Beyond Obedience and Virtue: Love, Sex and Marriage in Hong Kong
By Petula Ho Sik-ying

Across Asia, the pressures of rapid economic growth and increasing urbanization are reshaping the way Asian women have traditionally defined – or had defined for them – their identity, their roles and their relationships with men.

Petula Ho Sik-ying, a professor at The University of Hong Kong, examines how middle-aged women in Hong Kong are replacing age-old Han Chinese scripts of female behavior with more liberating ones.

IN 2010, 53.3 PERCENT of the population of Hong Kong was women and the rate of female participation in the labor force was 52 percent; their median age at first marriage was 28.7, giving Hong Kong one of the lowest fertility rates in the world — currently 1.04 births per woman, according to the CIA World Factbook. This shift towards late marriage took place during a period of across-the-board advances in employment for women and a remarkable improvement in their education. The status and role of women in the community has come a long way in a relatively short time. And the elevation of women’s education and status has had an impact on the way they deal with their identity in regard to love, conjugal relationships and sexuality.

Middle-aged Chinese women in Hong Kong who live their lives according to a “conventional” heterosexual life script are referred to as si-nai. The two Chinese characters in the term mean “teacher” and “breast,” respectively. The term, which originated in Hong Kong in the 1960s, was initially one of respect, but now carries the derogatory meaning of a “middle-aged married woman who is ignorant, overweight, and ‘penny wise but pound foolish.”’ How do middle-aged married women cope with this stigmatized identity? An analysis of their narratives reveals pro-active response strategies to this derogatory usage.

Through my interviews with 67 si-nais between 2001 and 2010, I began to understand how they perceived themselves and how they reacted when addressed as si-nais. I found that they had ways of rehabilitating their roles and identities through everyday practices of resistance (see references below to Ho, 2007a, b; 2008 a, b, 2011). These stories of married women in Hong Kong and their sexual choices help reveal how they have produced new scripts on gender, love, sex, marriage and family during this transformation and moved beyond the “Three Obediences and Four Virtues” that have governed Han Chinese women for so long. In Chinese tradition, a woman was required to obey her father before marriage, her husband during marriage, and her sons in widowhood; the virtues are morality, proper speech, modest manner and diligent work. Hong Kong si-nais, however, have rewritten the scripts.

RESISTING STIGMATIZING LABELS

Most studies of middle-aged women have focused on women fulfilling traditional roles of the good wife, mother and homemaker. Very often, motherhood is considered the core of women’s identity, while other aspects of the self are pushed into an outer circle and are considered less important. My study showed that middle-aged married women in Hong Kong are aware of how labels are used to control them and belittle their contributions, and so resist being pinned down to a fixed identity by altering the meaning of being women and by creating new identities when they find that their children no longer need them.

Throughout the interviews, these women kept saying, “I am not a si-nai at all!” or “I am not a si-nai any more!” Obviously, this was a strong rejection of the identity associated with si-nai.

New virtues for women’s behavior might be: healthy, beautiful, looking younger than their age, fashionable, sexual in a modest way, useful and socially respectable. We can argue that these women are conforming to the homogenizing and normalizing images of beauty that have arisen in a patriarchal and capitalist society. However, we can also argue that they are subverting their motherhood and wifehood identities by empha-
sizing their erotic appeal and the use of the body as a site of pleasure.

The dissatisfaction of these women with their lives as wives and mothers is a motivating force for resisting a stigmatized social identity and stereotyped image. Interviewees with children quite explicitly stated that they envied women who had experienced success in the work place. They felt the urgency to negotiate their social roles and articulate and contest the discourses that constitute social reality, even though they did not necessarily have the alternative source of self-esteem provided by a career. They had done many things to achieve this and reinvent themselves. It is important to look at how women pursue self-development and pleasure through activities such as working out, slimming, leisure activities, voluntary work, interest classes and extramarital relationships.

Rather than holding on to the family roles of their younger days, Hong Kong si-nais have learned to be “flexible housewives” by actively expanding their life space from motherhood to diverse other spheres. These supplementary activities are important, though often overlooked, in the complex life-worlds of modern women. What women do besides take care of their families highlights aspects of their lives that have traditionally been overlooked or undervalued. Women’s life-worlds are never complete, and always invite reconfiguration. The question is: How do these supplementary activities subvert their social identities, create new lifestyles and save the women if their husbands leave them for younger women?

