so. Janet is a 44-year-old teacher who has never got married. She shared with me how she thought about independence. She said,

In Chinese culture [*sic*], no one talks about independence. Generally, you don't really think that there is a need to be independent because when you get married, you will have to learn everything and support your own family. But for me I have to live alone because my parents passed away.

To further elaborate, it maybe useful to cite a few cases – Chui, Ho and Lau. Chui and Ho, both in their early 60s, and Lau, 38, grew up two decades later than Chui and Ho. Still the ideas of independence and marriage bound the actions of these three women. For Chui and Ho, there is no need to live alone because it is always good to live with family members. Gaining residential independence is not considered at all until they have to. Chui said.

I have thought about getting married. But after I passed that age, I don't think about it anymore. My father was living with me. I did not need to have a family. Days passed fast. I kept working and working. I forgot the time. Time flies. I thought that I had to take care of my parents and this was a heavy burden. But now I have a new feeling. I tell myself, ‘it was them who

¹³It is important to note that young people may not want to live with their parents. An informant who moved out when he was 17 years old said that he was regarded as a unfilial son. Later, the family members understand why he does so and in turn supported him financially to buy a flat for himself.

¹⁴ An interview was done with a 30-year-old Hong Kong man, who lives with his parents. He thinks that there is no need to move out or live alone to show that he is independent. He thinks that one can be dependent even though he/she moves out and lives alone. This is because he/she can go back to parents' home for food by living very close to each other. He also thinks that he can still have a lot of freedom when he lives with his parents.

accompany you. You need to treasure it.’

Ho only chose to live alone when she was 40 years old. Before that, her friends urged her to find a partner and tried to introduce her men of similar age when she was younger. She did not think about moving out until feeling uncomfortable to live with her sister-in-law. I found her sad because she might feel being left out by her brother and sister-in-law. She said,

I lived with my brother for over ten years after he got married. I lived with his family for 10 years. It is good to meet them but not to live together with them. People can have conflicts sometimes. I don’t mind staying over for one or two nights if it is just for special occasions. Later, they planned to emigrate overseas so I had to find a place for myself. I was 40 years old that time. I thought that I would never find a partner. So I decided to stay single for the rest of my life and tried to find a flat....In long term, to live alone is better.

Ho and Chui have both lived with their parents or family members for a long time before they lived alone. They did not think about the issue of dependence or independence. Residential independence is not so important for women because they are expected to get married in a Hong Kong context. As pre-marital sex is not widely accepted by parents today, living with somebody else might not have been a choice for Ho and Chui forty years ago. But it is also because both of them have never had any long term boyfriends. There was no reason for Ho and Chui to move out when they were younger.

Compared to Ho and Chui, Lau is younger and more capable in making money. She is also more educated than Ho and Chui. She finished her high school and started working as a nurse and later a kindergarten teacher. She supported her family financially before she moved out. Her mother thought that moving out implied abandoning the parents because only daughters getting married should move out. She moved out 18 years ago in 1989 when she was 20 years old. Even her extended family members thought that moving out meant that she was being irresponsible to her parents. It is not difficult to understand why she was badly treated by her relatives even though she still cares a lot for her family. However, the changing ideas, the independence of women and gender equality, do not match with the traditional beliefs in her parents’ eyes. She said,

In general, family is very important. In a family, there should be father, mother, and children. To my parents, I should not have moved out. They thought that I broke the family. If I were their son, not daughter, I would have lived with them until I got married. My parents think that I can be independent but continue to live with them. They did not see that I need my personal space. They did not know that I want to become independent.

The reason for the limited number of people living alone in Hong Kong in the previous decades, especially for young women, was the need for dutiful adult children to support the familial finances during the economic hard times in the 1950s to 1970s¹⁵. In a Hong Kong context, people should act and care about the reputation and

¹⁵ In the 1950s, there was civil war in mainland China, which brought a lot of refugees to Hong Kong. In the 1960s and 1970s, the economic hardships and political movements in mainland China continued

image of the family first. (Leung 1996: 80) Family values such as “filial piety, mutual help, and respect” have been persistent. (Leung 1996: 78) Similar to the dutiful daughters such as Chui and Ho, they sacrificed their marriages for the interests of their families when they were young.

Compared to Hong Kong, individual independence is one of the core cultural values in Sweden. It is ideal for most Swedish, no matter young or old, to gain residential and economic independence. Living alone in Hong Kong, however, may not connote the idea of independence but loneliness for the elderly and rebellions for young people. One of the reasons is that the concept of filial piety is linked with residency – living alone may imply “being abandoned by the family” in a Hong Kong context. Despite these differences of cultural values between Sweden and Hong Kong, the concept of independence is gradually changing in Hong Kong. One of the phenomena reflected in the by-census in 2006 is the vast amount of single women, who are well-educated and financially capable, but choose to delay their marriages. They may prefer to have private space and live alone or move out with their partners. Even for women who were born in the 1950s – when living alone and independence of women were not widely accepted concepts by the Hong Kong families – some of them still manage to live alone although there were hurdles such as housing to overcome. Cheung, 58, has lived alone for almost thirty years and was initially supported by her mother and other family members. Being raised in a liberal family, she has never had pressure to get married before a certain age. She plans to live in an elderly home if she is too sick to take care of herself in the future. She discussed the concept of dependence as follows,

I have some friends who have a lot of children and grandchildren. So what? You will still have to go to live in an elderly home when you are old one day. Some good grandchildren will visit you once in a while. If they are not nice to you, they don't even visit you once a year!

