IS MARRIAGE IN DECLINE? A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF PERCEPTIONS OF YOUNG PEOPLE ON MARRIAGE IN HONG KONG, CHINA

Tabitha Ng

Hong Kong Shue Yan University, Hong Kong

Corresponding Author: Tabitha Ng
yln@hksyu.edu

Abstract: The traditional family seems to be fragmenting in many parts of the world. In Hong Kong, China, young people’s perception on marriage seems changing rapidly. The objective of this paper is to examine the young adults’ perceptions on marriage in the global world of late modernity where conditions of risks and uncertainties require careful illumination. A purposive sample of 10 young people was interviewed. Themes that emerged included normal aspect of the life course to get married, acceptance of other lifestyle options, female respondents more worried about prospects of finding a partner, delaying marriage because of uncertainties associated with transitions from school to work and suggestions for a better transition to young adulthood in family building. The findings revealed insights on the perceptions of Hong Kong Chinese young people on marriage in the transition to adulthood and in a context of global and local culture in late modernity. Practical measures to facilitate a better transition to young adulthood were discussed in the paper as well. The insights from this study inform policy makers and interested parties who together can jointly map out appropriate interventions to assist young people in their transition to adulthood.

Keywords: young people, reflexive biography, marriage, perception on marriage, global and local culture


Received: 12 December 2018 Accepted: 24 February 2019

Introduction

The traditional family seems to be fragmenting in many parts of the world. Some regret this; others welcome it as a progressive development. As we can observe, there is no doubt that the way in which family life has been developing over the last half century reveals some remarkable and very speedy transitions, most evidently in Western societies.

In Hong Kong, China, in the past 10 years divorce and single-parent families have increasingly occurred. Young people’s values and perception of marriage are also rapidly changing. Under the impact of globalization, Hong Kong families are also undergoing change such as an increase in cross-border marriage, split families, rising divorce rate and dual-earner families are more prevalent (Census and Statistics Department 2018) as the cost of living in Hong Kong is high.

Hong Kong census data reveals that more young people are delaying marriage and choosing to live with their parents after marriage (Census and Statistics Department 2018) because of uncertainties over the security of their employment. They often have to pursue further education and gain credentials in order to maintain their competitive edge. Unemployment
amongst young adults is high compared to the overall unemployment rate in Hong Kong and financial dependence upon parents is commonplace.

In addition, according to various surveys conducted by the Census and Statistics Department of Hong Kong over the past decade, the number of Hong Kong residents working in the Mainland China has been on the increase. The findings show that young people with a higher level of education working in the Mainland is on the rise as a result of China's entry into the World Trade Organization. With the increasing globalization of the world economy, the mobility of workforce resources becomes a key factor.

In a study on family attitudes and values in Hong Kong, Chow and Lum (2008), found that family values and attitudes in Hong Kong have become more heterogeneous over the last three decades. While the general public remained relatively traditional, they were becoming more receptive, both for themselves and for others, towards divorce, remarriage, cohabitation, pre-marital sex, childlessness, and a less traditional gender role. A study on the contemporary young generation in Hong Kong (Yip, et al. 2011) indicates that young people still hold fairly strong traditional family values and a high percentage intend to get married.

Aim of the study
This study seeks to explore the marriage concerns and issues faced by young adults in Hong Kong. Through examining the perceptions of a group of Hong Kong young people on marriage, the study could provide a picture of marriage-related challenges that they may encounter in a changing global world.

Method
This study is a qualitative research with semi-structured individual interview design with a view to obtaining a deeper understanding of young adult’s perceptions and concerns about marriage. The study can help inform policy agenda that can, where needed, assist young people for better transition to adulthood.

Sampling
Ten individuals were identified via theoretical sampling as being representative both of some particular thematic perspective and also some key characteristic of the youth profile as generated by the Hong Kong 2006 Population By-census Report. They were selected in terms of their socio-economic backgrounds such as gender, educational attainment, job status and working conditions, income, and immigration status. The profiles of the interviewees were as follows:

Case 1 (Lok, male, aged 23) –
A drawing class tutor with low education level (Secondary 5), low monthly income (around HK$3,000.00) and limited occupational skills.

Case 2 (Irene, female, aged 19) –
A programme assistant in a welfare agency with low educational level (Secondary 5), low monthly income (HK$6,500.00) and limited occupational skills.

