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# A Choice under Constraints: Child Labour in Hong Kong from 1950 to 1971

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

A Choice under Constraints:

Child Labour in Hong Kong from 1950 to 1971

by

Nga Yee Lau

A THESIS

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## **Abstract**

This is the untold story of child labour in Hong Kong from 1950 to 1971. Based on 31 interviews conducted mostly with former child labourers and archival research, this thesis examines the many facets of child work from former child labourers' perspectives. This study aims to broaden our understanding of the post-war economic miracle, child work experiences, and why children worked and contributed to the household economy. While the world was eager to stop child labour, the influx of Chinese newcomers kept it alive. Although some children chose to work out of filial motivations, they made their choices under duress and debased socioeconomic conditions. Family circumstances, limited education access and the lack of poor relief were among the constraints that reinforced their choices. This research enriches the mainstream narrative of Hong Kong's economic success by documenting the toil and sweat of the post-war generation that built contemporary Hong Kong.

## Acknowledgements

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*To my parents*

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## Introduction

The end of the Second World War unleashed waves of independence in Asia and Africa. Yet, Britain still managed to keep its Crown Colony in the Far East, Hong Kong. During a period of reconstruction, the economy in Hong Kong was slowly recovering. To eke out a living, Hong Kong residents engaged in a range of informal labour practices.<sup>1</sup> One was child labour, which to Britain signified a dismal past of oppression and exploitation.<sup>2</sup>

Still a Crown Colony, Hong Kong reached world headlines “usually because of its reputation as a corrupt ‘sweatshop colony’.”<sup>3</sup> The use of child labour formed part of the “sweatshop” imagination. Although scholars have written about *Mui Tsai* working in the 1920s, very few have commented on child labour in the post-war era.<sup>4</sup> Situating child labour in historical context, this research has investigated the diverse reasons why children worked in Hong Kong from 1950 to 1971 from children’s perspectives. It has also explored how, in retrospect, former child labourers assess childhood and their work experience.

The period of study begins in 1950, the year when the colonial government set a permanent immigration control at the Sino-British border. The Chinese inhabitants could not move to and from China without restrictions.<sup>5</sup> Studying from 1950 onwards also helps track

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<sup>1</sup> The word “Hong Kong residents” excluded the group of British ex-patriates in Hong Kong.

<sup>2</sup> One example is E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Gollancz, 1963), 349, as cited in Hugh Cunningham, “The Decline of Child Labour: Labour Markets and Family Economics in Europe and North America since 1830,” *The Economic History Review* 53.3 (August 2000): 409.

<sup>3</sup> Joe England and John Rear, *Chinese Labour under British Rule: A Critical Study of Labour Relations and Law in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1975), v.

<sup>4</sup> *Mui Tsai* is a Chinese term referring to domestic servant girls who worked for the families who had bought them.

<sup>5</sup> Steve Tsang, *A Modern History of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 180-1.

the making of the economic miracle resulting from industrialisation. Since compulsory education is often seen as a way to curb the practice of child labour, the period ends in 1971, the year when Hong Kong started to provide free and compulsory primary education to its subjects.<sup>6</sup> 1971 was also a time when the post-war baby-boomers grew up and were no longer children. Since Hong Kong enjoyed economic growth every year from the mid-1950s until the financial crisis of 1997, the 1950s and 1960s are crucial periods for the economic success and the development of Hong Kong.<sup>7</sup>

This thesis brings together stories from thirty-one interviewees and a collection of documents to examine child labour in Hong Kong from child labourers' perspectives. This thesis explores how various factors pushed and pulled children into the workforce. It also analyses how former child labourers, in retrospect, assess their child work experiences. I recruited the interviewees mainly from my personal networks and two other third parties. They represent child workers born in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s with work experiences in various sectors. Their stories bring colour to the economic miracle in the history of Hong Kong.

## **Economic Miracles, Household Economy and Child Labour**

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<sup>6</sup> For discussion on curbing child labour through compulsory education, see, for instance, Marjatta Rahikainen, *Centuries of Child Labour: European Experiences from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 155; Cunningham, "The Decline," 416.

<sup>7</sup> Leo F. Goodstadt, *Profits, Politics and Panics: Hong Kong's Banks and the Making of a Miracle Economy, 1935-1985* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 5.

This thesis enhances our knowledge of the economic miracle in Hong Kong. As Joe England has observed, youth was one of the basic traits of the working class in Hong Kong.<sup>8</sup> Young persons and children pulled down the average age of the working population and served as a steady source of cheap labour. Readily-available cheap labour was one reason for the cheap entry cost leading to the economic take-off.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, child labour played a role in Hong Kong's economic success. The demand for unskilled workers, including child labourers, also showed the characteristics of the industries during the 1950s and 1960s. Studying child labour helps us understand the business cultures and strategies in Hong Kong.

The reasons for children to work shed light on how family circumstances, limited education access and social norms affected the household economic strategy in Hong Kong during the 1950s and 1960s. Child labour was a family strategy which secured increased income for the family. Although the family strategy was not necessarily consciously directed, it was a social and economic arrangement that benefitted families. Earnings from child work contributed to the family economies and supported younger dependent children.<sup>10</sup> Children worked due to various constraints. This thesis evaluates how various factors interacted with each other and explores children's roles in household economies in Hong Kong during that period.

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<sup>8</sup> England and Rear, *Chinese Labour*, 61.

<sup>9</sup> Goodstadt, *Profits, Politics and Panics*, 113.

<sup>10</sup> Jane Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 149.

This research also helps us learn more about the varieties of child work experiences. The manufacturing industries only dictated the economic growth in Hong Kong but not the types of work available to children. Former child labourers often engaged in multiple jobs of different natures. Their work experiences impacted their lives. Their stories matter because their generation formed the pillar of society in the next decade. According to the Hong Kong 2011 Census, the post-war generation constitutes the largest population age group and shapes the trajectory of Hong Kong from the late-1960s onwards.<sup>11</sup> As anthropology strives to “translate emotions across class, gender, language and culture,” this project translates child work experiences in Hong Kong to that in other regions and contributes to anthropology.<sup>12</sup>

### **Defining Child Labour**

As British historian Hugh Cunningham has rightly pointed out, “The history of child labour is for the most part, not inappropriately, inscribed within a framework of morality.” Literature often links child labour to “the exploitation of little children’ . . . [and] passes moral judgment.”<sup>13</sup> The representation of “the Dickensian portraits of tender girls . . . and infant boys” shapes the perception of modern-day child labour.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, child labour is often seen as “a kind of unfortunate accident of history or fate” in which children are exploited. In

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<sup>11</sup> Hong Kong Government, *2011 Population Census: Key Statistics* (Hong Kong: Census and Statistics Department, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Nancy Scheper-Hughes, “Parts Unknown: Undercover Ethnography of the Organs-Trafficking Underworld,” *Ethnography* 5.1 (March 2004): 39.

<sup>13</sup> Cunningham, “The Decline,” 409.

<sup>14</sup> Lieten and van Nederveen Meerkerk, “An Introduction,” 11.

this thesis, I consider exploitation “a specific social relationship in which one person profits from another or gains advantages at his expense.”<sup>15</sup> Scholars stress that we should also study children’s role in household economies or any economy. To define child labour, one should turn to the concept of childhood and embrace a wider perspective on child work. Through examining the concepts of childhood and work, this section aims to define “child labour” in a way appropriate to the case in Hong Kong.

As anthropologist Christine Ward Gailey has questioned, “Who ‘counts’ as a child?” The cultural definitions of childhood and child labour is often “imprecise and ambivalent.”<sup>16</sup> Class, ethnicity, gender, time and culture affect how one defines childhood. Anthropologist David Lancy explores the concept of childhood by synthesising the biological and cultural perspectives. Broadly, the biological perspective considers childhood in relation to human development over the life course. Lancy suggests that “early childhood begins with weaning and overall independence from the mother and father.” Childhood ends when one reaches puberty, which is variable. However, culture might “‘accelerate’ children’s development” and therefore be in conflict with the biological perspective. For example, the !Kung foragers believe that children who could not walk are major burdens in the traditional mobile subsistence pattern. Therefore, they accelerated children’s development, including sitting and

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<sup>15</sup> Manfred Liebel, *A Will of Their Own: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Working Children* (London: Zed Books, 2004), 5, 196.

<sup>16</sup> Christine Ward Gailey, “Rethinking Child Labor in an Age of Capitalist Restructuring,” *Critique of Anthropology* 19.2 (June 1999): 116-7; Viviana A. R. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Values of Children* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 73.

walking.<sup>17</sup> Combining the two perspectives, Lancy defines childhood as a period “when the child can be ‘useful’”, both in terms of “a suite of attributes, including self-locomotion” and “the willingness and ability to be helpful”. Although Lancy proposes that children are those under 15, the “biocultural perspective” Lancy puts forth leaves flexibility for the chronological cut-off age of childhood.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, the flexibility in the cut-off point for transitioning from childhood highlights how contested the chronological age of childhood could be. Similarly, Robin Bernstein argues that no “one cutoff point . . . will apply to all considered.”<sup>19</sup> Anthropologist Alice Schlegel explains that it is hard to determine chronological age of childhood because “the transition from social childhood to social adolescence usually depends on level of physical development”, which differs from one to another. This makes it hard to set a cut-off age for “the social transition from childhood to adolescence” applicable to all cultures.<sup>20</sup> Also, the perception of childhood is changing. Nowadays, children are not often valued according to their economic contribution to families. More often, they are valued based on love and affection they bring to their families. Chapter 4 will provide an in-depth explanation.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, the definition of child needs to be contextualised and culturally-specific.

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<sup>17</sup> David F. Lancy, “Children as a Reserve Labor Force,” *Current Anthropology* 56.4 (August 2015): 545-6.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 545-6.

<sup>19</sup> Robin M. Bernstein, comments of “Children as a Reserved Labor Force,” by David F. Lancy, *Current Anthropology* 56.4 (August 2015): 555.

<sup>20</sup> Alice Schlegel, comments of “Children as a Reserved Labor Force,” by David F. Lancy, *Current Anthropology* 56.4 (August 2015): 560-1.

<sup>21</sup> For discussion on the changing perceptions of childhood, please refer to Hugh Cunningham, *The Children of the Poor: Representations of Childhood since the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); Colin Heywood, *A History of Childhood: Children and Childhood in the West from Medieval to Modern Times*

In the literature of child labour, two separate discourses emerge. One type of literature adopts a “simple age-based distinction” and defines “a child as anyone under a certain age, 12 or 14 or whatever.”<sup>22</sup> Another body of work considers children as “people still co-resident with one or both parents” regardless of their actual age, leaving flexibility for the cut-off age of children.<sup>23</sup> Cunningham defines a child as “anyone under fifteen, primarily because one can isolate this age group in the census figure for 1851.”<sup>24</sup> Taking the Hong Kong sources into consideration, I will define a child as anyone at or below the age of 14. Since the colonial government in Hong Kong did not define child labour in its reports, I referred to the census, labour legislation and researchers’ practices to support my argument. The *Report of the 1961 Census* and *Report on the 1966 By-Census* grouped residents between age 6 and 14 into one group, suggesting that persons below age 15 were children. Furthermore, child labour was generally perceived as the employment of “any person under 15 years of age,” with a lower minimum age in 1922 and 1932.<sup>25</sup> Researcher Robin Porter also assumes a child as “any person under 15 years of age”.<sup>26</sup>

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(Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), as cited in Kristoffel Lieten and Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, “Child Labour’s Global Past, 1650-2000: An Introduction,” in Kristoffel Lieten and Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, eds., *Child Labour’s Global Past, 1650-2000* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 13.

<sup>22</sup> Ben White, “Social Science Views on Working Children,” in Hugh D. Hindman, ed., *The World of Child Labor: An Historical and Regional Survey* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2014), 14.

<sup>23</sup> Cunningham, “The Decline,” 410-1.

<sup>24</sup> Hugh Cunningham, “The Employment and Unemployment of Children in England, c. 1680-1851,” *Past & Present* 12.6 (February 1990): 118, as cited in Lancy, “Reserved Labor Force,” 546.

<sup>25</sup> The minimum age for employment in 1922 and 1932 was 10 and 12 respectively. Robin Porter, *Child Labour in Hong Kong* (Nottingham: Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, 1975), 2-3. The legislation mentioned was the Protection of Women and Juveniles Ordinance, Cap. 213. It was cited by Porter.

<sup>26</sup> Porter, *Child Labour*, 2-3.

Other than the chronological age, I will also define the meaning of labour. Some scholars consider unwaged, domestic labour and waged work as labour because both are linked in family economies. However, I will define child labour as children under 15 engaging in income-generating activities, which mean “labor for the production of economic goods and services.”<sup>27</sup> In this sense, income refers to not only “wages paid individually, but also . . . wages paid to the head of the family.”<sup>28</sup> As long as the family received income in return for a child’s work, that would be counted as labour. For example, both agricultural labour and marketing agricultural produce are labour because these activities generate income for family economies. I will also count doing outwork at home and helping out in family businesses as labour. Although domestic, unwaged work could be labour, I will not consider household chores, or “performance of tasks (such as looking after younger siblings) which allowed other family members to be productively employed,” as labour in this thesis.<sup>29</sup> First, this research is analysing labour in the more formal sense. My research would be more focused by using a narrower definition. Also, child labour was closely related to industrialisation in Hong Kong, which laid the foundation for the economic success. I can make the study of child labour more relevant to the situation in Hong Kong by focusing on

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<sup>27</sup> Hugh D. Hindman, “Editor’s Note: Measuring Child Labor,” in Hugh D. Hindman, ed., *The World of Child Labor: An Historical and Regional Survey* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2009), xxxi.

<sup>28</sup> Cunningham, “The Employment,” 118.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-9.



waged work. I will only touch upon domestic helping by analysing how these experiences helped pave the way for child labour more formally in Chapter 3.

## **Literature on Child Labour**

### *Child Labour in Industrial England*

“‘Child Labour’ as a phrase, and as a concept with negative connotations, was a product of the debates that accompanied the use of children to work mills, factories and coal mines during the Industrial Revolution in Britain.”<sup>30</sup> To fully understand child labour, one must study the issue of child labour during the Industrial Revolution in Britain. Industrial England is one of the well-researched periods and places of child labour. Britain during the Industrial Revolution serves as a great reference point for child labour in Hong Kong. This review will examine reasons why children worked in Britain. In Chapter 3, I will compare it with child labour in Hong Kong, a former British colony.

The research analyses diverse reasons why children worked. Child labour in Britain was driven by economic motives in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A number of underage workers “found [working] necessary.”<sup>31</sup> Jane Humphries used the state of hunger to indicate whether children were in poverty. By reading selected autobiographies by working men at that period, Humphries suggested that autobiographers experienced hunger in their

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<sup>30</sup> Hugh Cunningham, “Child Labour’s Global Past 1650-2000,” in Kristoffel Lieten and Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, eds., *Child Labour’s Global Past, 1650-2000* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 64.

<sup>31</sup> Humphries, *Childhood*, 178.

childhood. She then postulates that many children endured economic hardship and needed to earn a living.<sup>32</sup> Changes in Poor Law policy during that period pushed poor families and single parents into dire financial difficulties. The Poor Law Commission cancelled child allowances. Therefore, families needed extra income from children or mothers. Peter Kirby also points out that child labour was not always determined by economic distress. Fluctuations in trade cycles pushed up the wage-rate and rendered child labour attractive to parents. Some well-paid parents even nudged children to work so as to “ensure a future continuity of employment.”<sup>33</sup>

Economic factors aside, non-economic causes such as “changing conceptions of childhood and the value of children” also drove children into the workforce. As Humphries has noted, sending children to work was a social norm. Even though some parents aspired to provide better education for their children, neighbours and friends would signal “community disapproval.” After all, “It was quite the custom in those days for baby boys to get regular employment[,] if not the mothers were charged with pampering them.” People also had a different mentality toward consumption goods. Generally, they valued consumption higher than “the child’s forgone leisure.” Such a perception towards consumption pushed children to work.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-100.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Kirby, *Child Labour in Britain, 1750-1870* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 29-31.

<sup>34</sup> Humphries, *Childhood*, 28, 178.

Technological advancement was another factor affecting the demand for child labourers in industrial England. Britain experienced rapid mechanisation during the Industrial Revolution. The improvement led to a more complex division of labour on a large scale. Industrialists could employ children to substitute “expensive adult male labour.” For instance, steam power enabled children to take up jobs that could only be performed by men previously. On the other hand, the eighteenth century was only the start of industrialisation. Since technology was not fully developed, children’s size became an advantage in work. Children complemented “failed or incomplete mechanisation.” Humphries suggested that the lack of “changed transport technology” gave rise to the expansion of child work in the coal mining industry.<sup>35</sup> Technological development in the Industrial Revolution made the widespread expansion of child labour possible. Studying child labour in industrial England is crucial for the Industrial Revolution invented jobs for children.

All the causes of child labour in the Industrial Revolution suggest possible reasons for why children worked in Hong Kong. It also explains the potential reasons for using child labour. For example, societal norms could affect parents’ attitude towards child work. The case in the United Kingdom also pointed out the relationship between technology and child work from the employers’ perspectives. As the case in the Industrial Revolution had shown, the inadequacy of machinery prompted the use of child labour, for they were small enough to

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 34, 43.

fit into the underground channel. Contrary to employers in industrial England, employers in Hong Kong often invested little, sometimes due to limited capital, into buying machinery. Light industries were labour-intensive at that time. This thesis will explore how the labour-intensive mode of production affects the use of child labour.

The research on the Industrial Revolution also examines various aspects of child labour, including child work experiences. Humphries reveals that children began working “‘at a very young age’ or ‘as soon as able’.” Those children clearly distinguished helping with domestic tasks from working. Seasonal farm work was the most common first job. Child workers in England did not commit themselves to full-time jobs, but part-time or seasonal jobs. In other words, the use of child work was closely connected to the labour demand, seasonal or long-term. In Hong Kong, seasonal demands of light consumer goods, for instance, often changed the demand for outworkers. To understand how industry hired children, I will examine the seasonal demand for labour as well.

The nature of jobs also constrained children’s choices. Kirby explains that particularly in agriculture, physical size often controlled “‘age of entry to ‘grown up’ work.” That is why most children mainly worked alongside adults and learned from them. Once children entered the workforce, employers would expect them to work like adults and “‘the pace of work was not tempered.” Apart from their work experiences, the literature also explores how family influenced the decision to work. A higher fertility rate raised the proportion of infants from

about 11 per cent to 15.5 per cent of the total population between 1676 and 1826. More children obviously increased the potential number of child labourers. This pulled down the average household income earned by the adults, making child labour more necessary for family survival.<sup>36</sup>

Regardless of various reasons for why children worked, the practice gradually died down in Britain. Some scholars believe that labour policies restrained the practice. Yet, it was policy enforcement that determined whether the state could curb the practice of child labour. As Kirby has noted, traditional stress on the role of government intervention has overstated the power of the state to apply effective changes in the labour market.<sup>37</sup> The problem of law enforcement abounded. Without the official certificate proving the ages of child labourers, the age regulations were hardly enforceable. Undoubtedly, the Factory Acts of 1833 lowered the number of convictions. Yet, it did not mean fewer people violate the law. The decline only suggested the “difficulties in using the courts.”<sup>38</sup> Schooling did not save children from work either. Although the Education Act of 1870 permitted school boards to “compel attendance,” few exercised the enforcement. Contrarily, the continued use of older working children in the household was crucial in curtailing the entry of young child workers into the workforce. With adequate numbers of older working children, employers did not need extra help from child labourers.

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<sup>36</sup> Humphries, *Childhood*, 39, 175, 219, 221; Kirby, *Child Labour*, 35.

<sup>37</sup> Kirby, *Child Labour*, 94.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

The studies on child labour in the Industrial Revolution provide a fresh perspective on why child labour ended in Britain. It helps us understand the situation in Hong Kong by providing ideas to explain whether similar processes were occurring. Similar to the situation in the United Kingdom, the practice subsided in Hong Kong. The evolution of child protection law in Britain in the nineteenth century might be one reason.

The literature on children and the Industrial Revolution helps me raise questions on the situation of child labour in Hong Kong. To commence with, the economy in both Hong Kong and the United Kingdom grew rapidly in the period of study. Secondly, both the United Kingdom and Hong Kong experienced similar processes at work. Intriguingly, both places underwent industrialisation which pushed up the labour demand. The labour supply was high as well. The pool of child labour was made available partly due to the expensive schooling. Since the children were not in schools, families had empty hands to send. Driven by economic needs, children were sent to work so as to contribute to the household economy. The lax legal regime made the illegal practice of child labour possible, as I have explained before. The literature on child labour in England throws light on the similar factors that led to child work.

Despite the similarities, the situation in the United Kingdom differed from that in Hong Kong. Although both Hong Kong and industrial England had a highly skewed age population leading to a huge labour supply, they had different reasons for such a population

structure. In Hong Kong, the influx of Chinese refugees and post-war population boom formed a youthful population composition, creating a huge pool of readily-available sources of labour. Secondly, the Industrial Revolution created huge labour demand in the United Kingdom, while the international subcontracting system increased the labour demand in Hong Kong.<sup>39</sup> Literature on child labour in other parts of the world serves as a model for comparison.

### *Child Labour in the Chinese Context*

Child labour in China existed in different periods, forms and locations. In this section, I have selected literature on child labour in the Chinese Republican era (1911-49) and contemporary England to illustrate the diverse practices of child labour. Child labour in the Chinese Republican era comes closest to child labour in Hong Kong because of the time period and similar work settings. In *Sister and Strangers*, Honig examines the women in the cotton mill industry in Shanghai during the Republican era. To record all aspects of the female workers' lives, Honig selected women who were not recorded in historical documents as the subjects of the study. The book also explores child labour practices, recording the number of child workers, the types of job for children, and why some industrialists decided not to hire them.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Tai-Lok Lui, *Waged Work at Home: The Social Organisation of Industrial Outwork in Hong Kong* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1994), 47.

<sup>40</sup> Emily Honig, *Sisters and Strangers: Women in the Shanghai Cotton Mills, 1919-1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 2-3, 45-51, back cover.

Baolin Liang's book further explores the tradition of child workers in Republican China. In the chapter "Child Labourers and Apprentices," Gao Yanyi quoted a saying that encapsulates the labour market situation in China, "we won't hire male workers if female workers can do it, we won't hire female workers if child workers can do it." The saying suggests that child labour was a strategy to lower the labour costs. While the wages for women were lower than men, wages for child workers were even lower. Gao argues that child labour indeed pulled down the wages for male breadwinners, making children's contributions vital for families. Gao suggests that child labour forced the families into a vicious cycle.<sup>41</sup>

In contrast, sociologist Miri Song examines the work of Chinese children in contemporary England. Song studies the Chinese children's involvement in family-based take-out food restaurants. Throughout the book, Song investigates the formation of cultural identity and how "helping out" impacts on family relationships. Participating in family businesses, child workers helped shape the Chinese community in Britain. To understand child labour, one must grasp the immigration experiences of the Chinese newcomers and racism in Western societies. The above literature shows that the child work experiences varied in different time and space.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Gao Yanyi 高彥頤, "Tonggong yu xuetu 童工與學徒 [Child Labourers and Apprentices]," in Liang Baolin 梁寶林, ed., *Xianggang yu Zhongguo gongyun huigu* 香港與中國工運回顧 [Perspectives on the Hong Kong & Chinese Labor Movement] (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Christian Industrial Committee, 1982), 62-3.

<sup>42</sup> Miri Song, *Helping Out: Children's Labor in Ethnic Businesses* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), x, back cover.



## *Child Labour in Hong Kong*

Child labour in Hong Kong only gains passing mention in the scholarly debate. Scholars have written on *Mui Tsai*, a form of domestic maid servant common in the late-nineteenth century to early-twentieth century.<sup>43</sup> However, *Mui Tsai* differed greatly from “child labour” in this research. *Mui Tsai* is often considered child slavery by the West.<sup>44</sup> It is gendered and confined to domestic households. As for relevant literature on child labour, the elaborate discussion on labour law centres on the regulations for female workers and young persons. Although it raised concerns about the exploitation of Hong Kong children in Britain, it did not address the issue of child labour directly. *Child Labour in Hong Kong* by Robin Porter was the only exception. Though the booklet is a political tract, it provides an overview of existing legislation on child labour, the application of the law, as well as the cause and extent of child labour in the 1970s. Porter used statistics to assess how sincerely the government tackled the problem. By contrasting the resources of the inspectorate with the number of visits, he believed that “the inspections are pretty cursory” and therefore questioned the adequacy of the inspectors in the Labour Department. He ended his brief study by urging the government to introduce legislation to right the wrongs and suggested ways to attain this goal. His study

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<sup>43</sup> For discussion on *Mui Tsai*, see, for instance, Sean O’Callaghan, *The Yellow Slave Trade: A Survey of the Traffic in Women and Children in the East* (London: Blond, 1968). Another example is Maria Jaschok, *Concubines and Bondservants: A Social History* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>44</sup> For example, please refer to Hugh L. Haslewood and Clara B. Lucena, *Child Slavery in Hong Kong, the Mui Tsai System* (London: Sheldon Press, 1930). However, some Chinese did not consider it slavery but a form of welfare for children. For a detailed discussion, please refer to Gavin Ure, *Governors, Politics, and the Colonial Office: Public Policy in Hong Kong, 1918-58* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012).

is useful for it outlines a framework for future studies on child labour. It pinpoints how intricate the child labour issue was, the reasons behind it, and how little effort the government put into monitoring the situation. Despite the limitations, the literature confirms that the colonial government opted for minimal intervention and few child labour laws were made.

Janet Salaff's *Working Daughters of Hong Kong: Filial Piety or Power in the Family?*

is another book that studies “working daughters” in Hong Kong. From 1973 to 1979, Salaff interviewed 10 unmarried women with an average age of 19. They worked in various sectors, including the manufacturing sector, service sector, and semiprofessions. Throughout her research, Salaff observed that women often contributed most income to their families. Therefore, she argued that traditional Chinese values directed the “labor power of working daughters” to serve their families. Although child labour is not its main concern, the book shows how family relations influenced the contributions of children to the family economy in the 1970s.<sup>45</sup>

### **An Overview of Chinese Families**

Apart from family relations, family structure and family size also affected children's role in the household economy. To grasp the family dynamics in Hong Kong, one must understand the traditional Chinese families and values, as most Hong Kong residents are ethnic Chinese.

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<sup>45</sup> Janet Salaff, *Working Daughters of Hong Kong: Filial Piety or Power in the Family?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), xi, xvi, 7, 8.

This section explores the Chinese family ideals, preference for sons, polygynous families and familial expectations.

To commence with, “familism” often characterises social values and organization in Chinese society. The traditional Chinese family is customarily defined as “an economic unit composed of persons who are related by blood, marriage, or adoption and who partake of common property and a common purse.”<sup>46</sup> It functions as an economic unit, a religious unit and also a social security organization that cares for the aging family members.

Social anthropologists traditionally identify three types of Chinese families, namely, the conjugal family, joint family and stem family. The *conjugal* family is made up of two generations at most. It comprises a father, mother, and usually up to six unmarried children. The *joint* family consists of a husband and wife, unmarried children, the families of two or more married sons, and potentially the families of their grandsons. The *stem* family is a hybrid of the joint and the conjugal families. The husband-wife family is the other form of family which includes couples without offspring. If possible, all the sons and their families should “live together within a single household” with “five generations under one roof” as the model. Due to short life expectancy and limited family inheritance, less than 10 per cent of Chinese families maintained the joint family ideal.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Lloyd E. Eastman, *Family, Fields, and Ancestors: Constancy and Change in China's Social and Economic History, 1550-1949* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 15-7.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-7, 20; Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949-1999* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 144.

Under traditional custom, the Chinese couple prefers sons rather than daughters. After all, only sons “perpetuate the family line” in a patriarchal society.<sup>48</sup> Marriage perpetuates the family line by producing sons and bringing in a young woman to share the household chores and care for her parents-in-law. Upon marriage, a woman would normally leave her parents’ home, the natal family, and move into her husband’s home, the uterine family. Although China belongs to a monogamous society, where a man could only marry one wife each time, men in China could take more than one concubine. Favouring sons over daughters, some families might leave the best options such as education to sons while daughters need to work. Chapter 2 will discuss the gender relations in depth.<sup>49</sup>

Sometimes, the first wives encouraged their husbands to take concubines and formed polygynous families. Eastman explained that concubines were not only tolerated, but acceptable. Usually, the wealthy enjoy having multiple wives.<sup>50</sup> James L. Watson detailed various categories of women, suggesting that concubinage was well developed in Chinese society. Different names for wives include the major wife, the secondary wife and concubines. The major wife is “the only woman in the Chinese family system acquired through a more or less balanced exchange of marriage payments.” The secondary wife is usually for producing sons for the family line and a concubine is mostly for pleasure.<sup>51</sup> The

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<sup>48</sup> Martin King Whyte and William L. Parish, *Urban Life in Contemporary China* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984), 159; Eastman, *Family, Fields, and Ancestors*, 16-7, 20.

<sup>49</sup> Eastman, *Family, Fields, and Ancestors*, 24-5, 28-9, 31.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 17, 32.

<sup>51</sup> James L. Watson, “Transactions in People: The Chinese Market in Slaves, Servants, and Heirs,” in James L. Watson, ed., *Asian and African Systems of Slavery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 240.

different labels for the Chinese wives also show that the Chinese put little emphasis on sexual fidelity for males. Such a practice pervaded in China and Hong Kong in the 1950s, when families left China for Hong Kong. The family structure affected the family circumstances for children in Hong Kong. This could impact whether children needed to work, as Chapter 3 will explore.

Children as well as wives had their role in Chinese families. Traditionally, parents expected children to “help with work in the fields, produce sons who would carry on the family name, and provide for their parents in their old age *and* (italics in the original) after death.”<sup>52</sup> Whyte and Parish also confirmed that children between the age of 9 and 10 were expected to help out in their families. Under familism, contributing to the well-being of the family guides ideas and behaviours of both parents and children.<sup>53</sup> Chapter 3 will examine how family obligation factored in children’s choices to work. Yet, not all children worked so as to fulfil duties at home. Although former child labourers in Hong Kong were influenced by traditional Chinese practices, they are individuals who mobilised “varieties of ethnic experience.” In other words, they worked for a range of reasons.<sup>54</sup>

## Methodology

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<sup>52</sup> Eastman, *Family, Fields, and Ancestors*, 15.

<sup>53</sup> Whyte and Parish, *Urban Life*, 172; Eastman, *Family, Fields, and Ancestors*, 15.

<sup>54</sup> Micaela di Leonardo, *The Varieties of Ethnic Experience: Kinship, Class, and Gender among California Italian-Americans* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

Although scholars have written on Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s, and the use of child labour such as *Mui Tsai* in the 1920s, very few have commented on child labour in the postwar era, let alone documenting how the former child labourers account for their work experience at that time. Therefore, this project aims to investigate child labour in Hong Kong from 1950 to 1971. The research questions are:

1. What are the diverse reasons children worked in Hong Kong in that period?
2. How, in retrospect, do the former child labourers reflect on their experiences?

