



Choice or Constraint? Exploring solo- living for young households in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

Solo-living among young adults in Hong Kong would seem to be exceptionally low with regard to other affluent cities. This may be driven by a combination of cultural (e.g. familism) as well as economic factors (e.g. high housing costs). More recently, an expanding population of highly educated, young adults (particularly those with overseas education experience), guest workers and returning emigrants at the high end of the labour market combined with delayed marriage and increased divorce have heightened the aspiration and the need for independent living (in some cases facilitated by rich parents). At the same time, population aging has obliged more young adults to stay with their parents to provide care and high housing costs continue to be a significant deterrent for solo-living. This is exacerbated by the unstable income and career prospects of many young adults. This paper offers new empirical research on the changing dynamics in the formation of single-person households in Hong Kong. It will draw on three different data sources. First, analysis of Census data from 1981 to 2011 will show the social and economic characteristics of single person households and their changing profile over the decades. Second, the way in which cultural, social and economic factors shape the housing choices of the young will be explored via a recent survey conducted by the authors of 1000 young adults aged 18 to 35. Lastly, in-depth interviews with young adults from varied backgrounds will further substantiate our understanding of such dynamics. This paper would aim to shed further light on understanding the impacts of social change on the formation of young single households.

Keywords: solo living, young people, Hong Kong

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INTRODUCTION

Solo-living among young adults in Hong Kong would seem to be exceptionally low compared to other affluent, global cities. Moreover, it is likely that a number of factors have combined in recent years to make it more difficult for younger households to form separate households, whether shared or solo. And escalating property prices and higher rents are certainly particularly important factors in the Hong Kong context. Indeed, internationally, the general trend has been for later departure from parental homes, particularly in high cost areas. However, whilst single person households have been on the increase in many societies this has been typically associated with societal aging and relationship breakdown. But there has also been increased solo living among younger households in some societies.

Regardless of the broader economic context and individual financial circumstances, however, it seems that very few younger households seek solo independence in Hong Kong. This may be driven by a combination of cultural (e.g. familism) as well as economic factors (e.g. high housing costs). There are, however, changes affecting Hong Kong youth which might suggest shifting social norms and aspirations. There is an expanding population of highly educated, young adults (particularly those with overseas education experience), guest workers and returning emigrants at the high end of the labour market combined with delayed marriage and increased divorce, the aspiration and the need for independent living (in some cases facilitated by rich parents) may have increased. But at the same time, population aging may have obliged more young adults to stay with their parents to provide care.

Against this background this paper offers some new empirical research on the changing dynamics in the formation of single-person households in Hong Kong. It will draw on three different data sources. First, analysis of Census data from 1981 to 2011 will show the social and economic characteristics of single person households and their changing profile over the decades. Second, the way in which cultural, social and economic factors shape the housing choices of the young will be explored via a recent survey of 1000 young adults aged 18 to 35. Lastly, we shall draw on some exploratory in-depth interviews with young adults from varied backgrounds.

LEAVING HOME AND LIVING ALONE

Living alone during working age has become more common across a wide range of societies (see for example, Qu and De Vaus, 2011; Chandler et. al. 2004). Jamieson et. al. (2008) draw on data from the European Social Survey to show that among working age men, the figure now approaches 20 per cent in some societies. A wider international sweep of patterns in the period 2001-2005 that averaged across the EU member states, indicated that almost 15 per cent of men and 11 per cent of women were solo living. In northern Europe, young people tend to leave home earlier and are more likely to live alone. For example, some 24 per cent of men aged 18-29 live alone in Finland and just over 20 per cent in Germany. However, in southern Mediterranean societies the figure is considerably lower and not dissimilar to the Hong Kong pattern-varying around 2-3 per cent for both men and women. The USA is also quite low at around 7 per cent. It is also interesting to note that some research suggests that there is an element of habituation in this experience of living alone.

Those who start young seem to get the habit and may well continue to do so-particularly women (Chandler et.al.2004).

The varying incidence of living alone among younger people corresponds, as would be expected, with variations in the age of departure from the parental home. In 2008, around 46 per cent of young adults aged 18-34 still lived with one of their parents. But this figure is well over 50 per cent in countries such as Italy and Greece and in some of the new member states such as Slovenia or Bulgaria. However, in Denmark, the comparable figure is only around 12 per cent (Eurostat, 2010).