Case 3 (Victor, male, aged 24) –
A banking management trainee with high educational level (bachelor degree in public administration), high monthly income (HK$24,000) and high skills (banking and management).
He undertook overtime working (around 15 hours per week) and also continuing education (following a banking course 10 hours per week).

**Case 4 (Abi, female, aged 25)** –
A secondary school teacher (major in Chinese) with high educational level (bachelor degree in education), high monthly income (HK$24,000) and high skills (teacher qualification). She worked overtime (around 15 hours per week).

**Case 5 (Ken, male, aged 19)** –
A dog trainer of a private dog-training company with low education level (Secondary 4), undertaking cross-border work (went to the Mainland China 1-2 times per week) and overtime working (around 10 hours per week).

**Case 6 (Blossom, female, aged 25)** –
A private housing management officer with continuing education (taking management course 6 hours per week) and overtime work (around 25 hours per week).

**Case 7 (Ting, male, aged 21)** –
A young man (Secondary 5) who had few tangible connections with the local community, had no paid employment, was not studying and had no income.

**Case 8 (Ching, female, aged 18)** –
A young female (Secondary 5) who had few tangible connections with the local community, had no paid employment, was not studying and had no income.

**Case 9 (Chak, male, aged 23)** –
A printing machine assembler who had migrated in the last 3 years from mainland China)

**Case 10 (Portia, female, aged 22)** –
A year-one university student (major in Geography) who was an overseas returnee from US

*Data Collection and Measure*

The interviews lasted 60-90 minutes, were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. The questions were asked on topics as plan for family building and their life course development compared with their older generation. Sample questions of the interview guide relevant to the present article include:

- Do you have any plan for getting married, or having other individual life styles (e.g. cohabitation, singleton …)?
- Why do you/ don’t have the family building plan?
- What kinds of culture/values mostly affect your perceptions of family building/individualized lifestyle, the western or traditional Chinese ones? Or some other influences?
- What kind of difficulties may you encounter when you start your family building or having your individualized lifestyle?
What policies, measures or service provision can support or help you start a family or having your own lifestyle?

Do you think that your life course development is the same as your older generation (traditional family life cycle consists of younger generation going through stages of leaving home when entering adulthood, then getting married, having children, fulfilling civic responsibilities and taking care of the older generation and etc…) or would there be some differences in choices and lifestyles?

Data Analysis
The model for analyzing qualitative data from the individual interviews was thematic analysis. This is a commonly used method (Bryman 2008; Davies 2007) that identifies themes or patterns within data (Braun and Clarke 2006). The method adopted was the six-stage model of Braun and Clarke (2006).

Major Findings
The themes identified from the data describing participants’ experience in the transition to adulthood with respect to marriage are described below.

Theme 1 - Normal aspect of the life course to get married

Unlike the studies by Whitehead and Popenoe (2003) into family change in the west, this study into Hong Kong youth found that a majority of the interviewees, especially females, had plans for family building. Male interviewees preferred to get married after 30 in contrast to females who wanted to marry earlier. The male respondents considered that they might first save up enough money once around 30 while females referred to the risks associated with first births by older mothers over the age of 30. Some interviewees considered that it is a normal aspect of the life course to get married. They considered that marriage provides protection and security. Irene provides an example of this shared perspective:

Irene (female with low income, low educational level and low skills):

Cohabitation does not provide protection ... if there is no marriage certificate, it would affect the whole family a lot. ...I think a marriage certificate is very important...there is no protection for cohabited couples. How long can you trust someone?

Apart from the above reasons, there is the influence of Chinese culture and values which influenced the family plans of the interviewees. According to the Chinese sage Mencius, ‘on the birth of a boy, it is wished by the parents that he shall have a wife and, on the birth of a girl, it is wished by them that she shall have a husband. This parental feeling is possessed by all’ (Mencius, Book III, Pt. II, Ch 4, Sec. 6, in Cheng 1946). Hence, it perhaps is not surprising that marriage has long been viewed as an inevitable stage of life by the majority of respondents who would all have been exposed in varying degrees to such traditional Chinese values:
Blossom (female undertaking overtime work and continuing education):

_I believe there is everlasting marriage. I think that the Chinese culture affects me... I am thinking it is desirable to have a companion. When you are elderly, you need to have a companion._

Chak (a new male immigrant):

_There is a Chinese saying that when a man grows up, he should get married, I agree with this Chinese saying._