Cultural conceptions may change gradually, but there are deep-rooted concepts born in every person in each particular society; Sweden or Hong Kong is no exception. These cultural conceptions continue to frame and justify how one should act while playing their social roles. Concepts like “filial piety”, “individual independence” allow people to legitimize their lives – although I anticipate that there will be greater changes of cultural concepts in Hong Kong because of the encroachment of the individualistic ideas. Similarly, in Sweden, it is possible that there are people who may want to live with parents and stay at home. But they may not be willing to live with their parents for fear of criticisms from their immediate others.

Societal view of being dependent and independent

Cultural values influence how people view one another. That is, Swedish may judge the others by seeing if they are capable of being independent; Hong Kong people may define others by seeing if they are filial. The judgment and comments from our close

to bring flocks of immigrants to settle down in Hong Kong. Therefore, a lot of people in Hong Kong suffered poverty back then. With inadequate social welfare policies, a lot of children were forced to quit their studies to work in factories for the good of the family. Ho, Chui and Lau lived in the legacy of hard times and served as the breadwinners. (Leung 1996: 75,76)

ones often decide our decisions in living alone or not. To explain the Chinese and Swedish differences in terms of societal views, I would like to divide into two parts here. The first part is the social image for Swedish and Hong Kong adults to move away from families. In the second part, I will explain the social views on the elderly living alone in Hong Kong and Sweden. As I will discuss later, there are housing subsidies for Swedish. It is possible for them to live alone.

Social stigma of young people not leaving home in Sweden and leaving home in Hong Kong

For young people, they are expected to move out when they start working or studying in universities. As most of their parents moved out when they were younger, this may be the reason why the young Swedes face pressure to live away from parents after finishing their education. In 1980, 38.5% of men and 31.5% of young women, who were both aged 20-34 lived alone. Ten years later, in 1990, the percentage of the same age group increased to 53.7% for men and 37.5% for women. (Fransson and Ludin 1993: 6) In other words, many parents of the young Swedish today moved out when they were in the age between 20 and 34. This also proves that it has been common to gain residential independence for decades in Sweden. For the young generation today, they may be socialized to be independent and to move out or live with somebody.

Beginning to live alone is also seen as a process of becoming an adult as implied by many young Swedish informants. If they do not do so, it may imply that they are not willing to embark on a new stage in life. Here are some ideas given by Kalle, 20, from Sweden. He mentioned the importance to be independent from parents as grown-ups. He said,

My parents moved out when they were around the same age as me. They were supportive about my moving out. I did not have to ask for permission for that. It was my decision. Most parents want their kids to leave and try adult life for themselves but it does not mean that they want to get rid of the children. If I were 16 years old, they would not let me move out. I had to wait until 18 and get a job...When they (the young people) go to school, they don't have enough money to move out. It is ok for them to live with their parents. But If they have a job, they should have an adult life. I feel bad for their parents if they live at home. They are too lazy to move out or to pay their own bills. It is a taboo for a person who is over 25 years old to live at home. When they move out, they get into the adult life. They do not rely on anybody else. If they are in trouble, their parents would not control them. If they want to meet and live with somebody, they are free to do so.

Although Kalle explained social pressure for young Swedes to live alone, there are two other reasons which were not mentioned by my informants. The first one is that Swedish children often have to move to cities when they have to go to universities or start working since Swedish may not be raised in urban area, such as Stockholm or Gothenburg. If these young people do not move out and stay in the home town, they would become socially isolated while their friends may have moved to bigger cities. They would be treated as problematic youth if they are afraid of going to the city for a new challenging life. This is why, there is a practical need for the young people to move out and become "independent". Yet Hong Kong is rather small,

which means that even moving out does not make much difference in terms of the distance between the old and new homes. Unlike Sweden, young Hong Kong Chinese do not have such a need to move to other town when they go to universities in the territory – after all the percentage of people who can go to university of the appropriate age group is only 18%, which is far lower than the Sweden –around 47.3% of Swedish aged below 25 start their first degree in 2003/2004 (Information Services Department 2008, Swedish National Agency for Higher Education 2005). For most of the Hong Kong young people, they may not have sufficient money to move out – even if they want to. Needless to say, they are not taught to become independent by living alone because it has a negative connotation – premarital sex, which is forbidden in a traditional Chinese context.

