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### Interview by Leong P

P LEONG

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## APPENDIX VI

In response to the oral history assignment of the general education course on “valuing childhood”, I conducted an interview on 20 February 2000 on a woman who grew up in a resettlement estate in Hong Kong. Subsequent to the interview, I compiled a Chinese transcription for the soundtrack of the interview at Appendix I. This Appendix II is an English translation of the Chinese transcription. The following is the interview in English translation.

“ This is an interview of a middle-aged woman who grew up in a resettlement estate in Hong Kong. It comprises two parts, namely the introduction and the interview.

### I. Introduction

#### A. Purpose of the interview

The person being interviewed is a lady who grew up in a resettlement estate. The interview aims to focus on the events happened in her childhood in the resettlement estate and the effects of this childhood has on her mentality development and socialization.

#### B. Interviewer

I am the interviewer and my name is P. LEONG, a year 1 student of the English Department of Lingnan University, taking a selective course of Valuing Childhood of the General Education Department.

#### C. Interviewee

The interviewee is a woman who does not intend to disclose her name. She said she is about 36 years of age.

#### D. Location of Interview

The interview was done in my house.

#### E. Recording

It was done as the interview proceeded.

## II. Interview<sup>1</sup>

I: Okay. Come to the part on Interview. Now the interview really begins. Thank you very much for your kindness to accept my invitation for an interview. As I had just mentioned in the introduction, this interview relates with an assignment of a course that I am now taking, namely. “Valuing Childhood” of the General Education Department of Lingnan University where I am now going. The purpose of the assignment is to take an oral history record. After the recording, the content of the tape will be transcribed into Chinese, then translated into English. Both of them would then become the oral history records in written forms. Okay. Let us move to the core of the interview, shall we?

She: Okay.

I: Firstly, I would like to ask you something about resettlement estate. Which resettlement estate did you live in in your childhood?

She: It's the Wang Tau Hom Resettlement Estate<sup>2</sup>.

I: Is it the oldest model of resettlement estate?

She: Not the oldest, because the oldest ones were built in Shek Kip Mei<sup>3</sup>. Anyway, the kind of resettlement estate we lived in then is the Mark II<sup>4</sup> resettlement estate type of the government. Compared to Shek Kip Mei's which is Mark I, Wang Tau Hom Estate is relatively the same in design, that is design with which nothing is provided in the flat unit.

I: “Design with which nothing was provided”! It is a very interesting description. Can you say something more about it?

She: Certainly. In our resettlement estate, we were not provided with private toilet,

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<sup>1</sup> In the transcription, “she” represents the interviewee and “I” represents the interviewer.

<sup>2</sup> Resettlement estate is housing estate built around 1950-60's in response to the rapid rise of Hong Kong population as a result of large in-migration of mainlanders to Hong Kong around that time, which caused sudden rise in squatter population and rent of private tenements.

<sup>3</sup> Shek Kip Mei Resettlement Estate was introduced around 1954.

<sup>4</sup> There are a total of 6 types of resettlement estates built under the categories of Mark I to VI. Mark II was introduced from 1961 to 1964.

independent water supply and any kitchen facilities<sup>1</sup>. Basically, the government just gave us an empty flat unit and that was all. Once moved into it, we had to do our own partitioning of the cubicle.

I: I presume what the resettlement estate you are talking about is that of the H-type one. Isn't it?

She: Yes, it is.

I: So, how large is your flat unit and how many family members are there in your house?

She: It was a 360 sq ft unit, which was so formed by combining two adjacent units into one through breaking the partition wall between them. At that time, the allotment policy was set that for a unit of 180 sq ft, the basic accommodation rate was 4 to 5 persons<sup>2</sup>. I remember my family consisted of 9 members when we first moved into our flat unit. From then on, our family grew larger in size and its total membership ran up to 14 people at most. Honestly, at that time, my grandmother and two uncles also lived in our family. It was only at a later day that they got their allotment and moved out.

I: So, the accommodation density of your house is really very high, isn't it?

