

Hong Kong's Young People in the 90's

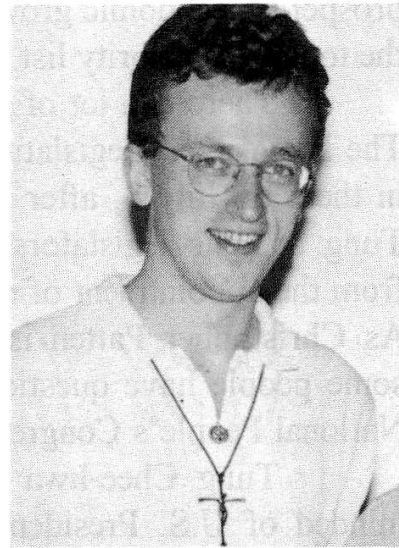
A very special generation

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Introduction

Recent surveys dealing with young people in Hong Kong¹ generally leave us with a very negative impression. I will, nonetheless in this article, explore the contents of these surveys mindful that, to provide a real understanding of these young people's complex societal situation would require a much deeper kind of analysis than surveys can provide. We must keep in mind that what is described here is only a trend. Yet it is sufficiently strong among the young people in Hong Kong to enable us to better understand their environment.



We can say that young people in Hong Kong fall into three different categories:

- *Those who, up to 1989, were engaged in social organizations and who had become aware of situations of injustice in Hong Kong's affluent society.*

They were concerned about the problem of housing, of work and the conditions of the marginated. Expecting very little by way of help from the colonial government, they were determined to keep up their efforts after 1997, and to make their grievances known to the new authorities. They even contemplated going on with their studies in order to better serve at the heart of the "Motherland." What happened at Tiananmen Square, June 4, 1989, shattered their hopes.

- *Those who have received the colonial system's classical education.*

Even while working, these pursue their studies in order to obtain additional diplomas, to have a comprehensive education and to meet the challenge of a rapidly changing society. Because of the cost of living, especially housing, they look for additional part time work to improve their bank account. In the 80's these young people moved by faith or ideals were the basis for the life and strength of parishes and social organizations. Today, they are engrossed in work, study, the consumer society and rampant individualism. Their main concerns are work, money and the future.

- *Those for whom living means living for today which in turn means living for oneself, making money and having fun.*

These are not affected with what goes on around them. As far as the future is concerned, they feel there is no use thinking about that. They feel that, given the political situation, they can't do anything about it anyway. These often live outside the value system supported by the traditional family or school. They are rather allergic to the existing structures or associations, and end up with their "buddies" who share the same kind of life

This last group, the one targeted in the recent analyses, is found essentially among adolescents between the ages of 12-25, and principally those the recent surveys are concerned about.

They constitute the generation that opened up to the world during the 80's and who have been more deeply scarred by the events of 1989. Their geographic, historic, political, economic and cultural environment, unique in all the world, makes Hong Kong's young people a very special generation. The study of this generation leads necessarily to a study of the society of which they are the product. This is what I will deal with initially.

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A Very Special Generation

An environment supersaturated with media

More than any other developed country, Hong Kong is saturated with too much media. Young people pass a great deal of time in front of the television; they are strongly influenced by the programming, a glut of information, constant advertising depicting a world of dreams and desires, violent films, etc. Even adults have a hard time not being influenced by all this and this is even much harder for young people!

Reversal of the ambiance within a decade: “from paradise to hell”

In the 80's people liked to think of Hong Kong as heaven on earth: Everything seemed possible; the future and happiness belonged to those who entered into the local economic game. The psychological trauma of the 1989 events and the specter of 1997 have changed this mentality. Some would even say that Hong Kong is more like hell than paradise. The reality is certainly not that bad but clearly, within a short time, the general atmosphere among the population has become more pessimistic. The economic indicators, however, have remained stable. Very recently, the closure of two big hotels, the increase in the unemployment rate (unemployment reached 3%), and the relative difficulty to find a good job (with a good salary) immediately upon graduating from university, have raised some concerns about the economic situation in the near future.