Recent demographic trends regarding younger households are somewhat confusing-and confused by economic transformations and disruptions of recent decades. On the one hand, solo living has become more common among young and old. This has been associated with the so-called second transition (falling fertility rates, marital breakdown etc) (Ogden and Hall, 2004) and broader sociological and ideological shifts concerning postmodernity, atomization and individualism. Authors such as Beck (1992) and Baumann (2001;2003) have used notions of reflexive individualization to explore what have been argued to be fundamental changes in affective social relations. Conversely, greater economic insecurity, higher youth unemployment, longer periods in education, less affordable housing and more market oriented housing systems are factors which are apparently working in the opposite direction with higher proportions of young adults having to stay longer in the parental home-sometimes involving a significant reversal of social trends over a number of decades (for longer discussion see Forrest and Yip, 2013).However, perhaps most pertinent to this discussion, is whether the increase in solo living among younger people, or conversely, any reversal of such trends should be interpreted positively or negatively. This relates to the broader issue of the timing of departure from the family home. Is this a positive social trend in terms of independence, identity and self-realization or anomie individualization-detraditionalisation and the erosion of the family and other key ingredients of the social cement? Certainly the factors at work in generating more solo young households in many societies-and more generally the drivers of household formation at younger ages have changed from being primarily associated with marriage to the search for greater personal independence. Departures to live solo or in some other household arrangement can be long term or temporary-the product of choice or family conflict (Qu and De Vaus, 2011). What drives these developments and their social interpretation and impacts depends critically on cultural values and norms. Moreover, policies are also shaped by such norms, acting to encourage or discourage particular forms of household formation. This is particularly relevant to housing policy.

With regard to Hong Kong, these considerations are brought to the fore in So's (2008) comparative research on Hong Kong and Sweden-societies which we have already established are at opposite ends of the spectrum in relation to the living arrangements of young people. As So observes, living alone has tended to be regarded as a form of social deviancy in Hong Kong society and presented as such in the media-very much in contrast with Swedish representations. Leaving home at a young age in Hong Kong is likely to be seen as a social 'problem' rather than realized aspiration. Drawing on the experiences of one of her informants,she comments, " If a young woman moved out long before she got married...it would be seen as a decline of moral standards and shame of the family" (p111). In Sweden, however, social norms tend to work in the opposite direction with younger people feeling increasing pressure to leave home and set up independent housing because of peer expectations.

SOLO LIVING IN HONG KONG – GENERAL PROFILE

Compared with many western societies, not only are single person households in Hong Kong not as popular, they have also increased at a much slower pace. In 2011, only 17 per cent of all households, or less than 6 per cent of the population, lived alone. This was a level most European countries had

surpassed back in the 1980s with the exception of Greece and Ireland, at 14.6 per cent and 17.1 per cent respectively in 1980 (Hall et al, 1997). This is also just half of the level in Japan where nearly one third (32.4 per cent) of households were one person in 2010 (Japanese Times, 20 Jan 2013).

Although nearly a quarter of a million single person households have been created in Hong Kong in the last 30 years, such an increase largely reflects the rapid growth of households in the last three decades. Whilst the number of households grew on an average of 2.1 per cent over the period, single person households only grew a little faster at an average of 2.5 per cent (table 1). The growth trajectories have also been uneven between age groups. From 1981 to 2001, there was a jump of young single person households from 3.5 per cent to 4.7 per cent. This may partly be attributed to the influx of illegal immigrants in the early 1980s, most of whom were young single men. This is reflected in the gender difference in single person households in which young and middle aged men were far more likely to live alone than women of the same age groups. In 1981, men between the age of 20-34 were 3.7 times more likely to live alone whereas for middle-aged men, it was 3.5 times (table 2). From 1991 onward, women have been steadily increasing among the middle-aged and young single householders. This is in line with the trends in other economically advanced countries in Europe and Japan.