Having sexual lives without marriage, however, is common among Swedish adults – as claimed by a programme about the Swedish identities on television, *Den Svenska Singeln*, The Single Swedish (Sveriges Television AB 2008), which constitutes to the prevalence of people living alone. On the other hand, in the mid-1990s, 32% of Swedish women between the age of 20 and 39 were living with a partner (Bernhardt 2004: 1). It is said that premarital cohabitation has become common since 1960s in Sweden and the trend was spread to Denmark and Norway – of course, premarital cohabitation does not necessarily involve a romantic relationship (ibid). By 1990s, roughly one half of all babies were born out of wedlock (ibid). It seems that having sexual lives is not seen as “shame” while it is almost prohibited in the eyes of Hong Kong parents, which discouraged Hong Kong young people moving out.

In Hong Kong, gaining independence at the age of 20s signifies “problems” at home. “To the (Chinese) parents, their children are always little immature kids no matter you are 20 or 30, or you are too old to be a child. If you are not married yet, you are not an adult. You need the care of your parents and protection from your families. Once you have the idea to move out, your parents start to worry”¹⁶ (Gu 1997: 3). Some Hong Kong parents are worried that their children are not well taken care of – if the latter try to move out. They are worried that their children are dissatisfied with the family and they will leave their families forever. Even though some parents may not blame the act of moving out not as a filial action, they may think that it wastes too much money. So if a young Hong Kong Chinese moves out and lives alone, the first hurdle may not be the money but his/her parents.

As I mentioned above, Lau faced objection from her parents when she moved out twenty years ago. Always having short hair and being capable in drinking a lot, she is never regarded as a typical feminine woman in a Hong Kong context. When she got an opportunity to rent a flat at a very low price, she moved out without discussing with her parents beforehand. As she simply packed her backpack and left home, she thought that she could go back home to get back her things sooner or later. The only reason for moving out is that she needed privacy and freedom to go out or work in the midnight. Her actions were unfortunately seen as rebellions in her parents’ eyes as she

¹⁶ The Chinese parents are worried about their children when they move out. Yet, some of my informants move out without any objections from their parents. If one is capable to buy their own flat, their parents may feel proud of their children. This is because the housing in Hong Kong is very expensive. On the other hand, some people around 30 years old in Hong Kong consider financial independence as a sign of “independence” rather than residential one. Therefore, there is no need to move out and prove their independence as adults.

was expected to be a very dutiful and good daughter – a role model for all the other siblings and cousins. Moving out destroyed her good image even though she gave most of the salary to her mother before she moved out. This change was big to her and her family members. She said,

I moved out when I was 20 years old. I did not mean to leave my family. But my mother thought that I was irresponsible and abandoned my family. She even changed the locks of the flat. She thought that once I left the family, I became an outsider. It was not my decision. She decided that I had to live away from family, not me. I did not give any money to her after I moved out. But I did not mean to do that. We did not even discuss the money issue. She treated me badly so I did not want to give her any money. After my father died, I started to pay my mother again. Then, she gave me the key of the flat. My relatives treated me as a rebellious girl and of course, a bad example for all my cousins. I am not a traditional woman because I chose to live alone and be single for my whole life¹⁷.

In a Hong Kong context, some of the parents are rather conservative toward cohabitation because it implies premarital sex. If a young woman moved out long before she got married, thereby losing her virginity, it would be seen as a decline of moral standards and shame of the family. Hong Kong parents face a dilemma as their daughters are educated and may be influenced by the so-called “western thinking” – to live with somebody. As my mother said, she would welcome if I move out and live alone because this proves my independence and capability. But she will oppose if I live with my boyfriend – “You would suffer a ‘loss’ to the man,” says my mother. My father asked, “Can you take care of your partner and yourself if you live with somebody? Can cohabitation help your career?” A friend of mine, 22, becomes the first rebel among my social circle. She lives with her boyfriend, whom she has dated for 4 years, even though she has faced fierce opposition from her parents. When my parents heard about this news, my father exclaimed, “Luckily my daughter does not do the same.” Despite that it is not a taboo to cohabit in Hong Kong, moving out may give negative images for the young women. As I observe through television dramas, many characters were depicted as innocent young women who become pregnant before getting married. It does not only bring frustration to the parents in the dramas but also in reality. Living alone in Hong Kong, especially for young women, is still not as accepted as it is in Sweden. The reasons are: women’s virginity and purity are still keys for family’s reputation and for them to choose husbands.

Talking about the barrier of living alone for Hong Kong young people, it is important to note the new images of living alone¹⁸. For example, my informant, Fong,

¹⁷ Moving out implied cohabitation or open sex life with others, women, who had to keep their virginity, would be regarded as naughty daughters. Some less educated and middle aged Hong Kong women have tried to be the good daughters and “virgins” by not moving out. All these societal expectation for women made it difficult for single women to live independently in the past decades. Among my female informants, four of them had never moved out of the family until their parents passed away. One of the female informants broke the social norm twenty years ago. Lau is an independent woman in her late 30s. She moved out at a young age, simply because she wanted more freedom. It has aroused criticism by her family since then.