### *Oral History*

Doing interviews is effective in sharpening our understanding of human experiences, in this case, child labour in Hong Kong. Recording the personal and historical memories of the people, oral history “was the perfect tool for the grassroots effort of interviewing ordinary [people].” Although oral history could be a way for the interviewees to confirm the stereotypes, it provides space for them to “complement and not duplicate the contents of the writings” by filling in “the information gap.”<sup>55</sup> Anthropologists also have respect for oral history as it helps document “alternative histories recounted by individuals.”<sup>56</sup> To do this, oral

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<sup>55</sup> Judy Yung, “Giving Voice to Chinese American Women,” in Susan H. Armitage, Patricia Hart, and Karen Weathermon, eds., *Women’s Oral History: The Frontiers Reader* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 87, 91; Susan Armitage, Patricia Hart, and Karen Weathermon, “Introduction,” in Susan H. Armitage, Patricia Hart, and Karen Weathermon, eds., *Women’s Oral History: The Frontiers Reader* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), ix.

<sup>56</sup> Julie Cruikshank and Tatiana Argounova-Low, “‘On’ and ‘Off’ the Record in Shifting Times and Circumstances,” in Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzcki, eds., *Oral History Off the Record: Toward an Ethnography of Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 48-9.

history facilitates the dialogue between personal and institutional history.<sup>57</sup> As anthropologist Carole McGranahan has noted, “Narrating one’s self [means] to situate oneself and to be situated in dialogue with society.”<sup>58</sup> Oral history enhances our understanding on why children worked from former child labourers’ perspectives. It informs us by adding personal experiences to existing literature, government documents and statistics.

Besides, oral history means more than “documenting the past,” it introduces researchers into “serious commentary on changing circumstances, tacking among past, present, and future.”<sup>59</sup> In my research, oral history sheds light on how child work impacted on former child labourers’ lives. It also shows how they account for the changing perception of childhood. Furthermore, narratives offer a range perspectives to interpret the conflicting meanings in human history and in daily experience. It could even “subvert official orthodoxies” and “challenge hegemonic institutions.”<sup>60</sup> Although there was not an official orthodoxy on child labour and in Hong Kong, oral history could nuance the dominant historiography of the economic miracle in Hong Kong.

Oral history has its own weaknesses. Reliability is an issue. People’s memories could be inaccurate and contradictory. When Kamala Visweswaran interviewed Indian women

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<sup>57</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 102. Portelli defines personal history as “private and family life; the life cycle” and institutional history as “the national and international historical context.”

<sup>58</sup> Carole McGranahan, “Narrative Dispossession: Tibet and the Gendered Logics of Historical Possibility,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52.4 (Oct 2010): 768, as cited in Cruikshank and Argounova-Low, “‘On’ and ‘Off,’” 49.

<sup>59</sup> Cruikshank and Argounova-Low, “‘On’ and ‘Off,’” 55-6.

<sup>60</sup> Julie Cruikshank, *The Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), xiii, 72, 111.

jailed during the Indian nationalist movement, the informant's friend told her that the informant lied.<sup>61</sup> This complicates the issue as one could hardly tell whether the informant or her friend lied. Judy Yung also discovered that her mother had mixed up the place of her detention to "give meaning to a crucial event in her life in relation to Chinese American history."<sup>62</sup> Even if the interviewees confirm that the transcripts are accurate, this does not necessarily reflect accuracy because of their self-presentational strategies. They might simply like the way s/he is being reflected in the interviews. I have to take inaccuracy into consideration because my research relies heavily on interviews. What they share might not be the "truth." Yet, this research explores how former child labourers view child work and their work experiences. Uncovering the "truth" is not the ultimate goal. Their perceptions matter. To quote Portelli, "errors, inventions, or lies are in their own way forms of truth."<sup>63</sup>

Although inaccurate memories depart from historical accuracy, they move toward "subjective, cultural accuracy."<sup>64</sup> This research does not only aim for accurate "hard facts" but "soft facts of subjectivity." Perceptions on child labour are subjective, something that has happened inside the interviewees' minds "in terms of feelings, emotions, beliefs, and interpretation." Oral history fits my research well as it is the "construction and expression of one's subjectivity." It uncovers how former child labourers explain the range of reasons

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<sup>61</sup> Lanita Jacobs-Huey, "The Natives are Gazing and Talking Back: Reviewing the Problematics of Positionality, Voice and Accountability among 'Native' Anthropologists," *American Anthropologist* 104.3 (Sept. 2002): 797.

<sup>62</sup> Yung, "Giving Voice," 92.

<sup>63</sup> Portelli, *Valle Giulia*, 64.

<sup>64</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 11.



compelling them to work and their diverse work experiences. Through “multiple approaches to truth”, we could embrace a variety of shared possibilities regarding child labour in Hong Kong.<sup>65</sup>

### *Insider and Outsider Relationship*

Being a local Hong Kong Chinese researching on Hong Kong, I will delve into the anthropological debate of the insider and outsider relationship with informants. Insiders benefit from knowing the language and the field well. I am a native Cantonese speaker who can read and write in Traditional and Simplified Chinese. I can communicate with informants in full linguistic competence. Knowledge of Hong Kong benefits the research as well because of “the thoughtful choice of ethnographic subject.”<sup>66</sup>

However, insiders are also criticised for lacking cultural sensitivity. Informants might hesitate to “talk frankly with cultural insiders about sensitive topics.” They might fear that they are “revealing too much to someone within their community.” Meanwhile, informants might refrain from sharing deep thoughts with a stranger as well. The relationship with the interviewees affects if they want to meet you and what they share. During my fieldwork, an informant made it explicit that if his/her children had not introduced me to him/her, s/he

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<sup>65</sup> Portelli, *Valle Giulia*, 64-5, 80, 88; Armitage et al., “Introductions,” xi.

<sup>66</sup> Jennifer Robertson, “Reflexivity Redux: A Pithy Polemic on ‘Positionality’,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 75.4 (Autumn 2002): 788.

would not have taken the time to meet me.<sup>67</sup> Although I did not ask my contacts to connect me to their relatives, some introduced me to their parents or siblings for interviews. Even in the presence of their children, some informants shared their thoughts deeply and stressed that his/her children should know his/her past. In contrast, the remaining others refrained from describing the details of their work when their sons/daughters were present.<sup>68</sup> My fieldwork shows that apart from the relationships with the informants, personalities and intentions of the interviewees also affect what they would share. Indeed, the distance between insiders and outsiders is blurred. There are “distances of age, of class . . . of experience” between the informants and me.<sup>69</sup> In reality, the limitations of “insiders” might not apply to me. I could still be culturally sensitive for I have a different life experience from them.

### *“Fieldwork in Archives”*

I have used another approach to complement oral history, my main research method.

Anthropologists could gain access to new documents and sources. They no longer confine themselves to “traditional ethnographic description and analysis.”<sup>70</sup> “Fieldwork in archives”

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<sup>67</sup> I have decided not to reveal the gender of that informant to lower the chance of exposing his/her identity to someone who knows him/her. See the ethics section for details.

<sup>68</sup> I usually opted for one-to-one interviews. However, interviewing with third-person presence was unavoidable in some cases.

<sup>69</sup> Patricia Zavella, “Recording Chicana Life Histories: Refining the Insider’s Perspective,” in Elizabeth Jameson, ed., *Insider/Outsider Relationships with Informants* (Tucson: Southwest Institute for Research on Women, 1982), 14; Elizabeth Jameson, “Introduction,” in Elizabeth Jameson, ed., *Insider/Outsider Relationships with Informants* (Tucson: Southwest Institute for Research on Women, 1982), 1; Elizabeth Jameson, “May and Me: Relationships with Informants and the Community,” in Elizabeth Jameson, ed., *Insider/Outsider Relationships with Informants* (Tucson: Southwest Institute for Research on Women, 1982), 3.

<sup>70</sup> Annelise Riles, “Introduction: In Response,” in Annelise Riles, ed., *Documents: Artefacts of Modern Knowledge* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 2.

is an approach used by historical anthropologists.<sup>71</sup> The archival sources reveal various dimensions influencing children's lives, including education. The quality of education children received might affect whether children would study or not. I compared the documents, such as news about working conditions for children, with the informants' narration.<sup>72</sup> I have also looked into the documents on general policy of the labour department. This complements the government reports about the general work conditions and explains the labour department's policy of minimal intervention. This is also called data triangulation, as I investigated how different sources explain the same phenomenon. I have also referred to published sources about children's work life to further validate the content of the interview.<sup>73</sup> Since these published sources are in line with the narration, they have confirmed the validity of the interviews I have conducted.

### *Recruitment*

To quote Bernard, "anthropology has always been about methods, from the earliest days of the discipline right up to the present."<sup>74</sup> This section will explain every step of my methods,

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<sup>71</sup> Caroline B. Brettell, "Fieldwork in the Archives: Methods and Sources in Historical Anthropology," in H. Russell Bernard, ed., *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1998), 513. For example, Hong Kong-based anthropologist Alan Smart used documents from the Public Records Office of Hong Kong in his book, Smart, *Shek Kip Mei*. Historical anthropologist Bernard Cohn also used colonial documents to "suggest about colonists' relationships to their subjects." Riles, "Introduction," 10.

<sup>72</sup> See, for instance, "Education, Schools – Roof-top schools," 8 Aug. 1968 – 17 Jun. 1969, HKRS70-1-99, PRO, GRS.

<sup>73</sup> One example is Zhang Dizhuang 張帝莊, *Meihelou ji: Wucun suiyue, linli zhiqing* 美荷樓記：屋邨歲月，鄰里之情 [Story of Mei Ho House] (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (Hong Kong) Company Limited, 2013).

<sup>74</sup> H. Russell Bernard, "Introduction: On Method and Methods in Anthropology," in H. Russell Bernard, ed., *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1998), 9.

including how I conducted the interviews. Most interviews took place in Hong Kong. I have also interviewed an informant in Calgary. I have recruited respondents by using the principle of multiple-starts, which means identifying key informants from various starting points, not just my personal connections, before I ask them to introduce other interviewees to me. My own existing network, such as friends and relatives, serves as one starting point. Taking the insider and outsider relationship into account, I have also recruited respondents who have no connections with me through two other “starting points,” namely Shatin Baptist Church and The Neighbourhood Advice-Action Council. I have also contacted other third parties, including a Hong Kong-based knitwear factory and several day care centres for the elderly in Wong Tai Sin, a district with a high proportion of elderly population. However, I could not recruit any interviewees from these organisations.

I have used snowball sampling, which means asking informants to introduce the researcher to his/her potential informants, to expand the sampling size.<sup>75</sup> While most of the interviews were conducted individually, some were done in group settings. If one interviewee introduced me to another, they usually preferred to meet in groups. In the recruitment process, I have used spoken Cantonese and written Chinese to reach out to potential interviewees. Therefore, I have paid attention to the translation. For instance, when I described the term “child work,” I have asked several questions, including whether their

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<sup>75</sup> H. Russell Bernard, *Research Methods in Cultural Anthropology* (California: Sage Publications, 1989), 98.

family brought outwork home, to make them realise that my definition of “child work” not only refers to factory work, but also outwork at home with their families. To follow up, I have tried to interview some of them twice. The interviewees responded to me even though they believed they had shared all their thoughts with me in the first round.

I have interviewed 31 informants who were children, i.e. under 15 years old, between 1950 and 1971. 27 of them had worked when they were children. Although 4 interviewees did not work, children around them worked. They throw light on the general social and economic conditions, and the reasons why children worked. Thirty-one interviews are enough to provide saturation in findings from informants with various work experiences and family backgrounds. Historian Judy Yung also opts for a small sampling size for qualitative research on life stories of Chinese America women.<sup>76</sup> Thirty-one interviews are small enough to safeguard “data quality and depth.”<sup>77</sup> I have also included publications about celebrities, such as Petrina Fung, in my thesis. By starring in film productions, she contributed to her household economy. Her reflection on being a child star strikes a chord with some interviewees. Although very few children earned income by working in the entertainment industry, they show us the range of possible child workers’ experiences.

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<sup>76</sup> For instance, see Hill Gates, *Chinese Working-Class Lives: Getting by in Taiwan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987). She interviewed nine informants. Apart from using documents such as letters, speeches and testimonials, historian Judy Yung interviewed 12 Chinese American women to bring together their voices in her book *Unbound Voices: A Documentary History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (California: University of California Press, 1999). Sociologist Miri Song based her book *Helping Out* on interviews with 42 young Chinese people residing in Britain.

<sup>77</sup> di Leonardo, *Ethnic Experience*, 32.

To grasp the dynamics of doing interviews with people in Hong Kong, I have listened to relevant interviews in the Hong Kong Oral History Archives.<sup>78</sup> The archive includes audiotaped interviews with former child labourers. I learned their work experiences and compared it with my interviews. All interviews were semi-structured, benefiting from both structured and unstructured interviews. On the one hand, interviews were based on an interview schedule, demonstrating that the interviewer is in control of what the researcher wants from an interview. On the other hand, the interviews benefit from the quality of semi-structured interviewing and leaves both the researcher and the interviewees “free to follow new leads.”<sup>79</sup> My interviews began on a tentative interview guide that centred on certain topics, such as their employment history, how they perceive child work and the family economy.<sup>80</sup>

Similar to Andrew G. Walder’s approach, I have introduced each topic with “requests for clarification or concrete examples.” I have also asked for concrete details of the economic and social conditions because interviewees are “remarkably accurate about economic and social conditions, particularly those that influenced their own lives.”<sup>81</sup> All questions were open-ended because these questions could shift the interviews from “a one-way questionnaire

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<sup>78</sup> See, for instance, the Hong Kong Oral History Archives Project co-organised by Leisure and Cultural Services Department and Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust.

<sup>79</sup> Bernard, *Research Methods*, 204-5.

<sup>80</sup> Andrew G. Walder, *Communist Neo-Traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 263.

<sup>81</sup> Humphries, *Childhood*, 19; Walder, *Communist*, 265.

to thick dialogue.”<sup>82</sup> When I come across responses of interest, I have followed up with further questions probing for greater detail and clarity, as well as why they offered such an opinion.<sup>83</sup>

Interviews are human interactions. Interviewing is “an open-ended process of discovery in which one encounters unexpected insights and new kinds of ‘data’.” The list of interview questions, or even the concept of the research changes during the process.<sup>84</sup> As anthropologist George E. Marcus has noted, researchers should expect the “derailment of original research plans.” After all, promising fieldwork will not merely answer specific questions but generate more questions, further consolidating the “unpredictability of fieldwork.”<sup>85</sup> What the informants narrated added nuances to my interview directions in subsequent conversations. For instance, I realised that many interviewees were born outside of Hong Kong. Some interviewees immigrated to Hong Kong when they were children. Therefore, I asked the interviewees about their family history in depth in the subsequent interviews. Earlier interviews impacted my course of research and generated “more pointed questions about topics that had become of central interest.” After learning that most

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<sup>82</sup> Portelli, *Valle Giulia*, 11.

<sup>83</sup> Walder, *Communist*, 258.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>85</sup> George E. Marcus, “Introduction: Notes toward an Ethnographic Memoir of Supervising Graduate Research through Anthropology’s Decade of Transformation,” in James D. Faubion and George E. Marcus, eds., *Fieldwork Is Not What It Used to Be: Learning Anthropology’s Method in a Time of Transition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 22; James D. Faubion, “The Ethics of Fieldwork as an Ethics of Connectivity, or The Good Anthropologist (Isn’t What She Used to Be),” in James D. Faubion and George E. Marcus, eds., *Fieldwork Is Not What It Used to Be: Learning Anthropology’s Method in a Time of Transition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 162.

interviewees only found child work appropriate in the 1950s and 1960s but not now, I asked the last few informants how they accounted for this change. I relied on these informants to “resolve the uncertainties encountered” in writing my thesis.<sup>86</sup>

### *Source Analysis*

I analysed the sources in the following ways.<sup>87</sup> To confirm the reliability of my interviewees’ accounts, I have “looked for internal coherence and contradiction in the responses of my subjects.”<sup>88</sup> I have compared their narratives with the online history archive, other archival sources and published materials, as mentioned before. The difficulty does not lie in finding if one “is telling the truth, but how to reconcile the different ‘truth[s] that informants present’.”<sup>89</sup> In order to portray the complex reality constructed by multiple narratives, I did not “include anyone’s full life story . . . Instead, I selected excerpts from different interviews to [construct the child labourers’] collective history.” I have also retained “the original wording as closely as possible.”<sup>90</sup>

The sample allowed me to analyse child labour in depth.<sup>91</sup> By recruiting informants through the principle of multiple-starts, I have a higher chance to recruit interviewees from

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<sup>86</sup> Andrew, *Communist*, 256, 260, 265.

<sup>87</sup> My main source is interviews. To quote Portelli, “the sources are persons” and they are reluctant to reduce “their lives to data for someone else’s interpretations.” Therefore I will use the term “source” instead of “data.” Please refer to Portelli, *Valle Giulia*, 79-80.

<sup>88</sup> Yung, “Giving Voice,” 92.

<sup>89</sup> Walder, *Communist*, 257-9.

<sup>90</sup> Yung, “Giving Voice,” 91; Walder, *Communist*, 265.

<sup>91</sup> Please refer to Appendix A, Source of Pseudonyms and Interviewees’ Information, for details.



diverse backgrounds. I recruited 24 informants from my personal network and 7 from two third parties. 6 out of 7 interviewees recruited from the third parties were born in the 1940s, whereas only 8 out of 24 interviewees recruited from my personal connections were born in the same period. As they were born in different periods of time, this suggests that the interviewees recruited from my own network and the third parties come from different backgrounds. If I could recruit interviewees from more “starting points,” I could have collected a wider range of child work experiences and reflections. Interviewees from the same third party could have a similar attitude of life. For example, they could share the same religious belief. That might assimilate how they view their past as retrospective memory is in play.

I was also able to conduct 7 second-round interviews. Six were conducted with those recruited from my personal connections. It was easier for me to ask interviewees from my own network to be interviewed twice. I am more of an insider to interviewees from my personal network and an outsider to those from the third parties. Generally, it was harder for me to pin down the personal particulars from those recruited from the third parties.

Despite the differences, interviewees recruited from both my personal network and the third parties showed a gender imbalance in the sample. Five out of 7 interviewees from the third parties were female. Similarly, 14 out of 20 former child labourers recruited from my connections were female. Undoubtedly, there were gender bias in introductions. Female

personal connections usually introduced me to other female interviewees. For instance, Mrs. Kong (Female; Year of birth: 1962; Age first worked: 6; Source of pseudonym: N/A; Recruited through personal connections; Place of birth: Hong Kong) introduced two other female informants to me. However, the same applied to male informants. One of my personal contacts introduced me to two of his male connections. In another case, a male interviewee introduced a female interviewee to me. For example, C.S. (Male; Year of birth: 1952-54; Age first worked: 12-13; Source of pseudonym: N/A; Recruited through personal connections; Place of birth: Guangdong) introduced his sister Susan (Female; Year of birth: 1955-60; Age first worked: 10-12; Source of pseudonym: Self-selected; Recruited through personal connections; Place of birth: Guangdong) to me. In my sample, gender bias in introductions does not affect the gender imbalance much.

Secondly, the age of the informants does not lead to the gender imbalance either.

Overall, men died earlier than women. However, my sample shows that 4 out of 8 male former child labourers were born in the 1940s. I was able to interview older male interviewees. This implies that a shorter life expectancy of men does not prevent me from recruitment of older male informants. Gender bias and a shorter life expectancy do not account for the gender imbalance. Besides, all 4 non-child labourers I interviewed were all males. 2 of them are the husbands of my female informants. Although the sampling size is too

small for generalisation, it suggests that the gender imbalance could be a phenomenon in child labour. Chapter 2 will discuss the gender relations of child work in detail.

Moreover, my sample also shows that some of them were born outside Hong Kong. Out of 27 interviewees, 14 were born in Hong Kong. 13 were born in Guangdong, Chiuchow, Shanghai and other parts of China.<sup>92</sup> Of these, 10 were born in Southern China, namely Guangdong and Chiu Chow. Clearly, these interviewees came from immigrant or refugee families. Even for those born in Hong Kong, they could be dependents of refugees. In my sample, 10 out of 14 Hong Kong-born interviewees have at least one parent who was born outside Hong Kong. These interviewees also belong to the immigrant families.<sup>93</sup> My sample conforms to the scholars' assertion that immigrants and refugees from China formed a significant part of the post-war population.<sup>94</sup> The refugees also provided a source of youthful labour. As they were involved in the Hong Kong economy, learning about the refugees helps us understand the business cultures and strategies in Hong Kong. Because of these, I contextualised child labour in Hong Kong by focusing on the refugee population in Chapter 1. Besides, refugees could share a similar financial situation among themselves. They were not familiar with seeking help from the colonial government and other organisations in Hong

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<sup>92</sup> I have only listed the place of birth for one informant as "China." I was unable to find out which part of China it was.

<sup>93</sup> For a detailed discussion on dependents of refugees, please refer to Chapter 1, p. 39.

<sup>94</sup> They are Steve Tsang and Lee Kim-Ming, to name a few. I have examined the refugee population, and subsequently its impacts on Hong Kong, in Chapter 1.

Kong. These could be other reasons for pushing children into the workforce as well. Chapter 3 will examine various reasons why children worked in depth.

## **Ethics**

Every informant can withdraw from the project at any stage. Although no one has withdrawn from the project, they still have the right to do so. Withdrawal could make my sample less comprehensive. To play safe, I have used the oral history archive and archival documents as part of my research. Above all, I minimised the chance of withdrawal by explaining my research interests and goals to every participant clearly before the interviews began.

Since interviews deal with human beings, anthropologists must handle ethical issues with care. Before I interviewed, I had sent the informants the tentative list of interview questions and obtained written or oral consent from every informant. I read out every point written on the informed consent form and explained them in detail. I stressed that the participation is voluntary. Interviewees are free to withdraw at any time during the study without consequences. I only audiotaped the interviews upon consent. Written transcripts are only produced with informants' agreement. Recordings are not disclosed to anyone. 4 interviewees, 13 per cent of my sample, stated that they did not want to be audiotaped. For those who refused to be recorded, I jotted notes instead. I also took notes when I was doing phone interviews. Note-taking affected source analysis. Without the recording, I could not

recall what they said exactly. It was harder, though not impossible, to use direct quotes from these interviews. Sometimes, there were gaps between the points I had jotted. I needed to establish the logical connections between them myself. Overall, these interviews met the ethical standards and were still helpful to my project.

The interviews probed into informants' private lives and personal opinions. The interviews could cause them emotional stress and discomfort. To minimise the risk, I reminded them that they could choose not to answer any of my questions without explanation. During the interviews, I observed if they showed any stress or discomfort verbally or non-verbally. When sharing his/her work history, one informant clearly showed "uncomfortable lapses of silence" half way through the interview. In response, I "h[e]ld my tongue" and gave it a pause until the participant indicated that s/he was ready to continue.<sup>95</sup> After that interview, I processed "such silence in order to understand the multiple messages that may be conveyed therein." Silence could mean emotional discomfort in recalling their past as Chapter 4 will investigate. I also paid close attention to their responses in subsequent interviews.<sup>96</sup>

To protect the interviewees' privacy, I have been careful in choosing the pseudonyms for the interviewees. Unless the informants want to use their real names, their names have been replaced with pseudonyms. 11 of them chose to use their real names while 20 preferred

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<sup>95</sup> Yung, "Giving Voice," 90.

<sup>96</sup> Jacobs-Huey, "Natives," 797.

to use pseudonyms. Interviewees could choose to use their real names as this could give them the right of recognition. However, “real names” could be another way of protecting their identities. When asked how I should call her in my thesis, an interviewee told me to call her as Mrs. X. The reason was that there were many Mrs. X in Hong Kong.<sup>97</sup> It is hard to find out who Mrs. X is.

Interviewees could choose the pseudonyms themselves. For those who chose not to select pseudonyms, I selected the names for them based on the following sources. First, I have chosen names that had the same first letter of their first and last names. For those who do not have an English name, I have picked names based on my personal preference. I selected the names that could help me remember who I was referring to. I decided to use pseudonyms instead of replacing their names with numbers. Rather than diminishing my interviewees as objects, the use of pseudonyms brings humanity back to their stories.

I have also taken the following precautions to protect the informants’ privacy. Anything printed or published from this study does not include participants’ names and their current occupation status. They could choose to reveal the approximate year of birth instead of the exact year of birth, as is the practice in the Oral History Archives in Hong Kong. Even though I use pseudonyms, it might be impossible to hide their identity. It could be “de-coded” by family members or friends who know them well. Therefore, rather than being “free with

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<sup>97</sup> I have replaced the interviewee’s surname with “X” to protect her identity.

[my pen],” I have also been cautious in the way I use the interview contents.<sup>98</sup> Even though I did everything to protect their privacy, it might still be impossible to conceal their identity. Therefore, participants could ask me not to use their comments as a quote.

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<sup>98</sup> Nancy Scheper-Hughes, “Ire in Ireland,” *Ethnography* 1.1 (July 2000): 128.

## Chapter 1

# Contextualising Child Labour

As “many have argued before, child labour was, and still is, a social phenomenon, which only makes sense in its historical context.”<sup>99</sup> This chapter aims to contextualise child labour in Hong Kong by examining the labour supply and demand during the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>100</sup> This chapter will start by reviewing the post-war baby boom and immigration from China that led to a population growth. Since the newcomers from China formed the backbone of the total population in Hong Kong, they contributed to a youthful, readily-available labour supply. These new arrivals also brought with them business cultures and practices that shaped the industrial economy, making the study of the refugee population crucial in understanding the context of child labour. Driven by the need to survive, many looked for jobs to feed their families. The soaring labour supply met with a growing labour demand as the burgeoning economy gradually thrived. It absorbed workers of all skill levels, including child labourers.

## The Labour Supply

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<sup>99</sup> Lieten and van Nederveen Meerkerk, “An Introduction,” 15.

<sup>100</sup> Mainstream literature approaches the topic of child labour through examining the labour demand and supply. One example is Lieten and van Nederveen Meerkerk, “An Introduction,” 14-34. Another example is Rahikainen, *Centuries*. The other example is China Labour Bulletin 中国劳工通讯, *Guanyu Zhongguo tonggong xianxiang de shidi kaocha baogao* 关于中国童工现象的实地考察报告 [Small Hands: Survey Report on Child Labour in China] (Hong Kong: China Labour Bulletin, 2006).



The Chinese population formed the backbone of Hong Kong's economic take-off as they provided "almost all the industrial workers."<sup>101</sup> The rapid population growth shaped the social contour of Hong Kong and created a steady labour supply. Despite the population plunge from 1,600,000 to only 600,000 during the Japanese occupation, the population bounced back and reached 2,360,000 in 1950.<sup>102</sup> Compared to other Southeast Asian countries, the population growth was rapid. It increased at an average number of 100,000 persons per year and came close to 4 million people by 1967.<sup>103</sup> Both the natural growth rate and the influx of Chinese immigrants contributed to the population boom in Hong Kong.

### *The Population Growth*

The constant birth growth had a hand in the population increase. According to *Hong Kong Statistics, 1947-1967*, the natural growth ranged from 1.8% to 3% between 1950 and 1967.

The period of 1955 to 1961 alone shared an average growth rate of 2.9%.<sup>104</sup> Yet, the natural increase rate in Hong Kong, which was 20.8%, was lower compared to Chinese populated cities such as Taiwan and Singapore, which had a natural increase rate of 38.3% and 38.6% respectively.<sup>105</sup> Ronald Freedman and Arjun Adlakha explained that the decline of women in

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<sup>101</sup> Tsang, *Modern*, 162.

<sup>102</sup> Chi-Kwan Mark, "The 'Problem of People': British Colonials, Cold War Powers, and the Chinese Refugees in Hong Kong, 1949-62," *Modern Asian Studies* 41.6 (November 2007): 1146.

<sup>103</sup> Please refer to Table 1.1, Estimated Total Population, 1947-67.

<sup>104</sup> Hong Kong, *Hong Kong Statistics 1947-1967* (Hong Kong, 1967), 40. Please refer to Table 1.2, Crude Birth, Crude Death, Natural Increase and Population Growth Rates, 1947-67.

<sup>105</sup> Hong Kong Refugee Survey Commission and Edvard Hambro, *The Problem of Chinese Refugees in Hong Kong: Report Submitted to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees* (Leyden: Sijthoff, 1955), 15. The natural increase rate is the difference between crude birth rate and crude death rate.

the “prime childbearing years (20-29),” born during World War II, accounted for the drop of birth rate.<sup>106</sup> Therefore, the natural increase was not the key factor leading to the population growth. The Chinese new arrivals also made up part of the increase in natural growth rate. Around 282,000 of the new-born babies were “Hong-Kong-born dependents of refugees.” Although in legal terms, their children were British subjects not refugees, they “in the social sense may be refugees since they [were] . . . children of refugees.”<sup>107</sup>

To quote Edvard Hambro, the former Registrar of the International Court of Justice who investigated the refugee crisis in Hong Kong, “this phenomenon of Chinese people streaming into Hong Kong in times of stress and danger, and of the surge back again when the situation calms down, is nothing new in the history of the Colony.”<sup>108</sup> The “migration from China,” both temporarily and permanently, formed “the majority of Hong Kong’s population.”<sup>109</sup> The number of Hong Kong residents born outside of Hong Kong rose from 547,000 in 1931 to 1,579,000 in 1961, which formed over 50 per cent of the population. According to geographer Ronald Skeldon, Hong Kong went through “three periods of more intense immigration” after the Second World War. The first period was shortly after “the foundation of the People’s Republic of China.”<sup>110</sup> The civil war between the Nationalist Party

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<sup>106</sup> Ronald Freedman and Arjun L. Adlakha, “Recent Fertility Declines in Hong Kong,” *Population Studies* 22.2 (July 1968): 184-5.

<sup>107</sup> Hong Kong Refugee Survey Commission and Hambro, *Chinese Refugees*, 29, 41.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>109</sup> Ronald Skeldon, “Labour Migration to Hong Kong,” *ASEAN Economic Bulletin* 12.2 (November 1995): 201-2.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

and the Communist Party claimed thousands of civilian lives in China. Shortly after Mao's triumph, the Great Terror followed in order to root out all Party Enemies. By 1951, two million "enemies," including schoolchildren as young as six, had been "buried alive, tied up and dismembered, shot or throttled to death."<sup>111</sup> Around 345,000 dispossessed refugees swelled into Hong Kong between 1949 and 1951.<sup>112</sup>

Despite tighter immigration control, the Chinese newcomers kept flooding into Hong Kong. According to Professor David Podmore, "The ceaseless sea traffic in Colony waters, the sparsely-populated islands . . . the many deserted coastlines" and even "the Portuguese colony of Macau" provided reachable points of entry.<sup>113</sup> Fleeing from Shanghai with her family, Fei (Female; Year of birth: 1958-62; Age first worked: 11-12; Source of pseudonym: N/A; Recruited through personal connections; Place of birth: Shanghai) remembered how determined her family was. "Even though we owned a house in Shanghai, my mom, my siblings and I abandoned it. . . . Our luggage was stolen at the train station. . . . It was a tough journey."<sup>114</sup> Although the colonial government released no statistics on immigration from China during the period of this study, either because of difficulties in tracking the changes or

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<sup>111</sup> Frank Dikötter, *The Tragedy of Liberation: A History of the Chinese Revolution, 1945-57* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), ix-xiv.