**Theme 2 – Acceptance of other lifestyle options**

As with the study by Georgas et al. (2006) into recent changes in family types in Western societies, we can see there is a sizeable increase in divorce rate and the proportion of single-parent families. Young adults increasingly cohabit without marriage and fertility rate has dropped markedly. There are evident global changes in lifestyle in the west. Likewise, a few respondents in this study would consider where relevant to them other lifestyle options such as cohabitation, same-sex marriage or being singleton as well. Here, the influence of global values and culture was seemingly a key factor. For example, Victor claimed open attitudes towards sexual relationships stating he was more influenced by western notions about liberalism, pluralism and individualism that he learned in his undergraduate studies. Portia, a returnee from overseas study in USA stated she was greatly impressed and influenced by the western style of education and culture and pursued self-development and other personal interests and freedoms.

Victor (male with high income, high educational level and high skills):

_err ... as for myself ... I consider pre-marital sex acceptable. As to multiple sex partners...It is not a big deal ... I will not criticize others if they have multiple sex partners ... Homosexuality, now I do not feel that I have this orientation. If one day I have such sexual orientation, why should I control it?_

Portia (female returnee from overseas study):

_I accept homosexual relationships and same sex marriage. Cohabitation and pre-marital sex are OK to me. If the partners think about it carefully and love each other deeply, then that’s no problem to have a sex relationship._

It is relevant to note that their acceptance of alternative lifestyles did not mean that they would follow such practices. Indeed some felt bound by Chinese cultural values that having sexual relationships out of marriage would be seen as an irresponsible act giving no status to either and no protection to a dependant party. This would, in the view of several, affect the reputation of both partners and bring shame and stigma to both families (Hu 1944; Eastman 1988; Stockman 2000).
Chak (a new male immigrant):

_Cohabitation is OK but if your partner lives with you, you have to give her status. Right? This is respect ... I mean I am serious._

**Theme 3 – Female more worried about prospects of finding a partner**

In examining the prospect of finding a partner, it is important to look into the unique characteristics of marriage in Hong Kong in which most grooms tend to be older than their brides. By comparing the number of men in the 25-49 age group that have never married with the never-married women in the 20-44 age group, we find that there are at least 199,200 more women than men (Census and Statistics Department 2010c). As such, women over 45 have only a very slim chance of getting married (South China Morning Post 2005). Thus it was interesting to note that female respondents were, comparatively, more worried about their prospects of finding a partner. They considered that their chance of getting married reduced as they got older. They were happy to consider a partner from the mainland. Some were not unhappy about remaining single if they could not find the partner they wanted; in this they seemed to reflect aspects of feminism in contemplating another lifestyle apart from marriage.

Abi (a female with high income, high educational level and high skills):

_On cross-border marriage, I consider it acceptable as we are all Chinese. ... The chance of being singleton is high. In Hong Kong, there are more females than males. There are many single women and they consider that the meaning of life does not lie on marriage. I think that if I cannot find a suitable partner, I will not force myself into marriage._

Some female respondents considered that it was difficult find a male partner in Hong Kong as there are more women than men. In 2010, the percentage of female and male in the population are 53.2% and 46.8% respectively. (Census and Statistics Department 2011b). The female respondents also felt a sense of time passing them by in terms of being married:

Blossom (female undertaking overtime work and continuing education):

_Now I am 25. This is an important date for a girl. Many friends of mine have already got married. There is too much pressure. ... It is very difficult to find someone you love and also that the guy is committed to the relationship._

One interviewee pointed out that in mainland China, ‘arranged dating’ by parents is popular in many of the provinces while it is not so common in Hong Kong. Some get married after getting to know each other through this arrangement. In Hong Kong such opportunities of ‘arranged dating’ by parents (see Eastman 1988; Stockman 2000) were less available and young people tended to make their own choices via other means when selecting a partner such as the
idea of looking for a marriage partner through matchmaking service centres (Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups 2000).

**Theme 4 – Delaying marriage because of uncertainties associated with transitions from school to work**

As with the study by Wu (2010), more young people are delaying marriage because of the uncertainties associated with difficult transitions from school to work, so in this study several respondents indicated the importance of finding a job first or to settle down in their career before dating seriously and getting married.