¹⁸ People living alone like Lau, in the age of 30s to 40s, are increasingly common as reflected by my informants. Some of them like living alone very much. They would not regard living alone as a terrible rebellion to the family. Not surprisingly, they see it as a sign of independence as well. But the number of living alone is still limited in Hong Kong society. I attribute it to the high-land price policy and

35, a secondary school teacher, did not face any objection while she bought herself a flat and moved out. Seeing that Fong is mature enough to be independent and would not cohabit, her mother supported it. She was allowed to pay half of the original sum of the housekeeping money. Only a woman like Fong can move out without any objection – because she is already in her thirties, capable of making money, and does not plan to cohabit. Her image as “independent woman” is admired because she has such a financial capability to afford a 2.7 million HKD apartment in the city centre.

But it is crucial to notice that even though living alone for young people is seen as a way to become independent, it may not necessarily mean that they want to become older adults. They value career more than having children – they want to enjoy being single and delay the time to become responsible adults, which in some cases, implies feeling old (Sveriges Television AB 2008). The image of living alone can therefore be playful and having casual sexual relationships, as many other Chinese parents may think so. This is not a coincidence – living alone does imply open sexual lives in Sweden, as some of my informants mentioned. As mentioned in previous paragraphs, the view toward premarital sex is totally different in Sweden and Hong Kong, thus, living alone is more of a problem in Hong Kong than in Sweden.

The image of people living alone in their later life

Old people who live alone seem to be affected by their financial and health status. Loneliness and bereavement have been found among the old people who live alone in the West. Negative sentiments may impair their food choices and nutritional intake regularity of meals for Swedish old people living alone (Sidenvall, Nydahl and Fjellström 2001: 153). Moreover, living alone may have depressive influence on old people, especially men (Dean, Kolody, Wood and Matt 1992). Does living alone cause all these depressive symptoms or does losing partners or death of spouses bring loneliness? Although it is difficult to say which is the cause, one can tell that living alone has less positive images than it has for the young people.

In fact, living independently is a way to show their capability as the elderly – even though they may not be economically productive; they are not familial burden at least. There is research about shopping habits of old Swedish women. They prefer doing their own shopping and show their ability in handling their own daily living – although, of course, some of the weaker ones depend on the local shops for delivery (Sidenvall, Nydahl, Fjellström 2001: 151). There is a stigma to rely on their children for daily care – children who live nearby may accompany them shopping but leaving the elderly to decide what to buy (ibid 165).

If independence is valued for gaining full personhood, being financially and residentially independent is therefore expected by the adult children and the elderly themselves (ibid 152). “(P)eople seem to think that at a general level, individuals should not anticipate family support when confronted with unexpected expenses or

family-oriented cultural conceptions in Hong Kong as well as the stigma towards living alone in the eyes of the older generations. These young Hong Kong people who can move out rely on the help of their friends or family members e.g. a cheap rental apartment, the first large sum of the mortgage in buying an apartment.

long-term economic needs. After all, an overwhelming majority of adult individuals have indicated that they have neither given nor received financial support as a loan or gift from their families” (Latta and Björnberg 2007: 442). This is made possible because of the welfare policies in Sweden.

Compared to Sweden, only 11.6% of the `elderly live alone in Hong Kong, but they seem to be more dependent and suffer poverty (Hong Kong 2006 Population By-census Thematic Report: Older Persons 2008: 10). Elderly living alone “had poorer self-rated health...less frequent contact with relatives, and higher levels of financial strain, reported more depressive symptoms” (Chi, Chou, Boey 1999) – although the image of elderly living alone is constantly stereotyped by the mass media and researchers (Chen 2006). It seems that both Swedish and Hong Kong elderly who live alone have negative images. The negative image of old people in Sweden comes from being too old and sick to take care of themselves independently but for the Hong Kong elderly, negative images come from not being well taken care of. Still, the number of living alone in Sweden is higher than that of Hong Kong – what does this imply in terms of the cultural and societal ideas of independence and dependence?

Financial and residential dependence is a feasible way of living style for Hong Kong elderly simply because it is not easy to be independent – although it is also a matter of face and reputation of the family. My mother once said, “If you do not take care of me when I get old, then why did I give birth to you?” Hong Kong older generations may expect them to be taken care of and be dependent on their children when the latter grow up. One of my informants held a huge dinner for her 80-year-old birthday in a Chinese restaurant. I asked her who would pay for the 4500 HKD dinner and she replied, “I pay for it.” I was surprised, why didn’t her adult children pay for it instead? She exclaimed, “They don’t have to pay for it. They paid me before so I can pay for it!” She was proud to pay for her own birthday dinner – with her children’s money as if it was her own money. Elderly are accustomed to rely on their children financially because having filial children enhances their reputation¹⁹. They do not mind if they cannot live with the grandchildren like the older Chinese tradition²⁰, as long as they are paid by their children every month. It is important to note, however, the inadequate social welfare support for the poor elderly in Hong Kong also contributes to the reliance of the elderly on their family.