<sup>112</sup> David R. Meyer, *Hong Kong as a Global Metropolis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 143. Other literature also notices that Chinese new arrivals streamed into Hong Kong during 1949 to 1951. One example is Suzanne Berger and Richard K. Lester, *Made by Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1997), 16-9. Another example is Chi Kuen Lau, *Hong Kong's Colonial Legacy* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1997), xii.

<sup>113</sup> David Podmore, "The Population of Hong Kong," in Keith Hopkins, ed., *Hong Kong: The Industrial Colony* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1971), 37.

<sup>114</sup> "Fei," interview by the author on 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

fear of international attention, the difference between the actual population growth and the natural population increase suggested the approximate number of Chinese new arrivals.

Because of the Chinese new arrivals, the census recorded an average of 1.9 per cent extra

increase on top of the natural increase rate from 1950 to 1971.<sup>115</sup> Believing that the

immigration was stabilised, the colonial government relaxed the quota system in 1956,

hoping that “no more Chinese wished to enter the Colony permanently or that new

immigrants would be naturally balanced by those who . . . were now prepared to return to

China.” However, it only led to a surge of another 56,000 immigrants into Hong Kong.<sup>116</sup> In

1956, refugees made up one third of the inhabitants in the colony.<sup>117</sup>

The second phase of migration from China happened in 1962 after the Great Famine.

150,000 refugees reached Hong Kong by foot or by swimming across the shark-infested

waters in Houhai Bay.<sup>118</sup> Together with 44 classmates in Chiuchow, Benny (Male; Year of

birth: 1950; Age first worked: 12; Source of pseudonym: Selected by the researcher;

Recruited through personal connections; Place of birth: Chiuchow) left China in 1962. Only 5

out of 50 students in his class remained. “It was a trend to leave for Hong Kong. . . . In China,

I doubted if I could have two meals a day,” Benny recounted.<sup>119</sup> Some reached Hong Kong

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<sup>115</sup> Hong Kong, *Statistics*, 40. The year of 1951 is the only exception of the extra increase.

<sup>116</sup> Hong Kong Government, *Hong Kong Annual Report*, 1956, 4.

<sup>117</sup> Edgar H. S. Chandler, *The High Tower of Refugee: The Inspiring Story of Refugee Relief Throughout the World* (London: Odhams Press, 1959), 165-75, as cited in Peter Gatrell, *Free World?: The Campaign to Save the World's Refugees, 1956-1963* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 58.

<sup>118</sup> Skeldon, “Labour Migration,” 202; Mark, “The ‘Problem of People’,” 1172; John Carroll, *A Concise History of Hong Kong* (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 2007), 149.

<sup>119</sup> “Benny,” interview by the author on 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

legally. According to the Oral History Archives, Law King Hei's father settled in Hong Kong legally with the help of his relatives and later became the owner of Chiu Kwong Light Bulb Factory.<sup>120</sup>

### *“The Problem of People”*<sup>121</sup>

Historian Steve Tsang has observed that there is “no dispute of the size of the immigration population in Hong Kong in the post-war period.”<sup>122</sup> As Skeldon has pointed out, “the post-war migration from China supplied an important component of the labour force that was essential in the development of Hong Kong as the ‘industrial colony’.”<sup>123</sup> Such a heavy refugee-based population impacted on the business cultures and practices in the colony.<sup>124</sup>

This section will examine how successfully the world and the colonial government responded to the refugee crisis. While the newcomers strained resources in Hong Kong and lived in subpar conditions, they served as a steady labour supply for the industrial take-off.

While the United Nations and other organisations responded to the refugee crisis in Hong Kong, the colonial government did not put much effort to intervening. Seeing the new

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<sup>120</sup> “The Factory Workshop of Chiu Kwong Light Bulb Factory and its Subsequent Expansion; Division of Roles by Types of Light Bulb Factories; Different Scale of Workshops in To Kwa Wan,” Law King Hei, February 18, 2013, *Hong Kong Voices* Oral History Archives, Hong Kong Memory website, [www.hkmemory.hk](http://www.hkmemory.hk).

<sup>121</sup> The phrase “problem of people” was first used as the title of the *Hong Kong Annual Report, 1956*. It was adopted by Chi-Kwan Mark as the title of his article. Please see, Mark, “The ‘Problem of People’.”

<sup>122</sup> Tsang, *Modern*, 167.

<sup>123</sup> Skeldon, “Labour Migration,” 202.

<sup>124</sup> For the discussion of refugee mentality, please refer to Tsang, *Modern*, 162-70. Lee Kim-Ming examined how the transient mentality affected the business strategies they used. See Kim-Ming Lee, “Flexible Manufacturing in a Colonial Economy,” in Tak-Wing Ngo, ed., *Hong Kong's History: State and Society under Colonial Rule* (London: Routledge, 1999), 162-79.

arrivals as a “transitory population,” the government “had neither the finances nor the will” to eradicate these social problems. Drained by the Second World War, the British government did not have funding for “refugees in general and Chinese refugees in particular.”<sup>125</sup> Also, it did not have the will to interfere because of two concerns: first, not to allow the refugee crisis to “damage Britain’s relations with China,” and, second, to uphold its “own colonial authority” and ward off foreign intrusion, the U.S. in particular. Rather, the British government consented to the colonial policy of “overseas emigration.”<sup>126</sup>

As the main strategy used to lower the population by British colonials, overseas emigration failed to counter the population growth. The problem did not lie with the refugees. Many desired to emigrate and viewed Hong Kong as a “transient harbour” between China and overseas countries. However, receiving countries refused to accept them. Despite raising international concerns for the Chinese refugees, Taiwan could not absorb all refugees from Hong Kong. Between 1949 and 1954, Taiwan only managed to admit approximately 150,000 refugees from Hong Kong and Macao, but the annual intake fell from around 67,000 in 1949 to 13,000 in 1953. Taipei became unwilling to accept refugees due the “fear of possible infiltration by communist ‘fifth columnists’,” as well as social and economic reasons. After all, receiving refugees means more than the “transportation of refugees,” but a “carefully planned resettlement scheme providing [refugees] with housing, employment, educational

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<sup>125</sup> Mark, “The ‘Problem of People’,” 1168.

<sup>126</sup> Sally Blyth and Ian Wotherspoon, *Hong Kong Remembers* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1996), 5.

and health facilities.” This burdened the economy, in which the major labour force was “occupied in non-productive activities, mainly military.”<sup>127</sup>

The United States set a strict immigration policy to prevent refugees from swelling into the country. Although the United States did not deny their entry, it set up a quota, only accepting several hundred Chinese immigrants each year. Even though the United States Refugee Relief Act relaxed the strict immigration policy, it promised no more than 2,000 “non-quota immigrant visas” for Chinese refugees between 1953 and 1956. The strict policy was deeply rooted in its “long-tradition of restricting and discriminating against Chinese immigrants.” Southeast Asian countries also refused to accept them due to nationalism and prejudices against Chinese minorities. In short, “the prospects of resettling Chinese refugees abroad are very limited”.<sup>128</sup> Even though many newcomers wanted to leave Hong Kong, they had no choice but to remain in Hong Kong. Seeing the refugee population as transient, the colonial government did little to improve the living conditions and welfare of the residents. The residents sought out their own ways to make ends meet, including sending their children to work.

### *“Hong Kong was like a Third World Country”*

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<sup>127</sup> Refugee Survey Commission and Hambro, *Chinese Refugees*, 72-5, 77, 186; Mark, “The ‘Problem of People’,” 1161.

<sup>128</sup> Refugee Survey Commission and Hambro, *Chinese Refugees*, 79-85; Mark, “The ‘Problem of People’,” 1161.

To quote Janet (Female; Year of birth: 1958; Age first worked: around 6; Source of pseudonym: N/A; Recruited through personal connections; Place of birth: Guangdong), Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s “was like a Third World country.”<sup>129</sup> The “problem of people” permeated in almost every aspect of lives in Hong Kong, including the living conditions. 2,600,000 out of 3,000,000 people chose to concentrate in urban areas, pushing the ratio to 22,300 persons per square kilometre.<sup>130</sup> Density approached 2,000 persons per acre. “Seven or eight people could live in a flat,” Maggie (Female; Year of birth: 1946; Age first worked: 10; Source of pseudonym: N/A; Recruited through personal connections; Place of birth: Guangdong) recounted.<sup>131</sup> With no assistance, refugees gathered materials “cheap enough to beg or steal or buy for a few dollars” to build their huts.<sup>132</sup> Their homes “consisted of flimsy wooden, oil-cloth, and corrugated-iron squatter huts,” and stretched from “the foothills around the harbour” to “below Lion Rock in Kowloon.”<sup>133</sup> Safety issues crept in. For instance, squatter inhabitants often lighted their huts with “kerosene lamps or candles” since no electricity was readily-available. Fire consumed the squatters repeatedly.<sup>134</sup> Without main water and an organised system of refuse disposal, squatters faced hygienic problems. The

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<sup>129</sup> “Janet,” interview by the author on 7<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>130</sup> Sheung Wan, a “popular” district on the Hong Kong Island, even had a ratio of 238,000 persons per square kilometre.

<sup>131</sup> “Maggie,” interview by the author on 2<sup>nd</sup> August, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>132</sup> Hong Kong Government, *Hong Kong Annual Report*, 1956, 13.

<sup>133</sup> Blyth and Wotherspoon, *Hong Kong Remembers*, 5.

<sup>134</sup> Please refer to Alan Smart, *The Shek Kip Mei Myth: Squatters, Fires and Colonial Rule in Hong Kong, 1950-1963* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006).



squatter areas soon became the breeding ground for “a widespread epidemic or major conflagration.”<sup>135</sup>

Apart from the subpar living conditions, the medical facilities were inadequate as well. Even though medical expenditures increased continuously, they still could not catch the overwhelming needs of the population.<sup>136</sup> The medical facilities were unable to curb “the diseases which spread rapidly in the overcrowded conditions.”<sup>137</sup> Some infants died due to the lack of medical facilities and basic health knowledge. Annie Yip (Female; Year of birth: 1946-49; Age first worked: /; Source of pseudonym: Selected by the researcher; Recruited through third party A; Place of birth: /) recalled how her little brother cramped, bit his tongue and died at the age of 3. “My mom did not know how serious it could be. She brought him to the doctor in the Tung Wah Hospital, but no one took care of him. His lips turned grey and he died.”<sup>138</sup> Annie’s case illustrates that some residents suffered from inadequate medical facilities and social welfare. To quote historian John Carroll, “Hong Kong remained well behind the rest of the industrialized world in terms of social welfare.”<sup>139</sup>

Governor Alexander Grantham rationalised the “Third-World” living conditions. The colonial policy was not to assist persons fleeing China in order “not to encourage any more of

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<sup>135</sup> Peter Hodge, “A Problem of People,” in Peter Hodge, ed., *Community Problems and Social Work in Southeast Asia: The Hong Kong and Singapore Experience* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1980), 37-49.

<sup>136</sup> According to the *Hong Kong Annual Reports*, the medical department expenditure soared from HK\$21 million in 1952/53 to HK\$64 million in 1962/63.

<sup>137</sup> Blyth and Wotherspoon, *Hong Kong Remembers*, 5.

<sup>138</sup> “Annie Yip,” interview by the author on 11<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>139</sup> Carroll, *Concise History*, 145.

China's 400 millions . . . to come begging for free lodging and free food." To the government, "to accept the squatter into the community implies more than building a roof over his head."<sup>140</sup> That was true because the non-recurrent public works expenditures rose from HK\$37 million in 1952/53 to more than HK\$370 million in 1962/63.<sup>141</sup> Despite criticisms towards the traditional *laissez-faire* welfare policy, the Hong Kong Refugee Survey Mission sympathised with the government. It stressed that "the local authorities have done a great deal to remedy the social and economic conditions in Hong Kong." Further "measures of welfare and rehabilitation" were only possible through "the further economic development of the Colony."<sup>142</sup>

In this historical context, the population in Hong Kong had almost doubled. "The excess of births over registered deaths" increased the population and lowered the average age of the people in Hong Kong.<sup>143</sup> The *Hong Kong Annual Report 1960* even pointed out that there were "children, children everywhere."<sup>144</sup> On the other hand, the influx of immigrants provided a ready source of young and able-bodied labour force. Most of the immigrants were physically capable and young. If not, hardly could they have made their way to Hong Kong. The post-war baby-boom, the influx of Chinese immigrants and refugees formed a young and

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<sup>140</sup> Peterson, "To Be or Not to Be," 182.

<sup>141</sup> Hong Kong Government, *Hong Kong Annual Report*, 1953; Hong Kong Government, *Hong Kong Annual Report*, 1963.

<sup>142</sup> Refugee Survey Commission and Hambro, *Chinese Refugees*, 133.

<sup>143</sup> Hong Kong Government, *Hong Kong Annual Report*, 1956, 31.

<sup>144</sup> Hong Kong Government, *Hong Kong Annual Report*, 1960, 40-1.

vibrant population, contributing to the pool of readily-available workforce, especially in the 1960s. With a leap in labour supply, Hong Kong was poised for industrialisation.

## **The Labour Demand**

Against the historical backdrop of population growth, Hong Kong's economy thrived and shaped the trajectory of Hong Kong. Historian Anthony Sweeting called this period the time of "labour pains and birth of modern Hong Kong."<sup>145</sup> According to the *Hong Kong Annual Report*, the local industry experienced a shortage of labour in the 1960s. The employers had to raise the wages because of "shortages of labour, especially of skilled workmen."<sup>146</sup> The labour department recorded that over 90 per cent of the persons employed in registered industrial establishments worked in the manufacturing industry. Since more than 50 per cent of the population were dependent, directly or indirectly, on the industry, the colony depended heavily on the manufacturing industry.<sup>147</sup> A "Foreign Office sinologist-turned-businessman" expressed such a conventional view of Hong Kong's industrial miracle: "The Hong Kong we know today is a creation of the years since . . . refugees . . . transform[ed Hong Kong], virtually overnight, from a mere trading post to a manufacturing centre."<sup>148</sup> As the dominant

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<sup>145</sup> Sweeting, *Phoenix*, v.

<sup>146</sup> Hong Kong Government, *Hong Kong Annual Report*, 1960, 44.

<sup>147</sup> Hong Kong, *Statistics*, 49-55; Hong Kong Government, *Hong Kong Annual Report*, 1956, 11. Please refer to Table 1.3, Working Population by Industry, 1961, 1966.

<sup>148</sup> Goodstadt, *Profits, Politics and Panics*, 97.

historiography goes, Hong Kong experienced rapid industrialisation in this period and made a contribution to the economic miracle.

### *The Birth of the Industrial Colony*

Some scholars argue that Hong Kong began industrialisation before the Second World War.

As Frank Leeming has observed, the “Chinese industry in Hong Kong in 1940 was much

larger in total, and much more advanced in style” than the government reports have

suggested. The textile industry did not dominate the manufacturing industry. Indeed, “semi-

traditional and low-technology industries, such as cardboard boxes, printing and soy sauce,”

also constituted part of the manufacturing industry. Since these factories and workshops

“were too small to fall within the official obligation to register,” they did not register and

often went unnoticed.<sup>149</sup> The number of workers employed suggests the importance of the

manufacturing industry in pre-war Hong Kong. As shown in the 1931 census, the

manufacturing industry employed 13,000 more workers than the commerce and finance

sector, which hired around 97,000 employees. Rubber shoes, leatherwear and cosmetics were

among the most successful industries in Hong Kong for they sold well in both exports and

domestic markets.<sup>150</sup> The above information shows that the manufacturing industry played a

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<sup>149</sup> Frank Leeming, “The Earlier Industrialization of Hong Kong,” *Modern Asian Studies* 9.3 (1975): 338-9.

<sup>150</sup> Tak-Wing Ngo, “Industrial History and the Artifice of Laissez-faire Colonialism,” in Tak-Wing Ngo, ed., *Hong Kong’s History: State and Society under Colonial Rule* (London: Routledge, 1999), 121-5.

pivotal role in pre-war Hong Kong. Before WWII, these industries had already established a good foundation for the “Industrial Revolution” in Hong Kong.<sup>151</sup>

After the Second World War, the world economy restructured and changed the form of the international division of labour. The international subcontracting system emerged and made it possible for Hong Kong to develop export-oriented industries. Kim-Ming Lee has quoted three reasons for the growth of international subcontracting. With an increase in demand for labour-intensive consumer goods, developed countries channelled their capital to mass production. Facing a more intense competition from Japan and West Germany in the mid-1960s, American transnational capital adopted subcontracting as a strategy. Lastly, due to growing class conflicts in the advanced countries, the businessmen resorted to employing cheap Third World labour.<sup>152</sup> Meanwhile, Hong Kong faced less severe competition from handicraft producers in Communist China and Taiwan, as their policies disadvantaged the labour-intensive industries. Together with the trade embargo on China in 1950, Hong Kong benefited from the restructuring of the global economy and entered a period of rapid industrialisation.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Leeming, “The Earlier Industrialization,” 341; Goodstadt, *Profits, Politics and Panics*, 114.

<sup>152</sup> Martin Landsberg, “Export-led industrialization in the Third World: Manufacturing Imperialism,” *The Review of Radical Political Economics* 11.4 (December 1979): 57, as cited in Lee, “Flexible Manufacturing,” 170.

<sup>153</sup> David Clayton, “Labour-Intensive Industrialization in Hong Kong, 1950-70: A Note on Sources and Methods,” *Asia Pacific Business Review* 12.3 (July 2006): 384; Lui, *Waged Work*, 46-7; Lee, “Flexible Manufacturing,” 170-1.

In response, the government adopted the traditional *laissez-faire* policy towards the burgeoning manufacturing industry out of “political convenience and economic expediency.”<sup>154</sup> The government did not provide much financial support to the industrialists. Although the colonial government received criticism from Britain, “the replacement of free enterprise with government intervention . . . was a threat to the foundations of its economy,” as Leo Goodstadt has rightly pointed out.<sup>155</sup> Any government regulation, even though it meant well, “increased the cost of employing labour and reduced the competitiveness of Hong Kong exports.” Given the “priority to raising employment levels,” the colonial government therefore adopted a policy “to consider first the all round economy of the Colony, and not to break rice bowls if it could be avoided.”<sup>156</sup>

Under the colonial policy of minimal intervention, the industries flourished. According to the conventional account, the Shanghai entrepreneurs brought huge capital and machinery to Hong Kong, seized the economic opportunity and set up large establishments, especially in the textile industry.<sup>157</sup> However, Hong Kong sociologist Tai-Lok Lui stressed that “their influence on the industrialization process should not be overstated.”<sup>158</sup> Since the

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<sup>154</sup> K. Y. Yeung, “The Role of the Hong Kong Government in Industrial Development,” in Edward K. Y. Chen, Mee-kau Nyaw, and Teresa Y. C. Wong, eds., *Industrial and Trade Development in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, 1991), 49, as cited in Goodstadt, *Profits, Politics and Panics*, 16.

<sup>155</sup> For example, please see “Parliamentary Questions & Enquiries Re: Labour Conditions in Hong Kong,” 7 Aug. 1964 – 18 Jun. 1968, HKRS1017-2-9, PRO, GRS. Goodstadt, *Profits, Politics and Panics*, 59.

<sup>156</sup> “Memorandum from E. C. Brown, Labour Officer, to the Commissioner of Labour,” 28 Nov, 1958, HKRS1017-2-1, PRO, GRS, as cited in Clayton, “Labour-Intensive,” 383.

<sup>157</sup> This view is expressed in Siu-lun Wong, *Emigrant Entrepreneurs: Shanghai Industrialists in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1988). This can also be found in Tsang, *Modern*, 163-7.

<sup>158</sup> Lui, *Waged Work*, 47.

light industries could generate a high turnover of capital, small workshops and even “mosquito factories” with little capital investment could enter into the competition easily.<sup>159</sup> Therefore, small and medium factories proliferated.<sup>160</sup> According to David Clayton, a great number of firms remained small, hiring fewer than fifty workers. These suggest that small and medium enterprises played a crucial role in the economy as well.

The international subcontracting system shaped the characteristics of the industrial market. Subjected to seasonal demand changes and fashions, the market of light industries usually fluctuated. In the whole system, industries in Hong Kong were specialised in manufacturing instead of sourcing and outsourcing. They could concentrate energy on production efficiency and gained competitive advantage through minimal diversification. These traits affected the tactics Hong Kong industrialists used to meet the market needs.<sup>161</sup>

### *Guerrilla Business Strategy*<sup>162</sup>

Based on the characteristics of the industrial economy in Hong Kong, the businessmen responded by adopting guerrilla business strategy. As cited by Lee, these industrialists aimed for “profits over the short term” and relied heavily upon the corresponding institutional

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<sup>159</sup> “Labour Department: General Policy (Correspondence on Miss Ogilvie’s Report 1958,” 31 Oct. 1958 – 7 Jan. 1960, HKRS1017-2-1, PRO, GRS. “Mosquito factories” is a term used by the Commissioner of Labour to describe small-scale workshops.

<sup>160</sup> For data and statistics, please refer to Clayton, “Labour-Intensive,” 379. Leo F. Goodstadt also shares this view. Goodstadt, *Profits, Politics and Panics*, 113.

<sup>161</sup> Lee, “Flexible Manufacturing,” 165, 170.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

system. Guerrilla business strategy fitted them well because it demanded little capital investment, specialisation, and promised flexibility to adapt to fluctuating demands by using cheap labour. These business strategies in turn boosted the demand for unskilled cheap labourers, including the demand for child labourers.<sup>163</sup>

Without huge financial backing, these Hong Kong workshops used simple technology. Employing simple production methods, labour-intensive production provided flexibility to compete with capital-intensive factories. It also required a lower entry cost and hence reduced the risk of failure.<sup>164</sup> Limited investment in machinery led to a high demand for cheap labour in booming industries of “clothing, furniture, shoes . . . and other cheap consumer goods.”<sup>165</sup> Even if they invested in machinery, they would only invest in those “operated intensively.” Labour-intensive production made “this ‘industrial revolution’ . . . affordable.” The use of simple technology impacted the demand for flexible and unskilled labour.<sup>166</sup>

As Marjatta Rahikainen has argued, production technology determined the demand for child labour in the long run. Employers often sought after cheap and unskilled labourers when the industries only needed simple tools in the production process. Child labour was an option. Similar to the case in the southern United States during the 1920s and 1930s, “the

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<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 164-5, 168-9.

<sup>164</sup> Goodstadt, *Profits, Politics and Panics*, 133.

<sup>165</sup> Clayton, “Labour-Intensive,” 377.

<sup>166</sup> Goodstadt, *Profits, Politics and Panics*, 112-3. For a detailed discussion of why the industrialists did not have huge financial backing, please refer to the chapter of “Industrial Take-off: Cut-price and Self-financed” in Goodstadt, *Profits, Politics and Panics*, 97-115.



availability of women and children” attracted employers to hire children in Hong Kong.<sup>167</sup>

Child workers could also use simple equipment to perform tasks manually. To Sui Wan, who worked in a knitting factory as a child, recalled how simple the tasks were. “Children usually helped packaging or cutting thread ends,” she said.<sup>168</sup>

Apart from using simple technology, high specialisation was another guerrilla business strategy. The elaborate international subcontracting system favoured a high degree of division of labour. According to a survey, Sit found out that less than 40 per cent of 174 factories completed all the processes of making finished goods. Most workshops engaged only in one dimension of the entire production process.<sup>169</sup> Chan Kwok Man, who co-founded an electric water heater factory in To Kwa Wan, recalled how they divided up the tasks for small workshops. “Those who specialised in moulding would focus on moulding, those responsible for punching press would only work on punching press. . . . Each and every task was assembled by different workshops.”<sup>170</sup> To make tasks even simpler, the factory where To Sui Wan worked assigned “one person [to] pack and another person [to] put it into bags.”<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall et al., *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 51.

<sup>168</sup> “Two Modes of Departmentalization of Local Garment Manufacturers: A Fine Mode and a Broad Mode,” To Sui Wan, July 25, 2009, *Hong Kong Voices* Oral History Archives, Hong Kong Memory website, [www.hkmemory.hk](http://www.hkmemory.hk).

<sup>169</sup> Lui, *Waged Work*, 56; Sit, “The Informal,” 111, as cited in Lee, “Flexible Manufacturing,” 166.

<sup>170</sup> “Small Factories Responsible for Different Outsource Tasks,” Chan Kwok Man, May 31, 2013, *Hong Kong Voices* Oral History Archives, Hong Kong Memory website, [www.hkmemory.hk](http://www.hkmemory.hk).

<sup>171</sup> “Two Modes of Departmentalization of Local Garment Manufacturers: A Fine Mode and a Broad Mode,” To Sui Wan, July 25, 2009, *Hong Kong Voices* Oral History Archives, Hong Kong Memory website, [www.hkmemory.hk](http://www.hkmemory.hk).

The break-down of tasks enabled unskilled child labourers to work, forming part of the readily-available pool of cheap labour.

To minimise capital investments, workshops crammed into “domestic tenements, squatter areas and other illegal premises” that were not for industrial purposes. Factories or home-based workshops penetrated in Hong Kong, from cramped 110-foot residential units to faraway suburban areas. Imperceptibly 60’s mother (Imperceptibly 60: Male; Year of birth: 1949; Age first worked: 8-9; Source of pseudonym: Self-selected, I60 thereafter; Recruited through personal connections; Place of birth: Guangdong) owned a rubber-shoe factory in a remote area. “We had to build it in the mountain top of the Jordan Valley. . . . This minimises the potential danger of industrial accidents to the residents.” It was high up in the mountain that all coolies needed to “carry the raw rubber for a long walk, reaching 20-storey high.” Mrs. Kong also shared a similar experience as she “worked in [her] neighbour’s flat next door.”<sup>172</sup>

Law King Hei, the descendent of a light bulb factory, recounted how crowded the home-based workshop was, “the flat was really small. I was a bit unhappy . . . All the workers went in and out . . . There wasn’t much privacy [in the flat].”<sup>173</sup> Factories in domestic premises, for example, lowered the rental cost for they could be “doubled . . . as a residence

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<sup>172</sup> “Imperceptibly 60 浮雲六十,” interview by the author on 28<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong; “Mrs. Kong,” interview by the author on 28<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>173</sup> “Technological Evolution of the Light Bulb Industry. The 1967 Riots and Family Changes,” Law King Hei, February 18, 2013, *Hong Kong Voices* Oral History Archives, Hong Kong Memory website, [www.hkmemory.hk](http://www.hkmemory.hk).

while others occupied a smaller premises.”<sup>174</sup> They further lowered the rents by concentrating in “the worst slums of Hong Kong, e.g.: Shamshuipo, Tokawan, and Western District.”<sup>175</sup>

As a low labour cost was the main concern, the industrialists did not mind whether workers were young or old, as long as they could finish the tasks. Still a primary school student, Carmen (Female; Year of birth: 1945; Age first worked: 12-13; Source of pseudonym: Selected by the researcher; Recruited through third party A; Place of birth: Guangdong) helped her mother glue the paper bags. “It was easy. You simply melt the glue in the pot, then, you put it on top, fold it and it was done.”<sup>176</sup> Sometimes, child labourers could switch to another job, or took two or more jobs concurrently without additional training. Besides threading the artificial flowers, Magnolia (Female; Year of birth: 1952; Age first worked: 12-13; Source of pseudonym: Selected by the informant’s relative; Recruited through personal connections; Place of birth: Chiuchow) worked in a home-based toy workshop and later entered the electronic-ware factory for higher wages. Mrs. Cheung (Female; Year of birth: 1955; Age first worked: 12; Source of pseudonym: N/A; Recruited through personal connections; Place of birth: Hong Kong) also worked for various workshops. Before she graduated from primary school, she threaded artificial flowers, stuck paper bags and cut thread ends. Immediately after she had graduated, she worked for other

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<sup>174</sup> E. G. Pryor, “The Delineation of Blighted Areas in Urban Hong Kong,” in D. J. Dwyer, ed., *Asian Urbanization: A Hong Kong Casebook* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1971), 70-88, as cited in Victor Fung-Shuen Sit, “The Informal Manufacturing Sector,” in Victor Fung-Shuen Sit, *Urban Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Summerson Eastern Publishers, 1981), 115.

<sup>175</sup> Sit, “The Informal,” 115.

<sup>176</sup> “Carmen,” interview by the author on 29<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

industries. “I did packaging for handbags. I used bubble wrap to pack it. Then, the workshop would export the bags,” Mrs. Cheung explained. Working for half a year, Mrs. Cheung quit and worked for an ironware workshop in her neighbourhood. “[The workshop] was just next to us. . . . The wages were higher,” Mrs. Cheung commented.<sup>177</sup> She stayed there and eventually left for the electronics factory when she turned fifteen.

Simple steps in light bulb factory, such as “power tests, packaging and dyeing,” could be outsourced to home-based workshops. These workshops did not register with the government, obtain factory licences or follow any government regulations.<sup>178</sup> They could evade factory inspections and therefore lowered the production cost. As the son of a light bulb factory owner, Law recalled, “we could hire underage child labourers. These girls, aged twelve or thirteen, could not go to school and worked for us. When the girls graduated from primary schools, usually they would stop going to school. They were not old enough for factory work, so they got lower wages [working in our workshops].”<sup>179</sup> Child labour suited the economy as it matched well with guerrilla business strategy.

### *Case Study: The Booming Toy Industry*

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<sup>177</sup> “Mrs. Cheung,” interview by the author on 10<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>178</sup> Clayton, “Labour-Intensive,” 384.

<sup>179</sup> “Family and Migration Background. The Changes in the Family-run Light Bulb Factory; Home-based Workshop on To Kwa Wan Road,” Law King Hei, February 18, 2013, *Hong Kong Voices* Oral History Archives, Hong Kong Memory website, [www.hkmemory.hk](http://www.hkmemory.hk).

Being one of the pillar industries in Hong Kong, the toy industry exemplified how industry succeeded during the 1950s and 1960s, leading to a soaring labour demand for unskilled workers. Although the work conditions were not standardised, these business strategies effectively lowered the production cost and contributed to Hong Kong's economic success.

Despite the slight drop due to the 1967 disturbances, the owners of the manufacturing factories had high hopes for the business prospect.<sup>180</sup> Mr. Milanlo Choy, Managing Director of Union International Co., commented that Hong Kong toys and dolls had “unexpectedly bright” prospects. As long as the products met the consumers’ demand, Mr. Choy was certain that “sales of toys and dolls in the U.S. would double in one year.”<sup>181</sup> For instance, Thunderbirds, a popular puppet show from the United Kingdom, generated over HK\$8 million for Hong Kong in 1967. The Hong Kong factories almost monopolised the production of the Thunderbirds toys. Mr. Robert Hearn, Director of Century 21 Toys Ltd, reported that “the majority of these toys, which [were] sold all over the world, [were] made in Hongkong.” The export figure stayed strong. In 1967, toy exports recorded a 23 per cent increase, mainly to the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and West Germany.