In the decade between 2001 and 2011, there was a slight increase in the proportion of single person households, from 15.6 per cent of households and 4.8 per cent of the population in 2001 to respectively 17 per cent and 5.7 per cent in 2011. Yet such increase was mainly attributed to increased solo living among middle-aged men and women, from 5.3 per cent in 2001 to 6.6 per cent in 2011. Whilst the proportion of single elderly remains the same in the decade, the proportion of young single households instead fell from 4.7 per cent to 4.2 per cent. The rapid escalation of house prices may be a constraint to the expansion of solo living among young people. From 2001 to 2011, nominal house prices and rents soared by 2.5 and 1.5 times respectively while wages increased by less than 20 per cent. Living alone has hence become an expensive housing option. It is not surprising for people who need to live alone to seek alternate living arrangements. Hence, cheaper options in the public housing sector, like the Homeownership Scheme flats (assisted homeownership) and public rental housing saw a sharp increase among the single householders (table 3). Yet for public rental housing, limited by the point and quota scheme which only set aside around 2000 flats a year for the 100,000 non-elderly single applicants (the 2010 figure), the chance of getting in to the public rental sector is very limited. Young single applicants are doubly disadvantaged as they are subject to a point system of allocation in which the weighting of age is predominant. This makes it practically impossible for single applicants under the age of 30 to enter the sector. This explains why the proportion of young singles in the public rental sector is under-represented.

Table 1 Single person households in Hong Kong 1981-2011

Year	1981	1991	2001	2011	1981	1991	2001	2011
Age	Number of single person Households				% of 1p HH in Relevant Age Group			
20-34	50861	66606	76239	63755	3.5	4.1	4.7	4.2
35-64	91101	105456	150126	220957	6.5	5.6	5.3	6.6
65 and above	42873	60147	94676	119376	13.1	12.5	12.7	12.7
Total 1p Households	190620	235625	321041	404088	1p HH as % of total HH / population			
Total Households	1237643	1682215	2053412	2368796	15.4	14.0	15.6	17.0
Total population	4986020	5522281	6708389	7071576	3.8	4.3	4.8	5.7

Source: Census Main Reports (1981, 1991, 2001, 2011)

Note: there were a small number of one person households below the age of 20.

Table 2 Gender ratio of single person households in Hong Kong 1981-2011

Age Group	1981	1991	2001	2011
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20-34	3.7	2.3	1.4	1.2
35-64	3.5	3.3	1.6	1.1
65+	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.6

Source: Census Main Reports (1981, 1991, 2001, 2011)

Note: Number of men per women

Similar to the trends in other comparable cities, the flexibility of the private renting makes the sector more accommodating for young singles. Nearly half of the young single households (46 per cent in 2011) were private renters in 2011. Yet, the rapid increase in rents, which jumped by over one third across the board between 2006 and 2010, forced those who did not have the means to afford the rent to leave the sector. Hence, the first decade of 2000s saw an increase in solo living among those who had a decent job and reasonably high income. The proportion of managerial and professional workers increased from 59 per cent to 64 per cent between 2001 and 2011 (table 4). For those who could not afford the high rent but needed to stay as single person household, a corresponding reduction of living space or living quality was a rational adjustment. It is in this context that the so called “sub-divided” flats have been sprouting in the last decade. Such private rental flats, often in old tenement buildings and some even in industrial buildings, are converted into very small, en suite units to greatly increase the supply and at the same time maximise the rental income of landlords. A recent survey commissioned by the government estimated that over 170,000 families, many of them single person households, are residing in such units (Policy 21, 2013). The Census has also found a high proportion of young singles (they count as young age up to 44 years old) who lived in non-residential buildings or temporary accommodation than their counterparts in other age groups (Department of Census and Statistics, 2013). As the overwhelming majority of such units are converted without complying with the hygiene and fire safety standards, they pose huge risks to the residents.

Table 3 Tenure of Single person Households 2001-2011

Tenure	Private Home Ownership %		Homeownership Scheme %		Public rental %		Private rental %	
	2001	2011	2001	2011	2001	2011	2001	2011
20-34	36.9	35.9	8.9	5.8	7.3	12.6	46.9	45.7
35-64	37.5	35.9	7.1	35.9	20.3	35.9	35.1	35.9
65+	29.8	32.9	4.9	9.3	51.0	51.0	14.3	6.8
All HH	35	35	15	17	31	32	14	12

Source: authors' analysis of Census microdata

Note: Homeownership Scheme (assisted homeownership flats)

Table 4 Occupation of One person households 2001-2011

Occupation	Managers & Professional %	Service workers %	Skilled manual worker %	Elementary workers%
35 and below				
2001	58.5	28.2	9.4	3.9
2011	63.7	28.1	5.4	2.8
35-64				
2001	46.8	22.3	16.3	14.6
2011	45.9	27.1	12.0	15.0