As we can see, the societal views on independence and dependence provide dos and don’ts for people. Many of them follow the mainstream for fear of arousing conflicts with their immediate others. Some are least shaped by societal views such as Lau who decide to move out or live with somebody in Hong Kong. Questing for personal space and independence, she may be a pioneer of women living alone among her generation twenty years ago, as if she is a advocate of women’s independence from their families and marriages. However, whether it is easy to live alone or not depends on which situations we are in. By “situations”, I refer to the availability of capital, one-person flats and governmental assistance for individuals to become independence, which are also called institutional realities.

¹⁹ I think that their reputation also comes from what they adult children do, where they live (emigration overseas imply how capable they are), or what education qualification does their grandchildren get etc.

Institutional impact on the feasibility to live alone

As we all know, living alone is constrained by institutional realities – the income, gender roles instilled, working hours adopted generally, setting of restaurants, welfare provisions or housing systems – although there are many exceptions within societies. Swedish institutional realities make living alone easier in Sweden. Here, I pick some of the institutional conditions for elaboration, including welfare and housing, which are closely related to the chances of living alone.

Welfare policies

The Swedish welfare system provides very good shelter for all individuals, no matter when they are students, unemployed or retired. It adopts universalism in its welfare policies. In 1999, 62% of the households on social assistance consisted of a single person without children. The social assistance is granted by assessing each individual, regardless of the family relationship (Eklind and Löfbom 2002).

The various kinds of pensions for both unemployed and retired citizens in Sweden help Swedish to live independently. For the unemployed benefits²¹, anyone over 20 years old is granted at least 320 Swedish Krona(SEK) if he or she has shown a plan of seeking jobs. If the unemployed worker is in one of the “funds” or “labour unions”, 80 % of his or her normal income (with a maximum of 730 SEK per day) can be given (Lundgren 2006). At least people living alone are able to pay their rent when they are hunting jobs like some of my informants do.

For the retired, they receive a stable pension for the later life until they die.²² Most Swedish are well protected under the welfare system – of course, they have to pay heavy taxes. It may make the Swedish rely more on the government than their families. In other words, it is possible for Swedish to live on their own in their later life. Ola, 25, commented on the welfare system,

We do have problems in covering all expenditure for old people. You have to save up some privately. But you get enough from your pensions because you work until you are 65. All the tax you paid is enough for your pension. If you really want to buy a lot of things, you have to save a lot. Everybody gets a certain amount. It is enough for you to live on if you don't live luxuriously. You need to have a high income to get more pensions...

As Ola also said, there is little moral responsibility for young people to support their parents financially in Sweden – the individual concerned and the state and/or municipalities should be mainly responsible for long-term economic difficulties (Latta, Björnberg 2007: 423). According to Latta and Björnberg (2007),

²¹ It is not provided by the government but the legally independent trade unions (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs of Sweden 2007).

²² There are two kinds of old age pensions, income pensions and premium pension. The first one is 18.5 percent of the gross income of the pensioner, contributed by the state, the employers and the insured person. Premium pension is the investment that the individual makes in the funds they choose. Low-income Swedes also receive housing supplements.

Financial transfers (between generations) take the form of allowances and help in certain specific situations rather than maintenance on a more regular basis. (P)eople seem to think that at a general level, individuals should not anticipate family support when confronted with unexpected expenses or long-term economic needs. After all, an overwhelming majority of adult individuals have indicated that they have neither given nor received financial support as a loan or gift from their families (p.442).

Lina, 83, has lived alone since her husband passed away 4 years ago. She has four children, but only two of them visit her sometimes; including the one who helps her do shopping once a week but none of them pay her any housekeeping money. She insists on living alone even though she is too weak to clean the whole house. Having a very good neighbor, a Bangladesh family, she was invited to live with them but she refused – for fear of losing her autonomy and contact with her children. Perhaps, from the perspective of the Bangladesh family, she is very lonely and abandoned. Although she does not receive much public service, she is still able to live alone. She said,

I've got an alarm, so I can ask for help, and they (the emergency services providers) should be here within 15 minutes. This makes my children feel safe while they work.... Here in Sweden it's not common that we move back to our children. My children don't have space and time. We cannot stand each other...In the past in the farmers' families, the elderly could be left in the home with their adult children. It was not so good though. The adult children might think that it was good, but nowadays this society is pitiful.

If Lina lived in Hong Kong, either she had to be rather rich; otherwise she would have to rely on her children. In Hong Kong, the pensions are not enough to cover all the expenses for people in need. There are no unemployment benefits but Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme (Lee 2000). Any person who is unemployed and under 60 years old, may have 1450 HKD a month through the CSSA scheme. For the retired, since 1960s, there has been a discussion for a central provident fund as a tool to sustain the retirement life of Hong Kong people. But it was not until 2000 that the Mandatory Provident Fund (MPF) was finally launched. (Mandatory Provident Fund Schemes Authority 2006)²³ Today, old people in Hong Kong still rely on the financial support of their children, or their private savings as well as the CSSA for a living (Mandatory Provident Fund Schemes Authority 2006). For able-bodied elderly without any family members, he/she can only receive 2235 HKD a month if his/her asset does not exceed 34,000 HKD (Social Welfare Department 2008). This payment is not even enough for settling the rent of a flat.