Jamie (Female; Year of birth: 1954; Age first worked: 10; Source of pseudonym:

Selected by the researcher; Recruited through personal connections; Place of birth: Hong

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<sup>180</sup> Influenced by the Cultural Revolution in China (1966-76), the 1967 disturbances, which lasted for seven months, was a major anti-colonial riot led by Maoists in Hong Kong. Riots occurred repeatedly in the 1950s and 1960s, though none came close to that in 1967. In 1956, the pro-Communist and pro-Nationalist (Taiwan) factions clashed on October 10, 1956, the National Day of the Republic of China. In 1966, the two-day Star Ferry Riots broke out in response to the increase of the ferry fare.

<sup>181</sup> “Toy Industry,” 18 Jul. 1964 – 23 Dec. 1970, HKRS70-1-394-2, PRO, GRS.

Kong), who never owned a toy herself, manufactured dolls exported to the United Kingdom.

Together with other former child labourers, they built the Hong Kong toy empire in the

1960s. The toy industry was so successful that even Mr. Morey Kasch, the owner of the

million-dollar American toy business, praised the industry as its main cause of business

success. “If it were not for Hong Kong toys, I might still be struggling for a living,” Mr.

Kasch shared with *South China Morning Post*.<sup>182</sup> Having worked for a toy contractor, Mrs.

Kong was convinced that the toy industry generated lucrative returns. To begin with, Mrs.

Kong did not think of getting her wages when she worked there. She considered it a leisure

activity with her friends living nearby. Later on, she discovered that the contractor could

afford expensive household equipment. “I saw that the contractor could buy a double-door

ice-making refrigerator. Imagine, that was the late 1960s. They paid for the lifting machine to

transport the refrigerator into their house. The contractor and my family lived on the fourth

floor. The coolies pushed the refrigerator into the flat,” Mrs. Kong stressed. Living in an

impoverished decade, ice was so rare that Mrs. Kong treasured the first cup of ice given by

her neighbour. The scene attracted her neighbours’ attention as well. “All of us went out and

saw what was happening,” Mrs. Kong recalled. From then, Mrs. Kong realised that “the toy

industry could be very profitable. Painting toys generated windfalls. Owners could earn so

much that they could even buy a refrigerator!”<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> “Toy Industry,” 18 Jul. 1964 – 23 Dec. 1970, HKRS70-1-394-2, PRO, GRS.

<sup>183</sup> “Mrs. Kong,” interview by the author on 28<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

Statistics confirmed Mr. Kasch and Mrs. Kong's assertions. According to the *South China Morning Post*, "the plastic toy industry alone ha[d] shown an average growth rate of 20 per cent annually" from 1961 to 1967. The total exports of plastic toys alone reached HK\$400 million, "leaving out of consideration metal and rubber toys or cloth dolls."<sup>184</sup> The colossal export figure suggested how thriving the toy industry became in the late 1960s, together with other industries. The manufacturing industries became very successful by then. With a huge production need, the industries demanded a huge pool of readily available labour in Hong Kong.

Since many toys were produced in unregulated mosquito factories in Hong Kong, they might not be produced in standardised procedures. As the newspaper *Hong Kong Standard* investigated, "too much lead" in the paint became one of the safety issues. In 1965, the *Star* reported that a three-year-old British boy "suffered from lead-poisoning after playing with a plastic toy from Hongkong." In response, London banned celluloid toys from selling in 1967, including "rag dolls with inflammable celluloid faces and toys painted with lead-based ingredients." Newspaper critics even attacked the Hong Kong toys as "toys that kill," though that was an exaggeration. Most incidents only resulted in minor injuries. The new toy scare caused worries in 1968 when a British firm attempted to recall Donald Duck toys exported from Hong Kong to Britain.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> "Toy Industry," 18 Jul. 1964 – 23 Dec. 1970, HKRS70-1-394-2, PRO, GRS.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*

The assistant director of Commerce and Industry Mr. McGregor claimed that the government had tried its best to ensure that Hong Kong toys met the British standards. According to Mr. McGregor, the department “ha[d] carried out hundreds of random checks of paints used in 600 or so toy factories” in 1967. However, the monitoring process was incomplete as the government did not inspect all workshops, especially those hidden in residential areas. Among the 600 toy factories in Hong Kong, more well-established toy factories were faultless. Therefore, Mr. McGregor argued that the safety problem lay with small toy workshops for they did not know of safe paints. However, negligence and the interest in cutting costs could also explain why small workshops used unsafe paints. These claims were typical colonialist tactics of minimal intervention. On the one hand, the government benefited from the free market. On the other hand, it did little to regulate the operations, not acknowledging the unintended consequences of those small industries. Under this colonial policy, these home-based workshops adopted flexible production methods that did not adhere to the international standards, generating the “sweatshop” criticism from around the world.

An experienced toy painter himself, Mr. Kwok (Male; Year of birth: 1961; Age first worked: 10; Source of pseudonym: N/A; Recruited through third party A; Place of birth: Hong Kong) believed that the safety issues went beyond the lead content in the paint. Workers often breathed in thinner, which was widely used to dilute the paint. The exhaust fan



near the work stations aimed to direct the thinner-filled air to the end of the ventilation fan near the ceiling. Yet, Mr. Kwok did not find the fan useful. “Indeed, we never know how much thinner the fan could remove from our workshop. We could still smell it. We wore no face masks,” Mr. Kwok recollected. Indeed, workers had low safety awareness and seldom thought of safety concerns. “Back then, who would have thought of wearing face masks?” Mr. Kwok exclaimed. The use of kerosene was another safety concern. Other than applying it on the dolls, Mr. Kwok and his colleagues “intentionally used kerosene on our wounds. It was very common,” Mr. Kwok commented. “Of course, they asked you not to do that. Well, we thought we had worked for a while. We found it alright,” he explained. Mr. Kwok only realised that these are safety problems after he had worked and received regular safety training in a renowned electricity company. Indeed, other interviewees mentioned nothing about industrial safety at all. To Mr. Kwok, the heart of the problem lay with the workers’ mentality. “Everyone, [both workers and employers,] had little safety awareness. . . . Safety is man-made, a habit acquired through practices.”<sup>186</sup> Mr. Kwok’s work experience showed that some workshops did not provide a standardised, safe work environment for workers. Simple and efficient, the workshops could produce consumer goods at a low cost, giving the industry a competitive edge. This also explains why the economy thrived and the labour demand soared.

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<sup>186</sup> “Mr. Kwok,” interview by the author on 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

Although there were complaints against the toy industry, some former child labourers enjoyed working there. Jamie recollected, “When we were painting the cheek and colouring the shoes, auntie, who monitored the child workers, would share life stories with us. . . . I enjoyed listening to that and learned a lot.”<sup>187</sup> To Mr. Kwok, working in a toy workshop meant more than mundane labour, it was also a competition with his colleagues. At age 16, Mr. Kwok and his colleagues would see who could paint the cheeks the best, in terms of quality and quantity. The skills required in the task made it an intense competition among the workers. Mr. Kwok explained, “You know, spraying the cheeks wasn’t that simple. You wanted it to look natural. You needed to tune the right colour.” Painting cheeks was difficult because the shape mattered. “You had a mould for painting the eyes, ears and the eye balls. Yet, you didn’t have one for spraying the cheeks.”<sup>188</sup> Mr. Kwok gained satisfaction by applying all these skills and painting dolls nicely. This job gave them joy in their long hours of work in jammed workshops in Kowloon.

Apart from spraying the dolls for exports, children also assembled different toy components themselves. When Mrs. Kong was 12, she could put together the Big Bird Music Box, thanks to her tiny body size. “My boss liked me because I was tiny. S/he instructed me to climb inside the big cabin box. . . . Being tiny, I climbed and stood inside,” Mrs. Kong recalled. Mrs. Kong was therefore responsible for assembling the inner part of the music box.

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<sup>187</sup> “Jamie,” interview by the author on 18<sup>th</sup> August, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>188</sup> “Mr. Kwok,” interview by the author on 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

“You needed someone to assemble it. An adult would be less convenient, if you ever managed to put one in.” After Mrs. Kong finished assembling the music box, she could simply place a chair nearby and climb away. The toy workshop Mrs. Kong worked in had few standard regulations or procedures. It adopted whatever production methods that were cost-effective.<sup>189</sup>

Although the birth of Hong Kong’s industries started before the Second World War, the manufacturing industries flourished from the mid-1950s onwards. They benefited from the changing international division of labour, suppressed labour intensive industries and the non-intervention colonial policy. Concentrated heavily in the light industries, many factories did not invest hugely because it was not necessary. Most of them chose to be small, employed simple technology and opted for labour-intensive production. These characteristics served as a pre-requisite for the booming economy to recruit unskilled labourers, including children. The burgeoning industrial economy allowed Hong Kong to absorb the expanding labour supply. The practice of child labour was therefore possible and permeated every corner in Hong Kong.

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<sup>189</sup> “Mrs. Kong,” interview by the author on 28<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

## Chapter 2

### Child Work Experiences

As the thriving industrial economy absorbed the huge pool of readily-available cheap labour, Hong Kong transformed from “a labour-surplus to a labour-deficit economy” from the mid-1950s.<sup>190</sup> Based on the interviews conducted for this thesis, this chapter aims to “provide access to private experience” of child work in Hong Kong.<sup>191</sup> It explores the range of jobs available to children, the work conditions for children, the issues of industrial safety and gender relations in the work place. Doing oral history helps “reach below the surface and uncover hidden stories and points of view” from the interviewees, the child labourers in this case.<sup>192</sup>

### Outwork

To meet seasonal demands, the industrialists chose outwork as a dominant strategy for recruiting cheap and flexible labour. Though the term “outwork” is widely used, its definition is ambiguous. As Hong Kong sociologist Lui Tai-Lok has stated, “it may be true that not all domestic work was outwork, but it is equally true that not all outwork was done under domestic conditions.” The work location could not determine the nature of outwork.

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<sup>190</sup> Skeldon, “Labour Migration,” 203.

<sup>191</sup> Susan H. Armitage, “The Next Step,” in Susan H. Armitage, Patricia Hart, and Karen Weathermon, eds., *Women’s Oral History: The Frontiers Reader* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 67.

<sup>192</sup> Armitage et al., “Introductions,” xi.

According to Lui, industrial outwork is “non-factory contract labour.” It refers to “the production process which is done outside the factory premises.” Outwork has two main features. For one, output determines the payment as labour is “acquired in discrete and variable amounts.” For another, the contractors organise production outside the factory premises. Without a fixed work location and formal employment, outwork is often more “invisible.”<sup>193</sup>

Amid a business environment characterised by “flux and uncertainty,” Outwork fitted small workshops the best. To respond to market changes quickly, the employers could hire or dismiss the workers easily by using the outwork system.<sup>194</sup> Outwork became popular, especially among small-scale workshops and burgeoning industries such as clothing and miscellaneous manufacturing. Law King Hei recalled that his family’s light bulb factory hired two child workers in the summer. “Some of them only worked in the summer. They would go to school for the rest of the time.”<sup>195</sup> The use of outwork provided employers with a readily-available pool of flexible, cheap labour.

Among all kinds of outwork, the artificial flower industry “blossomed” in many family households and factories in Hong Kong. Many children, able or disabled, shared the experiences of threading artificial flowers. Cheung Hon Seng was a volunteer in the

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<sup>193</sup> Lui, *Waged Work*, 2, 63; Duncan Bythell, *The Sweated Trades* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1978), 13, as cited in Lui, *Waged Work*, 2.

<sup>194</sup> Lui, *Waged Work*, 49-50, 56.

<sup>195</sup> “Light Bulb Workshops in Homes on To Kwa Wan Road: The Production Process, Division of Labour and Industrial Safety,” Law King Hei, February 18, 2013, *Hong Kong Voices Oral History Archives*, Hong Kong Memory website, [www.hkmemory.hk](http://www.hkmemory.hk).

Association of Hong Kong Hospital Christian Chaplaincy Ministry suffering from congenital spasm. He could not walk or stand up since he was one year old till his mid-twenties. To support his family, he threaded the artificial flowers and braids when he was still a child.<sup>196</sup> Choy So-yuk, former Hong Kong Legislative Council member, also threaded the fake flowers as a child to contribute to the household economy.<sup>197</sup> Easy access to the materials could be a reason why many families engaged in the plastic flower industry. Usually, the contractors would take the materials up to “your door step.”<sup>198</sup> Carmen even found “a plastic factory in [her] estate.” The plastic factory workers would put “the raw materials in a trolley” for delivery and collected the artificial flowers back.<sup>199</sup>

Even though every family did identical outwork, each had its own way to thread the components and finish their tasks at their highest production rate. To motivate Carmen, her mother promised her extra pocket money if she finished threading 100 fake flowers by the designated time. To attain the goal, she squeezed herself into the upper deck of the bunk bed and strung together the plastic flowers when everyone was asleep. Carmen recounted, “I would switch on the light and put it inside my blanket. Then I threaded the flowers. . . . Sometimes, I dared not to switch on the light. It was too late.” Being familiar with the steps,

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<sup>196</sup> Zhang Hansheng 張漢生, “Yougu yucai: Huowo jingcai 幽谷雲彩：活我精彩 [Valley and Clouds: Living a Meaningful Life],” *Hong Kong Hospital Christian Ministry*, accessed October 14, 2015, [http://www.hospitalchap.org.hk/2k10/makwai-newsletter/doc\\_details/64-200812](http://www.hospitalchap.org.hk/2k10/makwai-newsletter/doc_details/64-200812).

<sup>197</sup> “Guli jiceng ertong kao zhishi tuopin, yiyuan jiang ‘jiushi’ doucan 鼓勵基層兒童靠知識脫貧 議員講「舊時」鬥慘 [Encouraging grass-root children to alleviate poverty through knowledge, Legislative Council Members competed in recounting difficult childhood experience],” *Apply Daily*, February 7, 2005.

<sup>198</sup> “Albert,” interview by the author on 26<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>199</sup> “Carmen,” interview by the author on 29<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

Carmen strung them together without looking at them. “It was because you got used to it, you knew where the plastic petals laid.”<sup>200</sup>

Simple as it may seem, Mrs. Kong found threading the fake flowers painful. “The holes were very narrow. Even we polished it with grease, we still needed to use our fingers to punch it through. That was a vivid experience, especially in the winter. . . . Very painful.”<sup>201</sup>

This is no exaggeration as they had to “string together the stigma, petals and sepals for the small flowers.”<sup>202</sup> Magnolia agreed. Yet, her family figured out a way to save their time and made it a less painful experience. “My family would simply boil hot water and soak the plastics in it. Then, the flowers would be softened,” Magnolia explained. “That made life easier.”<sup>203</sup>

Artificial flowers aside, outworkers also produced a wide range of commodities. According to Clayton, Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s produced inexpensive, handmade consumer goods including “food, clothing and miscellaneous products such as toys and toothbrushes.”<sup>204</sup> Fei’s family threaded braids as well. “The braids were shipped to India for ceremonial Buddhist practices.” Fei’s family was not selective in choosing outwork. “We just made money whenever we could. If we had the braids, we threaded the braids.” If not, they would thread the artificial flowers, even though it took up more space.<sup>205</sup> Other than

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<sup>200</sup> “Carmen,” interview by the author on 29<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>201</sup> “Mrs. Kong,” interview by the author on 28<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>202</sup> “Ken Chau,” interview by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>203</sup> “Magnolia,” interview by the author on 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>204</sup> Clayton, “Labour-Intensive,” 377, 384.

<sup>205</sup> “Fei,” interview by the author on 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

threading fake flowers or braids, Mary Lim's brother (Mary Lim: Female; Year of birth: 1947-52; Age first worked: 10-11; Source of pseudonym: Selected by the researcher; Recruited through personal connections; Place of birth: Hong Kong) grouped the price tags in order. He would put a hundred price tags as a unit and deliver them back to the contractor. Being a simple task, outwork engaged children into these tasks and normalised child labour through their families.<sup>206</sup>

Apart from producing consumer goods, children also engaged in the food-processing industry. Emigrated from Shanghai in 1954, Rodney (Male; Year of birth: 1943; Age first worked: 12; Source of pseudonym: Selected by the researcher; Recruited through personal connections; Place of birth: Shanghai) had shelled watermelon seeds. Rodney recalled, "Sometimes, I hammered my hands as well, that was very painful." Jamie's family peeled water chestnuts in the mid-1950s, but Jamie was too young to peel.<sup>207</sup> Diverse as outwork was, it shared things in common. Almost everyone, skilled or not, could handle the jobs. Children could work and contribute to the family economy, too. To quote Maggie, "as long as you were willing to work, you could get a job."<sup>208</sup>

## Apprenticeship

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<sup>206</sup> "Mary Lim," interview by the author on 26<sup>th</sup> April, 2015, Calgary.

<sup>207</sup> "Rodney," interview by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong; "Jamie," interview by the author on 18<sup>th</sup> August, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>208</sup> "Maggie," interview by the author on 2<sup>nd</sup> August, 2015, Hong Kong.



Apart from doing outwork, many child labourers worked as apprentices. Although apprenticeship was regarded as “one of the toughest child work at that time,” apprenticeship remained popular. Apprenticeship was mostly found in the handicraft industries, including “garment making, tailoring, auto repair, woodwork . . . ironware . . . [and] hair-dressing.”<sup>209</sup> Apprenticeship was popular for three reasons. To begin with, the Chinese handicraft industries had long been using the apprenticeship system, especially in the early-twentieth century. Hiring child apprentices was “a kind of economic benefit” to the industrialists. According to Peng Zeyi, most factories ran twelve hours a day with only an hour lunch break. Child apprentices worked long hours and stood for the whole day. “The work continues without any stop. . . . And [they] only received wages when they worked.”<sup>210</sup>

Apprenticeship also appealed to parents. Fei’s father regarded apprenticeship as an alternative education for his son. Believing that his eldest son failed to do well in a normal primary school, Fei’s father decided to send Fei’s brother to a clothing workshop as an apprentice. “My dad wanted us to study. But he thought that my eldest brother was mediocre and failed to score high. That was why he sent my brother to be an apprentice. Hopefully, he would learn a set of skills and become an artisan one day.”<sup>211</sup> Some parents sent their children to be apprentices out of economic reasons as well. In a woodwork workshop in Ken’s

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<sup>209</sup> “Ken Chau,” interview by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>210</sup> Peng Zeyi 彭澤益, *Zhongguo jindai shougongyeshi ziliao, 1840-1949* 中國近代手工業史資料·1840-1949 [Data of the Modern History of Chinese Handicraft Industry] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1962), 336.

<sup>211</sup> “Fei,” interview by the author on 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

neighbourhood, it hired many apprentices. Ken (Male; Year of birth: 1944-49; Age first worked: N/A; Source of pseudonym: Selected by the researcher; Recruited through personal connections; Place of birth: Hong Kong) recalled, “They were of my age. I chatted with them a lot. Since the parents of an apprentice could not feed him, they sent him to the workshop. The artisan guaranteed free meals and boarding.”<sup>212</sup>

Defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, an apprentice is “a learner of a craft; one who is bound by legal agreement to serve an employer in the exercise of some handicraft, art, trade, or profession, for a certain number of years, with a view to learn its details and duties, in which the employer is reciprocally bound to instruct him.”<sup>213</sup> However, apprentices in Hong Kong learned little. I60 remarked, “you could learn nothing even if you stayed there for ten years!”<sup>214</sup> The woodwork artisans in Ken’s neighbourhood did not teach the apprentices. “If you were smart, you just learned the skills quietly through observation. However, when the artisans discovered that, they would slap your face twice.”<sup>215</sup> Apprenticing in both a garment and an ironware workshop, Ah Ma (Male; Year of birth: 1946; Age first worked: 12-13; Source of pseudonym: Selected by the researcher; Recruited through third party B; Place of birth: /) argued that an apprentice’s circumstances largely depended on “whether your artisan and his wife were of good nature.”<sup>216</sup> K.C. (Male; Year of birth: 1953; Age first

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<sup>212</sup> “Ken Chau,” interview by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>213</sup> “Apprentice, n. and adj.,” *OED Online*, September 2015, Oxford University Press, accessed November 20, 2015, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/9815>.

<sup>214</sup> “Imperceptibly 60 浮雲六十,” interview by the author on 28<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>215</sup> “Ken Chau,” interview by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>216</sup> “Ah Ma,” interview by the author on 25<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

worked: N/A; Source of pseudonym: Selected by the researcher; Recruited through personal connections; Place of birth: Hong Kong) apprenticed in an ironware workshop forging iron gates. “One time, the artisan taught me the skills.” Yet, the teaching could not last. “After he had taught me, his wife whispered to him. Then, he seemed cautious and reluctant to teach me anything again.”<sup>217</sup> Some might learn the skills, but others only found themselves being servants, learning few skills they hoped for.<sup>218</sup>

Rather than learning the handicraft skills, many apprentices served as domestic helpers or general workers in reality. Ken said that “the apprentices’ routine included emptying the spittoon . . . cleansing the toilet, buying the breakfast for the artisan, renting the mah-jong. . . . Yet, you could not sleep before your artisan. You got to return the mah-jong first.” Ah Ma saw emptying the spittoon an easy task. “If the artisan had married, you even needed to wash their children’s diapers.” Benny apprenticed for a tailor and an ironware workshop. His boss often vented his anger on him. Benny simply thought that being a punch bag was a part of his job. Based on the tasks assigned, Benny could tell the relationship between the artisan and the apprentices. “You were lucky if he asked you to buy him newspaper, milk tea or breakfast,” Benny commented.<sup>219</sup> “That meant he favoured you.” In short, apprentices worked as domestic helpers and learned few skills in the workshops.

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<sup>217</sup> “K.C.,” interview by the author on 20<sup>th</sup> August, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>218</sup> “Ken Chau,” interview by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*; “Ah Ma,” interview by the author on 25<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong; “Benny,” interview by the author on 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

Often described as “slaves” exploited by greedy businessmen, apprentices received minimal income.<sup>220</sup> Some bosses sought ways to lower the apprentice’s wages. Albert (Male; Year of birth: 1957-59; Age first worked: 13; Source of pseudonym: Self-selected; Recruited through personal connections; Place of birth: Hong Kong) apprenticed in a printing company in the late 1960s. He remembered the complicated wage system that saved his boss the year-end fringe benefits. “You earned \$150 as your monthly wages. \$50 was counted as food stipend not wages. When the end of the year came, the boss needed to distribute an extra monthly wage as bonus, [a common practice at that time.] He could save \$50 by claiming that it was not wages.”<sup>221</sup> Albert’s case was a relatively good situation. Apprentices working in the 1950s and early 1960s received almost no wages. The artisan thought that free food and accommodation was enough. At best, they “would give apprentices 20 cents for their own spending,” Ken explained.<sup>222</sup>

Some artisans paid the workers poorly while they saved up for themselves. Minnie (Female; Year of birth: 1947; Age first worked: 6; Source of pseudonym: N/A; Recruited through personal connections; Place of birth: Hong Kong) recollected her experience in a small clothing workshop in the early 1950s. “On the first or the 15<sup>th</sup> day of a month, the artisan would sacrifice chicken or pork to the goddesses. And I thought to myself, ‘I must be able to eat meat!’ But no, not even a piece.” The artisan kept all to himself. Therefore, Minnie

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<sup>220</sup> “Child Labour,” HKRS70-2-207, PRO, GRS.

<sup>221</sup> “Albert,” interview by the author on 25<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>222</sup> “Ken Chau,” interview by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

bought bread crumbs at the bakery for 50 cents. Janet faced a similar situation. She apprenticed in a western tailor workshop after she graduated at eleven. Although her artisan could afford to keep a dog, they criticised Janet for eating too much. “When I ate rice, the artisan’s wife scolded, ‘why did you eat so much!’ . . . She always criticised me, ‘you eat a lot!’ . . . Yet, I didn’t eat much in reality!” Janet stressed.

Apprentices in Hong Kong sometimes faced physical and sexual abuses as well. Ken recalled that his friends were “frequently beaten, being kicked at. If the artisan did not like you, he could refuse to give you food. ‘You didn’t do well. I would not give you food today.’” The apprentices could only remain quiet. After all, they had little family protection. “Even if the apprentice’s mom wanted to see her son, she could only bring black tea and visit him once a month.” She could only rely on neighbours such as Ken’s grandmother. “My grandma told me, ‘Oh, poor, his artisan did not give him food again.’ She asked me to bring a bowl of rice and dishes to him.”<sup>223</sup> Hing agreed (Female; Year of birth: 1947; Age first worked: 11; Source of pseudonym: N/A; Recruited through third party A; Place of birth: Guangdong). “You would be bullied by others. Often, they would bark at you and force you to work. If you were slow, they looked as if they wanted to punch you.” Ah Ma was numbed and desensitised to the abuses. “There was little human rights at that time! You did what the artisan told you. . . . When you made a tiny mistake, he would strike you immediately. The

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<sup>223</sup> “Ken Chau,” interview by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

artisan in the ironware workshop beat me the hardest.” Physical abuses aside, Janet faced sexual harassment. Janet was the youngest apprentice among all apprentices. One time, her fellow apprentices scorned at her, “You should marry Ah Choy,” the eldest, crippled apprentice. The Chinese clothing artisan sexually assaulted her. “That man looked like a Ha Ha Yi,” a fat, monstrous character in Gu Long’s chivalry novels. “When I worked there, I was in puberty. One day, he waved me to come close to him. Then, he touched my boobs.”<sup>224</sup>

After “apprenticing” for almost a year, Janet carefully planned for her escape. “I carried my only possession, the blanket, [as the shop provided none to her,] and sneaked out at night. I took the transit from Hong Kong Island to the far north in Tuen Mun.” Sexual harassment was not the only reason why Janet left the workshop. “Knowing that I graduated from primary school with distinction, my artisan asked me to tutor his kids without giving me due respect.” Besides, they assigned Janet to tasks that no one liked. “I could only take the unwanted sewing jobs.”<sup>225</sup>

Deplorable as the working conditions were, it resembled the hierarchical apprenticeship system in China from the 1920s through 1940s. To learn the skills, the apprentices in China worked at the workshop for three full years. Most apprentices only received free boarding and food. The treatment of apprentices depended on the apprentices’ relationships with the artisans. Favouritism often crept in. Disfavoured apprentices would

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<sup>224</sup> “Ah Ma,” interview by the author on 26<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong; “Janet,” interview by the author on 7<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>225</sup> “Janet,” interview by the author on 7<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

take a longer time to “graduate.” Albert was one such case. Unlike other apprentices in the printing workshop, Albert did not spend all his free time practicing his skills. Finding Albert the least promising apprentice, the workshop did not favour him and fired him before he could graduate.<sup>226</sup>

Even if they managed to learn the skills, they could not enter into the market immediately. In some industries, apprentices needed to give the artisans gifts voluntarily. For instance, the graduating apprentices in the towel industry would give their artisans 100 towels as a thank-you gift. The apprentices in Mainland China were not well protected. The working environments in Tianjin knitting factories “were filled with debris, obstructing the air flow, harming the health of the workers and the apprentices.”<sup>227</sup> Seeing the unsatisfactory working conditions, a Chinese columnist in 1929 bemoaned, “the lives of the Chinese workers could be the toughest in the world.”<sup>228</sup> The reference to Chinese apprenticeship system reminds us that apprenticeship in Hong Kong was rooted in Chinese customs and practices. This explained why the apprenticeship experience differed from that in the West.

### **Other Types of Child Work**

Outwork and apprenticeship were only part of the child work experiences in Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s. Many children did not engage in outwork, factory works or

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<sup>226</sup> “Albert,” interview by the author on 26<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>227</sup> Peng, *Shougongyeshi*, 336-7.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 340.

apprenticeship. They picked any opportunities that were available. According to Clayton, the inhabitants worked in the “informal sector: in services . . . and in manufacturing.”<sup>229</sup> The service sector attracted many child workers, especially in the early 1950s because there were few factories at that time. To feed themselves, children needed to work in the service sector.<sup>230</sup> In the service sector, many child labourers worked as “shoeshine boys.” Often, they earned 10 cents for shining a pair of shoes. In 1956, Reverend Chu Yui-ming worked as a shoeshine boy when he was twelve. After work, he slept under staircase in the same area at night.<sup>231</sup> However, they were constantly bullied, sometimes by the Triad society. “Well, when people exist, there will be such thing [as bullying].” Ken was suggesting that bullying is a by-product of human nature. It was unavoidable and transcendent across cultures and time periods.<sup>232</sup>

Apart from shining shoes, some child labourers worked in the hotels. I60 once worked in the kitchen of the Peninsula Hotel. “We collected the waste, rice, veggies. . . . We poured them together and took it as pig pellets to Kadoorie farm.” The wages varied greatly among child labourers in a hotel. Although it demanded huge physical work, I60’s kitchen job did not pay well. “When I was eleven or twelve, I worked in the hotel office carrying tea pots.”

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<sup>229</sup> Clayton, “Labour-Intensive,” 384.

<sup>230</sup> “Ken Chau,” interview by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>231</sup> Wang shufang 王淑芳, “Guanghui beihou zhuyaoming mushi de chengzhang lu 光輝背後 朱耀明牧師的成長路 [Behind the Radiance: The Growth Path of Reverend Chu Yui-Ming],” *Zhongxuesheng 中學生 High Schoolers*, December 1986.

<sup>232</sup> “Ken Chau,” interview by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.



The office specifically hired child labourers in the morning to pour tea for staff. “I carried a black tray, on top of it were 4, 5 or 8 pots. Very heavy. More than 22 or 23 pounds. Then, I carried it to the office,” he recalled. Although I60 could earn HK\$50 a month in that hotel, he stressed that a bellboy could do less and earn more. “That was the best job. After opening the car door, the guests would give you HK\$10 tips. The rich people. And we, the office boys, got nothing.”<sup>233</sup>

Similar to the shoeshine boys, child labourers in hotels also faced discrimination. I60 could not work as a bellboy because it was reserved for the favoured. “He won’t give you that job, the well-paying jobs. . . . Of course those managers of the child workers could share the tips,” I60 recollected. Younger child labourers were being pushed around. I60 felt that others bullied him and therefore quit after working for half a year. “The old pushed the young around. In other words, you were delegated with work, but those older would only sit and do nothing. I was too infuriated and therefore quit.” Soon after, I60 found another job in a car factory from his mother’s connection. Although I60 felt agency to quit his job, not every interviewee had the same degree of agency.<sup>234</sup>

Child labourers also worked as teahouse servers. The newspaper commentary in *Hong Kong Standard*, “A City without Conscience,” depicted how tough the lives of teahouse boys were in 1969. “Barely 12 years and over, slaving seven days a week for just \$200 a

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<sup>233</sup> “Imperceptibly 60 浮雲六十,” interview by the author on 28<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*

month. . . . the little boys [needed to work] from 5 a.m. to 7 p.m.”<sup>235</sup> Although Mr. Kwok knew that working in the Chinese restaurants was tough, he still chose it because of free accommodation. “I didn’t have a place to live. . . . and it took me 10 cents to get a tram to work.”<sup>236</sup>

Child labourers delivered newspapers, breakfast and hawked on streets as well. Back then, there were few newspaper stands. To sell the newspapers, the companies hired child labourers to dispatch newspapers on the streets. “If the newspaper boys were acquainted with you, they would deliver it to your doorstep,” Ken commented. Newspaper delivery was less difficult than delivering breakfast, which means milk delivery, before schools started at 8 a.m. “Normally, those child labourers woke up at 5 or 6 a.m. They collected the newspaper and milk, and started delivering it. It was pretty tough,” Ken said. Child labourers would also sell steamed rice roll, fruits, peanuts and other products. Magnolia prepared Chiu Chou braised dishes for her family’s cooked-food business. The steps were complicated. “You needed to pull out all the feathers from the ducks, pigs etc. . . . And braised it, too.” Unlike the office boys and shoeshine boys, some child labourers worked part-time. The owners simply hired children to “look after the stall after class and collect the money.”<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> “Child Labour,” HKRS70-2-207, PRO, GRS.