The international and local political atmosphere

The events of Tiananmen have awakened this generation to the meaning of democracy, and love for one's country. But young people in Hong Kong, through many and daily newscasts, are confronted with a very complex political situation. Powerful nations assume the role of policing a world that is tearing itself apart. Economics and power rule the international situation, relegating rights and justice to a secondary consideration in a world where the weak have no place. The psychodrama of relationships played out between London and Hong Kong behind people's backs; the local political

situation where expediency alone determines political friendships, and admittedly, more and more under Beijing's influence; the uncertainty linked to the black hole of what will happen after 1997--all these factors make it impossible for young people to form their own opinion, and often leaves them feeling powerless or disinterested. For example, more than 70% of young people think that press freedom will be restricted after 1997;² 30% of secondary school students say they are worried about the change of sovereignty in 1997. And 35% say they have doubts about the meaning and value of life. For them, the future is lacking in consistency. In this situation, is it possible to confide in anyone? And so, these young spend most of their leisure time in self-centered activities, playing video games, or reading comic magazines.³

The state of the economy

Hong Kong presents itself as an increasingly important international economic center. A 1995 report on the economic standing of nations (GDP) ranks Hong Kong in third place worldwide. This is the result of its market economy and its system of free enterprise. But Hongkongers pay a price for all this in the quality of life: long working hours, tensions of all kinds within the family, the housing situation, transportation, education, lack of social benefits and anxiety about the present and future political situation.

On the level of the individual, this prosperous economic situation is translated into a quest for personal wealth, an ideal which finds its way into the educational system and the illusory world of advertising. The people's buying power increased tremendously during the 80's, and young people learn very early how to have their money pay off by tutoring, taking on part time jobs, playing the stock market, betting on horses, etc. A society based on consumerism creates an insatiable appetite for consumer goods, i.e., the pressure exerted on young people to buy brand names advertised on TV. Young people between the ages of 10 and 14 spend from HK \$200 to HK \$500 on clothes every month.⁴ Often their desires far exceed their financial means. This either leaves them frustrated or leads them to find sources of easy money. A survey conducted among 600 adolescents between the ages of 15 and 19 reveals that 9% among them are ready to use illegal means to obtain money. Twenty-nine

percent are not disturbed if their friends obtain money illegally.⁵ More young people are attracted to prostitution as a means of making money.

Disruption of traditional family and cultural milieu

Many say that the traditional values of Hong Kong's Chinese society are deteriorating. Some even maintain that they no longer exist. Hong Kong has entered into a post-Confucian era where traditional values have lost their meaning and are at best only perfunctorily practiced. This is especially true of the family situation that is very unstable. Although according to Confucius, the continuation of the family line is an essential expression of filial piety, only one third of the boys, for example, think it important to do so.⁶

The progressive eclipse of the traditional family

In the 70's Hong Kong went from the "extended family" to the "nuclear family" The result is that today there are very few families with three generations under the same roof. For many reasons, even this nuclear family, seems doomed to failure. Most often both parents work. This is necessary to pay for the home ownership scheme--the possibility of buying property has been encouraged in recent years. Sometimes the father works on the Mainland which means long and repeated absences (even a second family). There is also emigration which separates the family, at least for a time, and the increase in the divorce rate during these recent years.⁷ In addition there is the movement of people to the New Territories, which separates households from the traditional support provided by the larger family. All these factors work together to create a parental void in the personal world of young people. Since

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grandparents are absent, they cannot fill that void. On the other hand, the increase in one child families⁸ intensifies the loneliness of the child and develops his/her egoism. In this kind of situation, friends are of

paramount importance. They offer a sense of belonging and group support which is vital for this generation. As a matter of fact, when friends migrate, whether for studies or to live, young people experience a deep sense of loss, abandonment and insecurity. Furthermore, they confront the change of sovereignty with feelings of helplessness and are full of doubts about their future.

The decline of the traditional value system

On the cultural level, the traditional system of former generations has lost its meaning for the children. They see that their parents no longer require compliance even if they themselves remain dutiful to the tradition and hope that their children will do the same. Without this, young people, who are the pure product of the colony, have no point of reference. They no longer know if they are Chinese or Westerners: they are Hong Kongers! And so young people find themselves more and more alienated from their parents, living their own life, in their own sub-culture which has neither structure nor discipline. For example, only one third of young people considered their parents role models. When young people have a personal problem or a problem at school, only 1/10th will confide in their mother and only 1/20th in their father.⁹

Since the 70's, Hong Kong's educational system has been significantly democratized and improved. Education is accessible to all and has also greatly improved at the university level. It is well to note here that politics have had a strong influence on the schools and education. In light of 1997, history textbooks have been changed so as not to irritate Beijing and risk having these texts withdrawn. To avoid trouble, the government seeks to justify the present political system, but at the same time courses in civics promote democracy in society.