Adult children's support to the family finance has been essential in Hong Kong, which makes the adult children difficult to move out. The family bears the burden of catering to the individual's welfare needs during the harsh years of Hong Kong's industrialization. In the past, the family formation was mainly contributed by the immigrants from mainland China since the colonial era (Leung 1996: 75, 76). "Family remains the individual's stronghold against the outside world...It was this 'familial network', rather than social welfare organizations and government departments,

²³ Before the implementation of the MPF System, there was a retirement schemes voluntarily operated to provide retirement benefits for the employees regulated under the Occupational Retirement Schemes Ordinance (ORSO). However, it is not a compulsory retirement protection for Hong Kongers.

which the individual turned to for material support in times of need” (ibid 80)²⁴. It seems that the Hong Kong people tend to rely on their families rather than the government for financial support, which is different from the Swedish case.

Housing policies and the adaptation to the needs of singles^{25 26}

Looking back, the public rental housing policies were not comprehensive to all Hong Kong singles. In the early 1980s, singles could apply for public housing only if they were over 60, and planned to live with three other persons. They might have to live with strangers arranged by the housing authority if they wanted to live in the public housing. Or if they wanted to buy apartments through government’s schemes, they had to share the apartment with persons of the opposite sex (Law 1981: 172). This can be applied to the universities’ hostels or apartments for the teachers and staff – the criteria of moving in is that one has to live with his or her spouse. This implied a discrimination against people who did not cohabit or get married (Hong Kong People’s Council on Housing Policy 2000: 69). It was not until 1985 that the singles can apply for public rental housing while the housing authority started to arrange proper flats for people living alone in late 1990s. (Lui 1996: 297, Xianggang fang wu zheng ce ping yi hui 2000)

Cheung, affected by the urban renewal, had to move away from the old building, which would be demolished soon. But there was no public housing for people living alone at that time. She said,

I was younger than 50 years old when my old building had to be demolished. I have a friend....We were both younger than 50 years old back then so we tried to apply for the public housing together. Otherwise, I would not have been qualified to live in public housing. While I was waiting in the line, I lived in temporary housing for 7 years. Then I moved into the public housing with my friend. The living conditions were bad in the temporary housing...

²⁴ However, some young people rely on the parents for support. Two young informants do not support the parents financially because they are not required to do so. It may be the reason why it is easier for them to afford the costs of living alone.

²⁵ Here is some background information about the housing services in Sweden and Hong Kong. Housing in Sweden is planned by Boverket, the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning. (Löwendahl 2007) Boverket manages land and water resources, urban development, building and housing under the Ministry of the Environment. It also allocates the subsidies for private housing contractors. “In the field of housing, Boverket’s task is to promote the availability of affordable good-quality housing. Boverket is responsible for ensuring efficient and consistent administration of government subsidies for investment in housing and improved energy systems.” (Löwendahl 2007) Yet, the housing service such as allocation of various flats in Sweden is mainly provided by private contractors and rental companies or the municipalities. For example, Stockholms Stads Bostadsförmedling AB is one of listed companies which arrange rental flats. (2007a)

²⁶ In Hong Kong, the Housing Department is the executive arm of Housing Authority while Housing Authority develops and implements the public housing programmes. (Transportation and Housing Bureau 2007, Housing Authority 2007a) In both places, housing benefits were directed towards households of lower income, who cannot afford renting private housing. There are three major kinds of housing, including public rental housing, subsidized sale flats, and private permanent housing. The first two are the two main housing benefits provided by the government. The public rental housing is provided to households at a lower rent than the market. Subsidized sale flats are to assist the households to purchase their own flats. (By-census 2006) But there are debates if subsidized flats are included in the housing benefits given by the Hong Kong Government.

The government policies were harsh to us (people who want to live alone).

Yet seeing that nearly 40% of singles in Hong Kong earn lower than 5000HKD a month, it is difficult for them to afford buying or even renting flats in the private buildings. Some elderly have to live in old private housing, where the owners divide one apartment into various rooms for singles to live in (2006 Population By-census Thematic Report: Household income distribution in Hong Kong 2007: 44). Law, 73, a retired nurse, has to bear a rather high rent and poor living conditions with her savings. She said,

There are three flats on each floor while I live in one of them. It is not easy to find a good place to live. Each entrance of these three flats is independent from others.²⁷ It was 3000 HKD a month but the landlord wanted to raise the rent in the New Year. My flat is around 120 square feet (approximately 11 square meters). I have my own shower room but I don't have a kitchen. I have a rice cooker and a pot to boil hot water, which I use for showering. It is too dangerous to use the heater – it may explode.

The housing service²⁸ is available to almost all Swedish while the Hong Kong public housing service²⁹ is only for people who are poor. In Hong Kong, for the people who want to live alone in public housing estates, the upper limit of income for the application is 6,800HKD per month³⁰ while the asset should not exceed 176,000HKD (Housing Authority 2007b). But the median monthly domestic household income of a person living alone, under the age of 65, is 11,500 HKD (2006 Population By-census Thematic Report: Household income distribution in Hong Kong 2007: 96). Many of the people who are living alone cannot apply for public housing³¹. But it is doubtful if they can afford buying their own flats.