THE ‘OTHER WOMAN’ ACROSS THE BORDER

Just as Hong Kong is finding the anchor for its new relationship to mainland China uncertain, Hong Kong women are feeling insecure about their status and marriages. Many husbands travel to mainland China to exploit financial advantages that their Hong Kong status provides them. There is an inexhaustible supply of younger women and sexual possibilities across the border, and many men find it difficult to resist these temptations.

The number of Hong Kong residents working in the mainland increased from 133,500 in 1998 to a peak of 235,400 in 2004 before declining slightly to 212,600 by 2008. Of these, 63.2 percent were aged 30-49, and 74.3 percent were men. Rapid development in China has meant that these men face new situations that challenge their masculinity and cause both role conflict and role strain (Ho, 2011). With the increasing value of the Renminbi compared to the Hong Kong dollar, it is becoming more difficult for Hong Kong men to establish and maintain their jobs and families across the border. The impact of this on them, their Hong Kong wives and ex-wives should be explored. In the old days, the proper behavior for women whose husbands had affairs or new wives was to say nothing. New virtues for proper behavior and speech might be for women to voice their views and be more assertive in relationships even though they might hesitate to initiate divorce, knowing the many adverse consequences that this might lead to.

NO GREAT EXPECTATIONS — WOMEN’S SEX LIVES

Many Hong Kong women feel that their husbands’ contribution to the family is often in the form of their salaries rather than in labor, emotion or energy. They worry that their husband’s sexual fantasies are being fueled by the women they encounter in bars or clubs, or by their mistresses or second wives. With this in mind, do these women have sex? What does good sex mean to them? What is proper morality for modern women in sexuality? The women’s narratives reveal that...
their perceptions of good sex might be summarized as follows (Ho, 2008a):

1. Women feel good if they have orgasms or pleasurable bodily sensations (often related to other psychological satisfactions).
2. Women feel good in doing “the right thing” and being seen as socially acceptable and respectable.
3. Women feel good because of the erotic satisfaction they derive from including interests, leisure or other intimate relationships, rather than just from orgasm or physical pleasure.
4. Women feel good through achieving psychological and social goals that are important in their life circumstances (possibly including the maintenance of marriage and peace in the family).

These new virtues of sex for si-nai indicate that it is important for them to expand their life-worlds and find multiple sources of happiness. Social respectability, orgasm, emotional intimacy or other specific elements may or may not be part of their formula for happy marriage (Ho, 2008b).

LOVE OR MONEY? WE WANT BOTH!

Some researchers have suggested that the economic problems caused by an aging Hong Kong population can be dealt with by encouraging middle-aged people to plan for retirement. Hong Kong now has a non-statutory assistance plan, the Mandatory Provident Fund (MPF), which is a retirement scheme in which employers and employees each contribute a minimum of 5 percent of a worker’s monthly income into the fund. However, these arrangements, together with personal savings, seem to be less than adequate to meet the needs of most retirees.

The MPF and CSSA are based on a model that illustrates the dominant discourse of retirement in Hong Kong, which incorporates a male-centered view of work life, paid employment and compensation. At its best, it provides for the less fortunate via a centralized distribution system. However, it does not address the needs of some women who do not move through the prototypical phases of full-time employment and then retirement. Furthermore, wives are not entitled to a share of their husbands’ or ex-husbands’ benefits.

Many studies of the elderly and retirement in Hong Kong adopt a theoretical framework that is indifferent to women’s lives and experiences. I advocate a multiple, rather than singular, instrument of economic valuation and exchange. I believe that an alternative, feminist economic model should be a goal of feminist scholarship (Ho, 2007c). The findings of my study challenge the assumptions of the male-centered model of retirement planning and highlight the significance of women’s definitions of wealth and poverty, showing that women’s retirement planning cannot be separated from their practices of self. By studying this “secret core” of women’s wealth, one can understand how women actually view, value and manage money. Women, now and before, work diligently for the family (and/or paid employment) and save for rainy days. The study finds that their private savings are for consumption as well as investment, and do not necessarily generate immediate benefits, but serve to strengthen their financial and socio-cultural capital to gain security, especially in later life. The emotional leverage of consumption and investment in the market, the family or intimate relationships, are as important as the money itself, if not more.

Asian women are often portrayed as materialistic and pragmatic. However, some women do not agree that a greater emphasis should be placed on economics than on the family and self-interest. Money and love are both important. In their investment projects, many women resist modern accounting systems and see things such as time, interdependence, mutual benefit and trust as equal or greater in value to money.

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