But on the whole, the educational system, which is strict and elitist, weighs heavily on the young. By putting the stress on success in examinations, the system develops young people who are competitive, in a system where there is no place for failure. Education remains superficial and pragmatic (to respond to local economic needs). This causes some to say that education is nothing more than a "fast food culture." Many things are offered to young people, but without seeking either to arouse their interest or to develop their personality and their self reliance. The only solution is for them to

follow in order to remain in the race, often at a disproportionate cost, even as early as from kindergarten. But every year many young people are left on the sidelines. From 1993, on the Form 4 level (14-15 years old) 17,000 students were directed towards “pre-vocational training”. This means to be put on the shelf, “the place of institutionalized failure”.¹⁰

A Generation without horizons

Living habits, points of reference, the feeble presence of adults in the environment of young people all mean that young people lead a life without any real relation to that of their parents and a life lacking in consistent and standard behavior.

Young people complain of lack of intimacy and suffer from claustrophobia in a Hong Kong which is too small, and which resembles more a huge housing estate than a paradise. The government acknowledges that 3,900 families live in apartments with an area of less than 11 sq. meters. The small size of the living space creates terrible pressures on families, where there is now an increase in child abuse. A substantial number of these are sexual abuses. Recently a mother whose child seemed insupportable, beat him to death. Six people were living an area of 10 sq. meters: 2 parents, 3 children and a grandmother. Realizing the magnitude of the problem, the government has just set up a team of specialists to follow up on the cases of these children martyrs. Although more than 400 cases are reported yearly, the team, for the whole of the territory, is made up of only 11 social workers. More often than not those responsible for child abuse are given only light sentences.¹¹

A cultural and affective void

Seeking outside what is lacking at home

Leisure time activities: Many young people supplement their education with extra-curricula activities (special courses, sports, music, social service...) These are suggested to them in great numbers. But in recent years young people are spending more and more time playing mahjong, going to karaokes, fast foods places , etc.

Twenty-five percent of adolescents spent an average of HK \$876 monthly on amusements (games, films, karaoke...)¹² A recent survey done by the University of Hong Kong reveals that in the previous week, 40% of boys older than 15, had spent money on slot machines (against 7% for girls of the same age) and 22 % had gone to the movies.¹³

Delinquency: Left alone with a feeling of frustration, more and more young people “escape from the system” by engaging in truancy and crimes of all kinds. Every day in 1992, 42 young people younger than 21 years of age were arrested: two for serious assaults, 2 for drugs, 1 for burglary, 1 for trafficking in drugs, 1 for a crime related to triads. Every twelve days one young person commits suicide.¹⁴

Young people find in gangs, the use of drugs (drug use is on the increase) and joining triads an emotional compensation for the affective void that often engulfs them. Some young people, right from the beginning of their secondary education, are strongly attracted to triads for their assurance of protection and the excitement triads provide. Four percent of students say they are triad members¹⁵ and 20% of students have no idea that relations with triads constitute a crime.¹⁶

In quest of a culture

A fast-food culture: Young people have a superabundance of choices. Their use of time is often filled up with para-instructive activities. But they can only consume. They are not trained to discern. They only know how to follow the person or product, the what/who that moves them for good or for evil. The educational system does not help them to develop their personality in depth. In fact, most young people are not interested in their studies. They do know that they must get good results if they are to get a good salary later. So, as soon as they are free enough--usually starting from Form 4--they sleep in class or do not even attend from time to time. Their main interest is to have fun, to go out to play games--any game will do, go to movies or watch videos, listen to music, play sports, etc. Most of them study only for exams

In this vague context, the unreal world of comic strips and video games exert a growing and disastrous influence. In the Hong Kong University survey cited above,¹⁷ 46% of boys and 34% of girls

say they had bought a comic strip magazine (Japanese style) the previous week. Secondary school teachers acknowledge that, during the last two years, there has been a tremendous increase of these circulating in the classrooms. This is a real passion with the boys who often talk about them and exchange them with one another. There are at least 50 books of this illustrated type on sale in the kiosks, often costing less than HK \$10. There are also shops where for a few dollars young people can rent any number of these. Their contents are excessively violent, and often contain many pornographic scenes. Some are very suggestive for adolescents (depicting explicitly sexual acts, rape, mutilation...) and very harmful to their personality. A legal paper has been filed to regulate the circulation of this type of material, but its effectiveness remains doubtful.¹⁸ Furthermore, 33 % of young people in secondary school say they are interested in occult sciences (divination, astrology...). This tendency in the traditional culture is reinforced by local and world television programs; 11% of young people interviewed complain of being attacked by these occult forces.¹⁹