Irene (female with low income, low educational level and low skills):

*A job is very important. Without a job, you cannot go out dating because you have to spend money on cosmetics, on food, etc in dating activities.*

Lok, Ching and Ting (low income and low education attainment) did not have stable jobs or salaries and all felt uncertain and somewhat worried about family building and at the same time take up family responsibilities towards their parents too:

Lok (a tutor in an art centre, with unstable job and low income):

*Ten years later I may get married. But up to now I don’t have a stable job and my life is so difficult. How can I save enough money to get married, to buy a flat or to pay for a great deal of wedding expenditure? I want to support my parents financially and take up family obligations but in fact I can’t do it because of my low salary.*

Finding affordable housing when getting married is a big issue both in the UK (Henderson et al. 2007) and in Hong Kong where a study by Yip et al. (2011) indicated that many young people do not have enough money to obtain a property, sustain a nuclear family and raise children. Many of the interviewees felt helpless when they thought about the high property prices in Hong Kong. Their major hurdle was not having enough money to commence family building. Most considered their future in some form of rented or public housing. The costs of traditional marriage rituals (large wedding party and dinner in a restaurant) would be replaced by just having close friends to the ceremony and some modest ambition for a honeymoon. Some chose to live with parents or in-laws to save money on renting flat.

Lok (male with no job, low educational level and low skills):

*(On marriage) the first hurdle is money....I am a traditional male. I do not want my spouse to contribute to the mortgage.*
Irene (female with low income, low educational level and low skills):

*It is OK by me to live in public (housing) estates. If I do not meet the eligibility criteria for public housing, I may rent a flat to form a nuclear family. Buying a flat is too expensive…*

Portia (a female returnee from oversea study):

*After marriage, I would live with my parents or my spouse’s parents. … Even if I’m single, I’ll keep on living with my parents. I don’t mind going back to my parents’ home for protection when necessary.*

A landmark study by Wu (2010) indicated that the transition of Chinese young people from school to work and family building has become more precarious and unstable than before in a global economy driven by competitive labour markets and harsh working conditions. So more and more young people are delaying marriage. The findings in this study were similar in that it revealed many constraints in family building and also taking care of parents.

Blossom (property management officer, overtime working and continuing education):

*I spend all my time in work. For many months I go to work at 9:00 am and return home at 12:00 at night because of overtime work and taking a course at night. I haven’t talked with my parents for a long time as I don’t have chance to meet them. I’ve no time to find a mate.*

Ken (a dog trainer who had cross-border work and overtime work):

*Actually I want to date, but you know I can’t afford to because of my present working conditions. I don’t believe a girl would like to choose a boyfriend who had to work cross-border and work overtime until 11 or 12pm at night….Er… My father is a dementia patient. I’m quite stressed in taking care of him because my job is quite demanding.*

### Theme 5 - Suggestions for a better transition to young adulthood in family building

The problems that the young people face are not unique to Hong Kong. Many western states such as the UK face similar problems. Higher unemployment rates, lower starting salaries and insecure jobs have put many young people in disadvantaged positions, protracting the transition from school to work and from adolescence to adulthood. Government policies could help to smooth the transitions from school to work and facilitate young people’s subsequent life plan in family building and taking family responsibility (Wu 2010; The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups 2010). One such area might be to streamline the right of abode as noted below.
Chak (Case 9) was a new immigrant and had a girlfriend in mainland China. He referred to many hurdles for a cross-border spouse to come to Hong Kong. Hence the Government might consider removing such hurdles.

Chak (a new male immigrant):

On cross-border marriage, if you want to get married in China, your other half has to wait for at least four years before being allowed to come to Hong Kong. The Government should relax this rule.

-- Government’s housing policy

Many interviewees criticized the Government for its housing policy as it was chronically difficult for young adults to buy a flat when starting a new family. Victor again summarized a view shared by many:

I hope that the Government could increase land supply and to regulate the developers. I don’t need the Government to subsidize me in purchasing properties but I hope that the Government would regulate the property market. I consider the Government should build more subsidized housing for the younger generation.