Source: authors' analysis of Census microdata

ATTITUDES AND ASPIRATIONS AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE IN HONG KONG

The extent to which high housing costs and limited housing opportunities explains delayed and constrained departure from the parental home is a matter of some debate given longstanding cultural differences in patterns of household formation (see for example, Emmanuel, 2-13). Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that housing costs, both in relation to purchase and private rental, are a significant barrier to the achievement of independent or solo living for younger households in Hong Kong. Real estate costs are among the most expensive in the world. For example, house prices rose by over 18 per cent last year and by over 90 per cent since the first quarter of 2008 (Economist, 2013). In such a context, young solo living is likely to be the preserve of a small, rich elite of home owners or involve sharing very limited space in the cheaper end of the privately rental sector (e.g. the sub-divided units mentioned above). Exceptionally, there could be circumstances where adult children are the sole occupants of a public rental dwelling.

Against this background, and as part of a larger project on the housing circumstances of Hong Kong's 'post-eighties' generation, a survey was undertaken at the beginning of 2013. This was a random sample, by telephone, of 18-35 year olds. In line with what has been outlined in previous section, as table 5 shows, a very small number of young people were living on their own. An even smaller number were sharing with friends. The vast majority were still living with parents. The survey does underrepresent solos or sharers among younger people, compared to the census data, reflecting the greater difficulty of contacting such households via survey methods. However, it is consistent with the general picture already established of the Hong Kong young seemingly with a low propensity to share with friends. In the survey, only 8 per cent of respondents said that they had very thought about sharing with friends. It seems that the young in Hong Kong see the choices in terms of living with parents, living with a partner or living alone-sharing is not seen as an attractive option. In effect, for most young this narrows the choices to the parental home or purchasing a flat when that becomes possible. Living alone either requires a high income and/or substantial parental assistance with deposit and other costs or renting the a low quality, probably illegally subdivided flat-hardly an attractive option for someone with the choice of staying at home. Moreover, although Hong Kong has very low space standards when compared to other major cities, 64 per cent of the younger people in this survey said they had a room of their own. Of those sharing, 87 per cent were sharing with a brother or sister. So, the majority of younger households in Hong Kong do have a room of their own. In purely physical terms, therefore, there may not be such compelling reasons to leave-particularly if the alternative is likely to be expensive and/or of lower quality. The more important issues are, however, sociological and cultural which cannot be explored in any depth from the current survey data. How far do young people living at home in Hong Kong feel constrained in terms of lifestyle? To what extent can they live 'alone' at home-to paraphrase Paul McCartney? It is certainly conventional wisdom to assume that Chinese parents are likely to be stricter than their western counterparts. It is also widely assumed that the Chinese family is more interdependent. As So (2008) has observed, independence has a very different cultural meaning in somewhere like Hong Kong when compared to a country like Sweden in northern Europe. As was already suggested, leaving home young in Hong Kong society is likely to signify some kind of social problem and carry social stigma-quite the opposite in many western societies where being an older adult child and still living at home can carry social embarrassment.

Table 5: Living Circumstances of Young People

<i>Living with:</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Parents/guardians but excl. partners	763	75.7
Living with partner with/without children	151	15
Living with partner with/without children and parents/guardians	59	5.9
With friends	3	0.3

Alone	9	0.9
Other	23	2.3
Total	1008	100

Source: telephone survey by the authors

Some of these issues can be informed by the survey data. First, consistent with arguments that leaving home is a process rather than a moment (Forrest and Yip, 2013), a number of our respondents had experience of living elsewhere. Over a fifth had lived away from home at some time. In some three quarter of cases this had been because of studying at university or boarding school. Indeed, 10 per cent of the respondents had been at boarding school. Only a small number (24) had experience of living with a partner or with friends and had returned home.

Second, how do young people in Hong Kong regard living at home? How do they feel about it? To what extent is it framed in terms of interdependence and reciprocity? How far do young people see living at home as constraint or choice? Table 6 offers some insights about how young people in Hong Kong currently regard living at home. The statements are organized according to whether they would be reasonably regarded as choice or constraint factors-filial piety is perhaps the only debatable one in this regard. The overall pattern is very clear. Choice would appear to far outweigh constraint. So, almost all the young people living at home say they are happy in this situation and are also happy to have more disposable income and to be taken care of. On the constraint side, only a small proportion of respondents say their parents actively prevent them moving out or that it is inconvenient to live with them. Nevertheless, almost two thirds say they could not afford to live anywhere else and a sizeable minority say that they would rather live somewhere else. And what about the feelings of those who have moved out? As would be expected, the older young (over 30) are more likely to have left home than the younger young (under 25). Over 70 per cent of those who have left home say that they do not live with their parents because they can afford to live independently. More than half also admit that people of their age and family status do not generally live with parents-so marriage and age are important factors rather than the desire for independence as such. Moreover, 41 per cent state they still wished their parents could take care of them.