She: Yes, it is. The accommodation density is really very high. However, of my age at that time, I had not any special feeling about it. What I did feel special then was the fact that there were many people eating together in the supper at night; a bit noisy. One thing is worth mentioning and it is about my grandmother and two uncles. They moved out when I was about 5 to 6 years old. On the other hand, all of our family members, except my father, are female. We did live together harmoniously; however, as regards accommodation density, ours is undeniably very high indeed.

I: Can you tell me something about how your house was partitioned then or, better say, how the internal layout was set? Example, the living/dining room, the

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<sup>1</sup> The provisions in Mark II resettlement estate are far from satisfactory. Communal bathhouse, scullery and laundry areas as well as communal toilet was used.

<sup>2</sup> The allocation policy is that the space allocation per person is set at 24 sq ft. The standard cubicle size is actually 120 sq ft (not 180 sq ft as mentioned by the interviewee), which is meant for an accommodation of 5 persons. The monthly rent is HK\$18. The rent is revised from time to time and has been readjusted to HK\$44.

bedroom and the place for cooking.

She: Partitioning? Can't be any simpler! Our kitchen was at the corridor in front of our house. There was only 1 bedroom, and it is in the rear portion of our house. Wooden boards were used for the partitioning, and in the bedroom, a double-deck bed was placed. The living room and dining room were combined into one to serve dual purposes. It is the place for doing homework and playing as well.

I: Then, how can 10 people live in one bedroom?

She: At that time, the combined living/dining room was also used for sleeping purpose at night time, and beds were set up at night and removed in the morning. The double-deck bed could accommodate 5 people at one time, and for the combined living/dining room, it could hold about 6 people or so. The upper deck of the bed in the bedroom was assigned solely to our eldest sister, probably because she was taller and can get to the upper deck easily. In the winter, the decked-bed was better because it was warmer there; but for summer, the situation was the opposite.

I: Which one do you like? The bed or the living/dining room?

She: Certainly, it is the upper deck despite the upper deck being a bit hotter in the summer. However, I could have more privacy in the upper deck; at least the space for doing homework there was larger.

I: Privacy seems to be rather important to you, doesn't it? When did you feel that it is important to you?

She: When I was in the primary school, I didn't have that feeling; actually, all our family members, except my father, were female. My sisters and I got together closely and harmoniously, and we were friendly to each other. However, once I promoted to the secondary school, I had the intention to keep a distance from people, hoping that I might have more time for myself, especially when I did my homework and revision, and when I was unhappy and down in spirit.

I: Mm. But, there was only one upper deck bed space and one bedroom. So, how

could you resolve the problem of deficiency in private space?

She: Private space? Frankly, in my time, people were relatively simpler in mind and feeling, so I didn't have any strong tendency to enclose or lock myself off from others. If I was not happy, I would move to the staircase next to the corridor and sit there.

I: Anyhow, if you really felt unhappy then, how could you resolve your problem?

She: Honest with you, I would sleep earlier in hope that things would die down after the sleep. Alternatively, I would have a walk in the nearby park. Anyhow, since I was little, I have been having an intimate relationship with my sisters; and I also had my schoolmates to accompany me as I grew up. Because of these, they could see through my secrets easily. The fact is this kind of relationship did do me good, because, in reminiscence, the more privacy I had, the more I indulged in non-constructive thinking, resulting in delirium and confusion. Do you think so?

I: I agree to what you said. However, it also depends on your personality and relationship with your friends. Do you think so?

She: Perhaps, it is. But privacy was a luxurious think to talk about when you grew up in the resettlement estate, especially so when the place for revision and doing homework is not that enough.

I: Let's skip the issue of private space. Can you share about how you did your home work and revision? Can you divide your description into two part: first, about how you did your homework when you were in the primary, and the second, about the situation when you were in the secondary?

She: Situation in lower and upper classes of the primary was different. When I was in the lower class of my primary, I remembered that after school I could finish my homework in about 1 to 2 hours. What I needed then were a stool for sitting and a higher stool for putting the exercise books, and these were all that were required. So, I could do my homework in the doorway, any one corner in the living/dining room or even in the corridor; the space that I occupied was very small indeed. In the meantime, my sisters watched over us very strictly. They

did so because my mother had to help my father with his work in order to earn enough money for the family. My eldest sisters were so strict on us that we were quite afraid of them and had the feeling that they were manipulative. Sometimes, when they were teaching us schoolwork, they would even take to physical punishment. However, when we grew up and recalled the work they had done for us, we were grateful to them, because their act was in good faith.