Both the Hong Kong housing authority and Stockholm Stads Bostadsförmedling intend to provide housing to local citizens in an affordable rent. A single person's flat would be around 1,000HKD a month according to my informants who live in public rental housing estates³². According to Stockholm Stads Bostadsförmedling, the rent for a one-person flat is around 1,700 to 5,000SEK per month (2007b). Although both Hong Kong and Sweden provide subsidies to people in need, the rent allowance in Hong Kong is only given to the residents of public rental housing by the Housing Authority. In Sweden, the housing benefits³³ are arranged for Swedish in need

²⁷ She does not have to enter others' room before going into hers. This kind of flats is more common than the one she has.

²⁸ A Swede who rents a single-person flat should earn 150000SEK a year. The salary of the applicant has to be 3 times of the rent (Stockholms Stads Bostadsförmedling AB 2007a).

²⁹ 38.5% of people living alone are in the low-income group in Hong Kong. In this group, the median monthly income is from 3000 to 4500HKD. So almost 40% of them is qualified to live in the public housing. Around 12% of the singles in Hong Kong fall into the medium income group. They have a median monthly income between 6300 to 17000HKD a month (By-census 2006).

³⁰ The limit can be up to 7158HKD per month, in which 5% of the income is contributed to the Mandatory Provident Fund (Housing Authority 2007b).

³¹ The selling of subsidized housing was ceased from 2003, which made poorer singles fell into the private housing markets. Yet there has been new opening for certain vacant subsidized housing since 2007.

³² In Hong Kong, the average rent of the public housing per month is between 31.5HKD per square meter to 46.4HKD per square meter, depending on the year of completion of the public housing estates. (By-census 2006)

³³ These housing benefits are determined according to the cost in residential housing and the income

regardless of the type of housing they are living in. In 2002, each person living alone received around 20000SEK a year as housing allowance. Among the group, people living alone who are over 65 years old receive more allowance. This amount of allowance can cover half of the housing rent of the singles in 2002³⁴ (Chen 2006). But in Hong Kong, the housing benefits are rather limited.³⁵

The fact that Sweden starts a lot earlier in planning housing for people living alone contributes to a large number of Swedish who live alone. “In Sweden, groups of individuals have started about 50 co-housing projects designed for singles or couples in the second half of their lives” (Power 2007).

I wonder if it is because of the need of the people who want to live alone, or if it is because of the availabilities of one-person flats that more and more Swedish live alone in recent decades. Or, since the idea of living alone has not been socially encouraged by many Hong Kong Chinese, there was basically no urge to build flats for people living alone in Hong Kong. But as the institutional world may also affect how people live, Hong Kong people may be obliged choose to share residence. Institutional realities seem to be affected by the cultural values and social opinions on living alone but they also shape how people may live in given society.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have found that living alone is viewed differently in these two societies; thus, there is a great number of Swedish living alone but only few Hong Kongers who do so. Despite this difference, living alone may be a common

of each individual. For young people who are in between 18 and 28, the numbers of persons living together, the size and rent or mortgage of the housing, as well as the income before tax are considered in giving the grant for housing. On the other hand, 80 percent of the study grant for university students is also considered as part of the income. The housing benefit for the single elderly is 93% of the rent or housing expenses maximum. But it does not exceed 5000 a month for unmarried, and 2500 for one who is married. For people younger than 65, 91% of the rent is granted, but that does not exceed 4500 for unmarried and 2250 for married. (The Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2007)

³⁴ Let's see how much a person who lives alone has to spend on housing in Sweden and Hong Kong. The disposable income for a single Swede with no children is 164200SEK in the year 2003-2005. The total amount (totala utgifterna) a single Swede spent on housing a year is 48060SEK in average. (Household Budget Survey 2003-2005) For example, the rent of a flat with one bedroom and kitchen in a multi-dwelling building costs 4695SEK a month in Sweden. If it is bought by the owner, the monthly spending costs 2729SEK a month. (Statistics Sweden 2007b) Therefore, the housing allowance for people living alone can help them pay half of the rent, assuming both the allowance and the rent did not vary a lot in the year 2002 and 2003.

³⁵ Among the households with the median income between 7500HKD and 17000HKD, about 33.6% live in public rental housing, 19.2% in subsidized sale flats and 46.3% in private permanent housing. Rent assistance is offered to any residents in the public housing according to the Housing Authority. 25% to 50% cut of the rent will be given for households in financial crisis. The average monthly housing benefits for middle-income get are between 74 to 353HKD (By-census 2006). When compared to the households of Sweden, which are granted 20000SEK (around 1600HKD a month) a year, Hong Kong does not give much housing benefits to the citizens. Household in this group spent in average about 12% of their monthly household income on housing. The By-census in 2006 shows that “Median Monthly Mortgage Payment and Loan Repayment of Owner-occupier Households with Mortgage Loan (HK\$)” of the households in this group was 6400HKD. Although these households are not necessarily occupied by singles, it reflects a middle income household's expenses on housing. If a person has to buy his or her own flat but he/she only earns 11500 a month, it would mean that over 50% of their income has to be contributed into the mortgage.