And what of our small group of soloists? Do they have a distinctive profile? We do not have any detailed insights about their particular motivation to live alone and whether it is by choice, accident or whatever. We do know that they are mainly living in the privately rented sector. Only one of them states that they are getting any financial assistance from their parents towards housing costs-rent or mortgage payments. They are more likely to be in their late 20s and older, to have an undergraduate or postgraduate qualification, to be working full time and are probably in professional or junior professional occupations.

Table 6: Attitudes Towards Living With Parents

Statement	Percentage of respondents Strongly Agreeing or Agreeing
<i>Choice</i>	
I like living with my parents at the moment	95
I live with my parents because I have more money to spend on other things	74
I live with my parents because they can take care of me	73
I live with my parents because I can take care of them	87
There are too many domestic chores to do if you live on your own	83
<i>Constraint</i>	

Living with parents is an act of filial piety	60
I live with my parents because I can't afford to live anywhere else	65
I live with my parents because they would not allow me to move out	16
It is not convenient to live with parents	19
I would rather live somewhere else	30

Source: telephone survey by the authors

PUSH FACTORS AND CONSTRAINTS

To explore the push factors as well as obstacles for independent solo living, in-depth interviews were conducted with young people who fell within the age range of 24 to 35 as part of the wider project in exploring the housing choice of young people. In fact, from the life course perspective, standard life stages no longer accurately capture the sequencing of stages and events over lifetimes (Elder, 1977). This involves a complicated interaction between personal and social time of an individual. This is particularly valid for young people who face apparent “transitions” in their life course. Yet, from such a perspective, the movement of young people out of the parental home to solo living cannot be seen as a one shot, clear cut linear event and standard path but may involve non-linear routes as well as complicated oscillating decisions. Among the nine young people we interviewed, four of them had or had been moved out to live alone and five had seriously thought of moving out. Yet most of them did not have the straightforward idea of living alone as the only obvious choice. This very often involved a multiplicity of considerations. As reflected in the census 2011, the majority of young single householders were in a relatively better job and have higher level of education, hence 7 or the 9 interviewees had completed post-secondary education and had middle class jobs like teachers or social workers. Yet to also catch people with a variety of motivation and constraints, there are also two interviewees who only finished secondary education and were ordinary service workers. An initial analysis of the interviews is reported here.

Moving out – the push factors

Among the interviewees who already moved out from their parental homes or are in serious consideration of moving out, the quest for independence and more freedom to control their lives were often quoted as the most important reasons pushing them to move. In fact, most of the interviewees had some experience of independent living (though not necessarily living alone) in student hostels or when they stayed in an overseas city for study or work. Apparently they enjoyed the freedom being away from the control of parents.

The advantage [of living independently] is free of my mom's mumbling (Sarah, a teacher in her late twenties)

I feel OK [living alone]. I can choose my own food for meals and if I can choose not to speak to others [at home] if I did not want to (Yeung, in his early thirties who had bought his flat)

While a caring family symbolises the virtual fibre of Eastern societies, the repercussion of “excessive” caring of parents may become a driving force to move out. Particularly in cramped homes in Hong Kong, it is not easy to avoid intensive interaction with parents who live under the same roof.

They [parents] regard moulding a well-behaved child their ultimate responsibility but they do not know how to let go for grown up children. They treat me as a child... urge me not to be late [to work].. instruct me how to hang my clothes, ask repeatedly whether [I would] come back for dinner.. They ask you everything, it is very irritating.. In fact, I decided to move out to show

to them they need not make the effort to “manage” me, I can take care of myself (Polly, as social worker in her late twenties)

It is equally likely that the motivation to move out of parental homes can be driven by the desire to live closer to work or leisure, or be able to entertain friends at home.