I: Actually, I do admire you because you have good elder sisters who set encouraging examples for you to follow. But the fact is there are really too many sisters in your house. How did all of you share the space together to have your homework done?

She: Some of our sisters studied in the a.m. session and some in the p.m. session. When we promoted to the secondary, school was in full-day mode. So, if you studied in a.m. session, you would do your homework in the afternoon and nighttime; and vice versa was the case for those studying in the p.m. session. However, if there was argument because of struggle over the use of space, then my mother would intervene and might punish us sometimes for the argument.

I: Is it the situation that occurred in the secondary school?

She: Yes. In secondary school, you just could not accomplish your schoolwork with two stools; you need one more table to put your exercise books. Actually, this situation of lacking space did deter our progress in study.

I: As a matter of fact, what I can see is that the adversity of learning environment did affect your academic performance profoundly. Can you list some additional reasons that account for affecting profoundly your academic performance?

She: Mm, I think there may be 3 aspects.

1. The first one was the absence of television in our childhood. As far as I could remember, it was only when I was in the secondary three did we get our first black-and-white television. So, the distraction of television on us was very insignificant.
2. The second one was the Secondary School Entrance Examinations at primary 6. At that time, our family was in financial difficulty, because of the large family size in comparison to the meager income of my father.

Because of the heavy financial demand for supporting everyone of us to secondary school, the Secondary School Entrance Examinations became the yardstick which decided whether we could further our studies after primary. This pressure of being eliminated converged our attention towards keener study subconsciously. Perhaps, of our age, it is indeed an unpleasant experience to us having to face this reality of life. At that time, our parents did forewarn us that they would not support us to secondary school if we were not allocated a place in the secondary school. So, we plan for our own studies early in life in order to forestall failure. Fortunately, I was allocated to a government-subsidized school and was entitled to another three years of free education.

I: You said that there are 3 causes in all. You'd just mentioned two. How is the third one?

She: Oh! I missed out the third point. In looking back, because of inadequacy in space at home for revision and homework, the presence of 'revision library' did play a very significant role in resolving our learning need. At that time, there was basically either a church-funded or government-organized library, or sometimes both, in each resettlement estate. In Wang Tau Hom, there was the 'Northern America Baptist Church Revision Library'. In Lok Fu, there were the 'Mennonite Church Po Kap Library' and the 'Young Diggers' Reference Library'. There, tutors were employed to help the kids with their studies, and there was also religion-oriented counseling services provided to the students as well. These library services were well tailored to meet the practical needs of the people living in these resettlement estates. Hence, the effects on students were significant and profound. The services were well received. Our elder sisters used the services first, and they subsequently introduced them to us. The consequence was that the tension of space for studies was relieved.

I: But, the point is many people at that time considered that libraries in the resettlement estate were places where teenagers easily mingled with the opposite sex, acquired undesirable habits and got abducted to triad society. How do you feel about that view? How did your parents feel about that?

She: I am afraid I don't agree with you. I remember that when I was at about primary 3 to 4, I started going to the library to do my homework and revision,

and to seek tutorial support from the tutors working there. In fact, the kind of help offered by the services of the library was profound. The problem was with the way parents educated their kids at home. The library could not replace the parents' duty of coaching on their kids in respect of morality and studies. Parental care and love on kids are essential to kids' development in mentality. They should endeavour all means possible to encourage their kids and help them to develop perseverance and discipline in their attitude towards learning. Maybe, parents might not know how to teach their kids textbook knowledge; however, if parents do care and empathy with their kids, they would have the courage and the will power to breakthrough in hard time. The tendency of yielding to difficulty is therefore minimized.

I: After listening to your sharing on learning, I would like to know something about the financial situation of your family at that time. I think you don't disagree with me that it was a common phenomenon that people in resettlement estate lived from hand to mouth at your time. How was the situation of your family? At that time, woman had to do small-scale light industry at home to help their husband with finance. How was the situation of your family then?