<sup>236</sup> “Mr. Kwok,” interview by the author on 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>237</sup> “Magnolia,” interview by the author on 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong; “Ken Chau,” interview by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

Child work also developed as by-products of the social conditions in Hong Kong. The jobs existed to meet the people's need. For instance, water rationing in 1964 generated jobs for children as well. During that period, residents only had access to water once every two to four days. "Whether you were rich or poor, you still had to carry the water yourself," Ken commented. Those who could afford the money would employ children to carry the water buckets. "If the child worker had strength, he would carry it over his body. If he hadn't, he would find a cart and pushed the water buckets," Ken continued. "The flat could be somewhere on the fourth floor, with staircase being the only route," Rodney commented.<sup>238</sup>

Other than responding to specific social issues, child labourers also contributed to the under-developed transportation system in Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s. There was little public transport taking one from one urban area to another, let alone to the suburbs. To meet the needs, illegal minibuses came into being. "It was a nine-seat minibus, actually. The seats were just chairs. They were not installed to the minibus," Ken explained. Child workers would call for riders. "Hey, van from Sai Ying Pun to Kwun Tong. Come! Come!" When the van was near the destination, these child labourers would announce: "it's now the destination."<sup>239</sup> Ah Ma even drove the illegal minibus when he was around 16 years old. "I drove the 'ruthless car', or [some may call it] the white-plate car," that ran in the suburb. Ah Ma drove the van two hours a day, from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. Although that was illegal, "no one

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<sup>238</sup> "Ken Chau," interview by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*; "Rodney," interview by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

complained,” said Ah Ma. Ken believed that “it just fit our needs. . . . We had child labourers even for minibus.”<sup>240</sup>

In the recycling business, it showed how the people made use of every scrap and turned it into money. Children picked up the scraps and traded them to the collectors. In the mid-1950s, Minnie went around the blocks and checked if she could find any dried weeds, and the “Sau Sing Kong” brand milk powder tin. “We would be thrilled to pick up the plastic flip-flops! We could exchange that for ginger candies,” Minnie recalled. Later in the mid-1960s, Janet would pick the green bean left-over from a food-processing factory and turned it into pellets. As she recounted, “we were very environmentally friendly. You couldn’t find lots of garbage on the street.”<sup>241</sup>

Child labourers did not merely work behind the scene. Many child stars worked to support their families. Trained by renowned master Yu Jim-yuen, martial artist Jackie Chan and six other children formed the group named “the Seven Little Fortunes.” In Ken’s eyes, Jackie Chan was also a child labourer because “his family could not support him and send him off.”<sup>242</sup> Entered the entertainment industry at the age of two and a half, Petrina Fung is esteemed as “the most well-known and prolific child actor in the history of Hong Kong

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<sup>240</sup> “Ah Ma,” interview by the author on 25<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong; “Ken Chau,” interview by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>241</sup> “Janet,” interview by the author on 7<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>242</sup> “Ken Chau,” interview by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

cinema.” When she was fourteen, she had already starred in over 120 productions.<sup>243</sup> Fung’s success inspired K.C.’s mother. “You should learn from Fung Bo-bo, who earns so much money when she is so young! She is not like you,” K.C.’s mother said, suggesting that K.C. was not contributing to the family.<sup>244</sup>

Child stars in the 1950s and 1960s differed from those nowadays. “The society progresses economically, once the child actors appear on the screen, . . . parents would be proud of them. Yet, the economy was bad in Hong Kong in the 1950s, being a child star was only a job to me,” actor Tsui Siu-Ming commented.<sup>245</sup> Despite gaining fame and prestige, Petrina Fung found her childhood depressing. “In the movies, I was a good girl, being taken to school by my parents. Ironically, I had never experienced that in reality,” Fung confessed.<sup>246</sup>

Apart from the entertainment industry, children also worked in the agricultural sector. Hong Kong retained traces of simple agricultural life in the 1950s and 1960s. Janet and Julie (Female; Year of birth: 1963; Age first worked: around 10; Source of pseudonym: Selected by the researcher; Recruited through personal connections; Place of birth: Hong Kong) farmed

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<sup>243</sup> Yvonne Teh, “Former Child Star Fung Bo-bo Planned to Retire, but Her Fans Changed Her Mind,” *South China Morning Post*, September 10, 2013, <http://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/arts-culture/article/1307038/former-child-star-fung-bo-bo-planned-retire-her-fans-changed>.

<sup>244</sup> “K.C.,” interview by the author on 20<sup>th</sup> August, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>245</sup> Wang Liming 王麗明, *Tongxing, tongxi: Wuliushi niandai Xianggang dianying tongxing* 童星·同戲：五六十年代香港電影童星 [Hong Kong Child Stars in the 1950s and 1960s] (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2014), 20.

<sup>246</sup> “Fengbaobao lunjin rensheng qiluo 馮寶寶論盡人生起落 [Petrina Fung reflecting on Her Life],” *Tangrenjie haowai* 唐人街號外 *News Chinatown*, May 4, 2014, <http://newschinatown.com/2009-03-06-03-59-adsf36/2531-2014-05-04-17-18-16.html>.

and raised livestock. Although Janet's parents did not claim the ownership of the farmland in Yuen Long, Janet's family farmed there after they settled in Hong Kong. Janet participated in almost all steps of farming. First, Janet would put the solid waste into a bucket, let it sit in the lakes and ferment. To keep others from stealing it, Janet "needed to take that to the county school with [her]. . . . It smelled awful." Janet also sowed the seeds before the dew melted early in the morning. Farming was not always easy. "We stepped into the field and farmed. There were many leeches sucking blood at my ankles. I always pulled them out." When the crops were ready for sale, Janet tied them with weeds, yelling "10 cents" for a kilogram of *choi sum*.<sup>247</sup>

When Julie was in primary school, she and her younger brothers maintained the hygiene of the chicken coops. "We shed the wastes from the deck," Julie recalled. To cleanse the deck, Julie took out the boards covered with excrement and washed there with the hosepipe. "You could see the faeces layered up. . . . But I didn't think it was disgusting!" Julie fed the ducks with insects, too. The protein in the insects provided a balanced diet to the ducks. After a while, "the ducks became really fat!" Julie recollected, savouring her past.<sup>248</sup> Julie's work experiences show that child labour could also be pleasant and enjoyable to some interviewees.

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<sup>247</sup> "Janet," interview by the author on 7<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>248</sup> "Julie," interview by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

## Job Hunting

Employers adopted different hiring strategies. In the late 1960s, contractors hired outworkers in public housing estates to distribute materials conveniently and manage the outworkers.

Mrs. Kong recalled how she and her grandmother carried the materials. “[Contractors] distributed the artificial flower materials on the ground floor.”<sup>249</sup> Apart from that, outworkers would look for “the red posters” everywhere on the street, advertising new job opportunities. More importantly, workers often got the job through personal introductions, especially in the early 1950s.<sup>250</sup>

To ensure these inputs fell into safe hands, contractors preferred recruiting workers they knew.<sup>251</sup> Grass Cow (Male; Year of birth: 1943; Age first worked: 10; Source of pseudonym: Self-selected, translated by the researcher; Recruited through personal connections; Place of birth: Hong Kong) found his job in an ironware workshop through a personal connection as well. He explained, “My friend referred me. . . . Few could find a job without connections at that time. Many [job seekers] needed to find a shop to guarantee [your character.] The employers only trusted those referred by acquaintances.” Hareven confirms that kinship played a role in labour recruitment in a New England textile factory at the turn of

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<sup>249</sup> Lui, *Waged Work*, 94-5; “Mrs. Kong,” interview by the author on 28<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>250</sup> From the interviews I have conducted, I found out that more interviewees needed to ask for referees or use their social connections to find a job in early 1950s. More often, interviewees could find a job through a contractor or job posting in the late-1950s and 1960s.

<sup>251</sup> Lui, *Waged Work*, 93-112.

the nineteenth century. Recruiting through the kinship network also allowed the hiring managers to give their acquaintances a favour.<sup>252</sup>

Employers in Hong Kong recruited workers through their personal network, including the kinship network. Law King Hei likens giving jobs to relatives or friends to providing “shelter” for them. Established before WWII, Law’s Light Bulb Factory hired relatives from rural China. Without professional skills, these relatives mostly worked in the light bulb factory or the restaurant trade, which required minimal skills. “When you observed the production process, you would learn it easily. Therefore, many relatives flocked into our factory. Our factory provided shelter for them. They ate and slept there,” Law King Hei commented.<sup>253</sup>

Moreover, it was common for workers to pay a deposit in order to secure a job, especially in the early 1950s. In addition to finding a referee, Minnie also paid \$10 before she could learn sewing in 1953. “If I did not pay it, I couldn’t learn sewing.”<sup>254</sup> On the other hand, I60 lost his job because he fell outside the kinship network. At age 12, I60 became an apprentice for a Chinese *dieda* doctor in 1960. After apprenticing for two months, I60 was

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<sup>252</sup> Tamara K. Hareven, *Family Time and Industrial Time: The Relationship between the Family and Work in a New England Industrial Community* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 88.

<sup>253</sup> “Family and Migration Background. The Changes in the Family-Run Light Bulb Factory; Home-based Workshop on To Kwa Wan Road,” Law King Hei, February 18, 2013, *Hong Kong Voices Oral History Archives*, Hong Kong Memory website, [www.hkmemory.hk](http://www.hkmemory.hk).

<sup>254</sup> “Grass Cow 草牛,” interview by the author on 27<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong; “Minnie,” interview by the author on 8<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.



fired. “It was fate. After working for two months, the *dieda* master told me, ‘my son has just come to Hong Kong, I don’t need you anymore.’ With no choice, I left.”<sup>255</sup>

## **Industrial Safety**

Industrial safety is worth discussing because the accidents often led to lifelong injuries. This section will examine the danger child labourers faced and how they responded. Although some work required little skills from the worker, others might be more demanding and pushed child labourers into physical danger. According to the *Hong Kong Annual Report*, industrial accidents amounted to 6,732 in 1960. Of which, 3,624 persons were injured in registered workplaces.<sup>256</sup> Mr. R. M. Hetherington pointed out in 1970 that some children under the age of 14 had suffered fatal injuries in industrial undertakings. A “young girl suffered a crushed arm and hand, one young boy was burned on the face, arm, and body, another lost a finger, and a third had his hand crushed.”<sup>257</sup> Industrial accidents often happened in the ironware workshops. Grass Cow worked in an ironware workshop in 1954. “My finger is distorted because of the machine,” Grass Cow recalled and showed me his swollen index finger on the left hand. He was supposed to cut the keys by using the machine. “After the

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<sup>255</sup> “Imperceptibly 60 浮雲六十,” interview by the author on 28<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>256</sup> Hong Kong Government, *Hong Kong Annual Report*, 1960, 358.

<sup>257</sup> “Child Labour,” HKRS70-2-207, PRO, GRS.

accident, I rested for about 10 days and left the workshop.” The real figure must be bigger as many workers decided not to report to the government. Grass Cow agreed, “No one would report it.”<sup>258</sup>

Like some child labourers, Grass Cow did not ask for compensation. “That was it. You didn’t have any compensation. No compensation. There was no labour protection, no insurance, no holidays. . . . We had nothing. I just bought some drugs and that was it.” In the ironware workshop, When Mrs. Chan (Female; Year of birth: 1962; Age first worked: 10; Source of pseudonym: Selected by the researcher; Recruited through personal connections; Place of birth: Hong Kong) was working on the steel watch band, the ironware machinery chopped the phalange of Mrs. Chan’s finger. Indeed, the employers knew they should not hire Mrs. Chan. “This job position was only fit for 16 or above. They knew that I was only 14. . . . To them, the most important thing was cheap wages.”<sup>259</sup>

Although Kelly (Female; Year of birth: 1949; Age first worked: 8-10; Source of pseudonym: Selected by the researcher; Recruited through personal connections; Place of birth: Guangdong) knew that the ironware workshops had more industrial accidents, she still decided to work there. Luckier than Grass Cow, she received training from the employer. However, accidents still happened. “We made the watchband. . . . Another girl asked me to switch off the machine for her. But it rolled in my shirt and then pressed my upper arm.”

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<sup>258</sup> “Grass Cow 草牛,” interview by the author on 27<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*; “Mrs. Chan,” interview by the author on 17<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

Kelly's arm was fine, but the accident left her a scar of two inches long. For Kelly, her height, rather than inadequate training, led to the injury. "I was just too short to reach the switch."<sup>260</sup>

Maggie did not hurt her fingers. However, she was exposed to a dusty working environment in the ironware workshop. Maggie was to select smooth iron sheets from the rough ones and put them into a box. "When I finished my work at night, my clothes would become brown. That was all rust. . . . If your whole body was covered by rust, how much more rust had you breathed in?" Maggie had to watch out for the edges of the iron sheets as well. "When you picked up a rough one, the edge could cut your fingers and you would bleed. But that wasn't deep though." Industrial accidents happened in the garment workshop as well. Born in 1947, Colleen (Female; Year of birth: 1947; Age first worked: /; Source of pseudonym: Selected by the researcher; Recruited through third party B; Place of birth: Hong Kong) recalled that there were "a lot fewer industrial accidents in the garment factories. . . . But it did have some industrial accidents. The needles could break into several pieces." One time, "a needle passed through [her] finger," though it did not hurt her phalange. In response, she simply pulled it out and put a plaster on it.<sup>261</sup> Physical harm aside, workers were also exposed to toxic air in the workplace. Law King Hei admitted that workers might inhale cyanide in the electroplating process in the light bulb factory. At the same time, the

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<sup>260</sup> "Kelly Choi," interview by the author on 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>261</sup> "Colleen," interview by the author on 25<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

employers also “lived in the workshop” and were “highly susceptible to chemical poisoning.”<sup>262</sup>

Despite the accidents, some former child labourers found child work quite safe. “It wasn’t dangerous in general. I don’t know the number of deaths or injuries. But I think there were few casualties,” Hing commented. She thought that the employers ensured the safety level. “There won’t be huge safety issues. . . . They won’t let child workers do it if it was too dangerous. After all, they would feel guilty if anything happened to them. . . . The employers only assigned us simple tasks that didn’t pay well.”<sup>263</sup>

## Gender Relations

Apart from industrial accidents, gender relations in child labour tells us about how Chinese customs intersected with labour practices. Nineteen out of the 27 former child labourers I interviewed were female. The Chinese preference of sons over daughters could be a reason.<sup>264</sup> According to common belief, “in poor families, parents, often, will let girls to be schoolless.”<sup>265</sup> Such gender inequality might push more girls away from school and drives them into the workforce.

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<sup>262</sup> “The Factory Workshop of Chiu Kwong Light Bulb Factory and its Subsequent Expansion; Division of Roles by Types of Light Bulb Factories; Different Scale of Workshops in To Kaw Wan,” Law King Hei, February 18, 2013, *Hong Kong Voices* Oral History Archives, Hong Kong Memory website, [www.hkmemory.hk](http://www.hkmemory.hk).

<sup>263</sup> “Hing,” interview by the author on 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>264</sup> For example, please see Long Bow Group and New Day Films, *Small Happiness: Women of a Chinese Village* (New York: New Day Films, 1984).

<sup>265</sup> China Labour Bulletin, *Tonggong*, 5.

Mrs. Cheung was born into such a family. Mrs. Cheung's mother told her, "Boys don't need to work, [the family] should save up the education expenses for all the brothers. Daughters do not need education." Therefore, only her brothers received money for secondary school education. Compassionate for her sister, Mrs. Cheung volunteered to pay for her younger sister's school fee.<sup>266</sup> The interviewees also observed that more girls worked in their neighbourhood. "In daytime, they worked at the United Hospital as nurses. At night, they cooked for their family at home." No matter how old they were, Mrs. Kong found that more girls worked than boys.<sup>267</sup>

Scholars have analysed why the Chinese society favoured sons over daughters. According to anthropologist James L. Watson, the positions of male and female in the Chinese kinship system are different. "The Chinese . . . are fiercely loyal to the patriline." "Wives and mothers, as outsiders . . . , are never completely trusted. . . . Daughters are conceived of as 'excess baggage' that will marry out eventually."<sup>268</sup> Therefore, most of the Chinese families prefer boys to girls. Unjust as it may seem, Ken offered an alternative view. "Girls will be married off and their husbands will take care of them. In contrast, man will marry a wife and have to care for his family. He needs good education and stable income. That explains why parents ask girls to leave education opportunities to boys."<sup>269</sup> Benny even

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<sup>266</sup> "Mrs. Cheung," interview by the author on 10<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>267</sup> "Mrs. Kong," interview by the author on 28<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>268</sup> Watson, "Transactions," 224, 227.

<sup>269</sup> "Ken Chau," interview by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

argued that lives for boys were tougher than girls. “For girls, they would simply get married.

But the boys needed to work even harder,” Benny added, suggesting that the type of jobs

boys did require more physical strength.<sup>270</sup>

Other families did treat their sons and daughters equally. In the families of Ah Ma, Mr. Kwok and I60, all the eldest sons had to work and contributed to the household economies. “My eldest brother could only return home when he was 20,” I60 said.<sup>271</sup> These cases show that the preference for sons is only one factor in deciding which children should work. Birth order, favouritism and poor family circumstances are other reasons why sons were expected to work as well.

Apart from the Chinese tradition, “the demand for female child labourers from the labour market” could also explain why more girls worked than boys.<sup>272</sup> In some cases, biological differences could translate into skill differences. “Most of the girls worked in indoor areas such as garment factories. Boys usually worked outdoors in the construction sites or served as apprentices,” Albert explained.<sup>273</sup> Boys also needed to transport goods. “At that time in the electric appliance factory, . . . I also needed to peddle the bicycle and deliver

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<sup>270</sup> “Benny,” interview by the author on 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>271</sup> “Imperceptibly 60 浮雲六十,” interview by the author on 28<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>272</sup> Bulletin, *Tonggong*, 5.

<sup>273</sup> “Albert,” interview by the author on 26<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong. The observation matches with the *Department of Labour Annual Report*. It states that “girls are employed in the manufacturing of torch cases and other metal articles . . . . Boys work as apprentices in engineering workshops and foundries, in printing establishments, and in small numbers in many other industries.” Please see *Department of Labour Annual Report 1952/53*, 70-1.

the front and rear grills of an electric fan,” Grass Cow recalled.<sup>274</sup> Instead of boys, girls suited their needs.

However, physical differences could not always explain the differences in job selection. The social perception normalised what jobs men and women could have. The job allocation in the garment factories best illustrates this. Although many women worked in cotton mill factories in China before 1949, a number of men also worked in garment factories in Hong Kong during the industrial take-off.<sup>275</sup> “There were quite a lot of men in the garment factories. Sewing jobs for the girls, while male artisans would be responsible for putting on the collars.” Grass Cow believed that male workers were assigned to put on the collar because it “required a higher skill level.”<sup>276</sup> However, women were capable of putting on the collars as well. This common belief justified the different jobs men and women should have.

The diverse child work experiences paint the lives of post-war children in Hong Kong. Children worked in the manufacturing industry, the service sector and other businesses. Reluctantly or not, some children even took apprenticeship as another form of education. Child labour was therefore a common scene in most parts of Hong Kong.

Influenced by the demand for female workers, and Chinese customs and practices, the labour

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<sup>274</sup> “Grass Cow 草牛,” interview by the author on 27<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>275</sup> One example is Honig, *Sisters and Strangers*.

<sup>276</sup> “Grass Cow 草牛,” interview by the author on 27<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

market hired more female workers than male workers. All these put a foundation for understanding the reasons why children worked.



## Chapter 3

# Why Children Worked

Back in the 1950s and 1960s, many children in Hong Kong shared a range of work experiences in different sectors. Some interviewees found child work a simple task whereas others suffered from unsatisfactory working conditions and industrial accidents. The introductory chapter suggested that child labour symbolises exploitation in the Capitalist world according to the conventional view. This chapter turns to the former child labourers and explores why children worked from their perspectives. In this research, interviewing the former child labourers is “the very act of focusing on [the interviewees] and asking them to ‘speak for themselves’.”<sup>277</sup> Using the classic case of child labour in industrial England as a reference, this chapter examines how various push and pull factors inter-played with each other.

Although children chose to work voluntarily, they often made the choice under constraints. Among the push factors, poverty was the main force driving children to work. The socioeconomic conditions and various family circumstances put families into economic hardship. However, the colonial government adhered to the principle of minimal intervention and provided little assistance to its inhabitants. Since the private welfare systems, including the voluntary sector and the free market, were not able help, the inhabitants had to rely upon

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<sup>277</sup> Armitage, “The Next Step,” 63.

themselves.<sup>278</sup> Also, limited education access left children with few alternatives other than working and pushed children into the workforce as well.

Constraints aside, other factors also pulled children into labour. Filial motivations were the biggest force drawing interviewees into working for the sake of their families. Moreover, some children and parents regarded child work a decent choice because they saw work as an alternative to education. These factors helped create social norms favourable to child labour. Although these pull factors showed children had the agency in choosing to work, that should not be over-emphasised. More often, children consented to work under duress and the notion of filial piety. These suggested nuanced dynamics that influenced children's decision to work in Hong Kong.

Child labour in industrial England provides a good comparative framework for Hong Kong. Both places shared similar socioeconomic conditions, and social perception on childhood and child work. Moreover, Hong Kong should also be compared with Britain given the absence of government intervention and regulation. The differences lie in filial motivations and the causes of unfavourable family circumstances. Since the cases in Asia's other "little dragons" are not as well-researched as that in Britain, comparing Hong Kong to them would be less appealing.<sup>279</sup> Furthermore, the economic development between Hong Kong and these countries differed greatly. Often, these countries received direct assistance

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<sup>278</sup> Eugene McLaughlin, "Hong Kong: A Residual Welfare Regime," in Allan Cochrane and John Clarke, eds., *Comparing Welfare States: Britain in International Context* (London: Sage Publications, 1993), 105, 109.

<sup>279</sup> Asia's other "little dragons" are Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan.

from their governments whereas the capital in Hong Kong mostly came from the Chinese entrepreneurs. This comparative study puts child labour in Hong Kong in dialogue with the wider literature of child labour in industrial England.

## Poverty

As scholars have argued, poverty was a dominant factor propelling children to work in industrial England.<sup>280</sup> Similarly, poverty was a major force compelling children in Hong Kong to enter the workforce. “Work out of necessity” was a recurring theme mentioned by many interviewees. Since poverty was the main factor pushing children to work, this chapter begins by examining the causes for poverty and how gathering children’s contributions became a family strategy, conscious or not, for survival. Apart from social conditions, the British model helps us understand that the family size, family structures and the availability of poor relief affected the degree of household poverty. The familial division of labour made child work necessary to maintain the financial well-being of the family.<sup>281</sup>

In the post-occupation years, the acute financial situation in Hong Kong remained. The colony still struggled to provide basic supplies to its population. The poor post-war economy put Hong Kong into financial hardship. Mrs. Chan’s family was so poor that they

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<sup>280</sup> The literature examining poverty and child labour in industrial England includes Humphries, *Childhood*; Kirby, *Child Labour*; Nigel Goose and Katrina Honeyman, “Introduction,” in Nigel Goose and Katrina Honeyman, eds., *Childhood and Child Labour in Industrial England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 1-22.

<sup>281</sup> Humphries, *Childhood*, 85.

were forced to sell their son. “The second one was a son. During that time, many valued sons highly. As we were in steep financial difficulties, my brother was sold. . . . I have never seen my brother,” Mrs. Chan recollected. The decision cost them highly. Similar to other Chinese, Mrs. Chan’s mother wanted her son to stay beside her deathbed before she passed away.

“When my mother was about to leave [the world], we still could not contact him even with the help of the Red Cross.” To trade their son for money must be heartrending for Mrs. Chan’s family. According to anthropologist James Watson, “Cantonese believe that men thus born are sacrosanct because they ‘belong to’ the ancestors; they could not be sold, even by a destitute father.” Contrary to women, the male enjoyed the privilege of “‘belonging in’” a lineage and therefore not “subject to sale.”<sup>282</sup> In my sample, only one interviewee’s family sold their son. Despite this established cultural norm, selling males to the outsiders illustrates the dire economic situation some Hong Kong families suffered during that time.<sup>283</sup>

### *Family Size*

The relatively large family size aggravated financial hardship in Hong Kong families.

Chapter 1 demonstrated that a high natural growth rate contributed to the population growth.

In the 1950s and 1960s, birth control was rare. Family planning only started gaining

momentum in 1965. Families usually had more dependent children to take care of. Almost all

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<sup>282</sup> Watson, “The Transaction,” 227.

<sup>283</sup> I was unable to find out figures regarding the selling of sons in post-war Hong Kong.

interviewees had more than two siblings. Minnie's neighbour even had ten children. In industrial England, "Families over-burdened with children" certainly added pressure to the family's economy and affected children's life chances. As Humphries has observed, that would result in a "trade-off between child quantity and quality within a family."<sup>284</sup> The size of the sibling group varied inversely with the amount of resources they received from the family. Children from a larger sibling group often started working early. In colonial Hong Kong, Minnie and her eldest brother worked at the age of six to support five other dependent siblings.<sup>285</sup> Similar to industrial England, the relatively large family size in post-war Hong Kong explains why many families suffered from poverty.

### *Family Structure*

Various family circumstances exacerbated the level of household poverty in Hong Kong. The British case has suggested that the male-breadwinner had long been the chief source of family income for working-class families. Therefore, "losing a father was a major economic and emotional blow" that "jeopardized families' survival" in industrial England. Jane Humphries has identified that parental mortality or disappearance and lone-parent households led to "breadwinner frailty."<sup>286</sup> The same applied to families in Hong Kong as well. Their parents' death and being adopted impacted the life chances of a child. In contrast, the causes of lone-

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<sup>284</sup> Humphries, *Childhood*, 54, 63.

<sup>285</sup> "Minnie," interview by the author on 8<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>286</sup> Humphries, *Childhood*, 66, 172.

parent households in colonial Hong Kong differed from that in Britain, with polygynous families becoming one example in the Chinese context.

### Parental Mortality or Disappearance

Children often lost their parents due to illnesses or accidents. Carmen's father worked as a kitchen crew in the U.S. navy during World War II. When the war ended, her father was about to retire. Being the second wife, her mother lived with Carmen's father in Macau. When Carmen was four in 1949, the whole family moved to Hong Kong. "My dad retired by then and received the pension monthly. We were in a good financial position," Carmen said.<sup>287</sup>

Carmen's carefree childhood ended abruptly in 1958. "I was in form 2 in Tak Ming Secondary School when my dad passed away," Carmen recalled. Her mother, brothers and Carmen herself became responsible for their family's survival. Carmen's responsibility weighed heavier because of her disabled brother. "My eldest brother wasn't blind at first," Carmen added. "Originally, he only had a minor eye operation. Shortly after that, he carried buckets of water during water rationing. Without health awareness, he kept carrying heavy objects and, sadly, his retina came off. From then, my brother became blind permanently."<sup>288</sup>

In order to earn money, Carmen had to drop out of school and learned sewing. To learn the skills, she paid almost HK\$200 to the sewing teacher. "The teacher was recruiting

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<sup>287</sup> "Carmen," interview by the author on 29<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*

apprentices. I sewed pyjamas and learned to use the motor sewing machine. After six months, I started looking for jobs.” Then, Carmen entered a garment factory to be an apprentice child labourer. As these workers were still familiarising themselves with the factory settings, they were only given food and meagre wages in return.<sup>289</sup>

The death of Mr. Kwok’s mother pushed him into the workforce as well. Mr. Kwok’s father owned a Chinese sausage manufacturing factory in Des Voeux Road, Sheung Wan. He could provide for two wives and eight children with no difficulties. Due to a distanced family relationship, Mr. Kwok was not well taken care of. “My relationship with my father was not close. . . . In front of others, I could only call him Uncle Ming. I could never call him dad. . . . I have never enjoyed any family care in my childhood,” Mr. Kwok said. Since all his siblings were girls, Mr. Kwok was not close to them. After his mother’s death, he quit school and worked in his father’s factory. Yet, he did not benefit from favoured treatment for sons and biological children. “I got to wake up at dawn, 5 or 6 a.m. . . . He never paid me the wages.”<sup>290</sup>

Finding no sense of belonging, Mr. Kwok left home and worked full-time elsewhere. Mr. Kwok later wandered with peers who shared similar backgrounds. Other workers engaged in illegal activities, took drugs and joined the gang society. Fortunately, Mr. Kwok focused on his job and resisted the temptations. Without family protection, Mr. Kwok relied

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<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>290</sup> “Mr. Kwok,” interview by the author on 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

upon himself and worked in less desirable jobs. When Mr. Kwok found a permanent job, he was excited to get his wages. “I could earn \$80 a month. . . . When it was pay day, I was so thrilled, very happy. I spent it the way I wanted.”<sup>291</sup>

Apart from that, abandoned or orphaned children also had poorer life chances than other children. While love and affection could be a reason for adoption, some parents in Britain adopted a child because of other motives. In industrial England, the adopted children would contribute to the household economy and “strive not to be a burden” and “show willing” to support their adoptive families.<sup>292</sup> Child work was a way to gratify their adoptive parents. In Hong Kong, Janet was “just an orphan that happened to be picked up by my adoptive father, a Kuomintang militia fleeing China.” While no one could explain why Janet was adopted, one thing was certain: Janet worked very hard. At age ten, Janet engaged in almost all aspects of farming. “I woke up before dawn. . . . In the winter, it was so chilly that your hands suffered from frostbite. My hands were stiff and could not move,” she recounted. The status of being an adopted child constantly reminded her that she had to perform extra well within the household. “At such a bad time in China, [my adoptive parents] voluntarily raised me up. They could abandon me at any point or even sell me off [as a prostitute],” Janet recalled. Keeping this in mind, Janet was convinced that she needed to contribute and take extra care of herself. Being adopted certainly persuaded her to work for her family.<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>292</sup> Humphries, *Childhood*, 79.

<sup>293</sup> “Janet,” interview by the author on 7<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.



## Lone-Parent Households

Apart from parental mortality or disappearance, households led by one parent would also increase the chances for children to work. Unlike the situation in industrial England, a number of families in colonial Hong Kong belonged to polygynous families, which was common and legal in Hong Kong until the passing of the Marriage Law in 1971. The Chinese refugees and immigrants made up a huge proportion of the population and brought Chinese customs, including the practice of having multiple wives, to colonial Hong Kong. Children in these families were born into lone-parent households in an economic sense as they could not get all resources the male bread winners had. The father shouldered the financial burden of several household units. For those interviewees born into polygynous families, all of them belonged to the households of secondary wives or concubines.<sup>294</sup> Lucky ones like Carmen could receive adequate financial support from her ailing father. The less fortunate households had to sort out other means to survive. Being the third wife, I60's mother had to send both of her two eldest sons to work overseas. Being the third son, I60 had to work as well.