I want to move out to enjoy more personal space...I have enjoyed briefly living alone when my mother moved to my brother’s home to look after his baby.. I was able to invite friends for meals.. when she returned, I would not do so (Kit, a chauffeur in his late twenties who lived with his mother in public rental housing)

In fact, Kit had moved out from his parental home to live with his girl friends when he was in his early twenties but they could not afford the high rent and decided to move back to their respective parental homes.

For young people who end up living alone this may not be their initial choice – many of them want to share with friends to reduce housing costs, particularly those who have had the experience of sharing a house when they studied overseas. Yet, as young people who want to stay away from parents are in the minority, they often find it difficult to find a suitable flatmate. In addition, when they become more mature, their expectation of the flatmates also becomes heightened. Living alone becomes a more attractive alternative when they decide to live independently.

I have experience in sharing an apartment with friends when I studied in Toronto... I also wanted to find a flatmate in Hong Kong and move out.. but it is difficult to find one among my friends.. I do not want to share with complete strangers...[B, a woman in her mid twenties who had been seriously considering moving out and live alone]

Why I could share with friends in Canada but not in Hong Kong? I have no choice there, also my parents paid the rent for me there but in Hong Kong, I have to pay my rent if I moved out and I do not want to deal with difficult flatmates [interview with B].

I did share a flat with friends before... but you know it is not easy to live with others.. we had quarrels and it affected friendship.. so if I move out again, I would not share with friends [Rene who were considering seriously to move out]

For some, living alone is a preparation for the transition to a stable relationship but for others, it is the result of relationship breakdown.

I want to stay with my girl friend over the weekends but my [parental] home in public housing is too small... and not convenient... I stay on my own [in his flat] and my girl friend can come and stay with me for a few days (Yeung, in his early thirties who had bought his flat)

I wanted to move back to parents when I separated with my wife... but my parents’ place is too small and they have converted the rooms I used to stay for other purposes... I could not return and need to find a place of my own [Mr Liu in his early thirties who was in the process of getting divorce]

The Constraint Factors

In our survey quoted in the previous section, the inability to afford to move out was expressed as the most significant reasons not to consider living independently. This is echoed extensively among those who have seriously considering moving out in our in-depth interviews. Nearly all of our

interviewees have seen actively looking for accommodation but all found the housing cost unaffordable.

I have seen a small flat, 100 square feet (10 sq m) which asked for \$4500 (US\$600)..150 feet for \$5200.. they were small but expensive and there was the refuge collection point just next to the building... I also looked up a flat for sale, \$3.8m(US\$0.49m) for just 500 square feet...I could only afford it if my pay doubles (LL, a master graduate)

As renting in the private sector is the most common choice of young people who lived alone, the sector is increasingly unaffordable as rental costs have risen faster than inflation in the last few years. Rents in the private sector jumped by 20 per cent in 2011 and 2012 but inflation was only 9 per cent. A small flat (less than 40 square meter) in the urban area costs on an average HK14.5k (US\$1.8k) per month and even in the suburb, such small flats still cost HK\$8500 (US\$1100) in mid 2013 when the median salary was only around HK\$12000 (in 2012). Unless you earn well above the average, otherwise, affording even the smallest flat was all but fantasy.

In fact, for those who managed to move out, even a self-contained small flat is unattainable given the income they have and many of them have to compromise the living environment and resort to the “sub-divided” flats referred to earlier. These are small en-suite rooms of a total area of around 8-15 square meters often located in old tenement buildings which are close to the urban centre. The small size allows them to pitch at lower rents though the unit rent can sometimes be comparable to upmarket apartment units. Not only are these units small, the buildings they are located are often old and dilapidated. Since most such conversions are not legal, the various risks are prominent. In fact, in 2001, a fire broke out in a tenement building in Mongkok in which many of the flats had been converted to “sub-divided” units. The result was nine deaths and thirty four injuries.

As such units are in high demand, their rents rise quicker than the general rental market. Currently, such units can demand rents as high as HK\$5000-6000, and more decent and centrally located ones, more than HK\$10,000. Such cramped living conditions have the effect deterring young people from moving out.