She: We did that then. We also sometimes help in such work as assembling parts of plastic flower (to affix them together to form into a mimic plastic flowers) in order to earn additional money for the family. Our situation was a bit different from the ordinary family's. My father ran a business of manufacturing fish balls. He developed his own business and did not have to work under any employer. In order to cut cost, promote productivity with a view to spur income, our mother also helped in his business. Besides my mother being his major helper, additional support also came from our elder sisters and uncles. Our elder sisters' help was only supplementary, because the making of fish balls did call for sophisticated coordination of hand and fingers movements, good physical strength and knowledge about sanitation and technique on the use of machinery. Basically, all of the first 6 sisters of our family had the experience of helping in our father's workshop, and this help was most significant among our eldest and second eldest sisters who did have to spend a lot of their leisure hours with my father's work. Since the work was strenuous, their progresses of studies were adversely affected.

I: Do you think this life experience had any influence on you?

She: In what aspect?

I: Maybe, I put it this way: what were the effects on you when your study was intermixed with heavy requirement to work in your father's place of work during your leisure hours?

She: My first feeling is "very tired out". The reason of being tired out is explicit enough, because this kind of strength demanding work just exhausted and slowed you down in your studies. But in view of my family's financial situation, I found it my obligation to help in my father's work. When I was small and saw my mom and elder sisters working in the workshop, I looked forward to being a part of them; however, when it was my turn to help, I came to sense of the immaculate contribution that they had made to the family. I do feel that this experience is invaluable to my growth, like a tattoo mark, symbolizing that I am a member of the family, who could be held accountable for thing. Now, when my sisters and I get together and reminisces of the past good old days, we are proud of our meager contribution to our family in those days. Our relationship and love of each other grow even stronger when we think of those days.

I: I do look up to you for your life experience and for the kind of intimate relationship you have among your sisters. Is there anything in your childhood that are unforgettable to you?

She: Unforgettable ..., I believe there are two events. The first one related with my eldest sister. The event happened when my sister worked in the workshop and one day being a bit incautious, she sustained a heavy injury by having two of her fingers trapped among the gears in a machine which, in consequence, amputated them. That night, everyone in our family was downhearted. No one said a word and the air was stagnant and the mood was dead. My age then was small, about 5 to 6, and I just knew that her fingers got hurt and were oozing blood; I did want to cry then. As I grew up, I grew to know a bit more about the exact nature of the accident, and I began to respect her more and more and take to her advice obediently. I think it is an act of mine to show her my respect of her contribution and to regurgitate. Another unforgettable thing was my father's passing away. He passed on at about 47 because of liver cancer. My family was cast with sadness. My mother cried for a while, but she recovered from it

quickly. From then on, she shouldered all the responsibility of rearing the family of nine kids. We were very obedient to and respectful of her, and every one just did the best we could to help in the workplace once when we finished our homework and revision. No one complained a word, and on the contrary, unity became more solidified. Every Ching Ming Festival, the whole of our family including the sons-in-law must pay a visit to my father's graveyard to pay him our respect and our remembrance of him.

\*\*\*\*\* Side A finished \*\*\*\*\*

I: Wa! It is just touching. From what you said, I do feel of a strong flow of warm and loving relationship among your family members. What do you think is the influence of this relationship to your relating with people?

She: This experience is not solely confined to our family. Actually, in resettlement estate, families of similar situation do exist in large number. Most families did not subside to fate, and they worked very hard to overcome the adversity. Of course, there were lots of families that were not as lucky. Their kids were abducted and became gangsters. Their families were broken.

I: Oh! How unfortunate! Anyway, might I further ask: what effects of your childhood in a resettlement estate had on your mentality development and your relating with people?

She: Oh! I am sorry. I have not responded to your last question. I think there are several aspects of influences. The first is our respect of and financial support to my mother. The second is our respect of our elder sisters and the intimate relationship we have with them. The third is our sense of responsibility and the capability to withstand pressure. The fourth is our willingness to help needy people. I remembered that at time when I was in my secondary school, I served in a library as volunteers.

I: Normally, parents have this traditional thinking that they dislike their kids to serve in voluntary service. You said you served as a volunteer. Did they object to your decision?