Some families were lone-parent households in a financial sense as the father still lived but failed to provide for his family. Born into a middle-class family in Hong Kong, Albert's father could work as a Chinese *dieda* doctor and support his family. Yet, his father spent all

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<sup>294</sup> For a detailed discussion of major wife, secondary wife and concubines in the Chinese family system, please refer to Watson, "Transactions," 240-1.

his wealth on opium. Albert's mother and all the three children had to contribute to the household economy. Albert said, "You had no solution. Your dad was like that. You needed to make a living." While Albert was still in primary school, his elder brother and sister had started working already. Although Albert was the youngest one, he worked as well. "After school, I would help thread the plastic flowers at home. To help out."<sup>295</sup>

C.S.'s father decided not to work due to the discrepancy between lives in China and Hong Kong. Highly educated, C.S.'s father socialised with friends in the literati circle in Shanghai before coming to Hong Kong. "He was born into a well-to-do family. He and his friends wrote articles for the news companies," C.S. said. Being the third wife, C.S.'s mother was educated as well. She could still read and write during the time when few women were educated. Similar to other refugees, C.S.'s father was "heavily hit by the deterioration in occupational status" after coming to Hong Kong. With a well-educated background, C.S.'s father found himself out of place in the colony. The occupational change posed "great psychological difficulties" to "refugee intellectuals" as "they have seldom been prepared by their former education or by their social background."<sup>296</sup> Therefore, C.S.'s father decided not

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<sup>295</sup> "Albert," interview by the author on 26<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>296</sup> "C.S.," interview by the author on 27<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong. According to Edvard Hambro, who surveyed the refugee conditions in Hong Kong in 1954, a large portion of political or political-economic refugees from China faced occupational degradation. In his survey, 39.6% of the political refugees received inferior occupation and 24.7% were unemployed. As for economic immigrants, 30.2% could only find inferior occupation and 17.2% were unemployed. Except the refugee teachers who "found positions in Hong Kong, especially in private institutions", most professionals and intellectuals who "have not had a complete training . . . such as government employees and military training," would find it hard to establish themselves in similar, let alone superior, occupation. Please refer to Hong Kong Refugee Survey Commission and Hambro, *Chinese Refugees*, 107, and Table 3.1, Distribution of Post-War Immigrants in Hong Kong according to Reasons for Leaving China, 31 August 1945 to 30 June 1954.

to take the manual jobs in Hong Kong. “He didn’t want to do manual, hard-labour jobs. He wanted to do business,” C.S. continued.<sup>297</sup> With little support from his husband, C.S.’s mother became the bread winner of the family and took up many jobs on offer. “My mom worked in a Mahjong Club as a maid. All five children depended on her. Day in and day out, she stayed there until midnight.” She also took up sewing jobs to raise her children. Although C.S.’s mother managed to support her family without her children’s contributions, they still decided to work. This suggests a filial motivation amongst children in Hong Kong at that time.<sup>298</sup>

### **“Seldom Could We Find any Help”**

Living in poverty, inhabitants needed help. Yet, the voluntary sector and the colonial government provided little poor relief for them. The lack of assistance also pushed children into the workforce. Cunningham argued that welfare legislation could effectively curb the practice of child labour in industrial England. Welfare legislation could transfer resources to families in need and decrease family reliance on children’s contributions.<sup>299</sup> Without adequate poor relief, the needy turned to trade unions for help. In the West, trade unions and workers’

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<sup>297</sup> “C.S.,” interview by the author on 27<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>298</sup> Hong Kong Refugee Survey Commission and Hambro, *Chinese Refugees*, 99, 110. “CS,” interview by the author on 27<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong. “Susan,” interview by the author on 27<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong. Humphries, *Childhood*, 103.

<sup>299</sup> Susan Pedersen, *Family, Dependence, and the Origins of the Welfare State: Britain and France, 1914-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), as cited in Cunningham, “The Decline,” 424.

movements helped unite workers and negotiated a fairer deal.<sup>300</sup> However, the nature of trade unions in Hong Kong differed hugely from their western counterparts. According to David A. Levin and Stephen W. K. Chiu, the trade unions in Hong Kong were mostly politically-driven and affiliated with pro-China unions or pro-Taiwan unions. The struggle between management and the union members in Hong Kong Tramways exemplified that politics, rather than workers' welfare, dominated their agenda. Although they attempted to tone down the political motivations, union growth remained static due to the colonial policy, the sojourner mentality of the population and the structure of the manufacturing sector. These limits prevented unions from extending services to workers in Hong Kong, let alone pressing employers for better deals.<sup>301</sup> Indeed, most interviewees did not mention trade unions in the interviews, confirming that trade unions often fell into the background.

Overwhelmed by the swarm of Chinese newcomers, the colonial government could only provide limited welfare services, as Chapter 1 illustrated. Even though the government gave out some financial assistance, the people residing in Hong Kong did not know it. "There wasn't any help, not that I knew of," Minnie commented.<sup>302</sup> Minnie was right in a sense that the government and other charitable organisations could only offer minimal assistance, such as milk powder for babies. Kelly simply believed that the government would not be able to

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<sup>300</sup> For instance, please refer to Portelli, *Harlan County*.

<sup>301</sup> David A. Levin and Stephen W.K. Chiu, "Trade Union Growth Waves in Hong Kong," *Labour History* 75 (November 1998): 40, 45-7.

<sup>302</sup> "Minnie," interview by the author on 8<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

help. “The government was like that. . . . You got to find a solution yourself,” Kelly stressed.<sup>303</sup> Rodney believed that the government would not intervene “if nothing disastrous happened. . . . If you did not breach the law, the government would simply leave you alone.”<sup>304</sup> Indeed, such a governing mentality continues today, despite globalisation impacts on setting minimum wages and providing old age allowances. Minnie preferred a status quo and was thankful if the government did not make troubles to her family business. When Minnie and her siblings were selling fruits in Yau Ma Tei, the policemen took a mandarin and left. “The government provided no welfare to us. . . . If the policemen were not corrupted, I should be grateful!” Minnie said. Simply put, many interviewees did not see the government as a source of help. To survive, each family could only rely upon themselves. After all, “seldom could [the people] find any help from anyone, government or charitable organisations.”<sup>305</sup>

### **Limited Education Access**

As Kirby has noted, “several historians and scholars of social policy have claimed that schooling ‘rescued’ children ‘from factory work and from the farms . . . ’ or that education ‘effectively ended widespread child labour in Britain’.”<sup>306</sup> Although scholars have questioned

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<sup>303</sup> “Kelly Choi,” interview by the author on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>304</sup> “Rodney,” interview by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>305</sup> “Minnie,” interview by the author on 8<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>306</sup> Wanda Minge-Kalman, “The Industrial Revolution and the European Family: The Institutionalization of Childhood’ as a Market for Family Labour,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 20.3 (July 1978): 454; Alec Fyfe, *Child Labour* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 33; James Walvin, *Child’s World: A Social History of*

that schooling laws could not cut off the supply of child labourers, they have argued that the aim of “schooling laws was undoubtedly to raise the age of starting.”<sup>307</sup> Discussing education provision in Hong Kong throws light on how limited education access pushed children into the workforce. This section will first examine the education policy in Hong Kong during the 1950s and 1960s. It will investigate how the prevalent view of education at that time explains why children worked.

### *Education Policies*

The education policy determined what education opportunities children in Hong Kong had. Prompted by the 1944 Education Act in the United Kingdom, the colonial government had been paying more attention to “the principle of equality of educational opportunity” in view of corruption than before. Corruption was deeply entrenched in colonial Hong Kong, affecting children’s chances to be educated. As Henry Lethbridge has phrased it, corruption was “accepted often as ‘morally not wrong’” and “a part of nature . . . a type of social behaviour, like conflict or competition, inherent in any social order.” Common in the late 1940s and early 1950s, very few could enroll in a primary school without fulfilling the unspoken expectations: “paying ‘tea money’ to a go-between who successfully arranged admission of their children into a school, . . . additional admission (*tong fai*) (italics in the

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*English Childhood, 1800-1914* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), 77, as cited in Kirby, *Child Labour*, 111.

<sup>307</sup> Cunningham, “The Decline,” 416.

original).”<sup>308</sup> Often, the poor could not afford these extra costs for schooling. Since the government did not plan for a “free, universal and compulsory education” for all children in Hong Kong, the burden of providing schooling fell onto the shoulder of voluntary bodies such as “Maryknoll Fathers and Sisters, the Rotary Club, and various district ‘welfare associations’.” Believing that the new arrivals would return “to the Mainland and [leave behind] empty primary schools,” the officials in the education department thought that primary education should be reserved only to “all bona fide residents of Hong Kong.” Arthur Clark, the acting Financial Secretary, regarded the aim of providing primary education only to bona fide residents reasonable. As a result, many children could not go to school, especially the poor living in the resettlement areas.<sup>309</sup>

In 1950, some claimed that the number of schoolless children was 50,000.<sup>310</sup>

However, the figure should be higher as it ignored both the post-war baby-boom and youthful Chinese refugees. The Director of Education believed that there were more than 100,000 schoolless children, based on the formula that one-eighth of the population did not attend school. Edvard Hambro, who conducted the refugee survey in Hong Kong in 1954,

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<sup>308</sup> Henry J. Lethbridge, *Hong Kong, Stability and Change: A Collection of Essays* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1978), 216, 231.

<sup>309</sup> Sweeting, *Phoenix*, 96, 104-5, 108-9, 112, 114; Anthony Sweeting, *Education in Hong Kong, 1941 to 2001: Visions and Revisions* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 213-4.

<sup>310</sup> First, the official estimated the number of children between five and eleven to be 9% of the total population recorded in the 1931 census. Then, he contrasted this figure with the number of children enrolled in school and came up with the number of schoolless children.

speculated that schoolless children between five and fourteen could be “estimated at 175,000, the majority being girls.”<sup>311</sup>

The educational policy started to change when the government realised that “the problem of people” was going to remain. On Christmas Day in 1953, a disastrous fire among squatters in Shek Kip Mei left 50,000 people homeless. This disaster convinced the Governor that these refugees were to stay in Hong Kong.<sup>312</sup> The Shek Kip Mei fire was a watershed of the colonial welfare policy as it called the government to cater for the refugees by all means. Other than introducing the emergency public housing scheme, the official also changed its education policies. Two streams of education policies emerged. Optimistic education officials asked for far-sighted long-term planning as they saw the post-occupation years as a chance to “*re-constitute* the whole education endeavour.” Pragmatic policy-makers and residents in Hong Kong focused on education provision and “quantitative reconstruction.” These pragmatists pressed for an increase of schooling, especially primary school in Hong Kong and gained the upper hand.<sup>313</sup>

The Seven Year Primary School Expansion Plan exemplified such an education policy change and defined post-war education developments in Hong Kong. It also marked “the end of the emergency, ‘hand-to-mouth’ atmosphere of the reconstruction . . . period.” The seven-

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<sup>311</sup> According to Anthony Sweeting, one-eighth of 2,250,000 would be 281,250. Since the total enrolments at all type of schools is 149,737 by March 1950, the shortfall is 13,513. Anthony Sweeting, *A Phoenix Transformed: The Reconstruction of Education in Post-War Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1993), 92-5, 253. Refugee Survey Commission and Hambro, *Chinese Refugees*, 55, as cited in Sweeting, *Phoenix*, 95.

<sup>312</sup> Tsang, *Modern*, 204.

<sup>313</sup> Sweeting, *Education*, 138-9, 143.



year plan aimed at increasing the primary school places by 26,000 per annum by building as many government, aided or private primary schools as government finances permitted, among other things.<sup>314</sup> To attain the goal, the government encouraged the building of non-profit-making private schools and expanded subsidised schools by turning one-sessional schools into two-sessional. However, most of the steps could only maintain the expansion rate of primary schools at best. The government still needed to provide at least 9,700 places per annum. The government also had to provide teachers and suitable sites for new schools as well.<sup>315</sup> In other words, there were still inadequate schools and supporting facilities before the end of the seven-year plan in 1961.

In 1960, the plan reached the target of providing 215,000 more school places for children in Hong Kong. By December 1961, the plan even exceeded the target by an extra 136,000 school places. Although the seven-year plan supplied more school places, it failed to catch the rate of natural increase. In 1960, the rate of natural increase was running about 90,000, “not allowing for immigration or unregistered births.” Even if the increase in primary schools met the rate of natural increase, the schools still failed to meet the demand. Over-age children also enrolled in primary school as well, and this “was likely to continue ‘for some years’.” Yip Kam Fook was one of the over-age children. He explained why, “I enrolled in a primary school at age 9. . . . My parents did not have the time to care for my education. They

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<sup>314</sup> “Education Department – Progress Reports (Quarterly),” 11 Jun. 1946 – 19 Jan. 1955, HKRS41-1-1742-1, PRO, GRS.

<sup>315</sup> Sweeting, *Phoenix*, 112, 115; Sweeting, *Education*, 205-6.

needed to earn money. . . . Many [in Tai Hang, my neighbourhood,] had no education at all. Even the policemen did not read or write in Chinese, let alone English.”<sup>316</sup> All children were only able to gain from the compulsory education when universal primary education, promised in the White Paper in 1965, was achieved in 1971.<sup>317</sup>

However, the increased education opportunities did not help the poor much. About 60 per cent of the increased school places were filled by private schools which charged school fees. Yet, the majority of the primary school population group was “composed of children whose parents [were] in the lowest income brackets and who [were] not able to pay private school fees.” Few of them could enter these schools. According to the Deputy Director of Education L. G. Morgan, approximately 75 per cent of the parents could not afford to pay for the school fees, especially when many had at least two children in primary school concurrently. Wilson T. Wang, a member of the Board of Education, recommended that the government sponsor children to study in private schools, but the suggestion was not implemented. Sadly, “as year by year the deficit of primary school places is more nearly met, the children out of school will increasingly tend to be in the low income groups.”<sup>318</sup>

Therefore, the schoolless children tended to be those with steep financial needs and who were

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<sup>316</sup> “First Taste of Schooling: Confucius Tai Hang School and Li Shing Tai Hang School,” Yip Kam Fook, January 5, 2010, *Hong Kong Voices* Oral History Archives, Hong Kong Memory website, [www.hkmemory.hk](http://www.hkmemory.hk).

<sup>317</sup> Sweeting, *Education*, 186, 205, 217-20, 237.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, 205, 217.

sometimes needed to work for family survival. The change in education policy did not benefit these children .

The former principal of the Shek Kip Mei Government Primary School Ms. Wong Ming Chu observed that some students had a hard time paying the school fees. Often, Ms. Wong would pay for those students so that they could continue schooling.<sup>319</sup> Yip Kam Fook agrees that education was not affordable to many, “At that time, studying in a formal school was a luxury.” Only he and his eldest brother could enroll into one for a short time.<sup>320</sup>

The cost involved in education deterred the government from embracing a more ambitious goal of putting more children in school with decent education quality. The capital expenditure on education which rose from HK\$13 million in 1954/55 to HK\$48 million in 1961/62 showed how costly education could be. In 1968-69 alone, the government spent over \$370 million, “not including the massive private expenditure and expenditure by voluntary and missionary bodies.”<sup>321</sup> With a limited budget, it was hard for the government to increase the quantity of education while ensuring the quality of education. Low education quality could be a reason why children were not attracted into schooling. Education specialists, parents and students found quality of education subpar, especially in the private vernacular schools. The problems of private vernacular schools abounded. First, more than 1,000

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<sup>319</sup> Zhang, *Meihelou ji*, 148-56.

<sup>320</sup> “Education and Daily Lives before Enrolling in Primary School. Education Experiences of Siblings,” Yip Kam Fook, January 5, 2010, *Hong Kong Voices* Oral History Archives, Hong Kong Memory website, [www.hkmemory.hk](http://www.hkmemory.hk).

<sup>321</sup> Podmore, “The Population,” 43.

unregistered schools collected low school fees of \$8 to \$12 per month at the expense of schooling facilities. The “verandas or cubicles or even back yards of the old tenement houses” could be the classrooms.<sup>322</sup> Rooftop schools could only operate in “a 15 by 18-foot compartment.” To utilise space, private schools packed several classes into a single classroom. Kelly recalled that the private school run by Kuomintang put students of different grades “in one classroom, different classes took the lesson concurrently. . . . Some students even brought their sisters with them.”<sup>323</sup> Besides, the private schools could not guarantee the teaching quality. Most of the teachers were only “graduates of primary schools or at most of Junior Middle Schools.” “Even if [qualified teachers] could be found, it is doubtful whether they would accept a post in a rooftop school” because of a low salary.<sup>324</sup> With such a huge cost in the education investment, the government could not control the quality of education while increasing the number of school places. A low quality of education in the affordable private schools could also be a reason why children were less interested in schooling.

The situation of schoolless children remained. In 1966, around 213,000 children, roughly 22 per cent of children aged between five and fourteen, did not attend any school. Even though the rest of them attended school, not everyone “w[as] in full-length education,

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<sup>322</sup> “Board of Education – Minutes of Meetings of the . . . .,” 2 Apr. 1948 – 11 Jun. 1959, HKRS41-1-3878, PRO, GRS.

<sup>323</sup> “Kelly Choi,” interview by the author on 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>324</sup> “Education, Schools – Roof-top schools,” 8 Aug. 1968 – 17 Jun. 1969, HKRS70-1-99, PRO, GRS.

as many children in Hong Kong attend[ed] school only part-time and others [did] not follow the full course.”<sup>325</sup> Mr. C. Y. Cheung, the principal of the Ecumenical Rooftop School in Wong Tai Sin, lamented how work interrupted students’ schooling. One time, “a student suddenly stops coming for lessons. We usually find him hawking on the streets.”<sup>326</sup>

### *“No Dreams or Goals”*

Apart from limited education opportunities, the prevalent view on education also affected the attendance rate of children. Jamie explained, “Of course, if the family could afford education for their children, they would send their children to school. If you did not have the money, you had no choice. . . . Parents seldom sacrifice everything just for education. They simply did not know how important and precious education was.” Jamie stressed that these parents were often illiterate or received little education themselves.<sup>327</sup> Not knowing the benefits of education, the parents would not strongly encourage their children to study. Mr. Leung’s mother did not urge him to take education seriously. Instead, his mother would ask Mr. Leung to thread the artificial flowers instead of studying. In the end, Mr. Leung did not complete his primary school education.<sup>328</sup> Even for those who happened to be at school, a number of them did not face pressure for good grades from their parents. “They didn’t put pressure on me. If

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<sup>325</sup> Podmore, “The Population,” 42.

<sup>326</sup> “Education, Schools – Roof-top schools,” 8 Aug. 1968 – 17 Jun. 1969, HKRS70-1-99, PRO, GRS.

<sup>327</sup> “Jamie,” interview by the author on 18<sup>th</sup> August, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>328</sup> “Mrs. Leung,” interview by the author on 28<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

you could study, go study. If you couldn't, they won't scold at you or put pressure on you,”

Mrs. Chan recalled.<sup>329</sup> In 1966, the social welfare department noticed that 8 per cent of the primary school places in resettlement estates were vacant. The government argued that parents must be responsible for their children's education. The government believed that it had “no powers to ‘put’ children of any age into school.”<sup>330</sup>

Without realising how important education was, some parents chose schools not for education quality, but for ideological reasons. K.C.'s father sent his three eldest sons to those “inferior communist schools,” as an archival document cited it. K.C.'s family moved to Hong Kong before 1949. However, K.C.'s father decided to answer the call from the Mainland and “build a better China” in 1955. Although the famine forced them back to Hong Kong in the late 1950s, K.C.'s father remained an ardent Communist supporter. As a result, K.C.'s father was willing to sacrifice for communist education. K.C. stressed that “the school fee wasn't cheap.” After studying in a communist school for several years, K.C. was disillusioned and learned little of substance. “The teachers always taught us Maoism. . . . The ‘best’ students were those who could always recite its content.” Knowledge transfer did not seem to be the teachers' concern. “Knowledge could be a double-edged sword. . . . If it is handled carelessly, it will bring harm. If that was the case, why should I bother to teach you?” K.C. recounted.<sup>331</sup> K.C. felt like he was learning Form 1 curriculum when he was in Form 3. Even though K.C.

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<sup>329</sup> “Mrs. Chan,” interview by the author on 17<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>330</sup> “Education, Schools – Estate Schools,” 1 Jan. 1965 – 17 Dec. 1969, HKRS70-1-94, PRO, GRS.

<sup>331</sup> “K.C.,” interview by the author on 20<sup>th</sup> August, 2015, Hong Kong.

and his brothers could go to schools, they could not receive good education and therefore benefited little from education.

The government report admitted that the education quality in Communist schools was unsatisfactory. “It is known that pupils in Communist schools study Communist newspaper[s] and Mao’s thoughts as part of their curriculum,” a government document asserted. As a result, these schools might “end up with insufficient time allocated to [other subjects normally studied in middle schools].” Worse, these schools could cause physical harm to students. In August 1968, a bomb prematurely exploded in the laboratory of Chung Wah Middle School. An 18-year-old student “lost his left hand and part of his right-thumb” in the accident.<sup>332</sup> Unfortunately, “left-wing schools were the headquarters of bomb-makers and riots during the 1967 disturbances.”<sup>333</sup> Similar to other schools with political motivations, these schools seldom provided children with proper education. This reinforced the people’s perception that education was not the only way to their dreams, goals or a better future.

Even though Mrs. Chan was not enrolled in a Communist school, she still found education an unpleasant experience as she was mistreated in the primary school. Teachers in Hong Kong at that time used corporal punishment. “When I was in class, my teacher beat me with a stick,” Mrs. Chan recounted. Mrs. Cheung was beaten by her teachers, too, “We needed to hold our fist tight when our teachers punished us. The teacher would take an iron

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<sup>332</sup> “Education, Schools – Communist Schools,” 13 Oct. 1967 – 30 Dec. 1969, HKRS70-1-93, PRO, GRS.

<sup>333</sup> Podmore, “The Population,” 53.

ruler and strike our metacarpals right away.”<sup>334</sup> Without adequate certified teachers, the school usually taught students to regurgitate the syllabus. “We managed to complete our homework, but we did not understand. The knowledge did not last. . . . You got to comprehend it fully,” Kelly recalled. Difficult assignments also discouraged Mrs. Chan from enjoying school. “I had no one to ask questions. And my mom always asked me to thread the plastic flowers,” Mrs. Chan said.<sup>335</sup> The education these interviewees went through did not engage them or form their dreams or goals for the future. Fei’s sharing captured the essence, “that time [we] didn’t have any dreams or goals.”<sup>336</sup>

### **Work as an Alternative to Education**

Even if they opted for education, some valued technical training more highly than academic schooling. Seeing work as an alternative to education was another pull factor drawing children into the workforce. Benny apprenticed in an ironware workshop shortly after he settled in Hong Kong in 1962. He commented, “I just wanted to learn skills that could set me off for the industry.” After all, he wanted to be independent and make a living for himself.<sup>337</sup> Rodney explained how technical education could be an alternative to education that promised a decent career prospect. He believed that there were two types of jobs. For the first type, one

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<sup>334</sup> “Mrs. Cheung,” interview by the author on 10<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>335</sup> “Mrs. Chan,” interview by the author on 17<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong; “Kelly,” interview by the author on 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>336</sup> “Fei,” interview by the author on 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>337</sup> “Benny,” interview by the author on 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.



needed to study well to get the jobs, such as the civil servants. “But the question is, are you good at studying? . . . Not everyone could be lawyers, IT technicians, doctors or accountants nowadays.” On the other hand, one could secure a job through technical training for a decent living. “With the necessary skills, you don’t have to worry about unemployment.”<sup>338</sup>

Some children preferred working rather than education because of the immediate rewards from work. Fei declined a scholarship offer and worked in an electronics factory. “At that time, I had graduated from primary school. . . . I did not think seriously about entering into the secondary school. . . . I took a summer job instead. . . . Perhaps I was a bit short-sighted. . . . I just wanted to earn quick money.”<sup>339</sup> Kelly found that the opportunity cost of education too high. She stressed that paying several dollars a month for the tuition fees was not a problem. “I just didn’t want to forego the wages, around a hundred dollars. I needed to feed my family,” she said.<sup>340</sup> Mrs. Chan enjoyed working better than education not just because of a fair working environment, but also for the reward. “Working was way happier than schooling. . . . I got no pocket money when I went to school. . . . I had it when I worked. I could even buy clothes for myself,” Mrs. Chan shared.<sup>341</sup> Some even picked up schooling only because there were no jobs left. After I60 was fired by the Chinese *dieda* master, he was

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<sup>338</sup> “Rodney,” interview by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>339</sup> “Fei,” interview by the author on 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>340</sup> “Kelly,” interview by the author on 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>341</sup> “Mrs. Chan,” interview by the author on 17<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

angry and indignant. “I decided not to work anymore. . . . I had no choice left and then I chose for schooling.”<sup>342</sup>

Back in nineteenth-century England, even though some wanted education for future welfare, “options were constrained by current levels of income.”<sup>343</sup> Hong Kong shared similarities with industrial England in this regard. Jamie believed that education is good, but learning skills could be a decent alternative as well under constraints. If one could not enter school or did not perform well, s/he could take up a skill-related job.<sup>344</sup> As Chapter 2 demonstrated, many children became apprentices hoping to learn skills and establish their own businesses afterwards. Ah Ma’s father sent Ah Ma to work as an apprentice because he thought Ah Ma was an average student at school. Becoming an apprentice featured less as a personal ambition but was a viable alternative to school. Tse Kin Wah shared the thought. “If you do not study well, try other industries, from garment-making to car repairing. You can pave the way for equal success. . . . In this world, there is always a way out.”<sup>345</sup> He also observed that his neighbours did not consider that “poor academic results mean a dead end, not even such a thought.”<sup>346</sup> Besides, work could also develop children’s character. In industrial England, parents often “commended child labour as character building.”<sup>347</sup>

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<sup>342</sup> “Imperceptibly 60 浮雲六十,” interview by the author on 28<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>343</sup> Humphries, *Childhood*, 179.

<sup>344</sup> “Jamie,” interview by the author on 18<sup>th</sup> August, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>345</sup> Zhang, *Meihelou ji*, 71.

<sup>346</sup> “Ah Ma,” interview by the author on 25<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>347</sup> Humphries, *Childhood*, 35, 178.

Similarly in Hong Kong, people in that generation did not stress that academic schooling was the only way out. Work could be an alternative to education.

### *School-Work Combinations*<sup>348</sup>

Even for those who could go to school, schooling was by no means their only duty. After they had come back from school, children worked. Law King Hei went to morning school when he was a primary school student. After he had finished his homework, he would help make light bulbs. “Except for binding wires, I did everything. Delivery . . . packaging, installing the Christmas lights. . . . I did every task, all the simple tasks.”<sup>349</sup> Simple tasks were not easy.

Take delivery as an example, Law needed to climb six storeys to deliver the goods, several times a day. Mary Lim’s mother pushed Mary to study hard, placing that as her top priority.

Mary would knit sweaters once she finished her assignments. “I would knit the little flowers that were attached to the sweater. . . . My siblings would work on other parts.” Although

Mary’s parents respected learning greatly, Mary joined her friends to look for summer jobs.

“We searched the streets and aimed for red posters for hiring.”<sup>350</sup> Schooling did not stop Law King Hei and Mary from working.

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<sup>348</sup> White, “Social Science,” 14.

<sup>349</sup> “Light Bulb Workshops in Homes on To Kwa Wan Road: the Production Process, Division of Labour and Industrial Safety,” Law King Hei, February 18, 2013, *Hong Kong Voices* Oral History Archives, Hong Kong Memory website, [www.hkmemory.hk](http://www.hkmemory.hk).

<sup>350</sup> “Mary Lim,” interview by the author on 26<sup>th</sup> April, 2015, Calgary.

Indeed, some interviewees were at school when they started to help out and work. Fei recalled that she worked during summer breaks. “My father wanted us to focus on schooling. He won’t allow us to work during the school terms.” During the summer holiday, she borrowed an identity card from her neighbour and worked in an electronics factory. Tse Kin Wah’s family sent him to factories during summer breaks as well. He worked in both a toy workshop and a garment factory. Later on, he earned money by tutoring.<sup>351</sup> Education and work could co-exist. That drew students into the workforce as well.

In other cases, students worked part-time for family businesses. Mr. Cheung, the principal of a rooftop school, witnessed “a pupil being yanked out of school when his parents require[d] him to pitch in at the family-run fruit stand.”<sup>352</sup> Children like Mrs. Leung were expected to help out. Mrs. Leung’s flat was a glove workshop, running 24 hours a day. From around 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., Mrs. Leung’s mother would oversee the glove production. Mrs. Leung would knit gloves at her home after school. Her father would continue manufacturing the gloves from around 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. To fit into the family business, education came second to work. Mrs. Leung delivered finished products to the contractors before she attended the afternoon school every day. “That was why I chose the afternoon session instead of the morning session,” Mrs. Leung explained.<sup>353</sup> Even for those who could afford

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<sup>351</sup> Zhang, *Meihelou ji*, 71.

<sup>352</sup> “Education, Schools – Roof-top schools,” 8 Aug. 1968 – 17 Jun. 1969, HKRS70-1-99, PRO, GRS.

<sup>353</sup> “Mrs. Leung,” interview by the author on 28<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

schooling, they would still work on their free time or during the summer holidays out of convention and peer influence. Seldom did they face disapproval when they worked.

### **Family Obligation**

Owing to the post-war social and economic conditions, various family circumstances and the lack of welfare legislation, most families in Hong Kong were poor. Filial motivations were the biggest pull factor drawing children into working. Hareven has investigated that poor working-class families in the United States in the late-nineteenth century relied on “the contributions of individual members and the marshalling of collective family resources.”<sup>354</sup>

As in Britain and the United States, families in Hong Kong could turn to the male breadwinners, the mothers and the children for contributions. As shown before, the adult male wages were not enough to support the whole family. Mothers’ and children’s contributions became the other options.

Mothers tried hard and “did many jobs, patching together seasonally and cyclically available work.” Yet, married women were also responsible for childcare and domestic work under the dominant familial divisions of labour in Britain. Therefore, they were constrained in the types of jobs they could do. Apart from working in the textile industries, they also engaged in badly paid jobs.<sup>355</sup> In Hong Kong, many married women would take up outwork.

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<sup>354</sup> Hareven, *Family Time*, 189.

<sup>355</sup> Humphries, *Childhood*, 103, 109, 188.

However, the employers took advantage of the relative immobility of these women and gave them little wages in return. Understandably, mothers' earnings proved meagre, unable to maintain the family well-being in Britain and in Hong Kong. The families had to turn to children for contributions. According to Sara Horrell and Jane Humphries, children consistently contributed more earnings to the families than did women in Britain. It had even made up the second largest portion of family income.<sup>356</sup> In Hong Kong, the notion of filial piety encouraged children to work and ameliorate the financial difficulties of their families.