I was looking for a flat, 430 square feet but cost HK\$9000 which I could not afford...I have resorted to sub-divided flats, \$6000 for 180 square feet.. but it was so small I have to turn sideward to get in... my brother also lives in a sub-divided unit but the conditions are so poor, dark corridor, falling ceiling....I cannot stand it.. I was still searching.... (Kit who worked as a chauffeur and wanted to move out)

The insecurity of tenure in the private rental sector is a further deterrent. Not only does frequent moving impose an unnecessary financial burden as it increases the cost of moving homes, it also creates a strong sense of insecurity. The rental contract in Hong Kong is usually two years but the landlords can raise the rent in the second year and this means the de facto security of tenure is only one year. As rents have been rising rapidly, many landlords would like to force out their current tenants to seek new ones who would pay higher rent. Some landlords of sub-divided units even refuse to engage tenants with contracts so that they can raise rent whenever they like. As relatively cheap rental units are in high demand, tenants who need such accommodation have little bargaining power and they end up moving very frequently in looking for cheaper alternatives. One of our interviewees, Sarah, who moved out and lived in a sub-divided en-suite unit, had to move four times in six years and some such moves were forced upon her by landlords.

As described previously in this paper, cultural expectation of young people staying in parental homes before they marry is another big constraint for young people to move out and live alone. This is in sharp contrast with many western countries where such expectations from parents are weak. And

has been noted above, in such societies there can be strong peer pressure for independent living—thus, living away from parents is a cultural norm. However, in our survey, the majority of those who are still living with their parents do not feel any compulsion to stay—many perceive it as an act of filial piety. But two thirds still admit to a lack of choice as they cannot afford to stay elsewhere. For those who have moved out or have been seriously considering it, such cultural expectations act in a more subtle manner. Polly, the social worker we interviewed, who had moved out briefly but has returned to parental home, encountered very intense reaction from their parents when she first departed.

They reacted intensely [when they knew I would move out].. my father did not talk to me for a few months.. they thought why should I insist to move out.. and more important, they blamed me not even discussed [the plan] with them .. I made all the decision and even signed the rental contract and pay for the rental deposit before I informed them... simply to give them no room for negotiation.. I knew them, they would not allow me [to move out]... it is better not to tell them in advance (Polly, a social worker who had moved out before but returned to parental home]

Fai, a man in his mid twenties who was also seriously considering moving out, thought he would only tell his family after he had fixed every arrangement .

There is no need to discuss.. what they perceive as “discussion” is to say words to you discouraging you to move out... though I understand they worry about me, whether I can take care of myself, whether I would misbehave... they may ask whom I will live with worrying that I would easily be influenced...but I do not think I would (Fai, university graduate in his mid-twenties)

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Demographic trends over the last thirty years show that single person households have been on the increase in Hong Kong but they are still very much the minority group . For the young generation, very few of them have in fact been able to move out and live alone. On the surface, cultural factors still appear to be dominating as staying with parents until they form their own family is still the norm shared among most young people in Hong Kong. Neither do they perceive staying with parents as inconvenient nor do they appear to feel any overt pressure from parents in preventing them from moving out. Instead, the over-whelming majority of them like living with parents and recognize this as an act of filial piety. Moreover, on the practical side, living with parents allows them to have more money to spend elsewhere as well as enjoying the care (and the housework service) from parents.

But is this a constrained choice? Given that an increasingly liberalizing society has encouraged the younger generation to seek greater independence and freedom, the traditional, paternalistic family is already under serious challenge. Whether the threshold of tolerance will outweigh the pulling force of cultural norms seems to be a matter of time. At the moment, the cultural factors working to keep young singles in the rental homes are being reinforced by both the pragmatic considerations of saving money and not have to do housework as well as the constraint of being unable to afford solo living. One third of respondents in our survey clearly indicated, their desire to live away from their parents and over two thirds said that they simply could not afford to live anywhere else. It would seem that such household configurations could well be under strain if housing becomes more affordable or more available for young people. the time in moving out is ripe when the housing market has returned to normal and housing becomes more affordable. Some of the informants from our in-depth interviews do illustrate a shift in attitudes. Just as staying with parents after marriage was not regarded as abnormal a few decades ago, such a situation is now generally perceived as

“strange”. Current attitudes towards solo living among young people in Hong Kong may also be obsolescent.

However, as shown by the experience of the interviewees in our in-depth interviews, the seemingly simple move of living alone involves series of complicated events in convincing themselves and their parents the need and advantage of moving out, planning and preparing for the actual move as well as adjusting to the lives of solo living. This proves not to be a straight forward and linear but a complicity of oscillating processes within the context of changing life course development and circumstantial events.

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