Discussion

Interviews with these young people revealed some crucial information for further discussion. Some important findings and issues raised with implications for social workers and policy makers are listed below:

A Reflective Biography Analysis

From the major findings of the research, we found that a reflective biography (Giddens 2001) could be used for understanding the situation of the sample youth and helped inform the analysis of the respondents’ subjective life experiences. Giddens (2001) recognizes the world we live in today as a ‘runaway world’; a world marked by new risks and uncertainties, albeit these risks are often borne more by some nations or segments within some societies than by the more privileged. That said, trust should be placed alongside that of risk. Living in a more globalized society, our lives are influenced by people we never see or meet, who may be living on the far side of the world from us. Also, we do not trust blindly but increasingly become reflexive about who and what should be trusted by drawing upon the resources of an information age that helps us think and act upon the circumstances in which we live our lives. Many aspects of life that for earlier generations were simply taken for granted become matters of open contestation and decision-making both in the private and public spheres. For instance, in our private world we can in many societies control the number of children we have via modern forms of contraception; in our public democratic lives we can bring to bear our preferences for which political party to support and exercise choice in relation to all manner of social arrangements.
Anthony Giddens (1991) suggests that in late modernity there is an endless range of potential courses of action open to individuals and collectivities. He argued that life is not only a biographical project but a ‘reflexive’ one where there is the exploration and construction of the altered self as part of a reflexive process in relation to personal and social change (Giddens 1991). There has been a shift from ‘standardized’ to ‘choice’ biographies. During transition to adulthood, ‘choice’ biographies can be understood in relation to the nature of action, decision-making and strategy by young people in dealing with risk and opportunity (Jones 2009). As shown by the findings of this study, the idea of ‘choice’ is likely to be quite narrow for some disadvantaged young adults in Hong Kong.

Globalization affects many countries of the world. China is also undergoing rapid changes in values and tradition. In this sense the Chinese communist state remains a decisive, dominant and fundamental feature of the political, legal and social landscape across a giant hinterland, albeit Hong Kong and nearby territories retain a mix of their former capitalist and internationalist structures while clearly a part of the new China. Such complexities together with the influences of a globalizing world – in which China has become a leading economic power, make for a fascinating case study in the instance of Hong Kong.

Based on these conceptual insights, the study has drawn upon reflexive biographies theory (2001) to provide a theoretical framework to help examine Hong Kong young adults’ perceptions of marriage in conditions of global and local culture in late modernity.

In Hong Kong, while there have been changes in household composition and family formation these are not so far reaching as in some western countries. Social expectations around the timing and shaping of individual domestic biographies while differing by social class and gender were still reasonably predictable. Parents still see themselves with a strong responsibility for keeping children safe and on track educationally. Normative timetables of getting married, having offspring, caring for parents, and supporting the family financially and practically were fairly well ordered expectations.

This study also found that Chinese cultural values remain strongly influential. Confucian teaching in relation to notions of where man and a woman should get married when grown up and have children was still strong in the minds of these young adults. The prevalence of traditional Chinese cultural values in regard to the ethic of collectivism is understood in the emphasis upon ‘we’ instead of ‘I’. Young adults as part of the family are expected to fulfill certain development tasks. Social pressure on marriage is not to be underestimated. It is a mark of filial piety, a highly powerful concept amongst Chinese families as it governs the parent-child relationship, including the responsibility of children to support and care for aging parents. This study highlights how it is still ideologically and culturally relevant among the young adults.

Although this study presents interesting data, this was a small qualitative study. Future studies should consider examining the perceptions of young people towards life development.

**Conclusion**

The findings from this study added to the understanding of the perceptions of Hong Kong Chinese young people on marriage in the transition to adulthood. These insights can be used to plan social policies that meet their needs. In addition, the findings suggest that in Hong Kong society, traditional Chinese moral values are still heavily emphasized and endorsed. But it is observed that some Western global values have begun to take root in Hong Kong society and these values might, according to the findings, be increasingly represented within the Hong Kong
young people’s value systems. The consequences of this for Hong Kong family life remains however an unfolding story.

References


Cheng, T. (1946) China moulded by Confucius, London: Stevens and Sons Ltd.


Chow, N. and Lum, T. (2008) Trends in family attitudes and values in Hong Kong, Hong Kong: Department of Social Work and Social Administration. The University of Hong Kong.


Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups (2000) Youth’s views on marriage, Youth Opinion Polls, 81, September 2000, Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups.

Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups (2006) *A study on economic dependence on family among young people in Hong Kong*, *Youth Study Series*, 36, December 2006, Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups.

Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups (2010) *A study on the economic dependence on family among young people in Hong Kong*, *Youth Study Series*, 45, December, 2010, Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups.


Ng, T.P. (2007) *Chinese culture, Western culture: why must we learn from each other?*, US: iUniverse Inc.


South China Morning Post (2005) *Squeezed out of the marriage game*, 22 October.