When asked to sacrifice for the family, children in Britain and Hong Kong often excused their parents. The autobiographers often "lapse[d] into an atypical passive voice" to communicate "a general desire to exonerate parents from blame" and how work "seemed like inexorable forces." Few child labourers in industrial England believed that they had to work "to support shiftless or lazy guardians." Therefore, they denied "the charge of parental exploitation made by contemporary social commentators." Some former child labourers in Hong Kong shared the same thought. "I will not blame my parents. . . . We found it necessary to work," Jamie said, believing that some children consented to working for the sake of the families' survival.<sup>357</sup> Unlike industrial England, filial motivations explained why children in Hong Kong decided to work. Yet, some children gave the consent to work under debased

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<sup>356</sup> Sara Horrell and Jane Humphries, "Women's Labour Force Participation and the Transition to the Male Breadwinner Family, 1790-1865," *Economic History Review* 48.1 (February 1995): 89-117, as cited in Cunningham, "The Decline," 420.

<sup>357</sup> Humphries, *Childhood*, 177-8; "Jamie," interview by the author on 18<sup>th</sup> August, 2015, Hong Kong.

socioeconomic conditions. Some former child labourers, especially those who started working at six, had limited agency in making their choices. Although some interviewees claimed that they worked voluntarily, the notion of filial piety suggests more nuanced dynamics of the push and pull factors that influenced children's decisions to work.

Child work allowed children to be filial and respond to their families' needs and expectations. Often, children participated in outwork. In the Fan family, the eldest daughter, Ying, would "first finish all the work at home" once she came back home. Ying's brothers and sisters would take up different work procedures of packaging dried squid by themselves and form a "fluid production line." Children's participation helped families to "hand in the stock quicker and get the wages faster."<sup>358</sup> Since child work could help relieve the family's burden, filial motivations pulled children into working.

### *"Just to Help Out"*

In southern United States in the 1920s and 1930s, "helping out" in the family was the children's first step to enter the labour workforce. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall and her co-authors studied how "helping out" prepared children to work in the southern cotton mills in the United States. "Helping," seen as "a family affair," could be "a form of apprenticeship by which basic skills and habits were transmitted to each new generation." When Ethel Faucette

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<sup>358</sup> Zhang, *Meihelou ji*, 51.

brought lunch for her elder sister, she “learned how to work her job” while her sister was eating.<sup>359</sup> Although I did not regard domestic helping as labour in a more formal sense, these experiences helped pave the way for child labour more formally. In Hong Kong, Kelly Choi learned how to stitch sweaters when she helped her mother out at age 8 or 10 “just to help out.” Kelly “assembled different parts of a sweater. . . . My mom taught me. . . . It wasn’t difficult at all.” When Kelly grew up, she worked in a similar field, the garment factory. Although the skills were not exactly the same in the two jobs, the early stitching experience prepared her to work in a garment factory. When she attended a job interview, she always told the managers, “I know how to do it.”<sup>360</sup>

To quote Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “Outside pressure was often unnecessary” to children in southern United States in the 1920s and 1930s. Children “realized the importance of their labour to the family’s well-being and took it upon themselves to get a job.”<sup>361</sup> In Hong Kong, “Everyone got to take a job and work. It was what we should do. All of us needed to hold the family together,” Hing remarked. Knowing how hard their parents toiled served as another driving force for work. Minnie recalled, “My mom kept embroidering for the whole day under dim light. Sometimes I got to deliver the products to Garden Company in dawn.” She did not bother to ask if she could go to school. She went straight to work. Sometimes, she babysat her neighbour’s children. Mrs. Kong made a similar note. “I really saw my parents

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<sup>359</sup> Hall, *Like a Family*, 61.

<sup>360</sup> “Kelly Choi,” interview by the author on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>361</sup> Hall, *Like a Family*, 63.



working very hard to feed us. . . . Because of that, I was willing to sacrifice. . . . Thus, it is filial to serve your parents.” With a heart to serve, Mrs. Kong did not resent her parents.

Family needs drove Mrs. Leung (Female; Year of birth: 1963; Age first worked: 8-9; Source of pseudonym: N/A; Recruited through personal connections; Place of birth: Hong Kong) to work and contributed to the family economy. “We did not work for selfish gains. . . . We worked to meet our family needs.”<sup>362</sup>

Their contributions found expression in how the former child labourers spent their money. Former child star Michael Lai recalled that “all the money went directly to his parents. My role was to finish my acts the whole film.” To reward their son, Michael’s parents gave him small gifts instead of money. He continued, “My dad would buy me a bicycle or a radio, . . . that was it, no concept of money at all.”<sup>363</sup> Like Michael Lai, Mrs. Leung, Maggie and Minnie would turn their earnings in “its original form” to their parents without hesitation. In return, their parents would give them back pocket money of around 30 cents to them. Apprenticing in a printing company in the late 1960s, Albert also handed in all his wages to his mother. “Sometimes I had to borrow the wages in advance for my mom,” Albert remarked. Even though Grass Cow received no food and transportation stipends from his family, he voluntarily gave “at least half of the wages to my beloved mother.”<sup>364</sup> As “each

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<sup>362</sup> “Minnie,” interview by the author on 8<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong; “Mrs. Kong,” interview by the author on 28<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong; “Mrs. Leung,” interview by the author on 28<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>363</sup> Wang, *Tongxing*, 44.

<sup>364</sup> “Grass Cow 草牛,” interview by the author on 27<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

family has a different story,” some children reluctantly handed in their wages to their families, being forced to contribute to the family economy. Hing remembered how her peers lied, using deception as a strategy. “I saw some of my colleagues altered the figure [of the wages] on the salary bag. Then they could save up for themselves.”<sup>365</sup> Similar to colonial Hong Kong, child labourers in inter-war English Canada also contributed to their families. According to historian Neil Sutherland, part-time earnings from children in English Canada in the inter-war period “formed an important and sometimes an essential part of family economies.”<sup>366</sup> Like those in Hong Kong, they would hand in their wages to their parents.

Canadians in the Inter-war period also fulfilled their family obligation by being independent financially, not burdening the famished family economies. I60 explained, “The mentality was that you planned for yourself. . . . You got to be independent.” After his mother’s death, Mr. Kwok eventually moved out from his home. He even found shabby accommodation for himself in rope workshop and in hostel provided by teahouse.<sup>367</sup> Maggie’s eldest brother left the family at age 10 or 11 and never returned. Her brother severed any connection to his family and took no money from his family.<sup>368</sup>

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<sup>365</sup> “Maggie,” interview by the author on 2<sup>nd</sup> August, 2015, Hong Kong; “Albert,” interview by the author on 26<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong; “Grass Cow 草牛,” interview by the author on 27<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong; “Hing,” interview by the author on 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>366</sup> Neil Sutherland, *Growing Up: Childhood in English Canada from the Great War to the Age of Television* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), as cited in Cunningham, “The Decline,” 423; Sutherland, *Growing Up*, 131-2.

<sup>367</sup> “Imperceptibly 60 浮雲六十,” interview by the author on 28<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong; “Mr. Kwok,” interview by the author on 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>368</sup> “Maggie,” interview by the author on 2<sup>nd</sup> August, 2015, Hong Kong.

Facing huge financial pressure, many families in Hong Kong decided to ask their children for contributions as they made more money than their mothers. Understanding the family needs, children in both Britain and Hong Kong would not blame their parents and felt obliged to help out. Even for those who did not help out fulfilled their family obligation by not further straining their families' household income. Particularly in Hong Kong, the Confucian emphasis on filial piety reinforced children's choice, pulling them to work for their families.

### **Social Norms**

In industrial England, "custom and practice, the conventions of the community and their own experience guided some parents."<sup>369</sup> "Limited imagination" and economic constraints aside, the belief that "work was better than idleness" was commonly perceived by many in Britain.

This was also a common belief in industrial Europe as well. According to Rahikainen, "work in factories was the best remedy for 'the idleness' of urban boys."<sup>370</sup> The people in Hong

Kong also agreed. The favourable social norms pulled children into becoming child workers.

Even though To Sui Wan worked over 10 hours a day, she believed work was better than wandering on the street. "It gave the children who couldn't go to school something to work

on," she commented. "Child labour wasn't a bad thing," she concluded, adding that child

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<sup>369</sup> Humphries, *Childhood*, 178.

<sup>370</sup> Marjatta Rahikainen, "Children and 'the Right to Factory Work': Child Labour Legislation in Nineteenth-Century Finland," *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 46.1 (2001): 41-62, as cited in Rahikainen, *Centuries*, 153.

labour was common.<sup>371</sup> After all, To Sui Wan, an immigrant herself, was grateful for the chance to work in Hong Kong and feed her siblings living in Mainland China. Furthermore, work could keep children from mischief. Mr. Kwok recalled how he saw his peers going astray. “I have seen too many of them,” Mr. Kwok said. “They smoked and took drugs. Fighting happened sometimes.”<sup>372</sup> Child work was appealing because it helped keep the schoolless children from entangling in illegal activities.

Mrs. Cheung’s child work experience prevented her from committing wrongdoing. Working helped her realise how decadent people could be. “I have thought of leaving my parents when I was very small. . . . But when I started working, I saw how decayed people became,” deterring her from following their paths. Besides, she started to appreciate how hard her parents had worked. “Later on, when I worked in the electronics factory, I started to understand my parents more, and hence to forgive them,” she said and gave up the thoughts of leaving her family. Such a change also impacted on her siblings as well. If Mrs. Cheung set on a wrong path, her younger siblings would follow suit. “My brothers and sisters would go astray as well. . . . I am the eldest of all. That is a matter of fact,” Mrs. Cheung commented. To some child labourers, child work could relieve children from wandering on the streets and becoming involved in illegal activities.

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<sup>371</sup> “Child Work Experience in Woollen Knitting Factories. Working Condition and Salary of a Child Labour,” To Sui Wan, July 25, 2009, *Hong Kong Voices* Oral History Archives, Hong Kong Memory website, [www.hkmemory.hk](http://www.hkmemory.hk).

<sup>372</sup> Mr. Kwok,” interview by the author on 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

Very few child labourers simply regarded work as a proper after-school activity. C.S. was one of the lucky few. C.S. threaded plastic flowers with friends, “I assembled different parts of artificial flowers and did other outwork as well. . . . That was fun to me. . . . I got to mingle with my friends.”<sup>373</sup> Mrs. Kong also worked with her friends in the toy workshop not for money at one point. “I participated to . . . . I worked with my neighbours and really, got no money from that.”<sup>374</sup> Such a perception also has to do with the changing conception of childhood, which will be covered in Chapter 4.

This Chapter argued that child labour in Hong Kong shared similarities with Britain during the Industrial Revolution. Poverty due to social conditions and family circumstances, limited education access and the lack of poor relief in Hong Kong pushed children into the workforce. As in industrial England, these explanations were “not necessarily incompatible with one another.”<sup>375</sup> For instance, the schooling laws affected the decisions made by families while cultural values might reinforced their decisions. All these reasons played a role in child labour in Hong Kong. However, poverty was the core reason pushing children to work, even at the expense of being educated. The quote on nineteenth-century England captures the essence of why children worked in Hong Kong, “The dominant factor in the child labour of the era appears to have been the cold, gray force of poverty.”<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>373</sup> “C.S.,” interview by the author on 27<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>374</sup> “Mrs. Kong,” interview by the author on 28<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>375</sup> Cunningham, “The Decline,” 418-9.

<sup>376</sup> Humphries, *Childhood*, 179.

## Chapter 4

# Childhood and Child Work

Driven by the force of poverty, many interviewees would associate childhood with child work. Being part of a family, they helped out and relieved their families from dire financial situations. Despite various accounts given by human rights advocates, employers and the government, former child labourers have their own views on child labour itself.<sup>377</sup> This chapter aims to present how the former child labourers perceive childhood and child work. As each interviewee perceives their past differently, this chapter attempts to offer “less a grid of standard experiences than a horizon of shared possibilities, real or imagined.”<sup>378</sup>

## Assessing Child Work

### *Child Work and Exploitation*

Although child labour is often termed as exploitative in the past and present, few of my interviewees stated that child work was exploitative.<sup>379</sup> There were several interviewees who strongly defended child work, but they were mostly the non-child workers. The former child labourers tended to be silent or give comments that child work was the lesser of two evils.

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<sup>377</sup> For instance, please see news coverage on child labour, “Toy Industry,” 18 Jul. 1964 – 23 Dec. 1970, HKRS70-1-394-2, PRO, GRS.

<sup>378</sup> Portelli, *Valle Giulia*, 88.

<sup>379</sup> It is worth noting that the sampling group might affect the information I gathered. If some former child labourers saw their child work experience to be exploitative or extremely unpleasant, they might choose not to be interviewed. That might explain why many interviewees find child work acceptable. Partly because of this, I do not aim to represent the experience of all child labourers, but only a range of experiences shared by some former child labourers.

Reflecting upon child work, several interviewees, especially the non-child labourers, stressed that child work in Hong Kong was not forced labour. Not a former child labourer himself, Ken differentiated child labour from illegal labour. “One must distinguish child labour from illicit work in the black market,” Ken emphasised. Children were by no means forced by employers to work. They decided to work, reluctant or not. “These child labourers work voluntarily. . . . Everyone [including the employers] got a hard life. It was voluntary. If you are willing to work, work then. If not, that’s fine.” Ken repeated that employers seldom coerced children to work.<sup>380</sup>

Moreover, Ken believed that child labour was not illegal labour because the employers made the terms of employment clear. “For illegal labour, the employers would not disclose the wages to workers. Contrarily, [the employers in the 1950s and 1960s] stated the terms clearly. You could only get such a wage, or two meals a day. Either you could take the job or not take it.” As the workers accepted the terms of employment, Ken did not regard child work as illegal labour. Rodney agreed, “the wages were not illegal money. They let you know from the outset. . . . You can’t compare [child work to forced labour].”<sup>381</sup>

Since workers took up the jobs voluntarily and the terms of employment were clear, Ken, Rodney and Mr. Cheung (Male; Year of birth: 1952; Age first worked: N/A; Source of pseudonym: N/A; Recruited through personal connections; Place of birth: /) did not consider

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<sup>380</sup> “Ken Chau,” interview by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*; “Rodney,” interview by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

“child labour” exploitation. To non-child labourer Mr. Cheung, the term “child labour” did not sound right for it denotes exploitation. “The international usage of the term differs from that in Hong Kong. On the international scale, child labour is linked to unlawful acts and illegal labour. We did not consider work as sweat labour,” Mr. Cheung explained.<sup>382</sup> Equating “child labour” with illegal labour, Rodney shared that people of his generation would not use the term “child labour.” Ken disagreed with the term “child labour” as well because he regarded it an exaggeration. To quote Ken, “child labour wasn’t about exploitation. . . . It was the natural product of poverty.”<sup>383</sup>

It was true that in some cases, children begged for jobs with the help of their parents. Maggie hunted for jobs in 1958 at the age of 10, “I looked for jobs in my neighbourhood, the ironware workshops. The owner’s wife questioned me, ‘you are so young, how can you work?’ I replied, ‘Please, have pity on us.’” After meeting Maggie’s mother, the owner’s wife decided to give Maggie a job. “Since you are diligent and dutiful, and [it’s] good for you to work in your neighbourhood. OK. If you are willing to work, I will hire you.” Maggie accepted the offer and started to work more than 12 hours a day for HK\$1. Although Maggie was happy and grateful, she admitted that her childhood was arduous. Without any coercion from her employer, Maggie still felt compelled to “meet the imminent needs” and work.<sup>384</sup>

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<sup>382</sup> “Mr. Cheung,” interview by the author on 11<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>383</sup> “Rodney,” interview by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong; “Ken Chau,” interview by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>384</sup> “Maggie,” interview by the author on 2<sup>nd</sup> August, 2015, Hong Kong.



Sadly, some employers exploited child workers. Being the eldest sister among six siblings, Minnie worked as a casual labourer for two to three years at the age of 6 in 1953. She decided to learn sewing from a small home-based workshop, hoping that she would find a decent job afterwards. On the condition of paying HK\$5-10 deposit, Minnie managed to find an artisan who promised to teach her the skills. Looking back, Minnie realised that the working environment was far worse than normal home-based workshops. “I first worked in a seven-storey building in Tai Kok Tsui. The room was very dark and cramped. When I sat there my leg could not even reach the paddle.” The employer did not keep her promises either. Instead of teaching Minnie the skills, the employer simply asked Minnie to sew the clothes in her own way. “You got to finish it for free for an entire month.” Minnie felt like “learning” meant free labour. Minnie looked forward to working there for the second month and earning her wages. However, the employer fired Minnie after taking advantage of one month of free labour. “That way, the boss got free labour. They needed to start paying salaries from the second month onwards,” Minnie explained.<sup>385</sup>

Despite such a bad work experience, Minnie still looked for job opportunities because of her family conditions. Immediately afterwards, Minnie sought to work in another home-based workshop in Cheung Sha Wan. This time, Minnie was not fired after apprenticing for the first month. “I was so glad that they let me stay,” Minnie recalled, as she would get her

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<sup>385</sup> “Minnie,” interview by the author on 8<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

share from the second month onwards. Unfortunately, the employer stalled Minnie's wages. Minnie stayed on for the third month and encouraged herself, "Now, they should give me back the salaries they owed me." Minnie's hope was shattered when her boss announced, "We do not need you anymore" at the end of the third month. "The most painful experience was not getting the salaries back," Minnie said sadly. Not only did she worked for free for one month, but she was cheated into working for free for three months. Although Minnie did not describe it as "exploitative," she was outraged.<sup>386</sup> This clearly shows that exploitation existed back then, as exploitation is "a specific social relationship in which one person profits from another or gains advantages at his expense."<sup>387</sup> The employers took advantage of Minnie at her expense. From the interviews I conducted, I observed that unfair treatment occurred more often to those born in the early 1940s and worked in the early 1950s. Born in 1943, Grass Cow also shared Minnie's anger against the employers. He commented, "Only the boss had the say."<sup>388</sup> Despite their grudges against employers, Grass Cow and Minnie still chose to work due to poverty.

None of the former child labourers in my interviews raised the issue of exploitation before being asked. Yet, silence did not necessarily mean that unfair treatment did not exist. It could be a sign of discomfort or reluctance. Although Mr. Kwok did not talk about

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<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>387</sup> Liebel, *A Will*, 196.

<sup>388</sup> "Grass Cow 草牛," interview by the author on 27<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

exploitation, his work experiences in the teahouse and the food-manufacturing factory were not satisfactory. Even though interviewees stressed that they found job satisfaction through notions of filial piety or friendships, they could still be mistreated at the same time. For instance, Mrs. Kong genuinely viewed work as a fun time with her neighbours. She experienced little hardship painting dolls. However, the employer paid no wages to her and profited from it, buying his family an advanced refrigerator. Their work could be exploitative in an objective sense even when children did not consider child work exploitative subjectively.

### *Child Work as Hope and Opportunities*

Many former child labourers regarded jobs as offering hope and opportunities. In Maggie's eyes, jobs gave many immigrants a chance to provide for themselves back into the decades. "You could find a lot of jobs at that time. . . . The manufacturing industry could help the people," she stressed. In contrast, Maggie observed that Hong Kong does not have light industries anymore, making it harder for Hong Kong to cater for the immigrants. Mrs. Cheung and Magnolia also believed that without the manufacturing industries, it was hard to feed oneself. Moreover, the manufacturing industries gave hope to those who scored low at school. They could learn a set of skills to help themselves. "The factories let people work on handicrafts, and gave them hope. 'True, I cannot study well, but I can become a technician',"

Mrs. Cheung recounted. None of the informants ever thought of suicide if they scored low in school. This contrasts sharply with the situation in Hong Kong now. In the academic year of 2015/16 alone, twenty-two students as young as 11 years old committed suicide due to academic pressure. Back then, “If you do not study well, you could enter into other industries, whether it is garment making or auto repairs. You can walk your own way. No one would despise those who do not study well,” Tse Kin Wah remarked.<sup>389</sup> The key lay in working hard. “If you work hard, you still have hope,” Mrs. Cheung summarised her thoughts. Considering the atmosphere in the 1950s and 1960s, most informants stressed the positive sides of child work.<sup>390</sup>

The interviewees see child work as opportunities instead of sweat labour. When I asked if the government should set legislation against child labour in the 1950s and 1960s, 16 of them did not support this idea and 5 interviewees stood firmly against any child labour legislation. Kelly believed that any regulations would bring more harm than good to the children and their families. Kelly argued, “Legislation would affect countless families. The government should not regulate child labour. If so, how could they eke out a living?”<sup>391</sup> Hing also believed that any legislation would be a blow not just to children, but also to innumerable families in Hong Kong. According to Hing, “children would lose their chance to

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<sup>389</sup> Zhang, *Meihelou ji*, 71.

<sup>390</sup> “Maggie,” interview by the author on 2<sup>nd</sup> August, 2015, Hong Kong; “Mrs. Cheung,” interview by the author on 10<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>391</sup> “Kelly Choi,” interview by the author on 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

help their family's household economy." Mr. Cheung understood the good intention behind child labour laws. However, he did not see the laws fit for Hong Kong at that time. In the 1950s and 1960s, "we strived to make ends meet. . . . If you were still starving, would you think about your own rights?" Child labour laws protect children's rights, but could have harmed their survival, which was their top priority.<sup>392</sup>

Fleeing from the labour inspectors, an experience shared by many former child labourers, epitomises the preference for minimal legislation. To curb the practice of child labour, the government sent inspectors to check if all workers met the minimal age of employment. Employees had to present their child identity cards without photos for inspection. Those underage labourers would borrow an identity card to pretend that they met the minimum age requirement. Mary Lim could not help but laugh when she recalled reporting the wrong name to the employer. "Out of natural response, I told the manager that I was called Mary Lim. And then, I realised that Wong was the surname printed on the identity card I borrowed," Mary recollected. Luckily, Mary managed to get by.<sup>393</sup>

Many former child labourers made every effort to evade inspection. Since the workshop Mrs. Kong worked in was located near the factory area, the government knew of its existence and therefore checked it often. To avoid the inspectors, Mrs. Kong often worked in "places without air-conditioning," as buildings out of the way and not easily detected often

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<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.*; "Mrs. Chan," interview by the author on 10<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong; "Hing," interview by the author on 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong; "Mr. Cheung," interview by the author on 17<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>393</sup> "Mary Lim," interview by the author on 26<sup>th</sup> April, 2015, Calgary.

happened not to have air-conditioning. “‘Hey, escape!’ When we heard that, we would dash to the staircase or the streets. Even the toilets proved dangerous because the inspectors would check that. We would be dead meat if they found us.”<sup>394</sup> To keep the job, Mrs. Kong endured the unsatisfactory work conditions, in order to avoid every inspection. Similarly, Ah Ma tried to escape. However, Ah Ma was a newcomer and therefore knew little about the factory setting. When the labour inspectors stormed in, they caught Ah Ma. His employer scolded him immediately afterwards. “Can’t you be smarter? Don’t be an idiot! I hired you because you are small, you can run fast,” Ah Ma recalled. Later on, he did become smarter and ran to the staircases or shopping centres. “There were many people in the shopping malls. The labour inspectors couldn’t find you,” Ah Ma explained. He continued, “The employer made it clear from the outset. . . . If we were caught, we would lose our wages that day. . . . If the labour inspectors caught us twice, we would be fired.” Simply put, he would lose his wages and job if he was caught.<sup>395</sup>

Taking the constraints at that time into consideration, they would opt for ways to survive rather than safeguarding their rights. To quote Mr. Cheung, children knew that “there must be sacrifices” in and for the family. Mr. Cheung recollected how one of his primary schoolmates accepted the fate to work and felt no pressure in examinations. “The children understood that they must work, they gave themselves up for alternatives,” Mr. Cheung

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<sup>394</sup> “Mrs. Kong,” interview by the author on 28<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>395</sup> “Ah Ma,” interview by the author on 25<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

explained. Undoubtedly, the working conditions might violate first-world labour standards, but some former child labourers endured them because “back then you only had the right to survive,” not “human rights.” Mr. Cheung explained, “The most important thing is income. With income you can have household expenses.”<sup>396</sup>

Maggie agreed that survival came first. As she has commented, “You have no choice. When the circumstances came, you got to work.” Maggie worked with her parents and contributed to the household economy. “My mom used to iron clothes to earn money. We would go collect clothes for her to wash as well.” While her mother was working, her father hawked and “sold congee as well as noodles on the street.” Still unable to provide for her family, Maggie was proactive in seeking jobs, even though it would deny her chances of schooling. “I feel like everyone should shoulder responsibilities for themselves and their families,” Maggie stressed. Because of her sacrifice, her family could feed all the kids. Maggie’s three other siblings could even graduate from primary school.<sup>397</sup>

### **Self-Help Mentality**

“Never enter the threshold of government organization when alive, never walk into hell when dead,” said Mr. Cheung, manifesting the mentality of relying on oneself. Janet’s view on getting help exemplifies self-help mentality. As a member of a farming family, Janet also

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<sup>396</sup> “Mr. Cheung,” interview by the author on 10<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>397</sup> “Maggie,” interview by the author on 2<sup>nd</sup> August, 2015, Hong Kong.

reared livestock for her family. She was grateful that the owner of Kadoorie farm lent the piglet to her family. “It wasn’t like nowadays when they only give you the money. . . . This way allowed us to support ourselves through our own hands. . . . Both parties were happy and we could meet our needs through our labour. We were honest. Never had we thought of gaining money through dishonest means,” Janet explained. She also considered asking for help shameful. To quote Janet, “We were tough in facing adversity. . . . If you helped me, I would be grateful. . . . But we really thought asking for social welfare a shame. . . . We had not thought of cajoling money from the government.”

Many interviewees were also proud not to rely on their families. I60 worked as a child not just to repay his mother’s debt, but also to maintain his living. He prided himself, “I earned money myself. I didn’t take a cent from my mom for tuition fee or clothing. . . . I earned that all on my own.” Maggie’s eldest brother left his home and supported himself through his work. He never returned for help.<sup>398</sup> These interviewees reveal that child work, which was not always pleasant, was a solid expression of how these children took up their own responsibility to sustain their living. They respected their work experiences. Some were even proud of it as it proved that they were independent and able to provide for themselves.

In other words, residents seldom sought help from the government, pushed for social welfare reforms or demanded workers’ rights. This mentality offers a grass-root perspective

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<sup>398</sup> “Imperceptibly 60 浮雲六十,” interview by the author on 28<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong; “Maggie,” interview by the author on 2<sup>nd</sup> August, 2015, Hong Kong.



on the colonial principle of minimal social welfare commitments. In the post-war period, the government decided its primary concern would be promoting “the economic well-being of the colony rather than the social welfare of its people.” The family, voluntary agencies and the free market should provide welfare for residents. The principle of fees for welfare services applied to them, especially the “underserving poor.”<sup>399</sup> Literature has placed much weight on the elite colonial governing mentality. This self-help mentality narrated by the interviewees evidences a mutual symbiotic relationship from the grass roots. It also sheds light on the debate of political participation among inhabitants in Hong Kong.

Self-help mentality provides an alternative view to Lau Siu-Kai’s utilitarian familism, which attempts to explain political apathy of residents. According to Lau, utilitarian familism serves as a theoretical framework that explains “the normative and behavioural tendency of an individual Chinese to place his familial interests above the interests of society [and] the furtherance of his familial interests is the primary consideration.” Material interests became their top priority.<sup>400</sup> He then argued that the people in Hong Kong felt a sense of “political powerlessness” and therefore refrained from political participation.<sup>401</sup> However, Lock Chung-sum has demonstrated that although the Chinese value family highly, another reason to explain the political view of Hong Kong Chinese was “the authoritarian Colonial structure

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<sup>399</sup> McLaughlin, “A Residual Welfare Regime,” 110.

<sup>400</sup> Siu-Kai Lau, “Chinese Familism in an Urban-Industrial Setting: The Case of Hong Kong,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 43.3 (November 1981): 978.

<sup>401</sup> Wai-Man Lam, *Understanding the Political Culture of Hong Kong: The Paradox of Activism and Depoliticization* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), 14-5.

which discouraged the public from participating in politics.”<sup>402</sup> My interviewees suggest that a sense of political powerlessness was not the main reason leading to little political participation. Rather, it stems from their determination to rely upon themselves, not asking for any kinds of welfare from the government through active political participation.

Although the Hong Kong Chinese did not seem to participate in politics actively, they involved themselves heavily in their community. Self-help differed from being selfish. Many interviewees were generous in helping their neighbours and benefited from the generosity of their friends. Despite being extremely poor, Janet’s fellow villagers shared their red-bean congee with others. “We were poor, but we took care of each other. We would introduce our acquaintances for jobs. . . . After all, only by gathering everyone’s strength could we survive,” Janet stressed. Helping each other out was not a thing of the past. The spirit of generosity still impacts on some interviewees’ lives. Mrs. Leung loves to help others, participating in many charitable organisations. In retrospect, Mrs. Leung said that “It’s different from the current generation. I would help others regardless of any kinds of gains.” She also baby-sat her neighbour’s son free of charge. When asked why she baby-sat for free, she answered, “I had the time and the ability. Why don’t I help out?”<sup>403</sup>

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<sup>402</sup> Chung-sum Lock, “To Live and Work in Peace and Contentment: The Political Attitudes of Hong Kong Chinese, with Special Reference to the China Factor, from the Late 1940s to the Late 1950s,” (master’s thesis: University of Hong Kong, 1993), 4-5.

<sup>403</sup> “Janet,” interview by the author on 7<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong; “Mrs. Leung,” interview by the author on 28<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

## Child Work and Personal Reflection

In retrospect, many informants found that they benefited from working as a child. For one, the experience moulded them to be a stronger person, solving problems on their own. “We had experienced the difficult lives. . . . We came to terms with how tough lives could be,” Rodney recalled.<sup>404</sup> Tse believed that his work experience encouraged him to devise methods to tackle problems. “The method I use is to try all means, think about how to solve it. . . . After all, no one will help you. You got to change if one method doesn’t work,” Tse recalled.<sup>405</sup> Such a self-help mentality also impacted their trajectory of life. After I60 graduated from secondary school, he ran a plastic factory himself. As he was the only person in charge, he learned all things related to his business from scratch. Not only did he obtain all driving licences from the transportation department within three years, he undertook courses on electrical engineering and mathematics to ensure all machines ran properly. He concluded, “I could maintain the factory all by myself.”<sup>406</sup>

For another, the interviewees believed that child work experiences instilled in them a positive work attitude. Hing was thankful for her job. Therefore, she would always work extra. Hing explained, “I would be satisfied to get a job. . . . I would always go an extra mile. Sometimes, I would help others, too. After all, what you have learned is truly yours.”<sup>407</sup>

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<sup>404</sup> “Rodney,” interview by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>405</sup> Zhang, *Meihelou ji*, 71-2.

<sup>406</sup> “Imperceptibly 60 浮雲六十,” interview by the author on 28<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>407</sup> “Hing,” interview by the author 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

Based on her child work experience, Mrs. Cheung realised that there was no reaping without sowing. Whenever she had a learning opportunity, she would seize it. “When my senior instructed me, I would do it all. No pain, no gain. You must work hard like a cow. If you don’t give, you will get nothing,” Mrs. Cheung stressed. Working hard is a highly-prized work ethic for her.<sup>408</sup> Kelly’s child work experience also prompted her to do the extras for her family and the company. “When I worked at home, I was helping my parents. I had tried hard to contribute. . . . I won’t mind working more than I have to,” Kelly commented. She still carries such a work attitude through her mid-forties and fifties. Working as a clerk in a primary school starting from the 1990s, Kelly would work overnight voluntarily to learn how to master her jobs well. “I would work late and figured out the work myself. . . . Even if that was out of my job duties, I would still do it,” Kelly continued.<sup>409</sup> Child work experience undoubtedly planted the idea to go an extra mile in their hearts, believing that it would not hurt to work more.