She: You are right. The time when I was a volunteer, I know that majority of parents

did not like that their kids work for voluntary organizations. They were afraid that their kids mingled with bad people and became gangsters. This phenomenon of disapproval was especially apparent in resettlement estates. When I was a volunteer, my father had already passed away. In fact, my mother did not know that I was a volunteer. If she had known, she would have been very upset with my deed.

I: What type of voluntary service did you participate in?

She: I helped in a library. My services then were to help in tutorial services, answering telephone inquiry and keeping loan records of the reference books of the library. However, the most thrilling experience was the voluntary services in the summer holiday when the library would launch its Used Books Selling Campaign. By then, the number of volunteers helping in the campaign would go up to about 30. The campaign did attract many people to come and queue up long for their term to buy books from our library. Because of the long queue, policemen were deployed to the scene to maintain laws and orders. I strongly sensed of the tremendous help that this service could extend to the low-income families in the resettlement estates; its meaning was profound and its purpose far-reaching. The same meaning was felt in the tutorial service we did in the library. I feel of the great joy being a helper to others. I do feel that being in this environment in my teenage, my mentality development was greatly enriched, strengthening my power of interpersonal skill and my resourcefulness in solving problems.

I: I see. Teenagers nowadays lead a very materialistic lifestyle, so their mentality and way of living differ greatly from the teenagers' of the past. Do you think so?

She: That they are more provided materialistically is evident, but I dare not comment on the state mentality development of nowadays' kids. Kids of the past were relatively simpler in mind and nature of their personality, and more obedient and duty conscious.

I: Is there any association with the family life in their childhood, the way they spend their leisure hours as well as the morality of the society then?

She: The answer is evidently yes. I had just talked a bit about family life. Actually, in our childhood, the provision of material things was inadequate, so we did treasure those things that we got. Take the toys for example. We made our toys almost at all situations. Most of the time, the games we played were played together with our neighboring kids, and these games included, for examples, jumping the rubber rope, picking miniature rice bags<sup>1</sup>, the hide-and-seek game, and last but not the least, cooking with miniature cooking utensils. In fact, these kinds of games demanded heavily on cooperation. I feel that this cooperative life experience made it possible for individuals to disclose themselves and mingle with group, through which to develop mutual acceptance, mutual help and a generous personality. However, I have to emphasize that this perception is only my personal feeling about childhood that I sum up to after recollection. There is no theoretical support for it.

I: Probably, nowadays under the normative concept of rearing only one to two kids in our household, family becomes smaller in size. It becomes therefore that kids are confined to a smaller social circle. In the mean time, in the setting of resettlement estate, the corridor becomes the place where kids moved around and played. However, this is absent in today's tenement houses. The consequence is kids are confined to a limited space for locomotion and activity. Beside the lack of community life, the toys around them become their best friends. Thus, their social circle becomes even smaller. Do you agree?

She: The corridor as well as the games that we played together with our neighbours did affect our mentality development. Nowadays, our living environment is too self-enclosed and self-centered, resulting in us being locked off from others easily. Majority of our time, the doors of our houses are closed, and they would be opened only when we depart for and return from office. The other times, we are either in the office or in our house, too self enclosed, indeed. As a result, the area for our kids to move around is restricted and the chance that they know more new friends is reduced.

I: Wa! Unknowingly, our conversation has been for about an hour. The things

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<sup>1</sup> Made by sewing tiny cloth bags, filling them up with raw rice and sewing them up. The game is played by spreading the bags on the floor and picking them up in gradation of difficulty. The way of picking is to hold one bag in one hand, flinging it up and catching it back while the player has to pick the bags on the floor up in predisposed pattern as the bag in the air in falling down.

that we had come across are quite many. Your ability to recall the things in your childhood is powerful and precise. I think I have to stop here. After this recording, I would transcribe the recording into Chinese and then to English. I am not sure if you mind it or not if I put this recording as well as the transcription and translation to the website of Lingnan University for reference of those who are interested in childhood development.

She: Mm, no problem. However, I have to state it clear that I don't want to use my real name. You might just call me Mdm X then.

I: Certainly! I shall follow strictly what you said. Lastly, let me extend my gratitude to you once again for your help. ”

End of Interview