experience for all informants regarding eating and social isolation at home. Living alone in Sweden is more feasible than in Hong Kong, in terms of cultural, social and institutional aspects. Being independent is a significant concept among many Swedish but it is not important in a Hong Kong context. As for the societal views, premarital sex is widely accepted by Swedish but not many Hong Kongers, especially the older generations. Independence as a key to full personhood is not recognised in Hong Kong until the very recent years in the fast changing Hong Kong society – because living with family can reduce housing cost and dependence on adult children may bring reputation to the elderly. The availabilities of one-person flats and welfare policies also determine the possibility of living alone in both societies. After thinking over and over, I realise that people are not only “moulded” by various cultural conceptions; they also shape one another as agents, and are influenced by the institutional realities.

By living alone, people may consciously choose what they do in life. As said by Gordon Mathews, “selves strategically formulate and interpret their *ikigai* (that which most makes one’s life worth living) from an array of cultural conceptions...selves are not victims of cultural fate, but canny consumers of culture, formulating their *ikigai* through their choices from the cavalcade of ideas ‘in the air’ of their cultural world” (1996: vii, 211) As we can see, from Ho and Chui, the followers of filial pieties as dutiful daughters, to Kalle, the typical Swedish pursuing freedom and adulthood, all reveals how people reweave the strands of cultural conceptions and live alone. Some informants have gathered ideas of how to live from their cultures but have tried to weave these ideas to fit into their own lives. Fong, who insisted on living on her own, without any partners, is in fact standing on the watershed of old and new generations – as she has not violated filial piety, so it is culturally and socially accepted for her to live alone. She can definitely choose to live with somebody but she knows well how to survive as a morally correct teacher and daughter. People may formulate and choose to act according to certain deep-rooted cultural conceptions while societal views shape people’s decisions – selves negotiate what they should do within their circles of immediate others (Mathews 1996: 218). People use cultural values to frame and justify their actions and, are shaped by the social discourses. To further expand the values and judgment, they may shape others’ actions. Among my young Swedish informants, they require little social negotiation with their family members because moving out or living with somebody else is socially accepted and encouraged. There is no rub between the cultural values of independence and living alone. But my young Hong Kong informants, Lau and my friend who moved out, have to negotiate with their parents – even though Hong Kong seems to be more liberal and open-minded toward moving out today. Lau’s very close friends also move out and thus, they tend to hang out together because they share the same feelings and experience of living alone, but not with other friends who live with family members. If Kalle does not intend to move away from home, then he would probably face negative comments from his friends or family members – which may discourage him from staying with his family. As this may imply, social negotiation perhaps reinforces the cultural values in existent – no matter how hard people may want to violate filial piety, or individual independence, they inevitably face criticisms, which make them difficult to legitimise their actions.

Or institutional realities may also shape people’s choices – it may increase or decrease the degree of freedom to live alone. Institutional world may be affected by the cultural values and social views in each given society. Selves pursue their living

styles or how they want to live as channeled by their society's institutional structures. All cultural formulations and social negotiations of ikigai are structured by the institutional world within which it must be sought (Mathews 1996: 224). The most important institutional reality is money – as Hong Kong informants are poorer than the Swedish informants, they may have less ability to choose how they live. Housing is one of the institutional realities as well – a large number of Hong Kong people fall out of the protection of public housing because the requirement for renting a one-person flat in public housing is very harsh but Swedish do not have to worry about this – because there are no harsh restrictions on what the applicants' properties. The third institutional reality would be the welfare policies. Swedish state determines each individual's needs when distributing welfare, which makes Sweden a place for people to self-actualise.

Conflicting situations exist in these societies, which reduce the feasibilities of living alone. In Hong Kong, women are having higher education level and social status, but premarital sex can only exist underground, not letting older parents know, so living alone may be objected (although there are plenty exceptions like Fong); there is aging population in Hong Kong but the elderly are unable to cover their own expenses without enough pensions, which mean that living alone is difficult for them as well. The rub in Sweden is: when there is increasing number of elderly who rely on the governmental help, there is a reduction of institutional care; tighter examination of grants to university students also renders young people staying at home or work a lot of part time jobs (The local 2006b).

Through all the interviews, and gathering the information about living alone, I realise how different these two societies are. Up till now, I still wonder if the high land price policy has made many Hong Kong people not living alone – while many Hong Kong young or old people are capable of living alone but they choose not to. No matter how, this final project provides a chance for me to better understand Sweden and Hong Kong, even I have stayed in these two societies for some period of time.

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獨居：香港與瑞典的比較研究

本文比較研究瑞典及香港的獨居人士，以解答以下問題：為甚麼瑞典的獨居人口比例比香港為高？根據與兩地人士的訪談，本文探討文化、社會及制度的差異如何影響他們對「獨居」的態度和看法。