“Cultural Schizophrenia”: With Hong Kong’s return to China on July 1, 1997, young people are no longer sure if they are Chinese or Westerners. Taiwan and Mainland China have a tendency to despise the Hong Kong Chinese culture. This factor tends to develop a cultural inferiority complex towards the big China that will soon swallow them up. The former generation has a solid deeply rooted Chinese cultural foundation, but the English educational system has given young people neither the opportunity nor the desire to develop their Chinese roots. (They do not master the Chinese language or the traditional Chinese culture very well. They master still less the English language and English culture). Also their general mentality leads them rather to despise “underdeveloped China.” At the same time, they are well aware that they are not Westerners. Britain's immigration policy is a painful reminder of this. Feeling that they are neither Chinese nor Western, young people find themselves at a cultural crossroads: resolutely turning towards China (e.g., learning Mandarin), or hoping to emigrate to a hypothetical Western country (each year about 60,000 people leave the territory). But the decision, of course, does not belong to them. They must follow their parents’ wishes.

“Mou lei tau” a culture without logic: calling for help. In 1990 and through 1992, there developed among certain young people a heterogeneous language. This language has been popularized locally through television. It is used for discussion and consists in using phrases that have no relation one to the other. This language is called *mou lei tau* and has no rules and no logic. It is understood as an expression of revolt against the rigidity of the education system, a call for help before the loss of meaning and identity. This language constitutes a veritable culture among a certain number of young workers, weary of their uninteresting work. It comes to “enrich” their cultural environment already marked by Japanese style comic magazines and video games.

Conclusion: A revealing trend

This description of young people in Hong Kong can seem excessively negative. Of course, what is written here does not relate to all young people, but it is a trend, developing among them which reveals their unique situation. No other generation has ever been confronted with so many destabilizing factors at one time: Tiananamen, the return of the territory in 1997 and its consequences, unclear horizons, emigration, fear, feelings of being forsaken, disillusionment, the loss of roots, a society given to excessive consumerism, a very restricted environment, the pressure of the education system, the breakup of the family structures--all these risk creating serious social problems very soon and, reveal the shortcomings of a society solely oriented towards profit. The words of a social worker expresses this so well: “We were trained from the very beginning to be competitive. We were trained to achieve. But we were never trained to accept who we are or where we are.”²⁰

However, this generation like all others, still harbors within itself the great ideals of youth: family, health, growth producing work, love... Will Hong Kong some day be able to satisfy its young people?

Endnotes

¹ My study is taken mainly from the report of a diocesan working group, under the direction of Mrs. Yan, which deals with pastoral work with young people in the diocese of Hong Kong (Sept. 28, 1994), as well as many other recent articles in the Hong Kong Press.

² An inquiry done among 507 young people between the ages of 15 and 29. *Ming Bao*, July 11, 1994.

³ A two year study done by an association of secondary school teachers among 4,208 students from 37 secondary schools. *South China Morning Post*, June 3, 1995.

⁴ *South China Morning Post*, June 9, 1995.

⁵ Cf. *Hong Kong Standard*, October 31, 1995.

⁶ Cf. *Eastern Express*, Oct. 1-2, 1994: "Dead-end kids, Hong Kong's alienated youth".

⁷ Since 1981 divorces in Hong Kong have doubled and continued to rise: 5,650 in 1992 to 7,454 in 1993, that is one divorce in 8 marriages. It must be stated that this is much lower than the figures of other developed countries (1 in 3 in the UK) Cf. *Eastern Express* of Oct. 10, 1994. A law inaugurated in May 1995 has reduced to one year after marriage, the delay necessary to begin a divorce procedure.

⁸ From 1982 to 1992, the average number of children per family has gone from 2.4 to 1.9. *Kuai Bao*, April 14, 1994.

⁹ Cf. *Eastern Express*, Oct. 1-2, 1994.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ op. cit., March 15, 1995.

¹² op. cit., *Hong Kong Standard*, Oct. 31, 1995.

¹³ Ibid., April 19, 1995.

¹⁴ op cit , *Eastern Express*,

¹⁵ op cit., *Hong Kong Standard*, May 13, 1994.

¹⁶ op. cit., *Eastern Express*.

¹⁷ op. cit., *Hong Kong Standard*.

¹⁸ op. cit., *Eastern Express*, Feb. 28, 1995.

¹⁹ *Eastern Express*, Feb. 11-12, 1995.

²⁰ op. cit., *Eastern Express*, Oct. 1-2, 1994.