The interviewees often went back to a recurring theme of job satisfaction. Mrs. Cheung stressed that you could develop your interests in your job. Getting a dream job was not the only road to job fulfilment. Even though most interviewees picked up whatever jobs on offer or those that guaranteed the highest pay, some argued that they enjoyed what they were doing. Many self-help books would suggest that readers pursue their wildest dreams for

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<sup>408</sup> “Mrs. Cheung,” interview by the author on 10<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>409</sup> “Kelly Choi,” interview by the author on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2015, Hong Kong.

job satisfaction. Yet, these former child labourers could still enjoy their work that did not seem appealing at the start. Mrs. Cheung recalled how her colleagues in the electronic-ware factory had changed. “The boys gradually picked up an interest in the production process. . . . They would take their free time to study that and slowly acquiring an interest in their job. Later, they became the technicians.”<sup>410</sup> Mr. Kwok did not specifically say that he enjoyed his child work. However, he argued that he started enjoying his job as a technician in the electric company later in his twenties. At first, he did not enter the field out of interest but solely for material security. “My wife’s relative referred me to work in an electric company because of stable income. . . . That was why I got that job,” Mr. Kwok explained. He wanted to work in the air wire division but was later assigned to work in the landline team. “I really disliked working for the landline system at the start. . . . Later on, colleagues in our team would compete for speed, quality and the presentation of our work. I started enjoying what I did,” Mr. Kwok continued. Both Mrs. Cheung and Mr. Kwok suggested that the circumstances at that time limited their work choices. Yet, it could never keep them from enjoying the work. Mr. Kwok explained, “Interest is built through cultivation.”<sup>411</sup>

### **Sanctification of Childhood<sup>412</sup>**

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<sup>410</sup> “Mrs. Cheung,” interview by the author on 10<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>411</sup> “Mr. Kwok,” interview by the author on 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>412</sup> Based on Zelizer’s idea on childhood, Cunningham used this term to describe the changing perception on childhood. Cunningham, “The Decline,” 424.

Although the interviewees did benefit from their child work experience, many rejected the idea of sending their children to work. “Well, the world has improved,” Mr. Cheung and others commented, hinting that child work is “a thing of the past.”<sup>413</sup> Ken also put it bluntly that child work was “far too tough for children. If circumstances allowed, children were better not to work.” Jamie added, “no child would work simply because s/he had nothing to do! We did not work just for leisure, but for wages.” To Minnie, volunteering rather than working for wages proved a better choice to build her children’s character. Even though I60 showed the least distaste at sending his family for work, he still hesitated. “Um. . . . I don’t want my children to be idle. They shouldn’t know nothing. We need to teach them and help them learn. But that shouldn’t be child work,” he commented. To him, childhood is a time for education, leisure and developing one’s mind. However, the circumstances in the 1950s and 1960s prevented them from making such a choice.<sup>414</sup> To most of them, child work was the lesser of two evils, serving their interests the best under various constraints.

The changing perception of childhood, likely, explains why the former child labourers support child work for their generation on the one hand, and oppose sending their children for work on the other hand. Based on sociologist Viviana Zelizer’s research, Cunningham has argued that “the process of sanctification of childhood” explained the decreasing supply of

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<sup>413</sup> “Mr. Cheung,” interview by the author on 10<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong. The phrase “a thing of the past” is the title of a book: Michael Lavalette, *A Thing of the Past? Child Labour in Britain in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999).

<sup>414</sup> “Ken Chau,” interview by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong; “Jamie,” interview by the author on 18<sup>th</sup> August, 2015, Hong Kong; “Imperceptibly 60 浮雲六十,” interview by the author on 28<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

child labourers in industrial England. Sanctification of childhood means that the value of children is not based on their contributions to the household economy, but “the emotional gratification they [bring] to adults.” This implies the “romantic conception of child as properly dependent and protected.” Rather than contributing to the household economy, children become “the beneficiaries of adult earnings.”<sup>415</sup> This process is related to the changing class perspective. As people gather wealth and move into a different class, their perception of childhood changes as well. However, sanctification of childhood only reflects a general, gradual change and varies by race, class and regions.

In Hong Kong, the increasing wealth of the society and the idea of birth control have been pivotal in accelerating the changing view on childhood. As Jamie has pointed out, Hong Kong has become a more affluent society than in the 1950s and 1960s. “Nowadays, the parents have adequate resources to spend on children. . . . If the children want to play the piano etc., parents are willing to pay for that as long as they can afford it,” Jamie remarked.

As Chapter 3 mentioned in passing, family planning only gained currency after 1965.

Families bear fewer children nowadays, as in western countries.<sup>416</sup> Families could therefore divide the available income among fewer children. Each child could have more resources, making sanctification of childhood possible. The changing perception of childhood also

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<sup>415</sup> Zelizer, *Pricing*, as cited in Cunningham, “The Decline,” 424; Cunningham, “The Decline,” 418, 425.

<sup>416</sup> “Jamie,” interview by the author on 18<sup>th</sup> August, 2015, Hong Kong; Zelizer, *Pricing*, 222-3.

makes families more willing to spend money on their children. Both societal norms and parents' attitude influence one another.

### **The Lesser of Two Evils**

Tough and demanding as child work was, nothing came close to the time in China before Maggie left for Hong Kong. Maggie's father left for Hong Kong in 1958 while his family lived in a county in Guangdong. "To escape [from China] counted as the hardest part in my life," she affirmed. "Even if you were willing to toil, you could earn little for your family." One needed a state-issued coupon for everything, be that rice, pork, fish or shoes. The materials ran short. "Rice was running out half way through the month. We had to eat congee instead of rice," Maggie recalled. Therefore, she always found herself hungry. "I didn't feel I was 70 per cent full." Dishes with vegetables would be a luxury.<sup>417</sup>

Her daily life was way tougher than working as a child. Since her mother worked till dusk for the commune, Maggie had to baby-sit her younger brothers and sisters. To carry them around, Maggie walked bare foot on the black cement road. "That was scorching," she sighed. Maggie's mother realised that she could bear it no longer when a tragedy happened. "That was when my brother died at age 7." Maggie paused. They knew her brother had been

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<sup>417</sup> "Maggie," interview by the author on 2<sup>nd</sup> August, 2015, Hong Kong.



sick for some time. Yet, they could afford no medicine or food. “[My brother’s death] sent a clear message to my mom: we must leave. If not, my mom might lose us all.”<sup>418</sup>

“No matter what, leave here first.” Such a mind-set pushed the family to leave Guangdong. Like everyone else, they kept begging the Immigration Department day and night, until they let them leave. Maggie’s family was so poor that they only brought with them a cotton quilt to Hong Kong. Enduring life in an impoverished county in China, Maggie found life in Hong Kong fair. Life in Hong Kong was tough, “but at least it was a free market,” Maggie commented. “If you were willing to work, you could find a job,” and eventually make ends meet. Even though Maggie’s family went penniless by the end of each month, she did not mind it. “It was alright to be without money” as long as she had the choice to feed herself.<sup>419</sup>

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<sup>418</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*

## Conclusion

This thesis shares the untold story of child labour in Hong Kong from 1950 to 1971. Based on archival research and 31 interviews with both former child labourers and non-child labourers, this thesis explores why children worked from children's perspectives and how, in retrospect, former child labourers assess their work experiences. Although human rights advocates and scholars often consider child labour as a moral wrong, child work had some positive elements making it the lesser of two evils in the context of Hong Kong in the post-war period. Under various constraints, children worked in order to survive. This thesis is also a distinct account of Hong Kong's economic success told from the workers' perspectives, detailing lives in diverse work settings. The assessments of child work leave room for how work could be seen as both exploitation and an opportunity by different former child workers.

Shortly after the Second World War, the Chinese civil war continued. Many Chinese, especially those in Southern China, fled to Hong Kong out of economic and political concerns. These newcomers made up a younger population composition and strengthened the labour force. Coupled with the post-war baby boom, Hong Kong experienced a strong population growth. Such a young and vibrant population provided a pool of readily-available workforce in the 1950s and 1960s. Concurrently, the labour-intensive industrial economy gradually flourished from the mid-1950s onwards and created a soaring labour demand that absorbed the labour force. With little financial support or loans available from the

government and banks, industrialists opted for labour-intensive production methods, instead of the expensive capital intensive one. Driven by the transient mentality, the industrialists employed “guerrilla business” tactics.<sup>420</sup> They demanded flexible, cheap and unskilled labourers. The renowned toy industry epitomised how the economy gathered strength at that time. Put simply, the economy gave residents ample opportunities to work, and “everyone would be able to feed themselves.”<sup>421</sup>

Although former child labourers worked voluntarily, they did so mainly because of various constraints. Different factors pushed and pulled children into working in Hong Kong. Similar to child labour in other societies, cultures and time periods, poverty was the dominant factor dragging children into the workforce.<sup>422</sup> In Hong Kong, family circumstances and little financial help left many families in economic hardship. When Carmen’s father passed away, Carmen quit school and worked as an apprentice child labourer in a garment factory. Born in a polygynous family, I60 and all his brothers worked in their childhood. Besides, inhabitants could seldom find any help from the colonial government, trade unions or charitable organisations. Interviewees just believed that “the government would simply leave you alone.”<sup>423</sup> Indeed, children had limited choices during the 1950s and 1960s. Due to limited education access, not many children could enter schools. Child work seemed a decent option

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<sup>420</sup> Lee, “Flexible Manufacturing,” 175-6.

<sup>421</sup> “Mrs. Cheung,” interview by the author on 10<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>422</sup> Sylvain E. Dessy and Stéphane Pallage, “A Theory of the Worst Forms of Child Labour,” *The Economic Journal* 115.500 (January 2005): 68.

<sup>423</sup> “Rodney,” interview by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

compared to idling on the streets. These circumstances limited children's choice and drove them into work. Although Kelly did not resent her parents, she admitted that "the circumstances at that time" forced her into working.

Kelly's case exemplifies how filial motivations became the biggest pull factor drawing children into the workforce. Seeing the steep family needs, Mrs. Kong consented to work, "be filial" and share their parents' financial burden.<sup>424</sup> Besides, the educational aspects of work also attracted some interviewees to work. Work was an alternative to education, allowing child labourers to "learn handicraft skills and establish his/her own business one day."<sup>425</sup> These factors created a favourable atmosphere for accepting child work in Hong Kong. Taken both push and pull factors into consideration, child labour in Hong Kong was a choice under constraints. Generally, those born in the 1940s faced more constraints than those born in the 1950s and 1960s. Yet, the degree of children's agency varied from one interviewee to another. While Fei exercised her agency when she declined the scholarship offer and worked in a factory, Minnie had few choices when she started working at the age of six in 1953. Conscious or not, child labour was also a collective, family choice, especially for children under debased socioeconomic circumstances. Since the age of four, Canto pop diva

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<sup>424</sup> "Mrs. Kong," interview by the author on 28<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>425</sup> "Benny," interview by the author on 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

Anita Mui also performed to support her family. When asked how she would choose to live her life again, Anita replied that she wanted to study well and “be a lawyer.”<sup>426</sup>

Undoubtedly, child work was tough. For the unfortunate, exploitation did happen. Despite the positive impacts child work had on the interviewees, none of them want their children to be child labourers. “After all, child work was very hard. Children could learn through other means like volunteering. It is best not to work out of the need to survive,” Ken commented.<sup>427</sup> Yet, children were left with no choice in such an impoverished era. Almost all interviewees went against child labour laws because it would harm their survival. Maggie captured such a seemingly contradictory opinion, “we lived in such a time and we could not choose. We could only accept our fate in order to survive.” Working as a child labourer in Hong Kong was the lesser of two evils. As the Colony was adjacent to Mainland China, the residents had either experienced lives in China or heard about it. To refugees fleeing China and my interviewee Maggie, Hong Kong was far more promising than its counterpart. “If you wanted to work, you could get a job, feed yourself and survive.”<sup>428</sup>

This research has its own limitations. Reflecting upon the limitations helps us to have a more balanced view on child labour in Hong Kong. Similar to other research methods, my main research method, oral history, has its own weaknesses. Oral history relies heavily on

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<sup>426</sup> Margaret Ng, “Anita Mui,” in Li Zhanpeng and Nan Zhuo, eds., *Zuihou de manzhu shahua: Mei Yanfang de yanyi rensheng* 最後的蔓珠莎華：梅艷芳的演藝人生 [Anita Mui: The Daughter of Hong Kong] (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Hong Kong, 2014), 253.

<sup>427</sup> “Ken Chau,” interview by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2015, Hong Kong.

<sup>428</sup> “Maggie,” interview by the author on 2<sup>nd</sup> August, 2015, Hong Kong.

reaching out to the interviewees successfully. How the interviewees narrate their past also affects the findings. Therefore, my sample itself and the issue of retrospective memory could be limitations for my research. First, my sample could be biased towards those who view child labour positively. As stated in the ethics section, participation in this project is voluntary. In other words, former child labourers who found child work exploitative might not be interviewed. Hence, my thesis might have excluded their voices. The interviewees in my sample might view child labour more positively than the norm. Besides, my interviewees only came from three “starting points,” as the introduction explained. My project could have recruited more interviewees from more third parties. That would make my sample able to include people from a more diverse background, sharing different views of life. Under a limited time frame, sampling is one of the weaknesses in this research.

Sampling aside, the issue of retrospective memory affects how the interviewees assess child work. Retrospective memory refers to the interviewees’ memories about their past. Apart from the issue of reliability, the interviewees’ present lives often impact how they interpret their past. To quote anthropologist Julie Cruikshank, “people invoked the past to talk about the present.”<sup>429</sup> For instance, one informant commented that the hard times were gone. She was happy to have her own flat and a decent retirement life now. Because of this, she narrated her child work experiences more positively than some other interviewees.

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<sup>429</sup> Cruikshank, *The Social Life*, 2-3.

Retrospective memory matters also because my project explores children's work experiences and how they assess child work. Rather than leading the researcher into one simple, objective truth, retrospective memory calls for more space for interpretation. Although not being "accurate" could be a limitation, this weakness, instead, invites the readers to value how these former child labourers narrate their past. It also implies that this research would be more about perception and "subjective, cultural accuracy."<sup>430</sup>

Apart from the weaknesses of doing oral history, the inadequate documents on child labour in Hong Kong is the other limitation. The statistics on the industrial economy and the population were deficient. To quote Leo Goodstadt, official economic and social statistics in Hong Kong seems to be "the worst record in Asia."<sup>431</sup> The government did not hold a formal census between 1931 and 1961 because "the influx of immigrants to which the Colony has been subjected" made it impracticable.<sup>432</sup> Also, the government was not able to keep track of the children population, the number of schoolless children and the refugee population. This poses difficulties in estimating the extent of the situation of child labour in colonial Hong Kong. As for data on the industrial economy, "The only standard time-series data that exists (for the post-war period only) (brackets in the original) is on industrial employment."

Although industry in Hong Kong was mostly made up of small home-based workshops, "The Labour Department statistics were 'biased in favour of certain of the more highly-mechanized

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<sup>430</sup> Portelli, *Harlan County*, 11.

<sup>431</sup> Goodstadt, *Profits, Politics and Panics*, 11.

<sup>432</sup> *Hong Kong Annual Report*, 1957, 35.

industries’ .”<sup>433</sup> Since the existing data was lacking, it makes it harder to further analyse the small-scale factories.

Although there are difficulties in researching child labour in Hong Kong, more research should be done on this topic. My research serves as a sketch of child work in colonial Hong Kong. Future research could focus on the following potential areas. Since the refugee population heavily influenced Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s, future research can explore the relationship between this population and child work. As my sample shows a gender imbalance, future project can also investigate reasons accounting for the gender imbalance. Moreover, my research examines the push and pull factors that explain why children worked. More research can be done on analysing the dynamics between the forces. Lastly, my research also has implications for international research in child labour. More than one interviewee commented that child work was not a moral wrong in colonial Hong Kong. Some even consider child work a pleasant experience. Other than judging child labour as a social ill, international research can study the issue from the child workers’ perspective and offer a nuanced assessment of child work.

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<sup>433</sup> Clayton, “Labour-Intensive,” 377-8.



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**Table 1.1: Estimated Total Population, 1947-67**

**2.2 ESTIMATED TOTAL POPULATION**

Year	Mid-year	End-year
1947	1,750,000	1,800,000
1948	1,800,000	1,800,000
1949	1,857,000	1,860,000
1950	2,237,000	2,060,000
1951	2,015,300	2,070,000
1952	2,125,900	2,183,300
1953	2,242,200	2,302,700
1954	2,364,900	2,428,700
1955	2,490,400	2,553,700
1956	2,614,600	2,677,000
1957	2,736,300	2,796,800
1958	2,854,100	2,912,600
1959	2,967,400	3,023,300
1960	3,075,300	3,128,200
1961	3,174,700	3,209,500
1962	3,346,600	3,442,700
1963	3,503,700	3,550,000
1964	3,594,200	3,636,600
1965	3,692,300	3,722,600
1966	3,732,400	3,785,300
1967	3,834,000	3,877,700

Sources: Commerce & Industry Department (1947-50).  
Census & Statistics Department (1951 onwards).

Source: *Hong Kong Statistics, 1947-67*

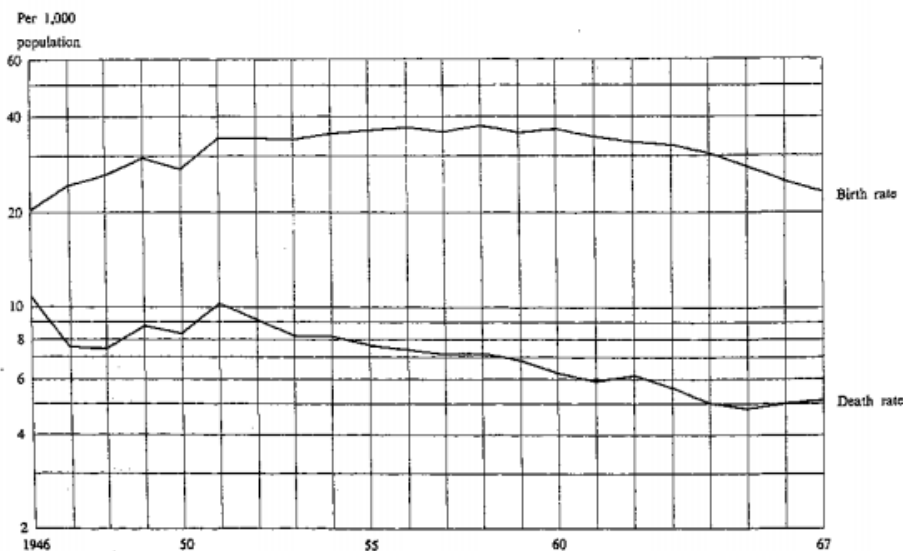
**Table 1.2: Crude Birth, Crude Death, Natural Increase and Population Growth Rates, 1947-67**

**3.3 CRUDE BIRTH, CRUDE DEATH, NATURAL INCREASE AND POPULATION GROWTH RATES**

Year	Population at Mid-year	Registered Births	Registered Deaths	Crude Birth Rate Per 1,000 persons	Crude Death Rate Per 1,000 persons	Natural Increase	Population Growth
						%	%
1946	1,550,000	31,098	16,653	20.1	10.8	0.9	—
1947	1,750,000	42,473	13,231	24.3	7.6	1.7	12.9
1948	1,800,000	47,475	13,434	26.4	7.5	1.9	2.9
1949	1,857,000	54,774	16,287	29.5	8.8	2.1	3.2
1950	2,237,000	60,600	18,465	27.1	8.3	1.9	20.5
1951	2,015,300	68,500	20,580	34.0	10.2	2.4	-9.9
1952	2,125,900	71,976	19,459	33.9	9.2	2.5	5.5
1953	2,242,200	75,544	18,300	33.7	8.2	2.6	5.5
1954	2,364,900	83,317	19,283	35.2	8.2	2.7	5.5
1955	2,490,400	90,511	19,080	36.3	7.7	2.9	5.3
1956	2,614,600	96,746	19,295	37.0	7.4	3.0	5.0
1957	2,736,300	97,834	19,365	35.8	7.1	2.9	4.7
1958	2,854,100	106,624	20,554	37.4	7.2	3.0	4.3
1959	2,967,400	104,579	20,250	35.2	6.8	2.8	4.0
1960	3,075,300	110,667	19,146	36.0	6.2	3.0	3.6
1961	3,174,700	108,726	18,738	34.2	5.9	2.8	3.2
1962	3,346,600	111,905	20,324	33.4	6.1	2.7	5.4
1963	3,503,700	115,263	19,748	32.9	5.6	2.7	4.7
1964	3,594,200	108,519	18,113	30.2	5.0	2.5	2.6
1965	3,692,300	102,195	17,621	27.7	4.8	2.3	2.7
1966	3,732,400	92,476	18,700	24.8	5.0	2.0	1.1
1967	3,834,000	88,170	19,644	23.0	5.1	1.8	2.7

Source: Registrar General.

**3.4 BIRTH AND DEATH RATES**



Source: Hong Kong Statistics, 1947-67

**Table 1.3: Working Population by Industry, 1961, 1966**

**2.20 WORKING POPULATION BY INDUSTRY**

INDUSTRY	1961			1966		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Farming ... ..	30,012	17,123	47,135	15,970	12,000	27,970
Community service ... ..	158,517	106,806	265,323	214,320	123,020	337,340
Communication ... ..	78,423	8,317	86,740	88,360	7,420	95,780
Commerce ... ..	109,915	21,364	131,279	181,580	51,760	233,340
Public Utilities ... ..	16,343	2,635	18,978	12,540	1,130	13,670
Construction ... ..	91,821	8,360	100,181	78,660	7,600	86,260
Manufacture:						
Engineering ... ..				37,010	1,970	38,980
Textile ... ..	319,338	156,182	475,520	112,740	133,730	246,470
Other ... ..						
Mining & Quarrying ... ..	7,354	1,515	8,869	3,900	300	4,200
Fishing ... ..	26,215	14,231	40,446	27,770	17,310	45,080
Unclassifiable ... ..	11,634	4,994	16,628	3,380	1,980	5,360
All industries ... ..	849,572	341,527	1,191,099	939,800	460,550	1,400,350

Source: *Hong Kong Statistics, 1947-67*

**Table 3.1: Distribution of Post-War Immigrants in Hong Kong according to Reasons for Leaving China, 31 August 1945 to 30 June 1954**

Reasons for Leaving China	Head of Household (Percentage)										
	1945*	1946	1947	1948	1949	1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	Total
Political reasons	4.7	4.3	4.5	21.1	65.4	68.9	58.9	37.1	-	-	53.2
Economic reasons	89.9	92.7	85.4	69.3	24.6	19.9	32.6	40	-	-	37.2
Political and Economic reasons	0.7	1.3	3.4	8.4	9.5	10..8	8.5	17.1	-	-	8.5
Unknown	4.7	1.7	6.7	1.2	0.5	0.4	-	5.7	-	-	1.1
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	-	-	100

\* 31 August 1945 – 31 December 1945

Source: Hong Kong Refugee Survey Commission and Edvard Hambro, *Chinese Refugees*, 152, as cited in Lock, "Peace and Contentment," 259.

## Appendix A: Source of Pseudonyms and Interviewees' Information

I arranged the order according to when the interviews were conducted. Information of non-child labourers are placed at the bottom. This table aims to show the source of pseudonyms and other information for analysis.

Name	M/F	Year of Birth	Age First Worked	Source of Pseudonym	Connections with the interviewer	Place of Birth
Mary Lim (pseudonym)	F	1947-52	10-11	Selected based on the first letter of the informant's first and last name	Personal contact	Hong Kong <sup>^</sup>
Annie Yip (pseudonym)	F	1946-49	/	She does not have an English name. Therefore, I picked a name starting with the letter A. I have not changed her last name	Third Party A	/
Albert (pseudonym)	M	1957-59	13	Self-selected	Personal contact	Hong Kong
C.S.	M	1952-54	12-13	N/A	Personal contact	Guangdong
Susan (pseudonym)	F	1955-60	10-12	Self-selected	Personal contact	Guangdong
Grass Cow* (pseudonym)	M	1943	10	Self-selected. This is translated by the author. The Chinese name is: 草牛	Personal contact	Hong Kong <sup>^</sup>
Mrs. Kong	F	1962	6	N/A	Personal contact	Hong Kong
Mrs. Leung*	F	1963	8-9	N/A	Personal contact	Hong Kong
Imperceptibly 60* (pseudonym)	M	1949	8-9	Self-selected. The Chinese name is: 浮雲六十. The informant translated the name himself	Personal contact	Guangdong
Carmen (pseudonym)	F	1945	12-13	Selected based on my personal preference	Third Party A	Guangdong
Kelly Choi (pseudonym)	F	1949	8-10	Selected based on my personal preference	Personal contact	Guangdong
Mr. Kwok*	M	1961	10	N/A	Third Party A	Hong Kong
Fei	F	1958-62	11-12	N/A	Personal contact	Shanghai



Hing	F	1947	11	N/A	Third Party A	Guangdong
Magnolia (pseudonym)	F	1952	12-13	Selected by the informant's relative	Personal contact	Chiuchow
Benny (pseudonym)	M	1950	12	Selected based on my personal preference	Personal contact	Chiuchow
Janet*	F	1958	~6	N/A	Personal contact	Guangdong
Minnie	F	1947	6	N/A	Personal contact	Hong Kong
Mrs. Cheung	F	1955	12	N/A	Personal contact	Hong Kong
Rodney (pseudonym)	M	1943	12	Selected based on the first letter of the informant's first name	Personal contact	Shanghai
Julie (pseudonym)	F	1963	~10	Selected based on the first letter of the informant's first name	Personal contact	Hong Kong#
Mrs. Chan (pseudonym)	F	1962	10	Selected based on my personal preference	Personal contact	Hong Kong^
Ah Ma (pseudonym)	M	1946	12-13	Selected based on the informant's nickname	Third Party B	/
Candy (pseudonym)	F	1949	9	Selected based on my personal preference	Third Party B	China
Colleen (pseudonym)	F	1947	/	Selected based on my personal preference	Third Party B	Hong Kong
Maggie*	F	1946	10	N/A	Personal contact	Guangdong
Jamie (pseudonym)	F	1954	10	Selected based on the first letter of the informant's first name	Personal contact	Hong Kong
Ken Chau (pseudonym)	M	1944-49	N/A	Selected based on my personal preference	Personal contact	Hong Kong^
Mr. Chan (pseudonym)	M	1955-60	N/A	Selected based on my personal preference	Personal contact	/
Mr. Cheung	M	1952	N/A	N/A	Personal contact	/
K.C. (pseudonym)	M	1953	N/A	Selected based on the first letter of the informant's first name	Personal contact	Hong Kong

Remarks:

[\*]: It refers to the number of interviews conducted. I interviewed those marked with asterisk (\*) twice. I interviewed others once.

[~]: Those marked with tilde (~) are the approximate ages.

[^]: It explains the family backgrounds of those who were born in Hong Kong. Those marked with caret (^) means that both of the interviewee's parents were born in Hong Kong. The rest of the Hong Kong-born interviewees were immigrant or refugee-dependents. At least one of their parents was not born and raised in Hong Kong.

[#]: I was unable to find out if the informant's parents were born in Hong Kong.

[/]: I could not find out the information.

## Appendix B: Interview Schedule

The interview is semi-structured. Some questions are used in the interviews but others are not. Most questions are open-ended. Informants, not just the researchers, should define their memory and the scope of the research. After all, “all oral history is ultimately authored by the so-called informants”.<sup>434</sup> This re-negotiate the narrative authority of the researcher, putting the informants on equal footing. I also assume that informants know what is important for them to share. They do not need to rely heavily on the interviewer.

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### *Family Background and Relations*<sup>435</sup>

1. How large was your family?
2. What did your siblings do?
3. What did your parents do?
4. Can you describe your relationship with your family?
5. How did you contribute to your family?
6. How did your family contribute to you? Did you get spending money? Did they pay all your school expenses?
7. What were your responsibilities at home?
8. What household chores did you do?
9. If you immigrated to Hong Kong, when and how did you move?
10. From where?
11. If not, did your parents migrate to Hong Kong?
12. Can you recall what your meals were like in those days?
13. What was the highest schooling you finished?
14. Did you want to study further?

### *Work Experience*

15. What kind of work did you do?
16. When?

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<sup>434</sup> Portelli, *Valle Giulia*, xix.

<sup>435</sup> The interview schedule models Judy Yung’s interview questions. For reference, please see Yung, “Giving Voice,” 104-8.

17. How did you find the work?
18. How did you get paid?
19. How much did you get paid?
20. Where did you work?
21. How long did you work?
22. How was your relationship with your colleagues?
23. Why did you work?
24. Did you experience any difficulties in work?
25. What, if anything, did you know about labour laws at that time?
26. If you met labour inspectors, what was that experience?
27. Could you describe that experience? (locations, duration, and the result)
28. How did you solve it? Solve what?
29. How did you spend the money you made?
30. Do you have any vivid work experience you can share with me?

#### ***Observations of Life in Hong Kong, 1950-67***

31. Do you know other people who worked as children at that time?
32. Why did they work, if you know?
33. What kind of work did they do?

#### ***Reflections***

34. What kind of work did you want to do? Why?
35. How did your work experience affect you afterwards?
36. Do you want your children to work the same job as you do?
37. Should there be legal limitations on child labour?
38. Do you have any photographs or writings you can share with me?
39. Can you describe your social life?
40. Can you compare that with others?

## Appendix C: Recruitment Poster



# 童工訪問邀請



## 我能否參與嗎？

你可參與！只要你：

- 一、於1940-60年出生；及
  - 二、曾於15歲前工作
- \* \* 「工作」指所有能帶來收入的工作，包括全職、兼職、暑期工、在家中協助家人做工



## 我需要作什麼？

- 我會先跟你通電話，約10-15分鐘，講解訪問的細節，初步了解你對童工的看法（可不參加）
- 訪問長約1.5小時，內容圍繞你的家庭背景、童年回憶、工作經驗、你對工作的看法等。
- 我們可另約時間（時間將較短）再見面（可不參加）
- 訪問將本年6-8月進行；地點可選屯門或另議



## 如何索取更多資料 / 成為受訪者？

請聯絡我！

電話/whatsapp：[REDACTED]

（請留言，留下姓名與聯絡方法。我將於5月22日回港，之後會盡快覆你！）  
（若能於六月前聯絡我，則更理想）

電郵：childlabour.hk@gmail.com



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關於我自己：

我是劉雅怡。我畢業於香港大學文學院歷史系，現為加拿大卡加里大學（University of Calgary）人類學系碩士生。此研究探討五、六十年代兒童工作的經驗。卡加里大學的聯合研究倫理委員會已審核了這項研究。



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